

THE RIGHTEOUS BROTHERS

Investigative Report on Straight-Edge Youth in Salt Lake City

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Adherents to the hardline will abide by these principles in daily life. They live at once with the laws of nature, and not forsake them for the desire of pleasure — from deviant sexual acts and/or abortion, to drug use of any kind (and all other cases where one harms all life). And, in following with the belief that one shall not infringe on an innocent's life — no animal product shall be consumed (be it flesh, milk or egg). Along with this purity of everyday life, the true hardliner must strive to liberate the rest of the world from its chains — saving life in some cases and, in others, dealing out justice to those guilty of destroying it. — from The Hardline Manifesto

A small undemonstrative town lying in the shadow of the Wasatch Mountains, Salt Lake City is famous for two reasons. First, it is the spiritual home of Mormonism. Second, it is the city that gave us Donny and Marie Osmond. Yet most visitors either pass straight through on their way to nearby ski resorts in the Rockies or stop only briefly to gaze at the oddly cartoonish Mormon temple that provides the sole visual focus in the downtown area.

Just like in any American city, just like any city in the world, there are some good kids in Salt Lake City and there are some bad kids. But given its size — less than a million people live in the city and its surrounding suburbs — and disproportionate religious significance, if you're a bad kid in Salt Lake City, then the whole world hears about it. Especially when the bad kids happen to be young "straight-edge" punks who don't drink, smoke or abuse drugs, and, in certain cases, eschew meat-eating and the consumption of all animal products.

Straight-edge kids look terrific on paper. In fact, you'd think parents and law enforcement officials would be breathing a great collective sigh of relief. Yet the entire scene is perhaps youth culture's most perplexing anomaly, made up of fiercely idealistic teenagers who shun all the usual outlets for teenage rebellion in favor of healthy living and an unstinting devotion to hardcore punk, with its aggressive, change-the-world choruses, and the fast and furious moshing they precipitate.

None of this would cause much alarm were it not for the fact that straight-edge kids have an overwhelming and well-documented propensity for fighting — both rival gangs and each other — in and around Salt Lake City. Following a series of violent incidents — in particular, the stabbing of two straight-edge youths that took place at a punk concert in 1996 — even hardcore bands are dropping Salt Lake City from their tour schedules. Viewing themselves as sober soldiers in a corrupt and polluted society, the group members often go to war using knuckle-dusters, knives, Molotov cocktails and pipe bombs. It's a phenomenon that continues to confound police, parents and educators and has attracted a wealth of unwelcome publicity for the city — including a recent front-page article in the *Los Angeles Times* and a story in the *Daily Telegraph* that claimed renegade Mormons were preaching violence in Salt Lake City.

Worse, in recent months the movement has been implicated in various high-profile outbreaks of violence and vandalism, including acts of sabotage carried out with homemade explosives. Much of this newfound notoriety is due to the violent actions of so-called “hardline” straight-edgers (pro-animal rights, pro-life, anti-sexist, anti-racist) and their association with the extreme activities of underground direct action groups like the Animal Liberation Front. And even though many straight-edge kids are horrified by their anti-social reputation, claiming that the ALF should not be considered in the same category as straight-edge, they have suddenly found themselves to be members of one of the most unwelcome, and least understood, groups in North America.

A lazy, lethargic summer night in south-east Salt Lake City. I’m talking to a couple of reputed bad kids, sXe punks (the sXe is shorthand for straight-edge; X being the movement’s universal symbol). We’re sitting on barstools in an all-ages disco (no alcohol, no drugs, no weapons, reads a sign on the door) sandwiched between a pizza chain restaurant and a Goth-themed coffee house called Caffiends. It’s not strictly a straight-edge hangout — there’s a six-foot-tall Goth in a floor-length cape and top hat on the dancefloor and over in the corner a pair of unnaturally pale girls with braces on their teeth are swapping make-up tips. But all the kids here — Goths, skinheads, hooded skate kids — know there’s nowhere else to go. This is the only place of its kind in town.

As the Goth continues to spiral across the dancefloor to the sounds of “Bizarre Love Triangle,” sXe pals Glen and Jeff (not their real names) tell me about the organized battles in nearby Kennecott Hills between straight-edgers and rival groups like SMP (Smoke More Pot) or SAE (Strictly Against Edgers) which have been common in the greater Salt Lake area since at least 1993.

“We’d agree to meet at this park at that time,” explains Jeff, an angelic-looking blond 18-year-old sporting short, cropped hair, camouflage combat pants and a T-shirt bearing the name of a long-standing straight-edge hardcore band called Warzone. “And then we’d fight them.”

If there were no rival groups around to clamor with, they’d simply fight among themselves. “People look at us wrong and it just happens,” Jeff says with a bemused shrug — equal parts bored and combative. Then he adds, simply: “Plus everyone thinks it’s cool to fight. We do it for fun.”

