GREEN DAY: ROCK MUSIC AND CLASS

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ABSTRACT

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The pop punk band Green Day is a surprisingly interesting source for a discussion of class. Despite their working class background, and their massive successes with *Dookie* in 1994, and *American Idiot* in 2004, Green Day performs many middle class values in their song lyrics, stage shows, and interviews. Using Chris McDonald’s book *Rush: Rock Music and the Middle Class* as a template, this paper analyzes Green Day’s performance of class through theories about social class in North America. Throughout Green Day’s career, there is a noticeable tension between wanting to stick to their working class roots and acknowledging their sudden and unexpected thrust into an upper class economic standing. Yet, despite skipping a middle class standing economically, their song lyrics, stage shows, and interviews articulate many middle class values such as individualism, professionalism, and the middle class family.
For Grace Roig
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Out of the hundreds of bands that came out of the 924 Gilman Street punk scene in the Bay Area in California the most well-known is Green Day. With their 1994 major label debut, *Dookie*, selling over 15 million copies worldwide, Green Day brought East Bay punk to the mainstream. Then, in 2004, Green Day’s hit punk rock opera, *American Idiot*, brought them back into the spotlight, but with a change. Until *American Idiot*, the members of Green Day were consistently dismissed as “snot nosed punks” who did not act their age (Marks 1995 54). Before 2004 Green Day dressed as they always had (band t-shirts and board shorts or Dickies) and were best known for a mud fight at Woodstock 1994 between the band and the crowd. Once *American Idiot* was underway in the recording studio, Green Day changed both musically and in their appearance. The band members lost weight and began wearing expensive suits. The mainstream press started calling them “punks all grown up” in accordance with their changes (Pappademas 64).

This was the Green Day that I became a fan of. *American Idiot* is still my favorite album and Green Day is still my favorite band. However, academia and the mainstream press do not give them as much attention. Much of Green Day’s work has been overlooked as unimportant by academia, and discredited as not punk by “real” punks because they went to a major label. Until recently, rock music in general has been discounted among academics (Simon Frith’s *Sound Effects* being the exception) because it is not within the classical repertoire of many academic musical foci. However, within the last twenty five to thirty years rock music has begun to be taken more seriously within academia. Rather than being looked at as just another commodity, theorists like Frith analyze rock music more closely for culturally significant dimensions such as
class. More recently, the emergence of fields such as Punk Studies and Metal Studies has increased the overall importance of these genres within academic discourse.

A more recent example of the increasing discourse about the importance of rock music is Chris McDonald’s book *Rush: Rock Music and the Middle Class*. McDonald’s analysis of Rush is heavily grounded in academic cultural theory about class in North America. Similarly, in Nathan Wiseman-Trowse’s book *Performing Class in British Popular Music*, he states:

popular music has and continues to engage with the idea of class and it is the purpose of this research to understand why class has consistently maintained a presence in the worlds of pop and rock music. Equally… class has continued to play an important role within the disciplines of sociology and cultural studies, even if it is a rapidly evolving role (10).

Many scholars from what is referred to as the Birmingham school of thought¹ do not believe that true punk exists outside of England in the late 1970s, because punk must be grounded in unemployed working class youth rejecting hegemonic norms (Wiseman-Trowse 13). This school of thought frequently is the main base for an analysis of class in punk. As one of the key scholars of the Birmingham school, Dick Hebdige, describes in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, British punk was putting together many signifiers of working-class-ness through their choice of dress and use of familiar objects, such as the safety pin, in unfamiliar ways (63). However, both analysis of and even recognition of class in general is very different in Britain than in the United States. Class consciousness is a big aspect of British life, whereas in the U.S. many Americans do not even realize that class exists. This lack of class consciousness is

¹ Scholars who were a part of the Birmingham school of thought included Dick Hebdige and Stuart Hall who researched aspects of subcultures in England in the 1970s.
important to U.S. (more specifically California) punk. Many participants are not holding working class punk ideals because they were born into working class life, but because they wish to get out of the boredom of middle class suburban life. The members of Green Day, as will be seen, are the exception to this because of their working class background. Because of the differences between the Birmingham school, with its British sense of class, and an American sense and analysis of class this paper will not be grounded in the Birmingham school’s analyses. Instead, much of the analysis will be using McDonald’s analysis of class in North America since it is a more recent work on the subject and analyzes a rock band. While there have been many analyses of class in America in the late 1950s and 1960s, such as William Dobriner’s *Class in Suburbia*, class in the U.S. has changed since then as Barbara Ehrenreich describes in her book *Fear of Falling*.

While reading McDonald’s *Rush: Rock Music and the Middle Class*, I noticed many similarities between Rush and Green Day. As McDonald notes about Rush, despite his own positive opinion of the band, Rush was not received well within the mainstream press and academia. Similarly, as a fan I saw more to Green Day than did academia and the mainstream press. While reading McDonald’s book I saw comparisons that led me to a further analysis of Green Day’s music/lyrics, interviews, and stage shows.

The band Green Day provides many opportunities to view the performance of middle class values. However, this would seem contradictory because the members of Green Day come from a working class background. Seemingly overnight, Green Day went from working class to upper class and were never, economically speaking, middle class. Despite this perplexing issue, many of Green Day’s interviews, songs, lyrics, and stage shows, upon further analysis display middle class values. Despite their working class background, many of Green Day’s songs,
business decisions, and ways that they portray themselves in interviews portray those values. Green Day’s ties to and lyrical emphasis on suburbia, as well as their insistence on close ties to family and a strong work ethic, all portray important values of the middle class.

The nuances of the performance of class are sometimes obvious, and at other times more subtle. Through their music, lyrics, stage shows, and business decisions, the members of Green Day portray many values of the professional middle class, such as a strong work ethic and individuality. Analyzing the performance of middle class values may, on the surface, seem unimportant or arbitrary. However, close analysis shows that it can be a door to a greater understanding of how class is performed all around us. From the schools we attend and the types of comments our teachers make to the music we listen to we are consciously or unconsciously fans of this performance of class. Therefore we are constantly influenced by it.

Chris McDonald’s book *Rush: Rock Music and the Middle Class* analyzes how the band Rush portrays middle class values. Using McDonald’s book as a template, both the subtle nuances and obvious similarities between Rush and Green Day become apparent. Their strong ties to their families are constantly in battle with their strong work ethic of playing hundreds of shows every tour and always searching for new sounds to explore. Many of these tensions are frequently expressed in interviews with both bands. Both bands have similar backgrounds of growing up in the suburbs; Green Day in a suburb of Berkeley, California called Rodeo, and Rush in the suburbs of Toronto. Songs from both bands reflect this influence.

Despite coming from two completely different genres, punk and prog rock, musically the two bands’ major ancestral tie is to The Who. Both bands were heavily influenced by The Who in their tastes in music and their writing and playing styles. Green Day was strongly influenced,
not just by the Who, but also by many other bands. Early on the members of Green Day were influenced by music their siblings were interested in such as The Beatles, REM, and Sam Cooke along with artists that were played on the radio such as Ozzy Osbourne and Van Halen. Later on they became connected to the local California punk scene. They were heavily influenced by the bands coming out of the Berkeley 924 Gilman Street Project scene. Bands such as the Avengers, Operation Ivy, Crimpshrine, and Isocracy were all heavily influential on the members of Green Day in their teenage years and beyond. Green Day’s left-wing political views were also influenced by the Gilman punk scene.

However, there are ways in which Green Day portrays middle class values that Rush does not. For example, Green Day’s portrayal of the family in their songs, as portrayed in the book *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California* by Dewar MacLeod, forms a stark contradiction to the way that they portray their own family values and strong ties to their families in interviews. There are other obvious differences between Rush and Green Day. Rush is a Canadian band from Toronto that is usually categorized as a progressive rock band with what has at times been categorized as having conservative political views, whereas Green Day is a pop-punk band from the Bay Area in California with left wing political views. For Rush, these assertions are just generalizations, but with Green Day their left-wing political views have influenced many of their songs.

There is a long history behind the theoretical context of class. Even the term Middle Class has varying interpretations. In fact, the traditional Marxian definition does not make sense for the typical American who lacks a sense of class consciousness. As McDonald points out, the traditional Marxian sense of “middle class” (or for Marx the Bourgeoisie) means “[society’s] elite of investors, captains of industry, and owners of large scale income producing property”
However, the groups of people who fit this description in the modern U.S. sense are members of the upper class, but many Americans identify as “middle class” as a way of identifying as “average” and sees the term as excluding “the extremes of rich and poor” even if economically they do not fit the description of being middle class (McDonald 22). In keeping with McDonald’s research I will also use his definition of Middle Class as:

A social identity that has not only economic and sociological dimensions, but cultural and psychological as well. At the same time, social class in North America needs to be understood as fluid and ambivalent, since people may change their class position in partial ways, form political allegiances in ways that contradict their class position, and may consume or participate in cultural expressions that come from all over the sociological spectrum. (25)

This rather lengthy, yet all-encompassing, definition of social class describes much of Green Day’s career and fans just like it does Rush and their fans. Green Day’s portrayal of middle class values is much more complex than Rush’s, not only because of their working class background, but because of the complexities of class within punk. As will be described in detail later in this paper, the members of Green Day went from their working class upbringing to an economic upper class nearly overnight when their major label debut album *Dookie* was released in 1994. This shows in their song lyrics, and the changes in their outlooks on life when, at this same time, they each began families. As their class status changed along with their success, their values seemed to change as well. During their first three albums, Green Day kept many working class views within their song lyrics, but as they became more successful, and eventually embraced that success, their values and lyrics began to change. They showed more middle and upper class values in their lyrics and in their interviews. This change is representative of their
changing class status throughout their career. Throughout Green Day’s career there has been a constant tension within their songs and interviews between what they want (to stick to their working class roots), what they have become (upper class), and what their music portrays (middle class). Green Day not only represents middle class values, despite their working class background, but also how class can affect one’s values. Green Day’s influences from punk, not only from their local punk scene, but a history of punk in general, all play a part in their portrayal of middle class values despite their working class background.
CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

An analysis of Green Day through a discourse on class in America must include a discussion of Green Day’s history. This is important for two reasons. First, Green Day’s working class background, along with their overall history as a band, plays an important part in how and why they perform middle class values. Their ties to their working class heritage, and their portrayal of themselves through this lens, is an important part of how the band portrays class. Second, Green Day, and the values its members portray, were not created in a vacuum; they are part of a long history of punk music. The way that they perform and perceive class was molded during their participation in the punk subculture, specifically in California in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Punks have had a long history of portraying class values contradictory to those of their actual class backgrounds. Therefore, a discussion of Green Day’s performance of class cannot fully proceed without understanding both of these contexts.

Punk got its start in New York City in the mid-1970s. Many early punk bands were influenced by proto-punk bands such as Iggy and the Stooges, the Velvet Underground, and the New York Dolls (Cogan). The very first punk band was the Ramones. Much of Green Day’s sound was influenced by the Ramones. When the Ramones toured Europe they influenced future members of punk bands the Sex Pistols and The Clash that would form not long after. One person, Malcolm McLaren, was also influenced by the Ramones and the evolving punk scene around them. McLaren would take many of the artistic aspects from the growing punk scene in

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2 Here I am rejecting the Birmingham school’s contention that punk only existed in England. As Cogan argues in “What Do I Get? Punk Rock, Authenticity and Cultural Capital” these British scholars often do not mention many oral histories of punk which place American bands as influences and the start to the movement with the Ramones (1).
New York City, mix it with influences from the Situationist movement from the 1960s, and (more or less) create the band the Sex Pistols.

The Sex Pistols would, through style, music, and general disregard of authority, create a lasting stereotype that punks would follow from then on. More specifically, the Sex Pistols would influence the emerging Los Angeles, California punk scene in the 1970s when they played their infamous “last show” at the Winterland Ballroom in 1977 (Boulware & Tudor 36-41). Bands like the Avengers, X, and Negative Trend were all influenced by this last Sex Pistols concert. This emerging punk scene would go on to influence the members of Green Day.

