

The Unlikely Bond Between A D.C. Church And The Punk Music Scene

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At St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church in Columbia Heights, about 350 punks of all ages have filled the performance hall. Baltimore hardcore band Mindset is on stage and the crowd is in a frenzy — bodies are literally flying through the air. In all of the excitement, the band's lead singer receives a gash to his head and starts bleeding profusely. But the group doesn't miss a beat.

[Positive Force DC](#), an all-volunteer social activist group, organized the Mindset show. Founder Mark Andersen says the group's goal is to turn the rhetoric of punk music into action.

"Punk talks about changing things, changing ourselves, changing the world and Positive Force in principle is a vehicle to help punks and anybody who's interested in turning their talk into action," says Andersen.

The group does this mainly by organizing benefit shows for various charities, movements, and non-profits. Most of these concerts are held at church halls and other religious organizations — a surprising fact to the uninitiated that isn't lost on Andersen.

"It's an odd development because it's fair to say that Positive Force, as it started out, was like most of the punk community — I mean it's deeply skeptical of organized religion," Andersen says.

But in D.C., social activism has created what might be considered strange bedfellows in other parts of the country.

"If you look past the surface, there are parts of those religious communities who actually share a common spirit with punks," says Anderson.

A very punk church community

St. Stephen is one such community. Since the mid-80s, Positive Force has held dozens of shows at the church and the site has become known as a legendary punk music venue. Andersen even has an office there.

So, why St. Stephen? Bill MacKaye has been a member of the church since 1960. He says the answer lies in the church's commitment to radical social change.

"I came at the same time as a very adventurous and forward-looking priest came to be rector or pastor of the church," MacKaye remembers. "His name was Bill Wendt. His sense of what he needed to do with this congregation was get them ready for major change."

At the time, Wendt presided over the first racially-integrated Episcopal Church in D.C.— then, a radical concept in and of itself.

"Father Wendt came in here with a mission to open up the church to the neighborhood," says MacKaye. "He not only was going to welcome in black people, but he was going to go up and down the streets and say 'You're really welcome. Come in.'"

But Wendt didn't stop there. According to Bill MacKaye, the priest led an ongoing effort to break down other barriers between the church and the community it served. In the 1970s, St. Stephen was one of the first Episcopal churches to ordain female priests and church leaders, even quietly blessed gay unions as early as 1976. Bill's son Ian MacKaye says this progressive streak extended to the musical programs as well.

"As a kid going to church there, I found most of the church stuff pretty boring but the music stuff I loved," recalls Ian. "They would have steel drums, for instance, would play or they'd have a lot of folk musicians. They had rock bands play. When Jesus Christ Superstar, the play, came down — I think it was at the National Theater or something — the band from Jesus Christ Superstar played at St. Stephen's. It was incredible."

Because of St Stephen's social activism, openness to all kinds of music, and the fact that the church was an all-ages venue, Mark Andersen says it was an obvious candidate to host some of Positive Force's first benefit concerts.

"We did our first show here at St. Stephen in spring of 1986," recalls Andersen. "It was a benefit for an agricultural cooperative in Sandinista Nicaragua."

Sharing a common spirit

Not long after that first show, Ian MacKaye played a Positive Force gig in the church's cafeteria with his new band Fugazi. Although no longer a member of the church, the event was still profoundly important to him.

"That was really significant for me because of course it was the church at which I had been baptized and a church where I felt I had been radicalized," says the younger MacKaye. "Almost more importantly, part of my radical ideas directly came from being raised in a church where you're supposed to question authority."

Fugazi went on to become one of the most important hardcore punk bands of all time, championing social activism and influencing generations of punks—many of whom attend Positive Force shows at St. Stephen Episcopal today. And according to Mark Andersen, the symbiotic relationship between the two organizations is as strong as ever.

"That doesn't mean that when a punk rock show happens, for example like the one we had this weekend, and leaves a big hole in the wall that someone doesn't have to fix the hole or that there isn't a tear in the community that has to be mended," says Andersen. "Those things happen. That is what happens when you bring together communities that might share a common spirit in many ways but have very different ways of expressing it. But what's beautiful is that the church is committed to working through that. And in that sense, the experiment that has been going on here at St. Stephen's since the mid-1980s is a beautiful thing and a very hopeful and inspiring thing."