MIDDLE CLASS MUSIC IN SUBURBAN NOWHERE LAND: EMO AND THE PERFORMANCE OF MASCULINITY

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Abstract

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Emo is an emotional form that attracts a great deal of ridicule from much of the punk and indie music communities. Emo is short for “emotional punk” or “emotional hardcore,” but because of the amount of evolution it has undergone it has become a very difficult genre to define. This genre is well known for its almost whiny sound and its preoccupation with relationship problems and emotional instability. As a result, it is seen by many within the more underground music community as an inauthentic emotionally indulgent form of music. Emo has also very recently become a form that has gained widespread mainstream media appeal with bands such as Dashboard Confessional, Taking Back Sunday, and My Chemical Romance. It is generally consumed by a younger teenaged to early college audience, and it is largely performed by suburban middle class artists. Overall, I have argued that emo represents challenge to conventional norms of hegemonic middle-class masculinity, a challenge which has come about as a result of feelings of discontent with the emotional repression of this masculinity. In this work I have performed multiple interviews that include both performers and audience members who participate in this type of music. The questions that I ask the subjects of my ethnographic research focus on the meaning of this particular performance to both the audience and performers. In an attempt to further clarify the meaning of this form of expression, I draw upon the works of gender theorists such as Judith Butler R.W. Connell as well as several popular music theorists such as Mimi Schippers. Overall I hope to show the greater significance of emo as a shift in masculine expression by that is very thoroughly based in the middle class.
For Theron, Cynthia, and Kirsten who I couldn’t do this without.

And for Rebecca, my strength.
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Introduction

Popular music subcultures have long been a place in culture where cultural norms are challenged and reinvented. Both male and female artists often challenge the construction of gender through the use of feminist criticism, “gender bending,” and sexual violence awareness. By contrast, emo, which is an emotionally charged form of popular music derived from punk and hardcore, is an example of a form that has not necessarily challenged gender norms outright. Although these artists do not necessarily consciously intend to critique gender constructions, male performers openly express their feelings about relationships and emotional issue, and this represents a certain kind of gender “maneuvering.” These artists are not attempting to illuminate gender inequality, but they are presenting a side of masculinity that is often ignored as a result of the machismo of male popular music performance. Through an exploration of audience members and performers opinions of such performances of this genre in the Northwest Ohio emo scene, as well as and exploration of performances within this subculture, I describe the effects of such performances on conceptions of masculinity. I conclude that through an openly emotional approach to songwriting and performance, as well as a subculture that support this kind of performance, emo has shifted audience and performers’ from a more repressed masculinity toward a more emotionally expressive conception of masculinity in fans and performers. In the remainder of this chapter I define the ethnographic area of study, the aesthetics of the genre of emo, and I introduce my participants.
The Setting

As I have mentioned, my ethnographic research was conducted in Northwest Ohio, particularly in the Bowling Green and Toledo areas. Furthermore, at least half of the concerts I visited were in Bowling Green where all but one was at Howard’s H Club which is a local concert venue. Bowling Green is a small Ohio town of approximately 30,000 people, and its population is dominated by individuals who are employed with the University. The city centers on the college campus of Bowling Green State University, which has a population of approximately 20,000 students (“Bowling Green State University: Academics, History, Financial Aid, and Other”). The student population is not necessarily reflected in the total of 30,000 for the city (“Bowling Green Population and Demographics”). As with many college campuses, this is an area that generally attracts some mainstream acts as well as a variety of local acts. Bowling Green itself has a very small-town identity, with a Main St. that has been restored to have a more historic late 19th century look. Overall, the town has a sense of small town community, while at the same time retaining some of the feeling of a college town.

While retaining some small town character, Bowling Green does have many of the amenities of a larger college town. Along with the nightly live music entertainment at Howards there are several record stores, bookstores and independent coffee shops. Many of the clubs in the area offer themed music nights including features, such as karaoke night, goth night, and 80s night. As with many Midwestern towns, Bowling Green is surrounded by farmland, and the actual terrain of the area is very flat. Cities in the area are often spread out with large tracts of farmland between which means traveling
between cities takes more time. Job opportunities in Bowling Green are rather limited by the small amount of businesses in the area. The University and the businesses in the area that serve students in faculty do serve as sources of employment for the young adults in the area, but these jobs are limited. Because of the agriculture this also means that cities are more spread out and further between one another. Also, it is actually well-known for one agricultural event. The National Tractor Pull championship comes to the city every August and draws many people to the city. Culturally, Bowling Green is also fairly well known for its yearly Black Art Swamp Festival which is held in the summer. Although Bowling Green has the campus and campus life, it still is somewhat lacking in recreational activities. Many young people go to Toledo or Perrysburg 10 miles north of Bowling Green in search of either jobs or more leisure activities.

Toledo is a city of 300,000, 20 miles north of Bowling Green that is on the Southwest tip of Lake Eerie (Brickey). The greater metropolitan area that includes several surrounding counties (including the one that Bowling is in) is 600,000 people (Brickey). This city formerly served as a fairly thriving industrial hub, but it now as a result of de-industrialization, the city has become a less of a commercially viable city. As a middle sized city, Toledo has a great deal more of an urban character with a far greater racial diversity than Bowling Green. Toledo still exists as an industrial city, with a major Jeep factory providing many of the blue collar jobs in the area. As with many cities, Toledo is surrounded by a more affluent suburban area that is has a higher density of middle class and upper class families. The actual city itself has a much greater ethnic diversity as well as a large population of working class people. There are many job opportunities in service industry or blue-collar jobs, but there are not as many
opportunities in more professional jobs that require a college degree. As a result, many people likely move out of the area in attempt to find an area that has more to offer than Toledo. As far as leisure activities go, Toledo offers several clubs such as The Underground and Headliner’s which both draw somewhat mainstream shows. Toledo also is known for its own college campus, with the University of Toledo which also hosts around 20,000 students (“University of Toledo: Student Enrollment Numbers”). In comparison to the Bowling Green State University this University has a much more ethnically diverse population. Overall, Toledo does have many things to offer, but often events such as performances have restrictive age limits, and many younger fans cannot go to such shows. Life for young people in likely does have many positive elements, but as with many mid-sized cities Toledo likely does not have enough to offer for many young people.

**What is Emo?**

Emo is an emotional form of punk that attracts a great deal of ridicule from much of the punk and indie music communities. This is likely due both to emo artists’ approach to songwriting and their openly emotional performance style, as well as emo’s more recent mainstream appeal. This subgenre initially emerged out of the Washington, D.C. hardcore scene, and it has been changed to incorporate a multiplicity of different styles. Emo is short for “emotional punk” or “emotional hardcore,” but because of the amount of evolution it has undergone it has become a very difficult genre to pigeonhole. The label “emotional punk” or “emotional hardcore” can be inclusive of a variety of styles and sub-generic classifications. Furthermore, within the music community and the music press, the definition of the label is contested. As Spin magazine journalist Andy
Greenwald suggests of emo, “It’s too contentious, too stylistically and generationally diverse to be a genre, too far reaching to be a subculture” (Greenwald 5). As this author points out, the aesthetics that define this genre shift as new generations create their own particular stylistic modifications.

In a general sense, emo is a form of punk or hardcore that presents emotional pain and sadness in a very direct manner. This is not to say that all songs in emo focus upon broken hearts and relationships, but it is fair to say that a good majority of them do deal with these subjects. Furthermore, due to a recent overabundance of mainstream media attention, the definition of emo has been distorted within the popular consciousness. The media has taken notice of emo’s popularity and as a result many bands that are not emo have been labeled emo. In many cases, the media’s conception of emo is an ill-defined category that includes male musicians who express a greater degree of emotional pain than other artists. For the mainstream music press, emo has become a label that is used for many punk bands that express more than the rather limited emotional spectrum that has been stigmatized as punk. Many punk bands express a more singular expression of anger and distrust of political and social systems, and they have a very limited emotional range. In contrast, emo expresses a much more diverse emotional spectrum that allows artists to express feelings of pain that would not normally be explored by male musicians.

The definition of emo as a genre is quite contentious within the indie and punk communities. Andy Greenwald writes, “It its takes cues from the world-changing slap of community-oriented punk, the heart swollen pomp of power ballads, and the gee-whiz nostalgia of guitar pop” (Greenwald 5). Although this does not specifically define the genre, it certainly is a good starting point for understanding the influences of emo.
James, one of my respondents, had an interesting definition that illustrates the relationship of this genre to emotion. He stated, “My opinion if you want to define emo, it’s all about loss because most of it is not really about the positive sides it’s more about loss. Mostly it’s about the relationships not really anything else and the teenage high school drama that goes with it.” As this shows, many members of the local scene define emo according to the emotions that are expressed by the band rather than focusing on the particular aesthetics of the music. Below I have attempted to further describe some of the characteristics of what makes an emo band. In the most recent wave of emo bands that originated in the late nineties, many of the bands have a lighter sound incorporating that incorporate pop guitar hooks into their music. These bands generally are quite different from the hardcore from which emo originated. Many singers within such bands sing in a high falsetto and they often sing in a very romantically pained voice. Another prevalent but rather absurdly labeled form of emo is “screamo,” which takes its cue from emo’s origins in hardcore. These bands are often much heavier involving the lead singer yelling his lines backed by fast violent guitar chords. This form of emo is much angrier, with a lesser degree of pop influence than other kinds of emo bands.

To understand the context from which rock and popular music’s approach to masculinity emerges it is important to understand the history from which much of the masculinity of the “rock star” was created. During several decades of rock, the rock star was characterized as unattainable and hypersexual. The lifestyle of bohemia in the 1960’s was rooted in ideas of sexuality derived from beatnik ideology that rebelled against monogamous committed relationships (Frith 87). As Simon Firth writes in his discussion of gender in Sound Effects, rock & roll was formulated upon an idea of
maleness that only included women as an afterthought. It was an idea of music making and the rock star that emphasized the Beat male, who lived a life formulated around independence, rootlessness, and wanderlust. As Frith states “…Beatnik ideology equated creativity and unconventionality and understood convention in terms of roots, home, and family…” (Frith 87). What is proposed by this passage is an ideology of rock, which resists conventional relationships and therefore women and romance. In the 60’s and 70’s, which was a time of the creation of many of the foundations of rock ideology, women were seen as a threat to male independence. Certainly there have been many variations, even outright exceptions, but this idea of the hyper-masculine rock star still exists in many ways.

A History of Emo

Below I attempt to trace a history of emo based upon both what the music press designates to be part of the genre and the responses that I have received from interviewees. I would like to stress that this is by no means a complete or definitive discussion of emo, but it does outline many of the major bands that have contributed to the development of the genre.

Despite its continuously contested nature, emo does have a particular point of creation within the D.C. hardcore scene that involves supposed emo progenitors Minor Threat and Rites of Spring. Minor Threat was the creation of the seminal independent musician Ian Mackaye and the band had the fast guitar driven sound that was characteristic of hardcore. The songs expressed a limited range of emotion that usually focused upon the standard punk expression of alienation and anger. The music of Minor Threat’s post-mortem Complete Discography (1990) has what now has become a rather
standardized hardcore sound. This sound is characterized by driving guitars, yelled almost incomprehensible lyrics and short, fast songs. Ian McKaye was de facto leader of the hardcore scene in D.C., and his music, including bands such as the indie band Fugazi and the early “emo-core” band Embrace, have exerted a great deal of influence on the direction of underground music scenes.

The music of Rites of Spring represents a change in the emotional character of hardcore, because it slows down the pounding hardcore influence to bring a much more personalized expression of personal anguish and pain. Rather than reflecting the more limited anger and more expressly political approach of McKaye and Minor Threat, Rites’ music was much more about bringing a community together in a feeling of collective pain. Accounts of early Rites of Spring concerts suggest that lead singer Guy Piccioto crying onstage was a normal occurrence. As Andy Greenwald suggests, “At Rites of Spring shows, audience members would weep among strangers; hardened cynics would sway like born-agains” (Greenwald 13). It is important to note that compared with what is considered to be emo today, the sound of Rites of Spring is much harder and driven by the hardcore sound. There are distorted guitar riffs, feedback, and a much more aggressive sound to Piccioto’s voice. Although the speed of these songs is slowed down compared to many hardcore songs, the songs of Rites of Spring still have much of the aggressive and rapidly yelled lyrics of hardcore bands. This represents a progression toward bands later emo bands that are less heavy and hardcore influenced.

After the short-lived 14-date tour life of Rites of Spring in 1984, emo-core became a reality, and it became acceptable for hardcore bands to express more personal emotions than the more generalized anger with the system. Several bands were created
as a result, including the “emo-core” band Embrace, which united Guy Picciotto and D.C. scene leader Ian McKay. The creation story of emo is a scattered, cross-fertilized account of the gradual development of a new genre. This first wave of emo bands was followed by what was arguably a second wave that arose during the 1990’s, and this was followed a wave in the 2000’s. Whether these can really be considered tangible waves with distinct sounds is questionable, but I have discussed them based on decades.

In the nineties, a kind of second wave of emo began including the seminal band Sunny Day Real Estate, as well as bands such as The Promise Ring and the “geek rock” band Weezer. Sunny Day Real Estate is another of the “original” emo bands that emerged from the Seattle Scene in 1992. Their songs were a combination of the slow, high pitched singing voice of Jeremy Enigk and the sound of flowing, distorted guitars which created a sound that was very important to the development of emo in the 1990’s. Enigks’ slow brooding and often wailing falsetto has a quite melancholic quality. I believe that *Diary* (1994) is an extremely important moment in emo, and it is argued that this album is a motivational factor for many of the present day emo musician’s sound. The flowing melodic quality of this album sets it apart from the more dissonant sound of many of the earlier emo-core musicians (Greenwald 28-33).

The songs on the genre-defining album *Diary* do not have the fast up-tempo beat of many punk bands, but have a slower, more drawn out sound similar to many of the “alternative” bands of the time. Sunny Day Real Estate is an example of the aesthetics of emo moving toward a much less hardcore influenced sound that resembles a softer more pop based aesthetic. Lyrically, Sunny Day does not necessarily have the same themes of
self-hatred and anger that is evident in bands such as Rites of Spring. Below is a sample of the song “The Blankets were Stairs” which is on Diary.

Lost myself when pain from your heart left it's trace
in written words held like a seam I have no hand to heal
I can't imagine your emotions wrapped around inferior
hold that iron. Inferior, my hand to heal your wounds won't
heal my longing for your warm embrace why can't it see
the thinking to me.

As is apparent, this song focuses on ideas of loss and regret that the subject feels as a result of lost love. The song talks of a lost love and the “inferior” seems refer to an inferior new lover of the woman who the author has lost. The pain that is expressed in this song and the melodic yet pained sound of lead singer Jeremy Enigk’s voice is typical of a Sunny Day Real Estate Song. Jeremy Enigk’s voice still retains the quality of a strained almost wailing sound, but it is not quite as aggressively angry as earlier bands such as Embrace or Rites of Spring. This band represented a further interpretation of emo, because they were one of the first bands (along with The Promise Ring) that used a less heavy more pop based sound. Sunny Day is one of the bands that can be seen as a turning point for emo, in which the genre evolved from a less accessible hardcore sound of early bands toward the more mainstream sound that is known today.

Emo today is characterized mainly by a lead singer who generally sings in a high falsetto voice and is backed by electric guitars with pop hooks and punk riffs. Although it cannot necessarily be said that all emo songs focus on relationships and heartbreak, such feelings are the subject of a great many artists’ songs. There also is still a punk influence in the music of most of the artists who fall in this category. As the genre has been popularized, more bands with a wider and more varied sound have arisen.
Bands range within a continuum between a fast and raw more dissonant hardcore sound to those such as Dashboard Confessional that prefer an acoustic guitar driven melodic sound.

Dashboard Confessional was formed in 2000 by Boca Raton, Florida native Chris Carrabba and was originally composed of only Carrabba and an acoustic guitar. The singer has since gained a band and a more electric sound, but much of his music still retains the intimate quality of his original performance style. Carrabba’s moniker is quite fitting as the songs he writes have a confessional quality that chronicle very personal and often painful feelings in the singer’s life. Carrabba’s songs have a hyper-emotional quality with the singer’s softly singing voice fluctuating between a soft mourning sound and a wailing falsetto. The songs are extremely personal, with Carrabba singing of lost love and emotional pain that is often a popular topic of such artists. Dashboard is an interesting case in that it is very much a stripped down bare bones version of emo. There is still the emotionality and commentary on relationships, but Dashboard has a quieter, less punk influenced sound to its songs. Carrabba’s songs sometimes do have a harder edge, particular when he is expressing the pain of the events he is describing. However, overall Carrabba presents a very soft version of emo with a much more pop oriented sound that appeals more to the mainstream (Greenwald 188-202).

Thursday is another example of emo from the late 1990’s and the early 2000’s, and their music has a great deal of hardcore influence. The band released its first record with the independent Eyeball Records in 1999, and has since released two albums, one with the independent label Victory Records in 2001 and one on the major label Island in 2003 (Loftus and Apar). Thursday are often placed within the category of “screamo”
which is a more intense form of emo. Music critic Anthony DeRotis suggests of this subgenre, “What the screamo bands add... are contrasting parts of their songs that are powered by rampaging, pile driver rhythms and deep, throaty vocals (there’s the screaming part) that have much more in common with thrash- and death-metal than with punk, emo, or indie-rock” (DeRotis). DeRotis is implying that the elements that differentiate screamo from the rest of the emo genre constitute a shift toward a much more heavy metal influenced guitar and singing style. I would also suggest that screamo represents a regression back to the roots of original hardcore influenced emo or emo-core bands.

The melancholic lead singer of Thursday sings with a falsetto that is reminiscent of such 80’s new wave acts as the Smiths and The Cure. The British bands The Smiths and The Cure have a melancholic style with many similarities to emo, and many emo musicians cite them as influences. These vocals are intermingled with a voice that is nothing more than yells of anger and emotional stress. As suggested above, this is a very hardcore/ heavy metal device and in a way represents a return to emo’s roots within the hardcore scene. The album *Full Collapse* (2001) represents relationships as a constant struggle, and it uses car crashes and empty buildings as metaphorical comparisons. The driving hardcore guitar riffs and yells of the heavier voice combined with the urgent sound of the lead singer’s voice creates the angry desolate feel of the album.

Quite appropriate to this paper on emo in Northwest Ohio is the recent success of the band Hawthorne Heights, who are from Dayton in Southwest Ohio (Monger). Not only has their album become popular, but the local Northwest Ohio band The Drama Summer stated that this band was one of their favorites. Hawthorne Heights recorded
their first album *The Silence of Black and White* in February of 2004 on the Victory Records label, which is an independent label that has recently signed several emo bands (Monger). The song on the album named “Ohio is For Lovers” serves as a kind of anthem for many emo kids from Ohio. “Ohio is for Lovers” is a very dark song about lost love, and its reference to Ohio makes it popular with fans and performers in Ohio. I have included the first two verses of this song, which it is a good example of the songs that are typical of the band.

Hey there,
I know it's hard to feel like I don't care at all.
Where you are and how you feel.
With these lights off as these wheels
keep rolling on and on. (and on and on and on...)
Slow things down or speed them up.
Not enough or way too much. (and on and on and on...)
How are you when I'm gone?

[Chorus:]
And I can't make it on my own.
(And I can't make it on my own.)
Because my heart is in Ohio.
So cut my wrists and black my eyes.
(Cut my wrists and black my eyes)
So I can fall asleep tonight, or die.
Because you kill me.
You know you do, you kill me well.
You like it too, and I can tell.
You never stop until my final breath is gone

Obviously the title is meant to be an ironic reference to love in Ohio, because the subject of this song is about an ex-girlfriend. This song is upset to the point of physical masochism with the references to blacking eyes and killing him. The author is obviously very bitter, and he describes what sound like a relationship fraught with pain. Despite its extremely negative message, the mainstream media attention that this song has received
legitimizes the Ohio scene, and it serves as a source of motivation for many emo rockers in the area. Hawthorne Heights is a band that follows a singing pattern that is similar to many other of the most recent emo more hardcore influenced bands. Many of their songs will start with soft sweet singing and will crescendo into an angst-ridden wail. The band has a very heavily metal influenced guitar sound as well as vocals that use hardcore influenced or “screamo” yells of pain.

