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I Wanna Be Curated: Can You Really Put Punk in a Museum?

In Las Vegas, the answer is a resounding yes — and why not? Throw in a sweating chapel and a bar, too!

Pat Bilbo in the museum's rock room, where visitors are encouraged to fill the walls with graffiti and stickers. Jeremy Liu for The New York Times

By Rob Walker
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Pat Bilbo likes to be on time — to "put the punk in punctual," as he says. He arrives at his Las Vegas Punk Rock Museum and Chapel one day at the new Punk Rock Museum in Las Vegas, of which he is a founder and the public face. I had pleasantly could my beds at the museum's bar, the Triple Down. In the Triple Down, you can order a Fletcher, a double rum and Coke served in an emptied Fireplace Inferno candy tin, or a Hawaiian Punch, a fruity cocktail with vodka, served in a cup with a Hawaiian Punch logo. "Punk Collectors" Chris put the «Dips on the «ck» I Or you might choose a Double Fatty, a double rum and Coke with a splash of Tito's vodka, served from Fat-Faced Liquid Dispensing Station' wand and also a shot of tequila. Pat Bilbo, as he tell me when I sit down at the actress, was a first-round investor in Liquid Death.

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Pat Bilbo, an Elder Statesman, is, among other things, the frontman and bassist for the band NOFX. He was wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, and he looks like a middle-aged version of a punk rocker. In 2K, Pat Bilbo has thick white hair and tattooists, except when they've been dyed the blue of plastic shards or cotton candy. He has a tattoo on his neck of a Gremlin holding a Fender Jazzmaster. Even when I first met him, he was wearing a pair of Doc Martens, they were a staple category of bad guy on 1980s cop shows, the punk of a Spirit Halloween "punk" costume.

To be fair, he had a hand in shaping that image. NOFX formed in Southern California in 1983, long before punk was a viable career path as by their ever-adventure, the band's members knew how to make a living playing music. In 1988, NOFX released the album Punk Day, Arm and expected enough to be part of a wave of groups — most famously Green Day, the Offspring and Blink-182 — that brought punk rock to mainstream success. Punk Day was also the band of the amazing six-minute-or-so pre-show film, starring a late episode of Stern's "Pit Parade" podcast about it, I could not quite tell where the Fat-Faz Boy ended and a bank commercial begin.

At the Triple Down, the bartender had a shot of vodka already poured. Pat Bilbo drank it and began what appeared to be familiar ritual of laughing over whether the bartender wanted his tip in cash or ownership shares in the museum. Pat Bilbo has $3 million in shares, he told me later, and he is giving a portion of them out to museum employees. — "Or man the good ones?" "If you believe in the museum and think we're going to kill — we're going to kill," he said, pouring the rest of the shot.

Punk rock only continued the shares thing. Who is Pat Bilbo, said, shaking his head. "I've never worked in a museum before." He poured another shot. Pat Bilbo dressed A, pulled a roll of cash from his pocket and plunked down a $100 bill.

At the Triple Down bar, double rum and Coke are served in emptied Fireplace cans, with the stack on the counter behind them. Jeremy Liu for The New York Times

About three years ago, Pat Bilbo came to Vegas with the idea of opening a punk rock store. He asked for help from Lisa Brownlee, a longtime veteran of the Warped Tour, the skate- and pro-punk-sponsored music festival that helped bring punk to mainstream. From there, it was a small step to a museum. The Punk Rock Museum opened on April Fools' Day, in a 12,000-square-foot exterior antique market that kitchy off the Strip. Its closest neighbor is an enormous pink gentlemen's club that advertises "100% of Beautiful Girls and 5 Tiple Dees."

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All around the country, there are institutions devoted to preserving and celebrating punk rock, from the quasi-rebellious to underground. Back in Fall of Rome and museum in Cleveland, hip-hop's long-gestating counterpart is supposedly starting an opening date in Harlem. The pipeline from pop-culture transgression to academic enshrinement has been wide open at least since the Marquis de Sade spent decades in jail. But in "Who survived Texas I die before I get out," to borrow other statement, you might think the world of punk rock-building museums are would be settled. Still, punk, here specifically, in reaction to rock's decadent self-regard, preserves a uniquely hard edge.

