



**Screams, guitars, and abstinence:
The evolution of straight edge lyrics**



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Abstract

Straight edge hardcore emerged in the United States in the 1980s as both a music genre and as a lifestyle. The straight edge lifestyle is characterized by abstinence from alcohol and drugs, in many instances refraining from promiscuous sex, and sometimes following vegetarian or vegan diets. Although straight edge has received some scholarly attention, some of its aspects have largely been overlooked. This thesis is intended to fill the gap in contemporary academic literature on straight edge lyrics by discussing the development of the lyrical content of straight edge hardcore. The research question for this thesis is: how do straight edge hardcore lyrics reflect the evolution of straight edge identity from the year 2000 onward? This question is answered by first looking at Robert T. Wood's article "Nailed to the X': A Lyrical History of the Straightedge Youth Subculture" in order to understand how straight edge lyrics reflect the straight edge identity between 1980 and 1999. Secondly, I performed lyrical analysis on lyrics between 2000 and the present day, and compared the lyrical content of these two time periods to see how these relate to each other and ultimately reflect the development of straight edge identity.

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Introduction

Straight edge hardcore emerged in the United States in the 1980s as both a music genre and as a lifestyle. The straight edge (often stylized as sXe) lifestyle is characterized by abstinence from alcohol and drugs, in many instances refraining from promiscuous sex, and sometimes following vegetarian or vegan diets.¹ Straight edge lifestyle opposes that of punk in the 1980s, a scene in which substance abuse was of frequent occurrence. Many hardcore bands adopted this mindset of abstinence and integrated straight edge ideals into their music and lyrics.

As a fan of hardcore punk, straight edge has always intrigued me because of its unique outlook on drugs and alcohol. When listening to straight edge bands the sometimes-explicit lyrics can be very striking. Since there is not much information to find about the metaphors and imagery used by straight edge hardcore bands, I thought it would be interesting to look into their lyrics.

Though there are many scholars who have written about straight edge, there unfortunately is not much academic material focusing on lyrics and other musical characteristics to be found. Furthermore, much of the academic research on straight edge predates 2010, raising the question if it has even become outdated now, ten years later. With my thesis I intend to fill the gap in contemporary academic literature on straight edge. Straight edge, and youth cultures in general, are everchanging, especially with the influence of the internet nowadays and its role in the global spread of youth culture.² Therefore, it is important to keep studying these cultures and their development, because a lack of understanding might lead to misinterpretation of these youth cultures and lifestyles.

For this thesis, I will research the lyrical content of straight edge hardcore bands. I hope to answer the following question with my research: how do straight edge hardcore lyrics reflect the evolution of straight edge identity throughout the years?³ First, I will explore the lyrics of straight edge bands up until 1999. I will then discuss straight edge lyrics from 2000 up until now. The choice to divide straight edge into two periods is motivated by the

¹ Ross Haenfler, "Straight Edge 101" in *Straight Edge : Hardcore Punk, Clean Living Youth, and Social Change* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 1.

² J. Patrick Williams, "Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 no. 2 (April 2006): 194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605285100>.

³ Herein, "throughout the years" is defined as the time period from 1980 until the present day.

methodology I will adhere to, since Robert T. Wood's article from 1999 will form the basis for the lyrical analysis of the first time period, 1980 until 1999. Besides a useful method, Wood also presents a valuable insight in straight edge lyrics for this first period, which I will review and supplement with other academic sources in the first chapter.

Furthermore, I will apply Andy Furlong's terminology of youth cultures. I use the term lifestyle rather than scene or subculture, conforming to Furlong's definition of the term lifestyle: "a term most frequently used to highlight shared patterns of consumption and the ways in which young people express identity through consumer purchases."⁴ Lifestyle as a concept is more applicable here, since nowadays many people who affiliate themselves with straight edge ideals are not necessarily involved in the straight edge music culture. Lifestyle is an important aspect of identity, and lifestyle aspects such as abstinence come forward clearly in straight edge lyrics.

In straight edge hardcore, much like in punk, lyrics "have a prominent status as a means of conveying messages and sharing ideas."⁵ These messages and ideas ultimately express identity, both individual and collective. Both aspects of identity, individual and collective, are important in straight edge because individual commitment to the straight edge identity reinforces collective identity as well.⁶ As Simon Frith writes: "[m]usic seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective and in the collective."⁷ In my analysis of straight edge lyrics I will pay attention to both aspects of collective and individual identity that come forth.

