

**Dave Dictor.** *MDC: Memoir from a Damaged Civilization: Stories of Punk, Fear, and Redemption.* San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2016. 192 pp. \$15.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-933149-98-1.

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Readers with a historical knowledge of 1980s punk will have little difficulty seeing the value of Dave Dictor's memoir, *MDC: Memoir from a Damaged Civilization: Stories of Punk, Fear, and Redemption* (2016). The memoir, which tracks Dictor's career as the front man for the punk band MDC (Millions of Dead Cops), not only provides a view into the life of one of the most influential punk figures, but also serves as an oral history of punk itself. From tours with legendary acts like Band Brains and Dead Kennedys, to a behind-the-scenes look at the grassroots effort that helped establish an audience for the genre, the memoir offers the perspective of a true punk-lifer who sees the scene as a platform to merge hard-edged music with political ideals.

The book starts by discussing Dictor's youth, first living in Jamaica, Queens, then moving out to the Long Island suburbs at age nine. Although these experiences are relegated to the relatively brief first chapter, Dictor's youth does provide an explanation as to why punk appealed to him. Due to an alienated relationship with his father and a nonconforming sexual identity, Dictor saw himself as someone on the "outside" and therefore sought refuge in music throughout high school. One of his most notable songs written during this time: "My Family Is A Little Weird" describes a family of cross-dressers, serving as a metaphor

for Dictor's own fantasies. Although written long before MDC formed, the song helped Dictor understand how lyrics could function as a form of social critique. Dictor writes: "As the scene shifted from arty, free-for-all punks to a more testosterone-driven, male-oriented hardcore, a lot of bands had members who didn't understand about being different and who hadn't been exposed to much diversity" (p. 19). Dictor and MDC took it upon themselves to become this "diverse" voice, and songs like "My Family Is A Little Weird" became an essential part of the MDC repertoire, celebrating inclusionary politics and critiquing hypermasculine subcultures.

Some of Dictor's other formative experiences relate to a growing mistrust of Catholicism and the formation of a radicalized perspective on the Vietnam War. These experiences are delivered in quick, anecdotal form, which helps Dictor show how his lyrics emerged in response to specific cultural events. For example, the song "John Wayne Was A Nazi" came into being when Dictor failed to understand the sadness of his peers at the University of Texas after John Wayne's death. Instead, Dictor was only reminded of Wayne's "'white man's burden' view of Native Americans" and saw the country's mourning as symptomatic of a racist national ideology (pp. 41-42).

Poverty, travel, and brawls with neo-Nazis characterize Dictor's time with MDC. While on tours, he describes sleeping in squats and navigating United Kingdom border patrol control guards "mumbling about 'the thousands of dead policemen band'" (p. 99). Dictor's most memorable shows and tours come at times when he sees an opportunity for protest. These include an anti-Reagan tour with the subtext of attempting to decriminalize marijuana (p. 87), and playing the song "Multi Death Corporation" from a San Francisco rooftop as Pope John Paul II's motorcade passed on the streets below (p. 128).

Many of these shows were made possible because of the nature of the punk scene in the early 80s. Beyond working to question the status quo, punk relied on a do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude, as bands not only wrote music, but also set up shows, created promotional materials, produced records, and functioned outside the corporate influence of the "music industry" (p. 53). According to Dictor, DIY punk functioned largely in response to the "hippie" generation, as the peace and love movement "turned against itself" and hippies "embraced consumerism and commodification of music as an industry" (p. 187). In this way, DIY punk is an example of musicians fighting corporate influence by abstaining from participation in consumer culture and taking all aspects of production into their own hands.

Of course, DIY bands did not operate in a vacuum, as Dictor recalls interactions with several other important groups like Black Flag, Minor Threat, D.O.A., and Bad Brains. In these interactions, Dictor is able to show fractures in the punk scene and the failure of these bands to coalesce around a singular political mission. Yet Dictor suggests that the scene did not need to be pigeonholed to particular "goal," suggesting that punk should serve as a forum to "rail against the conformity of the status quo" (p. 188).

It is therefore no wonder that this memoir is not strictly linear—linearity would not do justice to the roller-coaster ride of touring, organizing, and economic uncertainty. Instead, the memoir is told in a twisted style with witticisms and a lexicon that borrows from the counterculture itself. Dictor often describes difficult tragedies with shorthands like "bummer" and "heavy" which depict him as unpretentious and approachable—a characteristic that is evident throughout the book, as Dictor seems always willing to engage with fans. Furthermore, such a conversational tone allows Dictor to make some of the more difficult parts of his life more palatable. From an ongoing battle with drug addiction to the loss of loved ones, Dictor manages to examine complex territory without overburdening readers, and likewise, without demanding sympathy for his mistakes.

Despite such experiences, Dictor remains remarkably optimistic throughout the memoir. This not only emphasizes his persistence to endure hardship, but also highlights his ambition to inspire. The title of the memoir uses the word "damaged" to suggest a broken society, not a society that is beyond repair. Dictor underscores this concept in the epilogue, in which he expresses excitement for future generations of young punks ready "to bust out from the norms," as he challenges the notion that punk is "dead" (p. 188).

It is clear that Dictor's life is unabashedly dedicated to the political ideals stressed in his music. From his distrust of politicians, his strict vegetarianism, and a lifelong struggle to address misogynistic behaviors in both punk and mainstream America, Dictor's memoir provides an honest account of a man who practices what he preaches. In this regard, Dictor knows his audience. He is writing for those with a clear interest in the intersection between punk music and political subversion. He is writing for fans of MDC.

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