

## Chapter X

### **'I Don't Preach Premature Suicide': The Biopolitics of GG Allin**

Ben Dumbauld

*Thinking about the body can take place only between two paradigms: the body as a site of regulation, or as a site where hegemony is evaded and resisted.*

Deborah Wong (2004)

*My mind is a machine gun, my body the bullets, the audience the targets.*

GG Allin (1991)

#### **The Corpse**

At his funeral in July 1993, punk rocker GG Allin was laid in an open coffin. As per request from his brother Merle, the body was displayed without any makeup or perfume and unwashed since the day he died, if not well before. During the wake, Allin's bloated body, veins once filled with heroin now with embalming fluid, was documented extensively by fans and friends, and narratives of the event soon disseminated to multiple underground punk zines. His unofficial biographer, Joe Coughlin, described the moment in one such publication:

Now, we all knew [Allin] wasn't going to die of old age and we all knew it wouldn't be an ordinary service, but I wasn't quite prepared for that I saw. The band's drummer was drawing on GG's leg with a magic marker. The body was dressed in his leather jacket and a jockstrap that said 'Eat Me'. He held a microphone in one hand and a jug of Jim Beam in the other. Everyone was hammered. When the beer ran out, people wrenched the jug from his arms to swig

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from it. GG looked like hell. There were gouges and scars everywhere and he was discolored, and frankly, starting to go bad after five days [...] One girl put her underwear on his face. Other people were putting stickers on the casket, pushing pills and liquor into GG's mouth, having their smiling pictures taken up by his face, taking his dick out and playing with it ... the works [...] Most common phrase of the night had to be, 'He woulda wanted it this way.' (Coughlin, n.d.a)

Such a presentation of Allin's body served as a eulogy in itself. The roadmap of scars, the broken teeth, the whisky and microphone by his side, the jockstrap and leather jacket pronounced without an utterance the life Allin led: a life without boundaries or hierarchies, a life most appropriately mourned through the defiling of a body already defiled. In death, Allin was surrounded by that which he lived for and that which would kill him. His music bombarded the funeral home, his fans continued to abuse him, he continued to ingest drugs and alcohol. In the amateur video footage capturing the event, Allin's brother Merle tells the cameraman, 'I gave him his sip of Jim Beam, gave him his Valium, toasted him,' giving one the impression that this was all that could be asked. Later, Merle would provide a final offering to the corpse of his brother: right before closing the coffin, he placed headphones on GG, connected them to a portable tape player, and played *The Suicide Sessions*, one of Allin's over thirty albums. Somewhere on the tape, a prophetic verse would serve as a second silent eulogy, travelling from Allin's disembodied voice to his dead ears: 'Blood on the walls and the floor of the shithouse/Where I laid my head to sleep a while/Veins filled with junk/Looking like a drunk/Everyday I'm dying/Why wait'.

In a certain way, there was sense of purity in such grotesque mourning practices. What was presented at the funeral was only the fact: a machine without a spirit, a corpse without artifice. Such an approach stands in stark contrast to what one has come to expect with the death of a rock star. Like countless popular musicians before and since, Allin died of a drug overdose. Yet his death brought no dawn-to-dusk media coverage, no anxious waiting for the coroner's report, no talk of missed opportunities for prevention, no psychoanalytic dissections, no passing blame to friends, family, or the music industry. The funeral videotape shows if anything a grim acceptance – there was little illusion amongst the mourners that Allin the punk, the alcoholic, the drug user, the man who threatened to commit suicide on stage would live a long life. Nor was there pity for the life he chose to live.

Given this fact, it is perhaps wholly unsurprising that the funeral was marked by a general indulgence of the very substances that killed the singer. As Stengs notes on the death and mourning of singer André Hazes (this volume), embodied forms of mimesis are often one of the strongest vehicles for fans to commemorate their fallen idols. Moreover, the funeral gave mourners the opportunity to legitimate their own hardcore punk ethos in the presence of their fallen comrade – an ethos that often takes degradation and aggression as a foundational rallying point, and directly relates one's filth and destitution to anti-authoritarian ideals.<sup>1</sup> Such practices continued well after the interment, with fans honouring Allin's legacy not by leaving flowers on his grave, but empty alcohol bottles, urine and faeces. What better way to honour the man who embodied the pinnacle of hardcore purity?