Taking Back Sunday is another recent addition to the emo canon; their first album *Tell All Your Friends* in 2002, was also released by the independent Victory Records label (Spano). The band was formed in Amityville, NY in 2000, and it has since received a great deal of attention from the music press (Spano). Like their label-mates such as Hawthorne Heights, Taking Back Sunday has a heavy sound, but the parts sung by their lead singer do not have quite the same extreme anger. There are more sweetly sung melodic vocal parts, and an overall less driving emphatically angry sound. Although Taking Back Sunday has a more restrained sound to their singing parts than Hawthorne Heights, they still have guitar parts that are very hardcore and heavy metal influenced. Their vocals also involved backup vocals that often involve the yelled “ahhhh!” or “yeah!” that are present in Hawthorne Heights work. Both Hawthorne Heights and Taking Back Sunday represent a recent trend in emo that has become angrier and more intense. Overall, the sound of emo has become more hardcore and heavy metal influenced in several of the more recent bands. This trend suggests that emo is possibly going toward a more masculine sound away from the more sweetly sung songs of the past 10 years.

**How is emo different?**
Although emo does not explicitly critique other artists’ presentation of masculinity, this genre does represent the appearance of a significant shift away from it. As opposed to prior forms of punk, emo is a music genre that has shifted away from irony and focuses upon emotional sincerity. By emotional sincerity, I mean that the persona that these artists present does not contain the same kind of masculine bravado as those of many prior artists. Nor does it contain as much of the dismissive irony with which many punk and alternative artists portray love and relationships. Rather, emo presents the pain and confusion of love in a quite straightforward manner, without the artists attempting to separate themselves from it for fear of appearing vulnerable. As James one of the audience members suggests “My opinion if you want to define emo, it’s all about loss because most of it is not really about the positive sides. It’s more about loss. Mostly it’s about the relationships not really anything else...” James emphasizes the fact that the music focuses on loss and love in a way very matter of fact way. Claudio a band member whom I interviewed had a similar statement about emo’s expression of feeling. He states, I think um emo is about kind of admitting that, ‘hey guys have feelings.’” Claudio’s response is important because it shows that emo allows men to explore feelings that gender norms often do not allow them to express. This is not to say that performers disregard their masculinity altogether, but that within the context of a performance artists defy gender roles in their expression.

This focus on emotional honesty is a shift away from the more ironic musical styles that have been prevalent in the rock music of the past two decades. This likely represents an attempt by performers and fans to create a musical genre that is perceived as more genuine or authentic. Furthermore, emo currently is a music that is performed
by largely suburban middle class musicians. This is relevant in that this demographic not only has its own ideology and approach toward the world but its own conception of masculinity. R.W. Connell looks at the differing masculinities that exist within and between class and race. As he suggests, “With the growing recognition of the interplay between gender, race, and class it has become common to recognize multiple masculinities: black as well as white, working-class as well as middle-class” (Connell 76). I have used this idea of varying masculine identities to suggest that the climate of middle class and suburban life have created the type of masculinity that is being presented in emo.

The idea that class influences the reception and production of art is not a new one within the study of culture. According to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the habitus is an unconscious set of beliefs, scripts, and ideas that are available a person based upon his or her class. Taste and ways of approaching art are a function of specific classes and the motivations that are built into an individual because of his or her upbringing and experiences within a specific class. He suggests, “the habitus is by necessity internalized into a disposition that is converted into a general transposable position which carries out a transposable, universal application” (Bourdieu 503). In other words, all of us have an internalized system of ideas and values that are applied unconsciously to every situation. Bourdieu uses this to suggest the reason that certain art forms can be classified and understood according to their class basis (Bourdieu 497-504). Bourdieu postulated that this internalization of class is how social systems were reproduced in the real world. Hence, in cases of the creation of art these social structures are reproduced as models and then are communicated to be reproduced again. Emo therefore can be seen as a
reproduction of many of the structures of the middle class ideology, but also as a resistance to many of these structures. These artists are still limited by the particular middle class norms of expression, and therefore this is a very characteristically middle-class version of resistance.

Within emo, male performers speak more openly and with a great deal of vulnerability about their personal lives and relationship problems. Because of this vulnerability, emo is often stigmatized as whiny and unreasonably emotional. I argue that this is due to male gender roles in musical performance that reject expressions of open emotionality. In this way, this genre’s emotionality could be characterized as unmasculine or even feminine in its expression of men’s feelings. In Robert Walser’s work on heavy metal, he suggests that certain kinds of heavy metal are criticized by more “serious” fans for their less masculine quality. Walser suggests, “Male fans of ‘harder’ styles of heavy metal are often frantic in their denunciations of androgyny, seeing in it a subversion of male heterosexual privilege…” (Walser 130). Emo is often criticized for what are seen as emotional and melodramatic qualities that can be easily likened to a lack of masculinity or a lack of “heaviness”. Also, as emo is derived from punk, it is often criticized because it goes beyond the rather limited range of emotions that punk rock expresses.

Although emo does represent a possible shift in the expression of masculinity, this shift does present many possible problems. It does stress an emotionally expressive male subjectivity that rejects a more repressed approach to performance, but emo’s themes can be extremely solipsistic and self-absorbed. This has the potential to promote a view of female sexuality that leads to fear of and possibly violence toward women. For example,
Taking Back Sunday’s song, “...Slow dance on the Inside” expresses themes of violence as a result of the singer’s anger toward a girlfriend. He sings “Because a long night means a fist fight, against my pillow, and your pearly whites, I want to hear your scream.” Although this might be suggestive of a consenting sado-masochistic relationship, it still could be interpreted as promoting violence toward women. Instead of dealing with the problems of the relationship, the singer is attempting to remove any agency the woman has in the matter. A second example is New Found Glory’s song “My friends Over You” which states, “Though you swear that you are true, I’d still pick my friends over you....” This song, although not as overtly violent toward women as the Taking Back Sunday song, still suggests that the male subject of the song can avoid any of the pain or problems of relationships by essentially avoiding women altogether. Some of this could be linked to as an expression of the confusion and anger that are part of young adulthood, but this does not necessarily excuse the sometimes quite hateful portrayals of women. As Allie, an audience member I interviewed suggested when I asked if emo was hateful toward women, “I think in some cases yes... I don’t think that it’s a feeling of hatred toward all women general. I think most of it’s like just certain ones.” Allie sees the music as having the potential to promote hatred toward women, but she is hesitant to say this hatred is toward all women. This is likely to a similar idea that they were impassioned and they didn’t necessarily mean what they said. In response to a similar question, Claudio a band member for the band Somerset states: “Not hatred but distrust of women more so than in the past. Guys are like, I’ve heard people say that they are afraid of relationships.” Claudio’s reaction is more critical, but his suggestion is that it creates a more passive fear of women rather than what could be seen as a more
aggressive hatred of women. I deal with these concerns further in my lyrical analyses
audience member interviews.

**Literature Review**

Throughout this study, I integrate a wide variety of studies that include mostly
academic works, but I draw heavily upon one popular work that focuses upon emo.
Below I thoroughly discuss these sources and show their relationship to this study, and I
show how I add to the popular press work that I have mentioned. Although I do not
necessarily specifically use passages from these works in later sections of my thesis, they
all have influenced my approach to studying popular music and the presentation of
masculinity.

To begin, I would like to explore a popular press source that has been useful to
my project. *Nothing Feels Good* is the only book that explicitly addresses emo as its
main topic. It is a non-academic book written by *Spin* magazine journalist Andy
Greenwald, and it is the book that initially sparked my interest in the topic of this
research project. In this book, Greenwald provides a good history of emo starting with
the Washington D.C hardcore scene. He also touches on the emo subculture’s roots
within suburbia and more urban regions. Although this book is useful because it serves
as a kind of outline of emo culture, it does not thoroughly explore many of the issues of
class and gender that I hope to focus upon. Below I attempt to give and outline of many
of the themes that Mr. Greenwald approaches and I suggest how I improve upon his
ideas.
In his introduction, Greenwald questions the validity of the label of emo and its use in popular culture. He writes, “It’s been a source of pride, a target of derision, a mark of confusion and a sign of the times… And yet, not only can no one agree on what it means, there is not now nor has there ever been, a single major band that admits to being emo. Not one” (Greenwald 1). In this short passage, the author shows the quite incomprehensible nature of emo as a musical label. Not only is its meaning continuously changing, but no major band ever voluntarily comes forward and states that it represents “emoness.” Therein lays one of the most difficult elements of both Mr. Greenwald’s project and my own project, as for the most part emo exists to some degree in the eye and ear of the beholder. In his introduction, the author continues to look at the problematic label of emo by discussing its relationship to mass media. He argues, “It’s the marketers, the publicists, and the radio formatters who refer to bands by genre, certainly not the bands themselves.” (Greenwald 4). I draw from this argument later to suggest that emo has become misconstrued due to its appropriation by the mainstream media. Furthermore, many of my respondents hold strong points of view the use of emo by mainstream media.

Greenwald traces the history of emo from its roots in the Washington D.C. hardcore scene to its present day manifestation. He includes an analysis of the meanings of several songs, particularly with regard to their expression of hatred of women. Furthermore and most importantly to this work, Andy Greenwald includes interviews with bands as well as fans within his work on emo. Although he does look at emo fans to the music and what it meanings it holds for their own lives, I would like to focus more fully on gender issues. He does scratch the surface with a chapter that problematizes emo
culture’s ambivalent relationship to women, but he does not fully explore the implications of this. Furthermore, Greenwald does not fully address the presentation of gender by either fans or performers within emo culture. I hope to expand upon these issues in an attempt to more fully understand emo and the emo subculture.

Within my research project I will be drawing upon several authors who explicitly address masculinity and theories of gender construction. R.W. Connell’s *Masculinities* is particularly central to my paper as it explores the effects that class has on gender. Through the use of an interview process, Connell conducts an ethnographic study of the variable approaches to masculinity that occur among individuals of varying class backgrounds. Connell states:

> To recognize more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step. We have to examine relations between them. Further we have to unpack the milieu of class and race and scrutinize the gender relations operating within them (Connell 76).

I would like to use an approach similar to Connell’s in that I will infer certain qualities of class and gender from my ethnographic data, but I will continuously problematize assertions of class based gender. That is, rather than suggesting that there is a fixed masculinity for a particular class, I will attempt to show that such definitions are flexible. Rather than a masculinity that cannot be changed as a result of one’s class background, I will look at masculinity as a characteristic that can be changed through an individual’s agency.

Connell’s explorations of different conceptions of masculinity within various class backgrounds are very useful to my work. Particularly, Connell explores “hegemonic masculinity,” which he states, “Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the
problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell 77). That is, this is the masculinity that the according to the dominant culture are supposed to aspire to. This is the form of manhood that is most desired and has been normalized by the hegemonic western culture. Furthermore, this is a form of masculinity in which, “...not many men actually meet the normative standards” (Connell 79). Within my own study, I explore a conception of gender that challenges normative and hegemonic masculinity. I use examples from Connell’s case studies of both hegemonic masculinity and more subordinated masculinities as examples illustrating my own discussion of gender.

One of the most important sources of gender construction theory I will be using will be Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender identities, which postulates that gender is a performed social construction. Butler argues, “Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler 139). Butler is suggesting that gender is not predetermined by biology nor is it a fixed construction, but is a construction with boundaries that can be bent or broken by the acts of the individual. She continues, “As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings that have been socially established...” (Butler 140). Butler has drawn upon theories of performativity, in order to create a theory of gender that is based upon the manner in which they are enacted through a ritualized process. In the context of this project this is quite important, as the performers (literally)
of emo music are performing a particular version of middle class masculinity. According to this theory, these performances have the ability to change conceptions of gender.

Authors Berger, Wallis and Watson who wrote *Constructing Masculinity* suggest of Butler:

The results of this ‘performance’ may work to defy original or primary gender identities, as in the cultural practices of cross-dressing; or it may stylize butch-femme identities in order to exaggerate, play with, or, in a more reactionary sense, conform to socially defined notions of the masculine or the feminine (Berger, Wallace, and Watson 5).

That is, Butler’s theory explores the idea of gender as a concept that is easily confronted or transgressed through a particular approach to gender by an individual or group. She draws from Foucault’s model of gender, which suggests, “identity is not fixed but fragmented and shifting. Thus it is possible to destabilize conventionalized notions of identity and gender (Berger, Wallis, and Watson 6)”.

Throughout my work, I have worked within a framework in which gender is fluid and is therefore negotiable through particular performative acts. Furthermore, the challenges to gender conventions that are made will not necessarily be conscious challenges.

Finally, Lynne Sygel’s study, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, is an analysis of the changing character of masculinity in the United States. Sygel explores the nature of masculinity since the women’s movement. Her exploration of the changing emotional expressivity of men is particularly useful to my project. She suggests that although men have been taught to get in touch with themselves further and may appear more emotionally expressive, much of this is the result of the “political correctness” of doing so and less an actual change in men. Sygel looks at anti-sexist men’s movements that occurred in the wake of the women’s movement. She states:
What the pro-feminist men’s movement literature and practice make clear is that, once they are aware of it, at least some men are very unhappy with the idea that they are caught up in a system which is exploitative and oppressive to women, gays and some other men (Sygel 290).

Despite this, she suggests that men have had a great deal of difficulty with adjusting to the changing roles of men within our society. She states, “It is this new diversity in masculine styles and behaviour which has suggested to many feminists that men are simply superficially accommodating to new times in new ways” (Sygel 293). I would like to suggest that this new ambivalence toward masculinity and male roles is part of the influence which has helped to make emo such a mainstream success. Emo masculine identity provides a much more emotionally expressive version of masculinity that exposes men’s changing relationship to male gender roles.

Many works in academic popular music scholarship have approached the subject of gender and class identity. Below I explore several of these authors’ works that are relevant to this work and that are useful to my own analysis. In her book on the *Rockin’ out of the Box*, Mimi Schippers explores the way in which gender relations were positively affected by the Chicago alternative rock scene. Through a combination of feminist awareness by artists and a rejection of the gender hierarchical norms by both male and female members of this subculture, the venues of the scene served as spaces where women did not receive the same harassment they would receive in a normal bar. Schippers’ use of Judith Butler’s conception of gender as a performance and R.W. Connell’s theory of various types of masculinity dependent upon the background of the individual are instructive to this project. Schippers’ idea that “gender maneuvering” is used to manipulate people’s ideas of gender is particularly useful to this study. Although
emo does not necessarily represent a case in which performers are consciously attempting to manipulate the gender hierarchy, it certainly does represent a change (Schippers xv-xvii).

Sarah Cohen also has done a great deal of valuable work on gender in popular music. Cohen’s article “Men Making a Scene” explores the work of several authors and it shows the effects of scene ideology and power on the gender hierarchy within the Liverpool scene. She suggests, “The music does however contribute to the continual process through which men, male, and masculine are produced, contested and redefined, and rock and pop have typically involved exploration of both behaviour and ideas concerning gender and sexuality” (Cohen in Whitely 1995). This suggests a constantly changing conception of gender which is both contested within and outside of the scene. I use this idea of contested gender as an important basis for exploring the presentation of gender in my own project.

Throughout much of the literature on the presentation of gender within popular music, the idea of the rebel is continuously discussed and challenged. As I have mentioned, much of the presentation of identity within rock is based upon the beat approach to manhood. In their work, Simon Reynolds and Joy Press approach the rebel through a psychoanalytic lens. They suggest:

Male rebellion is a re-enactment of the primal break that constitutes the male ego: the separation of the infant from the maternal realm, the exile from paradise. The rebel re-enacts the process of individuation in endless and diverse rites of severance continually flees domesticity. (Press & Reynolds 2)

These two authors are suggesting that the masculine revel figure can be traced to a man’s relationship to his mother. They trace the rebel figure to a break of men with the mother figure and a continuously evolving relationship to women. Throughout their work, these
two authors follow the development of the rebel male throughout popular music history. They also look at feminist challenges to patriarchy through a similar lens of psychoanalytic theory. Although their work may focus somewhat heavily on a largely Freudian approach, it is useful in understanding the changes that have occurred in the presentation of gender onstage in popular music performance.

In their work, Press and Reynolds divide the male artists by constructing a binary of the Rebel male and the Soft Boy/Mother’s Boy. They suggest of this binary in their introduction,

In the first section, Rebel Misogynies, we explore the ways the rebel male dramatized himself against the ‘feminine’…The second section, Into the Mystic, examines the idealized images of women and femininity in male rock - the endless longing to come home, to return to the womb, that often take the form of cosmic/oceanic mysticism or worship of Mother Nature (Reynolds and Press xiv).

They divide male artists between those who reject the mother and those who wish to return to the mother (Rebels vs. Soft Boys). Basing their discussion upon this division, they trace the development of the rebel and its effect upon masculine identity. Although I have not based most of my research on psychoanalytic theory, many of their insights into the motivations of artists is useful to my discussion of gender within this work.

Sheila Whiteley’s work, Women in Popular Music, also approaches the rebellious male of the 1960’s, but with a less Freudian feminist perspective. Although Whiteley’s main focus is the changing role of women within popular music culture, her book does provide a vivid presentation of the masculine identities that have been portrayed by past artists. Her account not only traces changing gender roles of women within rock, but she also traces the hegemonic presentation of masculinity of many artists such as the Rolling
Stones and Beatles. As with many authors, Whitley looks at the rebellious character of these early rock musicians and the relationship of the rebel to women.

Also particularly interesting in the context of this study is Whitley’s commentary on punk poet Patti Smith. She writes that punk allowed for a greater range expression for women. She suggests one possible reason for this change was that “the emphasis [in punk] lay on the delivery of the vocal, the shock tactics of the lyrics and an overall emphasis on an eccentricity of self-expression” (Whiteley 98). That is with the rise of punk it became acceptable for both women and men to create their own particular mode of self expression. Rather than being limited by societal norms, punk encouraged them to challenge society’s norms through musical expression. Whiteley looks at Patti Smith’s androgynous presentation of sexuality as an example of this new right for women to openly express themselves. She notes, “As American critic Dan Graham observed in 1979, ‘She speculated on a new definition of “female”, redefining women’s subservient position… projected herself as lesbian, androgyne, martyr priestess, female God” (Whitely 100). As Whitely shows with Patti Smith and later Siouxsie Sioux, punk opened the door for musical artists both male and female to present their own versions of sexuality.

**Methods**

As stated above, I have focused my ethnographic research in the area of Northwest Ohio, primarily in the Bowling Green and Toledo areas. Throughout the interview process, I have attempted to obtain a sampling of both audience and band members that are representative of the music scene in the area.
All of my respondents fall within the ages of 18 and 27 years and all but two of them are white. I have spoken with 8 men and 5 women and the time that I had the opportunity to interview each varies greatly. Those whom I chose to approach did not necessarily conform to a particular type, besides the fact that I noticed they were interested in the music that was being played. There were also some whom I chose to interview as a result of their association with bands of the genre. In particular, Angie, Jerrod, and Anthony were all spending time with the bands I interviewed, so I chose to interview them as well. Furthermore, Alex was well acquainted with the bands as a result of his job as concert a promoter who often features emo bands. In approaching potential interviewees, in a very forward manner I introduced myself and stated that I was writing a thesis on emo music. I then asked the potential respondent whether he or she was interested in participating in my study.

Through an interview process, I have attempted to explore issues of class, masculinity, and the effect of the music upon its listeners. In Appendix 1 I have posted a copy of my original questions and those can be referred to for more specifics on the questions I asked. I also focused upon opinions of what emo music is, as well as what its place is within the musical underground. Together with this I explored opinions of the local music scene and whether emo was an important element of the scene. Furthermore, I have also focused upon the tastes of the members of the audience to guide which bands I study.