As for methodology, I will review existing literature on straight edge and perform lyrical analysis. My research will be focused on straight edge bands from the United States and Canada, since it is in this area that straight edge originated, and it remains mainly a North American phenomenon. Since the focus is the lyrics, sound will play a minor role in my thesis. I will briefly address musical characteristics in order to provide context, but the analysis of musical characteristics will be subordinate to lyrical analysis. In the book chapter

⁴ Andy Furlong, "Youth cultures and lifestyles," in *Youth Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 155.

⁵ Gerfried Ambrosch, "Punk as Literature: Toward a Hermeneutics of Anglophone Punk Songs," *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 42, no. 1 (2017): 106.

⁶ Ross Haenfler, "Collective Identity in the Straight Edge Movement: How Diffuse Movements Foster Commitment, Encourage Individualized Participation, and Promote Cultural Change," *The Sociological Quarterly* 45 no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 785. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4121210>.

⁷ Simon Frith, "Music and Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*. (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), 110.

“Domain of Lyrics: The Voice of the Song”, William Moylan theorizes the analysis of song lyrics.⁸ Moylan identifies different approaches in uncovering meaning in lyrics: by looking at the narrative, the singer’s delivery of the lyrics, linguistic characteristics, and the relationship between lyrics and music including sound qualities, nonverbal sounds, and vocal style. The narrative aspect of lyrics identifies different aspects of the story such as narrator, story, and narrative. The delivery of the lyrics concerns the performance of the singer. Linguistic characteristics include not only the words being used, but also nonverbal sounds. By focusing on these elements while analyzing lyrics, I have tried to focus on the text itself and less on personal perspectives to keep subjectivity to a minimum.⁹ Though not always explicitly mentioned, I used Moylan’s framework during the analysis of lyrics in order to better understand the lyrics.

I will adapt the methodology of Robert T. Wood’s article “‘Nailed to the X’: A Lyrical History of the Straightedge Youth Subculture” to a smaller scale. In this article, the author gives a thorough analysis of different themes and metaphors in straight edge lyrics.¹⁰ Wood also provides a useful framework for studying the “historical artefacts and texts that concretize and communicate the norms, values and beliefs which comprise(d)” the lifestyle and music culture.¹¹ He acquired lyrics from over six hundred songs, briefly examined them to find thematic patterns, and linked these to historical periods in straight edge. The themes and information provided by these lyrics was supplemented with further lyrical analysis and information from “magazines, videos, pamphlets, leaflets and mail-order catalogues.”¹²

In adapting Wood’s method, I have selected twenty self-proclaimed straight edge bands for chapter two, and read through all of their lyrics in order to discover patterns in themes and metaphors used. Out of these lyrics, I quoted those containing relevant themes. I chose to select bands that are well-known within straight edge (e.g. Have Heart, Bane, Earth Crisis) as well as newer bands (e.g. World of Pleasure, Regulate, Magnitude), in order to have a balanced view of straight edge after 2000. Just as Wood did, I have supplemented my findings with information from other sources such as academic articles, as well as information from online news outlets and social media. I have chosen this method because it

⁸ William Moylan, “Domain of Lyrics: The Voice of the Song,” in *Recording Analysis: How the Record Shapes the Song* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 105-141.

⁹ Moylan, “Domain of Lyrics,” 114.

¹⁰ Robert T. Wood, “‘Nailed to the X’: A Lyrical History of the Straightedge Youth Subculture,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 2 no. 2 (1999): 133-151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.1999.10593032>.

¹¹ Wood, “‘Nailed to the X,’” 135.

¹² Wood, “‘Nailed to the X,’” 136.

is most suitable for this thesis, fitting within the scope of this research and keeping this thesis within its bounds. I also believe these methods will give an insightful overview of straight edge lyrics, combining academic knowledge of straight edge with the lyrical content of straight edge music. In the first chapter, I will discuss Robert T. Wood's article and straight edge lyrics from the 1980s until 1999. The second chapter will be dedicated to straight edge lyrics between 2000 and 2010. In the third chapter, I will explore the contemporary lyrics of straight edge hardcore, looking at the more recent years: from 2011 until now.

Chapter 1: 1980 - 1999

In this first chapter, I will discuss the early stages of straight edge hardcore lyrics based on Robert T. Wood's article "'Nailed to the X': A Lyrical History of the Straightedge Youth Subculture", which provides an excellent overview.¹³ Wood delineates the development of straight edge hardcore by means of the lyrics, and commonly used metaphors and symbolisms therein. As mentioned before, Wood's methodology consisted of collecting around six hundred straight edge hardcore tracks and connecting frequently used metaphors to the evolution of straight edge. Wood also used information gathered from magazines, album covers, and other sources in order to uncover and clarify the themes in the lyrics.

