Who Makes What

FROM TOM BRADY TO ACROBAT TO TITANS OF TECH, THIS IS WHAT BOSTON EARNED. HOW DOES YOUR PAYCHECK STACK UP?

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Rock ’n’ roll will never die. Artifacts from the defunct punk club the Rat are preserved in the Hotel Commonwealth’s Rathskeller Suite.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TIM KENNEDY
How the city lost its underground cool—and might just get it back.

THE LIFE AND DEATH AND REBIRTH OF BOSTON'S COUNTER-CULTURE

BY SIMON VAN ZUYLEN-WOOD
begin my research in November with an email to Sam Potrykus, the closest thing Boston's theoretically leaderless underground rock music scene has to a leader. I write in my email that I am investigating Boston's vanishing counterculture, whatever that is, and am seeking a kind of Sherpa to help me navigate what's left of it.

"Sounds fun man!" Sam writes back. He mentions an "electronic techno freak sorta joint" at an unlicensed music venue he runs in Allston. We meet downtown, where his minivan is parked. Sam is 29, with shoulder-length hair and an easy manner you'd associate with the West Coast—though with a Carhartt-and-hoodie aesthetic you might associate with Braintrust, where he grew up. With him is a DJ and electronic music producer who goes by Gobby, wears a blue painter's jumpsuit, and never speaks. "We don't need to chitchat," Sam says, grinning. They sit up front while I prop myself up on an elbow in the rear of the minivan—Sam removed the back seats to facilitate his day job as a mover—and try not to roll around too much. A joint is produced and we barrel onto the Mass. Pike.

Sam's minivan eventually pulls up in front of a squat building in a gnarly sliver of Allston near the Pike. The space is home base for Boston Hassle, an all-purpose DIY nonprofit organization he cofounded half a decade ago to promote independent music, art, and film projects. Inside, up a stairwell and through a hallway, is a large room in which DJs are setting up behind a trippy diptych of a skeleton head and its own hideous skull by the claw. A middle-aged Hassle volunteer named James works the door while sitting in a recliner and drawing images of shrimp in a notebook.

When the Boston Phoenix keeled over four years ago, it occurred to Potrykus that there was a massive gap to fill. The city hadn't lost just an alternative weekly newspaper, but a vital cultural nerve center, a hub. Maybe the Hassle, which already had a website and a monthly print offering, could be that clearinghouse? After all, Potrykus's group was responsible for booking more than 400 artists last year—not bad for a guy who carries people's furniture up and down staircases to sustain his penniless endeavor. Then again, maybe not. "There was a time when I was trying to replace the Phoenix," Sam says. "But the world is so vast, and people have all sorts of ways to get their information." In fact, thanks to soaring rents, the all-devouring maw of social media and online technology, and a bunch of other factors, it seems that nobody is going to replace what Boston's lost anytime soon.

What exactly has Boston lost? Let me back up.

I'm arguing that Boston's counterculture has shuffled off its coil—that the city produces less smart writing, less good music, and less radical thought than any other point in the past half century. Boston, plus Cambridge and Somerville, once housed thriving folk, punk, indie music scenes. The city was a breeding ground for independent cinemas such as Symphony and the Orson Welles. The Rat, a nightclub on Comm. Ave. where Eastern Standard now operates, was a punk mecca, and along with rock station WBCN incubated influential local acts such as Cars and Mission of Burma. The alternative papers were absurdly talent-rich. BU was grungy. Harvard Square was hippie. Newbury Comics was cool. Newbury Street was cool.

Today, local radio is a wasteland. The bands are fine but barely register out of town. Journalism-wise, we're down to a handful of niche websites and one hobnobbed alt-weekly, DigBoston, which is in the process of being sold. Cultural criticism has been largely supplanted by breathless cheerleading for athletes, tech startups, and, worst of all, Hollywood actors who grew up in the general vicinity of the city. (Please, no more B. J. Novak articles!) Three years ago, the Verb Hotel, in the Fenway, plastered its walls with artifacts from Boston's alt-glory days and turned itself into a hipster history museum. You know what goes in history museums? Things that are old or extinct.

