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Hundreds of Punks Hit the Desert. The Modern Music Festival Was Born.

From 1983 to 1985, punks including Perry Farrell and Aaron Sherer from Psi Com trekked to the Mojave Desert to attend D.I.Y. concerts that were part of Desolation Center. Mariska Leyssius

By Jenn Pelly

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Under the first full moon of 1985, the psychedelic punk band Meat Puppets shredded in the depths of the Mojave Desert, powered by a generator and surrounded by incandescent cactuses. Some 500 pink-haired, leather-clad punks had traveled — many in a caravan of yellow school buses — from downtown Los Angeles to what was advertised only as a "remote desert location." Those who came to the gig, called the Gila Monster Jamboree, in cars were given hand-drawn maps directing them to a checkpoint in Victorville, Calif., where they received a second guide, pointing three miles down a dirt road to a dry lake bed. Many were on acid.

"It all seemed like a cartoon," the Meat Puppets guitarist Curt Kirkwood said in an interview. "It was someplace no one was supposed to be." In her memoir, the Sonic Youth bassist and singer Kim Gordon called her band's performance that day — its first on the West Coast — one of her "favorite shows ever."

The spectacle was a part of Desolation Center, a series of guerrilla punk shows in Southern California that set an adventurous precedent that lingers today. Fifteen years before the world's highest-grossing festival started, Gary Tovar, the founder of Goldenvoice, which produces Coachella, attended a Desolation Center gig. Perry Farrell, who helped mastermind Lollapalooza, played the Jamboree with his pre-Jane's Addiction group Psi Com. These anarchic desert happenings didn't last long — they ran from 1983 to 1985 — and have rarely been celebrated, but now their history is chronicled in a documentary called "Desolation Center" that premieres this week at the Slamdance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. Its director is the Desolation Center organizer Stuart Swezey, who began booking shows in 1982 as a 21-year-old college dropout.

Thurston Moore called his band's Desolation Center performance "one of the great moments" in the history of Sonic Youth. Bob Durkee

Growing up amid incendiary late-70s L.A. punk, Swezey was galvanized by the self-starting ethos of underground zines and labels. A self-described autodidact who "found out about Nietzsche from Adam Ant," he followed the great question mark of punk where it led. "What about venues?" he recalled wondering. "How could we question the assumptions of how you see music performed?"

"I felt this compulsion to take music out of nightclubs," he said in a phone interview, explaining that he preferred the community and spontaneity of unconventional spaces like the Hong Kong Cafe in Los Angeles — a former Chinese restaurant that was loudly overtaken by bands including Black Flag and the Bags — or an Elks Lodge. "It feels more authentic when it's somewhere it shouldn't be happening. You're taken out of your everyday reality."

Swezey was in Mexico, traversing the Sonoran Desert and listening to the L.A. post-punk band Savage Republic, when he decided to book shows in the desert. Like his favored permutations of punk, the landscape was austere, spatial and extraterrestrial. Better still, the desert location would dodge the L.A.P.D., who had shut down Swezey's earlier efforts at booking downtown warehouse shows. He and the Savage Republic guitarist Bruce Licher tracked down the owner of the remote dry lake-bed property, but did not get in touch. "We looked at each other and said, 'No one's going to say yes to us doing this,'" Swezey said.

With the San Pedro band Minutemen on board, Swezey advertised $12.50 tickets with photocopied fliers and sold 115. He found a sound person with a generator; arranged the buses, which added "a performance art aspect," he said; and the "Mojave Exodus" journeyed out on April 24, 1983.

Fearing that he might repeat himself after two desert outings — the 1984 event included the imposing German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten and the terrifying Bay Area machine artists Survival Research Labs — Swezey sought out the complete opposite: He booked Meat Puppets and Minutemen to play on a whaling boat. With the sound system tied to the guard rails, they cruised the shadowy San Pedro and Long Beach harbors after dark. “The barrier between participant and performer blurred,” Swezey said. “We were all part of this bigger thing.”

The Jamboree returned to the desert the next year, and Thurston Moore, writing by email, described the mood as “one of complete joy and wonder at being together in a place that might as well have been another planet.” He said the most radical attribute of Desolation Center was that “it asked no permission,” and he called the show “one of the great moments” in the history of Sonic Youth.

Swezey’s film illustrates the eclecticism of his early ’80s Southern California scene: the trilling art punks Suburban Lawns, the guitar-less Screamers, the savage performance art of Johanna Went. He interviews Desolation Center musicians including Moore and the Einstürzende Neubauten vocalist Blixa Bargeld, as well as enthusiastic concertgoers (one identified as “sorceress,” another, “failed visionary”). Crucially, Swezey illuminates the necessity of taking the counterculture further underground, as punk continued to clash with the L.A.P.D. under its chief, Daryl Gates.

“The L.A.P.D. freaked out about punk rock,” the Germs drummer Don Bolles says in one scene, “and they were gonna squash that stuff.” The film shows the authorities turning up at a Ramones show in riot gear, inciting what the attendee Linda Kite calls “tactical violence on children.” Punk shows were effectively outlawed; punks hid to keep going.

This anti-authoritarian impulse thrilled the Burning Man co-founder John Law in 1990, who had heard of Desolation Center's myth. "It really stuck in my mind," he said in an interview. "I thought it would be great to do something crazy in the desert." Law was inspired by Swezey to book early Burning Man locations at the intersection of three separate counties, where, he said, "the evil cops couldn't get at you."

Free as the desert's sprawl can be, it was unkind to the glam punks Redd Kross, who got lost for hours in a cramped beater car when they played the Jamboree. "We thought we were going to die," said the bassist Stephen McDonald, who was 16 at the time of the gig. "I wasn't much on navigation. Now I am obsessed with navigation."

After their Jamboree, Meat Puppets did not linger: "It started to sink in: 'Oh, we shouldn't be here,'" Kirkwood said. Swezey eventually paid $400 in trespassing fees to the federal government, then ceased organizing shows to helm the bookshop and publisher AMOK, and work in television. "Desolation Center" is his first film as a director.

"Maybe it's a good thing, watching a movie about people making something out of nothing in a nowhere place," the Minutemen bassist Mike Watt said in an interview. He began to recite something of an impromptu beat poem: "No cookie cutter, no sleepwalk, no rubber stamp, no cruise control. You gotta feel the bumps in the road."

Swezey took those ideas to heart. "D.I.Y. is now a shorthand for a lot of things," he said. "But the idea that you can have a wacky idea and get a bunch of people to go along with it, and make it happen even with very limited resources — that was life-affirming."

Slamdance Film Festival
Jan. 25-31, Treasure Mountain Inn, Park City, Utah; slamdance.com

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