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Fox's ethnography (1987) of the punk subculture in Southwestern United States, where he observes that those considered the most 'Hardcore' in the community (that is, those possessing the most cultural capital) are usually unemployed, homeless, and addicted to alcohol or cheap drugs like glue.

Without a doubt, everything about Allin's life and art, ranging from his music (loud, fast and careless) to his lyrics and song titles ('Watch Me Kill', 'My Sadistic Killing Spree', 'Bruise Me [I Want to Die]'), to his lifestyle was widely offensive to civil society. But little work has been done in analysing Allin's work and conceptualising his lasting legacy. Taking Thompson's (2004 p. 5) argument that punk performatives 'represent repressed cultural impulses and desires' as a starting point, in this chapter I will consider a simple question: what exactly are the 'repressed cultural impulses' embodied by GG Allin, both in life and death? Answering such a question sociologically (rather than psychoanalytically), I argue that Allin's performances serve most readily as mechanisms of counter-conduct – that is, mechanisms of power, often deployed at the social extremities, that serve as means to disrupt hegemonic notions of social organisation and the role of the citizen (Foucault, 2003 p. 27-8). In particular, his transgressive performances and nomadic lifestyle both confronted and discounted the social construction of the body and its role in 'modern' society. In simple terms, Allin became a legend within hardcore punk because he was the antithesis to the model Western subject. Before discussing the particular trajectories through which Allin countered Western constructions of the body, however, it is first necessary to properly frame his work and lifestyle.

### **The Masochist**

Hours before his death, Allin played what would become his last and perhaps greatest show. The performance occurred at the Gas Station, a club in the Lower East Side of New York City – a fitting place for Allin's swan song, given the neighbourhood's historic association with punk and hardcore culture.<sup>2</sup> In a fan-made video recording of the performance, we see a clearly inebriated

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<sup>2</sup> See McNeil and McCain (1997) and Blush (2010) for detailed accounts on the development of punk and hardcore subcultures (respectively) in the neighbourhood.

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and likely high Allin wearing military boots and women's underwear. Before the performance starts, Allin visibly ingests small white pills given to him by a fan, and then grabs and kisses a female audience member, who seemed not to have any objections. Once the music begins, Allin quickly strips naked and starts lunging violently at the audience, at multiple points throwing and receiving punches with the various fans that dare approach him. After only two songs, the sound crew cuts the power, effectively cancelling the show (not a rare occurrence given Allin's penchant for destroying audio equipment while performing). The inability to perform quickly leads Allin into a violent frenzy: he smashes a glass window with his fist, slams an empty beer can violently against his head multiple times, and defecates on stage. After multiple failed requests by the audience to return power to the microphone, Allin eventually leaves the club and walks onto the streets naked and covered in blood, dirt and faeces. The crowd follows him, chanting: 'G-G, G-G ...'. In the background of the video, we hear sounds of broken glass, sirens, screeching tyres, police yelling through the distortion of a megaphone. The film quickly blurs as the camera man starts running. At the end of the video, we can clearly hear the voice of an unnamed fan: 'that was one of the greatest shows of all time.' Less than 24 hours later, Allin would be found dead in a Lower East Side apartment.

Such a performance perhaps serves as a fitting conclusion to Allin's life. In his final show, the space dedicated to physically containing and socially relegating the chaos of a GG Allin concert cracked, leaking onto the otherwise ordered and stratified city streets of New York City. Such a viewpoint, however, threatens to imply that it was only through performance that such an event could take place – that the riot demanded as its foundation the inherent liminality of the initial concert. Perhaps this was indeed the case for the audience, who might not have violently acted out if it were not for the concert. But for Allin, transgressive and dangerous acts

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were never exclusively confined to particular performance spaces; they were as much a part of his private life as they were his public. As Coughlin argues, ‘no other artist’s life and work are so consistently true to each other’ (n.d.b).

