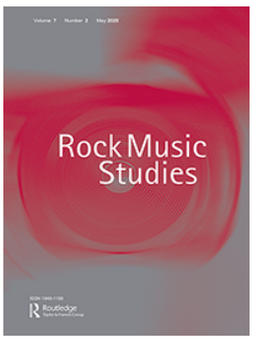

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Jawbreaker's 24 Hour Revenge Therapy

Ronen Givony, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 232 pp., $14.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-5013-2309-6

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BOOK REVIEW

Jawbreaker's 24 Hour Revenge Therapy, Ronen Givony, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 232 pp., $14.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-5013-2309-6

Though the readership of this publication can likely remember the 1990s, certain differences from then bear mentioning. Music was not the decentralized, streamable experience it is now for so many. A time indeed existed, and not so long ago, when active bands sought to produce their music as physical objects. Perhaps most importantly, subcultural music scenes perceived themselves as communities with starkly different values than the corporate mainstream. Together, these indicate a different code of ethics, and it is discussing that code that drives Ronen Givony's chronicle (book number 130 in Bloomsbury's 33 1/3 series) of Jawbreaker's *24 Hour Revenge Therapy* (1994). What was this ethical system? More precisely, what does it mean that this ethical system "[went] obsolete in ten or twenty years, and what does this rapid obsolescence say about its legacy, in hindsight?" (174).

A brief overview of Jawbreaker's influences is necessary before approaching these questions. Givony shows that Jawbreaker developed in the aftermath of California punk bands like Black Flag, Minutemen, Descendents, X, and Social Distortion. Los Angeles punk's influence on Jawbreaker was ideological, too, since it was a scene, a genre, and "a counterpoint to the more commercial new wave of the era" (8). As a result, Jawbreaker's generation was informed largely by bands that were fast but talented, pissed off but community-oriented. Though not from the west coast, it is necessary to mention that Minnesota's Hüsker Dü influenced Jawbreaker's melodic experimentation and gruff catchiness. If readers have never heard Jawbreaker and are still not helped by Givony's contextualization, it may help to imagine something perkier than Nirvana, rougher than Green Day, and more bookish than both.

The book's nuts and bolts emerge as Givony dissects the band's earlier work before and including *24 Hour Revenge Therapy*. An example as good as any of these bite-sized analyses is his reading of "The Boat Dreams from the Hill," *24 Hour*'s second track. First, he argues that this song belongs alongside decidedly more canonical statements including the Stooges' "Now I wanna be your dog," the Ramones' "I wanna be sedated," and the Sex Pistols "I wanna be anarchy" (59). Is this too ambitious? An overestimation of a band's importance? No, not according to Givony, since this track is in punk's long-standing tradition of "declarative self-fashioning" (59). The author also identifies similarities between the song's lyrics, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Arthur Rimbaud's "The Drunken Boat."

The above reading is an example of an interesting technique Givony uses throughout the text: providing standard analyses a reader would expect and then inserting those analyses into more elevated discourses. In addition to Rimbaud and Hurston, he examines the group using John Milton, Virginia Woolf, Homer's *Odyssey*, Aristotle's *Poetics*, and Edward Said among others.

This does not read like abstruseness or navel-gazing, though. It always enhances the discussion surrounding Jawbreaker, and it provides a way to consider their contributions to the human experience in general and the '90s Bay Area DIY (do-it-yourself) scene in particular. Moreover, by discussing the band in this more refined company, Givony accomplishes three things: (1) Calling into question the assumption that punk is only a lowbrow pursuit; (2) Inviting the reader to more seriously consider Jawbreaker's contributions to

music and subculture; (3) Prompting the reader to question the ethics of the specific musical culture Jawbreaker inhabited and what, in turn, the stakes were of those ethics.