To be clear, I'm aware of flaws in my argument: The very concept of "counterculture," a term coined in the 1960s, is anachronistic and probably irrelevant. Plus, some of my highly subjective signposts for a thriving underground culture—rock music, print media—are in decline everywhere. In an era in which technological disruption has become the punk of its time, Boston has much to recommend it. The city is a wealthy urban playground, boasting many...
In a way, the city’s counterculture was born in Cambridge, at Club 47. Sure, there were earlier bouts of norm-busting activity. In 1926, H. L. Mencken was arrested on the Common for selling copies of his banned-in-Boston magazine the American Mercury, and in the 1940s Malcolm X’s radicalization began in prison cells across eastern Massachusetts. If you really wanted, you could go back to the publication of Walden, in 1854, or William Lloyd Garrison’s The Liberator, launched in 1831. Or to the guys who threw the tea off the boat in the harbor. The folk era, though, tore a permanent hole in the culturally conservative fabric of the city, opening it up to the possibilities of musical experimentation, political consciousness-raising, and all the deliriously heavy substance abuse that came with bohemian living. It created a whole new city.

The ‘60s was a tug of war between old and new Boston. Timothy Leary, the godfather of psychedelic drug use, evangelized the spiritual merits of LSD from his perch at Harvard—that is, until Harvard fired him. Drifters, squatters, and anarchic-collectivists colonized Boston Common—suburban flight had already decimated the city’s economic base—triggering breathless Globe coverage and pearl-clutching moral panic. After witnessing antiwar protests and clouds of reefer smoke (Continued on page 105)
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hanging over his city, Cambridge Mayor Daniel Hayes in 1967 actually declared a "War on Hippies."

Meanwhile, a number of players affiliated with the Club 47 scene had fallen under the sway of guru and self-proclaimed deity Mel Lyman and established a commune with him in Roxbury called the Family. Together, they put out a magazine titled Avatar, which served as a soapbox for Lyman's neo-transcendentalist ravings. In 1967, a confrontational editorial triggered the city's anti-obscenity laws, which led to a raid on the magazine's offices in Cambridge. By then, though, muzzing Boston's counterculture was no longer realistic. Alternative media had planted its flag: Boston magazine was an East Coast rival to Rolling Stone; Crawdaddy was for the rock nerds; Boston After Dark and the Cambridge Phoenix merged to become the Boston Phoenix, which in turn played foil to the Globe. WBCN live-streamed the outré pulse of the city from its Newbury Street studio, while the music scene migrated to the station's sister venue, a psychedelic ballroom in the South End called the Boston Tea Party.

It would be a fool's errand to keep tracing the history of the city's counterculture on such a granular level. Suffice it to say, a distinctly Bostonian alt-cultural gestalt persisted into the 1990s. Boston's attitude— influenced by its enormous student population—was ironic and smart-assed, rebellious but with a cause. Think Willie "Loco" Alexander, the in-house enfant terrible at the Rat. Think Steven Wright or Denis Leary, who came out of the city's go-go '80s standup scene. Think the Pixies, or Morphine, local giants who recorded at Fort Apache studios.

Gradually, though, economic pressures crushed many of the city's old hubs, and Boston's counterculture began to lose its relevance. In 1994, the state did away with rent control, accelerating the gentrification of Boston and Cambridge. Fort Point, long a seedy artists enclave, would be rebranded into an "innovation district." Kenmore Square was scrubbed clean as BU evolved from a slacker commuter school to a $65,000-a-year NYU clone. Luxury condos sprouted like weeds. Because of new technologies, some of them invented here, record stores and indie theaters became superfluous and faded. Alternative newspapers, which depended heavily on personal ads, lost their business model and died.
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By the time I started reporting this story, the infrastructure that had once sustained the city’s alternative life had all but disappeared. “There are no record labels in Boston, no film production companies in Boston, no television stations in Boston,” says local filmmaker and musician Michael Epstein, who announced his move to L.A. last year in an open letter to the city. Like him, many artists I spoke with had recently moved away—less because of anything other cities offered and more because Boston had become unaffordable. You can be cheap or you can be interesting. But it gets tough when you’re neither. “I would have been the first to be really honest and say, ‘No, there really is an awesome, thriving counterculture. Go find it. Go to a couple basement parties,’” says DigBoston editor Curtis Faraone. “But it’s just not the case. It just isn’t.”

The question remains, though. What’s replaced it?

WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER LIVING IN HARVARD SQUARE in the mid-2000s, I rode the T to prep school in Boston. I wasn’t going to sit there with a fat, dull Globe slidding off my lap, so my commuter entertainment was limited to the Metro, which was as vapid as it’s now, and on Thursdays the latest Phoenix, which was a revelation. I was too young to really get a lot of it, but I was taken by a weekly comic strip called Failure, which was drawn in a technically precise, realist style and focused on the charming aimlessness of twentysomething life in Allston and J.P. The strip, and the newspaper that housed it, became conduits between the comfortable but stuffy milieu in which I was raised, and the lingering weirdness that lay just beyond.

