

# **My Life as a Late-'90s Ska Kid**

*A retrospective  
appreciation*

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**When I was living in New Haven, working as a music journalist,** in the mid-to-late '00s, I had a favorite one-liner I'd apply, vocally or only in my mind, to so many of the ultra-cool indie rocker twenty-somethings I'd run into around town: *I remember your teenaged ska band. That's the shit you can't hide.*

In New Haven in those days, it was considered extremely fashionable to be into psych rock and alt-country. For musicians, sometimes bearded and stoned or whiskey-drunk, to strum lackadaisically on their guitars and avoid giving off the appearance of trying too hard. For people in the audience at shows to stand six feet from the stage and chatter while nursing cheap old-man beers, wearing shaggy hairdos and tight jeans and messenger bags. But I'd look around at those faces, and I'd remember. I'd remember when they were just a little bit younger, guitarists grinning giddily while jabbing quick tempos on their instruments, as a swarm of laughing kids danced maniacally and crowd-surfed practically on top of the stage monitors. I remember because I had been one of them.

Oh, sure. All of us who grew up with ska grew onward. We developed more "mature" interests, perhaps an interest in modes of creative expression that employed a bit more shade, subtlety, and nuance. A lot of us tried to brush our ska periods under the rug, to write off those days as kid stuff. I certainly tried, too, for a while. Almost immediately after the dissolution of my own teenaged ska band, I came to think of my ska phase as a bit of youthful naivete that could be erased with Stalinesque precision. It was silly, to my mind, and not something worth getting nostalgic over as I got my own adulthood on.

Eventually I realized I was wrong. There's no sense in shame. For one thing, way too many of us were involved with ska for any of us to feel embarrassed. For a period in the late '90s and very early '00s, the ska scene was practically unavoidable for any young person in Connecticut who was into alt culture. Punks and hardcore kids

got in on it. Kids who otherwise should have been ravers got in on it. Burgeoning reggae heads got into it. Kids who were into the more melodic side of whatever was left of alternative rock radio—kids who later realized what they were really into was garage rock and powerpop—got into it. Even some of the hippie kids got into it. And a lot of kids got into it who weren't big music heads and who had no countercultural interests. Many of those kids had no idea about the musical or cultural context they were stepping into, but they knew the music was fun and upbeat, and they could dance to it, and their friends would be at the shows. Ska wasn't a niche youth subculture in Connecticut at the time. It was a rite of passage.

If you were in a ska band on a good bill of six local or regional ska bands at the Tune Inn in New Haven in 1999, you might easily find yourself playing to 150 boys and girls of every skin tone you might imagine. If you kept playing in indie rock bands for another six or seven years, you might never play again to a crowd as large and as diverse as you did when you were in a ska band during the height of the Connecticut ska scene. There's no shame in having been in a ska band. It was a heroic experience, and those of us who did it should own it.

**Before we go deeper into all this ska talk, let's take a minute to** define terms and paint a historical and cultural picture. Ska is a form of dance music played with live instruments: electric guitar, bass, drums, sometimes piano or organ, and often a brass and reed horn section (most commonly, saxophones, trumpets, and trombones). It was originally developed in Jamaica in the 1950s and 1960s. The apocryphal though not entirely true story is that Jamaican musicians at that time had become keenly interested in American rhythm and blues, and they tried to copy it, but came out sounding way more ... Jamaican. While rhythm and blues digs heavily into the downbeat—that is, if you'd count out the beat, one-and-TWO-and-three-and-FOUR-and—the Jamaican players ended up hitting hard on the offbeats: one-AND-two-AND-three-AND-four-AND. As with American rhythm and

blues, Jamaican ska often used simple three- or four-chord patterns, walking bass lines, and bawdy lyrics sung with a bluesy lilt. It was music meant for local dancehalls. As the '60s progressed, Jamaican musicians dug deeper into those ska grooves, slowed down the tempos and put more space between the rhythmic accents, which gave way to the development of rocksteady and reggae.

