Life at the Outhouse

AN ACCOUNT OF LAWRENCE, KANSAS' FABLED DIY VENUE

by Corban Goble

IMAGES COURTESY OF BRADLEY NORMAN

Long before it was a BYOB strip club on the outskirts of Lawrence, the Outhouse had a history as the heart of Kansan counterculture. A live-music venue and a hangout for those who didn't fit in with the college scene, it seemed like the fantasy creation of the most anarchic, anti-establishment, plains-bred punks. It was a cinder-block garage in the middle of a cornfield, four miles from the town's main drag and conveniently located beyond its police jurisdiction. Though Lawrence, historically, has been one of those "blue dot in a red state" cities like Austin or Madison, the Outhouse served as a bridge to something more raw and chaotic. It was an oasis to disenfranchised young people who grew up in conservative, closed-minded small-town Kansas of the '70s and '80s.

Though the capacity was about 200, early Outhouse organizer Jeff Fortier claims that some nights they crammed 750 people inside. "If you were on top of the crowd at one of those biggers shows," Fortier says, "you couldn't really get down because there was nowhere to go." Nirvana played there when they were touring behind *Bleach*. (As the story goes, headliners 24/7 Spies didn't want Nirvana on the bill, but after watching them play the Outhouse, they reconsidered.) Fugazi played there when the band was just getting started—a memorable early flyer infamously depicts Ian MacKaye in a suggestive position with a pig. Cannibal Corpse, Bad Brains, Green Day, and the Melvins all played the Outhouse, often passing up better offers in favor of the scuzzy, extraordinarily DIY room, where the sub-zero winters seeped through the walls and the toilets rarely worked. Graffiti covered every inch of the place. Bonfires dotted the parking lot, which was, in fact, its own scene. Bill Rich, an early Outhouse organizer, later became William S. Burroughs' personal assistant when the author lived in Lawrence; Rich would drive Burroughs to the venue, firearms in tow, to create "shotgun art."

These are the apocryphal tales on which the scene was built. "There wasn't Facebook back then," Fortier says, "and it wasn't always safe to go to shows. Anything fucking went."

Jeff Fortier now has his own promotions company—Mammoth, which works with Live Nation—and old articles about the Outhouse refer to his time with the venue as a "boot camp," an apt analogy since the military is what brought Fortier to Kansas in the first place.

"I grew up back East so I was going to punk rock shows at a place called the Anthrax in Norwalk, Connecticut, and Sundays I'd hang out at CB's for Sunday matinees," Fortier says. "I got stationed at Fort Riley. I was 17. I was pretty bummed I was coming out to Kansas. A guy named John Noonan told me about the punk rock club called the Outhouse in Lawrence."

