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# STRAIGHT EDGE



**CLEAN-LIVING YOUTH,  
HARDCORE PUNK,  
AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

## STRAIGHT EDGE 101

In early 1989 I attended my first punk rock show with my best friend, Nate, and experienced a night that changed my life forever. The venue was an old cinderblock building at the county fairgrounds, and the bands included the Skrods, from Minnesota; PhantasmOrgasm, from Denver; and locals Painful X-tremities and Limbic Salad. The music was loud and harsh, the dancing was rough, but the entire evening was infused with a positive, supportive attitude. Nate and I “moshed” around the dance floor with the rest of the misfits, relishing every minute. When we fell, the other punks scooped us up, patted us on the back, and happily continued their flailing, stomping rotation around the mosh pit. These kids wore their hair in multicolored, crazy patterns, passed out flyers about vegetarianism and women’s rights, and made shopping at the Salvation Army a virtue. For the first time in my life, I felt like I truly belonged.

Scattered among the punks in the crowd were a number of youths with large X’s applied to their hands with black magic marker. I had also recently noticed that a friend of mine wore X’s every day to the Spanish class we shared. Eventually, I came to understand the meaning: these kids were *straight edge*. They abstained from alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and even what they called “promiscuous” sex—hardly your typical punk rockers. They seemed fun, interesting, creative, engaged in the world, and they actually made it cool not to use drugs and alcohol. I was fifteen years old, and I had found a home.

The story of this research begins earlier, however, with a series of experiences that led to my involvement with the straight edge movement. In 1986 I was in the eighth grade at Dakota Junior High, a school in downtown Rapid City, South Dakota, where I grew up. Dakota served a diverse student body, including wealthy doctors’ kids, children of the working poor, and Native American youth. Dakota housed a variety of cliques: metalheads with their torn jean jackets, long hair, and Iron Maiden t-shirts; athletes, wearing expensive shoes and dressing like Don Johnson on *Miami Vice*; ‘preps,’ with their Guess Jeans (rolled up over the ankles), big jewelry, and gelled hair; and of course the regular assortment of nerds, band geeks, vo-tech kids, and skaters. I was caught between them all, accepted in most groups but feeling at home in none of them. I had tried being a prep, but affording the expensive clothes so necessary to fit in with

that crowd proved difficult. I had a bit more success as a metalhead, but my involvement with sports and home in a middle class neighborhood left me a few steps outside the inner circle. Despite their differences, each of the cliques held one thing in common: they all began experimenting with alcohol early.

Abstaining from drugs wasn't a problem for me; Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign left me terrified of becoming a burned-out addict. By high school, however, I had already experimented with alcohol for several years. My peers and I began drinking sporadically in the sixth and seventh grades. We would steal from parents' liquor cabinets, beg older siblings for booze, and bribe legal-age strangers to buy it for us. Getting alcohol was never easy, but the booze-seeking adventure was part of drinking's appeal. We were rarely caught, although I had a near miss at a school dance when the guidance counselor noticed me stumbling around the gymnasium; several friends and I had polished off a case of cheap beer out on the football field before entering. Even as I choked down the beer a part of me wondered what compelled me to drink something so foul tasting. But the desire to be accepted won out, and I drank until I threw up.

My luck did not hold during a second incident some months later. Two of my friends succeeded in filching a variety of hard liquors from their parents. Since my mother was out that night, six of us sat on my deck drinking a mixture of bourbon, vodka, and rum. After we had drunk our fill, we roamed the neighborhood, sneaking through yards and down sidewalk alleys between backyard fences. Though a few of us were old enough to drive (the legal age in South Dakota was fourteen), none of us had cars, so we often walked the streets at night. Little did we know that our friend John, a star football player, had drunk considerably more than the rest of us. As we walked between two wooden fences, he suddenly went berserk, running back and forth between them and throwing himself at the fences as hard as he could. Somehow his pants had come down and were inside out over his shoes, causing him to stumble and trip as he yelled incoherently at the top of his lungs. The scene may have been funny were it not past midnight and had he not been about to seriously injure himself or one of us as he swung his fists. My friends and I tackled him, pinning his muscular frame to the ground and covering his mouth to avoid detection by the neighbors. Since my house was nearby, we dragged John, kicking and screaming, to my basement, his pants still dragging behind him. Once inside, two of us held him down and tried to console him while my friend Brian used a scissors to cut off his pants. I remember looking into his eyes and saying over and over again, "It's OK, John, it's Ross" while he contin-

ued to yell and lash out in drunken fury, not recognizing me. It took three of us to hold John down until he passed out, as my ten-year-old brother Brad looked on in horrified confusion. I defied my mother's rule against friends spending the night when she wasn't home and we all went to sleep, exhausted and traumatized by the whole evening.

The next morning two of my friends returned and retrieved John, who was still drunk, and took him to another part of the neighborhood as I delivered newspapers on my route. I made it home, lied to my mom, telling her the guys didn't have a ride home last night, and went back to bed. That morning, the police found John drunk in a yard and called his mother, a single parent like mine. After a tear-filled explanation, the next day, John, Brian, and I had a date with the school liaison police officer who had found out about the affair from other students. He gave us a lackluster speech about the dangers of alcohol and wrote us each a warning ticket. On the way out, he said with a wink, "If you're going to drink, you should at least have the sense not to let a bunch of giggly girls know about it. They tell everybody." My doubts about drinking continued to grow.

By ninth grade, obtaining and drinking alcohol became one of our biggest priorities. Those with ready access to liquor were held in high esteem, and drinking great quantities of alcohol was a surefire way to climb the social ladder. If you wanted to fit in, wanted to be "cool," you *had* to drink. I felt like there was no alternative, so I didn't question. Feeling like I was always on the border between the popular clique and everyone else, I was ready to do almost anything to avoid falling out of the inner circle completely. If that meant drinking until I was sick, so be it.

By tenth grade, keg parties in the woods outside of town became commonplace. Each weekend, an older-looking student with a fake ID would purchase a keg of beer, and carloads of kids would gather in the McDonald's parking lot before cruising deep into the forest to drink. Standing under enormous ponderosa pine trees, revelers bought a cup for a few bucks, got drunk, and drove the winding roads home. Always a bit of a cautious introvert, I increasingly felt this lifestyle wasn't for me. Shortly after attending that first punk show, for the rest of my high school life and beyond, I abstained from alcohol, drugs, and tobacco and began calling myself straight edge.

Drinking, for my fellow straight edge (sXe)<sup>1</sup> punks and me, became associated with popular kids and jocks, groups that did not appeal to us. Though some of my former friends chided and mocked me, and a few pressured me to resume drinking, my new social circle provided more than enough positive reinforcement and comfort to prevent me from ever

turning back. Coming to grips with my own family's history of persistent alcohol use, and sometimes abuse, only strengthened my resolve never to touch alcohol again.

My regard for punks, and sXers<sup>2</sup> in particular, grew as I learned that my new friends were among the most politically active at my high school. They constituted the majority in groups like Amnesty International and Students Against Violating the Earth (SAVE), and were later a large part of local organizing against the 1991 Persian Gulf War. These groups inaugurated me into the activist world and challenged me to examine racism, sexism, and classism. Vegetarianism and animal rights had infused the scene by this time, prompting many of us to politely ask the lunch ladies at school to "please hold the hamburger. I'll just have the bun, lettuce, and tomato." Punk made the possibility of a better world a reality for me, and sXe seemed the purest form of punk—true freedom, no outside control, challenging some of the deepest-seated norms of youth culture. It was very idealistic and heady stuff for a teenager.

Even during my earliest involvement with sXe, I never wore X's on my hands. Like some of the participants in this study, I was suspicious of any sort of label and was unsure that I agreed with every aspect of sXe. I thought outsiders could easily interpret the group's message as judgmental and intolerant. I even grew my hair out long and kept wearing my Metallica and Iron Maiden t-shirts, fashion statements much more suited to the heavy metal scene. Although I agreed with sXe's message I was conscious of its weaknesses and contradictions and always felt that sXe had to be a means to a greater end, whether that was activism, art, or self-actualization.

After graduation, I left for the University of South Dakota in the fall of 1992. Located in a sparsely populated rural area surrounded by corn and wheat fields, USD offered little in the way of punk rock entertainment. Like high school, keg parties were the social events of choice, only now alcohol was even more readily available. I knew no other sXers, but I refused to drink. Occasionally I went to fraternity parties (when I could get in; few allowed nonmember men inside), but mostly I socialized with other misfits and a few friends from high school. By the end of my first semester, I had a steady girlfriend. She smoked cigarettes and sometimes drank beer, but gave both up immediately when our relationship began. Her background in the punk scene and her Alcohol and Drug Abuse Studies major made us a good match. We wore shirts with sayings like "It's OK not to drink" and "Sober" around campus, hoping that others would reconsider the beer culture we disliked.

