

DAVE GROHL

FOO FIGHTERS, NIRVANA & OTHER MISADVENTURES



MARTIN JAMES

gigging in Washington DC had a huge and lasting effect on the area's growing mass of young punks.

Subsequently, Washington DC quickly marked itself out as a punk capital, albeit not through the radical politics of Bad Brains, but through the emergence of a highly motivated so-called 'teen-punk' scene. These punks, too young to go to the club venues, had taken a stance that was in direct opposition to the older generation of punk rockers, many of whom were derided for their neo-hippy, drug-taking lifestyles. These teen-punks were staunchly united in their anti-drug stance.

With this teen punk scene - marked out by an 'X' written in marker pens on their hands and uniformly shaven heads - there was a near-rejection of the values upheld by the punk originals. Furthermore, these DC teenagers would stand their ground through any means necessary - which invariably meant violence at the gigs.

At the forefront of this scene was The Teen Idles who counted among their numbers one Ian MacKaye, a hyperactive skate kid who respected rock legend Ted Nugent for his total rejection of drugs. He quickly recognised a similarly contrary stance in punk and increasingly adopted the musical ideologies of bands like the Sex Pistols.

The Teen Idles split when MacKaye decided he wanted to be the main songwriter - however their posthumously released eponymous single did mark the beginning of the famous Dischord label, which became a ground zero for hardcore fans. MacKaye immediately returned to the limelight as vocalist in the seminal hardcore act Minor Threat - so called because they were all below twenty-one years of age and because their threat to the status quo was considered negligible.

The teen punk scene did represent a threat to the punk hegemony however. Their ethos was more on the edge, more confrontational more... harDCore - as the DC teens punks started to spell the word. By 1980, the violence that surrounded the Washington DC harDCore scene had begun to overshadow the

music itself. However, in bands like Minor Threat, there was something quite unique and different from the punk that was being created elsewhere. Sure there was a heavy influence from the UK scene, especially The Clash's debut album, but they were delivering their sound at breakneck speed, with clear and precise dynamics.

With the arrival of the debut eponymous Minor Threat EP, the third release on Dischord, there also came an ideology which marked out the DC teens. The eight track EP included the cut 'Straight Edge' which, although not intended to provide a philosophy for the scene, succeeded in doing exactly that. Straight Edge thus became signified by the 'X' mark (as previously used to identify the teen punk scene and used on every Dischord release to date) and represented an ideology that embraced anti-drugs and anti-alcohol beliefs, even the abstinence from underage sex. The DC teen punks were flying directly in the face of the easy liberalism of the 1960s' hippy generation.

Ironically, however, the Straight Edge harDCore scene didn't regard itself as political. Lyrically the songs of Minor Threat *et al* were far more about personal beliefs and observations. Inevitably, this meant that their fury was vented in the direction of small targets. Thus the older generation of punks would get it in the neck, as too would the venues that didn't admit underage punks. On the surface then, this hardly appeared to be an establishment-scaring manifesto, but it was a stance that became crucially important to this increasingly élitist group of teens.

The Straight Edge philosophy found its way into MacKaye's lyrics for Minor Threat's second and final EP in 1983 - *In My Eyes* - specifically on the title track 'Out Of Step' which found the vocalist proclaiming "Don't smoke/Don't drink/Don't fuck/At least I can fucking think". It was a totalitarian philosophy that by this time had unfortunately found favour with right-wing skinheads. Straight Edge was turning into a major threat.

Following Minor Threat's split, MacKaye ventured to England to roadie for Black Flag (in support of clueless punk band Chelsea and proto-Oi! band Exploited). Here he met Crass and was introduced

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to a much wider political viewpoint. During this period he was able to redress many of his earlier beliefs, but remained nonetheless extreme in his standpoint.

By late 1983 then, when David Grohl first started to venture to Washington DC, there was a vibrant scene that was gaining an international reputation. MacKaye and friends had continued with their Dischord label putting out the definitive harDCore compilation *Flex Your Head* in 1982 as well as later records in 1983 by bands including Scream, SOA, Faith, Void and Marginal Man. Minor Threat's *Out of Step* EP also heralded the start of a partnership with John Lober of Southern Studios in London (who had also put out the Crass records).

In the summer of 1984, Dave Grohl trekked to DC to see a show by local harDCore band Void. At this show he met fellow teenage punk Brian Samuels. Grohl's new-found friend, it turned out, was in a band called Freak Baby and they were on the lookout for a guitarist. Grohl jumped at the opportunity and an audition was hastily set up.