The first type of lyrics that Wood mentions is the straight edge style characterized by the use of an 'X' symbolizing straight edge identity. A commonly used metaphor was "To the X I'm crucified". This metaphor "symbolizes one's commitment and dedication to straightedge philosophy and straightedge lifestyles".¹⁴ This 'X' symbol was often painted on hands by straight edge concert attendees. Although this practice of painting an 'X' on your hand started out as a way for music venues to distinguish underage attendees so they would not be served alcohol, it was adopted by straight edge culture signifying one's commitment to the lifestyle.¹⁵ Many lyric sheets, album covers, and even merchandise like t-shirts, were decorated by objects crossed on top of each other forming an 'X'.

Early straight edge youth of the 1980s oftentimes used the phrase "thinking straight" or "being straight" as a denominator of their straight edge identity. Thinking straight, or being straight, was an opposition to drinking and using drugs that cloud one's mind. In this paragraph, Wood mentions the most-cited straight edge lyrics in academic articles from Minor Threat's "Straight Edge" and "Out of Step" (1981), which laid the foundation for the straight edge hardcore genre and lifestyle. "Straight Edge" kickstarted the self-identification of sXers for those who recognized themselves in the lyrics: "I'm a person just like you / But I've got better things to do / Than sit around and smoke dope / Cause I know I can cope".¹⁶ "Out of Step" also mentions the aspect of promiscuous sex: "Don't smoke / Don't drink /

¹³ Robert T. Wood, "'Nailed to the X': A Lyrical History of the Straightedge Youth Subculture," *Journal of Youth Studies* 2 no. 2 (1999): 133-151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.1999.10593032>.

¹⁴ Wood, "'Nailed to the X'," 137.

¹⁵ Jesse J. Helton and William J. Staudenmeier Jr., "Re-imagining being "straight" in straight edge," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 29 no. 2 (June 2002): 451. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009145090202900209>.

¹⁶ Wood, "'Nailed to the X'," 137.

Don't fuck / At least I can fucking think".¹⁷ Despite this strong opposition to alcohol and drugs, straight edge lyrics at this time did not condemn those who did use these substances until later on, when a phenomenon that Wood describes as "straight edge drug warriors" emerged in the mid-1980s.¹⁸

"Kill anyone with a beer in their hand" and other aggressive metaphors were used in order to indicate that these sXers saw those who drank alcohol and used drugs as enemies that had to be eradicated. A good example that Wood also points out are the lyrics of Earth Crisis' most popular track "Firestorm" (1993): "Drug lords and dealers all must fall / The helpless are crying out / We have risen to their call / A firestorm to purify". Lyrics like these incited violence, and essentially declared a war on drugs, alcohol, and anyone that consumed or distributed them.

A growing number of sXers adopted a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle during the '80s and '90s. "Hands off the animals" referred to the suffering of animals in the meat and dairy industry. Wood mentions lyrics by Instead, who clearly voice their vegetarian standpoint: "A moral opposition / To the murder of animals / It's my philosophy / To take life is criminal".¹⁹ Later on, Earth Crisis expressed their opposition against meat eaters in an aggressive way on "Stand By" (1992): "If you refuse to change, then you are guilty and must be destroyed / Thoughts of superiority your supremacist crimes must end / You're a demon with blood on your hands, your death will bring their freedom".²⁰ On "Ecocide" (1998) however, their lyrics have a more somber tone: "A forest of beautiful creatures senselessly dies / Smoking fields of devastation left in mankind's wake".²¹

The late '80s marked the beginning of the fragmentation of straight edge. Many bands referred to being "stabbed in the back", accusing some sXers of not actually knowing what straight edge is about and being backstabbers.²² Those who "claim edge" are expected to maintain the straight edge lifestyle, and not "break edge". Claiming edge is the action of adopting the straight edge lifestyle and identity, and breaking edge is a term usually applied when someone breaks the "rules" of being straight edge.²³ Breaking edge was seen as

¹⁷ Wood, "Nailed to the X," 137.

¹⁸ Wood, "Nailed to the X," 138-139.

¹⁹ Wood, "Nailed to the X," 139.

²⁰ Wood, "Nailed to the X," 139-140.

²¹ "Ecocide," Earth Crisis, Genius, accessed November 11, 2020, <https://genius.com/Earth-crisis-ecocide-lyrics>.

²² Wood, "Nailed to the X," 140-141.

²³ Ross Haenfler, "Rethinking Subcultural Resistance: Core Values of the Straight Edge Movement," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 33 no. 4, (August 2004): 409. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241603259809>.

betrayal by some straight edge bands such as Youth of Today, who thus actively condemned this in their lyrics.

