The Long Weekend: Exclusion, Intrusion, Trolls, and Punks

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Abstract

This essay describes the indie punk scene in Washington, DC, in the days approaching and immediately after the Women's March 2017. The scene became a cultural target of the right, as musicians were threatened by online trolls from 4chan and other rightwing message boards, culminating in the "Pizzagate"-inspired attack on the venue, Comet Ping Pong. Musicians staged a series of concerts and performances around the march, helping to dispel the sense of threat through intersectional political congregation as well as maintaining a longer steady protest locally.

In this article, I will describe the local lead-up to the weekend of the Women's March, including a protest concert the night before and an after-party the night of the march. The narrative draws out the growing sense of threat to musicians as online trolls from right-wing message boards became active. Then, the narrative continues to detail the ways in which the two events at the rock venues dispelled the fear through intersectional political congregation. I hope that this article offers insight on how eclectic urban musics that embolden the left can also provide cultural targets for the right.

I am writing not only as a music scholar, but also as a resident of the nation's capital embedded in a music scene and economic bracket and as a US citizen making sense of socio-political shifts. This article allows for this blur, eschewing the detached writing of scholarship and provocative agit-prop of activism. I write as a concerned local interlocutor who is fluent, at least, in speaking of music's role in social change. As a research method, I worked my way outward from friends after the Women's March to other participants through a series of interviews. My goal is to bring together the role of the Internet in musical and political action, a widening economic gap expressed culturally, and the ways in which music can simultaneously activate intersectional politics and animate deep antipathy.

Visibly Divided: A Quick Backdrop

Beginning with the post-Fordist turn of the 1970s, consumption began to underpin the US economy. Connections between urban manufacturing and rural goods began to wither in the new information economy. Painting with broad strokes, there now exists a heightened polarization that overlaps class, consumption, culture, politics, and geography—visible to anyone with access to the internet. Rural America has more visual access to less-accessible cultural and economic worlds. These worlds include DC's gastronomic treats: vinegar and smoke-infused cocktails, fusion foods, and expensive coffees.

Today, both cultural capital and real capital are becoming requisites for living in cities. Like all other US cities, DC has grown as a model of progressivism versus conservatism, including specifically the rise of the creative class. Hip and “enlightened” consumerism abounds (see Currid-Halkett 2017). Neighborhoods devastated from the 1968 riots now boast million-dollar row houses. Recent newcomers tend to be single white professionals who marry and begin families. DC has become whiter, wealthier, and younger. Amenities bring the wealthy professional class and ancillary service jobs engage the poor. As Richard Florida has recently written, the middle class is left out of city life.¹ Alongside this demographic gap, there appears an empathy and values gap.

Trolling Underground Art Rock: The Initial Threats to Individuals

During the lead up to the weekend of the inauguration and march, many Washington residents felt a sense of threat. There was a sense of uncertainty for the many people who work in federal institutions. Independent musicians were also braced, standing ground under another threat from the alt-right. The threat began slowly and continued steadily across the scene.

Washington has the distinction of having a politically-minded punk scene since the late 1970s—a scene that continues to evolve musically and ideologically. For decades, this scene has built an infrastructure of musical practice and political action, many of whom were hosts to the hundreds of thousands who came to protest. That infrastructure was both under threat and employed in the events leading up to and immediately following the march.

On November 4, the Friday before the 2016 election, Amanda Kleinman received an email from a stranger. Getting emails from strangers was normal. She had been playing in independent experimental rock bands for decades and had an associated internet presence. This email, however, was unusual. It came from ProtonMail, a Switzerland-based encrypted email service. “Are the children safe,” the message read, “or are you the monster?” Perhaps it was in response to the dark imagery and her bad humor—part of her band’s aesthetic. In her first attempt to understand the source of the email, Kleinman thought back a few decades. “It seemed as if it was part of the Satanic panic of the 1980s,” she recalls. That night, Kleinman forwarded the email to Erick Jackson, her bandmate in the local rock band Heavy Breathing. Jackson did some research to discover that there was significant activity on WikiLeaks, a whistleblowing website that releases classified information to the public. Users were connecting Kleinman and their band to the website’s release of Hillary Clinton and Democratic National Party emails. Furious activity on several message boards had been “decoding” John Podesta’s leaked emails.²

Forum members honed in on pizza orders that Podesta and his staff were making to Comet Ping Pong, a local pizza restaurant that hosts a well-regarded local music series where Heavy Breathing had played recently. On the message boards, someone determined that orders for “cheese pizza” were code for “child pornography.” The “decoding” devolved from there. Ice cream surely meant male prostitute and salad dressing on the side was code for certain bodily fluids. The suggestion that someone would put walnut sauce on a pizza indicated to conspiracy theorists that the Democrats were not really talking about

¹ Richard Florida, *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); see also Richard V. Reeves, *Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Middle Class Is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why That Is a Problem, and What to Do About It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2017).