In the course of my fieldwork, I was introduced to the band The Drama Summer by an individual who is an undergraduate major in the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University. Alex Merced is an undergraduate in Popular Culture
who also works as a booking agent for Howard’s H Club. Because this band was on tour during the course of my fieldwork, almost all of my interviews took place during a night when they were one of many bands playing at a particular venue. By conducting much of my ethnographic fieldwork with this band, I was able to observe them perform multiple times at different venues. I was also able to see the workings of the local scene, including how bands interact with one another and their audience at different venues and before various sized crowds. Furthermore, because several of these shows were not strictly emo shows, I was able to speak to individuals from different crowds who had various backgrounds and opinions on the subjects with which my work was concerned.

**Specific Context of Research**

I would like to give a more specific description of the context of the interviews I performed. It is important to note that I changed all of the names of the audience members to protect their identities except for Alex. Alex is public figure who works as a concert promoter and doesn’t mind having name used. The band members’ names remain unchanged because they all are public figures as well. The first set of interviews I performed included the Drama Summer as well as James and Allie. These interviews were conducted in downtown Bowling Green under the roof of a false storefront where the lot is vacant. A second interview was conducted that night in my home with Alex, whom I met on the way home from the concert. The second set of interviews I conducted included several of the members of the band as well as Anthony, who was a friend of the band. These interviews were conducted almost entirely in the motor home that the band uses to tour in. All of my interviewees sat through each of the interviews and several made comments even after I had finished their own interviews. Finally, the final sets of
interviews were the two groups that I met at Headliner’s on the final date that I conducted interviews, November 17th, 2005. These included a group of the two women Kari and Ellie as well as the group of Kurt, Stacy, and Cathy. These groups were interviewed at Headliner’s between the and after particular performances.

**Textual Analysis**

In an attempt to explore the meanings of the actual songs that are sung by emo bands, I have analyzed the text of the lyrics of several songs as well. I have used the feedback that several of respondents gave me to guide which songs I have chosen to analyze. This has allowed me to more specifically explore the themes that I am speaking of in the rest of my thesis. Because I have analyzed both the text of the music and the responses that my respondents give me, I attempt to show a link between the two. Textual analysis has allowed me to explore the specific themes and ideas that are expressed within emo songs, while interviews allowed me to show audience perceptions of this kind of music. Through this analysis a kind of cause and effect dialectic can be explained. Where textual analysis shows specific meanings in the music, the ethnographic response explain the response to those ideas that are expressed within performance. Through the textual analysis, I have been able to effectively show the material that my respondents are referring to when they talk about the music.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to define the musical genre of emo through a discussion of its history and aesthetics. Furthermore, this chapter has dealt with the expression of masculinity and its significance within contemporary popular music. Together with this, I have attempted to show the problematic status of the
approach toward women that is expressed by these musicians. I have shown the theoretical approach of this work as well as the sources from which I have drawn material. Finally my methods have shown the manner by which I conducted my fieldwork as well as the supporting analysis I perform. Within my methods I have shown particular area of my research in Northwest Ohio, as well as some basic background of my studies. In the following chapter, I begin with a series of interviews of performers within this genre. I look closely at the music their motivations as performers as well as their feelings about the particular version of masculinity that emo expresses.
Chapter 2: The Performers

Introduction

Within this chapter I will look at emo from the standpoint of the musicians that perform music from this genre. It is also important to note that these performers do not necessarily identify themselves as belonging to the emo subculture. As has been suggested, emo is a label that very few artists will self identify as, for it has become a kind of slur. Generally, these musicians identify their band’s sound as melodic hardcore or punk rather than be lumped into the vague category that is emo. I have chosen them because they were labeled emo by local concert promoter Alex Merced. Alex booked both of their shows and has a detailed knowledge of the local music scene, so he seemed someone who could refer me to the local emo scene. This highlights one of the methodological stumbling points in my fieldwork. That is, although I have given a history of emo and have attempted to show its aesthetics, those bands that are considered emo either get this label from fans or the media. That is, few if any bands go into their careers with the assumption that they are emo artists. As a result, it was imperative that I rely on word of mouth and journalistic reviews to decide which bands to interview. Below I fully explore responses from members of two bands that I interviewed for the purposes of this work.

High school and early College

I believe that many of the themes of emo are resonant with students because they relate to the difficulties that can be associated with adjusting to becoming an adult. Furthermore, I believe that the social hierarchy of middle class high school and early
college creates a version of normalized masculinity that almost directly contradicts emo masculine identity. I am drawing somewhat from the work of an undergraduate named Alex Merced, who wrote a paper suggesting that emo masculinity is resistant to jock masculinity. Alex is also interviewed below and he helped me to get a feeling for the emo scene in Bowling Green.

In her book *Jocks and Burnouts*, Penelope Eckert gives a good discussion of the social categories that high school students operate on. Eckert is an associate professor in linguistics from Stanford who has done research into the use of social categories by youth. As the title of the book suggests, she divides the student population into jocks and burnouts which she uses as two very broad well used categorizations of students. She writes of jocks and burnouts:

Most of us who have attended an American public school recognize the opposition between a ‘leading crowd’ (Coleman 1961), who enthusiastically participate in, and receive sponsorship of, the school; and a ‘rebellious crowd,’ who reject the hegemony of the school… (Eckert 2).

These jocks or “leading crowd” as she suggests are the elite of the high school, and I believe that this can be extended to the athletes and fraternity brothers of a college campus. They represent the dominant social group of the high school and hence the dominant representations of their gender. For men, this is representative of a masculinity that is similar to Connell’s construction of hegemonic masculinity or “men of reason.” This group includes not just the traditional athlete, but also those who perform well in school and value the institutions of the school in an attempt to advance their careers. Athletics as well as participation in other extra-curricular activities are central to this construction of jocks. This section of the student population subscribes to the institutional construction of student life. Eckert states, “The high school Jock embodies
an attitude- an acceptance of the school and its institutions as an all-encompassing social context…” (Eckert 3). These individuals represent the all-American high school and therefore subscribe to conventional norms of both student life and identity.

Eckert makes a binary distinction between the jocks and their opposite, the burnouts, who are stereotyped as the drug-taking section of the student population. She writes that a more proper definition is, “these alienated adolescents are ‘burned out’ from long years of frustration encountered in an institution that rejects and stigmatizes them as it fails to recognize and meet their needs” (Eckert 4). The author is not attempting to argue that all students fit into one category or the other, but that these two labels represent the extremes of high school culture. I think that emo represents a similar kind of feeling of not fitting into the particular categories of such institutions. As Eckert argues, “But just as there are jocks who are not athletes, there are Burnouts who do not do drugs” (Eckert 3-4). On a broad level, these two categories represent the middle and working classes respectively for jocks and burnouts. Because of emo’s popularity with high school students and the manner in which it addresses high school issues, it represents an interesting element of this binary. For, as I have suggested, emo represents the middle class, so it is difficult to fit it into the culture of the burnouts which is predominantly working class. Furthermore, emo’s resistance to conventional masculinity and hence conformity to certain norms of the institution puts it in conflict with the dominant jocks. Therefore, within middle class circles, emo represents a rejection of jock identity as well as a refusal to necessarily accept burnout identity.

Emo: Gender Maneuvering Lite?
As I have mentioned in my first chapter, I am using Mimi Schippers notion of “gender maneuvering” as an important part of understanding the masculinity presented by emo musicians. She suggests of gender maneuvering:

If, however, we decide to buck the rules and refuse to follow expectations for femininity and masculinity in a given setting, we could possibly disrupt the relationship between masculinity and femininity. If done collectively, a group of people could possibly set a new course for gender structuration. This what I call gender maneuvering (Schippers xii).

By using the idea that gender can be constructed through a particular kind of performance, Schippers suggests that individuals within a musical community have the ability to disrupt gender construction. Schippers looks at what she terms “the alternative hard rock” scene in Chicago in the middle 1990’s. Schippers’ discussion looks at both the way in which the performers challenge hegemonic gender constructions and the actions of the audience members.

Within scene members day to day interactions in clubs and bars, there is a kind of unspoken code in which women are protected from unwanted advances of men. As she writes:

As I suggested earlier, there is an understanding among alternative hard rockers that schmoozing women is sexist, intrusive, and therefore obnoxious. Because of these subcultural norms, there is almost a hyperawareness of men approaching women they do not know in order to strike up a conversation (Schippers 51).

Within this subculture, both men and women follow particular rules to approaching one another that allow for minimal amounts of harassment. In cases where these norms of this particular music scene are broken, those men (or women) who break them are generally ridiculed. In one case, a group of women Schippers is studying are approached by two men who attempt to hit on them. In both cases the groups of women ridicule the men’s attempts at approaching them directly through the use of pick up lines. Schippers
suggests of these situations, “In both situations, the relationship between masculinity and femininity shifted and thus the symbolic meaning of the interaction changed… The women asserted an alternate gender structure for the interaction, and a different set of gender relations emerged” (Schippers 87). As this short passage indicates in many face-to-face interactions within this subculture, women and men will turn the gender hierarchy around to their own advantage. The members do not tolerate normal bar behavior in which men approach women and attempt to pick them up. Rather, they attempt to create a zone in which women do not feel that they will constantly be hit on by men.

The above is just an example of the way that the subculture that Schippers studies provides an arena in which gender roles are directly challenged. In contrast, emo culture does not necessarily directly critique masculinity, but its performers and audience promote a much more expressive masculinity. I believe that although this is not necessarily the same self-conscious political gender critique, it still qualifies as an act of gender maneuvering. Rather than simply accepting the hypersexual male rock star standards, the extreme emotional expression of pain that the artists deal with serves as a critique of more emotionally repressed modes of performance. Furthermore, the idea of emotional connection with the audience is an important element of an emo performance. As I show below, there is an emphasis by these artists on connecting emotionally with their audiences. Nick of the band The Drama Summer particularly emphasizes this idea when he talks about what he hopes to express during a performance. Emotional connection with the audience is a stereotypically feminine mode of performance. Not only are they trying to connect with someone but they are opening themselves up
emotionally in an attempt to do so. This challenges ideas of male expression and allows for the possibility of change in the manner in which men are able to express themselves.

**The Drama Summer: “Do you think we’re Emo?”**

Below I address several in-depth interviews with musicians that I conducted as part of my ethnographic research. Although I have attempted to ask the musicians many of the same questions that I ask the audience members, I have also included many questions about the bands themselves.

I titled this section with a question that Nick, who is the lead singer of the Drama Summer, asked me after the band had finished playing. The first interview that I performed was with the band The Drama Summer, who are a band from Findlay, OH. Findlay is roughly 45 minutes south of Toledo, which means they are from an area that is 30 minutes away from me in Bowling Green. I was introduced to them by Alex Mercred who is an undergraduate popular culture student with our department, the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University. Alex, a longtime emo fan, also does booking for Howard’s H Club, the local hot spot for the music scene. Alex suggested that The Drama Summer was the most popular emo band in the area, and also that the scene did not have as many emo bands as it formerly did. (I have included an in-depth interview with Alex later in this work.)

I met The Drama Summer on October 15\(^{th}\) outside of Howard’s H Club where I was able to interview 3 of the band members. Throughout the interviews Nick, their lead singer does most of the talking as he is obviously the most articulate and is therefore de facto spokesperson. Nick is dressed in a grey sweatshirt with a Hawthorne Heights T-shirt underneath, and he is also wearing tight jeans that he later reveals to me are his
girlfriend’s. When I question as to why he wears women’s jeans he suggests that they are more comfortable than men’s. Tight women’s jeans are a fairly well-known part of emo style, but it is unclear how this trend began. Also, his hair is cut in what is generally termed to be an “emo haircut”, which means that it is long enough in front to fall over one side of the face and cover one eye. Nick is blond but it looks as though he has chemically altered his hair to make it more of a bleached blond color. Nick himself is skinny and short, but his demeanor is very friendly and lacks the stereotypical emo disenchantment. It also important to note that in later performances that I viewed, Nick had cut his hair shorter and grown a beard so he no longer exhibited a look that was stereotypically emo.

I begin by asking what each of the group members’ class backgrounds are and they all replied that they are middle class and that they are in their early twenties. I begin by asking the group what their own definition of emo is:

Nick: I guess what I think it stands for is emotional. I guess all music’s emotional but I guess it’s extra emotional.

Although Nick’s answer is not particularly enlightening, it does follow what many of the respondents who are both performers and audience members have said. Many do not know how to define emo because of its status as a largely undefined genre, particularly as a result of mainstream “distortions.”

I then attempted to delve deeper into this subject by asking what they as a band were attempting to express.

Nick: A lot of our music, like lyrically I guess is the typical emo music, [short pause] is about heartbreak and relationships. I would say but in our music we tried to, um, do something a little different. Lyrically we’ve written anything from relationships to just, uh, suicide type of serious topics. Pretty much we just don’t really have a particular topic we always talk about [looks at co-band members].
Kevin: Anything that promotes somebody to feel.

Nick: Life and death. We wrote a song about business that we don’t play anymore.

Surprisingly, Nick openly admits that they play what could be considered emo music, which is not commonplace. As they suggest, relationships and heartbreak as well as feelings of pain that come from topics such as suicide are an important part of their repertoire, but this is not because they “have to” write about these subjects. Kevin’s comment is particularly enlightening, as he has suggested that one of the most important elements of the music which they perform is feelings themselves.

I then broached the subject of their approach to women, and I would like to note that I had not yet heard either a recording of their music or their live performance. That is, I was not attempting to suggest that their music was or was not openly hostile toward women.

Nick: Uh, not really, I think our songs; I don’t think we have any angry songs. I don’t wanna say it’s towards women. You can relate either way being a man or a woman. Yeah, it’s not necessarily about love and relationships.

Anthony: Women tend to be a popular topic. We try to avoid keeping all our songs about women though

Nick: I think our last EP that there wasn’t really a song that was directly about women or relationships as your typical emo would be. I don’t really hate women when I’m writing.

Again, their responses imply that although they may occasionally express anger toward women, they are not approaching all of their songs from a standpoint of open hostility toward women. However, they do again suggest that relationships are a main theme in their songwriting and performance.
As I have suggested throughout this work, emo is often seen as a derogatory term or insult by many musicians. As a result emo has become a categorization with which few will claim. As a result, I asked them their own feelings about bands which are considered to be emo.

Nick: I don’t really listen to a whole lot of emo, but when I think of emo I think of Bright Eyes.

Interestingly, I asked Nick off tape whether he listened to such bands as Hawthorne Heights (whose shirt he was wearing), Taking Back Sunday, and Saves the Day. He said that those were some of his favorite bands, and the others agreed. Obviously, the band is more resistant to the idea that those bands they love were “emo,” which they see as a kind of slur. I followed this by asking a related question in which I asked if they resisted being called emo.

Nick: I think people just kind of get classified as emo. A lot of people just won’t listen to it if they think that. I think a lot people would think we’re emo like the way we dress or the way we look, because we wear like tight jeans. Stuff like that. I don’t know if I’d like classify us as emo. I know a lot of people would. I guess whenever I think of emo I think of whiny vocals.

Throughout this chapter, artists will reference interchangeably emo as a musical genre or subculture and emo as a style. Emo style generally involves as Nick suggests tight jeans-usually women’s- as well as a tight T-shirt or sweater, and sometimes includes a particular type of haircut. Also, as Nick suggests above, particular clothing or hairstyles do not necessarily mark one as emo, as tight jeans (but not necessarily girl’s jeans) are worn by a variety of subcultures particularly indie subculture.

Next, I discussed what the band considers to be a good performance, that is, how they are attempting to reach people.
Nick: Our lyrics can be taken in so many different ways. We write them like I’m thinking of this specific topic. I mean, the lyrics can be taken in a bunch of ways. My own goal is just to try to connect with somebody out in the crowd. I want it to be an intense performance try to make it something they won’t forget.

Kevin: something they’ll relate to their own lives in general

Nick: We have a song ‘Don’t Go,’ and a lot of people portrayed it lyrically by thinking of it as a song more about relationships. But when I wrote it at the time it actually was about losing someone to death. It’s written more of as in you lost somebody close to you.

As is apparent, the band is much more concerned with simply reaching people, than with the particular meanings of their songs. As has been suggested a big part of emo music is to have a particular type of emotional resonance with the fans. Although Nick is disputing interpretations of one of their songs, he is also suggesting that the most important element of his performance is connecting with his audience rather than conveying specific meanings of his songs.

In my final questions I explored some of the implications that the music that The Drama Summer performs has for perceptions of gender. I began by asking whether they believe through the music they perform there is a greater ability to express themselves emotionally.

Nick: I’d like to think that our shows are more intense and emotional than a normal alternative rock band that stands in front of a mic and plays their guitar. Because, we really get into it.

Interestingly, Nick has expressed distaste for alternative bands, which could easily be interpreted as a distrust of mainstream rock. Alternative rock has become an all-encompassing category for rock bands which are seen as following a tradition of music that started with grunge. It is mainly a creation of the music industry and is used to categorize those bands that do not fit into any prior categories. Such bands include Pearl
Jam, Creed, and even earlier Nirvana, and this tradition of music is seen by many as inauthentic. Nick has also emphasized once again the emotional experience that they are attempting to convey through their performances. I followed this by asking if he thought there was an increase in emotion with the type of music that The Drama Summer played.

Nick: I think that for bands that are considered to be emo, that they are more emotional in their live performance. They do weirder things then what non-emo bands do. We played with this band Friday night that people would think are emo. They can do some stuff that a non-emo band probably wouldn’t do. Like they can wear eyeliner.

Researcher: Do you think this was a positive shift?

Nick: If that’s how they’re feeling getting into the music, then I think it’s fine. They should be able to express themselves however it comes out.

Nick seems to be suggesting that bands are able to maneuver in a manner that is not available to more masculine forms of musical expression. In his early opinions they can act in ways that are not generally allowed as a result of specific sexual norms. That is, they are not constrained by the need to perform their masculinity in a particular fashion because they could possibly appear feminine. I then ask them if they consider emo bands to be more feminine.

Nick: Uh well the first time I saw Taking Back Sunday I thought he was gay. He was so feminine. I’d never heard of a guy wearing girl jeans and he had the tightest jeans on. He was prancing around onstage just acting really girly. Now it’s like the cool thing for bands to do.

Nick’s comment suggests that emo overall represents a shift in masculinity toward a less masculine approach to male performance. However, he also seems to have a great deal of ambivalence about this trend, as if the fact that it has become the “cool thing to do”.

Although Nick has formerly expressed to me that he believes emo represents a positive shift in the style of performance and expression, this comment indicates that it has
become a fad, and also that this change causes it to become far less of a positive change. For, as a result of commoditization, many bands have a tendency to be seen as selling out and hence lose much of their meaning.

**Masculinity, Soft Men and Men of Reason**

In his work, *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell looks at a group of men he refers to as “soft men.” These men are a group who have recreated their masculinity in order to create versions of themselves that is more sensitive to women’s needs and women’s issues. The particular individuals that he interviews for his work are members of the environmental movement in Australia. Connell writes that these men have made an effort to contradict hegemonic masculinity. Connell writes “The project of remaking the masculine self certainly requires a great deal of willpower in the face of derision from other men, half-shared homophobia and ambivalence from feminists…” (Connell 135). These men, who were very serious about gaining “passive non-assertive self,” worked through the relationships that were vital in forming their masculinity. Through a process of, “…reforming the self that was directed at undoing the effects of Oedipal masculinization” (Connell 135), these men were able to modify their own masculinities toward what they saw as a pro-feminist approach to masculinity. These “soft men” are interesting in that through a specific type of self-examination they are able to manipulate their masculinity positively. Through a great deal of work, these men are able to get in touch with their emotional more sensitive side.

I believe that what Connell calls “soft men” represents a form of masculinity that shares many similarities with the masculinity of emo performers. A major difference is that emo performers are not attempting to change themselves to be more sensitive to
women’s needs. Emo performers do break many norms of masculine self expression in their emotionally honest performances. However, their variation of masculinity is not necessarily an attempt to challenge the way that they approach women, but is a kind of appropriation of a stereotypically feminine form of expression. I would not argue that these men have necessarily become more sensitive to women’s issues, but it could certainly be said that their music involves a great deal of self-exploration. There is a possibility that this could lead to a more progressive approach to women and women’s issues.