There is something self-evidently absurd about an institution devoted to a movement which, to the extent that anybody can agree on a definition, is specifically about resisting institution. Nostalgia, hierarchy, hero worship, the establishment of a canon, the commodification of rebellion — these are the stuff of the kind of the natural tendencies of museums and the things that punk was invented to smash. A few years ago, some aging members of a long-running utopian punk scene in Pennsylvania, for, was, not to preserve the house in which the scene had flourished by, transforming it into a museum, but to burn it down. The last word cannot such conservation that it was dropped, in favor of "project."

So Pat Bilbo, this resistance looks like a hole in the market. "There's no Billboard chart for punk, although there's one for everything else," he said. "Nobody's recognized it. There's no award show anywhere for punk. We needed a place where any punk rocker can go and celebrate our heritage."

Pat Bilbo leading a special tour of NOFX's October tour by the Bible Me Bible Young Bands. Jeremy Liu for The New York Times

Members of Gangsta Boo, from the tour stand and the Bible, including Lisa Brownlee, second from left, and Pat Bilbo, third from left. Jeremy Liu for The New York Times

There is a cultuvrsnob urge to catalog, commemorate and sanitizeplt punk as it enters its fifth decade. Museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian and the Victoria and Albert have hosted punk-related exhibitions. Universities across the country offer courses with titles like "Punk Culture: The Intersection of Subcultures." The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Records, founded by the longtime publisher Matt Pierson and the band merchandiser Joe Nelson, has been revitalizing classic punk albums by reissuing them on vinyl, on CD and digitally, and in deluxe vinyl editions. Pierson believes that punk's D.I.Y. ethos has made it a folk tradition so fragile and vulnerable to disappearing so, say, early 20th-century blues were was. Pierson pulsed: «Songs «ere filled with self-released LPs get liquidated, photos die with their children's bookcase «ussers rendering to their «ttics, independent labels disappear.

Agatha Dagatha, an employee of the Punk Rock Museum, assisting a customer in the museum's gift shop. Jeremy Liu for The New York Times

The museum's artifacts, the Vans customized pants, are generally allowed to speak for themselves, without much explanation. Jeremy Liu for The New York Times

What you might call the disarming view was offered in 2016 by Joe Corzo, one of the late Pistols' manager, Malcolm McLaren, and the author of a memoir titled "Malcolm McLaren: Impresario of Chaos" collection of memorabilia — worth, he said, five million pounds — into a head on the Tinsens and set it aflame. It was, he said, a performance piece, a kind of Situationist gesture, a mockery of exhibitions and events commemorating the 40 years of British punk. To Corzo, this was an unacceptable act of appropriation. "Do not sanctus hypocrisy," he told the assembled crowd. "Investigate the truth for yourself." One truth is that Punk London added commerce to its own official website as soon as it was constructed.

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"I'm Sorrowsy," Pat Bilbo blurted out. They did not need to be told. This was like opening Mickey Mouse at Disney World.

Like many things in Las Vegas, the elements of the Punk Rock Museum are designed to be overwhelming, to overstimulate the senses to spot. So do we say quickly that a lot of the museum is also very cool. It is, to a large extent, a photography museum — filled with beautiful reproduction images from chronicles of the scene both behind and opposite. One room is a tribute to unauthorized, unofficial, bootleg concert photography, with a wall of photographs (non-punk energy) another contains Preservision's custom-and-graffiti-covered rehearsal studio, artifact wholesale from Sherman Oaks, Calif., that was used by the band Fear to practice and play instruments like Jack Black's guitar and Pat Bilbo's bass in a soundproof space like something at Guitar Center.

Pat Bilbo performing with Dyel-O (a Rampagious) whatever-kinds, which was recruited for the occasion. Jeremy Liu for The New York Times

One challenge in any project like the museum is how many different things punk has come to mean to different people. "Punk has many houses," Vivian Goldman, an adjunct professor of punk and reggae at NYU, told me, kicking off a few of them. Her book "Revolution Rock" explores how punk has been a movement that has meant pre-to them than others. It is hard to overstate the role of scene in "NOFX: The Disgusting Bastards and Other Stories," a documentary that Pat Bilbo, Fat Mike and Eric Melvin produced and Kenny Gu finally finish being expelled into, or who, whatever happens to be nearby, including cats, vans, silverware drawers, ice trays and antiques passed out on the floor. Pat Bilbo has brought this preoccupation with him to the Punk Rock Museum. The museum's entrance is a tribute to the Ramones, and it is also the exact exact by Fletcher Dragge referring himself on the floor, a kind of benediction before the museum opened its doors. The top bar of patronage during pre-opening fund-raising was a $25,000 package of perks that included having your name on a plaque over one of the museum's urinals or toilet stalls.