That Allin’s lifestyle was, as another journalist penned, ‘worse offstage than onstage’, greatly complicates the idea that Allin was merely a showman, being shocking or transgressive only before an audience. Instead, Allin enacted violence and aggression as much in private as in public. But such acts of violence, regardless of setting, were framed around the same circumstances – circumstances that I would argue were inherently masochistic.<sup>3</sup> In *Coldness and Cruelty* (1989), Deleuze differentiates sadistic violence from masochistic violence by noting that while sadism is inherently demonstrative – that pleasure is derived by the sadist demonstrating their power over the victim by force – masochism is dialectical, involving the establishment of a contract between the participants which frames and regulates the violent event. In examining accounts of Allin’s actions both in public and in private, we immediately find a trend in which both Allin and the ‘victim’ of his violence enter a contractual agreement in which both willingly accept that abuse may occur. Such forms of contractual aggression are pervasive in hardcore culture, perhaps most apparent in the associated dance styles of moshing and slamdancing, which are violent but nonetheless rely on an explicit code of ethics (Tsitsos, 1999; Blush, 2010).

At concerts, such a contract often began at the door of the venue, where there were posted ‘enter at your own risk’ type disclaimers at Allin’s request (Coughlin, n.d.b). Such notices, coupled with Allin’s notorious reputation as a performer, served to filter out possible unwilling or unprepared audience members. But even attending a show was not enough to become implicated in Allin’s violent performances – one had to almost request it. In his memoir *I Was a*

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<sup>3</sup> See also Bloustein (2003), who describes masochistic characteristics of punk fashion and style.

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*Murder Junkie*, author Evan Cohen, who accompanied Allin on his final tour, describes the demographics of the typical GG Allin audience:

There were several classes of people that came to see him. The first group saw GG because they had heard about his wild and crazy stage show. They showed up at the club to see if it was for real or not, and stood in the back [...] The second group was a bit more daring. They tried to get as close to GG as possible during the show, but ran like hell whenever he came near them. They wanted near the flaming car wreck, but they didn't want to get burned.

The third level was the scariest and most dangerous one of the bunch. It was comprised of the tried and true GG Allin fanatics. They enjoyed getting beat up by him, and getting his shit on their bodies. They would stay up front no matter what happened. They would take all the abuse and more, and thank him afterwards. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it over and over again.

(1999 p. 30–31)

Much of Evan's book is sprinkled with accounts of such 'tried and true' fans thanking Allin for his abuse after a performance, asking for more abuse, or bragging about the scars and bruises inflicted upon their bodies by their idol.

In private, Allin's violent activity was carried out on a similar contractual basis, often utilising methods common to bondage, dominance and sadomasochist (BDSM) sexual practice. As described by Cohen, interestingly enough Allin more often chose to play a submissive role in sexual encounters, asking female fans to demean him in various ways while he masturbated. Rarely, at least according to Cohen, did such encounters result in actual intercourse.

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That those most abused by Allin were also his biggest fans complicates the image of the performer as a criminal aggressor – an image that was promoted largely by Allin himself. Thus, in spite of his hyperbolic song titles and lyrics (‘I’m Gonna Rape You’, ‘Legalize Murder’, ‘I Wanna Kill You’), actual self-proclaimed ‘victims’ of his performances were in fact very hard to find. A case in point is Allin’s criminal record: outside of a litany of misdemeanours related to public indecency, intoxication or destruction of property, Allin’s only felony indictment involved the abuse of a fan who, in addition to prosecuting Allin, wrote him love letters and marriage proposals. At the trial the possible masochistic nature of the abuse was heavily considered, and at the verdict the judge, conceding that ‘there are lifestyles which this court does not understand,’ convicted Allin only on the grounds that he pled no contest to the charges. In this way, any discussion of the victim’s possible complicity in the abuse was sidestepped (Fertig 1989; Reynolds 1989; State of Michigan Circuit Court Case number 89–24090 FH). The judge sentenced Allin to two years at an Ann Arbor penitentiary.

Ultimately, Allin’s **rock and roll** reputation for danger and chaos was then not built via physical violence purposefully levelled upon the unsuspecting ‘mainstream’ masses. On the contrary, Allin’s violent performances were contractual and consciously framed by singer and his most diehard fans. His legacy for controversy was rather solidified because he embodied, as I will argue, the antithesis to the model western subject as constructed by Western governmentality.