In the late '70s, when punk rock exploded in the UK, it became extremely fashionable for a certain sort of punk to be interested in reggae, rocksteady, and ska. Part of it was the shared simplicity between punk and those Jamaican styles—just a few chords and a lot of feeling. But for some politically minded punks, being into Jamaican music was a statement in and of itself. The UK had seen a huge influx of Caribbean immigrants over the previous few decades. Political punks wrote songs about the experiences of the working poor, often because they *were* the working poor, as were many of their neighbors who were first- or second-generation Caribbean immigrants. Some of the key socially conscious UK punk bands of the era were wont to cover or write songs in a reggae or ska mode (say, The Clash or Stiff Little Fingers). Other young musicians formed bands around a more explicit mission to specialize in ska and to fuse it with punk and contemporary pop. They played ska accents over four-on-the-floor beats, and they played faster than the '60s ska bands did, because people involved in punk wanted to play everything faster anyway. Some of the leading ska revival bands—The Specials and The (English) Beat, for two—formed around intentionally integrated lineups. The premise of black and white musicians playing together, wearing snappy black suits and white shirts, led The Specials to name their own record imprint 2-Tone Records. By extension, the whole second wave of ska is often referred to simply as the 2-Tone Movement.

Ever since the late '70s, certain punk bands have nodded toward ska and reggae in their music. You have to keep in mind how even though punks are supposed to be thoroughly iconoclastic, they're essentially traditionalists when it comes to anything that

defines what it means to be punk. Punks look back for aesthetic guidance to that Ground Zero moment around 1977 or 1978, when so many of the most influential bands of the first wave of punk were making their first records. If it were permissible for a punk band then, a band could do the same thing now and still be punk. If a great punk band did it in '77 or '78, it would be a good idea, as far as a lot of punks are concerned, to repeat it as often as possible. So, even after the '77-era punk bands broke up, after 2-Tone fell out of favor commercially with record-buying audiences, punk bands kept messing around with ska fusion. Why would a punk band in the United States in 1985 incorporate a ska break into a song? Well, for one thing, because it's fun as hell to play, and for another thing, because The Clash did it on their first album.

And that's how the third wave of ska came about—primarily from young U.S. punk bands in the late '80s and early '90s getting off on those accented upbeats and walking bass lines. Because punk and hardcore at that time was heavily regional — almost completely absent from commercial radio or MTV, with every local or regional punk scene spreading the word about its own set of heroes through hand-made 'zines and small batches of 7" records — it's impossible to trace the third wave to one clear Ur-moment. But if you'd asked ska kids in the '90s and '00s where the third wave started, you'd see a ton of fingers pointing toward the San Francisco Bay area in the late '80s, and the band Operation Ivy in particular. The Bay Area's pop-punk bands of that era became a national export throughout the '90s, thanks in part to the wide distribution of Berkeley label Lookout! Records and the attention brought to that scene through the explosive fame of onetime Lookout! band Green Day. If anything, Operation Ivy was emblematic of the third wave of ska in just about every way except that it was a stripped-down four-piece band, and eventually it would become typical for ska-punk bands to come with three or four horn players. But Op Ivy did what most ska-punk bands did: They took the tempos of the second-wave ska bands and sped them up even *faster*. If '77 punk often sat somewhere around

180 beats per minute, hardcore punk, as it developed through the '80s, had nudged tempos up toward the 240 BPM level. The third wave of ska was full of songs where the band held back, hitting those off-beat accents and walking bass lines during the verses, between which the choruses raged with the intensity of your average punk band. While there were plenty of bands in the '90s that tried to bring ska back to its deeper, groovier roots, third-wave ska was mostly bands playing outrageously fast, hypermelodic music for overstimulated kids to freak out to.

If you talk to a person in the United States born between roughly 1975 and 1990 who had ever experienced a ska period, they're almost certainly talking about the third wave. All around the country, this stuff has been bubbling up in just about any city of any size since the early '90s, and it's never really gone away. But for a brief moment, from about 1997 to 2000, the third wave was massive. Ska was everywhere, and it was the closest to anything that could be described as a "commercial juggernaut" to come out of the rock underground. There were a lot of black-and-white checkered band stickers around. There were a lot of caps with little peaked brims. There were a lot of thrift store polo shirts, and a lot of T-shirts with jokey slogans. There were a lot of kids coming to shows at punk clubs who had never been to punk clubs before and maybe never would be again. For a lot of otherwise bored kids who passed through that era at just the right age, ska was one of the incontestably coolest things you could do with your time—which was especially appealing if you were one of those kids who had never been cool at all.

