



ONLY WHAT IS DEAD CAN LIVE FOREVER

When David Morris moved to Iowa City from Austin, he traded the buzz of the live music capital of the world for the vacuum of what seemed like a cultural wasteland. Then he noticed a thriving, noisy subculture just below its surface... Photos by David Morris and Sarah Dorpinghaus

Jeff "Secret Abuse" Witscher marks Jason "Chouser" Miller for life in an Iowa City living room

A pudgy, pale kid banged away at a tiny keyboard and sang into a microphone, monotonous Casio beats and melodies forming nothing like structure, fighting their way over his English-accented rambling. The P.A., unable to contain the chaos, drenched everything in an ominous, gritty syrup of distortion, the final product useful as a tool of psywarfare but otherwise undeserving of a place in God's universe. Amazingly, at least thirty more tragic youth were packed into this basement, their fists in the air, screaming their adoration through the storm, swinging from pipes, crawling over each other, sweaty. They seemed to be listening to an entirely different performance, something pulsing, muscular, anthemic. Like Bacchus's fevered troupe, they had let force and intoxication triumph over form and beauty, and screams of anguish now struck their deranged ears as the finest melodies. Welcome to Iowa City.

I moved here a few years back from Austin, where on any given night I could choose between a half-dozen decent shows. Rock, hip hop, reggae, free jazz, klezmer, bluegrass—locals in legions and touring indie bands drawing hundreds, thousands. The excitement in the air, every night, that there was something new, something great crouched just around the next corner. The Live Music Capital of the World.

Iowa? I could hardly find it on a map. Iowa City's just got a scattering of venues, nearly squeezed out by bars built like strip-mall church-

es that stack drunken fratboys ten deep. Bands that I'd seen in cavernous rooms packed to their rafters rolled into Iowa City to the greeting of a few dozen, in venues including one that's been described as looking like "the first Bennigan's." It was dispiriting—the shadow of a music scene.

But then, little by little, I started to notice that the shadows were where the real music was. I can't quite remember how I first met them—the freaks. Maybe you just stand around long enough, alone, and they come for you. I was invited to a show, not even at a real venue, just in the space left after a few stores closed up at night. The money went in a cigar box. In Austin, I'd grown soft on the glut of information, always in your ears or at your fingertips. But here you had to search it out, work the phones, find the right basements, living rooms, names like the Glory Hole, the Yellow Ghetto, sharing them with not a few hundred people but twenty, thirty, many of the same faces every time, like a congregation without a church, wandering the desert. I slowly got with the new program. Eventually, like a C.I.A. man diligently working the angles, I was inside the operation.

I've found signs and portents. In the looming shadow of a second Great Depression, welcome to a sneak preview of what America will sound like five years from now. We will dig Jean Michel Jarre tapes out of the trash and worship them like atavistic space-gods. We will go next door to jam with our neighbor because

the cable's disconnected. We will sew our own clothes, drink cheap beer by the crateful, and learn to love the apocalypse.

The Anti-Life Equation

A place like Austin or New York turns the most passionate music fans into A&R reps in training. Does this band have buzz? Are they tight? Who fucked over who? Are they gonna blow up? Even house parties are tryouts. But in Iowa City, it doesn't matter, because nobody is gonna "blow up," everyone knows it, and nobody cares. There are no festivals here, no record industry. No justice—just us. Instead of an aura of competition and one-upmanship, it's a mutual appreciation society—not a fishbowl, but an echo chamber. It shows in both the best and worst ways. Sometimes people go in monumentally bad creative directions, getting away with sloppiness that would be laughed off the stage elsewhere. By the same token, the safety of the net leads to risk-taking and monumental feats. The mastery of improv and chaos doesn't come without long nights of sounding perfectly shit-tacular. You incubate, leaning on the people who, for whatever mysterious reason, believe in you, as much because of who you are as what you're doing. Brendan O'Keefe, half of space-trash-house jammers Cuticle, knows the value. "Honestly, I don't see how you do it without friends."

