

THE WAKE OF
**CANCELLED
CULTURE**

FOR MANY PEOPLE, MUSIC MEANS EVERYTHING. BUT HOW DO YOU PROCEED AFTER YOUR FAVORITE BAND IS SUDDENLY “CANCELLED?” THIS WRITER EXPLORES HOW FANS RESPOND TO THEIR FAVORITE ARTISTS AS THEY COME TO THE LIMELIGHT FOR A WHOLE SPECTRUM OF OFFENSES.

WORDS HANNAH NUSS PHOTOS MICHAELA SPIELBERGER

It's my last day being 18 and a motorized needle is jabbing into the flesh of my ribs. Like thousands of other teenagers before me, I'm getting my first tattoo. It's for my favorite band: Brand New. The design is simple—an outline of a lime wedge. It's an allusion to the band's song "Soco Amaretto Lime." Real creative, I know.

Hours later, news breaks about lead singer Jesse Lacey for allegedly sexually assaulting underage girls. I had a whole five hours of post-ink joy, and then none.

A Facebook post started going viral about Lacey's actions. Nicole Elizabeth Garey, a former fan of Lacey and Brand New, opened up about the harassment and abuse she endured from Lacey as a minor. In the days that followed, more women came forward with similar accusations. Soon after, Brand New was cancelled. Just like that.

MUSIC AND CANCEL CULTURE AS WE KNOW IT

The music industry has experienced major shifts in the last few years, specifically when it comes to their handling of sexual misconduct and assault. Since the #MeToo movement, artists are being called out more and more for a whole spectrum of offenses ranging from romantic coercion to rape.

Thus, "cancel culture" was born out of a steady recognition of shitty actions. You may be familiar with the term "cancelled." The term essentially translates to a shunning from the public, a collective condemnation, a mass boycott. After being exposed for misconduct, people are typically "cancelled" through online condemnation and are consequently removed from their platforms—no longer being booked for tours, signed to labels, or hired as actors.

Cancelled culture is definitely amped up by the social media age; anyone can discover and condemn something in a matter of seconds. People might've been generally aware of the problematic things

musicians were doing decades ago, but it spread as rumor, if at all. Now allegations go viral instantaneously, and people who shame artists have a stark public platform to utilize.

In the aftermath of being cancelled, many fans are left unsure of what to do. It's an odd place to exist, when enjoying your favorite band suddenly becomes political. Fans wonder how to proceed as listeners, or whether they should continue to listen at all.

THE MORALISTS

Anna Jacobson was defensive at first. She's a diehard fan with friends crawling in the Kansas City DIY scene—the do-it-yourselfers of the music industry. She grew up with music that has since been tainted. She wanted to believe art could be separated from the artist, but she soon realized this wasn't the case.

"I was making an exception because I liked it," Jacobson says. "I was letting myself believe I was doing the right thing, but I was doing the easy thing. If my rule is that you can't separate art from the artist, that has to apply even to art that I really like."

Part of what changed her mind was taking a hard look at the messages behind post-cancellation apologies. For Anna, a good apology should have no excuses. It should directly acknowledge the misconduct without dancing around it. It should come from a place of genuine regret, not out of defense.

"If their goal in [apologizing] is so they can have their platform back, they're missing the point. They're not actually wanting help, they're wanting to check a box," Jacobson says.

St. Louis native Austin Striffler is a fan and a musician. He's a feel-it-in-his-bones diehard. And when he sees something like Brand New, it's visceral. It hurts him, and it hurts the music.

"If someone abuses or harasses people, it taints everything. It's hard to ignore that and just pretend that it didn't happen."

In Striffler's eyes, music is what gives artists their platform and power, and thus places them in a position to abuse it. It's difficult for him to separate the art from the artist. The allegations are too interwoven in the music, so ignoring the issue just isn't possible.

"It's hard to just pretend that the art was not in any way involved, that it can be separated from the person and what they did," Striffler says.

Still, he's not unsympathetic towards fans who find themselves struggling in the wake of a cancellation. But for Striffler, it's a problem when fans continue to directly and financially support artists who've done bad things. Some artists are continuing to make a living despite allegations, and that doesn't sit well with him.

"Even if a band is really small, it does in some ways put you on a pedestal and give you a platform and it also gives you a literal stage," Striffler says.