Freak Baby consisted of Samuels on bass, David Smith on drums, Bryant Mason on guitar and Chris Page on vocals. The gaggle of young punks was impressed by Grohl's six string abilities and invited him to join as second guitarist. The wheels of Grohl's punk rock career were thus set in motion and in the six months that followed, Freak Baby played a number of gigs at a local high school and even gained a following of about six skinheads. A start of sorts had been made, although it is a fact that such allegiances were hardly unusual at a time when the harDCore scene was becoming over-run by skinheads who'd latched onto the Straight Edge scene's ideology.

Freak Baby then recorded a demo in local studio The Laundry Room, home of engineer and producer Barrett Jones, who would go on to be a regular feature in Grohl's recording life. Jones's set-up was located in Arlington, Virginia, and so-called because the studio had originally been in the washing room of Jones's parents' house.

Foo Fighters, Nirvana And Other Misadventures

The Freak Baby demo represented another turning point in Grohl's life. Far from the cassette recordings of old, this was a fully-fledged four-track studio and in Jones he had discovered a musical compatriot whose own multi-instrumentalist approach to the DIY punk rock ethic would continually inspire Grohl to write and record his own songs.

Of the Freak Baby tracks recorded, one stood out. It was called 'Different' and it displayed the band's rough-around-the-edges approach to punk. Stuffed to the gills with adolescent anger, but somewhat lacking in the precise power of punk at its best. However, despite its obvious energy, when placed in context against the big punk bands of the time, Freak Baby seemed only one small step away from being that covers band in Grohl's past. Their sound was too loose, especially in the rhythm department, so the power was dissipated through inability. Furthermore, the band's sound was mostly a transparent pastiche of their heroes. Nonetheless, local record store Smash was impressed enough by the demo to stock it and even sold a couple of copies!

Freak Baby remained with this line up for only six months until, one day after a rehearsal Grohl sat behind the drum kit and started bashing out a rhythm. As mentioned, Grohl had started drum lessons at Fairfax County High School, but he didn't possess his own kit. Instead he would practice by employing a pair of enormous marching band drumsticks to hit out rhythms on everything within sight in his room while the radio blasted. It was during this time of hitting pillows hard enough to hear a beat that he learned to strike the drums with the intensity he is renowned for today.

With Grohl finally ensconced behind the kit, hitting the drums like a man possessed, usual drummer David Smith took the opportunity to pick up Samuels' bass - Samuels had already gone home. The bass guitar was, it turned out, Smith's favoured instrument. The only reason he had taken up drums in the band was because he owned a kit and, as was obvious on the band's demo, his drumming abilities were limited.

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When Grohl and Smith started jamming together they immediately produced a supertight, powerhouse sound. Bryant Mason picked up his guitar and started playing along and Chris Page took up the mic. It was immediately obvious that this was a vastly improved version of Freak Baby.

Rather than continue under the same name however they split up and reconvened without Brian Samuel but with a new moniker - Mission Impossible. "That new band was a super-fast hardcore delight," explained Grohl ten years later. "A chance to try out all the tricks I had learned from my growing record collection, on a real drum set even! I hadn't the slightest idea how to set the fucking thing up, but I sure loved beating the shit out of it... we actually wrote songs that had little breaks in them so we could jump just like the pictures we'd seen in (the magazines) *Maximumrocknroll* and *Flipside*. It was 1985 and I was living my hardcore dream."

Mission Impossible set about playing shows in an ever-widening circle of venues -including one show opening for the legendary Washington Go-Go act Troublefunk at a high school prom (Washington Go-Go was a dance sound which linked 1980s tech-funk and late 1980s house) - before going back to The Laundry Room studios to record some new material and a few vastly improved Freak Baby tracks. Among these was a vastly superior take on 'Different', on which the rhythm section tightened to a singular, pounding unit, pushing the song with a hitherto unseen power.

"I saw Dave when he was in Mission Impossible," explained Dante Ferrando to Eric Brace of *unomas.com*. Ferrando, part-owner of the Black Cat nightclub (of which Grohl is also a partner) and past drummer in such Washington area punk bands as Iron Cross and Grey Matter, was clearly impressed by his friend's ability as a teenager. "He was pretty young, and the stuff he was playing was simple but he did it with so much power and precision." He continued, "I remember someone telling me he'd only been playing live about eight months and could I believe it? I was envious because I'd been playing for years and couldn't

play like that.”⁽³⁾

Soon after they recorded their demo, Mission Impossible developed an association with Washington DC hardcore band Lunchmeat (later to become known as Soulside – one of the more interesting bands to emerge from the Washington DC scene). Over the course of the next few months, the two bands would play gigs together in front of a growing fan base.