However, Billie Joe Armstrong, lead singer, guitarist, and main songwriter for Green Day, was not born until February 17th, 1972. Armstrong was only around five years old when this concert happened (Spitz 4). 1977 was also the year of Armstrong’s first recording called “Look for Love.” The song was written and recorded by his voice and piano teacher Marie Louise and Jim Fiatarone with a short interview with Billie Joe on the B side. From the age of five until about fourteen, Armstrong took voice, and later guitar, lessons and performed various show tunes and Broadway musical hits in hospitals, convalescent homes, and singing competitions (Broadway Idiot, Spitz 6-7). The Armstrong household always had music since Billie Joe’s father, Andy, occasionally played drums in a jazz band along with being a truck driver. Billie Joe’s brother David remarks, “Me and Billie learned to play drums early” (Spitz 6). Unfortunately, Andy Armstrong was diagnosed with esophageal cancer and passed away only a few months after being diagnosed in September, 1982. Billie Joe was just ten years old. Billie Joe’s mother was a waitress who had to support six children once Billie Joe’s father died. The family quickly went from a more economically stable working class position to a much less financially stable working class position.
At around this same time Billie Joe met a classmate named Michael Ryan Pritchard, later to be known as Mike Dirnt (Spitz 12). Billie Joe reminisces about the first time he met Mike Dirnt in an interview in 2011:

Q: …you have been creatively partnered with him [Mike Dirnt]…

Billie Joe: Pretty much since the first day we ever spoke to each other. Our first conversation--I don’t know why we had this conversation or why it happened this way, but the first thing we talked about was songwriting. When we were ten…” (Armstrong, Mayer)

Mike Dirnt, born May 4th, 1972, was born to a heroin addicted mother and was adopted by Cheryl Nasser and Patrick Pritchard when he was only a few weeks old. Nasser was a stay-at-home Mom to Dirnt and his sister Myla, and Pritchard was a student at UC Berkeley who later became a computer programmer. After many fights, they divorced when Dirnt was seven. Dirnt initially stayed with his adoptive father, but later moved back with his adoptive mother. Dirnt moved out at the age of fifteen and into the Armstrong’s garage. Throughout his teenage years he had various jobs, such as gutting fish, and being a sous chef. Mike Dirnt is the only member of Green Day to have graduated from high school (Spitz 12-14). As he described it in his Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony speech, “First and foremost, I also have a mom who gave me a guitar, a little pawn-shop bass, and it only had two strings on it, but luckily for me they were A and E” (Rolling Stone). Like Armstrong, Dirnt was raised in a working class household.

Armstrong and Dirnt became fast friends. Soon after, Armstrong taught Dirnt how to play guitar. The first song that they learned to play together was “Crazy Train” by Ozzy Osbourne (Spitz 14). By the time the duo got to high school they had been opened up to new bands/music
such as R.E.M., Chuck Berry, and the Replacements. At Pinole Valley High School, in a suburban working class neighborhood, they were a part of a group of friends who were into punk music. The group of friends would share tapes of punk bands such as Bad Brains and Hüsker Dü. Armstrong and Dirnt quickly found out about the new punk venue called Gilman Street (Spitz 19-20).

Tim Yohannon, the original organizer of the Gilman Street venue and organizer of the very influential zine *Maximum Rock n Roll* (MRR) was characterized as a “countercultural” (i.e. hippie) from New Jersey. Yohannon began MRR as a radio show that would later become a zine, but many punks in the Bay Area strictly adhered to MRR’s definitions of what was or was not considered “punk.” From a young age the members of Green Day took many of these punk ideals such as Do It Yourself (DIY), and anti-consumerism seriously. Green Day was on the independent label Lookout! Records for their first two albums. They also toured in a van and booked their own shows DIY-style on their first tours (Livermore “Green Day in…”). Gilman Street has been described by Billie Joe as “a romper room for degenerates” and a place where many types of art could be displayed, not just punk (*Rolling Stone*). Aaron Cometbus, the roadie for Green Day’s first tours, described Gilman St. as “all these goofy, silly kids coming together to bring creativity and humor back into punk…” (Boulware & Tudor 304). This statement is similarly backed by Billie Joe describing Gilman as:

That place and that culture saved my life… it was like a gathering of outcasts and freaks. It wasn’t about people moshing in the pit and taking their shirt off. That’s one thing I hate about the new mainstream thing: Blatant violence… to me, punk rock was about being silly, bringing a carpet to Gilman Street and rolling your friends up in it, and spinning it in circles. Or having a pit with people on tricycles or Big Wheels. The whole thing had a
serious message to people, but at the same time it was silly and people weren’t afraid to talk about love. (Small 11)

The Gilman scene developed as a way for many East Bay punks to have a venue closer to home than the L.A punk scene was. Prior to Gilman, many punk shows took place in local restaurants and people’s basements and back yards (Livermore “How to Ruin…” 3-4). The Gilman scene was closely related to the L.A. scene originally and developed many similar characteristics to the L.A. scene due to similar socioeconomic situations. Many L.A. punks were fleeing the “typical” American dream, the dream to live in the suburbs and have a job with a middle class income like a lawyer or professor (Traber 32). As Daniel Traber argues in “L.A.’s ‘White Minority’: Punk and the Contradictions of Self Marginalization,” many L.A. punks would: “re-create themselves in the image of street smart kids who are skeptical about the trappings of Bourgeois America. In doing this they hoped to tap into a more ‘authentic’ lifestyle-equivalent to ‘real,’ ‘hard,’ ‘tough’ all those qualities of a life on city streets- than the one they thought themselves being forced to replicate” (31). In effect, many punks were trying to escape their often middle class backgrounds in the suburbs for the more “authentic” punk lifestyle on the streets. As Traber admits, this is certainly not the case for all punks, including the members of Green Day. “Success is the result more of hard work than the privilege accorded to race and class (is it not such privileges that give them the option not to succeed?)” This comment by Traber suggests that many punks were attempting to go against the middle class American dream even though they remained “complicit with America’s dominant social values by privileging the individual” (Traber 32). The members of Green Day never had the option not to succeed. Green Day never had an option to fall back on. They could either stay working class, or make hard
decisions that would lead them to an upper class standing. Armstrong describes this situation by saying,

One thing that really bugs me is all the rich snobby kids who claim all this punk rockiness coming out and saying, ‘you can’t make money’ and stuff. How can they even say that to me? They already have money. They live punky now, but in twenty years their parents will keel over and they’ll get everything. (Arnold 83)

Armstrong openly boasted that if Green Day didn’t work out he would end up a T.V. repairman (Spitz 47).

The DIY, anti-consumerism, and anti-hierarchy (anarchist) punk ethos would seemingly be working class. However, because of the above contradictions that Traber points out, this seemingly working class ethic is misconstrued within punk. Since many California punks are middle class kids pretending to be working class, it makes this intertwining of class values within punk more integral to Green Day’s portrayal of middle class values. The gatekeepers of what was “authentic” punk in the Gilman St. scene identified this authenticity based on their portrayal of working class values even though the gatekeepers themselves were middle class. It would seem contradictory to reject a band who actually is working class by those who are only pretending to be so.

The members of Green Day were heavily influenced by the MRR compilation EP *Turn It Around* (Spitz 60). They also volunteered as security for the venue, in keeping with Gilman’s volunteer policy, so that they could not only see shows there, but eventually play there as well (Spitz 35). The members of Green Day (especially Billie Joe) were influenced by a hugely popular band called Operation Ivy. Operation Ivy was a ska-punk band that, while they only
lasted a little over two years, would make a huge impact not only on the members of Green Day, but also on the larger punk community surrounding Gilman. As Armstrong has said “…I’ve got to say Operation Ivy was definitely one that changed me…” (Spitz 58). This statement is backed up by one of Armstrong’s recent posts on Instagram of a photo of him at an Operation Ivy Concert (see Appendix A). Armstrong and Dirnt had created a band called Sweet Children, but they didn’t have a drummer. They had trouble booking shows at Gilman because their music was too melodic or pop sounding (and therefore not sufficiently working class punk), until they met John Kiffmeyer (A.K.A. Al Sobrante) at Gilman. Kiffmeyer was the drummer for the popular Gilman punk band Isocracy. With Kiffmeyer added to the band, Sweet Children finally had the credibility to play at Gilman, and grow their small fan base. Kiffmeyer helped to teach Armstrong and Dirnt more about booking their own tour, and how to run a band, but also took a more authoritative role within the band because he was older than Armstrong and Dirnt (Spitz 43-45). Soon after Sweet Children began playing regular shows Armstrong decided to drop out of high school, saying “The only thing I really wanted to do was live up to our potential, and that was it. We suddenly had this band that musically became pretty powerful, and we made a big noise. We just wanted to see where it could take us” (Spitz 46-47). And as future Green Day road manager and at the time Gilman patron, Bill Schneider, explains “at that age Billie was so into music that he was distracted by the rest of his life- the rest of his life was a distraction from him doing his music” (Spitz 47). Soon after dropping out of high school Armstrong began living on his own by squatting in places around town or sleeping on friends’ couches (Spitz 47).

Armstrong, Dirnt, and Kiffmeyer played a show on a mountain top with no electricity for then Lookout! Records’ co- founder (along with David Hayes) Laurence (Larry) Livermore. Livermore signed Sweet Children to Lookout after the aforementioned show, and Livermore is
often cited as saying “…as I’ve often said, they played for those five kids like the Beatles at Shea Stadium… I knew before they finished their first song that I wanted to do their record” (Spitz 63). Hence, their first EP, *1000 Hours*, came out in 1989; but not under the name Sweet Children, but the name Green Day. At the last minute Armstrong, Dirnt, and Kiffmeyer decided to change their band name after a song that Armstrong wrote with the same name. Kiffmeyer wrote Green Day on the back of a jacket, and the name stuck (*VH-1 Behind the Music*, Spitz 64).

Then, in 1990, Green Day released a second EP called *Slappy*, and later that year their first full length album, *1039 Smoothed Out Slappy Hours* (Spitz 64). Shortly after the release of *39/smooth* Green Day went on their first cross-country tour. On this tour, not only did they grow their fan base, but Armstrong met the woman later to be his wife, Adrienne Nesser (Spitz 67-68). Multiple songs on Green Day’s next album, *Kerplunk*, were about Adrienne. However, before Green Day could record *Kerplunk* they had a lineup change. Kiffmeyer only viewed Green Day as a fun, short-term, thing to do with friends, and left for college after the first tour ended.

After Kiffmeyer’s sudden departure from Green Day, Tré Cool (Frank Edwin Wright III), joined the band. Tré Cool was a fellow Gilman participant and drummer for Larry Livermore’s band The Lookouts (Spitz 70). Cool also came from a working class background, but it was different than Armstrong’s and Dirnt’s backgrounds. Cool was raised in an economically working class household, but with middle class freedoms due to its geographic isolation. After serving during the war in Vietnam, Cool’s father wanted to get away, so his whole family moved to the mountains of Willits, California. They lived in a house with no electricity or running water, and their nearest neighbor was over a mile away. Luckily, his nearest neighbor was Larry Livermore of Lookout! Records. Livermore taught Cool how to play drums so that he could form a band, the Lookouts, along with another neighbor, Kain Kong. At first it was tough when Cool
joined Green Day. Kiffmeyer initially wanted to continue as Green Day’s drummer when he could get time off from school, but after a few shows where both Kiffmeyer and Cool showed up to play the show (and Kiffmeyer initially won), it was decided that Tré Cool was their official drummer.

