

## Making a Scene By Rachel Rinaldo

In the fall of 1993, when Liz Phair's "Exile in Guyville" was conquering the college charts, I could not have cared less. I was a fuschia-haired college senior in New York City, immersed in the waning political punk scene. If a band didn't play ABC No Rio, the Lower East Side's punk mecca, they meant little to me. I heard Ms. Phair and Urge Overkill and Smashing Pumpkins on the radio, and though the music was preferable to Pearl Jam, it was too commercial for me. I barely noticed the growing hype about Wicker Park. In my book, a place that produced a band as slick and mainstream as Smashing Pumpkins wasn't a real scene.

Three years later, the punk scene in New York City had vanished, and I felt too old to be part of a subculture anyway. My musical horizons were very slowly expanding.

So I almost missed the boat when I moved to Chicago in 1996 to start grad school. For the first few months, out of old habit, I went to punk shows at the Fireside Bowl. I remembered that some of the bands that inspired me in college and after – Big Black, Ministry, Shellac – were from Chicago, but as far as I could tell that scene was pretty much dead and gone too. On one of my first days in Chicago, I went into Urbis Orbis to ask where the Wax Trax store was, but no one was sure what had happened to it.

After that, I was wary of Wicker Park; it reminded me strongly of New York's overly gentrified East Village. I told everyone I planned to leave Chicago and move back to New York anyway.

But grad student life lent itself to hanging out more and more on weeknights at the Rainbo and Tumin's. Over the next couple years, I listened to jungle djs, danced at the Empty Bottle on Sunday nights, went to film screenings at James Bond's loft, and was one of the multitudes at Lumpen parties. And I realized that most of the young white denizens of Wicker Park were not listening to the Pumpkins (and never had), but to Tortoise and Gastr del Sol and the Flying Luttenbachers and Bobby Conn and all sorts of lesser-known wacky experimental stuff. I had caught the tail end of an authentic scene.

Chicago's charm grew on me as I became a connoisseur of Quimby's, old building facades on Chicago Avenue, and cheap clothing stores in Logan Square, where I soon moved.

But by the end of the 1990s, Wicker Park had changed irrevocably. Chi-chi restaurants and expensive clothing boutiques were proliferating. Couples my age who had gone to business school were buying the suburban-style condos and 'soft-lofts' that were popping up everywhere. And then there were the college kids rapidly moving to Division Street and Ukrainian Village, most of whom had little allegiance to anything like a serious alternative scene.

*The census sums up the story. A look at the population of the census tracts that include the Milwaukee/Damen/North intersection shows a significant jump in white inhabitants from 1980 to 1990. In 1990, the inhabitants of Wicker Park were over 25% Puerto Rican, about 31% Mexican, and 28% non-Hispanic white. But by 2000, the white population soared to 40%, while the Puerto Rican population fell to just over 16%.<sup>1</sup>*

The Wicker Park scene was dead. Everyone understood that it was because of gentrification. That the yuppies moving in had destroyed the character of the neighborhood and the resultant rise in rents had forced out many of the interesting people. But was that all there was to it?

How does a neighborhood or a college town suddenly become an epicenter of cool? And how does it then fade back into blandness?

In the 1980s, Wicker Park was part of West Town, a mixed area with a *large* Puerto Rican population, as well as older pockets of Eastern Europeans. It was considered dangerous and run-down. The alternative music scene was on the North Side.

But by the late 1980s, the North Side was expensive, and so, young, mostly white people, looking for an edgier, cheaper place to live landed in Wicker Park. (It wasn't the first time, actually. Decades ago, Nelson Algren wrote his cult novels about life among down and out Polish immigrants in West Town.)

Within a few years this conglomeration of young newcomers created vibrant, experimental, and polyglot music. But the cultural scene that developed in Wicker Park had everything to do with the demographics of the people who were part of it. They were part of the generation born largely between 1965 and 1978, mostly white, mostly middle-class. Many, especially those my age and older, were veterans of the punk scene. What differentiates us from other generations is that we were the first generation in which the majority of those of us who were middle-class grew up in the suburbs. Places like Wilton, CT, where I went to high school, Grosse Pointe, Skokie. You can't really understand 80s punk and hardcore unless you understand the experience of the suburbs. So, for some of us, our first social awakening back in junior high or high school was all about hatred of the 'burbs. Misfits, dorks, and losers, we rejected community as conformity. The city was a magnet, the opposite of suburbia. Its grittiness was its appeal.

Some of us went to college in the city, and others flocked to the city after college, and some never went to college, and we were all attracted to the cheap, rough-edged neighborhoods like Wicker Park. As the punk scene fragmented into a million micro-scenes and died away, we got bored with the same old sounds. People branched out in new and strange musical directions. As disparate folks came together to make music and art, talk about politics, or simply hang out at diners and bars, a new scene was born.