In contrast to Connell’s conception of soft men is his idea of hegemonic masculinity or “men of reason.” He states, “Hegemonic masculinity establishes its hegemony partly by its claim to embody the power of reason, and thus represents the interests of the whole society; it is a mistake to identify hegemonic masculinity purely with physical aggression” (Connell 164). Connell proposes a conception of masculinity construction in which dominant forms of masculinity are found among those men who have access to particular technical abilities. The author also suggests that hegemonic masculinity is varied within itself in that there are those forms that revolve around direct dominance in professions such as the military and business and around those that depend upon technical skills. He states of these two forms, “The latter have challenged the former for hegemony in the gender order of capitalist societies without complete success” (Connell 165).

I believe that emo is a response to conceptions of hegemonic masculinity in that it allows men to transcend the boundaries that normalized masculinity has put upon them. In fact, its refusal to follow these norms can be seen as a form of resistance to the
demands of stereotypical masculinity. These performers express their emotions in a way that many of those who are considered to be “men of reason” would see as a weakness. I think what is also useful to understand the emo movement as an example of something that Lynn Sygel points on in her work on changing notions of masculinity. Sygel suggests that with the continuing women’s movement men have had difficulty adjusting to changes in both the nature of masculinity and femininity. She writes:

A diversity of ‘masculinities’ jostle to present themselves as the acceptable face of the new male order. They allow men to partake of the fantasy gratifications of phallic power and the compensatory pleasures of displaced aggression, while also perhaps sharing more ambiguous gratifications as passive objects of desire (Sygel 293).

As she shows, as a result of changing social and political environments, masculinity itself is constantly changing. According to her view men, men are continuously trying these new masculinities and they don’t necessarily a represent a positive evolution of masculinity. Emo is not a movement that attempts to improve relations between men and women; in fact many see emo identity and expression as doing quite the opposite. Emo expresses anger toward women and sometimes hatred toward women and this makes its effect on men quite problematic. Jessica Hopper, who is a writer for the zine Punk Planet, is quite damning in an article that she writes about emo. She writes:

Emo’s contentious monologue—it’s balled fist Peter Pan mash-note dilemmas—it’s album length letters from pussy-jail—it’s cathedral building in ode to man-pain and Robert-Bly-isms—it’s woman-induced misery has gone from being descriptive to being prescriptive. Emo was just another forum where women were locked in a stasis of outside observation, observing ourselves through the eyes of others (Hopper).

This is the problem with suggesting that emo represents a fundamental and positive change in the way that men present their feelings. According to this passage, emo expresses failings of pain and anger that men have as a result of dealing with their
relationships with women. According to Hopper, emo puts all the blame on the women and it stereotypes women as objects of blame and derision. I will leave this by suggesting that emo can be viewed as a step toward men expressing their feelings more fully, but that this is can only be seen as a small step in the proper direction.

**Somerset: The Problem with “Emoness”**

Another band that I interviewed is named Somerset and they are band from Minneapolis. Claudio and J.T. are the drummer and the guitarist for Somerset respectively and they are who I interview first. Claudio was dressed in a simple black band t-shirt and had black rimmed glasses and dark hair that was somewhat long. J.T. was also dressed in a black T-shirt, he was very skinny and he had both of his ears pierced. Both gave me a good background story regarding their class and upbringing. J.T. is twenty years old and is from California originally and currently lives in Minneapolis. His parents both have jobs that can be considered to be working class jobs. Claudio was born in Chile, and although his parents were teachers in Chile, they had to take working class jobs when they moved to the United States. J.T. does not indicate a strong class identity, but it seems that he is of working class background or possibly lower middle class. On the other hand, Claudio seems to have a much greater awareness of his standing in society. This could perhaps be linked to Claudio’s experiences growing up in an immigrant family. I would also like also to state that Claudio was one of two participants in this study who is not considered to be white. Throughout my research, I found emo to be a largely white male phenomenon in Northwest Ohio. Overall, both participants provided some useful insight into their backgrounds which I will address further below.
I questioned both J.T. and Claudio as to the kind of music that they felt that were performing.

Claudio: We’re a rock band, by and large there are all kinds of influences anywhere from punk rock to hardcore, but we are definitely melodic.
J.T.: There’s, uh I’d… we’re a progressive rock and roll band. There’s some pop influences and punk rock influences.

As is obvious, neither member even suggests that they are emo musicians, nor do they cite any particular bands. I think that at first they were a little bit wary of being labeled as an emo band, which made them more wary about citing influences. The use of “melodic hardcore,” is interesting in that this term is many times interchangeable with emo. All of this is representative of the fact that few bands want to be called emo, because it is often associated with bands that many consider to be inauthentic. Although it is possible that the band could be labeled emo, it is more important to stress that they identify with hardcore more.

I followed this by questioning them about their feelings about emo, and it was immediately apparent the Claudio had very strong feelings about the subject. In fact, after this first section, Claudio dominates the discussion of music.

Claudio: It’s a misunderstood musical lifestyle fashion kind of fad if you will, along the same lines of what quote grunge was in the early 90’s. It wasn’t like the bands. [short pause] It’s primarily a musical movement, but where bands didn’t set out to do this, and it was people that kind of forced it upon the band to like make them adopt this word, this tag, and this thing. So that it’s quite, [short pause] I don’t know, ironic in the sense you know. Again for example, if Nirvana did not consider themselves a grunge band, but they are the seminal grunge band. I think emo is the same thing.

Claudio illustrates the feelings that many people have about the explosion of the emo musical culture. According to him the media has grabbed onto this as a tag for certain bands, and the label has been distorted to become an almost empty signifier that
can include almost any band. Furthermore, as he suggests, a similar distortion occurred with the creation of grunge in the 1990’s. Grunge was largely created by the media, and many bands followed suit and started creating grunge music much the same way that they are creating emo. Emo is a little different because it was a term originally used in the 1980’s, but it still has been changed by the rise of marketing. Furthermore, this marketing campaign has resulted in a rise of what has become emo style or the marketing of a specific image rather than the music itself. Particularly with stores such as Hot Topic, it has become common for specific subcultures to be reduced to a particular style of clothes.

J.T.’s response is below.

J.T.: I seem to have a difference sense of it than most people. Like, it’s one of those things that no one agrees on. I have always thought of it as music that has an overtly emotional overtone, undertone, but more recently it seems to be it carries more of a stigma with it. I guess it’s like an insult.

Although he is not as negative about emo, J.T. does point out the fact that it has become a kind of term of derision within modern popular music culture. He also points out the general confusion that is very common regarding the label. Many of those bands that are termed emo are those bands that are overtly emotional, but who in many cases have also had mainstream success. Claudio continues with a similar critique of the genre.

Claudio: It’s become more pop, more acceptable and more polished and watered down emotions. Maybe a band that some people would think is emo like Taking Back Sunday, and, uh My Chemical Romance. I think those bands are terrible and they don’t move me in any way.

Researcher: What about Sunny Day Real Estate?

Claudio: For sure, they were doing way different things but they weren’t doing it with this massive marketing spectrum. These guys were doing recording for cheap which was all they could afford. They were distributing their music on
vinyl, uh but playing old old guitars. They were a totally home grown kind of thing.

Immediately following this I asked Claudio if this was a kind of scene elitism, in which those bands who had achieved a great deal of critical and financial success were immediately dismissed as debased. Claudio did not respond, but J.T. nodded his head and smiled when I asked this, which I understood to mean that Claudio does have a tendency to be elitist. Regardless, as has been suggested, Claudio is fonder of those bands who continued to follow a more independent philosophy toward music making. As with many independent musicians and fans, he exhibits a great deal of mistrust toward those bands that become mainstream successes. However, this is not to say that Claudio is being unreasonable in suggesting that the mainstream has diluted the meaning of emo and that the bands that have latched onto the label have become less meaningful.

I followed my questions about emo in general by inquiring about their feelings about the masculinity that is expressed by those bands. Although they spent a great deal of time talking about what was wrong with emo, they both had some positive comments about its importance with regard to gender.

Claudio: Yah, it’s for sure a polar opposite of modern rock that’s about getting pumped up and lifting weights playing football and drinking beer. I think um emo sometimes is about kind of admitting that, ‘hey guys have feelings.’

J.T.: Yah, I think that even if what it’s become is less legit than it started out, I guess as far as the gender issues are concerned it’s still a step in the right direction. Even if it’s a little bit phony there’s nothing wrong with guys not being what they’ve been.

Claudio: There’s nothing wrong with exposing muscle heads to poetry even if it’s shitty poetry.

I think one of the most striking features of this is interview excerpt is the similarity Claudio’s comments regarding modern rock have to some comments that Nick of the
Drama Summer made about alternative rock. Modern rock and alternative rock are both labels that have been created by the media to describe contemporary mainstream rock and they often are used almost interchangeably. Although Nick only suggested that their music was more expressive than alternative, there is a correlation between both band members’ comments. Obviously, both bands see alternative rock or modern rock as symbol of the mainstream’s homogenization of rock. However, what’s most interesting about this characterization of the modern rock scene is the fact that they suggest that the scene encourages an expression of a kind of macho hyper-masculinity. Claudio expresses an open hostility toward those bands and characterizes them as what seems to be brainless jocks. Furthermore, their characterization of emo is quite positive, as they are suggesting it allows men to be less repressed about their emotions. This fits very well with the idea that emo represents a kind of gender maneuvering in that these artists are directly challenging the status quo in this case “muscle heads.” Despite the fact that these two believe emo has also been homogenized by the mainstream, Claudio still believes that “crappy poetry” has an effect on people’s conceptions of masculinity.

I followed this by delving into issues of violence toward women that it has been suggested emo could promote. As I will suggest, emo does not necessarily openly promote the aggression toward or rape of women that can be seen in other genres, but in some cases it could easily promote a hatred or mistrust of women that could lead to violence.

Claudio: Not hatred, but distrust of women more so than in the past. Guys are like, I’ve heard people say that they are afraid of relationships.

J.T.: I think it’s a weird combination if we’re talking about where this fits in feminism. Well, I guess it’s hard to place for me because like on one hand there’s an openness that you assume would bring males and females closer together. At
the time that openness is like ‘god I fuckin hate females.’ Like, I’m finally going
to talk truthfully about women instead of acting like the suave Rock & Roll Star. I
don’t know what the end result is as far as advancing women.

Claudio is very dismissive of the attitude of emo singers, and he believes that they
promote an attitude that suggests that men should be afraid of women. This is not
necessarily an invalid critique considering the large amount of emo songs that approach
the subject of extremely painful ends to relationships. J.T.’s comments show a very
interesting ambivalence toward the genre’s effects on gender issues. As he suggests, on
the one had emo allows men to be much more emotionally open, but at the same time the
emotional openness is usually regarding the pain that is related to their relationships with
women. However, he does seem to believe that there is potential for this to change the
way that men and women interact with one another.

In a later interview with a fan of the band, the rest of the band continued to listen
and they continued to comment upon my questions. I first address those comments that
were made by those band members who had already been interviewed. I then focus on
some of the comments that were made by a third band member, Matt. Furthermore, in
the chapter where I deal with audience members, I address the responses that were given
to me by the fan who was present during this interview. As I was interviewing I
mentioned that I felt that emo was a very middle class phenomenon and Claudio added
the comment below. I would also like to note that throughout this response, Claudio
seemed to be very annoyed with the middle class kids that he was talking about.

Claudio: Not to sound petty as shit, but when you look at lower class kids they’re
not crying about breakups. They’re crying because they don’t have food on the
table, and so they’re crying about real social and political problems, like rap
music addresses. Lower class inner city youth is going to identify with that.
Someone in the suburbs with plenty of food in the fridge and plenty of clothes in
their closet, the only thing they find to feel sad about is because their girlfriend dumped them.

Claudio is addressing what he sees as the inauthenticity of the pain that these middle class musicians are expressing. That is, in his opinion the problems that such musicians express are not real problems, but because they have things so easy they almost have to stretch to find anything in their lives that is going badly. Although I personally believe that Claudio is being overly dismissive, Claudio does make a good argument for the class-based nature of emo. He is correct in his assumption that those middle class kids do not have the same problems of their inner city counterparts. However, the fact that they are expressing their masculinity differently possibly points to a positive shift in middle class identity. This comment is an interesting contrast to Claudio’s prior statements that emo represents a positive shift in masculinity.

Matt is the bassist for Somerset and he is 22 years old. As with the rest of the band members in Somerset, he resides in Minnesota. Matt did not participate as much as the other band members but he still had several interesting comments to make about emo. I asked the group about whether they thought that the shift in masculinity of emo artists was a positive shift.

Matt: I personally think that’s a good thing. That males and guys in society are supposed to hold in emotions. I think that it’s stupid and unhealthy that they bottle everything up. I think that it’s maybe allowing guys to open up a little more.

As with many of the respondents, although he does not seem to enjoy listening to emo, he thinks that the lyrics and performance style allows men to have a greater degree of flexibility when it comes to expressing their emotions. Also, he implies that emo stretches many of society’s norms by allowing men to express emotional pain.
I then asked them if they felt that the lyrics which expressed anger toward women caused men to be fearful of or even violent toward women.

Matt: I think there are a bunch of bands like this who have lyrics that are hateful toward women, but I think its meant to be more figurative as a way to describe the pain that they’re, like, going through. I think it could be taken seriously. I mean I’m sure there are people who do, but I don’t think that most people do. They realize it’s a metaphor.

In addressing the problematic lyrics that emo artists create, he states that he believes that these men are not directly expressing anger toward women. Rather the hatred they express is meant to be more metaphorical. He does, however, acknowledge that the audience may not understand the subtleties. I have dealt with this idea more in depth in the audience section of this work, but for now I would like to stress that this is an important point.

Below I will discuss the problems with assuming that emo masculinity represents a positive shift in masculinity through the use of lyrical analysis.

The Dark side of the emo masculine identity

Although I have argued for a somewhat positive view of the masculinity that is performed by emo artists there are still a great many who approach women in a hateful and misogynistic way. As Andy Greenwald suggests:

The way typical emo bands sing bout women is a volatile mixture of Ian Mackaye’s strident Puritanism- as in sex equals fear, failure, and weakness-and self-obsessed sexist solipsism. If mid-nineties emo was more about not meeting girls or running away from them, emo’s national generation dumbed it down and amped it up. Now emo songwriters were one-sided victims of heartbreak, utterly wronged and ready to sing about it, with women having no chance to respond. (Greenwald 133)
This is an apt description of many of those in the most recent wave of emo in which male performers go to great lengths to portray the women who have wronged in the most negative light. Greenwald emphasizes the fact that emo has been “dumbed down” as a result of its nationwide mainstream appeal. In many cases it has become heavier and its artists have become more likely to write extremely hateful songs. In the most extreme cases this can include an extremely graphic description of acts of physical violence. This is not commonplace, but even the less negative typical songs are cases in which men can use their position in front of a microphone blame women for their problems.

As I pointed out in my introduction, emo already portrays a great deal of emotional turmoil, and in many cases been changed to express violence and hatred toward women. Andy Greenwald looks at the lyrics of Saves the Day as an example of this, and I have used lyrics from the band for similar reasons in the passage from the song “At your Funeral” below.

This song will become the anthem of your underground.
You're two floors down getting high in the back room.
If I flooded out your house, do you think you'd make it out,
or would you burn up before the water filled your lungs?
And at your funeral I will sing the requiem

The bitterness of the author is apparent, but he also expresses a desire to flood his (presumably) his girlfriend’s house just to see what happens. This is the kind of violence that has become more commonplace in recent emo artists’ songs. Saves the Day Lead singer Chris Connelly’s lyrics have a tendency to take this very morose shift toward violence and talking about death as is obvious with a later verse in the same song. As a result of a likely betrayal or perhaps simply for morbid satisfaction he imagines that he will try to drown his ex and then sing at her funeral.
My Chemical Romance has been one of the most visible emo bands in the past two years, with millions of copies of their albums sold. In a manner similar to many of their contemporaries, this band has many lyrics that are questionable in their approach to women. The following passages are from the song “Drowning Lessons” which is from their 2002 album "I Brought You My Bullets, You Brought Me Your Love."

I dragged her down I put her out
And back there I left her where no one could see
And lifeless cold into this well
I stared as this moment was held for me
A kiss goodbye, your twisted shell
As rice grains and roses fall at your feet
Let's say goodbye, the hundredth time
And then tomorrow we'll do it again

I never thought it'd be this way
Just me and you, we're here alone
And if you stay, all I'm asking for is
A thousand bodies piled up
I never thought would be enough
To show you just what I've been thinking

The lyrics are obviously written in a very metaphorical manner, but the references to killing a woman and killing multiple people are not easily reconciled as meant totally in jest. The addressee of these lyrics is obviously talking about killing a female with “I dragged her down I put her out.” Interestingly, much in the same manner that the Saves the Day song previously discussed, her death involves water and drowning. Unlike the prior song, this does not seem to be directly speaking of revenge, but a song about love driving someone crazy. This is not the revenge violence, but something resembling an obsessive insanity that drives one to kill.

In his work on heavy metal, Robert Walser conducts an analysis of gender that has many similarities to my own analysis of gender in emo. Walser uses John Fiske’s
ideas to suggest that heavy metal is, “‘identity work’ - among other things, for ‘accomplishing gender.’ That is, notions of gender circulate in the texts, sounds, images, and practices of heavy metal, and fans experience confirmation and alteration of their gendered identities through their involvement with it” (Walser 109). As Walser writes, through a particular type of performance, heavy metal artists are able to manipulate and alter their gendered identities. This can easily be likened to the way that emo musicians manipulate their gender during performances. Walser explores several strategies that heavy metal musicians use in their approach to gender. Again drawing from one of John Fiske’s works, he writes that the fantasy of exscription is, “a world of action, excess, transgression but little real violence, one in which men are the only actors, and in which male bonding among members of the ‘hero team’ is the only important social relationship” (Walser 114-115). Walser uses the example of Judas Priest’s video for “Heading Out to the Highway”, which he writes is a video in which, “There are no women to be seen in this video, and what is there to be seen- the cars, the road, the leather, the poses- have long been coded as symbols of male freedom, linked as signs of aggressiveness and refusal to be bound by limits” (Walser 115). Through this fantasy of a world in which men do not acknowledge the existence of women, these artists have created a homo-social fantasy in which they act as they believe men should act.

A very similar homosocial fantasy can be found in the music of emo as Andy Greenwald explores in his study of emo. He states, “On ‘3,720 to 1,’ The Benjamins, another young Drive-Thru band sing about a fantastical mission that’s really a thinly veiled Dear Jean letter” (Greenwald 134). In much the same manner as the heavy metal artists in Walser’s study, emo artists fantasize about a world without women, but in this
case in a much more juvenile manner. However, unlike the heavy metal artists in Walser’s work, these artists are using this homo-social fantasy as a way to get away from women. Greenwald continues:

By couching their fear of commitment of a juvenile space fantasy the band is not just celebrating nostalgia, it’s living it like a code. Safe in their band world from the female Scyllas and Charyrbdises that lurk outside of it, The Benjamins choose to watch *Star Wars* again… This sort of emo with its female phobia celebrates perpetual adolescence (Greenwald 135).

As Greenwald suggests, emo tends to employ a much more juvenile approach in which the male singers have a wish to revert to a much more child-like state. Again, the fantasy is one in which women are absent and the men are free to act without the bonds of relationships or women in general. However, it is less about men than it is about regressing to boyhood fantasies. This sort of attitude promotes a fear of women and a fear of romance relationships, and as he suggests it celebrates the fear of women.

Overall, there are various themes that emo expresses that have the potential to promote a very negative attitude toward women. In these cases, the shift toward a more expressive masculinity does not necessarily promote a more positive version of masculinity. Rather, it almost makes it possible for a more hateful and sometimes fantasy-driven form of expression to be employed by emo artists.

