

Final Assignment details:

Word Count: Between 2,000 and 2,250 words (**no more, no less**)

Assignment: Research and write a magazine/website feature article in a journalistic style.

Note:

After emailing your assignment **DO NOT REMOVE IT** from your hard drive until after having received your final mark. Make sure you have a copy, perhaps on a USB.

Only send one document. All info (story and sources) have to be in same file.

Assignment requirements:

- A minimum of 5 original interviews.
- You are greatly encouraged to do **MORE** than 5.
- Your primary interview must be in person.
- At least 3 of the other interviews must be in person or by phone.
- Email interviews are accepted as long as you meet the other interview requirements.
- Contact info (phone and email) must be included for all interviewees at end of assignment. They do not make up part of the word count.
- Include people you tried to interview but who declined or were unavailable.
- You must have a minimum of two scenes in your article. A good idea, but not imperative, is to start with a scene (either witnessed by you or reconstructed). Another is to have the second scene follow a line break. You can have more than two.
- Follow the CP style guide.
- Include your research information at the end of the article.
- It does not make up part of the word count.
- Include a word count.
- Have a tight, catchy title.
- Indicate target publication.
- No footnotes.
- No Internet links (you can mention a website but it can't be used to explain your story).
- Sidebars are acceptable but not necessary; they are part of the word count. Make them tight. Give them a headline. Bullet points or other such formats are OK for a sidebar.
- Make sure the file has your name on it, such as pmclaughlinfinal.docx.

- For the **first draft only** you can use "TK," which means a certain detail will be forthcoming in the final draft. For example, "In TK, the company published a report..." The TK subs for the actual year, which you have yet to determine.

Dirty, Wholesome Punks
Maxine Grech

Zac Houston's 5'5 frame ricocheted against the bodies around him. His damp t-shirt was yanked and torn while anchored to the mosh pit of Winnipeg's Garrick Centre on September 16, 2010. His clammy hands gripped the shoulders of concertgoers beside him, complete strangers, as the crowd head-banged to the band commanding the stage: Against Me!.

The mess of young people filling the seedy venue was typical of any punk show: slick with sweat and brimming with emotion.

A toothy smile was fixed on Houston's pale, glistening face as he threw himself around the crowd, every so often catching a glimpse of his younger sister, Tess. She was his go-to concert companion and one of the few people with the knowledge of his depression, a mental illness that drowned the gangly 19-year-old in feelings of isolation and worry.

Upon the first note of the song "Because of the Shame," the crowd exploded into howls of elation and fists punctured the air with purpose. The full, twinkling keyboard was immediately juxtaposed with echoing gang vocals. This moment embodied punk at its finest: loud, unexpected, and unifying.

Tapping a stranger's shoulder and pointing upwards, Houston was launched above the crowd within seconds. The only thing keeping him from crashing onto the sticky floor were the tattooed arms of the fans below him.

Surfing atop the mass of his peers, he screamed lyrics to the ceiling, embracing every jab

and prod felt by the backside of his body. Lifting his head toward the band, Houston moved his messy razor cut hair out from his view.

Against Me!'s bassist, Andrew Seward, scanned the crowd. The stocky, bearded punk locked eyes with Houston. Stepping atop the monitor at the front of the stage, Seward took his hands off his instrument and pointed directly at Houston.

Never breaking their gaze, the two sang to each other: "Because of the shame / I associate with vulnerability / I am numbing myself completely / Do you hear me right now?"

The lyrics being sung reflected Houston's own anguish. This instance of connectivity and kinship, a spark of hope in a sea of solitude, kept him going.

Houston's eyes immediately blurred with tears. To him, Against Me! was a lifesaving band.

Punk music has always championed a careless, rebellion-embracing, "fuck it all" attitude. Violence and self-mutilation were standard — Iggy Pop purposefully cut himself on stage, much like Dead Boys' Stiv Bators consistently strangled himself with his microphone cable in front of CBGB's New York City audience — all in the name of punk.

The Ramones and Sex Pistols didn't advocate health or order. They sang of sniffing glue and causing anarchy. Political revolt, recklessness, and individuality formed the backbone of the 1970s punk revolution.

Modern punk, however, is a different animal. Though there are bands today carrying the studded leather torch for all founding punks who came before them, a new subdivision of punk

bands abandon anarchy and indulgence for wellness and recovery; mental health awareness has found a place in rock and roll.

Punk artists who stray from the behaviours and attitudes seen in the early days of the genre aren't doing so in an act of betrayal but celebration. Punk advocates for the underdog, and that's what 21st century bands Against Me!, My Chemical Romance, Modern Baseball, and Sorority Noise, and a select group of others, have done.

These bands, falling into the emo subculture defined by its emotional, raw nature, crack open the topic of mental health, utilizing their struggles with mental illness to start the conversation and break barriers of stigmatization.

