Three Essays on Rock

As I’ve already indicated in the editorial pages, these essays were all written for composition 2201 sections at Mount Royal College, Calgary. I do not invite students to write on musical subjects because the results have typically been disappointing. I remember vividly some papers attempting to contrast Punk and Heavy Metal during the 80s: “Punk music is very loud and obnoxious, and Heavy Metal is very ... loud and obnoxious. Punk musicians wear a lot of black leather, and Heavy Metal musicians wear ... a lot of black leather. Punk musicians are all into drugs, and Heavy Metal....” I still shake my head at the coincidence that all three of the present essays came in at once, without being solicited.

Shiftone is a Calgary blues-rock band; The Unicorn is a comfortable, somewhat upscale pub in the heart of downtown, founded by members of The Irish Rovers a couple of decades back. Cordell’s essay documents—more vividly than I ever recall reading—a special test which all musicians, from all genres, must undergo: learning to control stage fright, not to eliminate it, but to use it as a source of energy. Cordell was close enough, chronologically and emotionally, to the moment when he realized that he really could do this! to be able to share it with us. Need I add that the atmosphere, reputation, and clientele of the REPUBLIK are rather different from those of the Unicorn? —GWL

Moshing
Justin Hartman

moshing->noun. Brit. slang->a style of energetic, serious dancing done in a crowded space, especially to heavy metal or thrash music and usually done in a mosh pit, the area in front of the stage of a gig.

It’s just about midnight, and I’m in a downtown nightclub called the REPUBLIK. The headliners for the evening, an Alberta band called the Smalls, are due on stage next. The group gathering in front of the stage is increasing in number. The smell of tobacco and alcohol, mixed with the faint scent of marijuana, permeates the room.

I join the group in front of the stage, feeling the buzz common to all around me. It is the high from anticipation, from knowing that in a few minutes there will be nothing but chaos and anarchy. I look around me and notice that everyone has the same euphoric look, knowing that violent abandonment is almost upon us. The Smalls burst upon the stage, and I feel like I’m about to explode. They start to play, and the release is almost orgasmic. Elbows, shoulders, bodies start to fly around—crashing into each other like a wild rugby game with no rules. It is especially violent tonight. The fifty or so people with me in front of the stage are hardcore, wanting to expel the demons of angst and testosterone. The common bond of the mosh pit, to inflict and receive pain, creates a common respect among us.

I think I was fifteen years old when I went into my first pit. Back then it was called slam dancing, but now the generalized term, moshing, is used. I don’t know what drew me in, but I know what keeps me going back. Not being the scrapper I was in my younger days, I find the mosh pit is a great place to release my tension of day-to-day living. From the outside, the mosh pit appears to be a violent display of aggression. (Which it certainly is!) However, there’s more to it than that. There is a bond among us, a feeling of belonging. The conventions of individualism and personal space are discarded. When the show is over, our arms over each other’s shoulders, we stand together, knowing we have survived the battle. Total strangers before the show share a battle-weary comradeship afterwards, glowing in the feeling of total abandonment that comes from our violent outbursts.

It is summer time, and I’m in Missoula, Montana. I have driven seven hours to see one of my favorite bands—Pearl Jam. Though PJ is not considered a punk band, concert promoters have come to realize that it is standard practice to have a mosh pit area at all heavy metal or grunge rock shows. If a pit is not provided, it is almost guaranteed that one will be made. Since there is no alcohol permitted at this outdoor venue, the smell of marijuana floats heavy in the air. I have waited a long time to see PJ, and the anticipation of this event is almost making me nauseous. There are approximately 8000 of us on the floor, barricaded in an area of about 1500 square yards, with a wall of security surrounding us. God help you if you are claustrophobic!

Pearl Jam bursts onto the stage, and almost immediately we bob and weave to the music. This mosh pit is different from the much smaller venue mentioned before, which offered, in essence, old school slam dancing. There are fewer bodies flying chaotically around, but now we have crowd-surfers—people who float on top of the outstretched hands of the people below. Sometimes these people come crashing down.

