

Nights at Bourbon Street

Kneeling In Piss - *Tour de Force*

Living in filth / Surrounded by shit / It gets worse every day / Kneeling in piss

If your body is a temple, your piss is holy water. To kneel in your own holy water is to perform an auto-baptism, a purifying self-renewal. Receiving a golden shower of someone else's *acqua santa* allows one to reach a higher plane in our common human experience. But to kneel in all of this world's piss—to live in filth, surrounded by shit, among campus rentals, broken sidewalks, and cans of Genesee—is to genuflect in an absolving acceptance of what is. And what is in Columbus, Ohio, where Kneeling In Piss is from, is hell.

There's a popular genealogy to the music made in Columbus, or there is to the only strain of music worth writing about there. The "Columbus sound" is a lineage communicated like a disease, passed on in the coke cut with rat poison six times before it passes into the state. When it's snorted, so too is the feedback, the broken instruments and relationships, the four passed-around PAs, and the three soundmen who've been in every band you can find in the "Ohio" seven-inch box at Used Kids. Here, the goal is to make the most shoplifted record, not the best-selling one. Proper Columbus music is not for people with haircuts, it's for people whose bohemia is just poverty, whose recreation is going to the café, whose diet is three coffees, two bagels, one cigarette a day. This small scene—where every person is famous, poor, and has the same sores—is centered on Café Bourbon Street. "Bobo," as Café Bourbon Street is called—"See you at Bobo!"—is as good a bar as one can find in the States in 2019. The Chipotleization that has banalized every other business in the past decade hasn't touched it, even as the bar has been passed down from failed business owner to failed business owner, and from cancelled booking agent to cancelled booking agent.

When I was a pup, Pink Reason, Psychedelic Horseshit, and Times New Viking were in their Pitchfork primes, playing and tending bar at Bourbon Street every night. A bit before they were pups, Cheater Slicks, Gaunt, New Bomb Turks, Scrawl, and Thomas Jefferson Slave Apartments were in their Trouser Press primes, in a scene around Stache's, then Little Brother's, as well as Bernie's, and the dives that once lined South Campus. Further back into the 1980s, there was Great Plains, Tommy Jay, Mike Rep, Jim Shepard, and in Ohio more broadly, Guided By Voices and Bill Fox's The Mice. Screaming Urge, cited often as the first punk band in Columbus, formed in 1978. Just a year later, Tommy Jay and Mike Rep's True Believers recorded *Accept It!*, and Kneeling In Piss shares more with that 41-year-old 45 than they share with any of their Columbus contemporaries. Both KIP and TB would have fit the bill at the Velvet Underground's Valley Dale Ballroom date in 1966, but where the Columbus sound comes from before that is unclear. If Kneeling In Piss is the 2019 spawn of this heritage, Winston Hightower's FAH-Q Catalog, along with its HYTWR, The Girl in Times New Viking, and Wharm releases, is the rightful heir to Datapanik, Anyway, and Columbus Discount Records.

Today this teleology culminates in the last great man of history, Alex Mussawir (b. 1992, Morse and High), whose previous bands include TKLS; Goners, with Empath's Catherine Elicson; Yuze Boys, with Hightower and Choir Boy's Jeff Kleinman; and the Future Nuns, with Danielle Gagliano, Aaron Miller, and Laura Payne, which morphed into Kneeling In Piss. I first met

Mussawir, who'd been a bullet-belt-wearing teen, but was, by that time, all patched hoodies, at the South Campus DIY venue the Monster House. He must have been barely 18, but he was already writing short stories, smoking cigs, and playing in punk bands. In the intervening decade, he's been the heroic worker-poet, in the Soviet tradition, caught in the black cloud of clinical depression and hourly toil but able to amplify it to fellow sufferers in alcoholic hovels. He worked in the café at the Wexner Center, studied at Columbus State, and for a long spell was a bartender and doorman at Ace of Cups—a bar owned by Marcy Mays of Scrawl—along with Hightower, three of the other members of Kneeling In Piss, and me. It was at Ace of Cups, before Mussawir's sojourn in Chicago, where the idea for Kneeling In Piss took root. Kneeling In Piss would write and record one side of a split-tape with Jigsaw Six, a project by Ace's soundman Nick Schuld, who had been a member of Gaunt and Nervosas. That one side turned into *Tour de Force*.

Tour de Force was written by Mussawir when he was down and out in Chicago and Columbus, first alienated by being around no one in Chicago, then alienated by being around everyone in Columbus. The album's title—the OED has "*tour de force*" as "A performance or achievement that has been accomplished or managed with great skill"—is ironically sincere but sincerely ironic. Mussawir recorded this collaged-together achievement on a portable eight-track with a 20-dollar keyboard and a 20-dollar mini-guitar in his two bedrooms and in random practice spaces, with whomever he could convince to play on it. Only two of the album's songs, "USA Will Start Another War" and "Social Scene," feature the full band's live line-up: Kyle Bergamo on bass, Alex Blocher on drums, Maisie Kappler on keyboards, Mussawir singing and playing rhythm, and Alex Paquet of Field Sleeper on lead. Yes, that makes three Alexes in the band.