Up until this point Armstrong and Dirnt’s working class influences were clearly seen. Armstrong’s early adoption of music being his entire life to the point where other things, like school, get in the way, can be seen as the beginning of his adoption of middle class values. As Rita Felski describes in her article “Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class,” “The office worker trudging to the railway station to catch the 8:20 train comes to serve as a resonant symbol of the modern dehumanized self, with its docile internalization of rules and regulations, of table manners and timetables” (37). The rejection of the “average” working class job for the chance at big success within the music industry is a rejection of Felski’s concept of “the modern dehumanized self” that is the working class American citizen. Of course this outlook was most likely influenced by many of the anti-authority, anti-establishment, and sometimes anarchistic attitudes of the punk subculture that the members of Green Day were so much a part of. However, Green Day go beyond a rejection of the connotations of the average working class person; they initially (before the addition of Tré Cool as drummer) embodied many working class attitudes. As Felski describes, there is “an important tradition of respectability in working- class life. Frugality, decency, and self-discipline… have often been the core values of the poor” (35). However, once Tré Cool joined the band, these values of “frugality, decency, and self-discipline” were quickly no longer valued. As Billie Joe describes, the transition was also initially hard due to Tré Cool’s personality:
Tré and I kept getting closer and closer as friends. But he was really obnoxious. To the point where I didn’t even know if I really thought the guy was that cool. We wanted to be more conscious people. We carried the ethics of Gilman into our lives. Those codes were sort of intact. Tré was not even close. Didn’t care what anybody thought, didn’t care what anybody did. He did anything he wanted all the time. And that was really hard.

(Boulware & Tudor 377)

In 1992 Green Day’s second full-length album, *Kerplunk*, was released with Tré Cool on drums. *Kerplunk* sold ten thousand copies on the day it was released (Spitz 76). This was one of the first signs of Green Day’s building success. Green Day was playing sold out shows along the punk underground club circuit. As Aaron Cometbus reminisces:

The switch from Al to Tré was less significant than the sudden boost in the group’s popularity. They were still doing things the same old way, though the audiences had doubled or tripled in size. They were still booking their own shows, but the small clubs were now packed almost uncomfortably tight… me and the other roadie had to hold back the surging crowd so that they didn’t knock the mic stand into Billie’s face. Two roadies can only do so much against a tidal wave… (26)

The larger crowds at shows, the increasing album sales, and an increasing demand for the band in general, was getting out of hand. This prompted talks about possibly switching to a major label. Although going to a major label would cast them out of the Gilman scene, Green Day thought it was the best option for them. Also in 1991 Nirvana’s hit album *Nevermind* was released. Although Nirvana is musically very different from Green Day, Nirvana’s surprising success led A&R representatives of major labels to ask if Green Day was interested in signing to
a major record label. After employing the management team of Elliot Cahn and Jeff Saltzman, Green Day was courted by multiple representatives for major labels. Eventually, they found Rob Cavallo of Reprise (Warner Brothers) (Spitz 83-85). In February 1994 Green Day’s major label debut album, *Dookie*, was released with Cavallo co-producing with the band (Green Day Authority).

Once Green Day officially signed with a major label, word got around the Gilman/Bay Area punk scene. Former fans and friends began to picket Green Day shows, and MRR ran anti-Green Day columns. Green Day was banned from Gilman Street. Once *Dookie* was officially released and its popularity began to grow, even the mainstream media fed into the hype of Green Day being banned from the punk scene. *Dookie* went on to sell over ten million copies. Much of Green Day’s early success was attributed to the music videos for the songs “Basket Case” and “Longview” that had heavy rotation on MTV, and the televised concert they did for Woodstock 1994. Their set ended in a chaotic mud fight between the band and audience that ended in fans rushing the stage and Mike Dirnt, being mistaken for a fan, getting his teeth knocked out by a security guard (Small 31).

However, the sudden popularity took a toll on Green Day. Suddenly being thrust into the limelight, but being ostracized by those who were once their friends drove the band to become insular. As Armstrong explains, “everything after was completely unpredictable… I remember everything being scary. It was a really sensitive period for us. We were affected by the fame… kind of in a negative way… I still had my set of friends… I loved them. I loved Adrienne. She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me in the whole world and that was all I needed” (Spitz 105-106). As 1995 began Billie Joe and Adrienne Armstrong, who married in July of 1994,
welcomed their first child, Joseph Marciano Armstrong, in March of 1995. Tre Cool also married his girlfriend Lisea Lyons, and became father to Ramona (Spitz 115).

1995 also saw the release of Green Day’s second major label album, *Insomniac*. *Insomniac* was partially a reaction to the sudden fame, being ostracized from the Gilman punk scene that meant so much to them, and new life changes such as getting married and having children. Green Day was attempting to fight against the backlash that occurred when they moved to a major label by showing that they still knew how to write punk music. Green Day’s sudden financial stability created a tension between old friends and the band’s members. The members of Green Day were no longer economically working class, and they were not necessarily unhappy about that. As Mike Dirnt describes in a 1995 interview,

One question we get asked a lot now… is ‘how much money do you make?’ When I was younger, I actually asked that question to my mom’s friend. My mom took me and slapped me in the face and said, ‘do not ask that question! It’s none of your business.’

Sure, we make money. We make plenty of money. And it’s peace of mind for me to know that I’ve bought my mom a house, and that my little sisters don’t have to live in a trailer anymore. (Marks 138)

*Insomniac* initially hit the music charts at number two, but slowly fell down the charts. Green Day was both shocked by the sudden success of *Dookie*, and possibly afraid of the sudden lack of success of *Insomniac*. Weiss, former Chair of Warner Brothers Records, says “consciously or unconsciously, the band probably didn’t want to be the hit making machine… that was my perception of why they would choose a song like ‘Geek Stink Breath’ to come back with” (as quoted in Spitz 120). Also at this time Green Day’s management, Jeff Saltzman and
Elliot Cahn, supposedly leaked to a local radio station one of Green Day’s songs that was to be on a movie soundtrack prior to the movie’s release. As a result, Green Day decided to split from Saltzman and Cahn and manage themselves. Despite their now upper class economic standing, Green Day still attempted to hang on to the punk DIY ethic by doing things themselves. Perhaps because of this, the tour for *Insomniac* was cut short due to exhaustion and supposed health problems (Spitz 121-126).

After time spent at home with their families, Green Day were back in the studio with Rob Cavallo to record their next album, *Nimrod*. They also changed their management to Pat Magnarella and Bob Cavallo (Rob Cavallo’s father) rather than managing themselves. 1997’s *Nimrod* was another musical departure from Green Day’s previous albums. The eighteen songs range from short punk pieces like “Nice Guys Finish Last” to adding a horn section on “King for a Day,” to even an acoustic ballad, one of Green Day’s biggest singles to date, “Good Riddance (Time of Your Life).” Although, like *Insomniac*, *Nimrod* did not sell as well as hoped (with the exception of “Good Riddance…”), Green Day continued to tour, creating much mayhem along the way.

After touring for *Nimrod*, the members of Green Day took a break to spend time with their families. By 2000 Green Day came out with their next album, *Warning*, their sixth studio album. It did not receive much critical acclaim when it was initially released. During the summer before *Warning*’s release, much to people’s amazement, Green Day headlined the Warped Tour, which is mainly filled with new unknown bands rather than established bands like Green Day. Many of the songs on *Warning* have a Bob Dylan inspired folk sound. In the first version of Green Day’s *VH-1 Behind the Music* T.V. episode they are about to leave to go on tour for *Warning*. Green Day bring their kids on tour with them for the summer as Billie Joe’s wife
Adrienne jokes “we are going to bring the kids and make it the summer camp on wheels!” (
*VH-I Behind the Music*). Later Green Day even shared a bill with newer pop-punk act Blink 182 on
the Pop Disaster Tour (Spitz 139-142).

After *Warning* Green Day released a greatest hits album called *International Superhits!*
in 2001, and an album of B sides called *Shenanigans* in 2002. After years of constant touring
Armstrong, Dirnt, and Cool were not getting along. When they went into the studio to record
*Cigarettes and Valentines* the band was stuck in a rut. However, *Cigarettes and Valentines*
would never see the light of day (except for the title track nearly five years later). Green Day
claims that the master tapes were “stolen” from their recording studio. After talking with Rob
Cavallo about whether to just rerecord the songs or start over Green Day decided that the songs
on *Cigarettes and Valentines* were not their best work. Armstrong took time to write in New
York City, but shortly after getting back to the Bay Area was arrested for a D.U.I. in 2003. After
this, Green Day went in to record an album as their side project/ alter ego band called The
Network. Their one and only album called *Money Money 20/20*, released in 2003, was a techno-
rock blend released through Armstrong’s indie label Adeline Records. However, there is a
mystery about The Network due to Green Day’s strong denial of any involvement with them
until 2012 (Fricke 2013 “Q&A: Mike Dirnt…”). The experimentation with the Network helped to
open up Green Day to write their greatest musical departure yet; an album called *American Idiot*.

*American Idiot*, released September 21st 2004, is a political punk rock opera. Not only
would Green Day depart from their previous work musically with nine minute song suites “Jesus
of Suburbia” and “Homecoming,” they also revamped their look and stage show. Armstrong,
Dirnt, and Cool slimmed down and chose black Armani suits and black eyeliner as opposed to
their previous more casual look. Clearly the band was attempting to move away from their
working class image. Their stage shows now included a multitude of pyrotechnics and anti-war left-wing political commentary and large banners with the album cover art on it. The tours for *American Idiot* had Green Day playing stadiums around the world. One of the biggest shows Green Day has played to date was during the American Idiot tour. It was for 65,000 people at the Milton Keynes Bowl near London, England (Spitz 158-182). The two-day stint at the Milton Keynes Bowl was filmed and resulted in the 2005 concert documentary *Bullet in a Bible*. In 2010 *American Idiot* was turned into a Broadway musical.

After a few random charity events and collaborations in 2007 and 2008 they recorded “The Saints are Coming” with U2 and a cover of John Lennon’s “Working Class Hero” for Amnesty International. The latter is an interesting song choice and is an example of the continuing influence of their working class background even though they are no longer working class, something that will be further elaborated on. Green Day also took on another side project called the Foxboro Hot Tubs. In 2008 the Foxboro Hot Tubs released their only album, *Stop Drop and Roll!* followed by a mini tour of the Southwest (Green Day Authority).

Then, in 2009, Green Day’s next studio album, *21st Century Breakdown*, was released. This is the only Green Day album where Rob Cavallo was not the producer. *21st Century Breakdown* was produced by Butch Vig along with the band. *21st Century Breakdown* was another rock opera. Some of the songs from the album were used in *American Idiot: the Musical*.

In 2012 Green Day released three new albums consecutively, called *Uno!, Dos!, And Tré!* (A.K.A. “the trilogy”). However, both promotion and touring for the trilogy were cut short. In September of 2012, during their set at the I Heart Radio Music Festival, Armstrong had an
expletive-laden rant that ended in him smashing his guitar on stage. This resulted in Armstrong attending a month-long outpatient rehab program, a cancelled/rescheduled tour, and a hit to the sales of the trilogy due to lack of promotion (since there was no band to promote them). In the only interview about the I Heart incident, Armstrong says “I know I’m not gonna relive that. That’s a side of me I don’t want my fans to ever see again. I want to put on good shows… I want to be reliable. And we plan on being reliable” (Fricke 2013).

After the shorter tour for the trilogy, Green Day was mainly silent until 2013. In November of 2013, Billie Joe Armstrong collaborated with Norah Jones on the album *Foreverly* a cover of the Everly Brothers album *Songs Our Daddy Taught Us* (Fricke 2013). However, the biggest Green Day news to date was in 2015 when Green Day was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (Greene). Green Day was inducted the first year that they were eligible. As Armstrong describes,

> It was surreal…And then when we we're standing onstage accepting the award and you look out. You see Patti Smith and you see Alice Cooper. It's like you're waiting to wake up. I'm waiting to turn over to my wife and say, "I had the craziest dream last night, check this out." All of a sudden, it turns into something out of *The Wizard of Oz* or something. [Laughs] (Greene).