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<sup>1</sup> These numbers are from the 1990 and 2000 censuses for the 60622 zipcode. For more detailed discussion of the demographic changes in Wicker Park and Humboldt Park, see my article "Space of Resistance: The Puerto Rican Cultural Center and Humboldt Park," *Cultural Critique* 50, Winter 2002.

The music scene of the early and mid-90s was fertile and creative, but not a subculture in the way that punk was. Thus, though the music was more cerebral, the scene itself was more accessible, less exclusive. Wicker Park quickly became known as a place where music was happening, attracting increasing numbers of people. *Yet most of the music lacked the politicization of punk*, and many of the newcomers reflected that. Few were critical of the rising tide of gentrification around them. They flocked to the new restaurants and coffeeshops and clothing stores, barely noticing when places like Busy Bee closed. Others didn't like what they saw, but thought it was inevitable.

Our early rebellion against community was to have important repercussions. The great flaw of the Wicker Park scene (and also of the East Village) in the early '90s was its failure to deal with the issue of community. After a while, many of us figured out that our scene was really an attempt to create community. But we failed to apprehend the community that pre-existed us in West Town. Some people talked about community, but often as not they were really only talking to their own community of mainly white, middle-class activists and artists and musicians. Others insisted that the neighborhood was really Eastern-European at heart, erasing the huge Latino presence. Only a few activists had the wherewithal to reach out to the Puerto Rican and Mexican communities and try to work with them on equal terms. So, when Wicker Park artists and musicians started howling about gentrification, they saw themselves as the primary victims. Few artists and musicians get involved with grassroots neighborhood projects or activism, because they don't recognize the non-artist, non-hipster people living in their neighborhood as part of their community.

But the fault isn't theirs alone. Let me digress, for a minute, to tell a cautionary tale about *New York's East Village*. We punks and anarchists and artists failed to understand that the Puerto Rican community there saw us as marginal misfits, interlopers in their neighborhood. Our flyers and pleas to attend anti-gentrification meetings and demonstrations fell largely on deaf ears. Because the very things we defended (and that I still would defend) – parks with homeless encampments, squatted buildings – were the things they feared and didn't want in their neighborhood. People didn't want their kids to have to walk to school through a shantytown where heroin addicts lay sprawled on the ground at 8 am. When we comprehended the clash of interests, we pretty much gave up. But there were indeed organizations that we could have sought out, issues on which we could have come together. *After all, we shared the same goals – to stay in the neighborhood, foster its distinctive character and cultural diversity, and keep rents relatively low.*

Artists and others are steadily moving further west into Humboldt Park, where perhaps a new and different cultural scene is emerging. They don't see themselves as gentrifiers, but they are, in a sense. Everyone is familiar now with the cycle of gentrification. First the bohos move in, and make a neighborhood trendy, then the more adventurous young professionals and couples arrive, and the condos appear. The police get tougher on crime, because now it has an impact on real estate values. Landlords evict their undesirable (read: ethnic/poor) tenants so they can rehab the buildings and charge inflated rents. By the time the boutiques and coffee shops emerge, the ball is rolling. Soon, the most

interesting people move out because they can't afford the rents. A faux-scene arises, in which stylish shops sponsor events and parties in a commercialized attempt to recreate the atmosphere that made the area so desirable. And in fact, it is even more desirable, as thousands of mainstream, middle-class people flock to the new restaurants, buy expensive clothing at the new boutiques, and perhaps put a down-payment on a loft while they're at it. These days developers and city governments are savvy about gentrification, and they know that artists and musicians are key. Hence the TIFs and tax write-offs for developers to build artist lofts in rough areas, further expanding the colonization of the city.

*Every few years, there is a new scene, a new place where the combination of youth and energy and low rent makes for an efflorescence of music and culture. Haight-Ashbury, the East Village, Williamsburg, Olympia, Athens, G.A., the Mission District, the list is endless. Nearly all have shared Wicker Park's gentrified fate, and for the same reasons. Unlike most, Wicker Park had a lasting influence on music. Across the nation, a new breed of esoteric bands and their imitators owe a debt to the musical experimentalism emerging from Wicker Park in the 1990s. And no doubt, Ken Vandermark and Isotope 217 had a lot to do with the heightened interest of hipsters in avant-garde jazz. But a decade after the zenith of the scene, Wicker Park is most noteworthy as a neighborhood of trendy bars and clothing stores. When a place starts out as Guyville, perhaps the progression to Yuppiesville is inevitable.*