**Song Analyses**

In this section I would like to address the music of the three bands whose performance I have analyzed in a later section. Through this analysis I will be able to give a broad idea of the type of themes that emo musicians deal with.
Dashboard Confessional: Screaming infidelities

Many of Dashboard Confessional’s songs follow a vocal pattern that is similar to this particular track. That is, Chris Carrabba sings in a low breathy voice and eventually crescendos in the refrain where he sings in a high pained falsetto. This formula is not limited to only Dashboard Confessional, but it can also be found in many other bands of the genre. Chris’s vocals are accented with the chords of an acoustic guitar that he plays as he sings. Although the sound of the band becomes more diverse and includes drums and bass later in his career, this is an early track that is only Chris and his guitar.

Dashboard’s music has a sound that does not follow the same punk or hardcore aesthetics of many other bands in the genre. Chris Carrabba does have roots in the punk scene in Florida where he got his start as a musician, but mostly Dashboard’s sound is a much lighter indie rock sound, with some punk influence on the vocals. Most of Chris’ songs seem to read like broken hearted love letters that he is writing to a lost love one. Below I have included the text for the song “Screaming Infidelities” as well as an analysis of the lyrics.

“I’m missing your bed
I never sleep
Avoiding the spots we'd have to speak,
And this bottle of beast
Is taking me home

Almost immediately this song delves into themes of loss and missing someone else, of avoiding thinking about that loss. “Avoiding the spots we’d have to speak” is obviously a reference to attempting to avoid thinking about if not literally talking to someone. “This bottle of beast” is likely a reference to drinking, or possibly going home with a woman who is drunk. I think a likely alternative interpretation of this line would
be that he is going home alone with himself and the bottle of beast is his own wounded psyche.

I'm cuddling close
To blankets and sheets
But you're not alone, and you're not discreet
Make sure I know who's taking you home.

I'm reading your note over again
There's not a word that I comprehend,
Except when you signed it
I will love you always and forever.

He speaks of knowing with whom she is going home as if she is still cheating on him, almost as if the relationship continues but he knows that he has lost her. The use of the note again shows another memory of the woman who has left and for whom he pines.

Well As for now I'm gonna hear the saddest songs
And sit alone and wonder
How you're making out
But as for me, I wish that I was anywhere with anyone
Making out.

I'm missing your laugh
How did it break?
And when did your eyes begin to look fake?
I hope you're as happy as you're pretending.

At this point, the song crescendos and Chris begins to sing a high urgent falsetto as he sings about sitting alone listening to sad songs. The third and fourth line have a double meaning with the use of making out, for on one hand it could mean kissing someone passionately and it also means how one is doing. Again he refers to lying with “eyes begin to look fake”, and happy as you’re pretending. Its interesting that the lyrics continuously switch from past to present tense, and this is more than likely used as a way
of emphasizing how the subject of the song still has not been able to deal with the pain as if they were still together.

    I am alone
    In my defeat I wish I knew you were safely at home

    I'm missing your bed
    I never sleep
    Avoiding the spots where we'd have speak, and
    This bottle of beast is taking me home.

Defeat is a major theme in emo, in that many artists sing about having been defeated or giving up because they have been wronged in a relationship. Despite the pain that has been caused the subject of the song still expresses concern about the safety of the woman he is singing about. I suspect that this also refers to the fact that if he did know that she was safe at home, she would also likely be with him. Again he reiterates the loneliness he feels after she has left him.

    Your hair, it's everywhere.
    Screaming infidelities
    And taking its wear.

[Repeat Four times]

The final verse is song in the similarly high falsetto but with an emphasis that is pained and the loudest point of the song. Again, this stanza focuses on the reminders of infidelity and cheating that are seen by the subject of the song. In this particular song, the author presents himself as the victim who is virtually helpless as a result of the loss of a woman. Not has he lost her, but she has cheated on him on him as a result and he is questioning the reason for this happening.

    Drama Summer Lyrics
Below I have added the lyrics to the two songs on the e.p. that The Drama Summer created as a result of their first recording session. The title (“We Make Rejection Look so Good”) of this song itself says a lot about what the emo fans want as far as what is seen as desirable for the members. Although the title is meant to be ironic, I think it suggests that the idea of emo culture is to turn ideas of rejection and loss into something attractive and to be desired. This subculture values the ability to express oneself fully and to do so in a manner that is considered to be attractive.

“We Make Rejection Look so Good” by The Drama Summer
You always said, that fate would bring us together, but fate can’t do it, without a little E is for Effort. So don’t be scared, invest a little bit of anything into anyone, but nothing into us.

A fairly simple first verse, the themes in this song are rather unsubtle as they suggest that the object of the song should try harder to make the relationship work. Like the title, the song is fairly ironic, suggesting that it is useless to put any effort into the collective us, which is likely the band.

Is it really worth our time, to tell right from wrong, because this feels so right. x2.

The refrain suggests that the subjects of the song should not over think their relationship but do what feels right initially. It as if it has been over thought already, more than likely as a result of the author not being able to make his move, and the woman who he is speaking to not doing so either.

Make your move right now, and make it fast somehow. I’m sorry for not doing it right, and I’m sorry but you didn’t try. If we gotta work hard, let’s not hide, why waste time with our precious lives.
Is it really worth our time, to tell right from wrong, because this feels so right. x2. Make a move!
Is it really worth our time, to tell right from wrong, because this feels so right x2.

Again the author is suggesting that the relationship should begin quickly without too much thought. It is interesting but it would seem that this is sung from a masculine point
of view and that the author does not feel that he can make the move on whomever the
woman he is speaking of is. This is a classic emo theme, the inability of the male to act,
but also singing from a very lovesick point of view. The “soft male” is definitely
represented by this song, for it is by no means macho or aggressive but very passive. At
the same time this song does have a very punk somewhat frustrated feeling that are
apparent in the vocals.

Somerset

As I mentioned, Somerset is a band that I would not necessarily call emo, but a
band that does share many similarities with emo. At most, they have emo motivations for
their sound and represent a more mature sophisticated step beyond emo. Particularly in
reading their lyrics, I found them to be melancholy in nature, but with a far less focus
upon relationship and broken heartedness. The song I chose is interesting because it still
expresses a similar feeling of hopelessness or morose sadness while at the same time
talking much more metaphorically about a woman. This song is reminiscent of many of
the songs that were written by the band Thursday who are a screamo band who write
songs with this same sense of impending doom.

“All You Are” by Somerset
Did you believe that this could end with you still winning?
All things so given will return
Are those decisions over you head undermining
The last pathetic bit of conscience retained

The song begins with something resembling a reggae beat on the drums and the guitars,
and the lead singer’s (Matt) singing slowly and in a falsetto voice. The first four lines
suggest that the subject of the song is hoping that someone, likely a woman gets what she
deserves. The use of “you still winning” suggests that he is waiting for the actions she
took to have an affect on her. The reference to conscience further enforces this idea that the person that this song addresses should feel some kind of guilt as a result of her actions.

All you are is nothing anymore
Love won’t stay, wading in decay
When conscience dies, justice still will live
You will get everything you give

Can a man sober from such thickened disillusion?
When it’s the reason that his heart ticks?
Can life resolve from sour notes all struck so knowing
They are doomed to exist in torment and shame

The refrain talks first about the decay and loss of love as a result of the actions of the woman that the song is talking about. The anger of the addressor of the song is apparent as he suggests that the person he is speaking of now means nothing. The song never directly refers to a woman, but it is likely that this was the subject of the song. Also the line about conscience suggests that despite the fact that the subject of the song has been wronged he will get justice.

All you are is nothing anymore
Love won’t stay, wading in decay
When conscience dies, justice still will live
You will get everything you give

Need a path to lead me home again
There’s no map to tell me where I am
So I’ll just find someone to use

All you are is nothing anymore
Love won’t stay, wading in decay
When conscience dies, justice still will live
You will get everything you give

All you want: abuse
Again the author is trying to find himself after what is presumably a messy breakup, or at least breakup that resulted from a betrayal. The author is lost a result, and the remedy is to “just find someone to use” seems to be a fairly sexist notion. The assumption is that “finding himself” is equivalent to finding someone else to be with, or in this case taking advantage of someone. I don’t think the author means for this to mean taking advantage of someone in the sense of sexually assaulting them, but more in the sense of betraying a woman’s trust. The final line of the song “All you want: abuse” could easily be misread as a suggestion that the woman the song addresses wants to be hurt in the sense of being assaulted. Again, it doesn’t seem this is necessarily the intent, but rather that the person has brought abuse in the sense of hatred on herself through her own actions.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have looked at my interviews which explore the opinions of emo performers. Through a discussion of many of the issues that are present in this type of music I have attempted to describe its meaning with regards to masculinity, its approach to women and a variety of other topics. I have also attempted to highlight the very contentious nature of this genre and the reasons for this. Through an exploration of often opposing viewpoints I have also been able to show a variety of opinions on the authenticity of this music. Finally, through a discussion of the meaning of several of the lyrics, I have shown the sometimes very volatile nature of the music. This has allowed me to show that the meaning of this phenomenon does not always reflect positively upon
the performers, nor does it always represent a positive shift in their performance of masculinity.

In the following chapter I have described the performances of several emo artists. In doing so, I will be able to show the way that such performances exhibit a particular alternative approach to masculinity. Because I was able to view both a mainstream and an underground performance I have also been able to contrast and compare these performances. Through this comparison I have been able to show the difference in the community interaction in these two types of shows. Furthermore, this description has allowed me to explicitly describe the way that both performers and audience members behave at such a performance. By doing so, I have shown how a particular performance style as well as a particular reaction by the audience promotes this alternative approach to masculine gendered identity. This has allowed me to explicitly illustrate how gender maneuvering onstage at an emo concert is performed by emo artists.
Chapter 3: Performance Analysis

Introduction

Throughout this chapter I describe and analyze the performances of several bands that have been categorized as emo. Again, I am only using this label for the purposes of this work, as some of these bands do not want to be labeled as emo bands. Through a discussion of their performances, I hope to better explore the manner with which they perform their identities particularly when it comes to gender. Furthermore, through a description of audience behavior, I show the ways in which members of this musical community respond to performances. Through a discussion of both mainstream and local acts I am able to explore the distinction between mainstream emo and those bands which have not signed to major labels. As many of my interviewees suggested, as emo has gained popularity, many fans believe that the music has become homogenized and inferior. Many also believe that emo has become a genre that is marketed and created for a younger and younger audience. Following the pattern of my interviews, I describe those local bands whom I have interviewed as well as one mainstream band. All of these opinions are important to my analysis which will include Dashboard Confessional, a band that is demonized by a good majority of the independent community. Rather than following a similar line of criticism, I show how all the band’s whose performances I have witnessed are representative of a particular form of masculine expression.
An important element of this chapter that I wish to stress is the differences between those shows that are underground shows and the one mainstream show. In my description of the performance I will contrast local more underground acts with the performances of nationwide and mainstream Dashboard Confessional. This will allow me to contrast the approach to performance of mainstream acts and underground emo acts.

**General Description**

Although I give a description of 3 bands below, there are also many bands that I have not been able to address completely. I still am not addressing all of the concerts, because there was a great deal of similarity in between many of the shows I visited. I will broadly address some of the bands because I did not take notes that fully described these performances. I feel that their performances are important to this study, but I am not able to fully address them in detail. The first band that I went to see was a band named Chiodos who are from Davison, Michigan and are what is referred to as “screamo.” This band’s songs involved unintelligible screamed lyrics that were reminiscent of yells of anguish. The lead singer wore eyeliner and had dyed black hair that was long enough in the front to cover one eye. This was the heaviest band that I viewed over the course of my research, and the crowd responded in variety of ways. Because the band was playing in a lineup with a variety of bands with various styles and forms, many members of the crowd were annoyed when they heard this bands set. However, there were several members of the audience that had a very emo look to them with piercings, dyed hair, and tight jeans. Several of these members danced around wildly and flailed their arms or they pushed into each other in a mosh pit style form of
appreciation. In contrast to the Dashboard show, this crowd generally seemed to have a more subcultural style, and they showed their appreciation in a more emphatic manner.

Another show that I do not have detailed notes on was a larger show on November 5, and what was interesting about it was the behavior of the audience. This show included The Drama Summer as well as several other bands of similar style. At this show, the audience participation included a mosh pit, in which audience members formed a circle in which they rammed vigorously into one another. The intent is not to harm one another, and particularly in this case the audience members were not as violent as they could have been. In contrast to the Dashboard Confessional show that I discuss below, this show seemed more like an authentic punk performance. Along with the moshing there was a wild dancing similar to that of the Chiodos show. The show also had more kids who had punk style of dressing. There were a variety of dyed hair such as pink, green, purple and orange as well as several audience members with a variety of facial piercings (nose lip or septum).

**The Drama Summer**

Howard’s club is where the first The Drama Summer performance and the Somerset performance were held. This is club that is split between two rooms: one side contains a small stage that rises 2 or three feet off of the ground and the other room (where the entrance is) is just a long bar and it includes several video games. The maximum capacity of the venue is between 150-200 persons at a time, so Howard’s cannot support major shows. In contrast to the Dashboard Confessional show which was held on a basketball stadium owned by the University, this venue makes the bands very accessible and it is a much more intimate setting. The room of Howard’s that has the
stage on one at the front has a bar running down one side and several stools that many audience members sit on during a performance. Along with two pool tables, there are also 5 picnic benches that sit at the end of the room that is opposite the stage. On two of these benches the bands for the night sit there merchandise which can include records, t-shirts and buttons. On the first night that I saw The Drama Summer they had a table of merchandise set out and after my interview with them they gave me a burned copy of two of their songs. Also, on another of the benches sits the control panel for the sound system where someone from Howard’s adjusts the sound for each band. Because of its lack of seating, most audience members at Howard’s stand throughout the show. The stage itself is only 15-25 feet across and only about 2 or 3 feet off the ground which is enough to support a band but does not leave a great deal of extra space onstage for elaborate performance.

The first night that I saw the Drama Summer their set came after a variety of bands only some of whom were emo or punk. Each band played only a half hour set in order to fit 8 or 9 into the 4 hour time period that the show went on (10pm-2am). The show started with Nick, the lead singer somewhat bashfully announcing that they were the Drama Summer. He then congratulated the bands that played before him and thanked the concert promoter (in this case Alex Merced) and the audience. The audience cheers in response and Nick says a few words about the band being from Findley and then mentions the first song and begins. Nick, who is obviously the center of attention is slim and short, and seems quite enthusiastic to be playing. It is immediately apparent that despite the fact their songs explore themes of broken relationships and sometimes even death, they are very energetic if not light hearted in their delivery. During the first song,
Nick does jumps about the stage and dances to the music that he is singing. Nick is very light on his feet and he almost seems to be skipping around the stage as he sings. The rest of the band is very energetic and they all do their own dances with their instruments and when the songs come to a crescendo they will jump together as they strum their instruments. As the first song comes to a close Nick takes a breath and says thank you and again says a few words about the next song. Between each of the 8 songs that the band plays during night they spend some time chatting with the audience often making jokes that the Bowling Green crowd will understand. At the end of their performance they began packing their instruments away and several people went up onstage and shook hands with the band. They seemed to know on another and the band was very congenial toward their audience after they were done performing. Nick came offstage and asked me how I liked their performance and I shook hands with him as well and complimented his performance.

The Drama Summer is a band whose performances I viewed on several occasions in which the band was included as part of larger show that included many bands of varying stylistic similarity. Despite the somewhat stylistic disparity of the bands, there was definitely a community of musicians that knew one another. Unlike many other contemporary emo bands, The Drama Summer did not put on the façade of being extremely tortured and in pain as a result of their emotional instability and relationship problems. Their performance style was much more energetic and pop influenced, with the lead singer Nick dancing around quite animatedly to the music. In the context of a performance of masculinity, their performance suggests that they are performing a particular type of masculinity. That is, the band dressed in a characteristically emo
fashion with tight women’s jeans and various ensembles including band t-shirts, hooded sweatshirts, and in the bassist’s case what looked like an army vest. It is important to note that this is typical emo fashion, which makes it problematic to assume that their dress necessarily is indicative of a particular masculinity. Overall they have not presented a masculinity which would be considered aggressive or dominant, but it is a much more passive and emotional representation of masculinity.

As with many of the local shows I viewed there was a small crowd at the first Drama Summer show I attended, it was mainly composed of the other bands that were playing during the night. Regardless, many audience members danced along to the music and encouraged the band on the stage. It is possible that the limited audience was related to the day that the show was on which was a Monday night. Also, Alex Merced suggested to me that the local emo scene had been on a downswing for a while which is also possibly the reason that the turnout was sparse. Those audience members who were not members of other bands were essentially dressed the same, with tight t-shirts and jeans and many women in skirts and similar band shirts. There was also a fair amount of body piercing that I noticed, mainly lips, eyebrows and nose rings. Unlike many shows that I have seen in the Bowling Green area, the audience seemed almost entirely composed of those people who would be considered “scene”. By this I mean that most were dressed in the dress of a particular subculture, which in this case varied quite a bit. There were several who were dressed in leather coats and spiked collars that are typical of punk fans. Also, there were those who had the second hand store look of indie music fans wearing clothing such as vests or suit jackets and jeans. Finally there were those who were dressed very much like the band with tight t-shirts and women’s jeans, many of
whom I later found out were actually members of the other bands. Also, as with other shows that I witnessed, The Drama Summer played with a variety of other bands of varying genre. Throughout the show, audience members mostly stood on the floor close to the stage or sat on stools at the bar. Many also congregated in the area on the opposite side of the room or sat on the tables with their friends. Often at these smaller shows, people would grow tired of standing or tired of the loud music and would wander into the other room of the club to rest or talk with friends.

As I have discussed above, the masculinity that is represented by these artists on stage is much softer than many of their contemporaries. They seem comfortable with expressing their feelings and displaying themselves as representatives of a form of masculinity that is more emotional than hegemonic. This I would argue is just the kind of act of challenging or maneuvering within gender hierarchies that both Schippers and Judith Butler speak of. Butler suggests “If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute would be measured; there would be no true or false…”(Butler141). That is, within Butler’s conception of gender there is no stable representation of masculinity or femininity but rather gender can be changed through particular cultural acts. As I have mentioned Mimi Schippers draws upon this conception of gender to create gender maneuvering which she suggests is, “…a specific kind of interaction. When one or more people manipulate their own gender performance in order to establish, disrupt or change the relationship between or among masculinities and femininities, they are gender maneuvering” (Schippers xiii). In contrast to my own work, Schippers’ work is more concerned with a particular type of gender maneuvering
in which individuals knowingly create and promote a particular type of gender awareness that creates an environment in which women can be safe.

This framework of gender maneuvering can easily be extended to the performances that will be discussed in the section. Although emo is not necessarily a genre in which the artists are attempting to raise awareness about particular issues, through their presentation of themselves as more emotional and less representative of dominant masculinity, emo musicians maneuver to create a more expressive and less emotionally repressed version of masculinity. These artists are not directly critiquing more dominant representations of masculinity, but are simply presenting an alternative to dominant norms of masculinity. In particular, Nick’s emphasis on soft and tender vocals combined with various themes of emotional pain is a prime example of this. Instead of presenting a very macho sexualized image onstage, the personae of the members of The Drama Summer are wounded and upset. There is not the feeling of the potentially violent sexual aggressiveness that is present with many male artists. Rather, The Drama Summer and the other bands in this section present themselves to their fans as emotionally passive expressive men. Their performance style is very energetic, but it is not aggressive as is common in other hardcore- or heavy metal- influenced emo performances. As I have suggested in prior chapters, this type of emotional display has the potential to expand the kind of masculinity that can be expressed onstage.