**Let me tell you a little about where I grew up. Bristol, Connecticut** is a former factory town where most of the factories had moved away by the time I was born. Bristol somehow managed to be both idyllic and terrifying. Housing prices were low enough for young newlyweds to buy a well-preserved pre-war home without much trouble, but there were also neighborhoods where street gangs ran amok. My mom would actually send me next door to borrow a cup

of sugar (“a cup of sugar” being a stand-in for any kitchen ingredient she was short on), and there was a house around the corner where one tenant ran a brisk drug-selling operation. We had an excellent school system that included a rigorous and diverse performing arts program, and I was twelve years old the first time a classmate pulled a knife on me in a gym locker room. It took city officials forty years to decide to extend a branch of interstate highway through town, and when it was finally built, it had stoplights on it. Bristol is that kind of town.

I discovered punk rock when I was in high school, mainly through articles in then-contemporary music magazines that drew a line from ’90s alt-rock to late ’70s and early ’80s punk. When I started my first band, during the summer before tenth grade in 1996, I was adamant that we were going to move in basically a ’77 punk direction. I had found The Ramones, The Clash, Buzzcocks, and the Pistols, and the anthemic, melodic roar they generated was everything to me. Now, over the course of the following two years, I would come to realize this was problematic for a few reasons.

First, we were the only teenaged ’77-style punk band in Bristol in the late ’90s, as far as I could tell. Bristol didn’t really have a punk scene. Bristol had a hardcore scene. It was a different beast. This wasn’t the lightning-quick hardcore punk that arose in the early ’80s in places like L.A. and D.C. This was its later, chuggier, more metallic variant, which gained notable traction among kids, mostly boys, in Connecticut towns in the ’90s. I was into bands that played fast and had mostly broken up years ago. The hardcore kids were into bands that played *heavy* and put on shows at the local skatepark. The Bristol indoor skatepark was booked by, among other people, a guy named Jamey Jasta, who was and remains the vocalist for Hatebreed, a band that is now probably Connecticut’s most valued gift to the national hardcore scene. I liked the hardcore kids at my school, but I wasn’t one of them. They were impossible to miss, on account of their distinct appearance—closely cropped hair, black T-shirts, probably baggy jeans, and big plain canvas bookbags that sometimes

had big Xs written on them in black marker (a sign that they'd chosen to abstain from drugs and alcohol). They looked tough, but they were mostly friendly, honest guys. It's important to note they were mostly *guys*. Hardcore was aggressively macho. I was into aggression, but not machismo. I didn't necessarily feel like the hardcore kids excluded me. In fact, a few of them, when they found out I was into punk, tried their damndest to reel me in by lending me cassettes by their favorite hardcore bands and encouraging me to come to shows. But the music didn't inspire me, and I was never convinced that scene would give me what I was looking for.

Second, I thought I was positioning myself as a '77-style punk until I met other punk kids from other towns, and I realized I had it wrong, and I wasn't a real punk either. Punks spiked their hair or shaved their heads. They wore denim jackets emblazoned with patches bearing the names of street-punk bands. Their hygiene was often questionable. They were tough kids, usually with nothing to lose, frequently alienated from their families and dedicated at a young age to operating outside "the system." By contrast, I was kind of normal. I might have existed apart from the herd in a psychoemotional sense, but I wanted to get into a good college and eventually lead an upstanding middle-class life. I liked the same music the punk kids liked, and I liked their politics. But I wasn't ready to follow through with the same lifestyle, or even the same look. Later on, I might have become a kind of punk rocker—the collegiate radical, the kid who'd show up at a party in a threadbare shirt and with messy hair who would talk about socialism all night. But as a high schooler, I wasn't there.

Third, I was a marching band geek. Thanks to the rigorous and diverse school performing arts program I mentioned earlier, I'd picked up the trumpet in fourth grade. In high school, for academic credit, I played in two jazz bands, an advanced symphonic winds ensemble, a brass chamber group, and the marching band. While I never thought I was all that great a trumpet player, or all that disciplined, I somehow managed to become the first-chair trumpet

player in every school group I played with by my junior year. I was the drum major of the marching band during my senior year. While punk rock is supposed to be, in part, about unlearning everything you know about playing music and starting anew from scratch, I knew a lot for a kid, and I wasn't really sure at that point how to unlearn it. In spite of my weirdo ideals as a musician, I was, in effect, kind of a traditionalist.

Ska, more than anything else, would give me the platform to transition from the musician and countercultural person I was equipped to be as a teenager, to the one I really wanted to be.