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— AUSTIN STRIFFLER

TO CANCEL OR NOT TO CANCEL

It's been difficult for Rebecca Elliott to let go. She built her career as a concert promoter at The Rino in Kansas City, Missouri. Music is more than personal for her—it's professional.

As a concert promoter, she feels responsible for fostering safe spaces at her shows. A lover of emo and punk, she's had to make tough calls in—literally—cancelling acts after hearing about allegations. Victims have reached out to her privately about their abusers taking the stage, and she doesn't take that lightly.

"I will believe you. If you tell me that happened, who am I to say it didn't? It's my place to keep people safe and to hold that standard," she says.

While Elliott fully supports fostering safe spaces, cancelled culture as it exists now doesn't sit right with her.

"I don't think [cancelled culture] should ruin people's lives. I don't think it should make people not be artists," she says. "I think it should push them to be better, to make them pull the breaks and get help."

Scott Heisel, former Managing Editor for *Alternative Press* magazine, also has some issues with cancelled culture. He sees a major problem with the spectrum of offenses being handled all the same. The formula is the same no matter what—allegations, public outrage, then banishment.

"Now that people are talking more about sex and sexuality in general, it raises the question of, 'Well hey, is this mistreatment, is this miscommunication, or is this something much more serious?'" Heisel says.

Many fans feel a similar confusion. One band facing backlash for using their platform to meet women is being equated to other bands who are sexually abusing their fanbase. Often, there's little consideration or investigation as to what happened. All it takes is a tweet to ostracize an artist, which also bothers

Heisel. He doesn't agree with blindly banishing people as a punishment for misconduct—at least not universally.

"If you do something wrong, whether it's a criminal act or an immoral act, you deserve the chance to rehabilitate yourself," he says. "And there's a corner of the scene that says, 'No, you're done forever.' I think that's a very dangerous and militant approach."

THE APOLOGIST

Daniel John is one of many who doesn't feel guilty. He's been a fan of Brand New since the group first came onto the scene in the late '90s. He was able to relate to most of the things Lacey was writing about—self-loathing and depression, among other things. John is fully aware of the allegations against Lacey, but it doesn't faze him. It hasn't affected his ability to listen or relate to the music.

"The thing that we loved about him was the thing that was breaking him," John says about Lacey and the emo genre as a whole. In John's eyes, we love music for the pain and edge imbedded within it, especially in counterculture genres. He doesn't expect this type of music to come from perfect people.

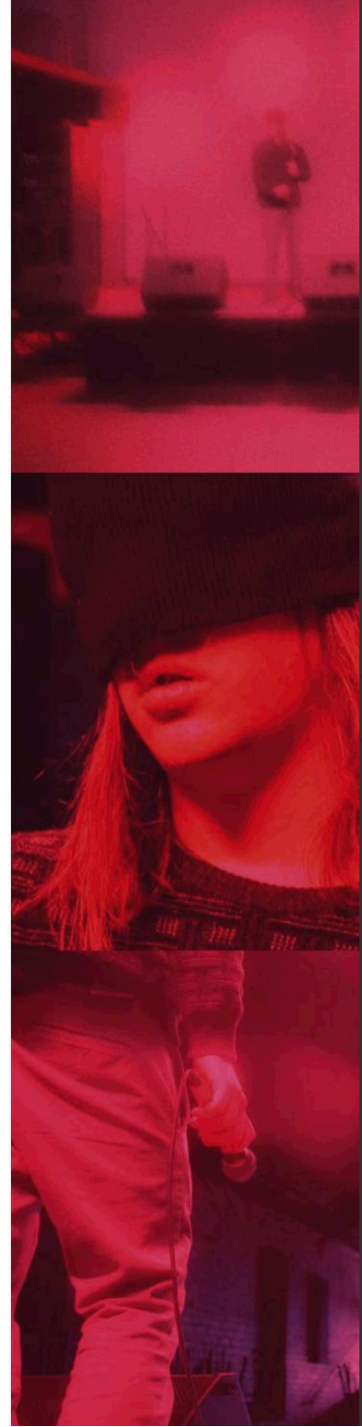
When reflecting on the recent rise of cancelled culture, John sees much of the criticism as selective. He believes young people are quick to condemn certain artists while willfully ignoring the sins of major music icons.

"If they actually learned about the past, looked in on what Bowie did, or what Jagger did or what Lou Reed did, would it change their approach to that music? Would you not go out in that Rolling Stones shirt?" he says.

THE DOUBLE-STANDARD

There is a definite double-standard in cancelled culture.