So-called hardline straight edge adopted a more militant mindset, focusing on the fundamental aspects of straight edge and being anti-alcohol, anti-drugs, and fighting for animal liberation.²⁴ In the '90s, hardline also became associated with pro-life and homophobic views.²⁵ Their ideals were translated into metaphors such as “don’t limit your potential through an X”. With this metaphor, hardline sXers referred to others who claimed to be straight edge but did not follow their idea of a straight edge lifestyle. Hardline also formed a “resistance to Western social and moral degeneration.”²⁶ The band Raid illustrate this sentiment in “Unleashed”: “Straight in your face, my law pure and strong / Live tough on a pledge, in a world full of wrong”.²⁷

During the early 1990s the connection between straight edge and Hare Krishna started to grow. Much like “Christian punk, Hinduism’s presence in punk solidified in the early 1990s in North America’s secular hardcore scenes.”²⁸ One of the first bands to reference Hinduism and Krishna Consciousness was Cro-Mags.²⁹ The connection between Hare Krishna and straight edge ultimately led to a new subgenre: Krishnacore. In order to reach enlightenment and salvation, Krishna Consciousness requires that one renounces “meat eating, gambling, illicit sex and intoxication”.³⁰ These requirements are comparable to the aspects of straight edge lifestyle. Krishna Consciousness added a spiritual dimension to straight edge. According to punk scholar Mike Dines, not only are the lifestyles of both movements similar, but so is the lyrical content.³¹ Though the vocal delivery of lyrics in Krishnacore is more aggressive than meditational, the lyrics communicate certain spirituality and exaltation, like on Shelter’s track “Saranagati” (1990): “I’m trying to understand that you’re the Supreme Friend / You’re beside me and you guide me like no one else can”.³²

²⁴ Wood, “‘Nailed to the X,’” 141.

²⁵ Gabriel Kuhn, “USA: Interview with Kurt Schroeder,” *Sober Living for the Revolution: Hardcore Punk, Straight Edge And Radical Politics* (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 150.

²⁶ Wood, “‘Nailed to the X,’” 141.

²⁷ Idem.

²⁸ Ibrahim Abraham and Francis Stewart, “Punk and Hardcore,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, ed. Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg (London; New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 245.

²⁹ Idem.

³⁰ Wood, “‘Nailed to the X,’” 142.

³¹ Mike Dines, “The Sacralization of Straightedge Punk: Bhakti-yoga, Nada Brahma and the Divine Received: Embodiment of Krishnacore,” *Musicological Annual* 50, no. 2 (2015): 152-154.

<https://doi.org/10.4312/mz.50.2.147-156>.

³² Idem.

Wood discusses the emergence of “straight edge holy terrorists”, whose opinion is similar to that of hardline sXers: that humanity should be purged of its “social and moral degeneration”.³³ A frequently used metaphor by bands that share this opinion is “humanity is the devil”. Additional metaphors used include religious imagery, referencing the concepts of hell, or the apocalypse, for example. Other straight edge bands’ lyrics demonstrated that there still existed some form of unity within straight edge. “We will remain” was the motto of bands that Wood categorizes as straight edge purists. This group of sXers firmly believed in loyalty and unity within the straight edge music scene.

Wood provides an overview of the different themes in straight edge lyrics between 1980 and 1999, and the developments therein. Metaphors concerning the ‘X’ or “thinking straight” were commonly used to express the abstinence aspect of straight edge identity. Militant sXers used more aggressive metaphors inciting violence on those drinking alcohol or using drugs. Themes concerning vegetarianism and veganism were also present. Then, fragmentation within straight edge started and metaphors of being stabbed in the back arose. Hardline resurgence saw an even more militant mindset being translated into lyrics. The combination of straight edge and Hare Krishna led to more spiritual lyrics, contrasting with later metaphors about the evils of humanity. Though these themes are well-explained, Wood only gives little attention to so-called straight edge purists. Straight edge purists called for unity within straight edge, with phrases such as “we will remain”. Furthermore, although Wood tries to incorporate a narrative, it is sometimes unclear how certain themes and movements within straight edge interacted, if at all.

³³ Wood, “Nailed to the X,” 144.

Chapter 2: 2000 – present

From the year 2000 on, straight edge hardcore has seen the releases of many records, as well as an increase in the global spread of this music and lifestyle.³⁴ Many sXers started to find each other online too.³⁵ Though many of the themes and metaphors presented by Robert T. Wood are still present in straight edge lyrics, the expansion of straight edge also led to more variation in lyrical themes.³⁶ In this chapter, I will discuss which metaphors and themes are still present in straight edge lyrics, which themes have disappeared, and what new themes have emerged.