Those of us at the front, with the constant barrage of bodies from above, are constantly reminded of the price we pay for getting as close as we can to our rock and roll heroes. As well, I’m one of the smaller people in the pit tonight and am feeling the effects of larger people constantly pushing and bumping me to and fro. Pearl Jam have played for over two hours now, and I feel exhaustion setting in. My body aches from the physical punishment it has taken, but I stay in. I have waited too long to cop out now.
Finally, the show is over. I nearly collapse once the crowd dispersions, now realizing that I’ve been held up for the past few songs by the compact mass of people. I am totally drained, but still flushed with ecstasy from the rush of the experience. With a smile that will not leave my face, I make my way back to the porch where we’d had a pre-concert party. I sit and recall memories of the concert to anyone who will listen. My mind drifts back to the pit, and I find myself already longing to return. Like a junkie who needs a fix, I’m already craving the next show, already craving the anonymity that can only be satisfied by another trip to the pit.

Woo-Hoo!
Justin Szott

"Man, it’s cold," I thought as I stood huddled with a group of strangers in the dark and bitter cold of Calgary’s winter nights. We stood there, rattling away, like cars backed up in traffic, blowing puffs of exhaust into the air, as we waited to file into the warmth the stadium offered.

After a friendly pat down from the security guards at the doors of the Max Bell Arena, I was in. The sticky, beer-covered floors and nicotine-filled air never seemed more inviting; the warmth of the building mixed with the swarm of excitement eclipsed any negative sensations I might have had.

Passing through the packed hallways covered with various toothless mug shots of the players, past and present, I got the impression that I was at a sold-out hockey game. This idea soon passed as I approached the rink and saw that the ice was replaced with cement, which was littered with all sorts of people. As I scanned the area, I noticed what appeared to be a herd formed at the opposite end of the rink, trying to push through the gates at the front.

As I neared the rear of the group, the single blurred blob morphed into a variety of individuals standing in a tight formation. As I let my eyes bob from one head to the next, I was introduced to a unique sight each time. Blue hair, spiked hair, long hair, no hair—my eyes spun in their sockets, trying to digest the variety of sights they saw. As my eyes continued to wander, they were introduced to numerous other strange sights like the girl with buzzed, short, purple hair, with numerous rings and studs poking out from various parts of her face, to the shirtless, chunky guy with baggy pants and long straight hair.

The atmosphere quickly changed as the calm before the storm was ended by the dimming of the lights and the darkness that followed. This triggered the attention of everyone, causing the crowd to push against the gates like a bull getting ready for his eight-second romp. All of a sudden, the strike of the first chord triggered the bull to buck and jump about wildly. * This reaction amazed me, and as the song played out, the diverse audience began to move and act as one, as if taking directions through the music.

Still at the back of the mass, I hesitantly made my way toward the heart of the beast, which appeared to be closer to the front of the group. At the front, the intensity of the people had increased dramatically as now people at random were thrown into the air to float mysteriously on top of everyone else. This looked like the ultimate high, since ear-to-ear smiles were present on all of the floaters.

In search of this ultimate high, I ventured further through the crowd towards the mesmerizing lights that pierced the fog, which had become thick with the smell of nicotine and other various herbs. Working through the damp mugginess of the mosh pit, I started to get more into the music. I started to become entranced by the attack on the senses; if my eyes weren’t busy taking in the different bodies flailing about, my nose was absorbing the bittersweet smell of perfume swamped by rank body odor. Either it was the intense pressure on the senses or the vibration from the massive black speakers surrounding the band, but I was continually drawn to the front.

As I looked around me, my eyes caught the eyes of the guy next to me. He was heavier set and quite a bit bigger than I was, and although we had never met before, he instinctively knew what I was looking for. He proceeded to boost me into the air where others who simultaneously lifted me above their heads soon joined him. Within moments, I was presented a birdseye view of the crowd, watching many heads of people bob about as many others surged across me. I soon caught a wave as well and started to travel across the rapids created by many hands beat across my body.

As I rode atop this wave of hands, nearing the front of the stage, the reality of the situation sunk in, and I realized that complete strangers were willing to hoist me above their heads. As I looked at the group holding me in the air, I noticed quite a few differences between them and me, and I wondered what possessed all of these different people to come together like this.

I thought about this as I continued to flop across the top of every-one and closed in on the stage. I soon had reached the front of the crowd and was plucked from my perch. As I was set down on my feet, between the frantic crowd and the band, who continued to play wildly, I looked back on the various individuals. It then hit—the thing that brings all of these different people together is the music. The appreciation I gained for the music at that instant was incredible. Anything that allowed complete strangers to coexist in such cramped quarters or to hoist each other above their heads is a very powerful thing. With the high I had just experienced, I looked back on the crowd, and with arms raised, I let out an appreciative "Woo-Hoo!" as I quickly cycled around to the back of the crowd to get back into the action.

* This is Alberta, remember—the image is of the rodeo bull, not the toro de la arena!