**Sometime in the spring of 1998, I was in my high school's band room, as was my wont anytime I had any time to kill. More than anyone else, the band geeks were my tribe. We were weird and artsy in a wide variety of ways, and we shared experiences of playing in school bands together and excelling at something most other kids made fun of us for. My friend Jen, a flautist turned French horn player, appeared from somewhere and beelined to my face.**

"Brian," she said. "*do you like ska?*"

Well, of course I did, so I said so. I'd known what ska was, and what it sounded like in its third-wave form, for a couple years at that point. Ska-punk was exploding all over MTV and alternative rock radio. I liked The Mighty Mighty Bosstones at the time. I liked Rancid, the punk band with ska flourishes founded by two of the guys from Op Ivy, which had totally eclipsed their old band as far as record sales were concerned. Tuning into alt-rock radio, you'd have a hard time missing stuff like the novelty ska-punk singles Reel Big Fish were turning out, or Sublime's seemingly endless run of frat-boy ska/reggae trifles. If anything, by my senior year of high school I was starting to think of ska as being a little played out. I found the chipper *chk-chk-chk-chk* guitar patterns irresistible, and as a trumpet player, I found it very edifying to hear trumpets, trombones, and saxophones on songs that had any fire to them recorded more recently than the classic soul era. But MTV's unflinching focus on

So-Cal pop-punk and ska was starting to chafe. It all sounded so sunny and so simple, and I was past the point where punk and ska was so new to me that I wanted nothing more than for it to be fast and catchy. I kind of wanted something that felt like it was *mine*.

Jen dragged me into our band director's office, where the stereo could be commandeered by any of the band kids on a first-come, first-served basis, and slammed a cassette into his tape deck.

"I *love* ska," she said breathlessly, "and there are a *ton* of *local* ska bands, and some of them are playing a huge ska show at the Webster next month, and *this* is one of the bands playing, and they're called Sgt. Scagnetti, and you should come."

In retrospect, I think when Jen said I should come to this show, what she meant was that I should *drive her* to the show. But she also had cause to believe she was tipping me off to something I'd want. She liked weird shit. I liked weird shit. And I was into this Scagnetti demo. The tone and the tempo were hypercharged and playful, but the songs settled around minor keys, and the horns sounded straight-up sinister. They were clearly a band of skilled players, because they sounded tight as hell on a demo, and compositionally they had something going on, with all of these subtle, sophisticated melodies popping up here and there. And they were based in, of all places, Seymour, CT, a small riverside town roughly halfway between New Haven and Waterbury.

"How much are tickets?" I asked Jen.

**Whenever the topic of one's senior prom comes up in conversation,** and I find it comes up with increasing rarity over time, I mention that I went to a big ska show instead of my senior prom. This is only partially true. It suggests there was a big ska show the same night of my senior prom, and that part is entirely true. That was the Ska Wars night—one wonders how many hundreds of ska shows have been dubbed Ska Wards, or Skamageddon, or Skalapalooza by their promoters—at the Webster Theatre in Hartford that Jen brought me to. It also suggests I was presented with a choice, to

go to the prom or to a ska show, and I chose the ska show. This part is hardly true. Like *hell* I was going to the prom. I was still smarting from being dumped by my first real girlfriend six months earlier. I didn't have a date. I was convinced I must have been dumped because I was hideous and unappealing, and in any case I was too heartbroken to consider the prospect of dating, or even to temporarily sustain the charade of dating that the prom more often typifies. I was also still pretty burned by the four or so years, roughly sixth through ninth grade, during which dozens of my classmates were dedicated to steadily ostracizing, mocking, and physically assaulting me, and I didn't feel much like being in the same room with any of those people if I didn't have to be. Simply being born in the same calendar year, I thought, really wasn't enough to bond over.

As such, I was more or less set on spending the night of my senior prom very much the same way I'd spent the night of my junior prom: lying on the floor of my room, listening to The Smiths in the dark, and feeling like shit. Once Skalapalooza was on the table, it just sounded like a better option all around.