### **The Sovereign**

In volume one of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes the process by which Western conceptions and regulations of the human body have evolved since the Roman Empire.

Historically, he writes, people were regulated primarily via mechanisms of deduction, in which



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the sovereign would take from its subjects a certain amount of labour, time, goods or services in return for protection of their respective territory. In the most extreme cases, the sovereign is granted the right to deduct life itself from its subjects, killing them under the assumption that such an act is necessary to protect the stability of the rest of the populace (Foucault, 1990 p. 136). Gradually, such deductive mechanisms faded from being the primary strategy for regulation to becoming but one of a number of strategies aimed less at dealing death to subversive elements and more on administering life to such an extent as to minimise the possibility of subversive action altogether. This new set of strategies incorporated two mechanisms of bodily regulation: the first being the ‘anatamo-politics’ of the individual body, or the ‘body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimisation of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces’; the second, ‘bio-politics,’ which takes as its object the administration of the population, incorporating issues of longevity, mortality and family planning (Foucault, 1990 p. 139). Both forms are deployed in order to maintain a primary conceptualisation of the body in society, one tightly integrated with capitalist production (Foucault, 2003 p. 31). In short, in the history of Western civilisation, a gradual change in the idealisation of the subject occurred, moving from being fundamentally *loyal and strong* (in order to protect one’s territory and sovereign) to being *productive and healthy* (in order to protect one’s national economy).

In terms of Allin’s life and work, it becomes quickly apparent that the singer embodied the complete rejection of the latter ideals of productivity and health, while idiosyncratically deploying the former, loyalty and strength. While there is no doubt that Allin was prolific in regard to artistic output, his lifestyle as an often homeless addict was far from the (particularly American) ideal of the middle-class homeowner with some disposable income. In terms of health, Allin’s broken teeth, alcoholism and drug abuse, and multiple bouts of blood poisoning (a

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probable consequence for artists who simultaneously work with their own blood and faeces) serve as testament enough to his priorities in terms of maintaining any semblance of a healthy lifestyle. Rather, Allin purposely injured himself and made himself sick because he privileged the experiences of such embodied states more than he privileged maintaining a healthy, beautiful body. ‘I’ve done things to my body that most can’t or wouldn’t do,’ he once said, ‘but it’s good for me to have experienced pain because it makes me much stronger’ (Anon., 1992). Stronger, I would argue, not biologically or aesthetically, but because each instance of transgression or masochism further empowered his sense of radical individuality and anti-authoritarian resolve. Through masochistic performance Allin both refutes the ideal of a healthy constitution while at the same time reasserting a sovereign right to physically enact violence upon the body – both acts a direct confrontation with contemporary biopolitical ideals.

Perhaps the most illuminating aspect to Allin’s use of his own body, however, was his views on suicide. In 1988, Allin published a letter in the underground zine *MaximumRocknRoll* promising to kill himself on stage on Halloween the following year. Due to his aforementioned arrest and imprisonment in Ann Arbor that year, Allin could not live up to his promise, frustrating many of his admiring fans and journalists who continued to ask whether he would carry through with his plan, when, and where. While in prison, he responded to such questions (in addition to others) through a series of written correspondences with fans and supporters. In discussing his intention for suicide, he responded in one letter: ‘I have lived on stage and that is where I will die. I will commit suicide at the peak of my life. [...] Death is the most important event in your life, your last final thrill and adventure. Don’t waste it by dying a meaningless death. You must control the moment’ (Allin, 1992). This public stance towards suicide serves as perhaps his greatest affront to western biopolitics – greater than his masochistic tendencies and

transgressive performances. Foucault writes:

Now that power is decreasingly the power of the right to take life, and increasingly the right to make live ... death becomes, insofar as it is the end of life, the term, the limit, or the end of power too. Death is outside the power relationship [...]. And to that extent, it is only natural that death should now be privatized, and should become the most private thing of all. In the right of sovereignty, death was a moment of the most obvious and spectacular manifestation of the absolute power of the sovereign; death now becomes, in contrast, a moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreats, so to speak, into his own privacy. Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death (2003 p. 248).

