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Punk Rock Museum: An interview with Rob Ruckus

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Abstract

Rob Ruckus is a veteran of the Las Vegas punk scene and has played in punk bands and been involved in various punk projects across the past four decades. Since the Punk Rock Museum opened in Las Vegas in April 2023, Rob has managed its Jam Room. The Jam Room features a range of instruments donated to the museum by various punk bands. The instruments are all available to be played by visitors to the museum, and Rob is as enthusiastic about encouraging people to play the instruments as he is talking about the museum or his experiences in punk. Rob spoke with Paul Fields in July 2023.

Keywords: archiving, culture, history, interview, Las Vegas, music genres, Punk Rock Museum

Introduction

While visiting the Punk Rock Museum in July 2023, I interviewed Las Vegas-based punk musician and television presenter Rob Ruckus. Having played in Las Vegas punk bands Godboy and the Vermin, and later presented the show *Bad Ink* on the A&E Network, Ruckus now works at the Punk Rock Museum full time as the manager of its Jam Room. The Jam Room features guitars, basses, amps and a keyboard, all donated to the museum by various punk bands. There are instruments used by Face to Face, Fishbone, Joan Jett, Me First and the Gimme Gimmes, NOFX, Pennywise, Rancid, Rise Against and the Adicts, among others, and some of

the instruments have been used on seminal records. The instruments are all available to be played by visitors to the museum, and immediately upon entering the room Ruckus encouraged me to play whatever I wanted. I settled for a short unamplified play on Tim Armstrong's pink hollow body Hagström, used on the first Rancid record. Ruckus is a notable character in the history of punk in Las Vegas, and speaks about the instruments in the Jam Room, and in the museum more broadly, with thoughtful enthusiasm.

The interview took place in the Jam Room at the Punk Rock Museum. As we were talking, visitors to the museum would come in and play on instruments. At the same time, Ruckus's two-way radio would discharge the conversations of other museum staff members. This presented a great opportunity as we talked to experience the room as it is intended – a mixture of punk music and punk chatter.

Figure 1: The Punk Rock Museum at night, 2023. Photograph by Lisa Johnson.

The photograph shows the Punk Rock Museum at night. The building is painted black with large green lettering.

Paul Fields (PF): *What got you into punk?*

Rob Ruckus (RR): My first punk rock gig in Las Vegas, one of my neighbours I remember would always listen to this weird music on his car stereo out in the driveway and one day he was, like, '[h]ey, do you want to go to a gig with me?' and it ended up being Dead Kennedys, MIA, Subterfuge and the Remains at this place called Pinollas. And I was all of 12 years old at the time, scared shitless. You know, all these big, crazy looking guys. I remember Ross and Jesse Baxter had nails sticking out of the front of their boots, and it just really stuck with me. And

then literally a year later I ended up booking at Veterans of Foreign Wars Hall (VFW) and my first band played its first show. So, it hit me hard, you know as soon as I saw it and felt that energy and sense of community. Because I was an outsider, an outcast, a little misfit kid, you know. Just like everybody else that got into this. I like the way Jack from T.S.O.L. says it: if you're going to be in – especially back in the late 1970s, early 1980s – if you're going to be into punk rock, you're basically drawing a target on yourself for the rest of the world to fuck with you. And I did. And I felt great doing it and I still do. I still feel good about it.

PF: It's interesting because if I think of friends who have always been into punk, they have typically got into it around that age, their early teens, and if you are a bit of an outsider at school that's also when you start to realize you are an outsider.

RR: You find your tribe. A lot of us were, you know, pushed aside. A lot of us were from bad homes, had bad parenting, a lot of drug use, a lot of alcohol. Finding a community of kids that could understand that and had those same angers and wanted to scream about it and make themselves look weird to be different from it, it became a community. It became our tribe, our family. When Punk Rock Bowling comes here every year, for me that's my family reunion. You know, I sometimes get to see friends I haven't seen in 30 years.

Figure 2: 'UK punk' display case at the Punk Rock Museum, 2023. Photograph by Lisa Johnson.

The photograph shows part of a display case inside the Punk Rock Museum. An example of items inside includes posters for gigs by the Damned, Generation X and Toy Dolls, as well as items of clothing worn by Captain Sensible of the Damned and a guitar used by Generation X.