Whenever I could, I would drive to punk shows in nearby cities, but these events were few and far between. As my studies, playing on the university soccer team, cartooning for the campus newspaper, and my new relationship kept me increasingly busy, sXe receded to the background in my life. Never once during my college years did I drink, smoke, or use drugs, but the sXe *identity* simply didn't feel as relevant as it had previously been. Other identities came to the forefront of my consciousness: student, activist, artist, boyfriend. As I grew further away from the sXe scene, I lost touch with the current trends and music. The movement's core values stayed with me, but without others who shared the identity, claiming sXe seemed rather passé.

In 1996, I graduated from USD with degrees in sociology and psychology and, at age twenty-two, began graduate school. My youthful involvement in the Midwest sXe scene grew into a sociological interest in this largely unstudied movement. I moved to Boulder, Colorado, to begin graduate training at the University of Colorado (CU). Boulder is a predominantly white university town of approximately 95,000 people and the university a large research institution with 30,000 students. Soon after arriving, I sought out the local Denver hardcore scene and began attending shows.

I went to my first Denver show in the late fall of 1996 at a rundown former movie theater in one of the city's poorer neighborhoods. Kids began mingling outside well before the doors opened, showing each other their new tattoos and jokingly practicing their dance moves in slow motion. A Los Angeles band called Downset was the headliner, but sXe kids were there to see Earth Crisis, a metal-influenced vegan sXe band that would transform the sXe scene in the mid-nineties. I went to the show by myself, but quickly sought out kids who had thick X's marked across their hands. My personal involvement and knowledge of sXe enabled me to gain entrée into the local scene very quickly. By using their vernacular, self-identifying as sXe, and consciously dressing the part (see Warren 1988) of an sXer by wearing a shirt with the slogan "It's OK not to drink," I immediately connected with other youth, particularly a small "crew" of guys from another nearby city. Each of them bore either an sXe tattoo or a shirt with an sXe message. The only thing that made me suspect was my very long hair (remnant of my metal days), still generally a fashion faux pas in the clean-cut hardcore world.

I quickly learned that I had a lot of catching up to do. Whole trends had developed within the movement in the four years since I had been actively involved, which proved beneficial for my work as I was able to approach

the setting with a relatively fresh perspective. Earth Crisis, a band from Syracuse, New York, brought a militant cry for veganism and animal rights to the scene and had become a national voice for sXe. They and other musicians were borrowing heavily from the extreme metal genre. Sports jerseys, camouflage pants, visors, stainless steel body jewelry, tattoos, bleached spiked hair, and the occasional sweater vest (!) had largely replaced Krishna beads, shorts, hooded sweatshirts, t-shirts, and shaved or crew-cut heads as the styles of choice. “Windmilling,” “speed skating,” “picking up change,” “floor punching,” and kung-fu spin kicks had supplanted circle pit dancing long before.<sup>3</sup> By 1996, sXe had almost become fashionable, something the outcasts who started the movement and the sXe punks I had grown up with would never have imagined.

I had never been much of a record collector, so I was fairly illiterate on the more obscure details of the history of sXe. I had never set up shows, been in a band, or created a 'zine (fan magazine), other roles central to the sXe scene. So although I had firsthand experience with the movement and some knowledge of its history, I was relatively naïve at the time I sought entry into the Denver scene. I knew enough to “pass” (Goffman 1974) and even to gain members’ trust, but I felt disconnected and realized that I had to rediscover sXe. This was fortunate. I believe my naiveté enabled me to set aside some of the preconceived notions I may otherwise have brought to the setting, as everything seemed relatively fresh and new.

This book, based upon seven years of field research among the Denver/Boulder sXers, will take you into the lives of members of the sXe scene, showing that there is much more to sXe than hardcore music, living drug free, and what you may have seen on MTV, *20/20*, and *America’s Most Wanted*. Scholars have written books about hippies, punks, skinheads, goths, rockers, and other youth subcultures and movements (for example Hebdige 1979; Brake 1985; Leblanc 1999; Wooden and Blazak 2001; Kaplan and Löow 2002), yet until recently researchers have given little notice to sXe, despite the movement’s twenty-five-year existence.<sup>4</sup> In the course of describing and explaining the sXe culture, I will address the numerous questions that emerged to guide my research. Where are the boundaries between subcultures and social movements? How do young men and women challenge stereotypical gender roles, and do they succeed? Is sXe a cool, hip version of the DARE program, or is it a middle class street gang that preys upon fraternity brothers, as some law enforcement agencies suggest? What happens to members of subcultures as they grow older in the scene? How do movements create and maintain boundaries designating who does and does not belong? What are the impacts of commercial-

ization, the media, and the Internet on youth scenes? I'll start with a brief history of straight edge, outline the movement's major eras, and discuss the methods that guided my research.

### **A Brief History of Straight Edge**

I'm a person just like you / But I've got better things to do / Than sit around and fuck my head / Hang out with the living dead / Snort white shit up my nose / Pass out at the shows / I don't even think about speed / That's something I just don't need / I've got the straight edge

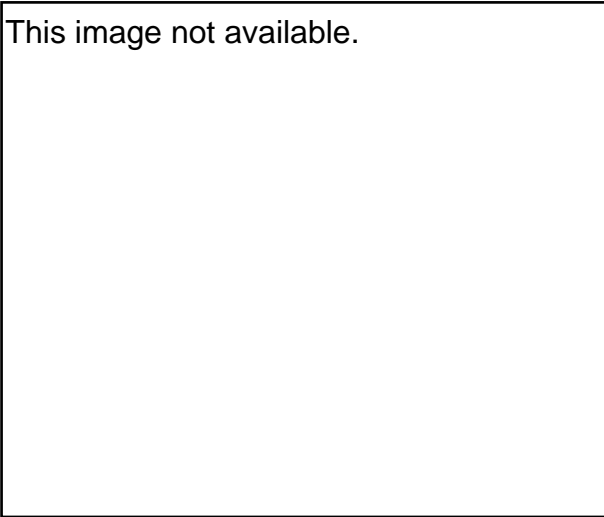
I'm a person just like you / But I've got better things to do / Than sit around and smoke dope / 'Cause I know that I can cope / I laugh at the thought of eating 'ludes / Laugh at the thought of sniffing glue / Always gonna keep in touch / Never want to use a crutch / I've got the straight edge.

—"Straight Edge" by Minor Threat, 1981

These lyrics, from seminal hardcore band Minor Threat, launched a movement that over the span of more than two decades has convinced thousands of young people to give up (or never start) using drugs, alcohol, and tobacco products. Popular media, mainstream culture, and even social scientists have often stereotyped youth as hedonistic, sexually promiscuous, and mired in substance abuse. Youth substance use has been socially constructed as a serious social problem and periodic drug scares reinforce the image of youth as "in crisis" (see Goode 1993). However, sXe promoted a drug- and alcohol-free, sexually responsible lifestyle that appealed to thousands of youth around the world. Their conservative lifestyle combined with progressive punk ideals and harsh music sharply contrasted the conventional image of youth gone wild.

Straight edge emerged on the East Coast of the United States from the punk subculture of the early 1980s. Club owners in Washington, D.C., like many places, were unwilling to allow underage kids into shows<sup>5</sup> (the legal drinking age then was eighteen). Clubs made a significant portion of their profits from alcohol sales and were therefore more inclined to cater to adults. Owners also wanted to avoid being caught and fined—and possibly having their liquor license revoked—for harboring underage drinkers. The fact that alcohol prevented minors from experiencing the punk scene was intolerable to many kids. Luckily, a D.C. law barred music establishments from refusing to admit minors. To accommodate eager underage fans, clubs marked underage D.C. punks' hands with large X's





This image not available.

1. Cover to the 1980 Teen Idles' *Minor Disturbance* record, one of the earliest examples of a punk with X's on his hands.

as a signal to club workers not to serve them alcohol. The X, however, quickly became a badge of defiance. Youth transformed the X from a stigma (that is, not having access to the “privilege” of drinking) to a symbol of pride, as if to say, “not only *can't* we drink, we don't *want* to drink.” The kids, including youth legally allowed to drink, began marking their own hands. The practice was popularized by the cover of D.C. band the Teen Idles' 1980 *Minor Disturbance 7"* record that showed a punk with crossed fists, each bearing a large X.