That Skalapalooza was the first full ska show I'd ever attended, and as is the case with a lot of firsts in one's life, I spent the next couple years in large part dealing with the fallout of its detonation. There were probably six bands on the bill, and a few of them became bands I'd follow throughout the course of my ska phase. There was Sgt. Scagnetti, of course, with their carnivalesque horn section and their brash, audience-baiting singer, a guy fans just called Steve Scagnetti, who would intro songs by shouting things like, "*this song is about smoking crack!*," or "*this song is about having sex with dead people!*" There was Big D & the Kids' Table, a young band from Boston with relentlessly upbeat songs that included a husky singing flugelhorn player wearing a boat captain's hat. And, hailing from New York, there was Mephiskapheles, another act that was uncharacteristically dark for ska—their singer was dressed entirely in black and sang lyrics peppered with cheeky Satanic references—and that was made up of guys who seemed impossibly adult, visibly older

than every other band on the bill and audibly in a different league of professionalism and chops.

Jen and I reached the cavernous, dim Webster Theatre early, well before the first band took the stage, and I watched as the room gradually filled up with kids. There were kids decked out in goofy thrift-store duds (as I was), there were kids in punk regalia, and there were kids who looked basically normal, whatever that means. There were white, black, beige, and brown kids. There were a lot of girls, far more than I was accustomed to seeing at local punk and hardcore shows. And once the music really got swinging, I saw the whole front of the room erupt in kids doing the skank, the distinct ska dance. I edged closer and closer, watching the skankers intently and bobbing my head along self-consciously. Eventually a pretty blonde girl with round cheeks, maybe 19 or 20 years old by my estimation, noticed me watching her, smiled, and grabbed my arm.

“Come on,” she said.

And so, nervously, I started skanking myself. After about a minute, I realized it was remarkably easy. On the one, you stomp on the floor with your right foot, lift your left foot a bit, pull your fists close to your hips with your elbows pointing back and lean forward slightly. On the two, you release, straightening up and arching your back, jerking your left knee up and raising your right fist to about shoulder height. Then you reverse that on the next two beats, doing exactly the same thing with the opposite sides of your body for each motion. Anyone could skank! I looked around and saw kids skanking in countless varieties, waving their arms around and swiveling their feet and hips however they saw fit. It just seemed so democratic—the easiest dance in the world, easier than the twist, and anyone was welcome to put his or her own personal stamp on it. Er, pun recognized, but not intended. I skanked that night until I couldn’t breathe and had to sit down. Then I got up and skanked some more.

It was one of those nights where everything clicked. I realized I could go out and see bands made up of people who didn’t seem so dissimilar from me, and I could whip myself into a euphoric frenzy

and probably look like an idiot, and I'd still be not only welcomed for my behavior, but encouraged. Sometimes that first high keeps driving you out time and again to try to replicate it. That's definitely how it was with me.

**That fall, I went off to college at Southern Connecticut State** in New Haven, finally free from the acts of asking permission and abiding by curfews. That's not to say I was interested in traditional collegiate wilding. I identified as straight-edge in those days. That's the punk way of saying I didn't drink, I didn't smoke, and I didn't take drugs, and I avoided all of those things by choice and not out of scarcity. All I wanted to do with my free time was go to shows and freak out. To that end, there was the Tune Inn, New Haven's de facto punk club, a skuzzy room with a capacity of about 300, where every local punk, hardcore, or ska band aspired to play. There was the significantly larger Toad's Place, where my friends and I would go to see more popular national bands. There were other rooms around the state where we'd trek to see punk and ska bands, in particular the El-n-Gee in New London, the aforementioned Webster Theatre in Hartford, and the perhaps surprisingly buzzing Newtown Teen Center.

Ska fueled an untold number of extremely wholesome nights during my first year of college. I'd pile into a car with friends, and we'd head off to a show, blasting Op Ivy or the Bosstones on the stereo. We'd arrive at the venue early—always early—and would position ourselves at the front of the stage, where we'd soak in every band, the greatest to the crappiest. Sometimes the piece de resistance of the evening would be an exceptional local like Scagnetti, or Spring Heeled Jack, the irrepressible kings of the CT ska scene, who maintained a chronically positive presence and message. Sometimes it would be a great touring act, like Mephiskapheles or Big D or Mustard Plug or MU330 or Metro Stylee or The Pietasters or The Suicide Machines or even the Bosstones themselves. Sometimes it would be one of the local also-ran. In particular, I'm thinking of

