

To look at him, you'd think that Mayer Schiller is just another Hasidic Jew draped in black and living inside the impenetrable bubble of his religious practice. But this intriguing and pensive man is anything but typical. Having grown up in a secular household, he became orthodox at thirteen and now teaches Gomorrah (Jewish law) at Yeshiva University High School in New York. Along the broad course of his life, Schiller has done some phenomenal exploration on paths unknown to most rabbis...

Mazeltov Cocktail: What were the circumstances when you first got into punk rock music?

Rabbi Schiller: I heard of it when it was in its first explosion but my real interest developed three or four years later when I just decided to plunge into it, around '80. The reason I did so was twofold, one personal and the other musical. Personally I found its depiction of suffering and hopelessness to be of meaning and relevancy, and musically I found it to be very much to my liking, sort of a throwback to the 50's and the rock n' roll that I had grown up with, the simplicity of it. **What bands do you remember being particularly meaningful for you?**

The Sex Pistols without a doubt, they are the prototypical, quintessential punk band. That is it. It begins there and ends there. I think Johnny Rotten once said why do people still talk about rock n' roll, punk, Sex Pistols...it ended years ago. I would include the Fall, the Damned, the Vibrators, X-Ray Spex, the Adverts. I was thrown back through my exploration of punk to read The Velvet Underground. If I would say two basic points of reference, The Velvet Underground and the Pistols.

Do you see them as dichotomous opposites?

Well, Lou Reed was giving answers to a certain extent.

And the Sex Pistols were proposing questions?

Yes, that's what I would say. The Pistols asked questions which were answered by nationalist skinhead music of the late 70's and early 80's. Sham 69 was also a band that was giving answers somewhat.

But don't you think that the Sex Pistols' anarchism was an answer in itself? I mean, was the nationalism of the skinheads a response to the nothingness of the Pistols or the anarchism of the Pistols?

The nothingness. That's the way I feel about it anyway.

So you think anarchism was basically synonymous with nothingness?

I think it was a philosophical statement as opposed to a political statement. I don't think it was advocacy of traditional anarchism. I think it was much more of a

statement about life.

What about the idea that punk rock is more political than artistic?

I see it as populist and anti-capitalist, so in that sense there is a political undertone. Sham 69, I would say, was the ultimate working-class band until they turned their backs on the nationalist movement.

What I hear in a lot of late 70's punk is exactly what you were saying about hopelessness and despair, and also apocalyptic visions, which seems connected to Judaic texts in terms of the Messiah and the idea that everything is building up to a climactic something.

I think I always thought of it much more in terms of the Psalms, or *tehillim*, in the sense that in hopelessness lies G-d. "From the depths of despair I call unto thee," that sort of thing. It's in the sense that man stripped of all illusions about himself and his life finds there, in the core of all emptiness, G-d. At least, that's the experience I've had in my life. I've found G-d in moments of great joy and great despair, and I found that in punk, in that absolute hopelessness, a cry to G-d and a bit of an answer.

At the time when you were into punk did you personally feel that kind of hopelessness?

Well I think that's one important aspect of the human condition, that there is a sense in which we experience the universe as cold and meaningless, but I won't deny that there are other ways to experience it. I once wrote that the Sex Pistols are right that the universe is cold and meaningless, and the Beach Boys are right that it's warm and meaningful, and The Kinks are right that it's all mixed up. So maybe The Kinks have the ultimate truth there.

Yeah, well I'd always be more inclined to believe the Sex Pistols.

I don't know about the Beach Boys.

Well that's a part of reality, isn't it?

Sure, I just don't know if the Beach Boys are the best representation of that reality!

Ah, I'm dating myself. I want to add one point to this. I think that if you're crying, then you're ultimately acknowledging G-d's presence because if there's no G-d, why cry, why yell, why scream? Who are you

screaming at?

So you think that punk rockers were screaming at G-d?

Begging, pleading, sort of trying to squeeze meaning out of the dry stone of what they perceived as life's meaninglessness.

But one of the canons of punk rock has always been denial of G-d and religion.

Oh absolutely, there's no question about that. It's the whole notion of the metaphysical rebel, you know. The metaphysical rebel is almost acknowledging G-d because your whole rebellion, your screaming, your pride is based upon an ascent to meaning, isn't it? Because if not, why rage? The rage is because you sense a certain degree of meaning, of purpose...