² See Gregor Aisch, Jon Huang, and Cecilia Kang, “Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/10/business/media/pizzagate.html>.

pizza—whereas to urbanite foodies, the combination was a vegan refinement of pesto. The conspiracy, now termed “Pizzagate,” had moved to Alex Jones’ *Infowars* Internet radio show two days before Kleinman received the threatening email. Through his far-right conspiracy theory website, Jones claimed that Comet was home to a child sex slave den led by Comet owner James Alefantis and that Clinton herself “has personally murdered and chopped up” children there.

Meanwhile, the message board activity continued. A transcript of a birthday roast given by Kleinman to Sasha Lord, who booked bands at Comet, had been analyzed in great detail. The roast involved a ski mask, sunglasses, and a pitch-shifter that, as part of Heavy Breathing’s regular act, transformed Kleinman into “The Majestic Ape.” People tried to connect Kleinman to Alefantis. Were they the same person? Was the roast part of a ritual before the slaughter of children? “They don’t understand art,” says Kleinman who is also a photographer and works at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design. Rock has had an art mode since British art school graduates like Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones and John Lennon of the Beatles began representing the genre. But most of the innovation in independent art-rock these days remains underground in urban areas. In part, interpretation of Heavy Breathing’s act is determined by class and geography. The internet, however, has provided access across those divisions.

Soon after Kleinman received the first email, other threats came via Facebook Messenger. By the time of the presidential election, threats had spilled into the comments on her YouTube videos and personal Instagram account. Then came calls to her workplace. Deans at the Corcoran received calls like, “Do you know that you employ a pedophile monster?!” The school enhanced its shooter training for her office. She began tracking down the trolls. In some cases, she used Facebook to identify the trolls’ mothers and informed them about what their (mostly grown) children were doing to her. In other cases, she found that messages came from paid troll farms in Malaysia and Madagascar. In one YouTube video, a man threatened to gut her with a knife—which he described in detail. She was able to identify him as a border patrol agent and contacted his supervisor. But striking back was futile. With each offensive move, new threats emerged with redoubled vengeance.

Threatening Alternative Venues

The lack of institutional support for independent musicians forces music into unconventional and more precarious spaces. Much of the creative music in DC happens in alternative music venues connected by word-of-mouth. With the rise of social media, the internet has given greater visibility to what had been under the radar—and not only visibility to potential concertgoers. Far-right message boards found an opportunity to investigate and target alternative venues following the tragic fire at the Ghost Ship building on December 2, 2016 in Oakland. This warehouse-turned-arts collective caught fire killing 36 people during a record release show for 100% Silk Records, an independent label for electronic dance music. After the fire received national publicity, online members of “free-speech” 4chan internet forum, home to many ultra-right-wing users, responded to a call to report DIY venues. The anonymous user wrote, “These places are open hotbeds of liberal radicalism and degeneracy and now YOU can stop them by reporting all such places you may be aware of . . . MAGA my brothers and happy hunting.” A battle cry for the troll, 4chan Safety Squad Raids began. Anonymous tips sent police to unlicensed venues, and in some cases, the trolls themselves came out of the internet to investigate shows.

Dante Ferrando, owner of The Black Cat, a venerable indie rock venue, began noticing the threat:

“There’s a lot of people tailing people and going to their work[place], and there’s a lot of lists circulating on the Internet of music places that need to get shut down and house shows that need to be stopped. . . . [There is] an assault on culture, arts, and music that is unique to this time period.”³ A follow-up interview I did with Ferrando clarified his position. More established venues like his were relatively safe, but the fringe of venues in houses and alternative spaces were more precarious. The local scene felt the attack as the Safety Squad Raids took a toll.

At the 16th Street House, a decade-old house venue, Erin Frisby and her bandmates sat at the kitchen table right after the election. They talked through their own potential responses to the surprising presidential election. The members of the feminist punk/R&B outfit FuzzQueen were the latest residents in the group house, rehearsing as well as producing a concert series. In anticipation of the incoming inauguration, they planned a four-day music, art, and wellness festival with workshops, meals, and yoga, among other activities. “Not My Inauguration” planned to feature 30 bands. They began aggressively promoting the event through social media.