By proclaiming that he would commit suicide in public at a concert, Allin remade death into spectacle, thus reclaiming the sovereign's right to take life, which in an interesting turn, happened to be his own.

### **The Nomad**

As modes of governmentality gradually shifted from privileging the nation state (*raison d'état*) to privileging the market, so too changed the strategies whereby the body of the citizenry was regulated.<sup>4</sup> Thanks largely to the Enlightenment, notions of individual liberty and governmental non-intervention grew to become the new administrative ideals for the 'modern' nation-state – but only insofar as they protected and nurtured the citizen as an economic unit (Foucault, 2008 p. 252). The entire system of regulation and administration thus began to rely almost entirely on the

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<sup>4</sup> See particularly Foucault (2007, 2008) in which he traces the genealogy of 'governmentality' roughly from the Medieval Age to the present.

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construction of the citizen as a unit of the nation's economy, a 'man of enterprise and production' (Foucault, 2008 p. 147). Economic policy was then gradually overlaid upon all aspects of population control and regulation, which consequently led to the citizen ceasing to be conceptualised as an individual being to be governed, but merely one component out of many that either added to or detracted from the overall profitability of the nation, whether in terms of health, safety or economy (Foucault, 2008 p. 45).

If there is at all an underlying, consistent impetus running throughout Allin's career, it would be the direct confrontation with such a *homo economicus* ideal. Indeed, for the past few decades scholars have illuminated the myriad of methods in which punk rock cultural workers have countered the prevailing 'mainstream' model of musical commodification (Goshert, 2000; Davies, 1996; James, 1988–1989; Moore, 2004, 2007; O'Hara, 1999; Thompson, 2004; Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1993). One way in which this counter-conduct occurs is through privileging the body as a producer of affect rather than the body as a producer of labour. As Thompson (2004, p. 123) explains in discussing punk rock's priorities in producing records and touring:

[in] the privileging of shows over recordings and raw over clean production, punks valorize modes of punk commodities that they take to represent affect rather than professionalization, because the latter category denotes economics in ways that the former does not. Affect connotes emotion and the body, as the bearer of emotion, both of which punks place at a greater remove from economics than professionalization, a term that suggests the erasure of the body. The body is literally absent in recordings but not during shows, while in cleanly produced music the body's signifiers – such as coughs, the squeak of fingers shifting on strings, stage banter, etc. – disappear.

Allin embodied the temporality of the moving, affective body more than any other hardcore musician or group. A self-proclaimed ‘Gypsy Motherfucker,’ Allin’s approach to touring was beyond simply a way to prove his anti-mainstream position as a musician, but a consistent lifestyle. During the peak of his career Allin was essentially homeless, his only possessions the clothes on his back and sleeping in cheap hotels, the homes of his fans, or in hospitals and prisons. While a shameless self-promoter, his artistic output was not particularly strategic economically: rather than creating a steady stream of definitive works, Allin’s oeuvre consists of a myriad of often poorly-produced albums, EPs, compilations and live recordings through over twenty different underground labels.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, concerts did not provide Allin much economic capital either, due to the fact that, as zine editor Al Quint noted, ‘he rarely played ‘cause he got banned everywhere’ (Blush, 2010 p. 280).

Allin’s model of musical performance thus runs contrary to the *homo economicus* construction of the modern citizen. Rather than building relationships in order to broaden one’s marketability, Allin left each venue he played in ashes, grabbing what he could to survive before quickly fleeing furious venue owners and fans who, more often than we might expect, were upset that Allin was not as transgressive and violent as they imagined. Despite such an economically inconsistent touring practice, Allin’s dedication to such a lifestyle remained strong. In an interview with *MaximumRocknRoll*, for instance, journalists Jay Sosnicki asks Allin what he would do if he ever made a significant income from his music career:

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<sup>5</sup> Given this kind of output, it is nearly impossible to provide a definitive discography for Allin, let alone sales figures. As an estimate, the website *discogs.com* currently lists 59 GG Allin releases in total, not including ‘unofficial’ recordings, bootlegs, appearances on compilation albums, and so on.

