

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 then, 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 others' shoulders, we stand together, knowing we have survived the battle. Total strangers before the

show share a battle-weary comradery 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 disperses, 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 mem-

ories 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.