Even then, though, Harvard Square was entering the pointless-bank-chain phase of its existence. Gradually, street life got sterilized, as the Pit punks and the buskers and the conspiracy-theorist megaphone Uncle Sam guy began to disappear. In May 2012 the Phoenix’s sister radio station, WFNX—first in the country to play Nirvana’s Nevermind from start to finish—died the worst of all possible deaths: It was sold to Clear Channel and eventually converted to a country music station. That September the Phoenix merged with the lamentable Stuff @ Night and became a glossy. Within a couple of months it was packaging features listing Beacon Hill’s “most beautiful” people. The following March, the paper officially expired, and hundreds of red plastic newspaper boxes became collector’s items.

Looking back now, the whole chain of events reads like a pathetically sad parable about the direction of the city. I may write for Boston magazine, but I wound up moving to Brooklyn. The erstwhile author of Failure, Kari Stevens, lives in a Fort Point condo he could not afford to live in: It’s subsidized for artists by the city of Boston. He still publishes a comic strip, but it’s printed once a week in the Village Voice, out of New York. And while the Voice itself isn’t what it used to be, it’s an improvement over what’s left in Boston. “You pick up something like the Improper Bostonian,” Stevens says, “and it’s completely alien to anyone who has any interest in art. It’s all about food and drink and this really conservative sort of lifestyle.” He continues, “I still think that’s sort of what has swept through the city. There’s this air of conservatism that goes along with new money from the tech industry—the rise of just a lot more young professionals who aren’t plugged into the counterculture. Squares, you know.”

But, squares. I couldn’t agree more. But the coddled nostalgia Stevens and I share also kind of misses the point. To understand why the Phoenix died, and moreover, why most Bostonians don’t know or care that it did, one has to reckon with the emergence of a different kind of counterculture altogether: the tech industry.

In 1999 a 19-year-old Northeastern University freshman named Shawn Fanning debuted a free music file-sharing program called Napster. Five years later, Mark Zuckerberg created the facebook.com in his cramped Kirkland House suite in Cambridge. At the time, neither was looking for corporate work at, say, a Kendall Square biotech firm. Both were, famously, dropouts. They were exemplars of DIY culture, and their websites were the new underground (and in Napster’s case, illegal) spaces.

Which is fitting, because as it turned out, the old, analog counterculture and the contemporary, digital one could not coexist. The migration of life to the Internet literally killed much of the old alt-culture by sucking off its revenue streams. All-weekly newspapers, being free, derived their revenue entirely from advertisements. But social media and search engines were more efficient at funneling customers to businesses, and so the ads went there instead. When music became free and/or instantly accessible on the Internet, indie radio stations and record stores were rendered practically useless.

What’s more, by destabilizing the existing underground infrastructure, the Internet sent the very concept of a counterculture into a tailspin. For decades, the old hubs were delivery mechanisms for cultural contraband. As Newbury Comics CEO and cofounder Mike Drecce says, “We used to enable voices that nobody could hear.” Suddenly, nobody needed Newbury Comics to access hard-to-find records or word-of-mouth bands. Now, the chain survives by selling Simpsons swag, streetwear, and gag gifts. Likewise, the decentralization of content obliterated not just the business model but the purpose of alternative media. In the ’60s, recalls Peter Kadiz, the senior editor of WGBH News and a former Phoenix editor, “there was only one culture to be alternative to.” Two papers, three TV channels, et cetera. Today, who needs the Phoenix as an alternative to the Globe if no one is still reading the Globe?

That was bad news for Newbury Comics and the Phoenix. But in a paradoxical way, it represented a win for the ideals of the counterculture. The demise of the old institutions suggests they served their purpose. Nothing is censored; everything is on your phone. There is more mass culture against which to react. In that way, Ibrahim to beatnik to tech bro represents a natural evolution for the city. The old radicals and the startup types who disrupted them into oblivion share the same mistrust of gatekeepers, the same anarchic rejection of accepted wisdom. The result is a slick and expensive city, yes, but also one that has traded in its parochialism for a cosmopolitan blend of cultural diversity and political progressivism.