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Maybe I could fly somewhere, instead of taking a Greyhound. Wouldn't matter – I'm still gonna have my own seat because I'm still gonna stink if you sit beside me. I'd take the money, probably get a higher class bunch of hookers, that's all, or maybe a better set of drugs. I might even give some of it away. I don't give a fuck ... (Sosnicki, 1993).

Nowhere in the above quote do we see the image of a musician suffering through tours with the hopes of the subsequent payoff of 'making it' one day, a strategy much more compatible to economy-based modes of governmentality. A financial windfall would not change Allin's lifestyle, but would rather be consumed, burned or forgotten.

Perhaps more than most performers, Allin's performances and lifestyle placed him in close alignment with Deleuze and Guattari's image of the *nomad* and Foucault's image of the *barbarian*. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987 p.380, 400), the nomad is one for whom 'every point is a relay and only exists as a relay,' a 'war machine' whose weapon is affect, 'which relate[s] only to the moving body in itself, to speeds and compositions of speed among elements'.

Foucault (2003 p. 195) paints a similar picture in describing the figure of the barbarian:

The barbarian is always the man who stalks the frontiers of the States, the man who stumbles into city walls [...]. He appears only when civilization already exists, and only when he is in conflict with it. He does not make his entrance into history by founding a society, but by penetrating a civilization, setting it ablaze and destroying it. There can be no barbarian without pre-existing history: the history of the civilization he sets ablaze.

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Both the barbarian and the nomad are figures that represent the antithesis of the modern ‘proper’ citizen who positions him or herself within fairly strict spatial hierarchies, repeating the same paths between various points in order to contribute to the economic stability or productivity of the state. As an almost constantly touring musician with a reputation for destruction (whether directed at himself, his fans or the venue’s sound equipment), Allin the nomad and barbarian operates in a different space, continually relaying between various points of civilization, staying only long enough to violently disrupt them.

### **Failed Martyr, Reluctant Rock Star**

GG Allin was born Jesus Christ Allin, a name given to him by his antisocial and highly religious father. And even though this name was later changed by his mother, the appeal of martyrdom remained with him throughout his life. Indeed, within Allin’s numerous, often contradictory interviews in print and broadcast, his expressed ultimate goal remained remarkably consistent: to destroy **rock and roll** in order to revive its dangerous, transgressive roots. Yet despite the constant discourse invoking ‘hate’ and ‘lawlessness’ perpetuated both by the media and by the singer himself, such a goal was actually not pursued via uninhibited malice or unchecked aggression towards his audiences. In truth, Allin’s violent performances and actions followed a fairly strict – one may even argue ethical – set of rules and boundaries. Much like his namesake, then, Allin’s radical goals were primarily pursued via the re-interpretation of his own physical body – the practices inflicted upon it or enacted through it.

With the growth of the capitalist system, there has developed the idea that it is both the individuals’ and the state’s priority to keep the physical body relatively clean, healthy and productive. Such a concept has embedded itself so deeply into Western culture that one can

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rarely turn on the evening news without hearing at least one story dedicated to breakthroughs in medical research, debate over federal health programmes, or new safety concerns related to specific products, practices or natural phenomena. For the better or worse, Allin achieved cult status because he rejected such ideals. For him, the fundamental goals of life did not encapsulate bodily, economic and spatial stability. Rather, Allin's life and work privileged instability, movement, brutal experience and, ultimately, the sovereign right to control one's individual body in whatever way one sees fit.

Taken to its logical conclusion, this dedication to countering the ideal of the healthy, productive body in increasingly violent ways could only lead to an early death. This was something everybody expected. Thus for many fans it was not Allin dying early that was truly the disappointment, but the way he died. As one fan I spoke to expressed, 'he [Allin] could have died a legend, but he died a rock star,' afterwards miming the act of injecting heroin and passing out. Indeed, for many hardcore fans, the biggest failure in what was conceived as an otherwise brilliant career was that Allin died like the very rock stars he spent his life critiquing. In their view, Allin did not live up to his promise: he did not kill himself on stage, spectacularly in public – but privately, quietly, slipping away from overdose. Despite this, he remains to many the most comprehensive embodiment of hardcore ethos, and thus a complete rejection of western governmental and economic ideals.

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