Jeff’s friend Glen, 20, is a reformed metalhead. As a teenager he did nothing but smoke pot and drink. Then, soon after he turned 17, he met a guy called Spidey who convinced him to join his drug-free crew. “They were so passionate about it,” says Glen. “And I wanted to quit drugs.”

Straight-edgers’ insistence on being classified as a crew may help to explain why Salt Lake City police have labeled the edgers as gangs. But, as a 14-year-old member of the Mafia X crew — other Salt Lake City crews include Monster Crew (to join you must be vegan as well as straight-edge), Cutthroat Crew, Two Foot Talley, and Godzilla Crew — informs me, they simply indicate who your friends are. “You get a couple of friends together, call yourselves a crew, get a dumb name and be serious about it or just have it be a big joke. Monkey Kids started as a joke, but now everyone respects it because it’s all about friendship.”

Even so, the local police department has recently added straight-edgers to its list of 333 known local gangs. Many of these are offshoots of street gangs in other cities and states. The Crips and Bloods — originally formed in the early Forties in Los Angeles — did not appear in Salt Lake City until the summer of 1990, when graffiti began to appear around town honoring L.A.'s Crenshaw Mafia and the Southern California-based Latino gang, Sureños 13. In 1993, a Vice Lords chapter of the Bloods was established in Salt Lake City by a local youth who had served jail time with a Vice Lords member from Chicago. And, towards the end of that year, a chapter of the Duce Crips from Texas was founded in Salt Lake City after several Texas members relocated to Utah.

These migratory patterns, combined with the rising popularity of hip-hop culture in the early Nineties, help explain how a predominantly white, gang-free city like Salt Lake City has become a center for violent urban gangs. Yet even in Salt Lake City, some of the gang members — around 50 percent — are Hispanic. Given their punk allegiances, most straight-edge kids — who are, in any case, predominantly white — aren't much interested in hip-hop culture. The straight-edge gang connection is largely the result of police confusion — connecting the baggy attire favored by straight-edge youth (which actually stems from skateboarding rather than hip-hop) and low-slung fashions that have long been a fixture of hip-hop and Latino culture.

Both straight-edge crews and street gangs, however, demand pledges of loyalty and respect from their members. In general, the straight-edge crew members are required to watch each other's backs, especially in the mosh pit at punk gigs, which themselves have a history of violence in Salt Lake City. In 1995, during a concert at the state fairground, a straight-edger confronted a non-straight-edger for allegedly smoking pot and exhaling into the face of a straight-edger and his crew. After beating the pothead to the ground, one member of the sXe crew went on to carve an X into his victim's back with a broken bottle.

An offshoot of the hardcore scene, straight-edge was conceived in the early Eighties as a reaction to the nihilism and self-destruction of punk, espousing instead self-control in the face of youthful temptations to experiment with drugs, alcohol and casual sex. Ian Mackaye, frontman of pioneering Washington D.C. punk outfits Minor Threat and Fugazi, is the person most often cited as the inspiration behind straight edge. In the early Eighties he offered a typically vociferous view of teenage angst through songs like "Out of Step (With the World)" and "Straight Edge," which he recorded with his first band, the Teen Idles, and a series of scene-defining lyrics: *"Don't smoke, don't drink, don't fuck, at least I can fucking think" and "I'm a person just like you/ But I've got better things to do/Than sit around and fuck my head/Hang out with the living dead/ Snort white shit up my nose/Pass out at shows/I don't even think about speed/That's something I just don't need/I've got the straight edge."*

Other straight-edge hardcore punk bands sprang up in rapid succession across the country: 7 Seconds in Reno, SS Decontrol in Boston, Youth of Today in Connecticut, Agnostic Front and Gorilla Biscuits in New York City, Uniform Choice in Southern California. By 1987, a second wave of U.S. hardcore bands had resulted in another resurgence of straight edge.

"My friends as I would say 'Yeah, we're straight-edge punk rockers,'" Mackaye recalls. "It was unheard of at the time because everybody felt punk rock just meant that you were totally self-destructive and that was it."

In the early Eighties, Mackaye played a show at San Francisco's legendary punk hotspot Mabuhay Gardens with the Teen Idles. Before the gig, the management scrawled a large X on the back of each band member's hand to ensure they were not served alcohol at the bar — this is common practice at U.S. venues that admit under-21s. After returning home to Washington D.C., the band decided to scrawl the same X on their hands before playing a gig, to show their commitment to an alcohol-free lifestyle.

That X would go on to symbolize straight-edge and unify it as a movement; its adult proponents would scrawl the X on their hands before attending an all-ages show, in solidarity with the younger punk fans in attendance, and in honor of their own commitment to not drink alcohol.

Mackaye has since distanced himself from straight-edge, largely because of the increasingly violent nature of the scene — violent incidents similar to those witnessed in Salt Lake City have occurred in California, Washington, Tennessee, Texas, New York and Ohio, where straight-edgers (also known in many regions as “hate-edgers”) have regularly tried through violence to enforce their abstinence on others. “I recognize that there's people involved with it who engage in violent activity,” Mackaye says. “I find it discouraging that there's a minority of people who use straight-edge as a reason to incite violence. There are plenty of good people doing good things in the scene.”