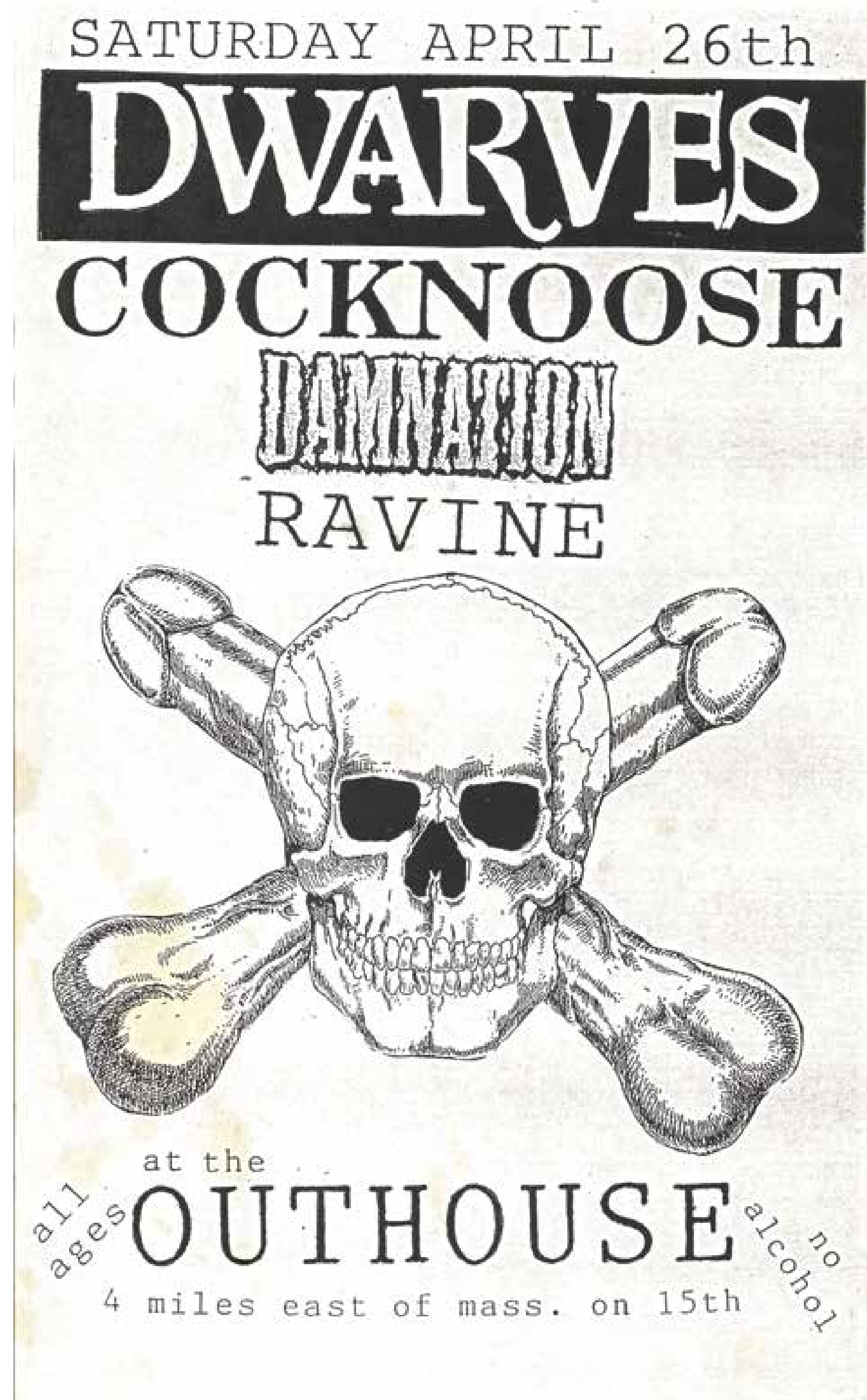
When Fortier made it there for the first time in the early '80s, he was stunned. "I'd seen on a flyer that the Adolescents were playing there. I found the place and you're in the middle of cornfield with a bonfire—I mean there's not really anything like that. I met a bunch of people there, I had an amazing time. I just couldn't believe that this was happening in Lawrence fucking Kansas."

From there, Fortier got involved with the Outhouse and, taking over the venue's lease with three other friends in 1984, recreated some of what he'd seen back East. It was purely a labor of love—they rarely broke even, but that wasn't the point. A local punk group, the Micronotz, painted the building and cleared out the brush on the property. Fortier would mock up the memorable flyers that served as official bulletins for the shows he was throwing, but he would find unofficial versions that patrons would make themselves and post around town. Because of the community the Outhouse inspired, bands would skip the more lucrative theaters downtown and play the barren garage out West for the crowds and the cred.

Fortier recalls the sense of community and the bizarre tales that have become local lore, like the time a drunk, naked farmer chased him around the parking lot in a Ford pickup before crashing through the brick facade of the venue (the wall couldn't be repaired in time for that night's Melvins show, so patrons simply entered through it.) Or the time a tripping audience member bolted out of the Outhouse and ran over to Fortier, who was talking to a police officer, and yelled that the band was trying to kill him before disappearing into the cornfield as if he were Shoeless Joe Jackson in *Field of Dreams*.