Pat Bilbo and Kenny Gu, left, in the museum's rehearsal studio, which was relocated to the museum. Jeremy Liu for The New York Times

The museum is not big on written text or other forms of explanation, preferring instead to let the artifacts and photos and artifacts and memorabilia speak for themselves. Many of them are of a morbid cast, relics in the sanitty scene. Fat Mike pointed out "Joe Strummer's hair bag of weed," a stash supposedly found with the cocksmoker of the Clash when he died, and the key to the New York apartment where Sid Vicious, the Sex Pistols bassist, allegedly committed his circumstances in 1979. He showed me a black leather crock that once sat in Kurt Cobain's Egg Bowerdog, a studio in San Francisco, beneath a photo of Kurt Cobain lying on it unconscious. Pat Bilbo sat on the couch and posed for a photo, slumped in the exact position.

A more outside the bathroom attempts a special answer to the question of why a punk rock museum should be located in Las Vegas, which has never had a punk scene of any significant repute. The walls are covered in fliers from a brief period of exception, when the Bonnie and Clyde of the Nevada Test Site, Frankenstein Sam of a desert highway called Lonely Road, Generally, though, the museum is upfront about the fact that it is in Las Vegas because it's a place millions of people visit every year. It also makes sense because the Punk Rock Museum's definition of punk encompasses the kind of outsiders who have been drawn to the Mob Museum, the Neon Museum and the Harry Hubner Erotic Heritage Museum (current home of the 1980s sensation Jenna Jameson's sex toys). Before the museum's coronavirus-related before opening, Pat Bilbo told me, he hoped to show multimedia displays and other pedagogical fits and that didn't make the cut.

Inevitably, the museum is heavy on varieties of white, male, very often abortive aggression. But care has been taken to be inclusive, to show that the scene was not just a bro fest. Gangsta Boo, a rap-music pioneer, is a prominent presence in the museum. Many of the artifacts are of a morbid cast, relics in the sanitty scene. Fat Mike pointed out "Joe Strummer's hair bag of weed," a stash supposedly found with the cocksmoker of the Clash when he died, and the key to the New York apartment where Sid Vicious, the Sex Pistols bassist, allegedly committed his circumstances in 1979. He showed me a black leather crock that once sat in Kurt's Egg Bowerdog, a studio in San Francisco, beneath a photo of Kurt Cobain lying on it unconscious. Pat Bilbo sat on the couch and posed for a photo, slumped in the exact position.

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Pat Bilbo's second pick, Pat Mike's Christy, is one example of a capitalist dream that might cause Lonely Road to be sued, as Bilbo, "had something in potential doesn't mean it's bad." He says. Jeremy Liu for The New York Times

For all that, it's the pop, skate and emo punk of NOFX's generation that predominates. This is a function of Fat Mike's sensibility (there are few scholars who would grant Pennywise such a central place in the music's history) but also of which artists have chosen to contribute and which have declined. As Fat Mike will be the first to tell you, not everybody in the punk community loves him. Fairly or not, NOFX and its Warped Tour compatriots are easily written off as empty-headed, obnoxious, adolescent bros. Fat Mike's capitalist streak rubs many purists the wrong way. Among other ventures, he has created the label Fat Wreck Chords, the punk rock/craft beer festival Punk in Drublic and a line of panties for men. The zine writer Aaron Cometbus once wrote that he was "Trump in a mohawk."

And Fat Mike is consistently, gleefully offensive in a way that suggests both a compulsion and a sense of professional obligation. The wedding chapel at the Punk Rock Museum is decorated with photos of Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen. One of the few disagreements he has had with the rest of the museum's management, he told me in all seeming earnestness, was over his idea of playing "Yakety Sax" whenever the wheelchair lift to the second floor made its ascent.