Rarely do punks use struggles with substance abuse, anxiety, or depression for mainstream exposure or to hop on a trending topic. Their battles with mental disorders and addictions sit at the forefront of their lyrics and the subsequent communities they've created with their fans — primarily young people in need of support.

For anyone living with bipolar disorder, experiencing a depressive episode, or contemplating self-harm, a handful of modern punks created a safe and inclusive space for those who need it.

Wellness is the new reckless, and these punks want you to know they have your back.

“The community punk and emo created is unparalleled in music. Of course there are anomalies within the scene, but it's been a second family to me,” says a now 25-year-old Zac Houston, founding member of Winnipeg emo band Boys' Club and solo venture Sorrier. Houston turned to writing punk music in his early teens; his love for punk has yet to cease.

He also suffers from functional depression and mood swings — one of the 1 in 5 Canadians experiencing an issue with mental health, as reported by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

“The most terrifying aspects of depression is isolation,” says Houston. But listening to punk artists vocalize the same disconnect he felt because of their own mental wellness problems has provided him with a comfort he’s never experienced prior to his exposure of the genre: “Punk bands like Against Me! have at times felt like the only thing I could rely on and trust.”

To Houston, Against Me! concerts weren’t just concerts, but movements, acting as pseudo group therapy sessions for fans and the band members themselves, who are vocal about their troubles with anxiety, depression, and dysphoria.

“The punk community has made LGBTQ rights a priority in ways other communities haven’t,” says Houston, referencing Against Me!’s transgender frontwoman Laura Jane Grace. Coming out 10 years after the release of the band’s debut album, fans like Houston watched Grace transition as she struggled with identity issues.

“Punk had always been a refuge for Grace,” says *Rolling Stone* journalist Alex Morris in his 2016 feature on the musician. What Grace took from the punk community, she injected right back into it, as Grace’s music and inspirational journey generates means of support.

Like Against Me!, Houston and his Boys’ Club bandmates use their musical talents as personal therapy.

“You can tell how happy he is on stage,” says Tess Houston, Zac’s sister, a registered nurse at Winnipeg’s Seven Oaks Hospital, “Music provides him an outlet to release his emotions.

Mental wellness impacts every aspect of your life, so Zac pushing through his depression by way of his band is a gratifying and healthy coping mechanism.”

There is a confessional nature to Houston’s music, exemplified in Boys’ Club song “Whistle Dog,” which includes the lyrics, “There’s gotta be somewhere on this surface / That doesn’t make us feel so fucking worthless.” Their dedication to vulnerability helps Houston grapple with mental illness.

Most people in the punk community join because they need support, a sentiment Houston shares with Nathan Greavette, guitarist of Toronto punk outfit Incendies.

“Emotional music is for emotional people, says Greavette, “and without punk music, I think a lot of people would be lost.”

The 25-year-old musician and MCS Recording Studios recording engineer has drunk every day since 2010 to deal with generalized anxiety disorder.

“Anxiety is something I deal with every day, every hour,” Greavette says, and though substance use is often his default method of personal treatment, there is no doubt his place in the Toronto punk scene eases the impact of his disorder, as his band frequents Homesick and Emo Night events put on by Sneaky Dee’s — evenings that are dedicated to the nostalgic punk and emo sound of the early 2000s — both as performers and fans.

Greavette connects to Philadelphia band Modern Baseball on an emotional level. Referred to as MOBO by fans, Modern Baseball’s presence in modern punk is instrumental to mental health awareness in the genre. With lyrics underlining courage — “Waking up every day is all about / Doing things you don’t want to do / But your reward is you get to wake up,” from their song “Everyday” — MOBO works to encourage the celebration of life through hardship.

Prior to the release of their 2016 album, *Holy Ghost*, a confessional album about mental illness, loss, substance use, and recovery, MOBO created a short documentary, *Tripping in the Dark*.

“It’s not a joke to play around with depression or mental illness and it’s not wrong to seek help or receive help,” says MOBO’s co-founder, singer, and guitarist Brendan Lukens in *Tripping in the Dark*.

The documentary revealed that after a detrimental depressive episode, Lukens climbed on his roof to kill himself, but a text message from bandmate Jake Ewald, unaware of Lukens’ current state, saved his life. Lukens was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, started on medication to regulate his symptoms, and began therapy for his mental illness and substance abuse — Lukens used drugs and alcohol to cope with his wellness problems.

Possibly the most important aspect of the punk community is the camaraderie and lack of barriers between fan and artist; Modern Baseball’s *Tripping in the Dark* highlights transparency in punk.

“We started Modern Baseball to be our journals,” says Lukens in the last scene of their documentary, “and with opening our personal lives to so many people, [we hope] that our fans can open up to everyone in their lives.”

Fellow punk musician and Lukens’ best friend, Cameron Boucher of Sorority Noise, makes an appearance in *Tripping in the Dark*. Sorority Noise is just as involved with mental health destigmatization as Modern Baseball; Boucher suffers from manic depression.