Rock music has never been a bastion of purity. It's why we've loved it for decades. The music is rooted in a desire to push boundaries; to go against the grain. The



quintessential rock star is simultaneously a sex god, and that's no coincidence—but it's not an excuse either.

Sexual abuse has always existed in rock, even if we didn't always know it was there. Mick Jagger allegedly drugged and raped under-aged girls. Jimmy Page had a fourteen-year-old girlfriend. David Bowie had sex with underage fans. Chuck Berry paid off child prostitutes. John Lennon beat both his wives. Steven Tyler made himself the legal guardian of his sixteen-year old girlfriend whom he forced to have an abortion.

As long as there's been music, there's been an abuse of power.

Here's a more current example: in 2019, two power-house artists were exposed as serious predators. Michael Jackson and R. Kelly both had documentaries made about their sexually abusive histories. While R. Kelly has remained "cancelled," the allegations against Michael Jackson have been met with extreme skepticism and denial.

"Michael Jackson was clearly a pedophile. But we're still going to hear 'Billy Jean' on the radio every day," Heisel says. "It's crazy that someone would defend a rapist, or a murderer, or a pedophile because they like their music. It's a wild, wild world we live in."

So why is it that only some artists are cancelled following allegations while others are left unscathed? Does their pop-culture footprint overshadow their immorality?

THE EMO-PUNK ROCK TREND

Cancelled culture has hit counterculture hard, and it's especially rampant in genres such as emo, punk, and DIY scenes. To understand why these scenes are seat-pools of misconduct, it's important to remember that they're fragile by nature. that they're fragile by nature. DIY scenes are supported by small communities building a scene completely on their own, and when the foundation rests solely on the shoulders of toxic individuals, the

music genre itself can easily buckle.

What's more, the kind of people who make emo music are often deeply troubled individuals with lots of internalized self-hate and insecurity. Traits that are also prevalent in the kind of people who hurt other people. It makes sense, but it's not an excuse.

Elliott attributes the rampant misconduct within counterculture to its hyper-masculine energy. But in her mind, the scene is still salvageable if an active effort is made to foster safety and inclusivity. As a concert promoter, she's especially passionate about maintaining safe spaces in smaller scenes. People often tell her that music spaces have helped shape them, have helped them become who they are.

"It's important for young people who are coming into themselves to find those spaces. Whether its music spaces or coffee shops or schools, it's important for them to have that kind of place to go and be where they are and be comfortable in who they are."

Still, some emo-aligning bands have been able to bounce back, even if they aren't always welcomed with open-arms.

THE REDEMPTION STORY

It was a unique situation. You don't see many bands dethroned only to be welcomed back to the spotlight. Pinegrove did it.

Evan Stephens Hall has been the front man and songwriter for Pinegrove since the band's genesis. And I say genesis because that's what this music is to so many of their fans. It's far more spiritual than other emo groups. It's more meditative and reflective and lacks the melodrama. It's honest, and for years, fans couldn't get enough.

Then came Pinegrove's fall from grace. The alleged victim of Hall's romantic coercion never wanted to go public with her pain but was outed by a friend. Still, Pinegrove was mindful and coordinated with the woman in question to make

amends. They agreed to take a year off from touring and to shelf their then-upcoming album "Skylight". Hall went to therapy. They dealt with the rest privately.

Pinegrove has since been welcomed back into the music scene with mostly open arms. This past September, the band released "Skylight" and continued touring with the woman's permission. All proceeds have been donated to organizations such as the Voting Rights Project, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and Musicares, which offers mental health resources to musicians among other services. Their tours feature tabling for similar organizations with bystander intervention seminars often held before shows.

"That to me is the best possible scenario if you've done wrong...I'm glad they're back," Heisel says.

Other (former) fans haven't expressed the same sentiment. And that's more than okay.

Jenn Pelly wrote a feature on Pinegrove's return for Pitchfork. Hall expressed an amount of sympathy and indignation, of humility and hurt:

"We don't want listeners who are like, 'We don't care about this sort of thing,'"

NOT MANY ARTISTS EXPRESS A SIMILAR DEDICATION TO DO RIGHT BY THEIR FAN BASE. BUT MAYBE THEY SHOULD START.