Two days before their Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction Green Day played a show in the Cleveland House of Blues. They even played an opening set with original drummer John

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3 Here are links to the I Heart Radio incident, and the interview before Green Day played the show. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSBZV94TD_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSBZV94TD_U) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NG58gUEjy8w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NG58gUEjy8w)
Kiffmeyer as Sweet Children. After the induction ceremony Armstrong posted a note to fans on Instagram saying:

dear you, I can't express enough how much love is in my heart for all of you in our green day community. for me to try to put it into words almost feels awkward. Sometimes I don't always like to use the word "fan". I think I can speak on behalf of me mike and Tré when I call you family or community. Because you all truly grew up together with us and shared this journey together. this is more than an award. it's the privilege to play music, write songs and follow this psychotic passion called rock n roll. And we share this honor together. because honestly YOU ARE our rock n roll hall of fame. idiot nation forever rage and love Billie Joe. (see Appendix B)

After their Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction\(^4\), Green Day has mostly been silent besides the occasional post on Instagram. This is mainly due to Mike Dirnt’s wife Brittany battling breast cancer last year, and Jason White (touring guitarist and official fourth member of Green Day as of 2012) being diagnosed with a cancerous tumor on his tonsils. As of October 2015 a long awaited documentary about the making of the album *American Idiot*, called *Heart Like a Hand Grenade*, was released.

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\(^4\) Coincidentally, Rush was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2013, many years after they were eligible for induction.
CHAPTER THREE: VALUES OF INDIVIDUALS, PERFORMANCES, AND PLACES

As the above background discusses, Green Day’s career includes a diverse set of different musical genres and achievements. The point of the above is not only to provide a background of Green Day’s career, but also to give context to the songs, song lyrics, and band members’ viewpoints that will now be analyzed. Green Day’s song lyrics, which are mainly written by Billie Joe Armstrong, cover many different topics and emotions. Green Day performs middle class values through both their song lyrics and stage shows. They show these middle class values through their portrayal of individualism, a set of diverging tendencies, and their depictions of suburbia.

Individualism

One of the most frequent topics of Green Day lyrics is individualism. Adrie Kusserow’s ethnographic research about different types of individualism provides an interesting template to look at Green Day’s song lyrics and their portrayal of middle class individualism. Her work describes different types of individualism through child rearing and teaching techniques. Kusserow’s research, which examined schools in different New York City neighborhoods, showed three types of individualism related to class: “hard defensive,” “hard offensive,” and “soft offensive” (Kusserow 2004 26). In Kusserow’s earlier work, “De-Homogenizing American Individualism: Socializing Hard and Soft Individualism in Manhattan and Queens” she refers to different types of individualism as “offensive” or “defensive,” however, in her more recent book American Individualisms: Child Rearing and Social Class in Three Neighborhoods she continues to describe two types of “hard” or “soft” individualism as “protective” and “projective.”
world” (Kusserow 1999 117, McDonald 73). “Hard offensive” individualism is described as “emphasizing upward mobility and a more aggressive, assertive expression of self-reliance. Children were taught to be assertive, to go after what they wanted, not merely to defend themselves” (McDonald 74). This type of individualism is tied to the working and lower middle classes. “Soft offensive” individualism is focused on the “concept of uniqueness” and is associated with professional and upper middle class neighborhoods (McDonald 74).

Both Green Day and Rush portray these types of individualism through their song lyrics. Rush has many songs about individualism such as “Vital Signs,” “Something for Nothing,” “Grand Designs,” and “Anthem” that encourage listeners to “swim against the stream” and live our lives according to our own rules; if we don’t, then we are just playing a part in a ‘mass production scheme!” (McDonald 79). Green Day songs such as “Minority,” “Jesus of Suburbia,” “Holiday,” and “Warning” all encourage listeners to go against mainstream thought and think for themselves and be individuals. This is one of many ways that Green Day has similarities with the band Rush. Just like Rush, Green Day moves from a “harder” form of individualism to a “softer” form later in their career. In the song “Welcome to Paradise” from both Kerplunk and Dookie Armstrong sings:

Dear mother, can you hear me whinin’?

It's been three whole weeks since I have left your home

This sudden fear has left me tremblin'

Cause now it seems I am out here on my own

And I'm feeling so alone
Pay attention to the cracked streets and the broken homes

Some call it slum some call it nice

I want to take you through a wasteland I like to call my home

Welcome to Paradise (“Welcome to Paradise Lyrics”)

This song, along with others on their first three albums, portrays a “Hard Defensive” individualism rather than a “Hard Offensive” or “Soft Offensive” form. As the line “now it seems I’m out here on my own/and I’m feeling so alone” would suggest “Welcome to Paradise” is more about living on your own rather than being unique. The song continues with “a gunshot rings out at the station/ another urchin snaps and left dead on his own” which would imply the need to defend one’s self in a working class (or punk squatter) neighborhood (“Welcome to Paradise Lyrics”). This reflects the places Billie Joe Armstrong was living in at the time (Spitz 47-48).

However, by the time Green Day released Warning they had shifted closer to a “Soft Offensive” form of individualism. The type of individualism that Green Day’s writing reflects on Warning encourages listeners to be unique, “live without warning,” (“Warning”) and reject the rules of others, “I don’t need your authority” (“Minority”). Each specifically addresses confronting authority and being unique. The song “Macy’s Day Parade” (also from Warning) alludes to the idea that if you are not an individual you will be lost in the sea of mass production:

Today's the Macy's Day Parade

the night of the living dead is on its way

with a credit report for duty call
it's a lifetime guarantee

stuffed in a coffin 10% more free

Red light special at the mausoleum

Give me something that I need

satisfaction guaranteed to you

what's the consolation prize?

economy sized dreams of hope (“Macy’s Day Parade Lyrics”)

These lyrics would imply that participating in mass production and consumerism will lead to a zombie-like person “with a credit report for duty call” that is just “stuffed in a coffin 10% more free/ red light special at the mausoleum” (“Macy’s Day Parade Lyrics”). This would imply a type of death by participating because the only thing they really get is “an economy size dream[s] of hope” (“Macy’s Day Parade Lyrics”).

While many songs on Green Day’s album, Warning, allude to individualism through defying authority and the mainstream, American Idiot develops the idea of a “softer” form of individualism through both the songs “American Idiot” and “Holiday” as well as the songs/characters of “Jesus of Suburbia” (JOS) and “Saint Jimmy.” They do this through emphasizing uniqueness, rather than conforming to the mainstream, and a rejection of authority. The storyline, or rock opera, part of the American Idiot album sets up the story through the title track. The lyrics suggest that the time that the story is set in does not condone individuality:

Don't wanna be an American idiot
Don't want a nation under the new mania
And can you hear the sound of hysteria
The subliminal mind fuck America
Welcome to a new kind of tension
All across the alien nation
Where everything isn't meant to be okay
Television dreams of tomorrow
We're not the ones meant to follow
For that's enough to argue

Maybe I am the faggot America
I'm not a part of a redneck agenda
Now everybody do the propaganda
And sing along to the age of paranoia
Welcome to a new kind of tension
All across the alien nation
Everything isn't meant to be okay
Television dreams of tomorrow

We're not the ones meant to follow

For that's enough to argue

Don't want to be an American idiot

One nation controlled by the media

Information age of hysteria

Calling out to idiot America

Welcome to a new kind of tension

All across the alien nation

Everything isn't meant to be okay

Television dreams of tomorrow

We're not the ones meant to follow

For that's enough to argue (“American Idiot Lyrics”)

The lyrics of “American Idiot” simultaneously reject and describe the paranoia and hesitance towards individualism that is a reflection of the times the song/album were written. Despite the album not being released until 2004, many songs were about George W. Bush’s first term as president, and the tension after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center as well as the debate
over the start of the second war in Iraq. The constant paranoia and emphasis on lessening of individuality portrayed the members of Green Day’s position on many government policies that were being issued at the time, as well as the seemingly constant threat of another terrorist attack.

“American Idiot” sets up the atmosphere that the characters JOS and Saint Jimmy are living in, where individualism and defiance of the mainstream are looked down upon. However, the description specifically of JOS’s attempts to be an individual is described in the song “Jesus of Suburbia:”

I'm the son of rage and love,

The Jesus of suburbia,

From the bible of "none of the above",

On a steady diet of soda pop and Ritalin,

No one ever died for my sins in hell,

As far as I can tell,

At least the ones I got away with

But there's nothing wrong with me,

This is how I'm supposed to be,

In a land of make believe,

That don't believe in me
“Jesus of Suburbia” emphasizes uniqueness in a world, such as the one described in “American Idiot,” that condemns individuality. JOS emphasizes that he is his own person by saying that he is “from the bible of none of the above” (“Jesus of Suburbia Lyrics”). “Jesus of Suburbia” also reflects a rejection of many political practices at the time. When JOS states “no one ever died for my sins in hell/ as far as I can tell/ at least the ones I got away with” is a reflection of the resurgence of the religious right, and that despite this “there’s nothing wrong with me/ this is how I’m supposed to be/ in a land of make believe/ that don’t believe in me” (“Jesus of Suburbia Lyrics”). This “land of make believe” refers to the land of “American Idiot” and that it does not believe it is O.K. to be this way. At this point in their career, Green Day were trying to keep ties to their working class roots with a “hard offensive” stance, but also wanted to emphasize how they were feeling at the time with a more “soft offensive” form of individualism. Economically, where the members of Green Day were when they wrote *Dookie*, and where they were when they wrote *American Idiot* are very different, and this wavering between the two types of individualism shows this. Later on the song JOS asserts this type of individualism:

At the center of the earth,

In the parking lot,

Of the 7-11 where I was taught,

The motto was just a lie

It says: home is where your heart is,

But what a shame,
'Cause everyone's heart,

Doesn't beat the same,

We're beating out of time

Here, JOS asserts that he does not agree with his parents or like living in the suburbs. The assertion of a “hard” form of individualism on *American Idiot* was a reflection of the band’s feelings at the time as Mike Dirnt described at the time, “as individuals we feel like we’re losing our individuality” (*Heart Like a Hand Grenade*). On the other hand, the character of JOS also celebrates uniqueness and individuality as “Soft Offensive” individuality does. Many of Green Day’s songs portray “Hard Offensive” individualism or a mixture of “Hard” and “Soft Offensive” individualism in their lyrics.

There are many similarities between Green Day’s characters and Rush’s characters. A comparison between Rush’s song “Tom Sawyer” and Green Day’s *American Idiot* storyline, more specifically the songs “Jesus of Suburbia” and “Saint Jimmy,” is a good example of this (McDonald 70). McDonald says of “Tom Sawyer” “Rush positions Tom Sawyer antagonistically against the larger society” and as the song describes “his mind is not for rent/ to any god or government” (70). Rush’s Tom Sawyer portrays a “harder” form of individualism and is described with words such as “warrior, invader, arrogance, energy, friction” (McDonald 74). This type of “hard” individualism can also be seen in the character “Saint Jimmy” that is described as “the needle in the vein of the establishment,” the “one that’s from the way outside,” and the “resident leader of the lost and found” (“Saint Jimmy Lyrics”). He is also described as a “son of a bitch” who is “insubordinate,” and “like a zip gun on parade” (“Saint Jimmy Lyrics”). This is similar to Rush’s Tom Sawyer because of the use of a “harder” form of individualism
through the use of harsher words to describe the character. In contrast, the character JOS would imply a “softer” form of individualism by emphasizing that he is unique against a larger society that opposes uniqueness and individuality. This difference may be why (at least in *American Idiot*) Green Day seemingly portrays a mixture of both “hard” and “soft” forms of individualism. It is not fully clear whether JOS and Saint Jimmy are the same person or two different people. Even Armstrong does not fully know, as he states in Green Day’s *VH-1 Storytellers*,

> I think the original thought was that it was kind of the same person… uhmmmm… it could be two different people I don’t know…. It’s sort of part of a split personality. I think a lot of people have, they sort of get disconnected from themselves a little bit and follow a self-destructive path and I think Saint Jimmy symbolizes that (Green Day *VH-1 Storytellers* 29:00).