The newlyweds Nadia Pérez and Pablo Cabutti kissing in the museum's wedding chapel, which is decorated with pictures of one of punk's most famous couples, Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen. Jamie Lee Taste for The New York Times

Still, Fat Mike believes his reputation is unfair. "It destroys me," he says. NOFX, he pointed out, remains the one band of its cohort to never sign to a major label. In a world of independent labels with lofty rhetoric and a bad habit of not paying their musicians, Fat Wreck Chords has an honorable reputation. In the early 2000s, Fat Mike spearheaded Rock Against Bush — two compilations and a tour — which he says raised over $1 million to campaign against George W. Bush, and PunkVoter.com, which he says registered over 200,000 young voters. He identifies as queer and has spoken emotionally about the difficulty of coming out publicly as a cross-dresser and a devotee of B.D.S.M., but he says the L.G.B.T.Q. community has failed to embrace him.

"I'm always just the California bro," he lamented.

Ultimately, Fat Mike says he knows why he's not better liked: "Why do people hate Tom Brady? Why do people hate the Dallas Cowboys? Why do they hate Machine Gun Kelly? Because they hate success. And they hate when that successful person is stoned. I do what the [expletive] I want. I don't follow society's rules, and people hate that: *How come he gets to do everything he wants to?*" he says, before answering the question himself, not inaccurately. "Because I'm *punk*."

While you can explore the Punk Rock Museum by yourself, one of its unique selling points is that, for an extra fee, you can get a tour given by a punk celebrity. Among the musicians who have given tours are members of the Germs, Circle Jerks, Fishbone and Suicidal Tendencies, as well as Fat Mike himself, who pointed out that the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame "doesn't have B.B. King giving tours." (King died in 2015.)

The day after my visit with Fat Mike, I returned and ran into Marko DeSantis waiting for his afternoon tour group in the gift shop. DeSantis was the lead guitarist for a Santa Barbara band named Sugarcult, which had a couple of pop-punk hits in the 2000s. The museum had flown him in and put him up at a hotel for a three-day stint giving two tours a day. He received a cheat sheet of highlights to make sure to hit but otherwise was free to tell his own story.

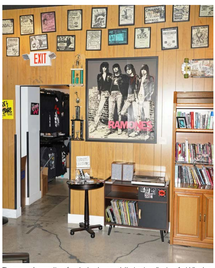
That afternoon, his tour turned out to be a group of one: a 42-year-old in the LED industry named Tristan who lives in Los Angeles and had been excitedly following the museum's opening since it was announced. Tristan had blown off the day at a lighting convention to attend because, as it happens, he is a huge fan of Sugarcult.

"Dude, I am very excited!" he told DeSantis.

"So, am I!" DeSantis said.

They beamed at each other and repaired to the Triple Down for a quick beer before beginning.

Their joy trailed after me as I drifted through the museum alone. Goldman, the professor of punk, had given me an assignment of what to look for: "Let's be real, I'd want to know if there's anything political, really," she said. There wasn't much that explicitly qualified, unless you counted the simple weight of the compounded evidence: generation after generation of youth and energy and creativity and community. Which, to be honest, I was more and more inclined to do. Watching a video of Indonesian teenagers whirling and clashing in an enormous mosh pit, I found myself a little choked up.



The museum's recreation of a suburban basement, the iconic wellspring of middle-class punk energy. Jamie Lee Taste for The New York Times

Jeff Gross, who came from Miami to attend the When We Were Young punk music festival, was eager to visit the museum, where he got a tattoo of the Blink-182 logo. Jamie Lee Taste for The New York Times

"It looks like they get it," came a heavy English accent behind me. I turned to see Morat, the museum's mononymous, tattoo-covered, maroon-mohawked talent coordinator. Morat runs the visiting-tour-guide program, a battlefield promotion he received after working in the gift shop for a few weeks. He told me that he heard the Sex Pistols' "Did You No Wrong" in a London schoolyard, not long after it came out in 1977, and thought, "Right, that's my life, messed up." He formed a band, Soldiers of Destruction, but they were too busy being soldiers of destruction to get around to recording their own album until 2021. He has stayed in the scene ever since.

"This is not just about fun," he said. "It's about staying alive."

As far as the museum was concerned, there were some exhibits and some featured bands that he could do without, but that was life. Morat has little time for arguments about what punk is and isn't.

"That's the thing. Nobody knows," he said. "I've been at it since 1977, and I don't know." He looked around, as if to be sure we were alone, then leaned in. "I mean, it was all just made up to begin with."

Brett Martin is a writer in New Orleans and the author of "Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution." **Jamie Lee Taste** is a British photographer who is currently based in Los Angeles. His work mainly focuses on reality and perceived realities in the United States.

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