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TURNING THE SCREWS OF THE LOS ANGELES EXPERIMENTAL NOISE SCENE.



he low bass tones of reggaeton reverberate through Harlem Place Alley, the slow kick-drum thumps creeping from the open door of a Mexican transvestite bar as the snare echoes off the walls of tall seventies-style office buildings, rising up beyond the steeple of a nearby abandoned church. The alleyway is really just a corridor lined by razor-wire fence and abuts empty parking lots. The dull, yolk glow of Los Angeles' megalopolis night sky reveals a crowd with the garb and affect of the denizens of nearby Skid Row—army jackets, stubble, hair unkempt, dirty sneakers with the tongue flopping out. They're smoking, asking politely for change, or leaning idly against graffiti-speckled dumpsters. Wading through them, though, you can see that this look seems more calculated than it previously appeared. The haircuts are meticulously asymmetrical, the ties skinny, the T-shirts homemade. And through a sticker-covered entryway, a screeching, grinding noise akin to a subway car's banshee scream obliterates the notions of reggaeton and trannies.

Inside the bar, a girl at the center of a writhing crowd is crumpled over a flimsy table with fold-out legs. She is spinning a stainless steel knob on a small, archaic-looking machine, which is unidentifiable but undeniably captivating. There are pedals, against which the girl is slamming her entire body, and they're fed by a mass of wires that are tangled like dreadlocks. And there is the noise, which is the music.

The girl, with the machine and its pedals, is producing piercing feedback. There are no lyrics and no apparent structure to the music. The deep, warm fuzz of grimy distortion builds louder with every spin of the machine and as the harshness of the screeching feedback swells, the tightly gathered audience watches intensely, covers their ears, or shakes like the congregation at a Pentecostal snake-handling revival.

Eva Aguila, who is performing, as she often does, as Kevin Shields (as in the name of My Bloody Valentine's guitar slayer) is the girl in the middle of the crowd. Aguila pushes the limits of music, challenges the conventions of what music is at all. "Noise music" (like Aguila's moniker) is a misnomer, for what you hear at The Smell is neither noise nor music. It's sonic experimentation aimed at the visceral *effect*—the feeling—of sound, rather than the confines of song structure. It is performance art fighting with technology and expectation. As the distorted screeches and sculpted feedback progress, Aguila's set begins to feel less like a screwdriver to the ear; it becomes a little comforting, like being enveloped in the warmth and inertia of electric sound waves.

Since 1998, The Smell has hidden itself in the shadows of downtown L.A.'s skyscrapers, as the big-budget venues of Hollywood nightlife provide a distraction for tourists and taste-making poseurs, allowing it to remain an accessible, all-ages venue dedicated to free-form experimentation and the DIY ethic. As such, it is a magnet drawing in kids from the fringe—the faraway corners of Los Angeles County, the myriad towns of the Inland Empire, and the endless-seeming Valley.

As with most unique subcultures, the attempt to pull apart, dissect, and categorize the harsh noise scene has seen it dubbed the "new punk," a middle finger to a music industry that has co-opted, chewed up, and commodified outliers of rock, rap, and even "indie" music genres. But, in essence, noise is really a return to the confrontation that the free-jazz pioneers and the avant-garde once proposed.

Some noise artists speed up the tempo of existing songs until the drumbeats sound like a hum. They have built instruments from guitar parts and old wooden planks only to destroy them onstage. They bark into megaphones so distorted that vocals sound more like a Hendrix guitar line. The harsh-noise scene, of which Kevin Shields is a part, can be described by a more grating sound, while the party-noise scene injects diced-up beats into dense musical *mélange*. There really aren't any common themes among

artists, other than they are all vastly different, and their songs are mostly irreproducible. But despite its different musical styles, the noise scene is intensely incestuous, with artists consistently collaborating, playing under five or six monikers, or even playing at the same time. Aguila, for example, performs as Kevin Shields—alone, and with others—but is also known as Gang Wizard. The emphasis is on innovation in all forms, and in the overlap between sounds and ideas something new is created. Like the happenings of the sixties, the performance can never be exactly repeated, and in the age of infinite digital mimicry permeating nearly all aspects of life, this becomes exceedingly important.

When saxophonist and free-jazz innovator Ornette Coleman recorded *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, in 1959, his sporadic bursts of dissonant tones, fast runs of unusual scales, and rejection of convention were as hard-core as the technophilic blasting that noise is now. T. S. Eliot's fragmented epic poem, "The Waste Land," a pastiche of the everyday sounds of London, cacophonous memory, and modernism thrust upon Europe by the destructive bombs of WWI and deconstructive explosions of artistic experimentation, made it a kind of prototypical noise music. "These are fragments shored against my ruin," Eliot wrote. And today, noise artists are the Jackson Pollocks of sound; they splatter noise against an invisible canvas and advance technology beyond the point of conventional expression, delving into a world of sonic transmutation.