You could survey the past 50 years and reasonably conclude that Boston has gone mainstream. Just as easily, you might argue that the mainstream has gotten weird.

ON A FRIDAY NIGHT LAST December, I got an unexpectedly close look at that dynamic: how the city’s aboveground and underground wound up joining forces. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Fort Hill Community—Mel Lyman’s Family—represented the very fringe of Boston’s radical fringe. To its adherents, the commune was a free-love refuge from the violent strife that plagued the Vietnam era. To nearly everyone else, it was a cult run by a
moderately talented banjo player who called himself God and subjected his captive followers to questionable LSD experimentation.

Among its many endeavors, the Family published a magazine called Avatar. It was printed on large, heavy-stock paper and suffused with hippie-Aquarian imagery. The magazine's staff members were identified by their given names and their corresponding astrological symbols. Mostly it was a vehicle for Lyman's stream-of-consciousness musings, but his decision in Issue 13, November 24/December 7, 1967, to fill a two-page spread with large, golden letters spelling FUCK SHIT PISST CUNT was seen as a sort of Dada manifesto against the city's Puritan ethos. "Within a couple days, [the magazine] was banned from school," recalls Kadzis, who was a student at Boston Latin at the time. "It must have been extremely threatening to someone."

Meanwhile, the Family continued to push the bounds of acceptable behavior. In 1971, a Rolling Stone exposé peeled back the curtain on the disturbing cult of personality enveloping the Family's hermetic leader. Damaging Manson family comparisons were inevitable. A couple of years later, two members—including Mark Frechette, star of Michelangelo Antonioni's counterculture classic Zabriskie Point—wound up in prison following a botched bank robbery, and the community went underground. After Lyman reportedly died in 1978, Fort Hill members occasionally acquiesced to interviews, but kept the status of their commune closely guarded. So I went to Roxbury and decided to see for myself.

The Boston property holdings of the Fort Hill Community are clustered around Cochituate Standpipe, a defunct watertower that looks like it belongs somewhere in medieval Bavaria. Ring the doorbell by the front gate of an impressive Victorian and a dark-haired woman greets me on the porch, white wine in hand. She is Jessie Benton, a former Lyman spouse now in her mid-seventies, who happens to be in town for a few days (she lives primarily in Martha's Vineyard and Mexico, where she operates a hotel). Jessie is by all appearances the unofficial matriarch of the Family, and, feeling spontaneous, decides to let me in. "We're the most interesting people in the world," she would explain. "But we don't ever let journalists in. This is just for you. And me."

Somebody turns off a Packers game that's on TV, and Jessie ushers me into a den. We're joined by a Family member, Randy Foote, who seems to be chaperoning the conversation. I sit on an armchair, Jessie on a couch across from me. To my left is a portrait of Jessie as a child, painted by her father, the major social realist painter Thomas Hart Benton.

About a dozen more elderly Family members are clustered around the kitchen on the opposite side of the house, preparing to eat a cut of venison from a deer slaughtered on a Family-owned farm in Kansas. "I used to sit up in the window of this house when the Black Panthers were going to burn us out," Jessie says, reliving glory days. "And I would make sure they could see the glint off the rifle on the window."

Despite the occasional flirtation with firearms, she says, the Family housed to a peace-and-love program. Lyman himself, she assured me, didn't truly consider himself a god, and neither did his followers. "Imagine Donald Trump, but as a spiritual person who you loved," she told me. "That same power,
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but imagine it as a beautiful one that's soft. Scary. Scary but soft. Not like it's going to rain the country or ruin your own soul." A comforting thought.

In the years after Lyman's reported but never-confirmed death, the Fort Hill Community established itself as a prominent homebuilding company based primarily out of Los Angeles. What, besides constructing mansions for Hollywood actors, was the Family about these days? "Money and soul," Jessic says, as if the two went together. "A lot of money. But we love each other, so our souls are still alive. We still believe in everything. We fight against everything. We are an environmental group that is very, very powerful. We will stop pipelines, we will do all kinds of things. But underneath, nobody knows we're there. But we're really good at it. We're really good. Politically, we're fantastic."

In one sense, the Family's progression from hippie commune to boutique construction firm suggests it sold out, like so many bourgeois bohemians. In another way, though, its entry into polite society says something about the subtle radicalization of Boston's mainstream. Today, the Fort Hill Community is far from the peripheral once was. I have no idea what to make of Jessie's political views, but it's true that her daughter Daria currently directs a restorative justice program at UMass Boston. Randy Foote teaches in the social science department at Roxbury Community College. In 2013, the family's former home and its famous Jug Band — a 50th-anniversary show at the Club 47's successor, Club Passim. The Globe ran an article featuring the occasion.