And eventually, out of support and false steps

Top: Sewn Leather at the Glory Hole. Bottom, left to right - Sadie Smith (Zooquarium), Cole Zrostlik (Fox Maidens, Zero Aggression), Ryan Garbes (Wet Hair), Shawn Reed (Wet Hair).

comes something bigger than the sum of its parts. The short, sharp ascent of Sullen Teen is a case in point, their shambolic dual guitars—out of tune, out of sync, totally enthralling—built partially on the years Evan Miller spent mastering his hypnotic mix of roots-blues and avant-improv for cheering audiences of ten. In those basements you hear moments that you know no one else ever will, real mystical ghosts entering the universe through human hands. Away from the delusory forces that turn music into a step to fame and fortune it becomes a reason to live. The faith of your friends becomes a dare, a game of chicken, the desire to give them something so extreme that they'll be rendered gibbering madmen, a fitting final reward. In this hothouse environment, everyone chases their own high under the glow of unconditional love, and weird, disturbing flowers bloom.

The British kid and his keyboard (which is, incidentally, duct-taped to a wheelless skateboard) are known as Baronik Wall, real name Jack Gilbert. In this strange, secret, momentary world, he peels off a retiring personality to kick out jams of maximum abrasion, improvising stream-of-consciousness lyrics that meld T.S. Eliot and William S. Burroughs. The way was prepared for him by dozens of other people's projects, impromptu and harrowing, the list of which reads like code names for G.I.s: Driphouse, Lwa, Fox Maidens, Youth of the Beast, Sewn Leather, Taterbug, Hyperventilating Teen, Supersonic Piss, Cuticle, Pukers, Chouser, Trash Dog, Zero Aggression, Secret Abuse, Wet Hair.

The last two are particularly notable. Secret Abuse is Jeff Witscher, a dynamo who's plied music along the spectrum from beauty to horror as Marble Sky, Impregnable, Rainbow Blanket, as part of Deep Jew, and as the leader/sole permanent member of Trash Dog. He's taken the counterintuitive trip from Los Angeles by way of everywhere to come bask in Iowa's long, brutal winters. He came largely thanks to Wet Hair's Ryan Garbes and Shawn Reed, Iowa natives who crossed Witscher's path over the course of a few tours, including with their preceding band, Racoo-oo-on. Racoo-oo-on and Witscher come closest of any on this list to having recognizable names, but even that's only among obsessive followers of left-field music. Their influence/legacy/examples have been instrumental in creating Iowa City's strange micro-scene—they made crazy music, put out tapes, toured America, toured Europe, made actual vinyl with their name on it, showing others that it could be done. But Reed isn't quite comfortable with that role, with the idea that he might be a big figure in other people's lives. "I don't want to be any kind of leader."

Reed runs frequent shows at his house, dubbed the Cave of Spirits. Like many shows before and since, in Iowa City and across America, these take place in the basement, in strange darkness. Along one wall in this Cave is a surface that is at first completely indecipherable, textured like wounded skin and the color

of twenty flavors of gum. It's deeply unnerving until you get closer, and see that it is made up of innumerable plastic shopping bags, melted or glued onto plywood. While you stare at that strange trash-art another kind is probably being made in front of you—obsolete toys squawking through distortion pedals; cheap saxophones made to scream unnaturally; echoing, detuned moaning.

This is the sound of the broken, unwanted, cheap, and portable. Taterbug's music revolves around obsolete Dictaphones that can pitch-down cassette tapes, making old pop chestnuts rage like demons. The clicking short-circuit in Chouser's thrift-store organ turns it into a soulless machine of genius. For a while a one-man band called NIMBY was centered around a drum kit made out of plastic margarine tubs attached to Radio Shack contact mics. There is no right way to do anything. Instruments are not revered, just one more element moving along the circuit of contingency. Witscher makes all his records with a keyboard, a few pedals, and an eight-track.

All this corner-cutting and recycling has also provided an easy label for scenes like Iowa City's. Listening to the tape hiss, the layers of echo and delay and distortion, the crackling, broken circuits, it's easy for journalists (including this one) to talk about "noise." But look beneath that layer of fuzz, and things explode out of neat categories: "It's not noise, it's not psych rock, it's everything—it's metal, it's girl-pop with a cello, it's punk," says Chouser (aka Jason Miller), not mentioning the dance producers and no-wave bands. Sewn Leather could be considered a rap group, albeit in a dangerously twisted sense. But they all perform together, trading tapes, sharing one big tent, issuing that clarion call of the "noise" scene: "Support!"