1985 had seen a wave of new harDCore bands which had taken over from the original acts including Rites of Spring, Kingface, Beefeater, Fire Party, Dag Nasty, Embrace (Ian Mackaye’s first post-Minor Threat band), and, of course, Lunchmeat and Mission Impossible. Impressively, Ian Mackaye publicly declared his love for Grohl’s band and their gigging partners.

“Lunchmeat and Mission Impossible were totally inspiring to see, high school kids playing again,” he continued. “Their whole scene was similar to how ours was in early Minor Threat and Teen Idles days.”⁽⁴⁾

MacKaye’s faith in both Mission Impossible and Lunchmeat was eventually realised when a split single between the two bands was released. Although it appeared on the band’s own Sammich label (which was started by Amanda MacKaye and Eli Janney), it received huge help and support from Dischord records. Two earlier releases from Mission Impossible had appeared in the shape of ‘Helpless’ and ‘I Can Only Try’ on the WGNS/*Metrozine* compilation *Alive And Kicking*. Together the releases displayed Mission Impossible’s brand of super fast hardcore. However, their combination of jazz-fuelled guitar and Grohl’s often-intricate patterns saw them stand out from many of the other bands on the DC scene at the time.

Although many of the bands of the era were involved in political benefits, Mission Impossible were far less active than most. This led to suggestions that they were apolitical at a time when it was deemed vitally important to show your colours. Yet for Mission Impossible, punk and harDCore was more about playing the music

and walking the walk, rather than talking up political activism.

Yet, only a year after the foursome had first formed, Mission Impossible played their last show in the summer of 1985 at Fort Reno Park in Washington. Two members of the band - Bryant and Chris - had opted to go to college and were thus forced to quit life in the punk rock fast lane. It was an act that was mirrored throughout the relatively youthful hardcore scene as many bands split in favour of the education system.

1985, the year of Mission Impossible, was also notable in DC history for being a time when the political side of the harDCore scene found a fresh direction. One of the more energetic forces was Amy Pickering, who had coined the term 'Revolution Summer', to capture the spirit that she set about distributing via hastily photocopied Situationist slogans (a tack used to great effect some years later by the Manic Street Preachers).

With many people now rejecting the narrow, and some would say misogynistic Straight Edge philosophy, the DC scene also found a unified and increasingly loud voice through a political activist group called Positive Force DC, a collective that would become increasingly important to Grohl in his future dealings with DC bands.

Around the same time as Mission Impossible disbanded, another local Springfield band of some repute had also split up. They were called A.O.C. and they drew their sound from a much artier area of the punk rock lexicon. Their axis spun around the intricate but abrasive structures of bands like Television and the post-punk funk sounds of Gang of Four. Central to A.O.C. was an extraordinary bassist called Rueben Radding. Grohl invited him to jam with the remaining former Mission duo of himself and Dave Smith in his living room.

The combination of the two Daves' hardcore energy and Radding's inventive bass explorations immediately gelled and the trio wrote four songs in that very first jam, with Radding improvising the vocals. The questionably-monikered Dain Bramage

was thus born.

“We started writing song after song at an alarming pace,” stated Grohl. “Playing shows around town, whenever we could get them, usually to the hardcore kids’ dismay. This band was where I really started to utilise my growing interest in songwriting: arrangement, dynamics, different tunings, etc. We were extremely experimental, usually experimenting with classic rock clichés in a noisy, punk rock kind of way.”

Dain Bramage played their first gig in December 1985 at Burke Community Centre in Virginia. As Grohl explained, it was to the dismay of the hardcore crowd that the ex-Mission Impossible/Fast duo had gone in such an arty, experimental direction. However, despite the negative response of much of the crowd, the band did impress a few of the more eclectically-minded punks, after which Dain Bramage slowly built up some fanatical support.

Somewhat inevitably the band enlisted the support of the aforementioned producer Barrett Jones, vanishing into his Laundry Room Studios to capture a couple of demos in 1986. These demos found their way into the hands of A.O.C. drummer Reed Mullin who passed on the good word about Dain Bramage to Los Angeles independent label Fartblossom Records. This fantastically-named label agreed with Mullin’s positivity and signed the band to record an album. Between July 20-24, 1986, the trio entered the twenty-four track RK-1 Recording Studios in Crofton, near Annapolis. The resulting album *I Scream Not Coming Down* was, according to Grohl, “a fine demonstration of our blend of rock, art punk, and hardcore. I still like it.”

Thankfully, the songs contained on that album were a tad less contrived than the title itself. Grohl’s ability to create simple but powerful patterns with dynamic yet understated fills came to the fore. However, the band relied more heavily on the interplay between guitar and bass. While such a dissonant approach may have worked for bands like Husker Du (whom they most often echoed), Dain Bramage were unable to combine the urgency of hardcore and the elasticity of jazz with quite such aplomb. In March 1987,