Meanwhile, a few venues around the country were shut down after the election as a result of 4chan pressure. The effect of the targeting was an awakening to the political value of music. As John Street suggests, power over popular music often creates its political value.⁴ Censorship, for instance, fundamentally affirms that music has political power. This contributed to one way that the shows during the march felt political as the threats increased. While feeling politically active has connotations of choice and commitment, collective action toward political goals can also be shoved upon those either affected by power or those anticipating unwanted change or violence. Extending Street’s point to this moment in DC, the Safety Squad Raids galvanized independent musicians, many of whom already had liberal political persuasions.

While on Facebook at the 16th Street House, FuzzQueen’s Erin Frisby came across a post about the 4chan and Reddit message board lists of targeted venues. Navigating to the sites, she found 16th Street House—her residence—at the top of the alphabetical lists. For a few days, she read the discussions, alarmed at the dehumanizing statements but also noticing how the conversations would evolve from basic misunderstandings of what art is to a vitriolic spiraling of hate and provocation of violence.

As the anti-inaugural shows loomed at 16th Street House, Erin Frisby’s family was also concerned for their safety. Her father volunteered to keep watch at the door. Security from The Black Cat volunteered to keep watch inside. Frisby thought through an active shooter plan, keeping the back door unlocked and anticipating moving the shooter to a room away from the exits. She felt it was ironic that the internet vigilante crackdown of unlicensed music venues would lead to a threat for her own safety. As a house, they briefly discussed the possibility of canceling the show. “We had a sense of responsibility not to be intimidated” she said. In the end, the shows were a success, galvanizing a feeling of political opposition to the incoming administration and the internet trolls. The threat loomed but other than a few minor concerns, nothing happened. Reflecting on the shows, Frisby says that they were safe because of the fact that they were in Washington and that they had no code violations, had a legitimate lease, and monitored underage drinking. Other venues have not been so lucky and what is more, the threat lingered in the

³ Tyler Clark, “DC Dissidents: Behind the Frontlines of Washington’s Anti-Inaugural Concerts,” *Consequence of Sound*, January 18, 2017, <https://consequenceofsound.net/2017/01/d-c-dissidents-washingtons-counter-inaugural-concerts/>.

⁴ John Street, “Rock, Pop and Politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, eds. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 252, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521553698.015>.

independent music community.⁵

Rewinding to two days after the Ghost Ship fire, another significant act added to the threat to venues. And like the attacks on Heavy Breathing's Amanda Kleinman, these came from the Pizzagate conspiracy. *Infowars* listener Edgar Welch watched a series of YouTube videos about Pizzagate and then drove to Washington from Salisbury, North Carolina, and walked into Comet Ping Pong with an AR-15 assault rifle and a revolver. Welch came to self-investigate "Pizzagate," the WikiLeaks conspiracy theory having reached beyond the message boards to become fake news. He went with the intention of freeing innocent children. But the only children at Comet were the ones eating pizza with their families. Welch shot a round into the ceiling and aimed at a waitress before finally surrendering to police. Thankfully, his online calls for people to join him with guns had fallen flat, and he stopped before physically harming anyone. While this incident was one of many moving through the quickened news cycle, the trauma lingered in town. If the mass shootings in the United States are any indication, it could have gone differently.

With its central venues under threat, many in the Washington indie scene felt at risk as individuals. The attack at Comet made Kleinman, who had been on her way there to see friends that day, feel that she was in danger. Soon after, she began staying with her boyfriend in Arlington. Since her relationship was not announced on the internet, she felt safer there, invisible to the trolls. People offered her weapons. She kept a bat under her bed but refused to accept a handgun from her brother, a gun advocate concerned for her safety.

Sasha Lord, who books Comet's music series, was out of town the day of the shooting. She found out about it after answering a call from *The Washington Post* about the shooting. Shocked, she could not connect the terrible news of the shooting with the communal feelings left over from the show that singer Katie Alice Greer had just done there. Was everyone okay? Without knowing what had actually happened, Lord felt strikingly alone. Like Kleinman, she had been getting harassed on the internet since Pizzagate broke. Message boards surmised that cult-like music was part of the hidden practice of child slavery. Forum members were busy deciphering hidden meanings in promotional posters that Lord had produced and from the names of the bands themselves—Heavy Breathing, Coat Hangers, Baby Alcatraz, and Princerama. Other message boards were filled with narratives about Lord's identity, some with anti-Semitic accusations of her involvement with the Zionist Occupational Government. Lord had made all of her social media private, struck by the amount of effort and time people were putting into the conspiracy theories. As the doxing began, she looked at the profiles of the trolls. "It was everyone from skydivers to yoga people [issuing] charges of elitism and straight-up death threats," she recalls. They were fundamentally "people who don't have a community and who don't understand art." Some had hateful postings right after proud postings about their own children.