It's a cry that echoes—Iowa City is not unique in much of this. Replace it with Baltimore, Minneapolis, Ann Arbor, and replace Racoo-oo-on with Dan Deacon, Gay Beast, Wolf Eyes—all places with their own trailblazers and their own crews, like gangs, dubbing tapes and occupying basements. People don't come to Iowa City because it's some mecca, or because there's a scene here that's special, exciting, or unique—things are special, exciting, and unique all over. People stop here, on their way to somewhere else, part of some circuit that will eventually see them back to their own rich turf. Others are here because it's home, but they'll eventually pick up stakes for a few days or a few months and travel to other strange and wondrous locales, where other people have built new worlds for the discovering.

There's nothing else to do but sit around the house and get stoned.

Talk to a few people and you start to get a clue as to the common thread that holds such disparate flavors together, and across such distances. "I wasn't born with a chunk of change in my pocket," says Daren Ho, a.k.a. Driphouse,

whose gothic kraut trips are released in editions of something like 20. "I've been given crude tools and they're prone to play crude music." Iowa isn't poor, but it's a long way from Wall Street, Hollywood, or any other place where cash has spent the last quarter-century falling off the backs of trucks. Most of this isn't music that's made for the purpose of sounding cheap. The "noise" isn't an effort. It's an inevitable, almost incidental effect of working with what you've got.

A lot of these kids came to what they're doing now through various strands of punk rock. Racoo-oo-on started life as a hardcore band called Hugs. Both Chouser and O'Keefe did the thing. After one tour, O'Keefe decided he "didn't want to pretend to be angry every night for fun." The progression from punk to noise fits well with a story we've heard a lot—that punk is about scraping away the aura of rock gods, discrediting expertise, doing it yourself.

This is the sound of punk's logical extension. Every bit of tape hiss is a declaration that money isn't the same thing as excellence, and what comes through that hiss ditches even the briefest outlines of a rock structure—less because it's tainted by the paper chase and more because it's boring. Instead you get brief squalls and blurs, or hypnotic long tones that you sink into full-length, improvisation, screaming, moaning. When records like this turn out sounding good—even great—it's tempting to think that you're bearing witness to some kind of singular genius, a gateway to individual talent, greatness untainted by the hassles of discipline, practice, regulation. No rules, dude—just a straight conduit to the spirit.

How many people have looked at a Jackson Pollock and thought the same thing—"My toddler could paint this!"? And how we rightly disdain those people. Wet Hair can sound like an ensemble in a ritual frenzy of inspiration, chanting calls to dark gods in something not-language, not-music. And Secret Abuse can sound like twenty different effects pedals haphazardly chained into a self-generating automaton of ever-mounting feedback. But the process of getting there is disciplined, even grueling—for much of the band's existence, Racoo-oo-on would pull three eight-hour practice marathons in a row, twice a month. The clearest testament is the band's penultimate record, last year's jaw-dropping Behold Secret Kingdom (Release the Bats), a clearly-recorded tour de force of intricate orchestration and mind-searing musicianship. Witscher's discipline is more iterative, visible in the dozens of releases that chronicle the evolution of his projects and talent.

We should already be accustomed to these contradictions—by the standards of anti-excellence and pure not-giving-a-shit, we've just lived through eight years of the most punk rock Presidency on record. We've seen the real effects of discrediting knowledge, dismissing expertise, and telling the rest of the world to go fuck itself. The tape underground pulls us back from the edge of worshipping chaos for its own sake, fills





in the other half, the half of punk rock that was about liking people instead of hating them, building things instead of tearing them down, making the world more beautiful instead of spitting on it. "We're just these kids from these small towns, and we want anything for ourselves, we have to make it happen," says Reed.

I Live Like This 'Cuz I Like It

Charles "Taterbug" Free is getting a tattoo, but he's not in a tattoo parlor. Ten of us are sitting around a coffee table, and Sadie is jabbing Taterbug's arm, over and over again, with a pair of sewing needles wrapped in thread and dipped in India ink. Witscher is doing the same favor for Jason "Chouser" Miller. The master plans to be committed permanently to flesh are, for Taterbug, a freehanded campfire surrounded by the legend "Feelin' Good," rendered as big as a dollar bill on his forearm. Chouser will become the proud bearer of a gaping, snaggle-toothed mouth, "Swamp" emblazoned on its wagging tongue.