Though sXe has its roots in kids' practical desires to see the bands they loved, the movement arose primarily as a response to the punk scene's nihilistic tendencies, including drug and alcohol abuse, casual sex, violence, and self-destructive “live fast, die young” attitudes. The youths who would form the nascent sXe scene appreciated punk's “question everything” mentality, raw energy, aggressive style, and do-it-yourself attitude but were not attracted to the scene's hedonism and “no future” mantra. Straight edge's founding members adopted a “clean living” ideology, abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, and promiscuous sex. Early sXe youth viewed punk's self-indulgent rebellion as no rebellion at all,

suggesting that in many ways punks reinforced mainstream culture's intoxicated lifestyle in a mohawked, leather-jacketed guise. For many sXe kids, being clean and sober was the ultimate expression of the punk ethos, an act of resistance that defied both mainstream adult and youth cultures. Being "straight" gave youth an "edge" over their counterparts, as Minor Threat singer Ian MacKaye explained: "OK, fine, you take drugs, you drink, whatever. . . . But obviously I have the edge on you because I'm sober; I'm in control of what I'm doing" (Azerrad 2001:136).

Straight edgers credit Minor Threat, a D.C. band featuring former members of the Teen Idles, for creating the movement's foundation.<sup>6</sup> Their 1981 song "Straight Edge" gave the movement its name, and the chorus of 1983's "Out of Step" furnished its credo: "I Don't Drink, Don't Smoke, Don't Fuck—At least I can fucking think!" MacKaye, considered by many to be the closest thing to a founder that sXe has, had no intention of starting a social movement: "I guess the movement had sort of started, but in my mind I wasn't interested in it being a movement. It ran conversely to my initial idea that it was a concert of individuals, as opposed to a movement" (Lahicky 1997:102). Being a punk meant being an *individual*; adopting any sort of label or following any creed ran contrary to individual expression. Nevertheless, sXe quickly spread across the United States, blossoming in Boston with bands like Society System Decontrol (SSD) and Department of Youth Services (DYS); in Reno, Nevada, with 7 Seconds; and Los Angeles with Uniform Choice. Punk kids who were formerly ridiculed for not using alcohol and drugs now had a community that not only accepted sobriety but also championed clean living.

Straight edge remains nearly inseparable from the hardcore music scene. Indeed, throughout the book I will refer to the hardcore scene, which includes sXe and non-sXe kids alike. Hardcore is a broad genre but began generally as a faster version of punk.<sup>7</sup> During the 1990s the two scenes became increasingly distinct, with their own styles and fashions. Where punk encouraged flamboyant clothes and bizarre haircuts, hardcore favored a more clean-cut, straitlaced look. "There was a quantum difference between early punk and hardcore—it was something like the difference between bebop and hard bop in jazz, or the leap from Chuck Berry's affable rock & roll to Jimi Hendrix's freaky electrocution of the blues. It was all about the intensity of the delivery" (Azerrad 2001:130). Straight edge bands serve as the primary shapers of the group's ideology and collective identity. Hardcore shows are still the most important place for sXers to congregate, share ideas, and build solidarity.

Since its inception, the movement has expanded around the globe, counting tens of thousands of young people among its members. A 2000 Commitment Records boxed collection of sXe 7-inch records called *More Than the X on Our Hands: A Worldwide Straight Edge Compilation* features bands from forty-one different countries, including Chile, Italy, the Czech Republic, Singapore, Columbia, South Africa, the Philippines, Israel, South Korea, Malaysia, Russia, Guatemala, and Sweden. Hardcore and sXe bands from the United States have toured the world since the mid-eighties, sharing their styles and ideologies with fans from Europe to Japan to South America.

The basic tenets of sXe are quite simple: members abstain, completely, from drug, alcohol, and tobacco use and usually reserve sexual activity for caring relationships, rejecting casual sex. These sXe “rules” are absolute; there are no exceptions and a single lapse means an adherent loses any claim to the sXe identity. Abstaining means many things to sXers, including resistance, self actualization, and social transformation. Members commit to a lifetime of clean-living and, despite the group’s lack of formal leadership and structure, sXers zealously stay “true” to their identities.

Like all youth movements, sXe was a product of the times and culture that it both resisted and grew out of. The rise of the new Christian right in the late 1970s and early 1980s contributed to a more conservative national climate that influenced youth values (Liebman and Wuthnow 1983). Fundamentalism gained appeal among populations who felt they were losing control of their ways of life (Hunter 1987). Straight edge’s unyielding, black-and-white strictures on behavior were similar to fundamentalist religion’s rigid, clear-cut beliefs (Marty and Appleby 1993). In particular, sXe’s emphasis on clean living, sexual purity, lifetime commitment, and meaningful community was reminiscent of youth evangelical movements, while the focus on self-control suggested puritanical roots. In addition to these conservative influences, sXe was, in many ways, a continuation of New Left middle-class radicalism oriented toward “issues of a moral or humanitarian nature,” a radicalism whose payoff is “in the emotional satisfaction derived from expressing personal values in action” (Parkin 1968:41). The movement’s core values reflect this curious blend of middle-class conservative and progressive influences.

Straight edge attracts a variety of young men and women, but in the United States the typical sXer is a white, middle class male or female, aged approximately fifteen to twenty-five (Irwin 1999; Atkinson 2003). Some scenes are more diverse. At times the Los Angeles scene has had a strong Chicano sXe/hardcore movement centered around bands such as

None for All and Downset. Straight edgers may or may not clearly distinguish themselves from their peers by wearing large Xs on their clothing, bookbags, or on each hand before attending punk concerts. Some are easily identifiable while others blend perfectly into the surrounding culture.

### **Straight Edge Trends**

Like other youth movements, sXe has a long and complex history. The movement changed over time, adopting new styles and behaviors and absorbing and reacting to other social trends and musical styles (see the timeline of straight edge bands at the back of the book). Each era of sXe history produced adherents with similar attitudes and interests. The following descriptions, in roughly chronological order, are merely caricatures or loose archetypes; it is often difficult to pigeonhole most sXers into one category or another. Furthermore, younger sXers may adopt a persona based upon a previous archetype: for example, a nineteen-year-old who becomes sXe in 2006 may align her or himself with the youth crew style that was popular two decades earlier.

#### *Old School*

Old school hardcore emerged in the early days of punk rock at the beginning of the 1980s, before the two scenes separated. Bands such as Black Flag, Bad Brains, Circle Jerks, and the Dead Kennedys toured the country playing their more aggressive brand of punk rock. Though these bands were initially labeled “hardcore punk,” today’s hardcore scene did not coalesce until the mid-1980s. The style of dress was often typically punk: short hair or shaved heads with the occasional mohawk, jeans and band t-shirts, bandanas, and spiked belts and wristbands. Common lyrical themes included friendship, standing out from society, and voicing opinions and concerns about the world. Minor Threat (D.C.), Verbal Assault (RI), SSD (MA), 7 Seconds (NV), and Uniform Choice (CA) were sXe stalwarts of the old school era, and Warzone (NY), Cause for Alarm (NY), Agnostic Front (NY), and Negative Approach (MA) also had an impact. Hardcore was very fast and relatively simple, and the singer shouted more than sang. Gradually, an underground network of musicians and fans developed, writing each other letters, sending each other tapes, and promoting each other’s bands. This era saw the rise of the rivalry between Boston and New York kids, battles with Nazi skinheads, and the initial split of hardcore from punk.

Some sXers still identify with the old school era, keeping the connection between sXe, punk, and hardcore alive. They might wear dirty jeans with bands' logos hand-sewn into the thighs, a patch-covered jean jacket with spikes, or a full beard, a rarity among sXers. They associate with punk rockers who reflect punk's original ideals such as individualism, disdain for work and school, and live-for-the-moment attitudes, yet are ardently sXe and often vegetarian. Old school sXers are just as likely to play in a punk as a hardcore band. Like many individuals aligned with old school punk, these sXers disdain what they see as the judgmental, cliquish nature of many sXers. Some claim to be "punk first, sXe second" and for them hardcore music and sXe *are* punk rock. Many old school sXers collect a variety of records, attend shows of every punk sub-genre, love circle pits, and have little tolerance for kids who only support sXe bands or only go to hardcore shows. As strong supporters of underground, "Do It Yourself" (DIY) music, though, they despise "corporate punk rock," typified by bands such as Sum 41 and Blink 182.

### *Youth Crew*

The youth crew era of approximately 1986–1991 helped spread sXe around the United States and the world, bringing new energy and urgency to the movement. Most of the first wave of sXers drifted from the lifestyle and distanced themselves from the hardcore scene, but not before inspiring a new generation of kids. New York's Youth of Today was the main inspiration behind this era, with charismatic singer Ray Cappo seeking to unite the scene into an sXe *movement*. It is their song "Youth Crew" which gives this era its name.