The overall storyline does not specify whether they are two different people or the same person. ⁶ The song before “St. Jimmy,” “Are We the Waiting,” ends with the line “the Jesus of Suburbia is a lie” which would imply that JOS wants to change himself, in other words JOS and Saint Jimmy are two sides of the same character. However, in the song “St. Jimmy” the character Saint Jimmy seems to be telling JOS “welcome to the club and give me some blood” which implies that JOS is meeting someone else rather than the same character under a different name (“Saint Jimmy Lyrics”).

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⁶ Please note I am using only the original *American Idiot* album. The portrayal of the storyline in *American Idiot: the Musical* is very different, and would suggest that JOS and Saint Jimmy are two different people. I am not referencing the musical because I am specifically analyzing Green Day’s portrayal of middle class values, and I am not sure how much of the storyline of the musical was influenced by director Michael Mayer.
Not only does this sense of individualism portray Kusserow’s types of individualism, it plays into a hegemonic myth of the middle class. McDonald cites Robert Bellah’s book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, “the meaning of one’s life for most [middle class] Americans is to become one’s own person. Almost to give birth to oneself. Much of this process… involves breaking free from family, community, and inherited ideas” (Bellah 82-83). The type of individualism in America is a strong myth that “it is a powerful fiction that we not only can, but must, make up our deepest beliefs in the isolation of our private selves” (Bellah 82-83). JOS does this in the section called “Dearly Beloved:”

Dearly beloved are you listening?

I can't remember a word that you were saying

Are we demented or am I disturbed?

The space that's in between insane and insecure

Oh therapy, can you please fill the void?

Am I retarded or am I just overjoyed

Nobody's perfect and I stand accused

For lack of a better word, and that's my best excuse (“Jesus of Suburbia Lyrics”).

The storyline of *American Idiot* fits Bellah’s concept of needing to leave home to find one’s inner self. JOS attempts to truly find himself by leaving home for the city, only to find Saint Jimmy. This is also the case with songs from their 2009 album *21st Century Breakdown*. Even though the story line on *21st Century* is less developed than on *American Idiot*, the same
struggles that Bellah describes are evident in songs such as “Restless Heart Syndrome.” The concept of questioning yourself about your identity shows through lines such as

I think they found another cure
For broken hearts and feeling insecure
You'd be surprised what I endure
What make you feel so self-assured?

And “I am my own worst enemy” (“Restless Heart Syndrome Lyrics”). These lyrics suggest that to become an individual you have to direct yourself inward rather than to family and community.

While these individualist aspects are prevalent in Green Day’s earlier work, they are not present in their newest work, the trilogy *Uno!*, *Dos!*, and *Tré!*. This may be symbolic of their changing attachment to, and significant distance from, their working class background. Economically the members of Green Day are now upper class, and they are struggling to keep to their working class and middle class ideals.

**Diverging Tendencies**

Another way that Green Day performs middle class values, again using McDonald as a template, is through their recording processes and stage shows. As McDonald describes with Rush, there is a set of diverging tendencies within Rush’s music lyrics and stage shows: “discipline, detachment, and seriousness” on one end and “excess, spectacle, and extremity” on the other (135). These two diverging tendencies display middle class views about the “mind, body, and emotions” that are often contradictory or polarizing (McDonald 137). Green Day also displays these diverging tendencies through lyrics for songs such as “Are We the Waiting” and the stories
of *American Idiot* and 21st *Century Breakdown*. Yet, the other end of the spectrum is shown through Green Day’s live shows where the band members overly exaggerate their movements, and have elaborate sets.

Rush exhibits “discipline, detachment, and seriousness” through lyrics of songs such as “Freewill” and “The Camera Eye.” The lyrics of these songs describe large abstract concepts such as freewill and the description of two cities from the perspective of a detached observer. Yet the delivery of these lyrics is with the “strained, upper register of his [Geddy Lee’s] voice” that would imply the other end of the aforementioned spectrum (McDonald 135). Rush also does this through their stage shows by having many elaborate sets, and yet never over-exaggerating their stage movement and performing their songs as they were recorded (McDonald 142-143).

The first set of “discipline, detachment, and seriousness” is shown through Green Day’s lyrics for the song “Are We the Waiting” from *American Idiot*. Similar to Rush’s song “The Camera Eye,” “Are We the Waiting” describes a city, in this case New York City, from a detached viewpoint (Travers 52). However, unlike in Rush’s songs, the point of view in “Are We the Waiting” is detached because it is presented through the character in the song. This is the main way that Green Day uses detached points of view for their songs: through the use of characters. The lyrics of “Are We the Waiting” are an example of this:

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Starry nights city lights
Coming down over me
Skyscrapers and stargazers
In my head
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Are we we are, are we we are
The waiting, unknown
This dirty town was burning down in my dreams
Lost and found city bound in my dreams

And screaming
Are we we are, are we we are the waiting
And screaming
Are we we are, are we we are the waiting

Forget me nots and second thoughts
Live in isolation
Heads or tales and fairytales in my mind
Are we we are, are we we are
The waiting, unknown

The rage and love, the story of my life
The Jesus of suburbia is a lie
And screaming
Are we we are, are we we are the waiting, unknown (“Are We the Waiting Lyrics”).

Similarly to “The Camera Eye,” musically “Are We the Waiting” mimics the sounds of the city with its pounding electric drum sounds and flowing whimsical guitar parts echoing the sounds of the city without actually being in the city. The detached feeling comes from not only being a
description of any city, but the character’s emotional place could be anyone’s feelings. This
generalized point of view creates the detached feeling of the song. These lyrics present a subject
that takes on the “position of a neutral, objective, invisible observer” that represents “a privileged
whiteness and masculinity, so that the unmarked and unhyphenated ‘American’ (or ‘Canadian’) is
presumed to be white and male” (McDonald 153). The “ethnic emptiness” of the white male
identity is “abetted by assuming a middle-class identity and lifestyle” (McDonald 154). This is
tied to class because “entry into the middle class often accompanies a loss of ethnicity and
absorption into whiteness” (McDonald 154).

Green Day also exhibits this detachment through characters presented on the album 21st
Century Breakdown. However, the storyline of the rock opera of 21st Century Breakdown is less
obvious than the story of American Idiot. 21st Century Breakdown follows the characters Gloria
and Christian. The description of characters in the songs “¡Viva La Gloria!,” “¿Viva La Gloria,?”
and “Christian’s Inferno” is another example of the way Armstrong uses characters to achieve a
more detached viewpoint. Green Day’s music and lyrics changed from American Idiot to today
in that their song lyrics are still emotional like their previous recordings, but through the
detached viewpoint of characters. This even extends into their trilogy on songs such as “A Little
Boy Named Train” off the album Tré. This detachment is related to middle class views of the
mind, body, and emotions because according to Jaqueline Warwick, this type of distanced point
of view has been popular with middle class audiences (Warwick quoted in McDonald 139).

Green Day also use the “discipline” part of this end of the spectrum in American Idiot
and 21st Century Breakdown. The recording process, especially for these two albums, is often
described as tough. As Armstrong notes of recording 21st Century Breakdown “It’s funny- we
make our most physical album not when we’re 19 but in our mid-30s” (Fricke 2009, 18). The
writing and recording process for *American Idiot* was similarly stressful. As Billie Joe Armstrong’s wife Adrienne puts it, “It was scary, because where he had to go to get this record wasn’t a place I’m sure I wanted him to be” (Hendrickson). And Tré Cool described that same time as “There were a lot of waterworks making this record; I went through the worst time of my life” due to a divorce from his second wife: similarly, Mike Dirnt went through a divorce from his first wife during this time (Hendrickson). It seems that the members of Green Day needed to discipline themselves in order to get an album released despite these conditions.

However, Green Day shows the other end of this spectrum, “excess, spectacle, and extremity” through their live shows. As with their music and style of dress, Green Day’s stage shows became more of a spectacle during the popularity of *American Idiot*, and even more so during tours for *21st Century Breakdown*. During the tours for *American Idiot* different types of pyrotechnics would go off during specific songs. They also had an elaborate stage set up with a catwalk jutting out into the audience. The stage for the *American Idiot* tours is well documented in the CD/DVD concert documentary *Bullet in a Bible*. However, Green Day took this elaborate stage set up even further with their tours for *21st Century Breakdown*. Not only did they have pyrotechnics, but they had a large T.V. screen that projected images related to the songs or video footage of the band on stage.

Another element of Green Day’s live performances that shows the “excess spectacle and extremity” is during their live shows; unlike Rush, many of the members exaggerate their movements when playing their instruments. Neil Peart is described as “emotionally detached” and as having “a dour look of concentration” when he plays drums (McDonald 145). In contrast, Tré Cool of Green Day frequently makes funny faces, throws drum sticks, leaves his drum kit to put on funny outfits or sing a part, and moves his arms as if the members of the audience in the
back of the stadium need to see that he is playing. Cool does these antics in between moments of focus and concentration which are clearly needed to play drums efficiently. Tré Cool’s stage antics may be related to his often silly personality, however, Cool’s ability to have control over his instrument despite his antics is similar to Alex Lifeson of Rush. Despite his silly antics, Lifeson also has control over his guitar playing. The biggest difference between Green Day concerts and Rush concerts is that the members of Green Day interact with the crowd more. This is mainly done by Billie Joe Armstrong through frequent call and response with the audience (mainly “Hey oh”), occasionally telling funny stories to the audience, and inviting audience members up to play or sing certain songs. Armstrong is frequently described as the “ring leader” by other band members who directs the crowd and the band in between frantically sprinting across the stage and various other gestures to the crowd. This only adds to the spectacle of their shows.

There is another aspect to Green Day’s shows that Rush does not have and that contributes to the spectacle: extra members for live shows. While touring, Green Day has three extra members. The group, who jokingly call themselves “the Big Three,” is composed of Jason White (now an official member of the main band who plays guitar and backup vocals), Jason Freese (keyboards, horns, and backup vocals), and Jeff Matika (guitar and backup vocals) (Cuatro). In order to play some of the songs on Green Day’s albums they need more musicians than the three (or four depending on how and when you count) main members. Rush achieves this through triggering tracks via foot pedals on the floor, but Green Day adds to their spectacle and excess qualities of their shows while giving renditions of their songs that are very similar to the album versions by adding extra members. The excess and spectacle are linked to middle class aspirations of upward mobility by keeping up with other bands’ stage props (McDonald 153).
The way that both McDonald’s analysis of Rush and my analysis of Green Day show aspects of middle class values through the spectacle of their live shows is that they show visions of upward mobility (McDonald 153). As McDonald describes, “‘showing off’ is always a sign of upward mobility, or at least the desire to appear mobile” (153). Green Day’s constant efforts to keep their live shows spectacular is an attempt to show upward mobility through keeping up with their competition. Through these diverging tendencies, Green Day’s live shows are yet another example of how they portray middle class values.

Suburbia

Both the members of Rush and the members of Green Day grew up in the suburbs. As Armstrong explains, “the one thing we do know is that we still are a bunch of geeks from the suburbs, and that’s how our music comes across. That’s what I write songs about” (Arnold 83). Despite the fact that neither the members of Green Day nor the members of Rush grew up in a middle class suburb, their depictions of suburbia in their songs are more representative of a middle class suburb than a working class suburb because of their emphasis on identity seeking, consumerism, and a need to leave the suburbs that are all more characteristic of the middle class. Both bands also write songs about the suburbs, Rush with “Subdivisions” and Green Day with “Jesus of Suburbia.” Both of these songs have similar outlooks about the suburbs, but with slightly differing messages. Both songs portray the suburbs as a place where anyone outside of what is considered the “norm” is excluded. In Rush’s “Subdivisions” they portray the suburbs as an “insulated border.” “Nowhere is the dreamer or the misfit so alone” because one must “conform or be cast out” and because “the suburbs have no charms to soothe the restless dreams of youth.” The city is a place where those who do not fit in can become trapped just to get out of the suburbs (“Subdivisions Lyrics”).