Maybe twenty at the core of Iowa City's music cadre sport this sort of body anti-art. Triangles on the backs of hands, "Sunbear" slanting drunkenly across a pectoral, "Falafel" asymmetric on a set of knuckles. Absurd symbols rendered crudely, ink bleeding like fungus under the skin, some already fading into false age, each one its own joyfully wrecked misadventure. In the words of Page, singer for Supersonic Piss, "I think prison tattoos look a little better than that." Then there's the clothes—tattered, torn, crudely patched, barely holding together, filthy. The missing waist of a pair of paint-sprayed jeans replaced by a triangle of purple dishtowel, a black do-rag lined with old thermal underwear, strung around the face against negative ten windchills. These people, they are not cool. They are not attractive. These are the marks of, as Witscher gleefully puts it, scumbags.

There's a lineage to the make-do of crust-punk travelers, dreadlocked hoboes with *This Bike Is a Pipe Bomb* patches on their black hoodies. But here it's infused with a crazed surrealism—that hoodie now has a rabbit-fur collar and a spray-painted third eye. A suit-jacket has its sleeves ripped off and a mandala sewn on the back. Reconstructed from the decaying parts of clothes that were last beloved twenty years ago, scumbag fashion turns its wearer into a walking Cornell box, decline and decay circling around to become beautiful. Of course, there is some distance from reserved, sober Cornell, his care replaced by its opposite. I asked Chouser about the tattoo, and he first, jokingly, gave me the standard "punk" line—"It forces me to stick to principles, man." But then he laughed, insisting instead that he was just doing it for the endorphin high of pain. "I just don't give a fuck."

Not giving a fuck has always been a marketable commodity in America, and in their own small way, so are these obscurantist bands. Most of the music is distributed on cassette tape, a format just this side of extinct but kept alive here

with a vengeance. "I'm going to dub twelve hundred tapes this month," Shawn tells me. Not Capitol Records, but the proceeds from Night People, the label that started with Racoo-oo-oon's first record, help him live without a day job—no compromise. Witscher also gives himself a hand up, not a hand out, flogging tapes online, largely on the Chondritic Sound noise message boards. "That's just my little hustle, trying to pay the rent." Brendan O'Keefe, a.k.a. NIMBY, half of Cuticle, runs Detrivore Records (that's "trash eater" for you non-Latin types), managing to break even on small runs of cassettes sold to a knowing and committed but miniscule audience.

The tape thing is a mystery because it's not mysterious—you hold that piece of obsolescence in your hand and it just makes sense. Reed and Garbes have honed the craft of cassette design to an understated perfection, with simple two-tone inserts and scrawling designs as evocative as the music. It's one more way of reclaiming music from the intangibility of the internet, making it more than bits and bytes. "It's definitely for nerds," Witscher says, confessing that he's a huge collector himself. There's a solidity, a certainty to cassettes, both in the warm imperfections of a frayed j-card and in the blunted edges of the analog sound within. By contrast, "CDs are the most disgusting format I can think of."

Other aspects of the appeal are less aesthetic than practical. "I can definitely hear that the CD [sounds] better," says O'Keefe, "But the tradeoff is that you've gotta treat it like a baby, like hold it and kiss it." A tape "can sit in the bottom of my backpack and a year from now I'll still be able to listen to it," says Will Kapp, the other half of Sullen Teen. Tapes are rugged enough to survive a sometimes harsh transient lifestyle, attractive enough to satisfy the needs of music nerdology, and ultimately, without the sense of permanence that makes vinyl such a nightmare if you don't own your own home and/or moving company. "A whole lot of scumbags were like, oh yeah, tapes totally make sense, I can trash 'em, I can lose 'em," Witscher explains. "They're like, I eat in a dumpster. And oh yeah, I like tapes." Both are the leavings of industrial society, a trail of the unloved that's enough to support a separate human ecology and culture. "Twenty years ago, tapes were the most popular thing," O'Keefe says wryly. "And now if my Walkman breaks, I can go buy a new one at Goodwill for two dollars."

Around the country, there are dozens of small labels living in the entrails of technology, putting out tapes dubbed by hand in loving, limited runs. Names like American Tapes, Fuck It Tapes, Tapeworm Tapes—again, some covered in a recent issue of this magazine. There's an audience, some known to drop upwards of a Benjamin when out-of-print releases show up on eBay. That's one kind of commitment, though for some at the other end of the transaction, the people buying tapes with button-clicks are an

afterthought at best. "I'm open to the idea that someone I don't know might hear my music," says Will. "But the people who matter are my friends."

But dude, he put his whole life into this.