Noise is nothing new in L.A. From the late-sixties musical experiments at the Beyond Baroque art space in the thriving psychedelics community of Venice to the late-seventies noise-punk explosion at The Masque (home to The Germs and The Cramps) between 1977 and 1979 in Hollywood, Los Angeles has a rich tradition of experimentation and innovation in music. The main difference today is the availability and the access to the noise-makers of the moment. When the L.A. noise scene was young, the primary mode of distribution was pressing records and creating handmade fanzines that would report on noise artists who were way outside the media mainstream. These fringe artists would never make it into *Rolling Stone*, so the zine was a crucial element of getting images and words out there, no matter how crude the cut-and-pasted Xeroxed pamphlets looked. Zines were based on proximity and access to sympathetic friends at copy shops, whereas today the Internet plays an integral role in the proliferation of noise. Web sites like IHeartNoise.com, home to Phil Blankenship's prolific label Troniks, keep the information flowing, with an ease and efficiency that could never be attained before. The listenership has now become global with MySpace, so the relevance of a kid with a Casio keyboard in Missoula is equal to that of any loft-dwelling Brooklyn hipster.

East Coast noise bands like Sonic Youth, Lightning Bolt, Black Dice, and Wolf Eyes enjoy immense popularity, and Japanese noise rockers, for example The Boredoms and Boris, are well known for their extreme technicality, but the L.A. scene focuses more on novelty and innovation. Primarily solo acts with an electronica bent, these bands make "party noise" that is sometimes meant to be tongue-in-cheek, and always meant to be fun.

"Noise has always needed some sunshine injected into it," says Brian Miller, one of Eva Aguila's collaborators and head of noise label Deathbomb Arc. "This is where the Beach Boys came from. I like to think that L.A.'s contribution to noise is similar to how those guys interpreted rock 'n' roll." Some in the L.A. scene take seminal Japanese noise artist Merzbow's famous adage to the next level, "If, by noise, you mean uncomfortable sound, then pop music is noise to me."

Steven Cano, who goes by the name tik//tik, makes mangled versions of pop songs and believes his music takes more from the bizarre, eyeball-headed band Residents than strict noise purists. Entombed under layers of distortion squirms the ghost of a saccharine pop song, barely putting

a beat to what might be highly processed vocals, if they could even be called that. Feedback and the crunch of what might be a hundred stompboxes fill in the body of tik//tik's compositions, but he doesn't believe that he's harsh.

"There are relevant and active artists who have been doing this for fifteen-year-plus, says Cano. I'm sure it might be a little sickening for them to see me come into a venue and slam down my multicolored digital gear and sing my Hilary Duff-loving heart out. I feel like I am making art and music, but definitely art and music with a lowercase 'a' and a lowercase 'm.' In my head, I am kind of making charred-up pop music."

Unicorn Hard-On takes a similar approach, using highly deconstructed, quasi pop songs as an outline. But, unlike many of the self-proclaimed harsh heads who make irreproducible, rhythmless sonic textures, she utilizes repetition as her musical touchstone.

"Repetition of melody is a signature of mine, and the consistent beat," she says. "The way I see it, the melodies are the characters and the beat is the background. They give the song a face and a feeling; then I can deconstruct it and tell a story."

Valerie Martino, as Unicorn Hard-On, is known outside the noise world, follows old-school noise tradition when she releases an album, which comes accompanied by her artwork, a mix-tape, even a mini-zine. "There is a feel I'm going for, contemporary nostalgia, perhaps," she says. "I've had many different kinds of packaging: spraypaint, stencil, screenprint, photocopy, domestic traditional women's arts like sewing, felting, knitting."

The art of noise, in many ways, depends upon a kind of visual-noise aesthetic, mashing together commercial iconography, bright (and sometimes annoyingly loud) colors, with a slight emphasis on the design culture of the video-game generation and after. The arts collective Paper Rad utilizes this anti-aesthetic to make videos for established noise bands Lightning Bolt and Wolf Eyes, which their distributor, Load Records, says "make Saturday morning cartoons look like the Nazi-programmed oatmeal of consumer misery." Like much of the outsider or pixelated pop-surrealist art that is popularized in galleries like 8-Bit, in Los Angeles, Paper Rad uses very basic computer graphic design from the embryonic stage of the Internet. They layer images of Bart Simpson, the Hamburglar, and clip art into a mess of multimedia refuse that we all wish we didn't recognize. The cover of Unicorn Hard-on's collaboration with Taiwan Deth, on a seven-inch, pictures a childlike image of a unicorn against swirling purple background.

