

From Pedro The Lion to Underoath: The Birth of the A-geographic Subculture

Written by Tyler Paulson in Fall 2010 for Thea Petchler's Pop Culture Class

Somehow, Pedro The Lion's *Whole EP* has become one of my favorite albums of all time. Musically, it's a humble work; simple drum beats and guitar progressions recorded without a lot of flair added, but the ideas explored in its lyrics caught the headwind of a subcultural transformation, making it memorable even thirteen years later.

When it released in 1997, a lot of people didn't know what to do with it. At that time, classifying something as Christian¹ music essentially meant that it was safe for the ears of every fifth grader in America and if you presented doubt or conflict in the first verse, it had better be resolved by the end of the chorus. So when Bazan wrote the song "Fix," essentially an ode to his drug dealer, those inside the Christian music industry didn't exactly know what to do with it. Here's how the song ends:

"My friend down on the corner says it's gonna be good times. He pats me on the shoulder and sells me a fix, he says I'll see you here tomorrow."

In the next song he goes on to say "the chances are slight that I won't shoot up tonight." So what's so unique about this? Musicians talking about drugs and people not liking it isn't exactly unique in the 1990s, but the album doesn't end there. In the next track Bazan writes about one of his one of his friends he did drugs with who met "Mr. Hole Fixin' Man." Bazan subtly implies that the man referred to is Jesus because his friend told him that he "died on Calvary." The album goes on to end in a beautifully powerful way, the chorus of the last lyrical track on the albums reads like this:

"I know I'm understood when I hear Him say, 'rest in me, little David,
and dry all your tears, you can lay down your armor and have no fear,
because I'm always here when your tired of running, and I'm all the
strength that you need.'"

¹ Generally speaking, I dislike the word "Christian" being used as an adjective, but for the sake of simplicity in this paper, I am going to use the phrase "Christian music" to mean music distributed by Christian labels (ex. those underneath EMI CMG) that is marketed to listeners who are Christians (ex. music that is shelved separately in a record store).

Again you may ask, what's so unique about this? Instead of going from conflict to resolution between verse one and chorus one, we've done it between track two and track five. The difference can't be found in the mathematics, it can only be found by looking into the culture.

Inside of the Christian subculture, having a very edgy and destructive past that God has saved you from is cool. It makes you an awesome speaker at youth group events. Simply referencing drugs wasn't enough to make this not fit in the Christian music mold.

It's that Bazan isn't writing about his struggles in a past life, the word choices he makes throughout the album are decidedly in the present tense. He's taking something messy like drugs, that is supposed to be in the past or in another place and he's bringing it to the here and now. He's making the broader claim that that believing in Jesus and the perfectly cleaned up life doesn't necessarily go hand in hand. He's highlighting that even though churches often say "come as you are," that message can so easily start appearing as "come as you are, but change immediately or else you'll risk polluting us" to those on the outside.

But how did this kind of music gain traction? It has just a little too much drugs for the Christian music industry and a little too much Jesus for the secular one and on top of all that, the music just wasn't all that catchy.

There were plenty of people scattered around American whom Bazan's music was absolutely perfect for; but new musical subgenres, especially ones where the distinguishing factor was more of a state of mind than a progression in musical style, usually came out of a particular region (punk from New York City and grunge from Seattle). Things were changing through, and Bazan and his contemporaries were coming around at just the perfect time for the birth of the a-geographic subculture.

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November 1997 marked the founding of Mp3.com (no relation to the current website at that domain). The idea was simple, leverage new music compression technology to allow artists to post copies of their music on the internet for listeners to stream and/or download. Most of the artists on the site were independent musicians or musicians on a smaller record label (PR Newswire). The website was a huge success and at its peak, it was delivering via stream or download four million songs a day to users. The addition of what was later determined an unlawful service ended up spelling the end of Mp3.com, but the model was set in place. Artists could now find new fans, continue their relationship with current ones, and even seek after representation solely through the internet.