Firstly, the ‘X’ as a symbol is still a commonly used metaphor in straight edge lyrics. Inclination, a straight edge band on the rise who were quickly signed to punk rock label Pure Noise Records, mention the ‘X’ in “An X of My Own” (2017): “Do not hold onto the X for anyone else but yourself / If you can't find your own reasons then this isn't something you believe in / This isn't a placeholder to fit in somewhere till you get older / This is active opposition to a world full of addiction”.³⁷ These lyrics highlight the personal aspect of claiming edge, and at the same time resent those who claim edge without completely believing in it. Similarly, Magnitude, who started out in 2017, mention the ‘X’ as a metaphor for commitment: “A permanent engraving indestructible / Perpetual and undying / With this X I mark myself proud to be unrestrained”.³⁸ Despite the ‘X’ remaining a widely used symbol, its context has changed from that of crucifixion like Wood describes, to a broader context simply referring to straight edge.³⁹ A possible explanation for the disappearance of this crucifixion metaphor could be the decline in Christian population in the United States.⁴⁰

³⁴ Vincent Bedu, “Reception and Appropriation of Straight Edge Culture in the French Hardcore Scene,” in *Postgraduate Voices in Punk Studies: Your Wisdom, Our Youth*, ed. Mike Dines and Laura Way (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 67-86.

³⁵ J. Patrick Williams, “Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 no. 2 (April 2006): 173-200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605285100>.

³⁶ Robert T. Wood, “Nailed to the X’: A Lyrical History of the Straightedge Youth Subculture,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 2 no. 2 (1999): 133-151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.1999.10593032>.

³⁷ “An X of My Own,” Inclination, Genius, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://genius.com/Inclination-an-x-of-my-own-lyrics>.

³⁸ “Ceaseless,” Magnitude, Genius, accessed November 25, 2020, <https://genius.com/Magnitude-ceaseless-lyrics>.

³⁹ Wood, “Nailed to the X’,” 136-137.

⁴⁰ Eva M. Hamberg, “Analyzing religious decline: A sociological approach,” in *The Decline of Established Christianity in the Western World: Interpretations and Responses*, ed. Paul Silas Peterson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 80-81.

On “All I Need” (2017) Inclination’s lyrics contain a metaphor about thinking straight and keeping your mind clear: “I know I’ve changed a little here and there / But my head has and will remain clear”.⁴¹ “When Fear Turns to Confidence” (2019) contains the same sort of metaphor, referring to abstinence as an “awakening”: “When fear turns to confidence you see through your minds tricks / And find reason to abstain which brings about an awakening”.⁴²

Earth Crisis’ album *To the Death* (2009) contains different metaphors referring to addiction and the harm caused by drug dealers as well as drug users. The lyrics of “To Ashes” call for a punishment for drug dealers, one of them being burning down every meth lab: “A demon encased inside of human skin / A profiteer that feeds a plague of addiction / There’s no option, there’s no recourse, there’s no other way / Every meth lab burned / To ashes”.⁴³ These lyrics can be compared to aggressive metaphors used by so-called straight edge drug warriors of the mid-1980s, in the same fashion as Earth Crisis’ own track “Firestorm” (1993).

Vegetarianism and veganism are lifestyle aspects that many bands still connect to straight edge. In the year 2000, Earth Crisis brought out an album containing songs that condemned the meat and dairy industry as well as the testing of medicine and cosmetics on animals: “Animals physiologically altered to increase their output for human usage / Left immobile as designed, trapped in a tortuous unexistence / Monstrosities brought into being / Behind the walls of laboratories, crimes go unseen”.⁴⁴ With these lyrics, the band also criticizes the fact that animal abuse is so normalised that these practices go unpunished. In more recent work by Earth Crisis the theme of veganism comes forth again on “To the Death” (2009): “Species torn from nature, individuals decreased / From living beings no nothing more than mechanized protein machines / Calves seized from their mothers, confined in veal crates / Meat, dairy industries connect to end with the same fate”.⁴⁵

Path of Resistance, which was formed by members of Earth Crisis, brought out their album *Can’t Stop the Truth* in 2006, that showcases the issue of animal abuse on “What Propaganda

⁴¹ “All I Need,” Inclination, Genius, accessed December 1, 2020. <https://genius.com/Inclination-all-i-need-lyrics>.

⁴² “When Fear Turns to Confidence,” Inclination, Genius, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://genius.com/Inclination-when-fear-turns-to-confidence-lyrics>.

⁴³ “To Ashes,” Earth Crisis, Genius, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://genius.com/Earth-crisis-to-ashes-lyrics>.