PF: How did you get involved with the Punk Rock Museum?

RR: I've known Fat Mike for going on almost forty years now. We first opened for NOFX out here in Las Vegas in 1985. Back then we used to have gigs out in the middle of the desert here in Vegas because in the late 1970s and early 1980s this was still a Mafia town. This town was run by the Mob, so it was a bunch of Mafia people and a bunch of desert cowboys. I don't mean regular cowboys. Desert cowboys were a different breed because you can't grow shit out here. It was a hard living, and they were hard motherfuckers. They did not like kids with blue Mohawks walking up and down their streets. So, we would get attacked, but we would fight back and beat the hell out of them a lot of times. But we didn't have clubs to really have gigs at back then, so we would take a carpet like here in the room, we'd go by the construction site, we'd steal their generators, steal a couple of halogen lights, and take 500– 800 kids out to the middle of the desert with GBH, Corrosion of Conformity, NOFX; White Zombie's first gigs in Las Vegas were all out in the desert. We didn't have them in clubs, you know that's why Vegas was a little different than every other scene. Every scene had a VFW. Every scene had their own little club house where they could do stuff. Well, we didn't. We went to the desert.

PF: Is that why the museum is here in Las Vegas?

RR: Part of it is. That's how I got brought into this. I've just known these guys for all these years. The reason that it is in Las Vegas is because we're set up for it here. If you would have tried to get a building this big in LA, New York or London it would cost millions and millions of dollars. There is no way you could have had a 30-dollar door charge. To do this anywhere else would be ridiculously expensive. Las Vegas is set up for it. There are hotels everywhere, there is Ubers everywhere. This is a place people come because they want to go to things like this.

Figure 3: 'Global punk' display case at the Punk Rock Museum, 2023. Photograph by Lisa Johnson.

The photograph shows a full l-shaped display cabinet inside the Punk Rock Museum. Inside the cabinet there are items from the Adicts, Da Slyme, D.O.A., UK Subs and many others.

PF: It seems that attractions based on what are often seen as quite niche interests can thrive in Las Vegas.

RR: Most definitely. Because it is an easy, cheap place to come to. In LA, New York or London it would have been a hundred bucks just to get in the door and nobody is going to pay that. Punks don't got that kind of money.

PF: Is there anything at the museum that is been particularly popular so far?

RR: This room. It makes people so happy that they can come in here and pick up Tim Armstrong's first guitar he used in Rancid – it is the one they used on the first album – and see a picture of it right above it where you can verify that. To be able to come in and pick up Joan Jett's guitar or Fat Mike's guitar and see the happiness it brings people. And then getting to see things like, I had a kid who couldn't have been more than 10 or 11 years old, and he has got Fat Mike's bass and he is trying to play 'Bro Hymn' by Pennywise. Well, he is doing it in the wrong key; Fletcher from Pennywise comes walking in and goes, '[h]ey little brother, move your fingers over here'. He showed him how to play it, barks at me, 'Ruckus, plug me in'. So, I plug in Fletcher's set-up over there for him and he starts playing with him. So, the kid just learned how to play the song right by the guy who wrote the song, and then the kids that are outside here walking around through the museum hear it, come walking over to see it and start singing. So now he has got, like, eight kids singing while he is playing guitar with the guy

in the band. His eyes were just bugging out of his head. And I get to see magic moments like that all the time. Fat Mike will be here, and some kid will be in here playing Fat Mike's bass, playing a NOFX song, and Fat Mike will walk in and, you know, either make fun of him or show him how to do it or just have a blast with him. Louiche Mayorga from Suicidal Tendencies has been a tour guide here many, many times. And, for anybody that could play a Suicidal Tendencies song on guitar, he will jam with you. Monkey from the Adicts, when he comes through and does his tours, he is the singer, so I learned a couple of the Adicts's songs on guitar. I'll play it on guitar, and he can sing it with his whole tour of people, like they're at a gig.

Figure 4: 'US 1970s punk' display case at the Punk Rock Museum., 2023. Photograph by Lisa Johnson.