Kids of the youth crew era often took on a more clean-cut image than their old-school predecessors; their carefully cut short hair, running shoes, shorts, and t-shirts sometimes evoked comparisons to jocks. Indeed, many sXers at the time were or had been athletes, and kids emphasized the healthy aspects of a clean lifestyle as much as the social challenge it posed. Champion™ brand hooded sweatshirts were common, as were high-top basketball shoes and short sleeved shirts worn over long sleeves. Bands from this era, such as Bold (NY), Gorilla Biscuits (NY), Turning Point (MA), Side By Side (NY), No for an Answer (CA) and Insted (CA), were still popular in the 2000s, years after they had broken up. (Both Insted and Bold played reunion shows in 2004-2005.) Youth crew preached positivity, personal responsibility, loyalty, sXe pride, and fun. Revelation Records was the premier sXe label of the time, releasing many



2. A girl stage dives as fans sing along with youth crew era band Bold, playing a reunion show. Reunion shows were especially common in the 2000s, much to the delight of younger fans who never had the chance to see bands that had broken up in the early nineties or before. Photo by Todd Pollock.

classic sXe recordings that now sell for hundreds of dollars on Internet auction sites.

It was also during this time that vegetarianism gained a significant hold in the sXe scene, as Youth of Today recorded the animal rights anthem “No More” in 1988:

Meat eating flesh eating think about it / So callous to this crime we commit / Always stuffing our face with no sympathy / What a selfish, hardened society so / No More / Just looking out for myself / When the price paid is the life of something else / No More / I won't participate.

Their West Coast counterparts, Insted, spread the vegetarian message with their song “Feel Their Pain” on the *We'll Make the Difference* record:

Hear my words—Feel their pain / Eating their flesh—You have nothing to gain / A moral opposition / To the murder of animals / It's

my philosophy / To take life is criminal / The smiling clown / For  
the billions served / Represents to me / Bloodshed undeserved

Bands also increasingly questioned casual sexual encounters in their lyrics, such as Youth of Today's "Modern Love Story" and "What Goes Around." Themes of personal empowerment and living a meaningful life were common.

Though the shows were intense, youth crew had a certain light-heartedness that appealed to many youth, especially kids from the suburbs. Some kids today look upon many of this era's lyrics as cheesy or simplistic and joke that sXe was a hardcore manifestation of the Boy Scout Oath. Some sXe kids today have never even heard of the youth crew bands that laid the groundwork for the movement's growth in the 1990s. Still, many kids new to the sXe scene eventually discover and enjoy this music, and the era still has a tremendous influence, as evidenced by the ongoing "youth crew revival" bands.

Today's youth crew kids retain the close-cropped hair, hoodies, and cargo shorts of their earlier heroes. Many wear vintage band t-shirts bought at shows or on the Internet. Their favorite bands include youth crew legends such as Gorilla Biscuits, Floorpunch (NJ), Bold, Chain of Strength (CA), and, of course, Youth of Today. Many older sXers (aged thirty plus) came of age during this era, which still holds a special place in their hearts. They often collect all kinds of punk and hardcore records and some are sXe historians, able to discuss the history of nearly every band, its music and members. Most reflect the positivity of the bands they love and many are vegetarian. It is fairly common to find older youth crew kids wearing the "X" Swatch, a watch with a white face and black X.

Though youth crew music was temporarily drowned out by more metal-influenced music in the 1990s and 2000s, periodic revivals have kept the sound and style alive. The music remains fast, featuring short songs without the growling vocals or intricate guitar work of metal. Floorpunch, Ten Yard Fight (MA), and Ensign (NJ) spurred new interest in youth crew sXe in the mid and late 1990s, and D.C. area bands Good Clean Fun, Count Me Out, and Down to Nothing carry on the tradition. Seattle youth crew style group Champion is perhaps the most popular sXe band in 2005.

#### *Emo-Influenced/Politically Correct*

As youth crew kids matured, many of them became increasingly aware of social issues such as sexism, homelessness, government corruption, and inequality. Wanting to break away from the perceived simplicity of old

school and youth crew, musicians of this era added more melody and complexity to their music while still keeping the intensity and urgency of previous bands. “Emo” music, short for “emotional,” has grown alongside hardcore and punk, becoming especially popular in the late 1990s and after (Greenwald 2003) and influencing a variety of hardcore bands. Emo has its roots in bands such as Rites of Spring, Sunny Day Real Estate, and Jawbreaker, but is now such a broad category it is difficult to define. Emo lyrics express feelings of “nostalgia,” “romantic bitterness,” and “general poetic desperation” (ibid.:12-13). Early-nineties hardcore and sXe bands with a variety of styles like By the Grace of God (KY), Four Walls Falling (PA), Forced Down (CA), Mouthpiece (RI), and Outspoken (CA) addressed issues of power, repression, and relationships. Like old-school, this genre traces back, once again, to the Washington, D.C. scene where mid-80s bands such as Rites of Spring, Embrace, Faith, Fugazi and others played melodic, emotionally charged music. It was not uncommon to see sXers from this era with longer hair than their youth crew counterparts. They wore long-sleeved shirts, running shoes, beaded necklaces, and the oversize pants more common in hip hop circles.

Also known as the “Politically Correct,” or PC, era, this was a period when many sXers took an interest in social issues, emotions, and self-actualization. Songs and discussions about sexual assault were common and the “Chicks Up Front” posse helped women stake out their space in the scene. Trial (WA), for example, actively promoted Native American rights, including championing the cause of imprisoned American Indian activist Leonard Peltier. It was also at this time that Krishnacore emerged, as Ray Cappo and John Porcelly (“Porcell”) of Youth of Today became interested in the teachings of His Divine Grace AC Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who popularized Krishna Consciousness in the United States. Equal Vision Records released records by Hare Krishna hardcore bands including 108, Refuse to Fall, and Cappo and Porcell’s group, Shelter. Shelter and 108 toured extensively, sharing vegetarian meals and Krishna teachings with their fans.<sup>8</sup>

Today’s PC sXe kids might wear sweaters, jeans, and sneakers; a spiked belt could be the only thing that makes them stand out from the rest of the young, alternative crowd. Buddy Holly style glasses have been a staple of this genre for years and carrier bags covered in buttons are not uncommon. These fans are somewhat less likely to sport X’s and tattoos than are the old school, youth crew, and metal kids. Many of these sXers take issues of sexism, racism, and homophobia very seriously. Some get involved with activism, martial arts, or spiritual interests, while others pursue higher education. When hardcore turned toward metal with its



concurrent increase in hypermasculine behavior, many PC sXers became disillusioned with the scene and what they saw as a stagnant musical style. Many have become fans (or members) of indie rock bands, holding onto sXe values while having less involvement with the hardcore scene.

### *The Victory Era and Metalcore*

Beginning in the late 1980s, a few youth crew bands such as Judge, Integrity, and Chorus of Disapproval (CA), delved into a heavier sound. Victory Records artists Strife (CA), Earth Crisis (NY), and Snapcase (NY) paved the way for a more metal-influenced hardcore in the 1990s. Their April 1996 “California Takeover,” in which all three bands played shows together at Los Angeles’s Whiskey A Go-Go and Corona’s Showcase Theater, marked a resurgence of sXe pride. Earth Crisis also ushered in vegan-sXe,<sup>9</sup> increasing the scene’s focus on animal rights and opposition to environmental destruction. The style reflected hip-hop and athletic fashion, as baggy pants and sports jerseys became the norm. The bands of this era continued with the intense social criticism of the emo era, taking on issues of racism, environmental destruction, hunger, and human and animal rights. Strife and Earth Crisis were among the most political—and adamantly sXe—bands ever. While the youth crew kids sported a clean cut, athletic look, even more metal-era males were large and muscular. Dancing became an acrobatic affair as kids leaped, punched, and kicked through the air. By the mid-1990s, the number of sXe kids swelled, although it seemed many were part of the scene more for the fashion and dancing than because they were committed to the original sXe principles. Nevertheless, thousands of kids adopted a strict vegan lifestyle, refusing to eat all animal products (often including honey); wear any kind of suede, leather, or wool; and support companies that tested products on animals. Influenced by the rhetoric of Earth Crisis and Unconquered (NV), sXe kids of this kind were very outspoken about sXe, although as they aged they often became less opinionated.

Today hardcore and metal have fused into a hybrid genre often called metalcore. Many bands are still influenced by Earth Crisis, though Throwdown (CA) has made a strong impact on the scene. Hatebreed (CT), Unearth (MA), and Poison the Well (FL) are extremely popular non-sXe bands with these kids. As metal-influenced sXe grew, the style of dress shifted to large military-style cargo pants, basketball jerseys bearing band (instead of sports team) names, expensive New Balance running shoes, and large, stainless-steel hoop earrings through “stretched” ears. Kids alternated between camouflage hats and bandanas, folded hippie style, over

gelled, stylish haircuts. Most metalcore kids have several tattoos and many have relatively little sense of sXe's roots. Some don't care about Minor Threat, Youth of Today, or any of the other pioneers of the movement and dislike old school and youth crew style music in general. At shows, they enjoy dancing very hard and several times I witnessed kids leaping over the front of the crowd, crawling over people's heads to sing along with the band.