Mussawir also writes fiction and poetry. In 2013, Monster House Press published his chapbook of short stories *Deadpan*. In *Deadpan*'s first story, an interviewer asks the protagonist what motivates him to work. "Money," the protagonist replies. *Everybody On the Internet Is Trying to Sell You Something* followed in 2015. A year later, *NY Tyrant* published a suite of his poems. His lyrics, too, could stand alone and hold a publication. They share the preoccupation with naming, disaffection, and the quotidian in Alt-Lit (the Jordan in the album's last song is the Alt-Lit writer Jordan Castro). Another touchstone is K-Mart Realism, a fiction genre which, Wikipedia notes, features "working-class characters in [...] bleak environments" and "represents and reproduces the disintegration of public life and the colonization of private life by consumer capitalism." The residue of Mussawir's Aus-Rotten and Plan-It-X high school years sticks to *Tour de Force*'s politics, but mostly in the recurrent theme of feeling dislocated from those earlier certainties. The arc of the punk-associated left from 2009 to 2019—from anti-capitalist, anti-war activism to the personal purity politics of excommunication; from society to identity—has led to Mussawir's lyrical motifs of dissociation, LARPing, and screens. To look into the present-day funhouse mirror of punk, where your friends play shows for 15 dollars to 400 NPR liberals, is to "observe a reenactment of a life," as Mussawir sings in *Tour de Force*'s first song, where "at the center of the Earth is a CD-ROM" running a simulacrum of a countercultural milieu that once was.

There's nearly half a century of punk music in Columbus, but beyond Kneeling In Piss and FAH-Q, the city's characteristic sound and outlook is in danger of being aged into obscurity. Fewer and fewer 18-year-olds come to Columbus to attend Ohio State University only to end up lost in High Street's punk dives—mainly because those no longer exist. In the mid-2000s, OSU, through its proxy Campus Partners, bulldozed the blocks of bars that sustained the 1980s-and-90s punk

scene to sedate a neighborhood that was the locus for football riots, public intoxication, and Section 8 housing. Then, in its stead, they erected a perpetually empty mall called the South Campus Gateway. In the last few years, Campus Partners has extended this social erasure into the heart of campus, tearing down Bernie's, a degenerate punk hole with all-ages shows, to make the block into a Target. Beyond Bernie's, the memory hole's taken Aardvark Video, Atlantis, Black Sheep Skateboards, the Blue Danube, Brenen's, Discount Paperback, Flying Pizza, the High Five, Insomnia, Johnny Go's House O' Music, Larry's, Long's Book Store, Mama's Pasta and Brew, Monkey's Retreat, North Campus Video, Singing Dog Records, Student Book Exchange, and so many more. Other businesses, like Piercology, Ujamma Bookstore, and Used Kids, escaped to neighborhoods out of sight of the students. This has left High Street, as it runs through one of the nation's largest campuses, without a comics shop, a gay bar, an independent coffee shop, a pornographer, a punk venue, a record store, or a dedicated used bookstore. Of what remains, only the family-owned Buckeye Donuts can be traced back to the New Left cultural effusion of the 1970-OSU-riots era, and that's only because Buckeye Donuts owns their own building. All else has been effaced by John Kasich's hand-picked capitalists who masquerade as managers of the public interest on Ohio State's Board of Trustees. These "trustees," unworthy of the name, only see short-term profit and are blind to long-term value, for both Columbus and the university itself. And, with Mike DeWine now installed at the Statehouse, it will surely "get worse every day."

Capital has succeeded in eliminating the culture that surrounded its prize institution. Hand in hand with that aim has been the displacement of costs from Ohio State onto the university's most vulnerable members: its own students and employees. This downward transfer takes on new forms, like parking privatization or compulsory dorms for sophomores, but it never goes in the opposite direction. OSU students are ever more indebted, their degrees ever more redundant, and their futures ever more hopeless. The neoliberalization of the university has depleted the material ability of young people in Columbus to focus on cultural production and to have the cultural environment to flourish in if they do. While some of the principal actors of the Stache's scene remain, almost the entire post-1990s generation fled the city because, as Mussawir puts it, "What future? There's none." We should also ask: "What past?" Although the recent influx of pathologically sane yuppies has turned what was an overgrown college town into the economic heart of Ohio, they have also brought with them the fast capitalist tastes and values of careerist transplants. These amorphous gentrifiers chase the latest trends in food, drinks, and "self-improvement" imported from the metropole, but they're scarcely aware of—or care about—the social histories that haunt the land under their new-build condominiums. For capital, it's ideal for us to only think in, and know about, the eternal present, where all we do is work and consume, unable to use our past as a model to better our future.

I moved back to Columbus in desperation in 2017 after living month-to-month for three years on meager fellowships and graduate stipends. Instead of hometown comfort, I found a city purging itself of its own identity in the vain hope it could be exploited by the next Amazon HQ. I found a rapacious, racist police force; spineless, ineffectual Democrats; an outmoded, crumbling infrastructure; and a rental market that had lost touch with reality. I was an adjunct college instructor, a barback, a bookseller, a doorman, a freelancer writer and copyeditor, all at the same time, and impossibly broke. Often I would go for days and days without money, and when the hunger kicked in, I'd hallucinate dollar bills on the ground. Those dollar bills always turned out to be trash in North Campus. It was the one certainty in the city, in the one neighborhood that

hadn't changed. The Future Nuns sang that the area, the so-called "Washington Beach," where Café Bourbon Street anchors an otherwise empty block, had a yellow sky made of glass, with "used condoms on the sidewalk," amid a "food desert and strip malls." To quote Jane Jacobs, North Campus's streets are "promenades that go from no place to nowhere." The place is terra too cognita. Like the collegiate failures North Campus nurtures, it's a many-splendored thing: aged, bored, frustrated, impoverished, self-loathing, an eyesore, and—per Barbara Mandrell—drinking doubles does not make it a party. But the music that hellworld can produce, like Gaunt, like Jim Shepard, like Times New Viking, like the True Believers—and like Kneeling In Piss's *Tour de Force*—does.

Nights at Bourbon Street, filth, shit, piss—these are the last things here that are real.

James Payne
Brooklyn, 2019