The photograph shows part of a display case inside the Punk Rock Museum. Inside there are items from Blondie, Dictators, Joan Jett, the Ramones and many others.

PF: And this reinforces the sense of community often found in punk.

RR: Exactly, and that is part of what this room is about: tear down that boundary between the audience and the band. You don't care about that. That means nothing to us, and this is proof of it because you can come and pick up Eugene (Hütz) from Gogol Bordello's guitar and play 'Start Wearing Purple' on the guitar that he wrote 'Start Wearing Purple' on. Or Fishbone's bass or Face to Face or, you know, Fletcher's set-up. That is his guitar, amp, everything from their first couple of albums. If you're into them, if you like the song 'Bro Hymn', that has what made it. And you can come here and play it.

PF: Some of the work I do looks at the debate around punk's start and end dates, its boundaries and so on. When does a piece of music stop being punk and become something else? Has anything like that played a part in what is and is not included in the museum?

RR: Not much. People that come in here are just more inquisitive about things, so they're not really coming in here to have that argument. You know, was it Love? Or the Standells? Or was it the Monks? Was it Stravinsky, smoking so many cigarettes writing a piece of music, he was so intently writing a piece of music, the man died of nicotine poisoning. Because he fucking smoked himself to death writing a piece of music. That is punk, in my book. The Monks, 1964 in Germany, playing a fucking electrified banjo, music no more complicated than the Velvet Underground. They were called 'the anti-Beatles'. Instead of saying, 'I want to hold your hand' they would say, 'I Hate You (but call me)'. That was 1964 and that is punk as far as I'm concerned. Is it still happening? Yes. Are there still kids that are beaten by their parents, made fun of at school, dealing with alcoholic parents or have something horrible around them that they need that outlet? That is still happening. There is no difference between now and then, other than the fact that in the late 1970s, early 1980s it was still kind of new and shocking. Now, grandma's got blue hair. It is not shocking at all. Back in the day you'd see somebody with blue hair and be like, 'I either know you or I need to know you'. Whereas now it has become common. And another special thing about this museum is getting to see how it started in the proto punk era, how it has morphed from punk in the 1970s and 1980s which was, 'Ra-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra!'. You know, 'One two three four, one two three four!', but now you look at it and it is these boy bands, you know, which a lot of these fuckers are. Some of this new stuff is put-together bullshit boy bands. But it is some kid's entry way into finding those other bands. So, they're just as relevant in here as everything else. Being able to see somebody play a washtub bass that they made, and playing folk music but with a punk

attitude, means that we won. We did, we changed popular culture. It went from being, 'Ra-ra-ra-ra-ra!' to all kinds of different stuff – radio friendly, country, folk, all of that can be combined into punk rock now. So, we win. All those beatings we took back then were worth it. We did change popular culture.

Figure 5: Display case at the Punk Rock Museum, 2023. Photograph by Lisa Johnson.

The photograph shows part of a display case inside the Punk Rock Museum. Inside there are items from Bad Brains, the Cramps, Misfits, Joan Jett, Johnny Thunders, New York Dolls and many others.

PF: Agreed. What are the plans for the museum? Will there be new exhibits?

RR: This place changes every single day. We've only been open three months and three days. Everything here still changes every day. Every day I get another guitar. Every day another picture to go with the guitar. These exhibits just outside (the Jam Room) are about to change out because they've been here for three months, so we're going to switch those out. People are finding out about this place and finding out how relevant it is and how real it is that it is not just a bunch of jackasses putting flyers on the wall. It is done with a lot of care and love. So new bands are bringing us new stuff every day, so yeah, this place will expand and change, just like a tiki bar. It will always keep changing and evolving constantly. And we're looking at the building next door.

PF: Oh really?

RR: Yeah, we're looking to get bigger. We're talking to them about buying this building right here on the side and the little one on the corner. I know (Fat) Mike's talked about putting a

skateboard ramp in here, we want to do something where we can have some gigs outside. Nothing major, not a venue. But if somebody cool is coming to town and they're going to be here let's do a secret show. Not tell people, just if they show up, they get to see it. A lot of that happens here, we don't announce a lot of things that are going to happen because these people paid to get here. They should have something special happen when they get here. It doesn't have to be because you came on a certain day, something special happens every day.

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