**Somerset**

The Somerset performance was also held at Howard’s H Club, and it was the 3rd show I visited in October 2005. Again their performance was part of a larger show that
included several bands that performed for the night. Somerset is a band that reveals the ambiguity of the characteristics that are supposed to define emo as a genre. As I have shown in the previous chapter, they self-classify as a melodic hardcore band and they do not consider their music to be emo. It is not my goal to suggest that they are mistaken in their assumption that they play a particular type of music. My interview with them has shown that some of the band members are very critical of what they see as the emotional indulgence of emo. However, I believe that they share many of the aesthetics with the bands that are currently considered to be emo. Together with this, I was referred to this band by concert promoter Alex Merced who labeled them as an emo band. In light of these factors, I have included them and their performance as a method of further emphasizing the problematic nature of the category of emo.

The performance began with rather quietly announcing themselves and thanking the other bands that had played before them. Almost immediately after this the lead singer quickly jumped into a song that was fast and had rather powerfully played guitar riffs. Somerset has a much more hard-edged powerful performance style than the other bands that are mentioned here. When they started playing they the lead singer quickly started flailing around the stage and rapidly dancing to the music they were playing. Their lead singer aggressively jumps and flails as he plays his guitar and yells out the words to their songs. Not only was their style of performance more powerful, but their sound was much louder than a band like The Drama Summer because they had a band that included an extra guitar. The intensity of the band as whole did not stop throughout and by the 3rd or 4th song the lead singer had fallen to the ground a couple of times as he performed. The lead singer was very animated throughout the performance and as he
sang the thrashing of head would put his hair in his face. Because the performance was so intense there were points in the show where it seemed that the bandmembers came close to colliding with the lead singer. Their performance style seemed to emphasize a heavier harder edged image that was not necessarily present in the Drama Summer show. Between the songs the band made a few comments about themselves, but kept their comments to a minimum in comparison to other bands. As they got further into their set the actually sped up their performance style and it seemed that they had saved the harder edged songs for later in the show. They continued their very animated performance style which seemed accent the very heavy nature of their songs. As they finally came to the end of their set the lead singer gasped and exhausted “thank you” and the crowd cheered.

Although does not wish to be called emo, there are some interesting similarities between their performance and appearance to that of emo performers. For instance, lead singer had hair that is generally considered to be characteristically emo. That is, it was bleached and it was long in front so that it went over one side of his face to cover one eye. This is an important point, as it illustrates that style does not necessarily mean that one is a member of a particular subculture. This band was quite opposed to being labeled emo, even though they took on particular characteristics of the subculture. Their vocals do not necessarily have the more emotionally indulgent sound that is considered to be characteristically emo. However the sound of the lead singer’s voice still does have a higher falsetto quality that is often described as emo. They definitely have a much heavier faster sound than many emo bands, which is likely why they are often qualified as a melodic hardcore band. Their sound is very fast and guitar driven, and as they perform, the band members aggressively dance and jump along to the music. However,
aesthetically they do share some similarities with such bands as Hawthorne Heights or Taking Back Sunday. That is, like Hawthorne Heights, their music is laden with guitar riffs that are reminiscent of heavy metal and hardcore, and their use of a falsetto sing voice is also reminiscent of these two bands. But as mentioned, this could have been classified as emo, but as a result of the stigmatization of this genre, the band resists the label.

As with other shows I saw at Howard’s H Club, the bands intermingled and danced to one another’s songs throughout the night. Again there was a sense of community particularly among the bands, several of whom had been touring together. As the other bands played they often made joking comments to one another from the stage to the audience or vice versa. Several of the audience members who did not seem to be musicians spoke to the band members offstage. Because the audience once again ranged in the area of 50 fans, it is difficult to make a judgment of emo audiences based on this show. Unlike The Drama Summer show, this crowd was more representative of a hardcore audience, as the audience seemed to include many larger men who were very aggressively dancing to the music. As I watched the show, it occurred to me that perhaps the music of Somerset is aesthetically and thematically different than emo. That is, there was an obvious difference in the audience of this band and that of The Drama Summer. Admittedly, they do have a different sound and an image that does not necessarily embrace many of the characteristics of many emo bands. Their heavier sound and their refusal to entirely embrace the ethos of emo music make them more acceptable to non-emo fans.
Somerset’s performance suggested to me that they are a band that only nominally fits into the category of emo. Particularly considering that they tour with emo bands and they share some of the aesthetics of emo such as the higher singing voice and the very personal lyrics, they are likely to be put into this category. It seems that they represent a step away from what I would refer to as the emo band cliché. That is, many of the bands that have come out recently have followed the pattern of what I will call “emo homogenization”, in which the market has been flooded with bands that have been classified as emo, many of whom are seen as poseurs. To many musicians, emo has become a homogenized product of the mainstream market, rather than retaining its status as a creative music of the underground. A backlash has occurred in the punk and independent community to both the bands and personally being labeled as emo. I think that emo has pushed certain forms of a popular music in a certain direction, and as a result many of these bands are breaking away from emo while still following many of the similar aesthetic sounds. Alternatively, it could be that emo as a result of its widespread popularity has changed the way that men can perform.

The two major analyses and the smaller analyses that I have included above are examples of the way that emo performances are carried out at local venues. A major feature of these performances that I noticed was the way that almost all of the audience members were part of the greater local music community. At these smaller shows band members would cheer on the members of the other bands and would speak with one another before and after the show. There was a definite sense of community between many of the members of the bands and the audience members of both of the main smaller shows. There was not the kind of separation between the audience and the band that is
shown below at the Dashboard Confessional show. Audience members were often also band members and the audience was able to interact directly with the band members. At both shows many people seemed to know one another and they all seemed to be supporting one another. Overall, the local shows seemed much more concerned with supporting a community than with going to witness the performance of a rock star.

**Emo in the Mainstream: Dashboard Confessional**

**Fans and Setting**

During the course of my research I interviewed people and witnessed performances of mostly local Northwest Ohio bands, but I was also given the opportunity to witness a mainstream emo band. On the Bowling Green State University campus, I went to see Dashboard Confessional on October 1, 2005. Dashboard Confessional as I have mentioned briefly in other chapters, is an emo band from Boca Raton, Florida. The show was held in a gym that holds approximately 2000 people and is normally used as a basketball court. Hundreds of young adults stood outside of the show as we waited, and I was able to get a good idea of the type of people who were going to be watching the show. Overall, the crowd was composed of fans that were obviously on their way back from the homecoming game that had been played before the Dashboard show. Dashboard confessional was featured as part of the homecoming day celebration. There were a few who looked like they were dressed as emo fans with dyed black hair and t-shirts with the emblem of emo bands on them, but most were wearing standard clothes such as button down shirts. The crowd was actually fairly unruly from the beginning because several of the members had obviously had too much to drink at the game.
Once inside I got a closer look at the crowd particularly those who were sitting in the seats close by. As a whole, the crowd was mainly composed of groups of average looking college and high school students both male and female, but women seemed to predominate. There were a few people who looked like local scene members including one individual who had a suit with a school letter patch on it and an "Ohio is for Lovers" t-shirt underneath. It seemed quite possible that he was a young undergraduate student at BGSU, but it is also possible he was a high school student in Bowling Green. Many of the men looked like they had been dragged to the show by their girlfriends, and many of them sat with disinterested looks on their face throughout the show, while their girlfriends stood up and danced or cheered. The opening band was an indie rock band that included a violinist, and whose music was much more lively and positive than that of Dashboard Confessional. The speakers were rather muffled throughout this opening set, and Dashboard’s performance was also difficult to understand at times. Throughout the show the audience that was on the floor danced in the aisles, while many in the seats stood and cheered and sang with the band. Many shows I’ve been to in the past have involved the audience singing along, but this concert was unique in that the crowd sang along to every song.

When the lights went out the band was greeted with a collectively scream of hundreds of women, and many people waving their cell-phone lights either in acknowledgement or to take pictures with their camera phones. This represents an interesting shift away from the use of lighters to show your support for the band to the more technological cell-phone. Together with this, many cell phone cameras were flashing and many of the audience members were taping the show using their cell phones.
Chris Carrabba was dressed fairly conservatively in a button-down white shirt and jeans, and there was very little evidence of his punk beginnings. As they began singing, it immediately became evident that the female population of the crowd knew all of the words to all of their songs. I did see a few males who were dancing and singing along, but they were in the minority. Unlike the smaller shows that I had been to in the area, the Dashboard Confessional show seemed much less community oriented. As a result of the fact that audience members were more spread out and the crowd was larger, there was a far greater disconnect between the audience and the performers. As with many large performances there was little direct interaction between performers and audience members. However, I still felt that the show still retained the feeling emotional resonance and emotional openness that is an integral part of emo community. There was still an obvious feeling of emotional connection that was apparent in the way that the audience members sang along.

**Performance**

Throughout the performance, Chris was very conversational with the audience, and I think this related to the very participatory nature of Dashboard’s concerts. Although it is common at many shows for bands to stop singing and allow the audience to sing, in this show it was much more prevalent than I have seen at other non-emo concerts. During at least half of the songs Chris would step away from the microphone and continue playing the guitar part to allow the audience to continue the next lines of the song. Also, the lights would shine toward the crowd at many points that the band was allowing the audience response to its call. Something that I noticed about the nature of
their performance was that it did not seem to have quite as much of the rock posturing and jumping around as many rock shows have. In fact, although Chris was encouraging the crowd, throughout the show he rarely moved from his position in front of the microphone.

There were several songs on which Chris would play an acoustic guitar that had been to a microphone. These songs seemed to be the slower more intimate songs many of which were from their earlier albums. Also, on many of the songs Chris would play alone or with either only the bassist or the keyboardist playing along with him. By putting himself onstage alone or only using one other musician, the sound was much quieter and there was the feeling of greater intimacy. Chris’s singing style generally starts very soft, with a crescendo in the middle of or at the end of songs. He stands almost inert in front of the microphone only occasionally spinning his guitar or acknowledging his band as he plays. The guitar was most prevalent on a few of the songs such as “Vindicated”, which is a song that employs several electric guitars and has a much louder sound than the other songs. At the end of the show before the encore, rather than simply thanking the audience for being a good audience, Chris thanked everybody for participating, which is again very indicative of the participatory nature of their music.

On the final two songs, Dashboard Confessional had all of their entire opening act come up on stage and they played the song “Vindicated” and one other song all as one large band. “Vindicated” is a very popular song which was featured in the Spiderman 2 (2004) soundtrack, and is also one of Dashboard’s most electric songs. These two songs seemed to have the most energy of any of the songs in the show, and it involved ten musicians playing together at once. The band that had opened for them was a much more
straight indie rock band, which would suggest that Dashboard is attempting to appeal to a broader demographic. This is supported by a 2005 article in Rolling Stone which reports that Carabba scrapped the first version of their new album because “it felt too safe” and People who were already Dashboard fans probably would have liked those songs," he says, “And people who weren't would have had the same complaints as ever.”(Eliscu 1)

Furthermore a producer who has produced for both Bob Dylan and U2 has agreed to help Chris produce his new album. All of this suggests that Dashboard has been attempting to get away from its roots within the emo community, but it is questionable how effectively this attempt at creative expansion will prove to be (Eliscu 1).

One of the other notable events that happened during the Dashboard concert was that midway through their set Chris sang the words to the theme song for the popular teen drama television show Orange County (2003) or “The O.C.” This is a song that was originally done by the band Phantom Planet, and it consists almost entirely of the words “California, California, here we come”, sung over and over again. Interestingly, this television show is well known for its character that is a big fan of bands like Dashboard Confessional. Many see Seth Cohen (played by Adam Brody) as a positive popular representation of an emo boy. Carrabba’s choice of “The O.C.” highlights the high school or young college student age of Dashboard Confessional’s fan base, as this is a show that is generally targeted toward a teenage audience. Also Chris introduced the audience to a new song, and encouraged the audience to sing along by adding a “woah oh oh oh” to the end of each verse of the song. As I mentioned participation was an important part of this show, and the band used this as a way for the crowd to sing along to
the song that they did not know. Also, it allowed the fan participation to resume as they
started to familiarize them with their newer material.

Because this was homecoming there was also the gratuitous promotion of school
spirit including lots of “Bowling Green Rocks” and “you guys rule”. The band ad-libbed
a homecoming song, where they chanted amusing songs and played the guitar a little.
While I watched this it struck me as ironic that a student committee had chosen this band
as a good band to promote school spirit on homecoming. Certainly, Dashboard
Confessional has a gained a great deal of popularity in the past couple of years to the
point where they had been touring with U2. It was just the odd juxtaposition of a singer
whose main themes involve heartbreak and emotional pain, who was now essentially
taking on the position of a cheerleader. This is not to say that Dashboard is not popular
with the younger college age members of the audience, but there was just a kind of
thematic dissonance between the celebratory spirit of homecoming and the very painful
somewhat angry spirit of Dashboard’s songs. In this case it seems that the popularity and
nationwide attention that the band has received was more important than the particular
tone of their music. That is, Dashboard Confessional has nationwide popularity
particularly with the early college and high school age people, and this is likely the
reason that the band was booked for homecoming.

Dashboard’s show is interesting on many levels, not the least of which is the
collective celebration of homecoming being turned into what I think is a kind of
collective celebration of pain. Dashboard’s songs do not emphasize a positive outlook
that would seem natural for such an event, but are very much lyrical representations of
emotional anguish. Despite the fact that Chris Carabba is celebrated not only for his
music but also for his looks, Dashboard fans definitely feel that the songs have a degree of emotional resonance for them. As will be shown, in my final chapter many of the fans feel precisely this when they go to these concerts. There is a feeling that these artists have the ability to articulate the kind of problems that they as people of a certain age go through. Furthermore, the collective affirmation of this feeling allows those who participate in this type of performance to reinforce this.

**Discussion**

To explore this type of performance, I would like to look at it according to categories that were created by Simon Reynolds and Joy Press in their work *The Sex Revolts*. These authors trace the development of the “rebel” throughout the history of rock & roll. They create a binary opposition between particular representations of the male rebel in rock music: the angry and militant rock rebel on one hand and the passive mother’s boy on the other. These authors study the rebel in rock through a psychoanalytic perspective, suggesting different iterations of each major theme. Reynolds and Press use Kristeva’s analytic theory which suggests, “...melancholy is ‘the most archaic expression of a non-symbolisable, unnamable narcissistic wound’ - in other words, the loss of the mother” (Press & Reynolds 214). These authors are suggesting that this melancholic tradition, of which emo is certainly a part, can be traced to a need for or loss of the mother. Although I believe Press and Reynolds’ approach sometimes oversimplifies the idea of the rebel and men’s relationships to women, I think it is still useful for this discussion. That is, I don’t believe that emo fits perfectly into their binary of the soft male and the militant rebel male, but I do think that it is important to explore the issues that they raise.
When speaking of a melancholic tradition these authors focus upon Steven Morrissey (Morrissey for short), onetime singer of The Smiths and a solo artist. Morrissey is known for his very sad self-indulgent music, and is also cited many members of emo culture as a motivation. The authors suggest:

So think finally of Morrissey who named himself ‘sorrow’s native son’…Morrissey, ‘castrated’ by those invisible threads that attach him to his mother’s apron, and thus incapable of any other attachments; Morrissey, with only misery for company, forever licking that ‘unnamable narcissistic wound’ in the wordless falsetto that climaxes his greatest songs. (Press and Reynolds 214).

It is interesting how much the nature of Morrissey’s music reflects the ideas that are expressed by many of the bands mentioned above. The performers in emo that I have mentioned reject the militant rebel, machismo-motivated for this more yearning narcissistic expression of loss. Although the presentation of masculinity by these performers can be read as a shift toward a less repressed masculinity, an interpretation of their songs and performances through a Freudian perspective similar to the one discussed above can reveal some interesting elements of emo music.

In Dashboard Confessional there is much similarity in themes of loss and want that are expressed by and performed by the artist. As Kristeva suggests, this melancholy style of singing or a “narcissistic wound” can be related to a loss of the mother. Without becoming too thoroughly entrenched in Freudian theory, I believe that it is appropriate to suggest that emo’s sense of loss communicates a similar unconscious yearning for the mother. For, these artists continuously sing about subjects of loss and the fact that they are unlovable and alone. In their music and performances, many of these artists are almost exuberant in their expressions of loneliness, anger, and sadness. Furthermore, these artists do have the tendency to seem very narcissistic and they have a tendency to
revel in, if not embrace their own sense of tragedy. As I have suggested, this solipsistic self-obsessed approach has the potential to garner very negative opinions of women.

The performance can be seen as a visual representation many of the themes of pain and loss. The audience obviously feels a great degree of emotional resonance with the artist on stage, and their collective singing is part of that. This identification with the artist represents not necessarily a collective celebration of pain, but a collective emotional understanding of the artist’s message. This is not to say that the fans of Dashboard Confessional or Morrissey necessarily feel the same as either artist, but that they have experienced similar feelings in their own lives. In my opinion, the performance by these “soft men” serves as a way for the fans to vicariously vocalize these feelings of disillusionment. The performance and the experience of that performance serve in effect to collectively acknowledge these feelings. In a live show, you can feel the sense of a strange exuberance that the audience feels in participating in this expression of sadness. Furthermore, this music serves as a voice of these feelings of insecurity that such individuals would not otherwise have.

One of the most important elements of this type of performance and the resulting behavior of its audience is that celebratory exuberance that can be seen its fans. Emo emphasizes the emotional connection of the performers with its audience, and their identification with the feelings of the performers onstage. Obviously, all of Dashboard Confessional’s fan base are not victims of actual emotional problem, but that they are at a stage in their lives when they have experienced a great deal of emotional change. I think this is celebratory spirit is a celebration of shared experience, a celebration of understanding one another’s feelings. It seems to me that the community serves as a
kind of oasis in which they can express themselves and feel certain ways that they cannot
in the outside world. There is a kind of strength that comes from a community based
identity in which one does not feel that he or she will be judged. I think that this relates
the idea that these are outcasts of the middle class, in which they are in a position to be
powerful and accept the norms of their class but have refused to do so. I think that this
situation may apply to some degree for the mainstream Dashboard show, but I think it
certainly applies for much more community oriented underground local shows. It is in
these situations in which bonds are formed and in which individuals know one another
more fully.

In the following chapter I have laid out the results of my interviews with audience
members. This chapter allows me to explore the audience interpretation of emo, and the
way that the alternative expressions of masculine identity effects emo fans. Through
interviews at several shows, I have shown how multiple individuals interpret emo as a
genre. By understanding what these fans consider to be emo and how they interpret the
meanings of emo songs, I have been able to address many issues of gender and genre
labels that are an integral portion of my thesis. Furthermore, this chapter has allowed me
to show the way that audience members participate in this particular performance of
gender and how it affects them in their own lives.
Chapter 4: Audience Members

Introduction

Throughout this chapter I explore the responses of fans with whom I spoke with during emo performances in northwest Ohio. I have attempted to gain a more comprehensive set of viewpoints by not limiting my research simply to individuals I knew to be specifically emo fans. Although I do speak with some who identify themselves of as “emo kids”, a great majority do not. However, all of the respondents I spoke with were fans of the bands that were playing but did not necessarily identify themselves or the bands as emo. As I have already dealt with, many reject this label as a meaningless label which allows the media to stereotype particular types of musicians. During this chapter I grapple with notions of emo musical identity and their pertinence to those who self-identify as part of the subculture, and to those who refuse it outright. Furthermore, I continue my discussion of emo and masculinity in an attempt to describe the effect of show the effect of the alternative presentation of gender identity in emo performance on the audience. I have divided the responses of these audience members into categories that reflect the particular ideas of the respondents as well as the questions I asked. I have also arranged the questions in an order that is most representative of the flow of interview questions that I asked my respondents.

Audience definitions of emo

One of the major challenges that I have dealt with in my work is actually defining what emo is as a genre aesthetically and thematically. As has been suggested in earlier chapters, the definition of emo as a genre has changed as a result of many evolutions of
the genre in the past 20 years. Many also see the genre as having changed because of mainstream media cooptation of the genre. As a result, there are variety of definitions of emo and the characteristics that mark its genre boundaries. Furthermore, because of the contested nature of this genre, many have very strong opinions about what qualifies as emo and what does not. This is partially due to the fact that fans feel the need to show the validity of this music which is often dismissed outright. Furthermore, emo is generally a fairly ill-defined genre and as a result there is much confusion on its general definition.