Hall adds. "We care about this sort of thing. I'm way more sympathetic to people who are like, 'I don't understand this situation, it seems fucked up, fuck this band,' than people who are like, 'I don't understand this situation, fuck this situation, I love this band.' We are thoroughly in favor of the dismantling of patriarchal structures, and the movement right now to elevate survivors and victims of abuse. And we are not interested in a listenership that doesn't care about that."

Hall proved that you can bounce back—at least to some extent. But why is Pinegrove an anomaly? It's worth wondering if other cancelled artists can learn something valuable from Pinegrove's on-going redemption arc. To be fair, some artists aren't so redeemable. No one expects Jesse Lacey to return to the scene or for R. Kelly to drop a new album. What's more, not many artists express a similar dedication to do right by their fan base. But maybe they should start.

THE SEPARATIST

Elliott wondered for a long time whether she could separate art from the artist. In seeing some of her favorite musicians exposed for cruel misconduct, she couldn't help but feel a sense of loss for the art.

"It's like an ex-boyfriend who gaslights you," she says. "You walk out of that wanting nothing to do with them, everything that reminds you of them, you throw away because it hurts. Its painful. I feel so deeply connected to music, but it's the same idea. It's just tainted."

Adam Billau expresses a similar sentiment. A college student and classic emo fan, he finds his personal investment in the music he loves to be troubling.

"I don't want to relate to someone that I see as a predator," he says with a heavy sigh. "Connecting so deeply to their music humanizes them, but you wish it didn't."

He doesn't think continuing to listen means he fully stands behind everything the artist has done—or that it reflects on his

own character. It just means that he likes sad songs. He tries to convince himself listening isn't a reflection of himself, though he still feels twinges of guilt.

"I try to not think about it too much," he says. "I like to think that just because I can relate to them in one aspect doesn't mean that I have to be that person."

WHAT'S BEING DONE?

There's a clear epidemic of sexual assault occurring at concerts. Many organizations are seeking to combat it. One of them is the OurMusicMyBody campaign. It was launched in 2016 as a collaboration between two non-profit organizations, Between Friends and Rape Victim Advocates. They promote anti-harassment and work to diminish instances of assault in Chicago's live music scene. The campaign has been involved in major music festivals such as Pitchfork, Lollapalooza, and Riot Fest, as well as local venues.

There are multiple similar organizations all around the world working to promote safe spaces for concert attendees. Safe Gigs For Women operates out of the U.K. and spreads awareness of how to stay safe at festivals. Safer Scenes teaches anti-racist bystander intervention. Calling All Crows aims to educate the masses on how to fight sexual violence at shows and festivals.

A lot is being done, particularly at the fan level, but the epidemic of misconduct in the music industry itself still persists. Many still say that intervention from extraneous organizations isn't enough to affect the scene. Change still needs to come from within and from the demographic largely contributing to assault: men.

Strifler elaborates. "It's important that men in the music industry are helping to spearhead that fight," he says. "Many women and non-men can share their experiences and demand change, but we're still at a point where the music industry is very much controlled by men. If men are not holding each other accountable, things

just aren't going to change or will change at a glacial pace."

THE AFTERMATH

Music can be a hard thing to give up, even in the face of hard truths and ugly realities. It can feel like a genuine loss when a song you've loved for years, that you have memories attached to and love for, gets tainted. "[The music] doesn't mean the same thing it meant to me anymore," Jacobson says. "It's just not fun to listen anymore."

Heisel sympathizes with the struggle most other fans face in deciding how to proceed in listening: "What do you do? What do you do when [music] you've attached so much of your life to turns out to have been harming people along the way? That's a tough thing to reconcile yourself with."

It's important to remember that for mental illnesses, music can make all the difference. When you're 15 and your brain suddenly stops working right, it can be terrifying and isolating. Having a musician articulate what you're enduring when you don't even understand it yourself is invaluable. Sometimes songs are a road map, other times it just reminds you that you're not the only one.

I'm not frustrated that the music is suddenly off limits. I don't think there's room to accept abusers into the limelight. Rather, I'm frustrated that the artists I once idolized never deserved to be celebrated in the first place. Frustrated that I'll never be able to listen to some of my adolescent relics, my music, the same way again. It's impossible to ignore the hurt its caused—hurt that deserves to be acknowledged and respected.

When Brand New comes up on my shuffle, sometimes I don't even notice it's playing. I forget to feel offended or noble. I simply listen and almost enjoy it, momentarily oblivious to the voices in my head telling me I'm wrong for still feeling attached and moved. But most times, I just skip to the next song. 🎧