These scumbags are what you might call gainfully unemployed, their hours spent not as sandwich artists or commodity traders or ophthalmologists, but hunched in front of a bank of keys and knobs, producing sound the way medieval cobblers made shoes. The cassette format allows them to package their sounds with just as much handcrafted detail. "It's inevitable that this person is going to be in this tape," Witscher explains. "They sat down, they recorded it, they mixed it, then they made the master, they got the tapes, they cut out the images, they typed the notes ... that's what's so attractive, you're looking at this tape and you see everything from this person."

Kapp lived outside of Iowa City for a time, working on a farm. I remember him coming to shows after the long trip into town, mud still spattered on his boots. "Andy [Spore, a.k.a. Youth of the Beast] and Shawn would send me anything that got put out on Night People. I'd just devour it and be like, Andy, what the fuck are you thinking, making these sounds? It's better than having a phone conversation with the person, to get something that they recorded and listen to it." Even at Night People, Shawn dubs every tape himself (albeit on a nearly mythical chain-synced tower of scrounged cassette decks), screenprints the inserts, folds, and mails them. While machines stamp Chinese Democracy out of black gold, tapes are the least alienated workers on the planet, with total control of the means of production. Maybe what those obsessive high-dollar collectors are gathering greedily to themselves are the fragments of soul stubbornly clinging to each product.

Don't get the wrong idea—money is the exception rather than the rule, and that's part of what makes it all so attractive. Tapes are the blueprint for another way of being. "[In high school] I really wanted to travel or be in the '60s, but there was nothing in my daily life that echoed that at all," I hear from Brendan O'Keefe, half of Cuticle. "Music, for a while, was my only connection to people who were living different from, like, going to college or whatever."

Gilbert, like others, figured out how to live the blueprint. "I try to have a reasonable part of the year where I don't have to work, do temp jobs or whatever." It's not what most Americans would consider a normal lifestyle.

"It's really, really hard for a lot of those people to understand that it's okay to live without a job," Kapp points out.

"Or to spend your last five dollars on photocopies," Witscher throws in. "And you're like, cool, that was my last five bucks."

We've all known those who suffer for their art,

bemoaning the society that doesn't give them what they deserve. But that's just another form of ladder-climbing, being outside and wanting to get in. "There are people who are like, interns in music," says Witscher. Sacrifice everything to chase the brass ring. But what about the people who don't even want to get in? How long can the system hold up when people start to realize that, to paraphrase *The Wire*, the music can't save you?

Well, you wisen up and replace the brass ring with a loop spliced between you and the next guy. The compulsively networked aspect of the new tape culture seems particularly tailor-made for the harsh necessities of growing up weird in the Midwest. In Williamsburg, you can comfortably exist in the thirty-minute triangle formed by a coffee shop, a record store, and a bar, and every day you'll meet someone new, who will be in a cool new band, or have a cool new haircut—and who gives a shit? Compare that with the distances, the walls of snow, the scant capital, the legions of indifference that spring to mind when you so much as think "Iowa." Out here, you fight to find the people like you, and you don't let them go.

Nobody around here even cared about what we were doing.

Ryan and Shawn describe high school years spent in frantic Brownian motion, pulsating and gyrating across the state—Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Cedar Falls, Sioux City, Muscatine—finding tiny pockets here and there of people on the same wavelength, then helping draw the lines between them. "You could play any of those places and it'd be pretty good," says Reed. "You could get a hundred or 200 people in some little town, who'd drive a couple hours." The music is sometimes dank and foreboding, but the people who make it are often the opposite, smiling idiot grins and introducing themselves to you if you so much as look in their direction. Witscher in particular has the kind of personal magnetism and self-assured generosity that's usually reserved for Mormon quarterbacks and Latin American dictators.

Over the years, as one goes from devouring and excreting hardcore thrash to things less wholesome, little scabbling jaunts multiply and extend—Detroit, Columbus, Oakland. Inevitably, things grow, and you enter the zone where the personal edges into the artistic, even the professional. "When Eat Skull comes to my house, they play a show, and I cook them three meals and we hang out and have a good ol' time," says Reed. "Then, when I wanna go play a show in Portland, they're like, let's do it." In Oakland on their tour as Wet Hair, Reed and Garbes knew every single member of the audience. The line between friend and stranger, local and national, collaborator and audience, becomes a blurry mess. Do you "know" the guy who buys a copy of every single tape you and your friends make twenty copies of? Maybe not. Does he know you? "It's Native American style," adds Reed. "You meet the other

tribe and trade your goods."