My first respondents were James and Allie, who almost immediately identified themselves as emo fans. I met James and Allie at the first Drama Summer show that I went to over the course of my fieldwork. James was a friend of the band and the two were friends with one another. I interviewed both after I finished interviewing the band, and we continued to sit under the roof in the false storefront on Main Street in Bowling Green where I had interviewed the band.

James is a freshman at Bowling Green State University from the suburbs of Cleveland, and he has not yet declared his major. He is one of the youngest individuals I spoke with, and as a result he is a good representative of emo fan culture which is generally considered to be high school age or early college. James was tall and skinny, and he was wearing somewhat tight jeans with an old faded t-shirt that had a band decal pinned to it. He did have fairly long uncombed hair, but it was not cut in any fashion considered characteristically emo. James stuck me as the typical Ohio emo fan. That is, he was not wearing an elaborate hairstyle or piercings that you might find in a punk or hardcore subculture, but he still seemed to be a big fan of the music that we were talking
about. Many of the people I met or observed at the performances that I attended to were similar to James with a similar lack of subcultural marking. James’s parents both were in jobs which many would consider working class jobs, but James identified as a member of the middle class. This is likely related to the culture of public schools in which a majority of his peers identified as middle class, and he has a result adopted many of the norms of the class and identifies as such.

James defined emo as is written below. Although James identified himself as a fan of emo, he has a similar view of emo to those who were quite critical of emo.

James: It’s really more of a tag that’s put on a group of people. In my opinion, if you want to define this, I’d just say it’s emotional music that’s about internal thoughts rather than a lot of external shit. [short pause] My opinion if you want to define emo, it’s all about loss because most of it is not really about the positive sides. It’s more about loss. Mostly it’s about the relationships not really anything else and the teenage high school drama that goes with it. I think it’s a very valid form of expression.

As I suggested, his view does share some similarities with the criticisms that are often lodged at emo performers. Even though he is a fan, he stills seems willing to admit that emo can be a very melodramatic genre of music. However, unlike those who are critical of emo, he sees the artists’ address of “teenage drama” as a positive factor that allows him to relate their music to his own life.

Allie was a friend of James’s whom I interviewed after she came and listened to the end of my questions with James. Allie was dressed in a dark coat and a pair of jeans and had no outward markings of musical subculture. Her hair was long and put in a pony tail but there was no dye or spiky haircut that often can be found with punk fans. Allie is 21 and is a Bowling Green State University undergraduate in sociology. As with James, when I asked Allie her background she said that she was part of the middle class, but
when she spoke of her parents they proved to have more working class jobs. Her dad
works in a machine shop and her mother now works in a factory. Both of her parents are
very much blue collar workers, but like James she does not consider herself to be part of
the working class. She also had an interesting viewpoint on what the definition of emo
was.

Allie: When I think of emo I think of emotion like [short pause] I don’t know, I
think of depressing music just by its stereotype. But I don’t really think of it, just
when I hear that word that is what I think about.

Researcher: Ok, so then is it used as a slur for bands or people?

Allie: No, not necessarily I mean I can see how it could become like a stereotype.
If you see someone walking down the street wearing a band t-shirt, like if they
have a lip ring it could be like stereotypical emo, but I don’t think of it that way.
Because, I know people that listen to that kind of music, and they don’t all dress
the same way. They just listen to the same type of music, but I could see how it
could be placed that way.

As she points out, emo is generally stereotyped as sad depressing music, and it is often
ignored as inferior because of this. When she talks about stereotypes about emo fans,
Allie seems to be suggesting that emo isn’t just listened to by a particular kind of group
of people, but that a variety of people from different social groups enjoy this music. In
other words, it is not just the stereotypically depressed emo kids who wear band shirts
and get their lips pierced. This seems to be a very viable criticism particularly
considering the mix of people that were present at the Dashboard Confessional show.
There are those very dogmatic “emo kids” who are enticed by the style and have a
tendency to listen to nothing but emo, but there are also many people who are less
involved in the scene, but who listen to this kind of music.

At the concert at Headliner’s on November 17th, I also did a short interview with
two women: Kari and Ellie who were both age twenty. I did not get a chance to ask them
all of the questions, so this will be a much shorter passage. I began by asking what they believed emo was, and if they believed it was a positive shift in the emotions expressed by men.

Ellie: I think emotional charged when I think of emo.

Kari: I think more sappy music, more emotionally charged

Ellie: You know in emo men are able to show that they are upset about stuff they’re able to know and express themselves. It’s definitely a shift from the stereotypical masculine role.

Like many of the other respondents they suggest that emo allows men to expand the range of emotion that they are able to express.

In my next response I cite a response by Alex Merced whom I met through my thesis chair Jeremy Wallach who had suggested him to me as a possible contact for the local music scene. Alex is a junior and he was 20 years old at the time of my interview. He is a junior in the Department of Popular Culture and he acts as Dr. Wallach’s peer facilitator, which basically means that he acts a kind of mentor for the incoming freshmen. Alex is ½ Puerto Rican, and he was one of two non-white interviewees whom I interviewed over the course of my research. After I stopped him he came and sat down in my apartment and seemed very grateful to get out of the rain. Alex was wearing a button down shirt with a brown vest over, which is something he mentioned he wears quite often. He did not have the look of an emo scenester, but rather dressed closer to the manner of an indie rock scenester. Indie style generally involves clothes that look as though they were bought at a thrift store. This I found out was quite appropriate because as a concert promoter he worked with emo bands as well as indie rock bands.
As I’ve mentioned Alex also has a great deal of personal involvement with the emo scene as both a fan and a promoter. When I asked his opinion on emo Alex responded as below.

Alex: Um [long pause] Emo is today a lot different than it was in the 80’s. [short pause] Like, nowadays it’s definitely more like a lot of the bands they don’t really seem rebellious in nature like bands like Rites of Spring did. I guess that’s too far back to compare them to. The punk clothing is still there, but I don’t feel like the attitude is still there. But while the punk attitude is not there, they play their instruments a lot better. It’s kind of a weird dynamic. But, still I think it’s a very prevalent musical form. Like lately some bands I wouldn’t necessarily even consider emo stylistically are emo by association. Like, take Coheed and Cambria for instance. They’re a straight up prog. rock band people [but] label them as emo because they tour with emo bands.

Alex points out some very interesting characteristics of the emo that has become popular in recent years. He states that emo no longer has an ethos of rebellion, but the style of the more rebellious bands remains. The idea of the style of these rebellious subcultures has been picked up by retail outlets, particularly the store Hot Topic, which many argue neutralizes and homogenizes the effect of such statements of rebellion. In effect, many of these bands could be seen as displaying the appearance of rebellion, without actually believing in or expressing it. Furthermore, Alex suggests that many bands that do not necessarily fit in the emo genre have been grouped into it by association. This is quite likely a result of the recent mainstream popularity and resulting media distortion of the subgenre by the mainstream media. Alex continues as a result of my prompting on the subject of what emo has become. I ask him if he considers the band Bright Eyes emo.

Alex: In a certain sense certain songs. It’s another band that’s associated with emo. It’s kind of hard to say what is emo because you have your softer stuff, and you have your more screamo stuff like Thursday and then you kind of have your stuff in the middle like The Drama Summer, which is not quite emo and its
As he suggests, emo arose as a subgenre of punk (hardcore actually), but since its origins many derivations of the original form have emerged. As a result of both artistic advances in the musical form and the misinterpretations of the media, this form has many subgenres within what initially was a subgenre itself. As he states, this makes the genre very difficult to define and often causes confusion when it comes to labeling particular bands within the genre. Again, this is likely another reason that few artists want to identify themselves as emo, because stating that you are an emo band is not a very descriptive definition.

My next respondent regarding the definition of emo was Allen, who was a friend of the band Somerset and who was present throughout my interview with Somerset. Allen was 24 and he was from Detroit where he currently works as a journalist. When I spoke with him I was still sitting in the motor home with the band Somerset on October 15. Allen had witnessed my discussion of emo with the band, and throughout the discussion with J.T. and Claudio he was listening and made small side comments. During my interview with him, I would also get comments from the band on what he had said. I have included a few of those comments in this section, but the majority of my interview with the band is included in the performers section. In interviewing him, it was immediately evident that Allen was not particularly fond of emo or anything that was associated with it. I began by asking him what his opinion was of the meaning of emo music.
Allen: I think emo is more of a media buzzword. More or less it arose more or less to peg bands that didn’t fall into a certain genre. To go to your question, I don’t really think there’s an emo scene there’s more of an emo attitude. I think a lot of it has to do with the Internet. That’s just my opinion. What bands are considered to be emo?

Claudio: The problem is there’s like a second wave. Like at first there were the post-hardcore bands like Rites of Spring. But now I think you ask any 15 or 16 year old, they’ll tell you to look at the cover of Alternative Press. That’s what I’ve been thinking of over the course of this discussion.

As has already been discussed, many emo bands have recently been signed to mainstream labels, and in many cases the label has been misused in the mainstream music press. Allen discusses the significance of the Internet, which is an element I have not had the opportunity to discuss. Many of the bands that are considered to be emo have used the Internet to gain a certain amount of popularity. Particularly for the most recent wave of emo, the weblog and social networking community myspace.com has become an important site for the marketing of many bands. Bands set up a page that contains music, tour information, and band biographies. It also gives fans the ability to communicate directly with the band on their particular pages. This allows local bands to get nationwide attention much more quickly and often results in bands getting signed more quickly to both independent and mainstream labels. Claudio also brings up Alternative Press which is also important to this genre because it is well known for featuring such bands. Alternative Press is a mainstream magazine that focuses on bands that are often popular with teen audiences. This often include bands in emo and pop punk categories as well as nu-metal bands which are bands that play a heavy metal that combines heavy metal and hip hop. Allen continues with his comments below.

Allen: See, you can make the argument for any band. It’s just a buzzword. I think as far the scene goes the attitude of what the scene would be from my experiences is especially being in college, I think a lot of it is younger college
kids. You know the myspace crowd livejournal crowd. You know, basically kids that take themselves too seriously. They’re overemotional and will basically go out and pay 50 bucks on CDs. Livejournal gave us this kind of thing.

Matt: I think you just managed to insult everybody in the room (laughter).

Allen: Honestly that’s my opinion. From a journalism standpoint I never used the term emo, and I’m not saying this about you [gestures to me], because you’re not pegging bands as emo. Your thesis is about emo in analytic terms. When I wrote I stayed away from emo because that to me is a copout, like, if they just peg them as emo. It’s spiraled out of control, because of the emotional aspect of it.

Essentially, Allen is saying that the weblog sites livejournal.com and myspace.com are for individuals who feel a need to pour their hearts out on the internet. He sees these individuals as melodramatic, attention-starved middle class college kids who have nothing better to do but complain. Matt’s comment refers to the fact that after Allen made this statement there was an uncomfortable silence in the room, and it was obvious from our reactions that we all had livejournal or myspace accounts. We all likely used our weblogs as a way of talking about our lives, which would presumably be what Allen was talking about when he states “basically kids who take themselves too seriously.” It is important to note that after making this comment Allen turned to everyone and said he was sorry, and that he didn’t mean to insult us. Something interesting in Allen’s final remark is that as a result of the emotional aspect of emo, the definition of the genre has been lost. That is, many bands that approach subjects of heartbreak or loss are often grouped with emo bands by the mainstream music press, despite the fact that they may not be part of the genre. As a result, many have difficulty defining emo and it is often misinterpreted by the mainstream music press.

My next set of interviews occurred at a show in Toledo on November 17th at a Toledo club called Headliner’s. The show included 8 bands, and their styles varied
including Christian rock, thrash metal, and emo. The Drama Summer was there but I did not get a chance to say hello over the course of the night. Also, I was not there in time to see their set, as their webpage had misinformed me as to what time they were scheduled to perform. Headliner’s itself is a much larger club than many of the others I had visited. There around 100 people present, and it seemed somewhat empty. Headliners is a large enough club that it brings in mainstream emo bands such as Hawthorne Heights, Taking Back Sunday, and Thursday. One of the groups I interviewed was a group of people I saw sitting around a table talking. I introduced myself and they said their names were, Kurt, Cathy and Stacy, and their ages were 24, 22, and 25 respectively. They were not dressed as in what you would consider to be emo or indie, but most were wearing jeans and t-shirts with their coats over their shirts. I began by asking them what they believed the word emo meant.

Stacy: Emo to me is just a label. As I’ve heard other people say, what it is… it’s the people who wear black all the time and they listen to what they would call emo.

Kurt: I think of emo as more bands like Rites of Spring and um Get Up Kids stuff like that you know? [short pause] Other early stuff like Fugazi stuff I guess I don’t know not really the stuff kids today call emo. Sunny Day Real Estate. I don’t think bands like Finch is emo or Taking Back Sunday. They’re good bands. I love them. It’s a misidentified term at this point.

Cathy: I gotta agree with Stacy, it’s just a label. It’s like a metal head or punk and skater and all that. It’s not really expression of a person it’s just a label.

Stacy: I think it’s been created not necessarily by the media but by the people and all the kids [short pause]. 14 on and 13 they’re just starting to look at things and figure out what they want to be, and they would be called emo by other kids. It’s not necessarily that they are like it’s just how they dress.

Researcher: Has it become more of a style?

Stacy: I think it’s stylized more than music just because that’s the way they dress doesn’t necessarily mean they’re emo or punk or skater.
According to Stacy and Cathy’s comments, emo has become a label that denotes someone who wears a particular style of clothing rather than a particular subculture of popular music. In this way, for many emo has become a fashion statement that emphasizes creating a particular image rather than a music style. These two women’s statements imply that the use of emo style by these young teenagers is an act of identity formation. As a result of the changes of adolescence, these teens feel the need to latch onto a particular identity perhaps in an attempt at feeling stability in their lives. This use of emo identity by teenagers has resulted in emo becoming associated more with style than with music. Kurt states that what today is considered emo is very different from the intentions and ideology of the first emo bands. He gives several examples, and he eventually comes to the conclusion that emo essentially no longer exists as it was initially intended. According to him, the term has been distorted by this particular generation of musicians. I followed this question by asking whether emo had been created or distorted by the media. This group continues with a conversation about what emo is and who likes emo below.

Cathy: People have viewed guys being emo [short pause] they see guys wearing girls jeans and some do and some don’t and you could easily view that as being emo. It’s harder to pinpoint the girls being who you think is emo and who you don’t.

Stacy: I don’t think it’s emo. I just think its weird if you’re gonna dress a certain way to define yourself then you’re really putting a label on yourself and a lot of people get really pissed off and you know he’s dressing like this so he must like this.

Kurt: To me like I wore like a T-shirt and jeans whatever it’s not all about fashion like for instance the singer of Thrice who has his own hairdresser. Now kids start copying that you get all these fashion-core type bands when I think of emo. I just think of junior high and high school if people called you emo back then they
didn’t know what you were talking about but now it’s become this solid title or something.

Again, they seem to be suggesting that emo has turned subculture into an expression of fashion rather than a musical culture with its own ideology. They point out the manner with which people work to label themselves as emo through emo dress such as women’s jeans. It seems that they are referring to younger emo fans who are intent upon putting that label on themselves through a particular type of dress.

As has been illustrated in this section, emo is a very contentious genre about which many have strong opinions. Again, there is little agreement as to a decisive emo canon that illustrates concrete aesthetics for the genre as a whole. Furthermore many of these respondents bring in ideas of emo style as being more influential than the actual music itself.

**Fans and their relationship to the music**

In this section I will address the responses of two of my respondents who were the most obviously vocal about their love of emo. In many cases, I either did not have the time to ask such questions, or the respondents could not think of an answer to the question. Despite this, I believe that their answers are telling about the way that many emo fans relate to the music and the culture of the emo scene.

James unlike many of my other respondents admits that he is a fan of emo. That is, he does not seem to have a problem with either being called emo himself or having the bands he listens to be called emo. This would suggest that, unlike other fans and band members mentioned he does not believe emo is a media distorted or inauthentic category. I asked James what attracted him to emo.
James: It’s just a lot of the songs it kind of, it just clicks for me, because I’ve experienced a lot of loss in relationships. Nothings ever worked out for me. When I first got into it back in the days of Taking Back Sunday and Dashboard Confessional, my friend Shawn introduced me to all this, just showed me all of this because it was real underground thing at the time. I listened to the lyrics and a lot of it just [short pause] seemed to feel like I could connect, like I knew exactly what they were thinking when they wrote that shit. Because [short pause] it felt like it was on a more interpersonal level. I knew exactly what they were saying and I knew exactly what they were going through. I have gone through a lot of that [short pause] just teenage high school drama and you really have no way of expressing other than what I’ve heard. I just started hearing the stuff and I related to the lyrics.

One of James’s main points is that the expression of emotional pain that emo artists portray resonates with his own experiences with love and loss. He relates it directly to “teenage high school drama”, which would imply that he believes that such artists express feelings that this age group can relate to. What is particularly interesting about this comment is the statement about not having the ability to express these feelings of emotional pain. Although he directly state this, I believe that this is related to a particular version of middle class masculine identity that does not allow this kind of expression of pain. In a way, by listening to the music James can vicariously express what he is unable to express for himself. I have discussed this vicarious expression and sometimes celebration of sadness and loss in the performance chapter of this paper. This supports my assertion that this kind of group expression of pain is an important element of emo musical culture.

Allie’s response is also interesting as it shows how women within emo culture relate to a musical genre that focuses upon men’s problems with women. James also adds his own opinion to the conversation.

Allie: I can relate it to my relationships even though it’s a guy being cheated on and that shit.
Researcher: Ok then, what for you makes an emo show a good show?

Allie: Well, just like it’s so interactive I don’t know you can like sing along, and they like get you going like Taking Back Sunday the lead singer, he rapped. He was so sweet I don’t it just like pumps you up.

James: It’s one thing about going to a show is you find yourself among thousands of people you know feel the same way you do. [short pause] They may be taking the lyrics in a different direction as far as what they’re about. Everyone has their own self-interpretation, but they still scream out the lyrics because it hits them. It’s like a big family you get to scream this shit you know? [short pause] Like if you go to Taking Back Sunday Show you expect that they’re going to stop singing at some point. [singing] “Why can’t I get anything from anyone,” yah you just kind of expect that.

For both James and Allie one of the big draws of emo is the fact that they can personally relate to the experiences of heartbreak and betrayal that these artists explore.

Furthermore, the fact that at an emo show they feel that they are a member of a family or a community who collectively experience the same feelings about the music. Also the fact that a large number of the crowd sing along collectively is very prevalent within the emo community, particularly with the more well-known artists such as Taking Back Sunday or My Chemical Romance. Again this further emphasizes the points I made in the performance section regarding the manner in which audience members relate to the music and performance.

Without prompting, James made several final statements on emo bands and the music scene.

James: I’m just really surprised at how many people have picked up on learning guitar. Like, I’ve known guitar for almost a decade now, but like over the past few years it just seems like there’s so many people that play guitar. Bands spring up out of nowhere. That’s the cool thing about it. It kind of eliminated the whole rock star thing. Emo rock stars compared to the other rock stars, I don’t think they’re rock stars anymore. I think there are too many bands out there to put one on the highest pedestal, like back in the day you’d listen to Metallica or Nirvana, and you’d consider that like the highest point. But now there’s so many bands out
there that there are so many different directions people can go that it’s more spread out; there are so many bands to choose from.

Although he does not clearly state the difference, James does say that there has been a shift in the conception of the rock star as a result of emo musicians’ presentation of masculinity. More importantly, he states that there is a difference between the classical conception of the rock star and the version of rock stars that are presented by the mainstream. As I have stated earlier in this work, emo artists represent a shift away from the classic rebellious Beat-influenced rock star, who presents a version of masculinity that is macho and hyper-masculine. Furthermore, this older version of the rock star rejects stable relationships in favor of a more free-ranging promiscuous approach to sexuality. Emo artists, although they do express anger at women for their betrayals, ultimately desire a more stable relationship. Rather than rejecting women for what the older version of the rock star might see as the stifling bonds of relationship, they are expressing anger for the loss of just that. This is not to say that this expression does not have the potential to promote a similar fear of women, but that the approach is very different.