The main story line of the *American Idiot* album is about how Jesus of Suburbia longs to get out of the suburbs and go to the excitement of the city. “Jesus of Suburbia” describes the suburbs as

At the center of the earth

In the parking lot

Of the 7-11 where I was taught

The motto was just a lie

It says home is where your heart is

But what a shame

Cause everyone's heart

Doesn't beat the same

It's beating out of time

Where the “motto is just a lie/ it says home is where your heart is but what a shame cause everyone’s heart doesn’t beat the same/ it’s beating out of time” and describes people of the suburbs as “everyone’s so full of shit born and raised by hypocrites” (“Jesus of Suburbia Lyrics”). While Rush just cites the city as a means of escape for restless middle class suburbanites, Green Day goes further to not just describe the city as a means of getting out of the suburbs for those who do not fit in to the “norm,” they also say how being outside of the “norm” is OK. This is described by the lyrics”
And there's nothing wrong with me

This is how I'm supposed to be

In a land of make believe

That don't believe in me (“Jesus of Suburbia Lyrics”).

However, the story of American Idiot/ “Jesus of Suburbia” is a cautionary tale of what could be found in the city. Jesus of Suburbia meets/ turns into “Saint Jimmy” and becomes addicted to drugs and alcohol, only to end up back in boring middle class suburban life afterwards.

From Green Day’s earliest albums many of the lyrics are about a general sense of boredom in the suburbs and a longing to leave. As early as Kerplunk, their second album, the song “Christie Road” describes this through the lyrics “gotta get away or my brains will explode” and pleads “give me something to do to kill some time” (“Christie Road Lyrics”). This general sense of a desire to escape is also in their major label debut, Dookie. Songs like “Longview” and “Sassafras Roots” describe a longing to go to a new more exciting place, but not having the motivation to get off the couch. As the first verse of “Longview” describes:

Sit around and watch the tube, but nothing's on

I change the channels for an hour or two

Twiddle my thumbs just for a bit

I'm sick of all the same old shit

In a house with unlocked doors
And I'm fucking lazy (“Longview Lyrics”)

And “Sassafras Roots” asks “I’m a waste like you/ with nothin’ else to do/ may I waste your time too?” (“Sassafras Roots Lyrics”). Both of these songs describe a general sense of boredom in the suburbs and a longing to be “anywhere but here” as Rush describes in the song “Double Agent” (“Double Agent Lyrics”).

As with many stories, middle class readers/listeners are looking for a moral to the story (McDonald 41). However, with both Rush’s “the Fountain of Lamneth” and Green Day’s American Idiot story line, the moral of the story ends up being that:

where the protagonist finds the attainment of the goal banal and unsatisfying… and there is a sense of having come all this way to end up nowhere… Life, the protagonist realizes, is not about reaching a destination so much as it is about the journey (McDonald 37)

In American Idiot’s storyline, Jesus of Suburbia, similar to the unnamed protagonist of “The Fountain of Lamneth,” searches for a new life in the city; he falls in love with a woman named “Whatshername,” and after struggles with addiction and losing “Whatshername” because of it Jesus of Suburbia ends up back in the suburbs reminiscing about the journey in the last lines saying “and in the darkest night/ if my memory serves me right/ I’ll never turn back time/ forgetting you, but not the time” (“Whatshername Lyrics”). American Idiot is a story of escapism that fantasizes about what life would, and could, be like when leaving the boring suburbs for the exciting city.

This escapism ties into middle class ideas about individualism by using stories, or very emotional lyrics, to tap into the middle class’s value of individualism and the idea that everyone has an inner “true” self that can only be explored through fantasy (McDonald 40). These stories
create a sense that there is “more to life” than “the everyday routine” (McDonald 40). Many of Green Day’s songs play to this idea. The storyline of *American Idiot* may seem like the most obvious example, but there are many more times Green Day’s lyrics project this idea. In the song “Misery,” from *Warning*, the lyrics tell a short story of a series of murders. Many songs on *Dookie* such as “Burnout,” “Having a Blast,” and “Basketcase” are written from the perspective of a neurotic teen and could easily be established as an inner self “Coming Clean” of inner neurotic feelings.

Both the story of *American Idiot*, and Green Day’s background in the punk scene closely resemble what is expected of someone going into a middle class career. It is expected that anyone attempting to have a career as a doctor or lawyer, or even a PhD student, goes through a series of trials to get to the final career position. As McDonald points out:

careers in popular music might be added to the list, since many critics and fans accord more respect to musicians who have clearly paid their dues—struggling to start a career, doggedly honing their craft, slowly rising through the ranks—than to artists who appear to have attained instant success (43).

Green Day is no exception to this. Until 1993, when they signed to a major label, they did everything under the punk “do it yourself” ideal by booking their own shows and tours, making their own merchandise, and recording on an independent label. Their ties to the Gilman St. punk scene gave Green Day a context that many pop-punk bands that came after them didn’t have (Arnold 75). To this day Green Day still adheres to the Gilman ideals by giving back to their community in many ways. Green Day has often brought local bands, and friends’ bands such as Pansy Division in 1994, AFI in 2010, and Best Coast in 2013 on tour with them (Arnold 117 and
Pelly). They also, until 2005, chose to keep their first two albums on Lookout! Records (the independent label that signed them) (Prested 183). They also frequently play benefit shows for local businesses and charities; in 1994 they played benefit concerts for the Berkeley and Haight-Ashbury Free Clinics and the San Francisco Library (Arnold 117). In 2013 they played a benefit show for UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital and the Children’s Hospital and Research Center Oakland (Singh). In 2015 they were allowed to play as “special guests” at Gilman for a benefit concert for a local paper whose building burnt down (Grow). Green Day has also attempted to keep ticket prices low by sleeping on the bus, and taking a smaller cut (Arnold 115).

The story of *American Idiot* also encompasses the “American middle class myth of the self, where ‘success is thought of in terms of personal choice’ with respect to lifestyle, career, and economic independence” (McDonald 44). In *American Idiot* JOS wants to leave home in the suburbs for the excitement of the city; however, when he does this he mostly finds solace in walking the city streets alone such as in “Are We the Waiting” and “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” “I walk this empty street on the boulevard of broken dreams where the city sleeps and I walk alone” (“Boulevard of Broken Dreams Lyrics”). This concept ties to the middle class belief that to find one’s inner self there has to be a point, usually in adolescence, where a child leaves home and finds his or her inner self through a series of trials. What they usually find is the freedom to be left alone (Bellah 22-23, 56-57). This idea is not just shown through songs like “Boulevard of Broken Dreams,” but through the way that JOS does not end up “happily ever after” with whatshername. Instead he chooses the solace of drug addiction over his lover. He then has to overcome this and the result is to be alone again back in the suburbs. This story is also similar to what Orrin Klapp calls “identity journeys” which are “a contemporary middle class practice, a response to the erosion of clear, traditional identity markers in an increasingly
pluralistic postwar America” (Klapp quoted in McDonald 59). These “identity journeys” are frequently linked to middle class males because many middle class jobs are linked to femininity, but these journeys are filled with danger and finding one’s inner self through leaving the home (McDonald 59). While the character JOS would seem to fit this description (he is “the son of rage and love” as the lyrics describe) this would apply better to Rush’s fans, who are primarily men; whereas Green Day have frequently been made fun of for how many female fans they have (Boulware & Tudor 378). 7

7 The topic of Green Day and gender, and even more broadly punk and gender, is enough information and analysis for a whole separate book. Therefore it will not be discussed further here.
CHAPTER FOUR: VALUES CONCERNING WORK AND FAMILY

Green Day does not only perform middle class values through their song lyrics and stage shows, but also through how they portray themselves in the media. As this chapter will discuss, how the members of Green Day describe their work and families within their interviews, as well as some song lyrics, they portray middle class views of professionalism and middle class family structures.

Professionalism

In many of Green Day’s interviews, especially since American Idiot, they emphasize how tough it is to be such a hard working band. They frequently discuss how much time and effort actually go into making a record, and then touring for it, and emphasize how hard that is on their families to be away for long periods of time. These discussions are interspersed with jokes, and hilarious stories from their youth. Through portraying themselves as hard working men attempting to provide for their families they emphasize the values of what author Barbara Ehrenreich calls “the professional middle class” (3). One aspect of the professional middle class is that they identify themselves through their professions. As William Weber describes, “Professionalism is an important facet of middle-class identity to explore… middle-class people identify themselves less as a class and more through their professions” (as quoted in McDonald 104). Like Rush, members of Green Day have portrayed themselves in a way that is similar to “the culture of professionalism” which is “a set of attitudes toward work, working relationships, skill, and prestige… and has become an important part of how middle-class careers are shaped and understood” (McDonald 104). Again similarly to Rush, Green Day portrays these values by “eschewing artifice, cultivating a down to earth persona, claiming to make music for the sake of
art rather than fame, and declaring artistic autonomy from the music industry—all these mobilize a number of well-discussed discourses surrounding rock music and authenticity” (McDonald 103). It is easier to look at aspects of rock music and authenticity through a series of binaries that are indirectly connected to professionalism for a musician, “rock/pop, authentic/inauthentic, artistic/commercial, innovative/derivative, real/fake” (McDonald 103).

Green Day presents itself as more “authentic” by presenting themselves as not only creating art solely for their own enjoyment, but also attempting to keep themselves as outsiders within the music industry. As previously mentioned this is complicated by some things that have occurred in their history. They were a part of the Gilman St. punk scene and were on an independent label for their first two records. They kept those records with Lookout!, the independent label which produced their first two albums, until 2005. Despite this, many still see Green Day as a “fake” punk band because they were perceived as having sold out by going to a major label. However, despite the heavy backlash from both the Gilman St. punk scene and the mainstream press, Green Day still tries to present itself as a “real” punk band by claiming creative autonomy from the major label music industry. It is important to have creative autonomy because, as professionals, Green Day wants their work to be viewed as solely being their creative work rather than just being told what to do by the major label they are signed to. In regards to Green Day’s original contract with their record label, Reprise, an interview on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Dookie says:

There is some debate as to whether Green Day’s Reprise contract included specific language granting the band full creative control over its records. ‘Absolutely,’ Armstrong says. ‘I think it said mutual creative control’ [Rob] Cavallo says. ‘its got to be a real partnership’ (Fricke 2014 51).
Switching to a major label, despite going against the biggest punk/Gilman St. motto of no major label bands, “was a career thing” according to Armstrong (Arnold 83). “[M]y band just moved on… we just went where the music was taking us” (Thompson 142). Dirnt elaborates on this idea by calling it a “survival of the heart:”

Dirnt contends that Green Day would not have signed to a major label ‘If it hadn’t been about the three of us trying to survive. For me, selling out would have been going back to flipping burgers, heating installation, and painting. Do I want to live a life where I care about something? Or do I want to live a life where everyone around me is miserable too? (Fricke 2014 49)

As Dirnt describes above, from fairly early on in their career, Green Day wanted to be seen as professionals rather than stay in the working class. McDonald describes Rush as having “credited a rigorous, honest work ethic as an important factor in its success,” and something similar can be said of Green Day (McDonald 107). Part of Green Day’s honest hard working outlook is based on how they have kept many of the punk ideals from the Gilman St. scene. However, despite keeping many punk ideals in their business practices, people frequently argue as to Green Day is still a punk band or not, and this continues because of the massive, and unexpected, success of *Dookie*. *Dookie*’s sudden success is often attributed to the earlier success of Nirvana’s album *Nevermind* in 1991. Despite these claims, Armstrong strongly believes that the success of *Dookie* was because of Green Day’s hard work touring before they even went to a major label. As Armstrong states in *VH-1’s Behind the Music*:

It had nothing to do with a major record company, it was our thing. We did it off of being self-sufficient for god’s sake. We did it on our own philosophies, you know, and we
stuck to ‘em. Something started happening that we didn’t really expect at all (*VH-1 Behind the Music*).