"If you were a punk in the 1980s, there was nowhere else for you to go," says Norman Bradley, a club regular who is now making a Kickstarter-funded documentary about the Outhouse. "You couldn't go to the football game, because you'd get picked on, you couldn't go to the mall without people fucking with you, there was no bar you could go to to listen to the Ramones ... You didn't go [to the Outhouse] unless you were a punk or were into music. A normal person didn't go there—that's what made it so important."

Like Fortier, Bradley fondly recalls the lawlessness and the freedom of the Outhouse, a venue he theorizes only got away with existing because of its remote location, free from any kind of zoning consideration. Teenagers wouldn't be flagged for Minor in Possession—cops would just have you pour your beer out and then you'd be on your way.



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Given its aggressive and sometimes-thuggish punk rock ways, the Outhouse was a male-dominated venue. But that's not to say women didn't have a role. "I felt safe, but I'm sure it's because I felt like I fit in," says Rikki Endsley, a regular after she moved to Lawrence in 1987 when she was 16. For Endsley, the club was a refuge. Growing up, she'd bounced between her mother and her father's places, changing high schools almost yearly. Her first trip to the Outhouse had been memorable—she saw SNFU with a few friends from Liberty High School but spent most of her time hanging out in the parking lot. Endsley says she keeps in touch with many of the women she attended shows with. She recalls a night when she and her friends went to see GWAR in the summer of 1988.

"The three of us were standing along the wall up near the front stage," Endsley recounts. "One of the chicks in the band was swinging a giant bloody tampon in the air and blood was flying. Some of it hit my friend Kim's shirt and she started panicking, 'It's real! It's real!' I doubled over in hysterics."

The legacy of the Outhouse creates a portal into a different Lawrence than the buttoned-up college town I experienced. Though the town has been portrayed as liberal outpost in conservative Kansas—often referred to as Brownbackistan, for good reason—the Outhouse had an even narrower and more crucial appeal to the punks that the state's culture had marginalized. Shows were not unlike a religious experience—young people found themselves there.

When I think of the Outhouse, I often think of the old, burned-out church building that used to stand in the graveyard in the nearby town of Stull—a truly spooky site long said to be one of the entrances to Hell. (Local legend has it that the Pope wouldn't fly over Stull when criss-crossing the United States on a tour.) It carries a similar sort of mythical aura and occupies the same kind of collective imagination—this shack jutting from the cornfield as if it were a mirage, bonfires dotting the lot, almost too weird to be real.