**Diminished masculinity?**

Another subject that some of my respondents touched upon was the idea that emo represented an expression of masculinity that was less masculine or feminine. Many of my respondents expressed a similar opinion that emo performers presented themselves in a manner that was feminine or less masculine. I asked my first audience interviewee James whether he believed that emo artists represented an expression of masculinity that was less masculine.
James: [short pause] That depends on how you feel about that kind of shit. I wouldn’t consider it that masculine because it’s not like back in the older times, not so much anymore guys that would express their emotions were less masculine just for that. It’s like guys aren’t supposed to have feelings or cry. That kind of thing it’s still true to some extent but I think this expansion on emo culture, which is definitely like the newest thing for the last 4 or 5 years, has become completely acceptable for expressing you emotions. But, [long pause] to express that kind of inner angst usually is still considered immasculine. [sic] To cry and whatnot I don’t know, I’m not for labels like masculinity and femininity as long as I’m being true to myself.

James expresses a great deal of ambivalence about the status of the masculinity of emo artists. On the one hand, he believes that masculinity has evolved enough so that an expression of emotional pain by men is allowable. This is an example of gender maneuvering that I spoke of earlier in the chapter in which through certain actions performers can manipulate their presentation of gender through certain transgressive acts. However, at the same time he still thinks that there is stigma which is attached to men crying or expressing emotional pain. My belief is that James’s ambivalence is due to the fact that he does not want to say that emo is more feminine because he feels that this would invalidate the genre.

Allie also had some interesting opinions on the masculinity presented by emo artists.

Allie: I think I would say it’s a more sensitive, but I would say no. Researcher: Does this sensitivity represent a positive change? Allie: I don’t know it’s tough because I know like a lot of people who would say its wussy or something, but I don’t look at it that way. [short pause] Just because someone’s expressing their emotions like it’s all out, I don’t see how that’s like feminine, you know I mean? [long pause] It all goes back to stereotyping though, because like you see someone and like they’re wearing tight jeans, like some singers tend to do or something. You could say that’s kind of wussy or something, I don’t know [long pause] I don’t think it’s a big deal. If you want to wear tight jeans you should be able wear tight jeans. Why does it have to be labeled like only girls can do that or only guys can do that, you know?
Allie looks at emo as a musical form that has been stereotyped by many as an unmanly overly emotional kind of music. Many label it as “wussy” or effeminate as a result of its focus on relationships and heartbreak. Again, this is an example of the fact that many see emo as a threat to dominant masculinity. Not only does it break certain norms of male emotional expression, but as she suggests so does the appearance of the performers who often wear jeans made for women.

I also asked the larger group of audience members at the show at Headliners about the masculinity expressed by emo musicians.

Stacy: It’s definitely a lot more effeminate and more whiny in a way if it had a banjo twang to it and a steel guitar it could almost be country. You know, I lost my dog it’s the same thing as I lost my girlfriend.
Kurt: Before it was just you’re all upset and just screaming like you’re goin to have a nervous breakdown.
Cathy: Now, it’s like you’re comin down off Xantax. You’ve been drinking all night and you’re a crying drunk

Obviously, they have a very negative opinion of some emo music, but despite the fact that Stacy is only half serious, the comparison of emo and country music is not an entirely invalid one. Despite the obvious aesthetic differences, both genres focus mainly on the themes of heartbreak and loss. The respondents characterize emo as a musical expression of mental trauma, which also a valid statement.

**Hateful Toward Women?**

As has been mentioned, many of the themes of emo suggest violence or hatred toward women. I was interested to find out how concertgoers felt about this issue, as it is an element of emo that I feel is very problematic.
James was very opinionated on this issue, and it seemed that as diehard fan and performer of emo he felt the need to defend what he loved.

James: Hell no. I really wouldn’t consider it hateful towards women or men. I think women can relate to it as much as men can. A lot of it’s just very general not really bashing. [short pause] I don’t know, I always considered myself really effeminate, but I never could really consider myself to be attracted to anyone but women. [long pause] It’s definitely not just hateful towards women it’s hateful to general situations relationships put us in. A lot of times it’s…there’s no one to put fault on, but its just sort of happens you’ve got to let out the anger somehow. A lot of the lyrics do put this sort of hateful [short pause] like you want the other person to die like in Brand New’s “70 by 7” [quoting lyrics] ‘Have another drink and drive yourself home, hope you die somewhere on the road. You can think of me when you forget your seatbelt and your head goes through the window’, that kind of thing? A lot of it is a kind of violent towards relationships but there’s really no one to blame, and I’m sure they really didn’t mean that to happen. Because, obviously they care about these people, but [short pause] you do kind of build up a lot of anger and when you, but I guess that’s how it comes it.

James’s response above is extremely uncertain, and it also seems he is almost defensive about the idea that emo could promote violence or hatred toward women. He begins by saying that emo represents kind of commentary on relationships gone awry, and as a result many times it is expressed as hatred. He implies that these artists are not necessarily expressing their anger or suggestions of violence toward women, but rather the situations that have resulted. He then quotes the lyrics of a Brand New song in which the singer wishes that his girlfriend would think of him when she gets into a car accident after drinking too much. Still, he is hesitant to suggest that the singer really means that he wishes harm to his ex-girlfriend. James seems to be suggesting that because it is a song, it is not meant to be taken seriously, but rather is a kind of impassioned outburst of irrational emotion. This is a very problematic assumption, as it seems that he believes it is acceptable to express hatred or wish harm on others as long as the intent was not actually to carry it out.
Allie, who is James’s friend, also added some input on this particular subject.

Midway through her answer, James added a comment of his own.

Allie: In certain situations, [short pause] yes. I would say so, like if a lead singer has a song about an ex-girlfriend that broke his heart, of course they’re going to have a kind of grudge like that. But I mean, I don’t know. [short pause] I don’t think that it’s a feeling of hatred toward all women general. I think most of it’s like just certain ones, but [short pause] I don’t know… I just don’t see it that way.

Allie: Yah I think it could because you’re what you’re hearing, most emo bands are all guys and they’re talking about girls so…

James: [interrupting Allie] I think women have a better way of looking at things from both sides, rather than men who just kinda have that egotistical, ‘it’s your fault bitch.’

Allie: Well in some cases it could be like in Taking Back Sunday how the girl is sleeping with both members of the band, [short pause] that’s just shitty. [short pause] They write a song about her because she’s a bitch, but I don’t know.

Allie excuses the anger and hatred that is expressed by emo musicians because she does not see it as a hatred that is expressed toward all women. She does believe that it can promote a negative view toward women, but she then qualifies this statement by stating that it is only hatred toward certain women. In other words, she is very hesitant to say that emo promotes a view of women that can invoke fear or hatred in men. She also gives an interesting specific example in which she feels that an expression of anger was warranted. Although she does not state the song title, she looks at a Taking Back Sunday song that describes a situation in which a woman was sleeping with two members of the band. In this case, she believes that anger or even hatred should be expressed toward this particular woman.

Both James and Allie also discuss the gender makeup of emo bands, and they say that this has an impact on the music’s approach to women. They imply that these artist’s approach to women is likely imbalanced because emo bands are almost universally all-male bands. James states that bringing women into the picture could be a way to possibly
solve the biased nature of much of this music. Off tape I had suggested that an emo band with both a male and female lead singer would serve to possibly remedy the lack of a feminine point of view. Despite his ambivalence in the earlier interview James says that many of the male emo musicians do look at women as “bitches.” Overall, both James and Allie do believe that there is a problem with the way that men speak of women in emo, but neither believes that it is a serious problem that could promote violence toward women.

Alex has a similar response to my question about emo artist’s approach to women.

Alex: I think [short pause] it’s cathartic. I think it deals in self mutilation rather than women again, I believe it ends up being more cathartic. I remember listening to Jeremy Wallach’s classes where he talks about how Metallica back in the day with the song Fade to Black. Like, a lot of people thought it was inciting people to commit suicide but a lot of people say it did the opposite; it made them not want to commit suicide. Though there are bands again not an emo band, but a band by association, Coheed and Cambria. You can look at a lot of their lyrics especially the new one [short pause] um, he goes, ‘you selfish little whore if I had my way I’d bash your head in the floor.’ If you take it in context it’s not as bad.

Researcher: but even in context, don’t you think it could be interpreted negatively?

Alex: yah I guess even in context it could.

Alex’s point of view is that emo represents artists hurting themselves rather than truly wanting to hurt women. He makes a good illustration with his use of a Metallica song which many misinterpreted as suggesting that people should kill themselves. Ultimately, it stopped many from actually wanting to commit suicide, proving a similar kind of catharsis. But this seems to be a problematic comparison, because this would suggest that without emo, fans would automatically want to go out and hurt women when a relationship ended badly. Certainly, it is valid to suggest that this is a way to deal with your anger, but I think that the comparison takes it too far.
The first group I met at Headliner’s had an opinion on emo’s approach to women.

Kurt: Yah when you get into like um some Emory stuff. [short pause] I don’t think they’re portraying them as negative things. It’s that bitterness, you know? When you just broke up with somebody you’re pissed you want to do that stuff, you know what I mean? I think that’s the real emotion they feel there’s a negative side of it but that’s part of life.

Stacy: I don’t think it’s so much negative as just, like he said bitterness. It’s not necessarily that he’s singing about hitting her or this guys she’s with [short pause] doesn’t necessarily mean he’s going to do it.

As with many of the other respondents, they suggest that emo does not promote violence but acts as a kind of catharsis that allows people to deal with their emotional problems.

I also questioned the group of two women I met at Headliner’s what their feelings about what they felt about emo’s approach to women as well as what particular type of person likes emo.

Ellie: Its different ok some of them are angry breakup songs but its all about heightened emotions both negative and positive it’s heightened.

Researcher: Do you think there is a particular type of person who likes emo?
Kari: 14 year old girls quite honestly when I’m like at concerts there’s a lot of young girls. It appeals to them because girls that age can understand. They are also emotional and they can really relate to it.
Ellie: They can understand what they’re saying they can sing along to a lot of it. It is an image thing as well as a lot them are your stereotypical emo kids so that’s why you see them at emo shows they’re going along with one of the trends.

Ellie suggests that the emotions expressed in emo are an extreme expression of emotion and that because of this it is allowable to be angry. They also suggest that teenagers are more likely to become emo fans because they are at an emotionally charged point in their lives and this allows them to sympathize with emo. Furthermore, emo has become a style and a trend that they can also identify with.

More Expressive, positive shift?
Throughout this work, I have looked at ideas of masculinity identity and their relationship to the music of emo musicians. With many my audience member respondents, I asked them whether emo was representative of a more expressive less repressed masculinity.

James’s response was interesting because it is a response that is representative of a true fan of the genre.

James: I’ve had people who thought I was gay because of that kind of thing. Not because I like a certain kind of music, but that sort of expression, it does bring out a feminine side. There is a difference between femininity and masculinity. Masculinity you won’t let that kind of stuff escape you. You won’t express it to anyone, you just bottle it all up. You repress it, and you hide it inside yourself. I find that to be very ignorant because there are things that, [short pause] I mean, when you bottle things up, that says you’re uncontent with it and I’m completely content with where I’m at. I’m completely content with everything in my life. I just like expressing it I don’t mind showing how I am.

Although it is not entirely clear, James appears to be attempting to critique more repressive conventional forms of masculinity. Essentially, he is stating that he is comfortable expressing feelings that would not normally be acceptable for men to express.

Alex, who is both a long-time fan and is thoroughly entrenched in emo culture as a result of his experiences as a concert promoter, had a first hand viewpoint on the masculinity of these artists.

Alex: Uh, definitely now I think well people are embracing the music. I hang out with the Drama Summer and people like them and sometimes it becomes downright homoerotic, but you know when you’re in that scene nobody really cares. It’s just about being with your friends. You’re free to express your affection too. Like, masculinity and gender become less of an issue, and it becomes more about bonds with your friends. [short pause] Um, coming from my experiences its weird you see all these like heterosexual dudes, and they’re all like touchy-feely. They’re all like hugging each other and even kissing each other like, [short pause] and they’re still like heterosexual guys. It’s really interesting
where, uh, you’re actually tougher if you’re not tough. Like its weird especially since it gets mixed with hardcore kids who are like, ‘Arg! Yah!’ And, uh it’s a strange dynamic. Emo in general has kind of like broken the rules of expression for a man. That’s why people get like turned off by it, and like I agree that the lyrics get old after awhile.

Alex gives a very interesting account of the manner in which members of an emo scene operate. He suggests that not only are the performances a situation in which many of the norms of masculinity are subverted, but that in the scene itself does not follow the rules of hegemonic masculinity. Within the scene, men have created a kind of safe haven where they are not criticized for their very touchy feely attitudes toward other men. This is very similar to Mimi Schippers description of the Chicago Alternative scene during the 1990s in which women have created a safe haven in which they will not be harassed by men. In this case the other men accept this as part of the scene, and value the relationships they have formed rather than being offended or making homophobic remarks toward one another. Another very interesting observation that Alex makes is the idea that one is tougher by being less tough. I take this to mean that those men who are not afraid to express themselves more fully are the ones considered to be most masculine. This is an interesting reversal of the norms of the outside world in which men who are more repressed are considered to be the models of masculinity.

Allen, who was extremely critical in his earlier comments about emo, also had some interesting comments on the expressiveness of emo. It is important to note that he is responding to the comments that Matt made, who as I noted in an earlier section.

Allen: I have a little bit of a different viewpoint, maybe because I’m not a musician. I mean in terms of the livejournal scene, you cruise through livejournal enough and see the amount of emotional spillage, it makes me feel glad that I have a lot to of stuff to do. I mean yours obviously isn’t that way (gestures toward other band members).

General reply: mine is
Allen: Ok, but… the music a lot of it is clearly hitting a target audience. I mean it hits you square in the face. You know when you get livejournal posts about relationships and breakups. So I guess um it’s taken a little bit too far. When see stuff like that out there it makes me glad that I have stuff to do. Because, I mean its positive like Matt was talking about earlier. But when you get too much time on your hands and you start to feel bad about the fact that you have too much time on your hands.

Despite the fact that he once again stumbles as he accidentally insults everyone in the van who has a livejournal, Allen does make some interesting points about emo. As I mentioned before, Allen does not represent the average emo scenester, but he could easily be seen as a skeptic regarding the sincerity of such artists. Allen focuses upon the self indulgence of these artists and his comments suggest that he believes they are selfishly absorbed in their own problems. This is not an invalid statement, for I believe that this is one of the dangers of emo emotional expression.

Allen’s comments are very similar to many of the critiques that Jessica Hopper lodges at emo music. She states in Andy Greenwald’s work:

“This sort of stuff is an emotional outlet with no sense of balance or responsibility… It’s incredibly self indulgent. There’s no culpability and no personality. Women are just things that do things. Emo in 2002 is just a passive aggressive rewrite of the Rolling Stones’ ‘Under my Thumb’” (Greenwald 137).

Although Allen’s critique does not directly address the misogynistic aspects it’s apparent that he is focused upon what he sees as the extreme self indulgence of these artists. That is the artists become so overly focused upon themselves and their own pain, that they ignore others. Furthermore, I believe that Allen’s statements relate to Joy Press and Simon Reynolds commentary on the melancholic themes of Morrissey. Although there were skeptics such as Allen regarding this particular subject, many agree that the emotional expression is a positive shift in masculinity that can be expressed by male popular musicians. As I have suggested, acts onstage by such performers can be
compared to Schippers’ notion of gender maneuvering. As shown by Alex’s response, this is an example of a subculture in which artists promote and alternative masculine identity.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Throughout this project I have explored the results of my ethnographic fieldwork in an attempt to show the effect that the genre of emo has on masculinity in American culture. In my analysis, I have attempted to show the role of masculinity in the expression of emo bands, and the effect of their particular class backgrounds on their masculinity. Also, I have looked at middle class masculinity and its effects on the themes that are contained in emo music. Drawing upon ideas of performative gender identity, I have shown how gender is represented through particular kinds of performances. Although I cannot make a decisive statement as a result of somewhat indecisive results from my study of the class of my respondents, the masculinity that is expressed by emo artists still appears to be resistant to hegemonic middle class masculine identities. I cannot make a decisive statement on this because many of the respondents did not necessarily fall into what would be considered a middle class background. However, the fact that nearly all of them identified as middle class is very pertinent and still supports my theory. Despite a working class background many of these individuals retained an identity that was middle class and they therefore had an outlook that was entrenched in middle class norms.

Regardless of the difficulties of making a decisive statement on class, emo obviously does represent a shift in the masculinity that is expressed in popular music. This shift has brought these performers away from the more conventional masculinity toward a masculinity that allows them to express themselves in ways that are not generally seen in male musical performance. Although this can be seen as a positive shift, as I have suggested there are many problems with this assumption. As I shown this
is problematic given the sometimes very hateful nature of emo and the way that this is perceived. The shift that emo represents remains an uncertain and contentious change, and I have found that it is not necessarily possible to state that the masculinity that emo presents is a positive identity.

This research has also dealt with the definition of emo as a genre and I have shown its very ill-defined and contentious nature within both mainstream and independent music culture. Through an exploration of the aesthetics and the evolution of the genre from its begins in the 1980’s I was able to create a working definition of the genre. However, I have shown the difficulty that many fans have with defining the genre and its status as what many see as a media creation. As many of my respondents suggested, emo does not hold a position of respect within musical subculture, and it is often rejected as a viable genre of music by musicians and fans alike. Through an exploration of the genre and a consideration of both the themes of its music and the aesthetics I have been able to fully explore what emo as a genre is. Regardless of these explorations, emo still remains a very ill-defined and contentious genre which a great deal more study is necessary to understand.

Overall, this work has allowed me to illustrate the manner with which emo subculture operates and the opinions of those who are part of this subculture. Through a discussion of the members of this subculture I was able to get the opinion of its members and understand their opinions on emo. This has allowed for a thorough investigation of the meanings of this genre as a social phenomenon and a musical subculture. Within a context of popular music studies this work has illustrated the relationship of class to particular expression of gender in popular music performance. It shows the way that
class dispositions affect the meanings that particular music express particularly when it comes to gender. It has also shown the way that gender be subverted as a result of acts made onstage. Finally, on a larger scale, this study has shown that as a result of particular internalized structures of class identity, individuals take a particular approach to their expression of gender identity. Depending upon their class or social background, individuals are limited to expressing particular versions of gendered identity as a result of the particular social context that they were raised. Characteristics such as education and upbringing affect and somewhat limit the way that we are able express ourselves because we are taught specific norms and worldview depending upon our class identities.
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Appendix 1: Questions Asked Respondents

1. How did you first get interested in this kind of music? What about emo music really has an affect on you? Is there something in your life that helps you relate to the music or do you see it simply like how it sounds?

2. What do you think about the feelings and emotions that are expressed by the singers of this band? Because there is a great deal of focus on emotional pain, do you think that the performers are less masculine? Is there something about your own idea of being a man/ of men that makes you feel this way?

3. What emotion or feelings are these performers expressing toward women? If they say anger, resentment etc.: What do you think about the anger toward women that is expressed by the singers? Is it hateful toward women? Do you think they are trying to get away from women? If not: Do you think they were expressing any kind of anger?

4. Do you think emo is looking is lacking in political message? Why do you or don’t you feel that way?

5. What do your female/male friends think of this music, and do you think they relate to this music in the same way that you do or do they relate differently? (This last part for male participants only) What your other male friends think of this?
6. As a man do you feel that you can express your emotions like they do on the stage? Has emo changed the way that you feel about expressing emotion?

7. Do you have the same feelings about mainstream performers with a similar sound? Do you think that they have lost their meaning once they appear on MTV or at a big arena show?

8. Do you think that there is a particular kind of person that is attracted to this kind of music? Describe that type of person.

9. Describe an emo show where the band or singer really affected you with their performance. What do you generally consider to be a good performance of this kind of music? What elements are most important to a good show such as this?