In an interview from 2001, Armstrong refutes the interviews that credit their success on Nirvana by saying “to me that is so untrue that it’s fucking ridiculous. Our success had nothing to do with them. We just toured hard, worked hard, and we also wrote great music” (Winwood 15). In that same interview, Armstrong described many bands that followed in Green Day’s wake like Blink 182 as “‘Disney punk’” because of “what he perceives as their lack of heritage and hard work” (Winwood 2001 16). The members of Green Day take bands’ backgrounds and ideologies seriously. Like many rock critics, and middle class Americans, Green Day believes that hard work equals success.

Further evidence of Green Day’s belief that their success is tied to their honest hard work ethic is that the recording of their albums are frequently described as rigorous. For Green Day this is most noticeable during *American Idiot* and *21st Century Breakdown*. As Armstrong describes about *21st Century Breakdown*, “It’s funny- we make our most physical album not when we’re 19 but in our mid-30s” (Fricke 2009). During the recording of *American Idiot*, as the documentary *Heart Like a Hand Grenade* shows, the band was mostly concerned with how the new direction they were taking would be received. The amount of work they put into the album created tension with their families; both Dirnt and Cool were going through divorces at the time, and Armstrong and his wife Adrienne have described it as a tense time in their relationship.

To a certain extent Green Day’s creative autonomy was due to a privilege that rock musicians from the 1970s to the early 1990s had. Many white male rock bands were given time
to be creative musically and build fan bases that artists in other genres weren’t allowed to do. Without this privilege, Green Day wouldn’t have been able to make experimental albums like *Nimrod*, *Warning*, and *American Idiot*. Unlike Rush, Green Day’s sudden massive success with their major label debut only helped; also, Green Day already had two full length albums out before they even went to a major label, and a growing fan base from touring for those albums. Green Day’s occupational autonomy must be thought of within the context of this white male privilege. Yet, what is even more important is that Green Day’s emphasis on creative and occupational autonomy is valued by the middle class (McDonald 110). According to Barbara Ehrenreich, “only in the professional middle class is work seen, and often experienced, as intrinsically rewarding, creative, and important” (132). This autonomy is key to the middle class because the more “honorable professions (law, academia, etc)” are seen as having a privileged position wherein, after years of generally paying one’s dues, a higher pay is reward for the hard work necessary to achieve a higher status (McDonald 110). As Ehrenreich describes, a dialogue between the working class and middle class persists through “the common perception that middle class professionals and managers don’t really do anything—certainly nothing that justifies their superior pay and status” partially because “for working class people, relations with the middle class are usually a one way dialogue” (136, 139). As Ehrenreich goes on to describe in further detail:

Professors tend to look down on executives, ‘pure’ researchers look down on industrial scientists, journalists look down on advertising copywriters. This is snobbery, but it stems from an allegiance to that elusive middle class value, occupational autonomy—the freedom to direct one’s own work according to inner principles rather than externally imposed priorities such as profit. (157)
Generally middle class professionals have careers that they enjoy, whereas working class people merely have jobs and have to find pleasure outside of that job (Ehrenreich 261). The previous quote from Mike Dirnt of describing Green Day’s choice to go to a major label as “survival of the heart” is very much tied to the middle class emphasis on occupational autonomy. As Gina Arnold points out in Green Day’s case “the fact that kids from this [working class] background would choose the security of a major label future over the more romantic and more Marxist, but far less secure, life of selling records out of the metaphorical equivalent of the back of a van, is hardly surprising” (82).

Members of Green Day also add to their personal occupational autonomy by insisting that the music they write/record is just them being themselves. This makes them appear to be self-directed professionals. This is most noticeable in their interviews. For example, in an interview from 2009, Armstrong states:

Ultimately we want to connect to people, whether it’s to a young kid listening on headphones in his room, or to an entire arena. In order to do that you just have to be as honest with yourself as you possibly can. You have to challenge yourself to test your own vulnerabilities as a songwriter, and not get tempted into doing whatever is popular at the moment. Success is like a drug, and what people often don’t understand when they first get it is that they’re just being themselves. And by success I mean making great albums. (Thompson 66)

The above quote emphasizes the importance of self-direction, and becoming successful based on “being yourself” rather than being influenced by the latest fad. Another part of an emphasis on self-direction that is important to the middle class is sustaining integrity
The only point where Green Day appear to have lost this integrity was the I Heart Radio incident. After it, Armstrong stated, “the thing in Vegas… that’s a side of me I don’t want my fans to ever see again. I want to put on good shows… I want to be reliable. And we plan on being reliable” (Fricke 2013 38). Clearly, integrity is important, at least to Armstrong.

However, this also ties into another part of professional middle class values, which is that the career is seen as a “calling” (McDonald 111). Green Day’s Armstrong is often described as if his entire being is constantly music. As Dirnt describes, “Billie is music-period” (Fricke 2013).

As Armstrong himself describes in the opening shot of *Bullet in a Bible*:

> music to me is the air that I breathe, the blood that pumps through my veins that keeps me alive… so without it I don’t know what I would do- I mean I would probably have a job or something like that but…. Or people say to me ‘what would you do if you didn’t have Green Day?’ I, I’d be in Green Day I don’t really know anything else… well I am Green Day that is- that is my life.

Another characteristic of the American middle class portrayed by Green Day is “status anxiety” (McDonald 123). According to C. Wright Mills, this is caused by ambivalence towards claims of status in North America. The prestige normally associated with many middle class professions is subject to questions and doubt which leads to a “status anxiety/panic” over the potential questionable middle class status of professionals (Mills 240). Even Barbara Ehrenreich’s book entitled *Fear of Falling*, is based on middle class fears of prestige and dominance over lower classes being ever in flux often leading to people becoming defensive.

Members of Green Day frequently, especially in earlier years, became defensive about their credibility as musicians due to two factors: “selling out” to a major label and, with the
exception of *American Idiot*, negative album reviews by critics. When Green Day became popular in 1994 even the mainstream press described them as the band who “sold out” to a major label; as Armstrong puts it in his own words, “even these mainstream journalists were calling us sellouts or whatever. I’m just like look who the fuck is talking?” (*VH-1 Behind the Music*).

Armstrong has a good point, the people making it such a big deal were a part of the aspect of selling out. The other aspect, album reviews, was described as follows by one journalist:

“Despite success, Green Day have tended to be a critically underrated band. Their albums are often criticized not for what they are, but for what they are not” (Winwood 2001 15). To combat these claims Green Day describe themselves as a “business- like” unit, or a “gang” (McDonald 124, *Cuatro*). As Mark Spitz, author of *Nobody Likes You: Inside the Turbulent Life, Times, and Music of Green Day* says, “the group were always business minded out of necessity… now Green Day were a business” (Spitz 118).

Green Day describes themselves as a “gang” in the documentary *Cuatro*, and frequently keep the same types of people within their inner circle. Despite mostly successful album sales, including a diamond record (over ten million copies) for *Dookie*, being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2015, their first year eligible, and even having their own version of *Rock Band* video game (the only other band to have this is the Beatles), Green Day are very insular. As Armstrong described in 2000, “we’re not a band who has a lot of friends… a lot of the mainstream bands won’t have anything to do with us, you know?” (Winwood 16). And speaking about the I Heart Radio music festival Mike Dirnt described their pre- show experience as “I didn’t want to hang out in the hallway with everybody’s entourage…it was a confined space with a lot of weird people around, people we didn’t know wandering in and out [of the dressing room]” and this made him feel “like a rat in a cage” (Fricke 2013). This attitude towards
others in the music business also ties into their management. When Green Day first signed to a major label they were managed by Elliot Cahn and Jeff Saltzman. After supposedly leaking a song to radio prior to its release date, Green Day left their management and managed themselves in 1995 with their former guitar tech as their liaison. As Armstrong describes, “no one knows what we want more than us” (Marks 139, Arnold 118). Green Day have also barred press from certain magazines. In 1995 Green Day would only do interviews with *Rolling Stone, Spin,* and *MTV News* after Armstrong refused to send an official statement to the press about his son Joey being born (Arnold 117-118). Similarly, since the I Heart Radio incident Green Day has only done interviews with David Fricke for *Rolling Stone.* Even long-time friend and former Green Day roadie Aaron Cometbus described Green Day during the tour in 2009/2010 for *21st Century Breakdown* as follows:

Much to my surprise, Mike and Tré scooted in next to Billie and took a seat on either side. It was one thing to be a successful band and still be on speaking terms—unheard of, really—but quite another to choose to be right next to each other, especially on a long and uncomfortable flight. …they seemed closer now than they had ever been… they were a very insular group. They hung out together even at home. I either saw them all, or none at all—and if I had a falling out with one, the rest didn’t tend to return my calls (5, 85).

Having this very insular outlook can be similar to a “lower middle class (petite bourgeois) enterprise, with all its advantages and ambivalence” (McDonald 125). This type of business can be vulnerable due to its middling status. As McDonald describes about Rush:

Rush’s success hung precariously between the power of the major record companies, who could withhold distribution and promotional services if Rush became burdensome or
unprofitable, and the support of fans, who could become alienated if the band used its creative privilege to swerve too far from the interests of its taste public. (125)

Green Day is in a similar position. Both bands started on independent labels and went to major labels. If they did not sell enough records the record company could refuse to let them record or to distribute their music, and if they experimented too much from what they are known for their fans could be alienated from the music they love. Despite Green Day’s general success with all of their albums, especially *Dookie* and *American Idiot*, they do attempt to stick to their punk ideals like lower ticket prices, and not having censored versions of their albums. The latter was abandoned in 2012 in order to sell them at large chains like Walmart. The avoidance of censored versions of their albums is not major label friendly, and neither is the ambitious trilogy of albums *Uno!*, *Dos!*, and *Tré!*, that only counted as one on their contract with Reprise (Downey 77). Both Rush and Green Day have pressure from fans to sound like a certain “era.” For Rush it’s the late 1970s and early 80s, for Green Day it’s either *Dookie* or *American Idiot*, depending on the fan. This pressure from fans has never impeded either band, but it does portray the middling status of seeing their bands as a business. It also ties into their emphasis on artistic autonomy; in rock, stylistic change and eclecticism are signs of growth for a band, and resemble the “verticality expected of a professional career” (McDonald 125).

Unlike Rush, Green Day did not specifically use eclecticism to show their musical breadth. As Armstrong asserts, “we never deliberately changed with the times. When pop-punk started getting popular again with Blink 182 and Sum 41, we put out *Warning*” (Downey 78). However, Green Day’s willingness to experiment with different styles of music keeps their musical identity open ended. Green Day’s ability to keep their music open ended is also tied to their image as a band. Their image has changed based on different eras as a band. When *Dookie*
was released they were not very concerned with their image. And, their style before *American Idiot* never really changed. For the most part, until *American Idiot*, Green Day never cared much about their appearance. However, like Rush, the sudden change in appearance that came with *American Idiot* may be tied more to the bands musical changes than to a specific focus on image (McDonald 131).