A lot of other Lyman-era countercultural types ended up graduating from the fringe, too. "Boston," says Sean Maloney, whose book on the Modern Lovers is out this month, "was one of the early cities to really get a handle on commodifying the counterculture." The Tea Party's manager, Don Law, wound up running virtually every music venue in the city. Dusty joined Newbury Comics into a mall-oriented chain store. Harvard Square's Coffee Connection — progenitor of the new American idea that coffee could taste good — invented the Frappuccino and sold out to Starbucks.

So the counterculture learned how to make a buck. But then, mainstream consumers developed good taste in music and coffee. Gradually, a lot of the old political lights were won, too. In 2004, Massachusetts legalized gay marriage. More than a decade later, pot is legal, the state’s attorney general is a lesbian, and the mayor of Boston employs as his chief of policy a former indie-rock promoter who once let Courtney Love crash in her living room. The counterculture, in a way, became a victim of its own success.


On a Friday in mid-December, I went to see a young black comic, Lamont Price, perform uncomfortably funny set at a Polish social club in Dorchester. I found out about it only because I ran into it the night before, at the House of Blazes, where he was hosting the Boston Music Awards in front of an entirely different audience. Earlier that night, I checked out some poetry at a House in Dudley Square, where the house team won the 2015 slam national championship, which, unless you're Facebook friends with someone who is Facebook friends with one of those poets, you probably didn't know.

Pre-web, the countercultural lynchpins were: newspapers, radio stations, and clubs. Once those businesses started dying off, though, consumers lost their conduits to local alternative culture. Alternative culture, in turn, retreated underground, taking on a fractured and almost pre-commercial identity. Staid clubs were supplanted by raucous house shows. Events were publicized by word of mouth and among Facebook friends. Instead of a standardized, citywide counterculture, Boston is left with a ton of scrappy, fledgling microcultures.

Singer-songwriter Amanda Palmer, for instance, credits the formation of her band, the Dresden Dolls, to her experience living in the Cloud Club, a twee communal artists’ residence in the South End. Boston's quality garage fuzz rock acts came of age in the early 2010s at the Whitehaus, a group house and DIY space in Jamaica Plain. When Sam Petykus has to text individuals concertgoers the address of his space in Allston—publicizing it might mean cops, and cops might mean no more shows—it reduces the reach of the Hassle. But it also stokes the intensity of its fans. "A generation of kids is rejecting the notion of clubs and are doing it on their own way and away from the public eye," says Michael Marotta, a former Phoenix music editor who started the local rock website Vanyaland. "They don't care about the Phoenix article and they don't care about being written about. When things are inhospitable [to artists], it pushes things out of the mainstream. You play by your own rules."

Alternative culture, in other words, has become radically decentralized. The disappearance of curators and tastemakers has made it nearly impossible for individual bands, artists, or authors to garner wide local appeal. But it’s also allowed creative life to flourish without the imprimatur of corporate gatekeepers. "I sort of equate it to Store 24 or 7-Eleven," says Oedipus, the storied former WBCN DJ. "In the '70s and '80s there’d be Pops and Mountain Dew. Water and milk. Now you go in there and there’s 50 types of energy drinks, 20 different waters. They all have a following, but none of them dominate."

After watching the standup show and the poetry and taking a Lyft ride with a not-all-there driver who took a piss in the ass deour to fill up on gas, I almost didn’t make my last stop of the night: a concert at MassArt by Guerilla Toss, an art-punk band with a loyal following. By the time I got there, I had an idea of how to incorporate the scene into the story: great local band plays riveting show. The twist: They moved to New York two years ago.

Then something unexpected happened. As the show ended, after the moshing college kids calmed down and I started making my way for the door, I ran into an art student I had met at the Hassle. A second later, we walked outside and bumped into Sam Petykus, who used to be Guerilla Toss’s tour manager. He introduced me to the girl he was dating, who turned out to be a band with an old friend of mine. The next thing I knew, I was in the back of Sam’s blue van again, being handed a lit joint, and hurrying toward a house party in Cambridge. And in that moment it dawned on me that the thing I thought was long gone—that pulsing, alternative scene that unified so much of the city for so long—would live to see another day.