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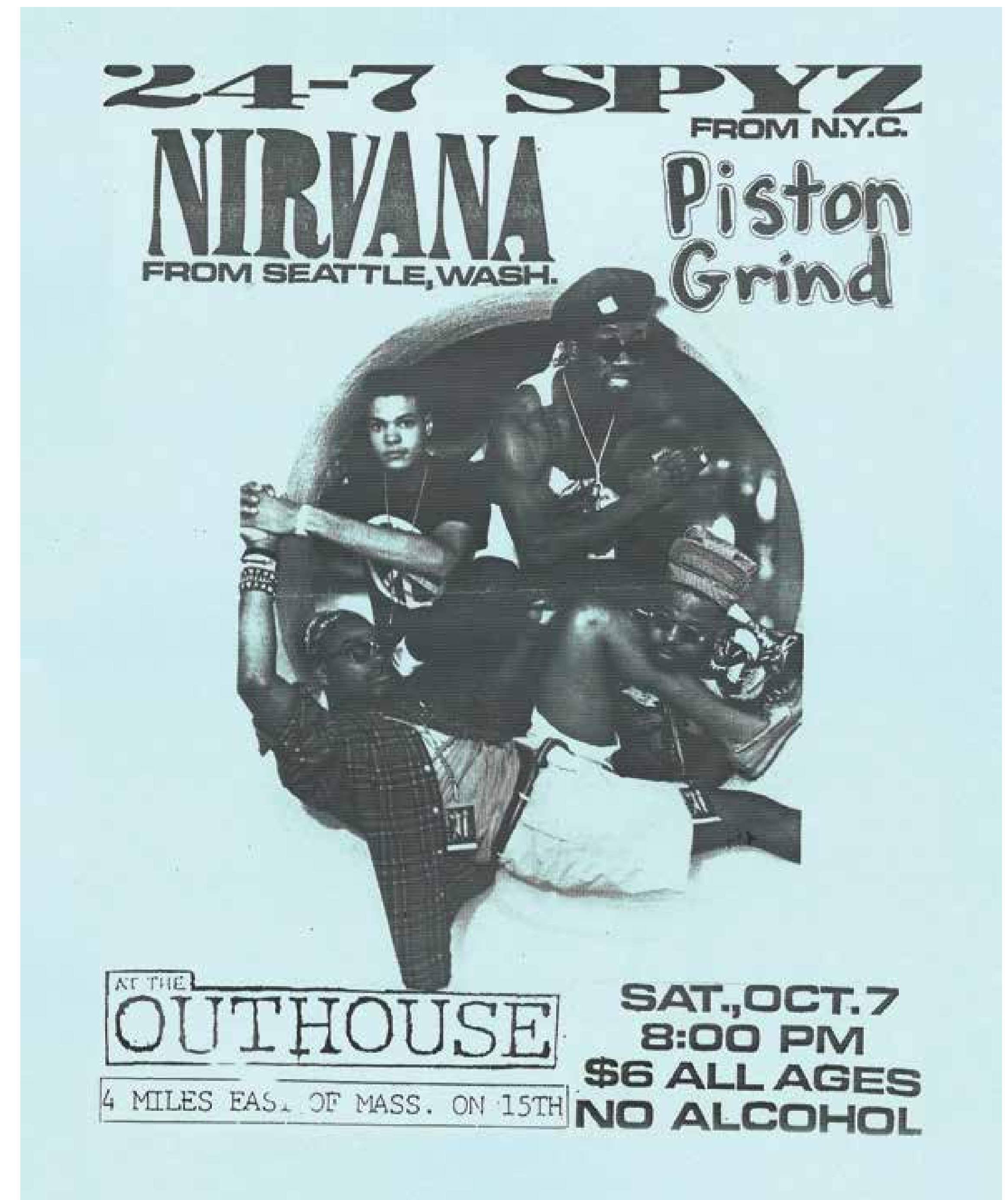
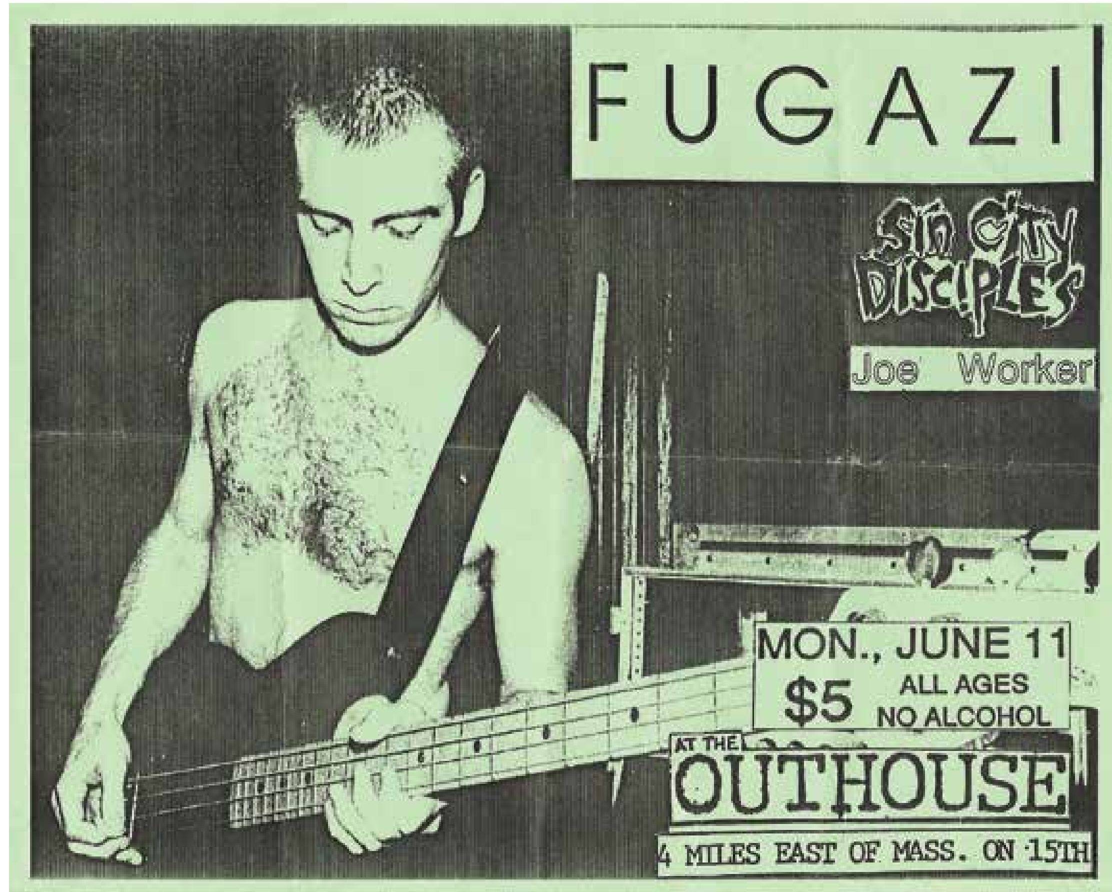
"What really did it in for us was the flood wiped out the road and we had to cart people over," says Fortier, referring the gigantic 1993 flood of the Kansas River that hit North Lawrence particularly hard. Sometimes, they'd even cross the floodwaters with canoes. Shows still went on throughout the mid-'90s, but the Outhouse was used more sparingly and rented out for frat parties. Eventually, in 1998, the owner—Donny Mellenbruch, the same guy who had used the space to work on his Harleys and also once performed a few songs on stage, where he ended his set by firing a pistol shot