Jiker, a shambolic CT ska-punk act whose calling card was that it played songs about being pirates. I never saw Jiker twice with the same lineup, and I don't think I ever saw them play a single song through to the finish before the band lost the thread, fell into chaos, and eventually stopped playing. (I really liked Jiker, and I very much respected their ability to get onto good bills in spite of the fact that they were outrageously unprofessional.) Whatever the headliner or the lineup, I'd skank breathlessly through every band. Sometimes—and I should add I'm on the small side, 5'8" and weighing about 130 pounds in my late teens—my larger friends would pick me up and swing me around in circles to clear room in the pit, or lift me up and force me to crowd-surf. I would become a disgusting mess over the course of the night, covered not only in my own sweat, but the sweat of who knows how many equally sweaty punk and ska kids. After the show, my friends and I would ride back to the dorms. I'd throw my clothes in a putrid pile on the floor, exhaustedly shuffle off to the dorm showers, rinse the filth of the night off of me, and walk back to my room to sleep as soundly as I ever had. I never snuck a drink. I never smoked a cigarette. I never made a move on a girl and subsequently spent the rest of the night sulking over her rejection. All I needed was the relentless *chank-chank* of the ska guitar, to do that stupid ska dance for several hours straight, to be soaked in a variety of people's sweat and the company of friendly strangers, and I would have the best night I could hope for. I went to bed after those shows feeling more euphoric than I did after 90 percent of the Saturday nights I spent at the bar when I was twenty-five.

**One of the great revelations of third-wave ska was how kids** who had previously considered themselves, and had been considered by their peers, to be patently uncool suddenly had this platform in which they could be seen as cool, as doing a cool thing, as bringing value to a cool culture. Lyrically, third-wave ska celebrated the ordinary. Traditional rock'n'roll bands might have written songs about getting laid, standing outside of society, and facing psycho-

logical demons. Ska bands wrote songs about junk food, TV, comic books, science fiction, boredom, awkwardness, and going to ska shows. One of the core values of punk rock is that everyday life, boring and unsexy as it is, is always worth writing about. Third-wave ska took the same premise and removed punk's self-righteous anguish and malaise.

If you were a ska kid, you could take your non-ska friends to ska shows without explaining what you were getting them into. By the end of the first band's first two songs, they understood that this was party music, dance music, and if they were 17 years old and maybe bored and quarantined in the suburbs, they'd be on board with you, the band, and the rest of the audience, because they'd be hungry for the ecstatic release ska promised. If you were a punk kid or a metal kid, you couldn't just take your non-punk or non-metal friends to a show without explanation. You'd have to set them up. ("Okay, the music will be very loud and very heavy, and it might not always sound like music. It will look like people are trying to hurt each other, but it's all consensual and what they're doing probably doesn't actually hurt much. A lot of people will look intimidating, but it's mostly theater.") Ska had a code of its own, and a rich history of its own, but the barrier to entry was close to nil. A person could like it without knowing *what* they were liking. A lot of people did.

Ska was party music created by an awful lot of people who, as high schoolers, probably didn't get invited to many parties. A lot of kids who went to ska shows didn't look much further beyond their recognition that this was upbeat music that was fun to dance to. But for an essentially nerdy kid, it was a big deal that the message behind these songs was so often essentially nerdy. A suburban comic book geek could hear a ska singer singing about comic books and imagine himself or herself on the stage, without altering or masking her or his core identity or main interests. It shouldn't be terribly surprising that when I finally joined a ska band myself, that band was named Dr. Device, after a fictional laser gun in space from author Orson Scott Card's young adult sci-fi novel *Ender's Game*.

For marching band kids, ska was something of a game changer. I'd known plenty of school marching band or concert band kids who had taken up the guitar or bass and formed bands. But with ska, if you were already a brass player, you were in demand. A trumpet, trombone, or sax player could join a band as a trumpet, trombone, or sax player. You could transform from a dorky kid in a school band uniform to a kid on stage, playing that same previously dorky school band instrument along with a full-on, raging dance band, doing something that everyone in the room perceived as being unequivocally cool. Being a brass player in a ska band wasn't just a new way to be cool; for the uncertain psychological makeup of your typical nerdy high-schooler, it felt revolutionary.