### *Straight Edge after 2000*

As Victory stalwarts Strife<sup>10</sup> and Earth Crisis broke up, youth crew revivalists Ten Yard Fight and Floorpunch went their separate ways, and indie rock and emo music exploded even more into the mainstream, sXe once again receded into the margins of subcultural life. Many sXers began growing out and dying their hair black and wearing expensive jeans to match their indie rock counterparts' disheveled look. "Fashioncore," a rather derogatory label describing preppy sXers in the nineties, was resurrected in a new form; instead of sweater vests and bleached hair, contemporary trendsetters wore ultra-tight black T-shirts and form-fitting jeans, adopting a somewhat effeminate look popularized by bands such as Eighteen Visions, From Autumn to Ashes, and Atreyu. Tattoos virtually became an obsession. While pockets of militancy remained, without a nationally recognized band leading the way, the movement maintained a quieter presence in the underground scene.

Hardcore has always had some mainstream commercial appeal. Some bands managed to eke out a meager living from their musical earnings. Strife and Earth Crisis had both played one of heavy metal's biggest events, Ozzfest.<sup>11</sup> By 2002, even more hardcore bands were receiving mainstream attention, earning radio airplay and slots on MTV 2. Hatebreed placed a song on the XXX (Triple X; no connection to sXe) movie soundtrack, and H2O (NY) continued to tour, as they appealed to both the hardcore and punk scenes. Victory and Revelation Records expanded, signing a variety of indie, emo, and hardcore bands. As hardcore edges its way into more mainstream youth culture, the future of sXe as an oppositional subculture remains to be seen.

### **Researching the Straight Edge Scene**

Throughout the course of my research, I used many methods to gather and record information, from examining song lyrics to face-to-face interviews. I assumed several roles and explored various settings to discover

how sXers understood and lived their beliefs. The intimate connection between sXe and hardcore music meant I spent a lot of time attending hardcore shows. Before revealing just how I went about conducting my research, I must try to convey the atmosphere at a show.

Describing a good hardcore show is like trying to explain the feeling of skydiving, meeting your hero, or standing in the Sistine Chapel; there is simply no adequate way to explain the experience to those who have not been there. Every music scene has something magical that makes it a beautiful experience for its fans. Bluegrass touches people's yearnings for a rural, simpler past and encourages everyone to sing and play along. Hip hop's energy can have an entire crowd bobbing their heads and pogo-ing up and down to the beat. The atmosphere in a great jazz club creates a mood unlike any other setting. Hardcore's gift is an urgent, physical intensity that to outsiders might look like a riot. "Patrick,"<sup>12</sup> a twenty-five-year-old tattoo artist from the East Coast, compared a good show to an intense religious experience:

If you can go to show and feel like you're on top of the world when you leave, like you've just had a religious experience . . . how could you beat that?! [laughs] I just feel like there's very, very few things—especially in today's world—that can give people like a sense of self-worth and positivity. People talk about going to raves and just having this unreal experience, with the music and the lights going. Get some of those kids to a good hardcore show and see what happens. There is nothing in the world that is like that, goin' to a show like that and seeing a hundred kids piled on top of each other with the band just inches away from where they are and frickin' microphones in there—this huge melting pot of energy. Stick a fork in it. [laughs] There's no other scene that's like that. Even in the punk rock scene, there's not that sense of togetherness so much, or like strength that you can get from the hardcore scene. . . . Literally we got out of a Boy Sets Fire show and were like "That was like going to church." That was like having your faith revived. Your strength renewed.

I recall being at metalcore band Unearth's show in early 2003 where most of the core members of the Denver scene sat cross-legged on the floor just before the band's set began, forming an irregular circle in the middle of the pit. Just as the guitarists struck their first notes, the kids leapt up and pushed the rest of the audience to the walls, creating a large, open dance area which immediately filled with flailing, kicking kids. In the space of two seconds the room went from quiet, casual interaction to



3. Often the distance between band and audience completely disintegrates, with kids mobbing the singer and screaming into the microphone. For many kids, this is the ultimate hardcore experience: sharing the intensity of the music with the musicians. Photo by Amanda Raney.

a frenzy of swinging arms and stomping feet. Uneath played abrasive, fast, and most of all, *loud* music for nearly an hour, leaving the room simultaneously exhilarated and exhausted. In the eyes of hardcore kids, the best show is one in which both the band and audience “go off,” losing control, jumping, and screaming together in a melee of tangled bodies. A great show carries a tense feeling in the air as if a fight or injury could happen at any moment, yet usually neither occurs. When a kid falls down, other kids, friends or strangers, ideally pick up their fallen comrade, who quickly leaps back into the fray.

Many readers may be familiar with “slam-dancing” or “moshing,” both of which have been mainstays in the heavy metal and punk rock scenes for decades. Slam dancing, most popular at metal concerts, usually involves two or more burly, long-haired men running head on at each other, colliding shoulder to shoulder, bouncing apart, then repeating the motion until all involved are sweaty, sore, and grinning from ear to ear. Moshing, or “circle-pit” dancing, is most common at punk shows and involves kids running, skipping, and jumping in a large circle, randomly

colliding with other moshers as stage-divers launch into the crowd from the stage. Hardcore kids frown upon slam dancing as ignorant, ungraceful, or silly. They have a more favorable attitude toward circle-pits, as many have roots in the punk scene, though a hardcore show is generally much more intense than a typical punk show.<sup>13</sup> Hardcore includes an exhibitionist element that slamming and moshing do not. The center of the dance floor remains relatively open, allowing a few individuals at a time take the floor, demonstrate their skills, and exit, permitting the next group to participate. (Breakdancing in hip-hop scenes follows similar patterns of “exhibition dancing.”) Meanwhile, other kids crawl over one another to scream along with the singer.

As the band approaches a song’s bridge, called a “breakdown” in hardcore music, the kids wait in anticipation. Hardcore bands, particularly those with a heavy metal influence such as Unearth, put slow, crunching riffs in the bridge. The kids reserve their most outstanding dance moves for the breakdown, windmilling, floor punching, and kung-fu kicking their way from one side of the pit to the other. Others practice “head-walking,” stepping on the heads and shoulders of their fellows as they carve a precarious path to the stage.

An uninitiated observer might have difficulty telling the difference between hardcore dancing and fighting.<sup>14</sup> While it may be difficult for outsiders to comprehend how a hardcore show could possibly be fun, participants generally have a fantastic time, despite the bumps and bruises they carry home with them. In fact, the occasional shiner, fat lip, or bruised shin usually makes for a good story and serves as a badge of honor: “I survived the insanity of the mosh pit!” Moshers describe the experience as a safe, relatively harmless “release” of emotion, aggression, and frustration. Though outsiders may view moshing as violent, dangerous, or antisocial, for insiders it is a fun, communal, and essential element of what sets hardcore apart from other musical genres. This is the setting in which I conducted much of my research.

### **Straight Edge Core Values**

Resistance in a time of mass self-destruction / Makes the few who walk the straight edge / A growing force of change / Committed, though gripped by the plague of a nation / Consumed by its intoxication and confined by crippling greed / In my rage / I walk the path of true change / Commitment sworn in the name / Of those who will walk the straight edge / Convictions held to my grave.

—“Force of Change” by Strife, 1997

Throughout sXe’s history, trends in the movement have come and gone almost as quickly as have sXers. Identifying a core set of principles that spans time and geography is difficult because values change, each scene has its own flavor, and even individuals within the same scene have different interpretations of sXe. Straight edgers recognize that sXe means something different to each person, assuming the identity and, as with any group, individual members’ level of dedication varies. However, while individuals are free to follow the philosophy in various ways, often adding their own interpretations, there is a set of fundamental values that underlays much of the movement: positivity/clean living, lifetime commitment to the movement and its values, reserving sex for caring relationships, self actualization, spreading the subculture’s message, and involvement in progressive causes.

T-shirt slogans, song lyrics, tattoos, and other symbols constantly remind sXers of their mission and dedication: “It’s OK Not to Drink,” “True Till Death,” and “One Life Drug Free” are among the more popular messages. The “X,” sXe’s universal symbol, emerged in the early 1980s, when music club owners marked the hands of underage concert-goers with X’s to ensure that bartenders would not serve them alcohol (see Lahickey 1997:99; Wood 1999). As I mentioned in the introduction, soon the kids intentionally marked their own hands, both to signal club workers of their intentions not to drink and, more importantly, to make a statement of pride and defiance out of not drinking. The movement appropriated the X, a symbol meant to be negative, transforming its meaning into discipline and commitment to a drug-free lifestyle.<sup>3</sup> Youth wear X’s on their backpacks, shirts, and necklaces; they tattoo them on their bodies; and draw them on their school folders, skateboards, cars and other possessions. The X unites youth around the world, communicating a common set of values and experiences. Straight edgers find strength, camaraderie, loyalty, and encouragement in their sXe friends, valuing them above all else. The community in Boulder was very tight-knit. Shows, frequent potlucks, movie nights, parties, hanging out at popular campus



5. Mike Medina, of Denver sXe band the Mutiny, “Xes up” before a show. Photo by Ross Haenfler.

locations, involvement in local animal rights activism, and even the occasional sleep-over kept members in regular contact. Many sXe youth live together. With the advent of email and the Internet, sXe kids communicate via a ‘virtual community’ around the country and sometimes the globe (see Williams 2003). A powerful sense of community, based in large part upon the hardcore music scene and symbolized by the visual avatar of the X, is the glue that has held the sXe movement and its values together for twenty years.