**The Middle Class Family**

As described previously, Green Day and Rush have many similarities. However, this last section is where those similarities end. Many of Green Day’s songs are about families, and many of their interviews talk about their devotion to their families, whereas with Rush, you barely hear mention of their families in interviews, and they do not write songs about families. Throughout Green Day’s career, the members have struggled with wanting to both be fathers/ husbands, and wanting to be rock stars, putting out great albums and constantly touring. These two sides to their lives are frequently at battle, as Armstrong describes, “Having a son has changed my ideas about life… I am a father and I am a husband and I have this relationship but at the same time I want to be like an arrogant rock n roll star. The two roles definitely clash” (Spitz 127). The members of Green Day frequently portray themselves as working hard to support their families, and describe wanting their kids to have “normal” lives outside of their fame. However, their songs tell different stories. The depictions of families in their songs are often dysfunctional and characters frequently come from “broken homes.”

This, according to Dewar MacLeod, author of *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California*, is tied to their punk roots. Many hardcore punk songs about families depict them as non- traditional both as a result of the changing political stance about family, and
because of the interplay of class politics within California punk. According to MacLeod, views within middle class families ranged from the Reagan inspired vision of a “Nuclear Family” to the more open liberal “Hippie family” to which many middle class punks were subjected in their own families. But, “postsuburban hardcore punk rejected both the traditional and the new types of families—both the Reaganite ‘fascist’ family and the Liberal ‘hippie’ family” (MacLeod 104). The song MacLeod uses as an example of this is Suicidal Tendencies’ “Institutionalized” (MacLeod 105). Many of Green Day’s songs represent families in a similar way to the way they are presented in “Institutionalized.”

Green Day’s portrayal of their families, and devotion to them, is highly contradictory to the depiction of family in their songs. These depictions of non-traditional, and sometimes very dysfunctional, families within their songs spans nearly their entire career. There is at least one song about such a family on nearly all of their major label releases. From Dookie all the way to the trilogy, various songs depict either a non-traditional and dysfunctional family, or often a strained relationship with parents. The songs that have this depiction of family include, “Coming Clean” from Dookie, “Brat” from Insomniac, “The Grouch” from Nimrod, “Jesus of Suburbia” from American Idiot, “21st Century Breakdown” from the album of the same title, “Nuclear Family” from Uno!, and “The Forgotten” from Tré!. All of these songs depict families that run contrary to the traditional image. Because these songs are ranging throughout Green Day’s career, these depictions of family are written from different viewpoints. A song like “Brat” is closer to a working class view of the middle class family, whereas “Jesus of Suburbia,” is seemingly from a different perspective. Possibly this is due to their increasing distance from working class views, or overall changing views about family. No matter the perspective, neither of these songs depict a more traditional family structure.
The depiction of a dysfunctional family could also be tied to Armstrong and Dirnt’s childhoods. Armstrong’s family’s structure became dysfunctional after his father’s death, or as he puts it “we put the fun back in dysfunctional” (*VH-I Behind the Music*); for Dirnt, his adoptive parent’s divorce when he was seven created a lot of dysfunction, and he also left home at the age of fifteen (Spitz 13). This certainly could have influenced how they portray families in their songs, but many of Green Day’s dysfunctional family portrayals are not always a “rags to riches” type of story. They more often depict similar situations to the Penelope Spheeris films *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981) and *Suburbia* (1983), which both brought up problems within the family structure during the 1980s Hardcore punk scene in L.A. (IMDB, MacLeod 101). As MacLeod describes, “ironically, the notion of the home as the last remaining hope to fight off the fragmentation of the outer world came about as the world inside the home was itself fragmenting” (101). Even songs that do depict this end up describing how it never worked out. For example the song “21st Century Breakdown” starts with “born into Nixon I was raised in hell/ a welfare child where the teamsters dwelled” but then goes on to say “I never made it as a working class hero” (“21st Century Breakdown Lyrics”).

Rather, some songs such as “Brat” from *Insomniac* attempts to depict a well off kid as “a snot nosed slob without a job” who will “wait for Mom and Dad to die get my inheritance” (“Brat Lyrics”). A song from the album *Nimrod*, called “The Grouch,” depicts a dysfunctional family as:

I've decomposed yet my gut's getting fat

Oh my God, I'm turning out like my Dad

I'm always rude, I've got a bad attitude
The world owes me so fuck you

The wife's a nag and the kids fucking up

I don't have sex 'cause I can't get it up

I'm just a grouch sitting on the couch

The world owes me so fuck you (“The Grouch Lyrics”).

While “The Grouch” is specifically from a father’s point of view, the song “Jesus of Suburbia” is from a young adult’s point of view. The lyrics state, “the living room in my private womb while the Moms and Brads are away” (“Jesus of Suburbia Lyrics”). According to Armstrong this references “people are sort of in a generation of people that came from broken homes, so it’s uhm where people sort of also refer to their parents on a first name basis nowadays” (VH-1 Storytellers). Armstrong’s quote specifically about that line in the song suggests that it represented a different aspect of a dysfunctional family, or “broken home” as he often describes it. The end of the song even describes it as “tales from another broken home” (“Jesus of Suburbia Lyrics”). This is also a part of the song “The Forgotten” from the album Tré!. The lyrics describe when you have lost a loved one as “like losing faith to our abandon or an empty hallway from a broken home” (“The Forgotten Lyrics”). Green Day even mentions the nuclear family, but only as a chaotic mess. In the song “Nuclear Family” it is referenced as “the death of a nuclear family staring up at you” (“Nuclear Family Lyrics”). The aforementioned songs span a decent amount of Green Day’s career.
As stated earlier, the members of Green Day do not depict their current families (wives, children etc) as dysfunctional, in fact, it is quite the opposite. They frequently portray wanting more of a nuclear family, 2.3 kids and a dog, or something from the 1950s television show *Leave it to Beaver*. Even in early interviews the band members emphasized family. In the first cover story about Green Day for *Rolling Stone* in 1995, the article describes “It is Joey’s [Billie Joe and Adrienne Armstrong’s first son] impending arrival- and that of Ramona, the daughter that will be to drummer Tré Cool and his girlfriend Lisea, that stands as the most life-altering [sic] that has seen the lives of the Green Day trio forever altered” (Foege 1995 13). Green Day’s frequent and chaotic tour schedule often got in the way of being “a normal dad” as the members of Green Day wanted to be (Spitz 126). As one journalist interviewing Green Day in 1995 claimed, “at their core, the members of Green Day desire nothing more than to build for themselves, their wives, and their children the kind of family they’ve hungered for all their lives” (Marks 58). This description of the band is still how they are portrayed today. In the Rolling Stone interview after the I Heart Radio incident, many of the questions were about Armstrong’s family. As Armstrong states in the interview:

I’m fucking bigger than this thing, better than this shit. This is an incident. It happened. The rest is history. I have so many important things to do. I have my family to take care of. I have my band. I’m a crazy idea person. I always will be. And that will overshadow any of my addiction problems. (Fricke 38)

Many questions later on in this same interview were directly about his family. For example, “Do your sons buy albums? Or are they download and Spotify guys?” and “was it hard on your wife and sons to be at home, watching you go through withdrawal?” To the latter Armstrong replied, “I kept it away from my sons pretty good…I could have gone to a facility,
but this way I could be around my loved ones” (Fricke 40, 41). Also, on the band member’s personal Instagram accounts, they post many pictures of their families. Even their choice to sign to Warner Brothers in the first place was based on their initial positive impressions of Rob Cavallo, and his dedication to his family (Spitz 90).

What is most important about Green Day’s ties to their family is not just that these views of the importance of family are very contradictory to the families represented in their songs, but overall to the image that they create about themselves as individuals and as a group. This ties into many other aspects that have previously been mentioned. It ties into the band’s views of authenticity because many songs are about struggling with relationships because of constantly being away. It also ties into professionalism because they can work on a career (as opposed to a job) to provide for their families in ways they never could have imagined. However, the family that is described in interviews is very different from the family depicted in many of Green Day’s song lyrics.

Many of the song lyrics above would suggest a very dysfunctional family structure that is closer to the liberal “hippie” family where there is no structure, and yet, in their interviews the members of Green Day idealize a nuclear family structure that is closer to the Reaganite “fascist” family structure. The problem for them is that they can’t have the idealized nuclear family structure because of their career choices and the unexpected success of both Dookie and American Idiot. This leads to a contradiction between their idealized family structure and the type of families both Green Day themselves and their punk friends grew up with. Green Day strives to have the middle class family that is idealized in 1950s sitcoms, but that is an unattainable goal. Whether their dysfunctional families in their songs are portrayals of their families growing up, or a portrayal of how their families actually are now, they are still two
portrayals of the middle class family that are being rejected; they do not reject these family structures outright, but through the contradiction between reality and their lyrics portraying it as unwanted (the dysfunctional family) or the ideal for their current families (the nuclear family).
Despite Green Day’s working class background, and their early attempts to portray that background, they nonetheless perform middle class values through their music/lyrics, stage shows, and interviews. And of course it has to be noted that all of this plays out as they became decidedly upper class. This analysis of Green Day’s performance of middle class values is one of an increasing number within the ongoing discussion of rock music and class. This is adding to analyses such as Chris McDonald’s in *Rush: Rock Music and the Middle Class*, and thus, is heavily influenced by such arguments. However, the analysis of Green Day through these class lenses shows the rather complex relationship both punk, and more specifically Green Day, have to their representations of class. These seemingly subtle nuances become more apparent with closer analysis of punk’s ethos, and Green Day’s attempts to keep those punk ideals within their lives and business practices.

However, this analysis is only one part of the way Green Day performs middle class values. There are always two parts to a successful band: the band, and their fans. No band can have success without fans. The fans’ interpretation of the band is the missing piece to this argument. While McDonald’s book started from an expansion of his dissertation, an ethnographic study of Rush fans, my analysis of Green Day began in the opposite direction knowing that there was a missing piece to the puzzle. As Henry Jenkins, noted audience and fandom researcher says in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*,

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8 There are two main reasons why this paper does not include an ethnographic study of Green Day fans. One, time and space limits. This is only a master’s thesis with a limited amount of time to finish it. Second, this is not the best time to attempt to interview Green Day fans. Green Day has not been on tour since 2013 (with the exception of their Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction), and because of their less frequent media coverage in general, not many fans are as active on online forums such as Green Day Community (tied to greendayauthority.com).
“fandom celebrates not exceptional texts, but exceptional readings” (284). This analysis of Green Day is only one fan’s reading of the text.

While further ethnographic research of Green Day’s fan base may reveal similar findings to McDonald’s ethnographic research findings, that Rush’s fan base was largely comprised of middle class white men, and Rush’s lyrics reflected many middle class values and experiences of its fans. However, even without this research this analysis of Green Day’s portrayal of class shows the deeper meanings, tensions, and nuances to their song lyrics, stage shows, and interviews. This analysis also reveals the often unacknowledged influence of one’s class background, and class status in North America. This research reveals the importance of analysis of rock music within academia. Pop music, often disregarded as mundane and not worth studying, frequently has underlying social importance to concepts such as class values. More research in this area, including further research about Green Day and more generally pop-punk, should be done.
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@billiejoearmstrong on Instagram posted this photo with the caption: “last night was pretty dang special alright... words? I don’t have any. thank you gilman for... well everything. this is me on stage during the usual mayhem of dancing and singing at operation ivy gig in 1987 with brother Tim... and this is last night. 2015 .. pure joy .. #gilman #924 #rancid #operationivy #sweetchildren #greenday
APPENDIX B

Billie Joe Armstrong’s Instagram post to fans after the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction.

“dear you, I can't express enough how much love is in my heart for all of you in our green day community. for me to try to put it into words almost feels awkward. sometimes I don't always like to use the word "fan". I think I can speak on behalf of me mike and Tré when I call you family or community. Because you all truly grew up together with us and shared this journey together. this is more than an award. it's the privilege to play music, write songs and follow this psychotic passion called rock n roll.and We share this honor together. because honestly YOU ARE our rock n roll hall of fame. idiot nation forever rage and love Billie Joe”