In all of my years of playing in bands, rarely have I seen a single band as mismatched as Dr. Device. My friend Rex, the guitarist and founder of the band, who lived across the hall from me in the dorms during our first year of college, was a rock 'n' roll traditionalist who had little interest in contemporary punk music. I played the trumpet, and I was actually far more interested in 2-Tone than I was in third-wave ska. Funky Joe, the bassist, would have preferred to have been in a punk band, but, to his credit, never said so. John, the drummer, was a Frank Zappa freak with jazz-rock aspirations. My brother Craig briefly was the sax player, even though he had never expressed interest in being in a rock band and never would again. His replacement was my high school friend Ryan, who would have rather been in a prog-metal band, even though he didn't realize it at the time. We never had a full-time dedicated singer, leaving me and Rex to alternate on lead vocals during our shows, though that wasn't because we didn't try to find one. The closest we came was when a singer named Sean Kenobi sat in with us. (For the record, that wasn't his real surname, but a relic from his tenure with the band Obi Ska Kenobi.) We dismissed Sean on account of his habit of "chickening" — that very ska habit of exclaiming mid-song things like "*Hut! Hut! Pick it up! Pick it up!*" — which we thought was cheesy, as if we were ones to talk.

Under most circumstances, there would be no reason for us to find each other and think being in a band together would be a remotely good idea. But each of us made it in for one important reason: We liked ska, and we liked going to ska shows. This consensus was enough to sustain about a year and a half as a band and the creation of about 10 original songs. As a band, we were, objectively speaking, pretty bad. We didn't know how to listen to each other, and the sax players and I never really memorized all of our horn lines. We all composed parts that were beyond our technical ability to play. Basically, we did a lot of things that very young bands do.

Except we also landed good gigs, better than we realized at the time. We opened at least two shows that were billed as Jiker's last show—Jiker couldn't even manage to get breaking up their band right—which brought out big crowds. Every show we opened for Sgt. Scagnetti, which was a few, had us playing to a nearly packed room. We always made gas money, and we made enough dough to buy a rudimentary practice PA and fund misguided recording sessions, with an engineer whose sensibilities were far heavier than our sound was, for an EP we never released. I remember one show we played at the Tune Inn, when a couple of kids, probably two or three years younger than us, came up to us and raved about our set.

"We're starting a ska band," one of them said, "and we're going to be called the Flaming Tsunamis!"

I don't recall what Rex and I said in response, but it was something along the lines of "aw, that's great, kid." The Flaming Tsunamis ended up becoming not just the leading CT ska band of the next wave of kids, but one of the most respected U.S. ska-punk bands of the latter 'oos.

If I were to be honest with myself, I would also clear up anything that sounds like a suggestion that because I wasn't getting laid from being involved in the ska scene, anyone else by extension was not getting laid. If you were a guy in a ska band, there was a chance you were dating someone who was cuter than anyone you'd date in the next ten years. If you were a girl in a ska band, you had every boy

in the audience eating from the palm of your hand. The ska scene was a unisex scene, and because of that characteristic, it got a lot of people very laid. Dr. Device eventually accumulated a following made up mostly of teenaged girls, whom I was told at the time would hang on my every word when we were offstage and acting like normal people. I was too self-conscious and hung up to have any idea this was happening when it was happening, but now that my old adolescent self-loathing has lifted, I at least remember it happening. I never made a move on any of those girls, but I remember experiencing brief flashes of understanding, for the first time in my life, that I probably could. And Dr. Device was a terrible band.

**It is in the nature of teenaged bands to break up, so I shouldn't** see any significance in how Dr. Device's breakup aligned with the demise of the CT ska scene. But we were right in tune with the zeitgeist when we threw in the towel. Of the local ska bands we cared about, Scagnetti broke up first, in 2000. The dominant rumor at the time was that the band was being courted by national labels and its members were split on how to respond. That was the narrative kids wanted to hear. It played into the idea that someone wanted to make our local heroes rock stars, and it played into prevalent '90s punk ideals that suggested there was a dichotomy between selling out to big-label interests and remaining true to one's independent roots. Later reports from the Scagnetti guys themselves implied a more standard band narrative. They'd reached a creative impasse and weren't getting along on a personal level.

Spring Heeled Jack, long the biggest drawer of crowds and the most commercially successful of the CT ska bands, split in the spring of 2001. For that band, label drama actually was a factor. They'd come up in the mid '90s putting out records through New York City's influential Moon Ska label, but were scooped up later in the decade by Ignition Records, a subsidiary of a major label. In 2000, Ignition went out of business. The Mighty Mighty Bosstones hired their trombone player, Chris Rhodes. Spring Heeled Jack were

barely active as a live band for months before their 2001 final blow-out at Toad's Place. The club was packed, but Rhodes wasn't there. He was playing with the Bosstones on David Letterman's show that night. The next year, the band's founding drummer, Dave Karcich, died from a brain aneurysm.