Technology wasn't only changing the way music was distributed, it was also changing the way it was produced. In 1998, Apple released the iMac (Foljanty), a major step in their revitalization which was marked by an emphasis on the Apple computer being a producer of media. The next year, Avid released Pro Tools LE and the Digi 001 (Poyser and Johnson), a relatively inexpensive simple piece of hardware that allowed for high quality sound recording of multiple channels digitally into a desktop computer. In 2003, Apple opened the iTunes music store. Now the entire process, from discovery to purchase, could be done online from the comfort of one's own home.

With each year that would go by, new technologies would make it easier and less expensive for artists to create, promote, and distribute their music, both for the do-it-yourself musician and for, I would argue more importantly, the artist on the independent or minor record label.

Major music distribution companies haven't fared so well with all these changes in distribution. EMI, one of the big four music distributors, posted a £1.75 billion loss in 2009 (Mostrous). Many of the distributors' troubles come from the fact that they are currently operating outside of the best cash flows in the music industry. People are actually more interested in music than ever, even with all of those losses, there was a 4.7% increase in music related spending in the United Kingdom in 2008 (Paulson).

There is now a wider range of music to be heard than any time in history. The advances in technology listed above have greatly increased the amount of available music for listeners to choose from. Calculating an exact statistic is difficult, but it can be estimated that there are four² times as many annual releases now than there were at the beginning of the decade.

So what does a large increase in available music and a marginal increase in spending on music create? Niches. Gone are the days where every one is listening to the same music. Sure, there are still hits and artists who can sell out stadium tours, but overall, the individual's music tastes have gotten a lot more unique. A decrease in money going to the big labels and an increased interest in music is funding deeper and narrower subgenres of music. While larger labels have been struggling over the last decade, many independent and minor labels have been profitable.

Even though people love representing themselves uniquely by their music styles in conver-

2 *I derived this number from a statistic of 115,000 reported at the Future of Music Coalition Policy Summit in 2009 (Kot) and a statistic of 27,000 in the RIAA report "The Value of a CD" in 2002 (qtd in Ziemann).*

sation, fashion and social networks, they don't want to live in cultural isolation. Surrounding all the increases in technology in music production distribution was the rise of Web 2.0 and the interaction between content publishers and consumers. Thousands of online music websites and blogs emerged to fuel these musical niches. Professional writers and regular people starting writing about what albums they were listening to, concerts they were attending, and future releases they were anticipating. Online merchandise stores sold music and apparel allowing fans to represent the music they liked without ever going to a store or even a concert. Many of these websites had forums and places for users to comment, allowing social interaction between people who were passionate about a particular artist even if they were thousands of miles away. The internet was providing a place for people to come together and to legitimize the subgenre, and instead of being from one place, they were from all over.

People listening to and discussing music on their computers alone isn't what made all of this noteworthy though, it was the fact that it generated traction back in the real world. The a-geographic subculture was going back to the streets.

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Fast-forward to 2004, seven years after Pedro The Lion's Whole was released. The music Bazan played, along with those of his contemporaries such as Sunny Day Real Estate, Further Seems Forever, Zao, Poor Old Lu, MXPX and Dogwood, had inspired an explosion of progression and popularity of a genre no one could quite define. They played indie, emo, hardcore, and punk music, and they played it well. They were Christians, their faith was personal and dear to their hearts, they were open about it too, but it wasn't about putting up walls, and they didn't want to be labeled by it. When they headlined tours, they freely invited friends who didn't share their religious beliefs to come open for them, and those friends returned the favor. There was a very natural intermixing that occurred there, both among the artists and the fans.

In 2004, I was sixteen years old and had just gone through the American rite of passage of receiving my driver's license. Pizza at my house and then loading up the family minivan and heading down to the local all-age venue was in our minds the greatest possible way to spend a Friday night. Bands like Copeland, Acceptance, Lovedrug, Mute Math, Thrice, and Underoath were coming of age at that time and doing so in front of an audience that was a little wider than their precursors.