Like Kevin Shield's cacophonous, gargantuan sound, Unicorn Hard-On's repetitive beats hollow out a space for introspection within tumultuous waves of sound. The cornerstone of music is a beat: the rhythm. After all, don't we become human to the beat of an organic drumbeat—our mothers' hearts—for nine months before we enter the world? So the innate allure to the beat is no surprise. But much of noise music exists without a beat, focusing mostly on improvisation and the random variations and interactions created between competing machines and the feedback it creates. Out of these seemingly random acts of science, with the noise artist at the helm, there emerges a pattern.

Much as it does in John Coltrane's "Giant Steps," the swirling caterwaul of noise begins to take on meaning and structure on a larger scale when perspective can be taken and the relationship between the notes (or absence of notes) is gleaned. It's like looking at fractals—the infinite repeating patterns within a leaf—or the cell on the hand of the man at the picnic portrayed in Charles and Ray Eames' *Powers of Ten* film.

The resurgence of L.A.'s noise scene is not a spontaneous development. The creation of two spaces for noise, Il Corral, near Melrose and Heliotrope avenues, and the art gallery Pehrspace, in Echo Park, is due to the success of The Smell and the explosion of L.A. noise artists like Cherrypoint, Dog Shit Taco, and the masters of party-noise ravesploitation, Captain Ahab.

Il Corral hosts large gatherings of noiseheads for the "Turn the Screws" festivals and an insane event known as "40 Bands 80 Minutes."

Noise promoter Sean Carnage developed the idea for the stunt, about which he made a film, after curating successful, and more eclectic, shows on Monday nights at Il Corral. "I wanted to instigate a situation where I could mix all these people together and get the spirit of the shows I grew up with," Carnage said.

Carnage, who is 35, grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, where he says the music scene was an intimate community that celebrated the fringe, especially performance art and noise, because there was nothing else to do. In that small scene, he would organize shows based simply upon what he liked. He created the zine *U.S. Rocker* without worrying what was popular or whether it would create a cohesive environment. When he moved to L.A. four years ago, he was struck by the isolation of living in a sprawling city.

"I was struck at how isolated people were here and how ironic it was that it was a city with so many people," he said. So he tried to foster a community like that in Cleveland, by putting on DIY shows every Monday. The shows became packed with noise bands, harshheads, and experimental acts, and Carnage became an indispensable part of the local scene as it organized around him. Then, in 2006, he came up with the plan for "40 Bands 80 Minutes," for which he would choose his favorite bands who played his Monday-night shows and condense them each into two-minute sets. With a bit of serendipity, Carnage was afforded another opportunity.

"The idea was to take a Monday-night show and document it. I really wanted it to be the biggest show of all time. Then, I was recently locked out of a job at a gay network, QTN, which went out of business, so I had a professional TV crew to use, who all had an ax to grind."

Seizing this opportunity, Carnage had the crew film the entirety of the show, and then completed post-production in seven hours with an editing model that he took from his day job: porn.

The frantically paced DVD chronicles the full eighty minutes, with rough production values that augment the feeling of being there among the dancers and the headbangers. The noise is crisp and clear, and the experience, watching emerging noise-rock talents Health and Anavan, for example, drips with the energy of the live performance, as audience members grab at Anavan's drummer and singer Aaron Buckley's hockey helmet. Minutes later, Health's vocalist, Jacob Duzsik, stabs his microphone at a guitar amp, creating searing feedback and a delightfully noisy new layer.

The DVD provides a glimpse into a slice of the community that Carnage helped create, essentially picking up where Penelope Spheeris' documentary of burgeoning L.A. punkdom, *The Decline of Western Civilization*, left off, in 1981. But this time, the kids are louder, happier, and having much more fun.

"[L.A.'s noise scene] is very community-oriented and accessible," says Carnage. "L.A. has so many professional musicians, and the people who are underneath the music industry are really free, open, and unpretentious." Carnage is now promoting his Monday-night shows at Pehrspace, an Echo Park gallery that allows him the freedom to develop shows as he wants, breaking down the genres that he says people of the iPod generation are not willing to obey. Venues like The Smell, Il Corral, and Pehrspace are sites of musical cannibalism, where everyone devours new ideas, images, or sounds of roughly the same species and spits them out. These spaces are unmitigated blank canvases, testing grounds for advancing the threshold of the mainstream—creating the shape of music to come.

"With nobody watching the gate," Carnage says, "you have a tremendous audience that you can build. Like a lot of fringe genres, [noise] is reviled by the mainstream. It's despised. Luckily, when you're in a genre that is despised, you get a lot of freedom."