Dr. Device disbanded unceremoniously during a routine rehearsal in my parents' basement in 2000. We got to talking, and we realized we were unhappy with much of our old material and unconvinced the new material each of us was writing separately would make for a coherent set. It was as though we were writing for five different bands. We agreed we were, and so we went upstairs, ate a hearty meal of linguine and homemade sauce my mom had prepared, and decided to promote our next show at the Newtown Teen Center as our last. Within weeks, each of us had a new band or a solo project in the works. None of them were ska-related.

**There are people I knew then and rarely kept in touch with who** asked me, seven or eight years after Dr. Device broke up, whether I still played ska. I told them, mildly offended by the suggestion, that I did not, as I'd progressed through punk rock, post-punk, garage rock, powerpop, and indie-pop. But I recognize now they were asking not because they expected I was stuck in a rut, but because they had seen Dr. Device and gone to ska shows at that time, even though they were not otherwise the sort of people whose idea of a good time involved going out at night to see bands.

With the demise of the bands also went the all-ages punk clubs that had been so crucial to the ska scene. The Tune Inn closed in January 2002. The El-n-Gee in New London closed in 2003. The larger clubs, Toad's Place and the Webster Theatre, remained, but they seemed reticent to build bills around local ska or punk bands after that. Punk comes out of basement shows and rented halls. The smaller all-ages clubs gave punk bands the opportunity to graduate to legit venues. Demonstrating the ability to draw a crowd of 200 kids at a small club gave larger clubs the incentive to book bands

that could. Once the Tune Inn and the El-n-Gee were gone, the punk, ska, and indie kids scattered. A host of quasi-legit small all-ages clubs, often deeper in suburban territory, opened up to fill the void. Certain punk and indie rockers convinced bars in New Haven and New London to book their and their friends' bands. New DIY booking and promotional entities descended upon American Legion halls throughout the state. If anything, the rash of new performance venues that appeared in the early '00s demonstrated the degree of sheer ambition and creative output in need of a stage throughout Connecticut. But it also led to the creation of countless niche scenes in a small geographical area, from which regional critical mass was nearly impossible.

In any case, by the time the El-n-Gee was shuttered, the air had long gone out of the CT ska scene. Very soon, there would be a huge shift in the tastes of suburban Connecticut teenagers. The kids wanted emo, a particular strain of punk and hardcore that can be traced back to the mid-'80s. It preserves the velocity and volume of punk, but plunges to emotional depths, going for the most painful, vulnerable, personal material possible. In the mid-'90s, emo was the domain of especially sad punkers, kids who were often unkempt, socially awkward, and straight-up physically unattractive.

"The emos are the kids who go to punk shows and cry," a friend explained to me in 1998. But through the late '90s and early '00s, more girls became drawn to emo, and emo strayed from its hardcore roots into something more melodic. By the time the CT ska scene was collapsing, a lot of emo had become virtually indistinguishable from pop-punk, except for its lyrical content. Emo ceased being the domain of ugly, inept kids and became a means for punk rocker boys to get laid. And it was massive in the early to mid '00s, not just in Connecticut but across the country. Teenagers of that era went through emo phases in much the same way teenagers in the '90s went through ska phases. But it wasn't entirely analogous. The people in emo bands were predominantly white and predominantly male. Emo of that era was about the male gaze more often than not.

Boys sang about girls they longed for and girls who had wronged them. The kids came out in full force to the shows, but to suggest those shows had anything like the democratizing effect of ska—the effect that anyone could be onstage, or that the day-to-day matters of one’s dumb life were worth singing about—would be naïve at best.

There have been times when I’ve spoken dismissively of my ska past. With the benefit of hindsight, I now understand there is no reason to. In ska, we were heroes. I don’t mean just those of us who were onstage. Audiences, bands, promoters—we were part of a heroic movement. No matter what instrument you played or didn’t play, no matter what your daily life was like, no matter what gender you identified with or what color skin you were born with, you could belong to ska. To anyone reading this, I can only hope you knew something in your life, especially at a point when you were young and vulnerable and wanted desperately to belong to something, about which you could say the same. If not, I hope you find it—and if you do, try doing some stupid dance to celebrate.