⁴⁴ “Biomachines,” Earth Crisis, Genius, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://genius.com/Earth-crisis-biomachines-lyrics>.

⁴⁵ “To the Death,” Earth Crisis, Genius, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://genius.com/Earth-crisis-to-the-death-lyrics>.

Hides”: “Controlled and caged, an existence of torment / In pain and sickness an entire life's spent / Stun bolt shattered skull to be killed is their fate / For the moment their flesh is set on a plate”.⁴⁶ “Best of My Best” addresses the same issue: “The horrors of the slaughter house / To most their awareness is nil / Time to face the issue, force the answer / It’s better not to kill”.⁴⁷ “Blood Trail” also discusses the environmental issues caused by the meat and dairy industry: “Strip away the forests for more grazing land / Cattle bred and slaughtered and consumed by man / Follow the blood trail / Back into your mind”.⁴⁸

Perhaps due to growing awareness of animal abuse as well as environmental issues such as global warming, vegetarianism and veganism are themes that continue to be a strong presence in straight edge lyrics. World of Pleasure, who brought out their first EP in 2020, are an example of this continuation of vegan themes. The track “Domination” presents their views on the abuse and killing of animals in the meat and dairy industry: “Knocked from the top of the food chain / How can death be humane? / Endless pain for your personal gain / Your ignorance is fucking insane / It's time for your extermination / Vegan domination”.⁴⁹ At the end of the track, the singer yells out “Vegan straight edge for fucking ever”.⁵⁰ On social media, World of Pleasure promote themselves as a vegan straight edge band as well.⁵¹ Ecostrike also critique eating animals and animal products as well as the abuse of animals in the fashion industry on “A Better Way” (2020): “The way that they suffer / If it’s a meal on the table or a fashion statement”.⁵²

Bane, who had a long career starting in 1995 and having played their last show in 2016, brought out a song called “You Wrote This Song For Me” in 2001. This song’s lyrics resemble one of the themes described by Wood, that of being “stabbed in the back”: “But swinging some rusty axe that has been weighing you down / Speaks volumes about your inability to understand / This scene, this struggle, that has existed so long before you / And

⁴⁶ “What Propaganda Hides,” Path of Resistance, Genius, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://genius.com/Path-of-resistance-what-propaganda-hides-lyrics>.

⁴⁷ “Best of My Best,” Path of Resistance, Genius, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://genius.com/Path-of-resistance-best-of-my-best-lyrics>.

⁴⁸ “Blood Trail,” Path of Resistance, Genius, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://genius.com/Path-of-resistance-blood-trail-lyrics>.

⁴⁹ “Domination,” World of Pleasure, Bandcamp, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://worldofpleasure.bandcamp.com/track/domination>.

⁵⁰ Idem.

⁵¹ world of pleasure (@worldofpleasure.xvx), “Vegan Straight Edge. Art by the Despize Brothers. Engineered by Jordan Chase,” Instagram photo, September 21, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFYEJOEJzR4/>.

⁵² “A Better Way,” Ecostrike, Genius, accessed November 25, 2020, <https://genius.com/Ecostrike-a-better-way-lyrics>.

will continue happily without you”.⁵³ The lyrics critique people who claim to be straight edge but don’t understand its history and the motives of other sXers. The way that the lyrics speak from a first-person viewpoint allows “a unique possibility of identification”, according to William Moylan.⁵⁴ Listeners may see themselves as the “I” person in these lyrics, or as the “you” person in other cases.

In 2005, Bane again voiced criticism towards members of the straight edge scene with their song “Wasted on the Young”. “It’s gonna take a little while to find out exactly who you are / But then maybe the day won’t come / When you have to turn your back / On all those things that you once stood for” references people claiming edge while not understanding the straight edge lifestyle, and ultimately breaking edge.⁵⁵ “Spit in the face of a sacred oath” is also used as a metaphor for breaking edge, since many sXers see claiming edge as a sacred promise to yourself and to others.

Themes that have practically disappeared from straight edge lyrics are that of hardline resurgence, Krishna Consciousness, straight edge holy terrorists, and straight edge purists. The absence of themes concerning unity within straight edge and the growing focus of personal aspects of straight edge raise interesting questions about the development of straight edge. Has straight edge remained a fragmented music scene? Or has straight edge lost the need of unity due to its incorporation in a more diverse hardcore punk scene? According to Kurt Schroeder of Catalyst Records, straight edge has matured and grown, since the 1990’s, to incorporate new ideas.⁵⁶ The incorporation of new ideas may have led to the disappearance of hardline resurgence as well as that of straight edge holy terrorists, since tolerance towards others grew. Schroeder also mentions that straight edge began “to rely less upon the more puritanical influences”, which would explain the disappearance of straight edge purists too.⁵⁷ Relying less on the fundamental aspects of straight edge also left more room for personal aspects to be incorporated in lyrics.