#### *Positive, Clean Living*

Through the clouds I see the light / My conscience tells me what’s wrong and right / Morals goals deep inside / A bunch of feelings I just can’t hide / But that’s me. . . . The way “I” live / My outlook on life is Positive

—“Positive Outlook” by Youth of Today, 1986

The foundation underlying the sXe identity is positive, clean living. Straight edge is, as Darrell Irwin (1999) suggests, fundamentally about subverting the drug scene and creating an alternative, drug-free environment. Clean living is the key precursor to a positive life. Many sXers even shun caffeine and medicinal drugs, and a majority are committed vegetarians or vegans.

Positive living holds different meanings for various members, including questioning and resisting society's norms, having a positive outlook on life, being an individual, treating people with respect and dignity, and taking action to make the world a better place. Straight edgers claim that one can not fully question dominant society while under the influence of drugs, and that once one questions social convention, substance use, eating meat, and promiscuous sex are no longer appealing. Therefore clean living and positivity are inseparable; they reinforce one another and constitute the foundation for all other sXe values. Joe, an eighteen-year-old high school senior and skateboarder, explained how the "positivity" he gains from sXe shapes his life:

To me, I guess what I've gotten from [sXe] is living a more positive lifestyle. Striving to be more positive in the way you live. Just being more positive around people. Because where I was at when I found it was really [laughs] I was really negative myself. I was negative around people and influenced them to be negative. I was surrounded by negativity. Then I found this and it was like something really positive to be a part of. Also, like the ethics, drug free, alcohol free, no promiscuous sex. It's just saying no to things that are such a challenge for people my age, growing up at that time. It's a big thing for some people to say "No."

Refusing drugs and alcohol has a variety of meanings for individual sXers, including purification, control, and breaking abusive family patterns. Purification literally means being free from toxins that threaten one's health and potentially ruin lives. Popular t-shirt slogans proclaim "Purification—vegan straight edge" and "Straight edge—my commitment against society's poisons." Straight edgers believe that drugs and alcohol influence people to do things they would normally not do, such as have casual sex, fight, and harm themselves. By labeling themselves as more "authentic" than their peers who use alcohol and drugs, sXers create an easy way to distinguish themselves. They experience a feeling of uniqueness, self-confidence—and sometimes superiority—by rejecting the stereotypical teenage life. Refusing alcohol and drugs symbolizes refusing the "popular" clique altogether. It is also a rejection of the perceived nihilism of other groups, such as punks, hippies, and skinheads.

The movement provides young people with a way to feel more in control of their lives. Many youth experience peer pressure to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or try illegal drugs.<sup>4</sup> For some, this pressure creates feelings of helplessness and lack of control; acceptance often hinges on



substance use. Straight edgers report that the group gives them a way to feel accepted without using and helps them maintain control over their personal situations. Matthew, a seventeen-year-old high school student and Christian, claims the sXe identity in part to resist both peer pressure and drug addiction in his own family:

Everyone in my school smoked weed. It was just kind of a common thing. If you didn't do it, you weren't anyone's real friend. There was *nobody* that didn't do it and didn't hang out with kids. That was just kind of the way it went. Myself, I started smoking marijuana when I was in sixth grade. I had my first cigarette when I was in fourth grade. So I kind of knew the path I was heading down because I'd seen a lot of my family members head down that path. Like my dad, especially. He had gone through some pretty horrible drug abuse and stuff. I just kind of realized I was going the same way. That just wasn't what I wanted to do.

Breaking family patterns of abuse is a common theme among sXers. Maggie, a twenty-three-year-old community college student and a veteran of the Denver scene, claimed she became involved in sXe as an act of resistance against her family history:

My brother, his whole adolescence he was a partier. He would do any kind of drug and it really messed up my family. It had a lot to do with my father. He left when I was two. My mom doesn't really tell me all the reasons, but I know he was a coke addict. He died when I was nine because he had AIDS from dirty needles. That really affected my family, you know. Then my brother heading on the same path. I was like, "Wow, I don't want to be like that and mess it up even more for our family." That had a lot to do with it. . . . I don't wanna mess up my family like my brother did. There were a lot of crappy days growing up just because of him.

Likewise, Gus, a twenty-three-year-old working his way through community college, became sXe in reaction to his cousin's drug abuse. He did not want to put his family through a similar situation:

My cousin was into heroin. Just watching him, my mom, and my aunt . . . he started doing serious drugs when my grandmother died, 'cause they were really close. He started doing serious drugs 'cause

he couldn't handle it. Just having to watch my mom and my aunt pull him off that stuff—they had to lock him in a room. He would just scream and want more. It was terrible. Just having to visualize that, I knew I never wanted to be any part of it. He's the cousin I look up to the most. He taught me a lot that I know. He's like a brother to me. Every single time I go out there, he always tells me "I'm really proud of you for being who you are. A lot of people see what happened to me, but they still don't learn. You took my bad example and turned it into a good thing."

Many sXers celebrate the fact that they would never wake up after a night of binge drinking wondering what had happened the previous evening. Adherents report that sXe allows them to have a "clear" mind and be free to make choices without artificial influence (see Wood 1999). Walter, a reserved twenty-one-year-old university student and aspiring lawyer, explained:

I don't make any stupid decisions. . . . I like to have complete control of my mind, my body, my soul. I like to be the driver of my body, not some foreign substance that has a tendency to control other people. I get a sense of pride from telling other people "I don't need that stuff. It might be for you but I don't need that stuff." And people are like, "Whoa! I respect that. That's cool."

Shannon, a twenty-two-year-old English major at CU, claimed sXe helps her be "true" to her self and maintain an "authentic" experience of life:

I guess I want to remember my life. [laughs] I don't want . . . I meet people and they've been drinking and then they don't remember you. What's the purpose of that? I just think that you need to experience life . . . I don't know. It just bothers me to even think about not remembering the previous night. I think that it's important to experience life with a clear head and act with . . . be true to yourself. A lot of people argue that you're still yourself when you're drinking, but I don't know. I don't necessarily agree with that. [laughs]

### *Self-Actualization*

Straightedge—the discipline / The key to self-liberation is abstinence from the destructive escapism of intoxication / I separate from the poison—a mindlessness I've always abhorred / Usage will only increase the pain—a truth I constantly see ignored / The pollutants that kill the body breed apathy within the mind / The substances that once brought release in the end will always confine.

—“The Discipline” by Earth Crisis, 1995

Straight edgers claim that resisting social standards and expectations allows them to follow their own, more meaningful, path in life, toward greater self-actualization. Like punks, they abhor conformity and insist on being “true to themselves.” Similarly to hippies, sXers believe that as children we have incredible potential that is “slowly crushed and destroyed by a standardized society and mechanical teaching” (Berger 1967:19). Subcultures, like social movements, engage in conflict over cultural reproduction; they are often especially concerned with quality of life, self-realization, and identity formation (Habermas 1984–1987; Buechler 1995). Straight edgers believe toxins such as drugs and alcohol inhibit people from reaching their full potential, stifling creativity and encouraging laziness (Azerrad 2001:137). Alec, thirty, formerly a member of several influential sXe bands, believed alcohol and drugs served to pacify a discontented populace. He saw sXe as an avenue out of an unfulfilling cultural pattern:

I realized that everybody around me was so screwed up and miserable. [Straight edge] was like one thing . . . it seemed like the most punk rock thing I could do. At an early age I developed a theory that it was OK to drink alcohol because alcohol subdued people so they didn't realize how miserable their lives were and how terrible their jobs were. So it's like they go out and have 'Miller Time.' So I got really into sXe.

Likewise, Ray Cappo wrote, “I wanted to use music as a medium to spread a message of truth and self-betterment based on inner reflection and pure living” (Cappo 1993:iii).

This view sharply contrasts with the hip version of self-actualization through dope (Davis 1968). For sXers, drugs of any kind inhibit rather than enable self-discovery; sXers believe people are less genuine and true

to themselves while high. A clear, focused mind helps them achieve their highest goals. Kate, the animal rights activist, said, "If you have a clear mind you're more likely to be aware of who you are and what things around you really are rather than what somebody might want you to think they are. A little bit more of an honest life, being true to yourself." Elizabeth, a twenty-six-year-old high school counselor with a masters degree who had been sXe and vegetarian for many years, said:

You're not screwed up on drugs and alcohol and you can make conscientious decisions about things. You're not letting some drug or alcohol subdue your emotions and thoughts. You're not desensitizing yourself to your life. And if you're not desensitizing your life, then yeah, you're gonna feel more things. The more you feel, the more you move, the more that you grow. . . . I truly believe [sXers] are living and feeling and growing, and it's all natural growth. It's not put off. That's a unique characteristic.

