

MUSIC

D.C.'s hardcore punk scene gets a jolt from its originators

By Mark Jenkins

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Washington's 1980s hardcore punk (or "harDCore") bands were known for vigor, intensity and rapid stylistic evolution. But the impatience audible in their songs also manifested in another way: Few of the groups persisted for long, often leaving an album or less as a legacy.

Some 40 years later, harDCore is surprisingly vital and increasingly available. Bad Brains, the D.C. punk-reggae quartet that began its on-and-mostly-off career in 1977, gained the rights to many of its master recordings in 2021 and has gradually reissued six albums, an EP and its debut single. The Goons, founded almost two decades after Bad Brains, just pressed a new edition of their "Live at the Black Cat," recorded at a February 2000 gig.

When the Goons play a record-release show this weekend — at the Black Cat, of course — the evening's lineup will span generations. One of the opening acts will be HR Band, a group named for and fronted by Bad Brains lead singer Paul "H.R." Hudson.

Yet reissues are just part of the story. Unexpectedly, a lot of harDCore veterans are making music together again. Two bands that began in the '80s, Soulside and Scream, have recorded new albums. Also recent are debut albums by Hammered Hulls and the Owners, quartets that include former members of such local '80s groups as Ignition and Gray Matter, as well as the more recent Autoclave and Medications.

Soulside's "A Brief Moment in the Sun" arrived in mid-November. Scream's "D.C. Special," its first album since 1993, is due this year, but an exact date has not been set. While details are guarded, "D.C. Special" is expected to include many guest appearances, including by the Foo Fighters' Dave Grohl, Scream's onetime drummer. (All four albums are distributed by Dischord Records, the local punk label founded in 1980.)

The '80s D.C. scene had a small cast of characters, and while the population expanded over the years, the new bands often resplice previous ones. Hammered Hulls singer Alec MacKaye collaborated with many other harDCore mainstays in the Untouchables, Faith, the Warmers and Ignition; that last group's drummer was Dante Ferrando, now co-proprietor of the Black Cat and percussionist of the Owners. Also in the Owners is longtime Cat employee Laura Harris, who played drums in Ex Hex with local guitar virtuoso Mary Timony. Both handle bass in their new bands.

While some hardcore alumni have ventured into other musical genres, the current crop of revived or realigned bands pursue styles that probably wouldn't have provoked a single boo at an '80s D.C. punk gig. Musically, the striking thing about the Owners', Soulside's and Hammered Hulls' albums is their consistency and urgency, not their innovation.

The Owners' self-titled album features speedy, straightforward rock-and-roll that recalls the less arty exponents of 1970s British glam rock, especially during the collective-yell choruses of such songs as "Red Room Nights." Soulside uses chugging hard rock to anchor Bobby Sullivan's wordy lyrics and bluesy singing; the latter is often woven with guitarist Scott McCloud's backing vocals in call-and-response arrangements that suggest gospel music and other African-rooted genres. (The quartet's other players are drummer Alexis Fleisig and bassist Johnny Temple.)

On their "Careening," Hammered Hulls hew closest to a classic Dischord mode. MacKaye shout-sings roundabout refrains such as "permission requested/permission denied/permission requested/permission denied" atop Mark Cisneros's tightly circling guitar riffs. When Hammered Hulls employ call-and-response, the dialogue is between MacKaye and himself.

Although punk can express the same sort of teenage complaints pioneered in the 1950s by Chuck Berry and Carl Perkins, it's known for addressing bigger issues. Soulside's album takes its title from W.E.B. Du Bois's characterization of the Reconstruction era, and many of its songs address racial justice. (Such tracks as "70's Heroes," which references Black activist John Africa, should probably come with a study guide.) If there's less reggae influence on Soulside's new music than on its '80s style, Bob Marley's mix of grievance and affirmation does echo in the album-ending "It's All About Love."

"The Owners" has a lighter tone, as Catherine Ferrando sings with un-punk precision about the joys of going fast and going out. But the quartet also delivers thoughts on climate change in "Wrecked the World" and gentrification in "Low Rent Paradise," a duet with guitarist Al Budd. The playful and the political tunes are equally packed with jaunty drum fills and exuberant "heys!"

By the mid-1980s, the breakneck and declamatory punk of Bad Brains and Minor Threat seemed to have exhausted itself. While Bad Brains began to toggle between speed metal and reggae, Minor Threat frontman Ian MacKaye (Alec's brother) cultivated a more varied and expansive approach with Embrace and, most famously, Fugazi. (On Feb. 11, [AFI Silver](#) will host a screening of "We Are Fugazi From Washington, DC," a documentary collection of live footage shot by the band's fans.) But hardcore punk had become an established style, ready to be adopted by successive waves of young musicians. For example, the Goons.

That band's "Live at the Black Cat" is clearly protest music, even if Serge Goon's vocals often travel too quickly for the lyrics' targets to be deciphered. Such titles as "Nation in Distress" and "America Hates Its Youth" set the tone, and the singer's introduction to "Ozone Alert" indicates that he was just as aggravated about pollution as about grown-ups in general.

On their new releases, the resuscitated and reshuffled '80s D.C. punk bands prove they can still perform with adolescent vehemence well into their 50s. The current lineup of the slightly younger Goons should demonstrate the same thing onstage this weekend. But among the reasons for the reconstituted band's fervor is a sad one: The Goons' original guitarist, Patrick Crean, died Dec. 27 after a lifelong struggle with cystic fibrosis recently complicated by cancer treatments.

The band is selling T-shirts that bear Crean's likeness and at the Black Cat will offer band mementos for sale. All proceeds will go to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. No matter how much fun it is to roar a punky "no" at everything, sometimes constructive action can be just as satisfying.

The Goons perform Jan. 21 at the Black Cat, 1811 14th St. NW. blackcatdc.com. \$20.

Soulside performs March 23 at the Black Cat, 1811 14th St. NW. blackcatdc.com. \$20.