⁵³ “You Wrote this Song for Me,” Bane, Genius, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://genius.com/Bane-you-wrote-this-song-for-me-lyrics>.

⁵⁴ William Moylan, “Domain of Lyrics: The Voice of the Song,” in *Recording Analysis: How the Record Shapes the Song* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 117.

⁵⁵ “Wasted on the Young,” Bane, Genius, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://genius.com/Bane-wasted-on-the-young-lyrics>.

⁵⁶ Gabriel Kuhn, “USA: Interview with Kurt Schroeder,” *Sober Living for the Revolution: Hardcore Punk, Straight Edge And Radical Politics* (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 150.

⁵⁷ *Idem*.

The personal aspect of straight edge lyrics is a recent development, that highlights the individual aspect of the straight edge identity and has led to very honest lyrics. Have Heart, who formed in 2002, became one of the most popular straight edge hardcore bands. Though they broke up in 2010, one of their reunion shows in 2019 turned out to be the biggest hardcore show ever.⁵⁸ On “Life is Hard Enough” (2006), the lyrics express the temptation of alcohol: “Do I turn to a drink or into what I want to be? / Is a substance gonna be the crutch that’s going to set me fucking free?”⁵⁹ Despite implicitly condemning those who drink alcohol, this type of lyrics is more personal than metaphors of “thinking straight”, for example. Have Heart’s song “Bostons” (2008) focuses on the family of singer Patt Flynn: “Old man, I heard some things about the boy you used to be / No father, no king, just a broken old man broken by the whiskey”.⁶⁰ This reference to alcoholism in the singer’s family is another more personal metaphor to express disapproval of consuming alcohol, and show what harm addiction can cause.

New York hardcore band Regulate demonstrate that self-destruction seems to have become a recurring theme in straight edge lyrics as well, an example being the lyrics for “Wishful Thinking” (2018): “Look in the mirror & you're hating what you see / Thinking to yourself / ‘What the fuck happened to me?’ / Shove inside your skin / Have that one drink / Snort it all up / But can you tell me for what?”⁶¹ Regulate take a militant stance and strongly disapprove of drugs and alcohol, but are more mild in this stance than bands who used metaphors like “kill anyone with a beer in their hand”.

Path of Resistance approach the topic of straight edge in a similar way on their song “That Golden Day”, pointing out the aspect of self-destruction when consuming drugs and alcohol regularly: “Synthetic escapism where did all the years go / Lost in an inebriated blur going nowhere slow / Won't conform to a mindset that breeds self-destruction / Life's too short to waste the days in a daze of poison”.⁶² The lyrics also resent the normalization and glamorizing of drug use by means of advertising. The song ends with group vocals screaming “Straight Edge”, emphasizing the message of the song, and that of the band in general. The

⁵⁸ Steven Bastias, “Have Heart’s Reunion Was The Biggest Hardcore Show Ever,” *Kerrang!*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.kerrang.com/features/have-hearts-reunion-show-was-the-biggest-hardcore-show-ever/>.

⁵⁹ “Life is Hard Enough,” Have Heart, Genius, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://genius.com/Have-heart-life-is-hard-enough-lyrics>.

⁶⁰ “Bostons,” Have Heart, Genius, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://genius.com/Have-heart-bostons-lyrics>.

⁶¹ “Wishful Thinking,” Regulate, Bandcamp, accessed November 25, 2020, <https://regulatehc.bandcamp.com/track/wishful-thinking>.

⁶² “That Golden Day,” Path of Resistance, Genius, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://genius.com/Path-of-resistance-that-golden-day-lyrics>.

same theme of self-destruction and addiction appears on “Haunted”: “Self-destruction is what's packaged, promoted and sold as fun / The conditioning of future addicts has already begun”.⁶³

New imagery referencing older straight edge bands has also been incorporated by straight edge bands. “One Life to Live” (2009) by Bane refers to Minor Threat: “I didn't find God and he didn't come looking for me / But someone showed me Minor Threat / And that was plenty good enough for me”.⁶⁴ This is most likely a reference to Minor Threat kickstarting the straight edge genre and lifestyle. Casey Jones refers to Metallica’s lead singer in one of their song titles: “If James Hetfield Can Stay Straight Edge, Anyone Can” (2011). The lyrics reiterate the personal aspect of straight edge: “Still drug free, for myself / Still drug free, for no one else”.⁶⁵ These lyrics also show that straight edge is a very personal identity, assumed due to personal motivations.