Context for Jawbreaker's early performances also helps us approach the aforementioned ethical system. Oft-mentioned in the book is the famous music venue 924 Gilman St., which the group played numerous times. To give unfamiliar readers an idea of this venue's importance, it helped launch acts like Green Day and Operation Ivy. Gilman's rules were simple: no racism, sexism, homophobia, drugs, alcohol, or violence. In addition to these, the venue was and is still all ages, nonprofit, and volunteer-run – a fully-functioning community center and a concert venue.

The ethical system is indicated by a perennial rule at Gilman since the beginning: major label acts being ineligible to play. To this day, the only exceptions to this rule have resulted from membership votes and were allowed to play for only one night. Naturally, this stipulation proved troublesome when bigger acts, including Jawbreaker, joined major labels. As a result, the very scene that nourished Jawbreaker felt a sense of betrayal that, for Givony, highlighted a cardinal sin in that community – selling out.

Givony describes the notion of selling out as "archaic, quaint, naive, even charming" (4) since the general public no longer considers recorded music to be an object of value. It is thus conceptually and economically impossible for a twenty-first century band to sell out. In turn, one must ask what selling out even means. In the '90s, the infraction indicated a "fall from grace" (4), a deliberate betrayal of integrity and community. For Jawbreaker, it was something more particular: touring with Nirvana (a major label act) and signing to a major label for *Dear You*, their follow-up to *24-Hour Revenge Therapy*.

Jawbreaker's perceived violation resulted in backlash. At one show, a "fan" attempted to spit into singer/guitarist Blake Schwarzenbach's mouth (131). On another occasion, a flyer was distributed at the band's Great American Music Hall Show in January 1995. It charged Jawbreaker with several offenses, including destroying the punk scene's trust by signing to Geffen records after vowing not to do so, "[doing] just what Wal-Mart does to a community," and "betraying a community when it was no longer profitable" (150–51). The flyer ultimately asked the audience to walk out during Jawbreaker's set in solidarity with those who felt betrayed.

There are numerous instances like these in which Givony shows us Jawbreaker's experiences with a scene whose values, to the outsider, can appear absurd and self-righteous. But in confronting these absurdities, Givony does not indulge the handy counter that punk is dead. On the contrary, he insists that "there are reasons to believe punk is more resilient than it seems" (188).

One reason is 924 Gilman St.'s continued presence in the Bay Area DIY scene. Bi-monthly membership meetings are still held, bands the world over are showcased, and all ages shows with cheap ticket prices are still the standard. This is even more remarkable, Givony maintains, since Gilman is even now nonprofit and volunteer run. Another reason is the uncompromising publication *Maximumrockandroll*, perhaps the most famous of all punk zines. At the time of Givony's writing, *Maximum* still produced "120 cranky pages of reviews, letters, editorials, and scene reports per issue, all printed on obsolete newsprint" (189). Givony also mentions the recent advent of Afropunk, a series of annual festivals focusing on black underrepresentation in punk. One could argue that Afropunk is "the most successful, dynamic, and forward-thinking cultural institution to emerge in the last decade" (189). So what exactly do Jawbreaker, a punk zine, and a music festival have in common? Each affirms that punk still motivates alternative ways of socialization.

Ronen Givony's *Jawbreaker's 24 Hour Revenge Therapy* is a tidy bundle of analysis, biography, research, and interview. Its content is sure to entice fans, as much of it is from

the author's own conversations with the band. There is trivia, but it never strays from the higher-order concerns established in its first pages. It is a chronicle of an album, and it is a call to recognize the importance of a particular band in a particular subculture.

After reading, a few questions are unignorable: How did Jawbreaker "sell out" if they experienced only a fraction of the success of their contemporaries Green Day and Nirvana? What is the use of discussing "selling out" if it is an idea the author admits is obsolete? One of Givony's achievements in examining a bygone ethical code – and, I think, the answer to these questions – is presenting the idea that punk, in all of its permutations, still has the potential for the "declarative self-fashioning" (59) so important to independent communities.

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