“I’ve been trying to talk about this at as many shows as possible,” says Boucher in an Audiotree Live session from August 2015, “but I have manic depression, and just because you

can't see it doesn't mean it's not there. If you have a mental illness [or] know somebody experiencing that, you should reach out to them. Instead of telling them to get over it, tell them you wanna help.”

Boucher's words of optimism and compassion preceded Sorority Noise's live performance of their song “Using” off their 2015 release *Joy, Departed*. Featuring the lyrics “I stopped wishing I was dead / Learned to love myself before anyone else,” Cameron Boucher vocalizes what so many discouraged, panicked individuals endure when dealing with diagnosed or undiagnosed mood disorders.

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) says treatment upon recognition of depression helps 80% of individuals impacted by the illness, and Sorority Noise is encouraging the public to normalize treatment, hoping to instill the belief that nobody is a burden and everyone is worthy of what life has to offer.

On February 21, 2017, Jake Ewald took to Facebook and announced the cancellation of MOBO's upcoming American tour with Sorority Noise to focus on their mental health.

“We have been championing the importance of mental health for a while now, and we recently realized it would be wrong for us to ignore our own health any longer,” writes Ewald. “Be honest with those you love and don't be afraid to lean on them when you need to.”

This cancellation followed shortly after a January 25 post by Brendan Lukens.

“I am okay -- but I need this time at home to focus on my mental and physical health,” writes Lukens. “Mental illness is very serious and should never be taken lightly. It's a long journey to understanding and coping with your illness but I have so much faith in y'all, and myself.”

Both posts from Lukens and Ewald include handwritten lists of crisis hotline numbers for fans in need of support. This display of honesty showcases their commitment to mental illness destigmatization.

“This humanizes them,” says 24-year-old punk enthusiast Lisa Lee on MOBO’s mental health break, “and this should be seen as brave. This helps fans like me understand taking some time for your mental wellness shouldn’t be seen as selfish.”

Lee has manic depression. Her high tendency for suicidal thoughts led to her contemplating suicide at 16.

“I sat on the jungle gym of my elementary school playground. Knife in one hand, cellphone in the other. My brain tried to convince myself this was the best thing to do. Helpless, I called Kids Help Phone, but didn’t realize they track your location, sending police to at-risk callers. They found me, crying, and put me in a cop car. Instead of trying to understand the trauma and fear I experienced, they sided with my father; he’s told me to kill myself in the past. The cops called me crazy. My father wanted me to go to a shelter, and the cops agreed, driving me to one. The pain I felt was indescribable,” says a tearful Lee.

The comfort Lee lacks from her father, she finds in the punk community. The scene’s acceptance of mental illness over the past decade helped her understand she is never alone.

“I cannot survive without music in my life,” says Lee.

Many kids turn to the punk scene because of minimal familial support, inaccessible resources, or stigmatization. CMHA reports that only 1 out of 5 youths who need mental health treatment receive it.

“I lived in the Philippines until December 2006. Mental health was not discussed, but dismissed,” says 22-year-old musician and photographer John Guleng, who suffers from insomnia and bouts of depression. “There’s lots of superstition and blind following of religion. If you’re having a manic episode, you’re seen as possessed or under compulsion. If you’re not feeling great emotionally, you’re told to pray.”

It is undeniable that some families living in Canada, and globally, perpetuate this harmful, stigmatized form of “treatment;” this is where punk can step in.

Coming from a religious family with a history of mental illness (his aunt committed suicide and his grandmother attempted suicide), Guleng believes faith and religion must learn to validate mental illness. Listening to My Chemical Romance, a band that wasn’t afraid to express vulnerability and acknowledge humanity’s hardships, Guleng knows this new pocket of punk is always there for him to turn to.

My Chemical Romance paved the way in the early 2000s for bands like MOBO and Sorority Noise, as frontman Gerard Way never hid his battle with depression and substance addiction. Their words instill hope within fans who feel misunderstood. Their song “Famous Last Words,” from *The Black Parade*, feature the lyrics, “I am not afraid to keep on living / I am not afraid to walk this world alone.” This is a band that truly struggles with the issues they’re singing about, positioning themselves as relatable and authentic.

Punk and emo are a much smarter and progressive community than people think, and through bands like Against Me!, Modern Baseball, Sorority Noise, and My Chemical Romance, mental illness is one of the many social issues that some modern punks address in hopes of sparking change.

“Punk has been my best friend as a fan, my only trusted confidant as an artist, and my reward as a performer,” says Houston.

Mental illness is not easily defined and diagnosed, and what constitutes wellness for one person may not be the same for another, making mental health a subjective and unique battle. Houston’s functioning depression cannot be cured through punk alone, but it encouraged him to seek treatment.

Using raw emotion and personal battles to carry a message of mental health destigmatization and recovery promotion, the empathy shown by a group of young punks injects resilience and strength into fans searching for support.

Punks can be dirty, messy, or intimidating, but undeniably, punks can be compassionate and human.