Lieutenant Carroll Mays, a Salt Lake City police officer who also serves as director of Salt Lake City Area Gang Project, sees it somewhat differently. “Our concern is the philosophy, particularly with the more militant — or ‘hardline’ — straight-edgers who have no patience for people who smoke or drink or whatever, and are willing to assault people, sometimes quite seriously, in order to get their beliefs across.”

This is what was reported to have happened in April of this year outside a Salt Lake City pizza parlor called The Pie, a popular gathering place for college students from the nearby University of Utah. As two fraternity brothers stood smoking cigarettes on the pavement outside the restaurant, what one local reporter described as “a gang of bleach-haired teenagers wielding chains, bricks and a giant spraycan of pepper gas” approached and ordered the students to put out their cigarettes. When they refused, members of the mob retreated to their cars and brought out baseball bats, chains, even a hatchet. One student was struck in the head with a baseball bat.

Police later arrested 24-year-old Clint Marvin, a reputed straight-edger, for his role in the attack. “What we found very interesting from a law-enforcement standpoint was that it almost seemed like the incident was planned,” says Lieutenant Mays. “The first thing the straight-edgers did was use pepper spray to take their victims' eyes away. Then they used a baseball bat to assault them.”

“The newspaper was completely misinformed about the incident at The Pie,” says Sean McClaugherty, the 23-year-old bassist for local straight-edge band Clear. “There was not 20 people who attacked them like the article said. The only interview the frat boys gave was to The Salt Lake Tribune, which made them sound like little innocent school kids: ‘Oh I was just out having a cigarette and all these mean straight-edge kids started shit with us!’ You know, it doesn't work that way. Everybody knows that frat boys don't exactly have a good reputation for being peaceful and nice, especially when alcohol is involved.”

Arriving along State Street, the main north-south artery through Salt Lake City, which runs for over 15 miles into the suburbs, you pass a series of abandoned car dealerships, run-down pawn shops, bleak mini-malls, state-owned liquor stores, bowling alleys and fast-food restaurants. It's no doubt this combination of suburban dereliction and teenage angst that attracted writer/director James Merendino. His film *SLC Punk* — shot on location in Salt Lake City with Matthew Lillard, Summer Phoenix and James Duval — is due for release in the U.S. early next year.

SLC Punk features an anarchist protagonist who gradually begins to question his own hardcore lifestyle. Of course, many of those involved in straight-edge will have fallen back into decadence by the time they reach their mid-twenties. Internet discussion groups are full of messages from older members bemoaning the uncontrolled violence and one-dimensional rhetoric of the scene. Yet the appeal of the straight-edge lifestyle is self-evident for teenagers across America, from Midwestern towns to the Eastern suburbs — anywhere, in fact, where alternative expressions of solidarity and entertainment are in short supply. The biggest mystery, it seems, is the increasing militancy of the scene in Salt Lake City.

“Straight-edge does seem to be everywhere, but they seem to be so much more violent here,” says Lieutenant Mays, who isn't the only one who can't figure out why there's a straight-edge problem here. “It baffles me. Fewer people drink and fewer people smoke in Salt Lake City, so you'd think that it wouldn't be that big a deal. You wouldn't think the straight-edgers would get so riled up.”

Straight-edge scenes are not confined to the U.S., of course. But while the anarchist punk fringes in the U.K. have long been associated with militant groups like ALF, the links between punk, straight-edge and violent direct action are far more diffuse. More intriguing is a change in attitudes among young people detected by British researchers, which suggests their thinking is oddly in sync with straight-edge ideals.

“I've noticed that more and more kids in their early teens are saying they will never, ever take drugs,” says Mark Ratcliff, who runs youth research consultancy Murmur. “They aren't saying this because of health risks, but because drugs are seen to belong to an older, rather pathetic generation. A few years ago, you wouldn't have found this at all. Kids would even pretend to have taken drugs they clearly hadn't just to appear cool. It's quite a seismic shift towards clean living.”

One evening after a hardcore show at the Tower Theater — a sometime art-house cinema and one of the last venues in Salt Lake City to book hardcore punk bands — I meet Tyler Densley, a tall, skinny straight-edger who tells me the movement has been his salvation: “When I was in third grade I started listening to hardcore. Then I discovered straight-edge. It turned my whole life around,” Densley admits.

Tempted by drugs and drinking at the age of seven, Densley has since committed to sXe for life (“True ‘Til Death is a common straight-edge mantra), even going so far as to declare total abstinence from sex.

“I've made a vow to myself not to have sex in my lifetime, mainly because of diseases,” he says firmly. “Even more because of my views on abortion. I don't want to bring a child into this world that would be deprived in any way.”

Tyler Densley is 14 years old. ■