When the death threats began, they seemed personal. Sasha Lord had no sense of where they had come from. Even after the threats got frightening, people close to her did not acknowledge the seriousness of the virtual threats. It was not until *The New York Times* reported on the 4chan involvement in Pizzagate that friends began understanding and, in some cases, trolling back the trolls. But the trolls came back harder, widening their scope to Lord's friends and family.

In the lead-up to the march, Lord left town. Her family did not feel that she was safe. No one knew

⁵ See Anna Codrea-Rado, "We're Mapping All the Music Venues That Have Closed since the Oakland Fire," *Vice*, March 6, 2017, https://thump.vice.com/en_us/article/kb5yvy/music-venue-closures-div-spaces-tracker-oakland-effect-map.

how the march would go down. While traveling to get away for the next year, she recalls, “I questioned if I really liked music.” Perhaps that pales in comparison to the five-year-old who continues to suffer anxiety attacks after Welch opened fire inside Comet. But the trolls continued to come after Lord.

The power over music is diffuse in an internet world. It is not only negligent local landlords that creative musicians need to worry about. It is the trolls. A confluence of city codes, rising rents, and internet forums have bound together a fear of urban eclecticism that springs from a lack of knowledge and a lack of empathy, and a reaction to what is heard as an elitism in obtuse independent music and a political anger towards Washington.

Sounding amid Threat: Local Intersectional Response as Festival Dissensus

In the days right before the March, Pizzagate conspiracy theorists picketed out in front of Comet. The local sounds, however, drowned them out as locals organized musical events to disturb the inauguration and host the out-of-town protesters. The events mixed local sounds with local voices concerns and as the voices echoed in the streets and music venues, the sense of threat dissipated.

Heavy Breathing played at Comet, standing up to the threat of violence. At this point, Amanda Kleinman felt her own apprehension to be absurd and yet she found herself browsing the web for bulletproof vests. Comet now had regular professional security staff at every show. You could no longer slip in through the back door. The night of their show, Comet doubled their security staff and provided Kleinman special coverage. The show went on without incident, but the feeling of threat remained as locals prepared their houses for out-of-town guests. Who was coming to Washington? Anecdotally, I heard reports both that hotels were not filling for the inauguration and that a few Trump supporters were drinking cans of beer in front of the White House.

As the day of the march approached, it became clear that the people flooding DC were the protesters. They were at the restaurants and the shows—some with local friends and others in their own groups. Soon, a haphazard mix of friends came to stay at our house and there were plenty of musical events to take them to, offering a sense of loud collectivity within a local music network. The first local musical responses were flittering and mobile. Students for George Washington University organized a protest event called “Werk for Peace” in response to Pence’s stances on LGBTQ issues. Over a thousand people marched (or, better put, danced) towards and as close as they could to Mike Pence’s house in northwest Washington. The group followed a truck outfitted with a powerful sound system blasting Beyoncé and Lady Gaga. Drummer/activist Amanda Huron reported: “I really danced my ass off. It was incredibly cathartic.” On inauguration day, women of the punk scene organized as cheerleaders, providing dances and cheers at the security checkpoints. Cheers included a version of “What Do You Do with a Drunken Sailor” reworked as “What Do You Do with the Trump Agenda,” with many verses referencing detrimental stated policies.

On the eve of the march, the Black Cat hosted a benefit show, entitled “No Thanks: A Night of Anti-Fascist Sound Resistance in the Capital of the USA.” It was part of a series of shows called “Can’t Grab This Pussy” organized with films, bands, and political speakers. The show began with a recognition of threat. All of our bags were checked before we walked up the stairs to the main stage, which fits about 700 people. No one had ever searched my bag at the Black Cat before. That feeling of threat eventually dissipated in the crowd. Activists gave speeches to rally the protesters.

A common gripe among local activists is that out-of-towners frequently leave them out of planning for national actions. Far from repeating that error, The Black Cat's "No Thanks" show was homegrown with help from national and local independent musicians and activists. Amanda Huron says that it was important to remind people who focused on the national issues that there were also local issues and active local organizations effecting change within arm's reach. The Black Cat is owned by former DC punk musicians. It is friendly to the idea of fundraising, supporting the ethical work of the musicians. Most musicians said that they participated as a way of donating their labor for the weekend of Women's March, and that labor made a local difference. The beneficiaries of the "No Thanks" show were both local: Casa Ruby (a homeless LGBTQ shelter) and ONE DC (for housing and neighborhood equity) both took home money for much-needed local services. Co-organizer Kevin Erickson took the mic to make a concrete case for the ways ACA insurance is good for musicians.