Although straight edge hardcore is a genre that is mainly expressed and categorized by its lyrics, another new development is that some straight edge bands only proclaim themselves as such and do not necessarily address straight edge as a topic in their lyrics. These bands are only placed in the category of straight edge due to their own marketing of themselves as such. Some examples are bands such as Year of the Knife and One Step Closer.⁶⁶ Year of the Knife’s lyrics are very diverse with subjects varying from police brutality to depression, for instance.

From the year 2000 until now, straight edge hardcore lyrics express different themes than between 1980 and 1999. Some themes described by Wood remain present, such as the ‘X’ as a symbol for straight edge and commitment to the lifestyle, themes of thinking straight, violence against those who consume alcohol and drugs, vegetarianism and veganism, and metaphors of being “stabbed in the back” by those who betray the straight edge lifestyle. Themes concerning hardline resurgence, Krishna Consciousness, straight edge holy terrorists, and straight edge purists have practically disappeared, due to.... New themes in straight edge

⁶³ “Haunted,” Path of Resistance, Genius, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://genius.com/Path-of-resistance-haunted-lyrics>.

⁶⁴ “One Life to Live,” Bane, Genius, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://genius.com/Bane-one-life-to-live-lyrics>.

⁶⁵ “If James Hetfield Can Stay Straight Edge, Anyone Can,” Casey Jones, Genius, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://genius.com/Casey-jones-if-james-hetfield-can-stay-straight-edge-anyone-can-lyrics>.

⁶⁶ Zoe Camp, “Year of the Knife: Hardcore Act Embraces Straight Edge to Escape Harrowing Past,” *Revolver*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.revolvermag.com/music/year-knife-hardcore-act-embraces-straight-edge-escape-harrowing-past>.

lyrics include more personal lyrics, themes and references to self-destruction, and references to other bands or famous sXers. Some straight edge bands also choose to express their straight edge identity through social media and merchandise for example, rather than through their lyrics.

Conclusion

From 1980 until 1999, straight edge lyrics reflected the different facets of straight edge identity and its development. One of the first commonly used metaphors was the ‘X’ as a signifier for straight edge and one’s dedication and commitment to the lifestyle (1). The concept of thinking or being straight was then implemented in lyrics, referring to the aspect of abstinence within straight edge identity (2). Some sXers so strongly opposed the consumption of alcohol and drugs that their lyrics reflected this and included violent sentences such as “kill anyone with a beer in their hand” (3). Vegetarianism and veganism are also themes that were incorporated into straight edge lyrics (4).

Then, the fragmentation of straight edge started, and with that came the metaphors of being stabbed in the back (5). The rise of hardline sXers saw a militant mindset being translated into lyrics (6). Later on, the connection between Hare Krishna and straight edge led to a new subgenre, Krishnacore, with lyrics that brought the straight edge and Krishna Consciousness movements together (7). Another trend within straight edge lyrics was the use of metaphors about the evils of humanity (8). Lastly, so-called straight edge purists introduced metaphors of loyalty and unity: “we will remain” (9).

Straight edge lyrics from 2000 until now showcase some of the nine themes outlined by Wood. The ‘X’ as a symbol for straight edge and commitment to the lifestyle, themes of thinking straight, violence against those who consume alcohol and drugs, vegetarianism and veganism, as well as metaphors of being “stabbed in the back” are still used to express straight edge identity through song lyrics. However, some themes have also disappeared from straight edge lyrics: hardline resurgence, Krishna Consciousness, straight edge holy terrorists, and straight edge purists. Furthermore, some new themes have also been introduced. More personal metaphors, themes and references to self-destruction, and references to other bands or famous sXers have been incorporated in lyrics. At the same time, some straight edge bands choose to express their identity as straight edge not through lyrics, but through social media, or by wearing ‘X’s on stage, for example.

Throughout this research, I have focused on the lyrics of straight edge hardcore, and I have thought it interesting that they have become more diverse. There are different themes concerning the straight edge identity to be recognized, but also a great variety of themes unrelated to straight edge. Despite the fact that my research connects well to that of Robert T.

Wood, it would have been beneficial to incorporate more musical aspects of straight edge hardcore into both chapters of my thesis to further understand the genre. Thus, for further research, a deeper understanding of the musical characteristics of straight edge hardcore would fill a significant gap in the academic literature regarding straight edge. Additionally, it would be interesting to research the personal aspect of contemporary straight edge and interview participants of this music culture and lifestyle about their own experiences. A focus on straight edge as an international phenomenon, or a focus on straight edge outside of North America would also be a good research topic.

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