Like adherents of previous subcultures, sXers construct a view of the world as mediocre and unfulfilling, but they also believe that society encourages people to medicate themselves with crutches such as drugs, alcohol, and sex to forget their unhappiness. Straight edgers felt the punks', skinheads', and hippies' associations with these things blunted their opportunities to offer meaningful resistance. Substances and social pressures cloud clear thought and individual expression. Claiming that many people use substances as a means of escaping their problems, the movement encourages members to avoid escapism, confront problems with a clear mind, and create their own positive, fulfilling lives. Brent emphatically insisted that self-realization did not require drugs:

There are ways to open your mind without drinking and smoking. . . . You definitely don't have to take mushrooms and sit out in the desert to have a spiritual awakening or a catharsis of any sort. People don't accept that. People think you're uptight. . . . There is a spiritual absence in the world I know right now, in America. To be money-driven is the goal. It's one of the emptiest, least fulfilling ways to live your life. . . . The way people relieve themselves of the burdens of their spiritual emptiness is through drugs and alcohol. The way people see escape is sometimes even through a shorter lifespan, through smoking. To be sXe and to understand and believe that means you have opened the door for yourself to find out

why we're really on this earth, or what I want to get out of a relationship with a person, or what I want my kids to think of me down the line.

Straight edgers rarely speak openly about self-actualization and they would likely scoff at anything that suggested mysticism or enlightenment (which they would connect with hippies and therefore drugs). Nevertheless, for many, underlying the ideology is an almost spiritual quest for a genuine self, a "truth." Some connect sXe to other very personal identities: "queer-edge," feminism, and activism, for example. Mark, a quiet sixteen-year-old new to the scene, claimed sXe as a personally liberating protest against his upbringing: "Straight edge to me, yeah, it's a commitment to myself, but to me it's also a protest. I don't want to give my kids the same life I had from my father."

### *Spreading the Message*

We started out to have some fun / It's amazing what we have become / Now we're not going to stop today / No matter what may stand in the way / We're not going to give up, and just do what we're told / We'd rather take a different path, follow a different road / Time that we all did our part, you all know what I mean / Together we have made a change—we've changed the scene / Look at all the things we've done / But the real fight has just begun / We have a chance to set it right / Now it's up to all of us to fight.

—"Today the Scene, Tomorrow the World" by Good Clean Fun, 2001

Straight edge resistance transcends members' simple abstinence. Straight edgers often actively encourage other young people to become drug and alcohol free. Some hippies believed their "ultimate social mission was to 'turn the world on'—i.e. Make everyone aware of the potential virtues of LSD for ushering in an era of universal peace, freedom, brotherhood and love" (Davis 1968:157). Likewise, many sXers undertake a mission to convince their peers that resisting drugs, rather than using them, will help create a better world. A minority of sXers, labeled "militant" or "hardline" by other sXers, are very outspoken, donning X's and sXe messages at nearly all times and confronting their peers who use drugs. There is an ongoing tension within the movement over how much members should promote their lifestyle. At one extreme is the "live and let live" faction—who believe that individuals should make their own choices and sXers should keep their opinions to themselves. On the other side is the

more militant branch, often comprised of new adherents, who believe sXers' duty lies in demonstrating to users the possibilities of a drug-free lifestyle. Most sXers maintain that their example is enough. Jenny, the student-activist, said:

I wanna show people there's a community out there; that it doesn't make you a fucking dork to be sXe. There are other people out there who are really, really into it. There's a whole group of people you can belong to. You don't have to belong to just them obviously. I just think it can be a really positive thing for people. I go to a dorm where you walk down every fucking hall and the smell of pot knocks you upside the head. I just think that in that case it's really important to get your message out there. . . . I think the best political, social, personal statement you can make is to live by example. That's definitely what I try to do.

Cory, an artist and veteran of the scene at age twenty-one, explained why sXers should set an example for others:

It's all about calling yourself straight edge. You could be drug free and you can not drink and not smoke and go to parties and do whatever, but you're not helping out. There's a pendulum in society and it's tilted one way so far, and sitting in the middle of the pendulum isn't going to help it swing back. There needs to be more straight edgers on the other side to help even it out, at the least.

Thus while adherents maintain that sXe is a personal lifestyle choice rather than a movement directed toward others, many members "wear their politics on their sleeve" in a not-so-subtle attempt to encourage others to follow their path. The youth crew band Insted's song "Voice Your Opinion" begins with the lyrics, "Nothing is ever accomplished / When your thoughts are bottled up inside / Let your many ideas flow / Don't let them sit and hide." Kyle, the twenty-three-year-old student from a working-class background said:

I like to show people there's another way to live. I like to say "You can go out to the parties, you can go out to a bar and you don't *have* to drink to have a good time. You don't *have* to drink to loosen up. You can be a goof and be sober. You just have to be happy with where you're at in life." I guess to me the whole drinking and drug use is a way to hide from your problems. It's a way to not deal with them

right at that time. . . . One big goal is I like to influence everybody I meet. If I can change one person's mind that I meet, it's a great feeling. I was able to convince my mom and her boyfriend/fiancée to cut back a lot. They were bad. That was kind of neat, just seeing people change. My sister has followed my footsteps. She's like nineteen and she won't touch anything either. It's kind of neat to have people look up to you and use you for respect.

Straight edge resistance also targets the corporate interests of alcohol and tobacco companies, which, adherents claim, profit from peoples' addictions and suffering. Kate, who clearly connects sXe with her activism, said, "By rejecting Miller Lite and Coors, they have less control over me and my life because I'm not giving them my money, I'm not supporting them." Brent, the outspoken vegan, said:

Each individual in society is connected to one another. When you hurt yourself, you're hurting your society. You're leading by example, your kids will see what you're doing and they'll pick it up. . . . Resisting temptation, resisting what's thrown at you day after day, by your peers, by your parents, by their generation, by business people, by what's hip and cool on MTV. Resistance is huge. That's why sXe is a movement. . . . It's all connected: resisting drugs, resisting rampant consumerism, resisting voting Democrat when you can vote third party.

By focusing their message on their families, subcultural peers, mainstream youth, and the larger society, sXers create a multi-layered model of resistance that individuals can customize to fit their own styles. Some are very outspoken and active in a number of causes. Others spread their values through their example alone.

### *Involvement in Social Change*

Because I stand in this defiance / I wear the mark of those / Who choose to refuse / Self-destructive points of view / And with each day spent in self-perseverance / My voice is strong, against what's wrong / Forcing it to end / Forcing it to an end / Standing in this defiance, and wearing the mark of those / We choose to refuse, our system's defective views / And with each day spent, in our self-perseverance / Our voices strong, against what's wrong / We're forcing it to end/ We're forcing it to an end

—"To an End" by Strife, 1997

Like members of other subcultures, sXers often become involved in a variety of social causes. The sXe youth I associated with insisted that working for social change was not a prerequisite of sXe. Indeed, only a few belonged to the substantial Boulder activist community. However, many viewed their involvement in social change as a logical progression from clean living that led them to embrace progressive concerns and become directly involved at some level. Clean living and positivity lead to clear thinking, which in turn create a desire to resist and self-actualize. This entire process opens them up to the world's problems and their concerns grow. Karl Buechner, singer of the very popular vegan sXe band Earth Crisis,<sup>7</sup> explained (Sersen 1999):

The reasoning behind [sXe] is to have a clear mind and to use that clear mind to reach out to other people and do what you can to start thinking about fairness, thinking about how to make things more just in society and the world as a whole. . . . It's about freedom. It's about using that freedom, that clarity of mind that we have, as a vehicle for progression, to make ourselves more peaceful people. And by making ourselves more peaceful people we make the world a more just place.

As Earth Crisis toured the country, Karl often encouraged crowds of youth to think of sXe as a means to a greater end. While their primary messages promoted veganism, animal rights, and abstinence, some songs discussed world hunger and poverty (for example "Filthy Hands to Famished Mouths") while others warned of world domination and exploitation by a few elites (such as "End Begins"). I asked Karl, "Is sXe supposed to be a means to a greater end?" He replied without hesitation, "*Absolutely*. For me, one of my goals is to be as peaceful as I can and alleviate some of the suffering around me that I see in the world. Through sobriety I think I have a lot more control over my own life and a lot of distractions are eliminated." In a similar vein, Kevin, the martial artist, believed that sXe was fundamentally about becoming a strong person in every aspect of life. Strength includes rejecting stereotypes and prejudices:

Technically, according to the "rules," you can be homophobic and racist and fuckin' sexist and shit like that and still technically be sXe. You're not drinking, you're not smoking, you're not doing drugs. But I don't personally, on a personal level, I wouldn't consider that person sXe. Because they're weak. I don't think you can be sXe and weak.