through the roof—sold the building. The new owner converted the grimy punk venue into a somehow-less-grimy strip club.

Though I went to Kansas University in the 2000s, long after the Outhouse had closed its doors to punk, metal, and hardcore shows, the legacy of the space was intact: The Shack, the shanty located a couple of steps from campus where I was a rotation DJ at KJHK student radio, was basically wallpapered in Outhouse flyers. A Nirvana gig in '89 had superseded even an R.E.M./Radiohead double-bill at the Bottleneck in 1995 in terms of local legend. While I felt a slight sense of faux-nostalgia for a place I would never know, the Outhouse was something that could only exist in an idealized state for a short period of time.

"If you had blue hair in 1989 and you were walking down Tennessee Street, there was a pretty good chance you'd get in a fight," Fortier says. "It's a different gig now, you know? Once Nirvana kicked in, it became mainstream and things changed. Everyone is comfortable with everyone and I have an appreciation for that." Bradley is more blunt about the State of Lawrence: "It was cool for a while. Not anymore."

The Outhouse lives on in the sense of community it inspired—like many great venues or music scenes, it was all about the people in the pit, not necessarily what was happening onstage. Even as Lawrence DIY spaces continue to form and flourish, its patrons acknowledge that the Outhouse experience cannot, and will not, be reproduced.

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