It is not enough to say that the show was a "political" show. It is more useful to understand *how* the music was political. Political theorist Mark Mattern offers a typology of protest music. His *pragmatic* mode describes the use of music to bring diverse efforts together, creating a potential for finding common interests.⁶ The mix of transgender musicians, aging third-wave feminist punks, Marc Ribot's rendition of Paquita la del Barrio's "Rata de Dos Patas" re-directed towards Donald Trump was diverse. Mattern's *confrontational* mode was also in effect but the confrontation was directed outwards, across the political divide. Most of this was in style. Co-organizer Katie Alice Greer brought her band Priests to the stage. They blazed through an antagonistic set of intense noise. In general, the *feel* of the music was confrontational—from the raw power of post-punk band Priests to the humorously off-kilter acoustic queer pop-punk anthems of Evan Greer. A diverse set of confrontational styles drew a line in the sand. Trump's musicians that day were 16-year-old *America's Got Talent* runner up Jackie Evancho, jingoist Toby Keith, and 3 Doors Down—acts that in no way represented new or exciting contributions to popular music.

As the night wore on, musicians mixed, crowds shifted and we reclaimed the musical space that had been under threat. The Black Cat show did the work of "signal-boosting," according to Speedy Ortiz frontwoman Sadie Dupuis. She played solo, somewhat less comfortable without her band but committed to somehow participating in the weekend's protests. *Billboard* magazine had already asked her to conduct interviews that weekend. The Black Cat invitation gave her more ways to participate. She stayed at Greer's house. "It was like a slumber party," she recalls, feeling the collective nature of the weekend's events. On stage, she let her music speak for itself, making room for the political speeches and the other artists. The artist does not have to lead, but her participation is valuable. Her songs and those of her peers are already political. At the "No Thanks" show, the stage was a shared space and the signal that was boosted at the Black Cat was politically intersectional and musically confrontational.

John Street argues that political music often has its power in musical elements that are found outside culture.⁷ There are two sources in rock for this: the first is in foreign cultural material and the second is from the avant-garde. The audience reaction of "That's not music" is a powerful reaction to seek, especially when there is an audience that will get out of their comfort zone to meet the challenge. The Black Cat show pushed musical limits and offered eclectic voices. In this way, it set a tone for the march the next day.

⁶ Mark Mattern, *Acting in Concert: Music, Community, and Political Action* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 25, 30.

⁷ Street, "Rock, Pop and Politics," 254.

Returning to Comet after the March

We marched on Saturday and never saw the main stage. The march was about the crowd—our collected network of visible people and the sheer mass of protesters. The march and the eventual inability to move felt reassuring.

On the night of the Women's March, I went to Comet in support of one of my favorite local music venues. Police cars were parked outside, the city recognizing the threat of alt-right protesters who were disturbing many of the businesses on the block. Comet staff had been receiving continued death threats since "Pizzagate." Tonight, it was packed. Locals and outsiders watched bands play, ate pizza, drank beer, and talked about the march. At one point, a right-wing protester out front with a bullhorn and a sign got too loud for us. In reaction, we brought the sound system out on the sidewalk and surrounded him with a dance party.

The punk scene is one of many scenes that resonated with response to the inauguration. There were other events connected to the march that weekend—for instance, at the 9:30 Club and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. All of these local events cut through the sense of existential and personal threat to become part of a weekend of protest that incorporated local voices and national rage, urban change, and economic exclusion, and intersectional political music that without empathy and inclusion sound elite and un-American. Widening attention to the way that music sounded in the march reveals a local independent music scene visible through the internet. Consideration of how music was political in this moment should include the role of the trolls defining music as a component of conspiracy theories about an imaginary radical left. The rhetoric about music develops in inexpensive chat rooms while another class of Americans have the means to congregate in person at urban music venues, buying tangible goods.

Interviews

Amy Farina, September 9, 2017
 Sadie Dupuis, September 19, 2017
 Amanda Huron, September 27, 2017
 Dante Ferrando, February 12, 2018
 Sasha Lord, May 8, 2018
 Erin Frisby, May 9, 2018
 Amanda Kleinman, May 15, 2018

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