For some, this is what it's all about—the connections, and the objects that index them. "Sometimes it's like the music doesn't matter," says Witscher. "We could be making rubber ducks, and it'd still be in editions of ten, and they'd be really weird, and we'd still all be doing our own thing." For others, though, it's exactly the opposite—none of it would matter if not for the blown-out, crazed pleasures of the music, an infection that seems to be in the air. Though Josh of Supersonic Piss says Iowa City is more of a "noise town" because Reed and Racoo-oo-on have been here for so long, the paths that brought people to total conversion weren't so simple as worshipping local heroes. "We totally got into harsh, weirdo noise by ourselves," Will tells me of one of his high school bands. "We thought we were the only band that had ever done any of the shit we were doing. And then we heard, I dunno, Sightings, and realized we were hacks." Josh had never even heard of "noise" until the Yellow Swans' stop in Iowa City as he puts it, "fucking blew me away."

By the same token, the early years of building a community around weird music were more focused outward than in. "Racoo-oo-on never played return shows [when we got back from tour], because it just didn't seem like it would be that big of a deal," Reed told me. There's a twisted logic to the local-national interplay. It's the people next door that make it spiritually possible to keep going, who make life itself worth living. But it's people across the country who provide ongoing musical inspiration, keep the horizons open, make it financially feasible. Conversely, Reed points out to me that even in a town as small as Iowa City, there are working bands plying formulaic funk and dance music who can make a decent living—but nobody in Missouri is going to give a shit.

Another friend of mine has made huge strides in organizing a national indie rock festival in Iowa City, and is fond of saying that he wants the town to "blow up"—just like Austin did in the late '90s. Certain people do play a crucial role in the noise scene—organizing, finding space, making things happen—but there's little of that sort of self-aggrandizing evangelism. No one goes around yelling about how "This is the NEXT BIG THING!" Because it's just the thing—how can it be next if you're already doing it?

Release you away, towards greater pig shit

The fuzz of the tape, the crackle of distortion, the speckling of a crudely-photocopied cover, the twist of a not-quite pitch may be the relics of poverty, or the personalizing errors of handcrafting. But they are also the mask that promises more. If you peel away these imperfections, might there not be something unimaginably beautiful beneath? Racoo-oo-on's record makes the promise explicit—Behold Secret Kingdom. The mad symbols on skin, on cardboard, spraypainted on cassettes, suggest

some code to crack. "I always liked bands that I thought were smarter," Brendan remembers. "I used to think someone had figured out some completely underground way of living, and that's why they're making this fucked-up music. Like they have some reality that I don't even know about." There is another world, another life—just listen.

I also grew up in a nowhere suburb, sure that just over the next hill there'd be something great, something amazing, something that would change my existence, break me out of isolation. For me, the dream was of the Big City. It's easy to romanticize cultural meccas, to think that there's something about Oakland or New York or Chicago that's going to change your life, blow your mind. The thing that bothered me for the first couple years—bothered me a lot—was how the hell there could possibly be anyone worth knowing in Iowa City. With Chicago three hours away, wouldn't all the cool kids have pulled up stakes and moved? Most of the Night People axis have been here since high school, traveling but never really leaving. Didn't they have a gnawing hunger to be somewhere else, to see something else?

These people, they were different from me. They were comfortable in their own skins, something I rarely am. Garbes had right what I had wrong for so long: "Places are different, but it's not going to be some kind of magical wand." You go to someplace like Austin, with excitement and entertainment before your face constantly, and you don't have to think of yourself. When there's a band in the room you don't have to talk to anyone. You tell yourself that you've found the other world, that you're living the other life. But it's just consumption by another name.

A place like Iowa City doesn't let you get away with it. You're not allowed to just stand around watching. You realize that the other world wasn't behind the mistakes, the distortion, the obscurity—it was in there, in the imperfections of the process of doing. "Something about how weird the music was just helps your imagination go where it needs to go," Brendan remembers. "But that mystery is gone. I still love the music, [but] I'm an adult. I don't need to wait for some band to tell me how to do it."

And so you stop looking somewhere else and start looking in front of your own feet. You make a tape or photocopy some drawings and hustle them for money and love. You play a show in your basement, or under a bridge. You do it with the leftovers, the butt-ends of someone else's largesse. You scrape and down there you find there are other people scraping along, just like you.

Take a good look, America. In your future, you are starving. *

David Morris wrote about underground Japanese hip-hop in STN#49