Again, in contrast to the hippies, punks, and skinheads, sXers, see a clear, drug-free mind as pivotal to developing a consciousness of resistance. The movement provides a general opening up to or expansion of social awareness. Kent, the rather quiet young man with many tattoos, said:

I would never have even considered being vegetarian or vegan if it wasn't for sXe. Once you go sXe, I don't really think you're supposed to stop there. It's supposed to open you up to more possibilities. . . . It just makes me think differently. It makes you not so complacent.

In the mid- to late-1980s, sXe became increasingly concerned with animal rights and environmental causes. Influential leaders in bands called for an end to cruelty against animals and a general awareness of eco-destruction. At least three out of four Denver sXers are vegetarian and many adopt completely cruelty-free, or vegan, lifestyles. Veganism had become such a significant part of sXe by the late 1990s that many sXers gave it equal importance to living drug and alcohol free. Many sXe vegans self-identify as “vegan straight edge” and some bands identify as “vegan straight edge” rather than simply straight edge. Veganism, while still widely practiced, has declined somewhat after 2000. Among the approximately seventy sXers I associated with regularly, only fifteen ate meat. Several individuals had “Vegan” tattooed on their bodies. Others led or actively participated in the campus Animal Defense organization. Essentially, the movement frames (see Snow et al. 1986) animal rights as a logical extension of the “positivity” underpinning the entire lifestyle, much like reserving sex for caring relationships and self-actualization. Brian, an extremely positive, twenty-one-year-old CU student and musician, explained vegetarianism's connection to sXe: “sXe kids open their minds a lot more. They're more conscious of what's around them. . . . Some people think it's healthier and other people like me are more on the animal liberation thing.” Elizabeth, the older veteran, said:

If you are conscientious and care about the environment or the world, which perhaps more sXe people are than your average population, then [animal rights is] just going to be a factor. You're going to consider “how can I make the world a better place?” Well, being vegetarian is another place you can start. . . . I'm glad it's usually a part of the sXe scene because it just goes along with awareness and choices. What kind of things are you doing to yourself and how is that impacting the world and the environment? The big, corporate-owned beef lots and cutting down the rainforests . . . the

most impactful thing you can do for the environment is to stop eating meat.

Like many sXers, Eric, a twenty-one-year-old student and scenester visiting from Boston, traced a direct connection between listening to sXe music and becoming vegan:

I think sXe and the whole sXe scene opens a lot of kids' eyes to other movements and activities they can do. Listening to hardcore music and being sXe, I listened to Earth Crisis. By listening to Earth Crisis, they opened my eyes to veganism. I got disgusted by this hamburger I had in my cafeteria at college and it made me be sick of meat. So I educated myself more on what veganism was about and I had always known about it from hardcore and being sXe and listening to Earth Crisis. When you're sixteen you listen to the CDs your friends listen to and the stuff you're about because that's what it's about. So I knew about veganism from listening to the idea that one hand feeds another, one thing feeds into another. By being sXe, by being hardcore, by listening to Earth Crisis it taught me about veganism. So when I finally became vegetarian and wanted to become vegan, I had already known about it by being sXe. I think kids can get involved in other [causes] by being sXe to begin with.

Some sXe youth get involved in social justice causes such as homelessness, human rights, and women's rights. They organize benefit concerts to raise money for local homeless shelters, sometimes including in the price of admission to shows a canned good for the local food pantry or a donation to a women's shelter. I observed several sXers participating in local protests against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in conjunction with the large 1999–2000 protests in Seattle and Washington, D.C. and others took part in a campus antisweatshop campaign. In the insert for their *Through the Darkes Days* CD, the Seattle-based sXe band Trial encouraged listeners to take responsibility for their involvement in a corporate/consumer culture:

While human and animal life are oppressed, disrespected and destroyed by corporate terrorism the world over, the dollars of our consumer culture provide fuel for the fire. We must be more responsible for ourselves and for our actions, identifying as best we can what we are supporting with our purchasing power. Each can set limits of his

or her own morality, recognizing and accepting that there is no one pure or correct lifestyle, and within that framework strive towards ahimsa: a way of life which causes the least possible amount of harm.

Similar to progressive punks, some sXe youth print 'zines on prisoners' rights, fighting neo-Nazism, challenging police brutality, and championing various human rights and environmental issues. Alec used his music to raise awareness for many causes: "We wanted to be a catalyst for people to have ideas and speak their mind and get involved. [Our singer] really started getting into women's issues." He explained how his band tried to involve kids:

When we would play, we would request that all the promoters . . . say like the show was six bucks. The show is six dollars and we told the promoter when we were setting up the shows, to make it five dollars and a canned good or a shirt, then you take that to the homeless shelter. A lot of people didn't know why we did that. We're like, "Well, what it does is it gets everybody involved." The band's involved, the promoter has to be involved, and the kids are involved. Whether or not they care, they're helping. We even tried to do that in Europe when we toured there.

Minneapolis sXe band the Real Enemy claimed their band had a political purpose as well ([www.tchc.org/enemy/](http://www.tchc.org/enemy/), viewed 2/22/2000):

We are also a political band and consider straight edge to be an important weapon. All of our actions are political and affect others. Think about that. There are many other subjects in this world than just straight edge and animal rights. Everything ties together. There are more important things to talk about as well. We can't limit ourselves to songs about friends and being stabbed in the back or singing about violent retribution that will never take place.

Many sXe women disdain more traditional female roles and appreciate the scene as a space where they feel less pressure to live up to gender expectations and the movement encourages men to reject certain hypermasculine traits and challenge sexism on a personal level (see chapters five and six). Many bands write songs against sexism and some young sXe men demonstrate an exceptional understanding of gender oppression given their age and experience. However, despite the movement's claims of community



6. Kevin Seconds, singer of 7 Seconds, has inspired punk and hardcore kids for over twenty-five years with positive lyrics in songs such as "Not Just Boys' Fun." Photo by Todd Pollock.

and inclusivity, some sXe women feel isolated and unwelcome in the scene. Men significantly outnumber women, often creating a "boys club" mentality exemplified by the masculine call for "brotherhood."

Straight edgers strive to live out their values in everyday life instead of engaging in more conventional "political" protest (such as picketing, civil disobedience, petitioning). Rather than challenge tobacco, beer, or beef companies directly, for example, an sXer refuses their products and might boycott Kraft (parent company of cigarette manufacturer Phillip Morris), adopt a vegetarian lifestyle, or wear a shirt to school reading, "It's OK not to drink. Straight Edge" or "Go Vegan!" In sXe and other youth movements, the personal is political. By The Grace of God's CD, *Perspective*, included a message encouraging listeners to make the personal choice to support local businesses:

In an attempt to make our world livable, we must all educate ourselves on the products we consume. We as a people have the power to refuse global powers. We as a people have the power to support local economy. We as a people have the buying power to end the lo-

cal economy meltdown. Educate yourself, Educate your friends, Educate your community. Convenience kills towns, not companies.

In the post-2000 sXe era, political concerns seem to be slightly overshadowed by the growing popularity and commercial opportunities of hardcore music and style. Yet many sXers continue to extend their sXe commitment beyond simple abstinence.

### **Conclusion**

Straight edge is more to many adherents than just music, more than posing at a show: yet determining just what sXe is beyond the style and music is difficult. Indeed, outlining the core foundations of any youth movement is a challenging undertaking. Straight edgers are a very diverse group whose members interpret and live the movement's core values in a multitude of ways. In many ways, subcultures are individualistic, heterogeneous entities (Muggleton 2000; Grossberg 1992; Rose 1994). I have done my best to outline sXe ideals that span time and place, but sXe is fluid and values change. Some sXe scenes greatly encourage involvement in social change while others do not. For some sXers, reserving sex for caring relationships has fallen by the wayside; for others it is central to their lives. There is no one, all-encompassing sXe. Nevertheless, the values I have outlined capture the enduring themes present in some way throughout sXe's twenty-five year history. While not every sXer lives up to each of these ideals, most refer to these guidelines, using them as a "subcultural frame of reference" (Wood 1999).

Some years ago, a popular sXe t-shirt slogan read: "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything." Straight edgers (and youth in general) are ever wary of "rules" and "molds" that give a clear definition of their group. The whole notion of rules runs counter to youth movements' celebration of the individual—no one wants to feel like the cookie-cutter stereotype of the alterna-scene flavor-of-the-month. Yet if sXe can be anything it will quickly become nothing. Through all of its changes and incarnations, sXe has held onto one central value: clean living is a positive personal choice, a meaningful alternative to a youth culture that pushes young people to drink, smoke, and even do drugs.