Fueled by the exposure and legitimization brought on by recording and communication technologies, the genre grew. Along with this, there are two connected theological ideas I

believe explain why this music subculture was placed perfectly inside of a larger culture and flourished so strongly when it did.

In the 1990s, as a whole, evangelical churches in America took a separatist viewpoint towards culture, there was a heavy black line drawn between what was of God and what wasn't. I remember in youth group being handed large sheets of paper that listed popular secular musical acts at the time in one column and Christian alternatives to them in the other. The message was clear, there was their culture and there was our culture, and it was unsafe for us to cross the lines.

Ironically, ten years later I hear a lot of people complaining about how secular many areas of our culture have become, not making the connection that the separatist ideas of yesterday leave a culture short on Christian influence today.

For the separatist, when one picks up a guitar and writes a song, it must be explicitly about Christ, share the Christian experience, and promote the Christian worldview. Since the music is only shared in Christian settings, there is never a reason for it to do otherwise.

In the 2000s, ideas penned by A.W. Tozer in the late 1940s started gaining traction again, Tozer said, "it is not what a man does that determines whether his work is sacred or secular; it is why he does it."

Tozer makes it all about the heart. And when the attitude stops being about us versus them and becomes about our hearts living among theirs, one's entire philosophy towards what art is changes.

That same guitarist picks up the guitar and instead writes a song about his experiences. Experiences are something that everyone can resonate with, we are all living life here on this earth. We do see Christ in the song, but we see Him in an honest way, molding how the artist is experiencing his journey. We see this idea shine through ever so perfectly in Copeland's first album *Beneath Medicine Tree*, written shortly after the hospitalization of Aaron Marsh's girlfriend and the death of his grandmother. The second track opens like this:

"There's an angel by your hospital bed, desperate to hear his name on your breath, as he looks down you're not making a sound. Open your eyes, look at me, I'll bring to you whatever you need and I'll tell you I'm sorry that I can't take this pain away from you and I'd put it on my own body if I knew how to."

Marsh's experience is honest, it's powerful, and it's beautiful. It sounds like what I would feel in his situation, not what someone would tell me I should feel. A beautiful love is shown in the midst of the messiest of situations.

And as a teenager going through the pains of transitioning to adulthood, I was drawn to this music. It reflected my real life, where Jesus lived inside a heart that was rather messy sometimes.

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The scene was set for this subculture to make its proclamation to the masses, like so many others had done before. The ideas, the musicians, and the fans had laid the ground work, and the group with the craft to take it forward was the post-hardcore band Underoath.

In June of 2006, they released *Define The Great Line*. It sold 100,000 copies in the first week and opened number two on the Billboard Top 200. Absolute Punk gave it a 96% rating and said "without a doubt, this album will be talked about for years to come" (Gross).

Alternative Press' Aaron Burgess gave it 5 out of 5 stars and uses a local church who name describes what Underoath embodies as something "we on the outside of nü Christianity point to when we can't understand what drives, you know, these people to high-five Jesus via loud, aggressive music." He entertainingly embraces the tension that exists here, just like so many did with Pedro The Lion.

Define The Great Line went gold (500,000 copies sold) just five months later (Gibson), but it wasn't an easy summer for Underoath. They were ridiculed on multiple occasions for their beliefs by NOFX frontman "Big Mike" during his band's sets while they were together on Warped Tour, proving oppositions comes from both side and nothing that is significant ever goes without criticism.

I'll close with another's perspective, Burgess' ends his review like this:

"While it's easy to follow Underoath's struggle if you read the lyrics, you get an even better sense of how they're overcoming it if you single out a line from Psalm 50—oddly enough read in Russian during [the] ambient track, 'Salmarnir': 'and call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.' Christian or not, that's the sort of message any community of believers can understand."

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