



Afropunks, Come as You Are

By Whitney Richardson Aug. 22, 2014

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In 1995, when I was 9, my family packed up our two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn and moved to a small Georgia suburb. In many Southern communities, desegregating white neighborhoods came slowly, as black families like mine fled cities in search of safer and affordable housing. In my case, we moved to Stone Mountain, famed for its enormous bas-relief of Confederate heroes.

My 13-year-old sister and I were two of a handful of black kids freshly arrived to the neighborhood. On my first day of fourth grade, a classmate asked me if I had ever seen someone get shot.

If navigating the complexities of teenage years wasn't confusing enough, I never quite knew exactly where I fit in. I began to discover British punk bands like The Clash and Sex Pistols and would often be the only black girl at local punk shows. Still going to the school cafeteria gave me anxiety attacks.

"You can say what you want around her. Whitney's only kind of black, she won't mind," a white friend used to joke when I joined her friends.

But I did mind. What did kind of black even mean? To avoid confusion, I just skipped lunch.

While I was going hungry, a young filmmaker was traveling across America asking many of these exact questions. Growing up mixed-race on the punk scene in Southern California, James Spooner said he experienced a confusing racial divide when he attended punk shows.

"You would go to shows and it was blatantly white power, swastikas, all of that," he said in a MTV interview.

In 2003, he released a documentary, "Afro-Punk," speaking with black punk artists and fans about their everyday lives — a missing voice that he felt wasn't being heard in mainstream media. He moved to New York and partnered with a former music manager, Matthew Morgan, to create what they called "the other black experience." The two held social events and after-parties for the film screening, booking black alternative bands to play for mostly minority audiences.

Later, an online chat forum brought together a global following of people who identified with this alternative – and often overlooked – culture.

“We usually see one side of the black experience, which isn’t always positive,” said Mr. Morgan, who now manages Afropunk productions with his partner and girlfriend, Jocelyn Cooper. “Afropunk is putting 360 degrees of ourselves out there.”

I was a senior in college when I stumbled on the Afropunk community while browsing the Internet. The forums were endless — people were sharing new music and having discussions about the evolving state of black identity. In time, the conversations began to include skateboarders, comedians and people in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. When I graduated, I moved to New York and began to interview alternative bands and artists of color to share on the site.

Phil Knott, whose portraits of heavily studded kids are illuminated with heavily contrasted black-and-white tones, was also a frequent contributor to the site. Documenting the growth of Afropunk culture has become a hobby for Mr. Knott, who has been taking street portraits of the alternative black scene in New York for the past five years.

When he attended his first Afropunk social event, he immediately gravitated to the vibrant expression that was encouraged among the crowd.

“I had never seen anything like it before,” he admitted. “I had never seen so many black kids do punk in one space.”

To set up his portraits, he matches his method to the mood. While on the streets, he rolls out a white sheet of paper and tapes it to a wall. Inspired by Richard Avedon’s rich contrast fashion portraits, and to “avoid distraction from their faces,” Mr. Knott uses a white background for all of his portraits.

“I just wanted them to look at the camera and show themselves for what they are,” he said. “I never dressed them. These people were photographed as they were.”

This month, Mr. Knott was in the studio with Unlocking the Truth, a trio of black middle-schoolers from Brooklyn. The heavy-metal band recently signed a multi-album deal with Sony.

He had been photographing and recording the band’s last year on the road, as they opened for Guns N’ Roses and appeared at Coachella and on the Vans Warped Tour. Photographing the energy during performances is where Mr. Knott feels most comfortable, because he likes to capture the back and forth between the musicians and the crowd.

For his portraits, he explores this intensity, finding “a little loveliness, a little arrogance and a little confidence.” As he has watched the Afropunk scene expand — the Afropunk Festival in Brooklyn is in its 10th year and draws tens of thousands of fans — Mr. Knott has experienced conflicting emotions. “I like the rebellion,” he said. “Rebellion changes things. But maybe it’s not a good thing to be accepted by mainstream media. I don’t know.”

The Afropunk Festival will be held this weekend at Commodore Barry Park in Brooklyn. Ms. Richardson will be taking portraits of people wearing Afro hairstyles while attending the event.