Something to rage about.

Exactly.

I'd like to talk about your interest in nationalistic music. I know it's connected to punk rock but it brings up a whole gamut of different questions.

There I'm a little more intimately familiar. With punk I was just a spectator, I just read and listened but never participated.

But you participated in nationalistic music?

Well this would take a whole separate interview, but I have certain fleeting connections with European nationalist movements and groups.

Are you talking about the Skrewdriver crowd?

Well, the National Front, although the faction that I had some contact with was anti-Skrewdriver. How familiar are you with the highways and byways of British nationalism?

Not very much. What were the circumstances that lead you from punk rock to oi music?

I can't pinpoint exactly which bands clearly lead this transition in my mind. I might have heard Skrewdriver's original album, the pre-political Skrewdriver. There was a Scottish band called Skids that had somewhat nationalist allusions in their music. Then you get to the Cockney Rejects and the Angelic Upstarts...I was wrenched in British national politics altogether.

Was this when, in the music scene at least, there was already an

Rabbi Mayer Schiller

appropriation of Nazi symbols and rhetoric?

There was an appropriation of Nazi symbolism before punk had anything to do with politics. Sid Vicious wore swastikas just to be shocking, but I don't think that had any political overtones at all. **But there came a point when it transcended the line between shock and actual belief.**

Yes it did.

And that was primarily within the oi scene, right?

Yes, led by Skrewdriver with many other bands. There was an album called "No Surrender, Volume 1" which was a collection of all the nationalist oi bands...

So personally, how did you reconcile with that?

Well I have to speak about my political orientation in order to do this, and we might not be friends after that.

If you're gonna tell me you're a Nazi I might have a heart attack...

(Laughing) No, I'm not going to tell you that. I've always been what you might call a man of the Right. Not of the American Right because I'm profoundly anti-capitalist. The European Right has much more influence on me because it is much more communitarian. I've always believed that man lives primarily with other people and that manifests itself in various ways such as economic caring, which is why I'm not a Republican or a capitalist. It also manifests itself in caring spiritually and morally, in establishing a sense of heritage, tradition, the past. There are various manifestations on the nationalist Right which I don't like, but there are things on the Left that I don't like. I keep an open mind to all political ideologies, and the European Right, by which I mean not the Thatcherite Right but the Populist Right, the Communitarian Right always attracted me because I saw it as an injection of G-d and a sense of caring for G-d and the community into its public discourse. I always followed nationalist developments throughout Europe, and British nationalism was one of them so the National Front was something I followed. Certain things I supported, certain things I did not support. So when my affection for punk because of its hopelessness and its music came together with a political movement which I also had a certain affection for, well, whoopee doo.

Hmm...

Don't get me wrong, I'm not an ideologue and I'm not a simplifier. I understand that the rough-and-tumble world of politics in society is never perfect, so my positive

comments on many of these movements are not unqualified. I'm not being too shocking, am I?

I think all of this is pretty shocking...a Hasidic rabbi who knows anything about punk rock. I mean, it's pretty fascinating. I want to go back to the Nazi question because in my work on this project, a lot of people have skirted around the issue but few have actually dove into it.

Working-class British youth had a resentment towards cosmopolitanism, multi-racialism, capitalism, the Jew...which in their minds became all one thing. So I



"I'VE FOUND G-D IN MOMENTS OF GREAT JOY AND GREAT DESPAIR, AND I FOUND THAT IN PUNK."

think that there was, in a lot of punk's enthusiasm, this resentment of capitalism which was equated with the Jew.

Do you think that was a legitimate association?

I think there is a legitimacy to what they see, but not in the conspiratorial, literalist sense that they expressed it. I think that the Jew finds it very difficult to feel roots in the societies in which he finds himself.

Are you referring to the Diaspora?

Yes, correct. And that he doesn't have the sense of a heartfelt attachment to the soil, the country, the history, the tradition that a Gentile could much more easily have. And therefore, the Jew tends to pursue a non-rooted life. This is why the Jewish attachment to both capitalism and communism is not a contradiction, because they're both rootless, they're not anchored in anything. Flannery O'Connor, the famous Catholic author once went to a cocktail party in Manhattan and when she came back home her mother said "Flannery, what are those people like in New York?" and she said "Momma, they're nice folks, but they ain't from nowhere." I think that's the way the Jew is very often and therefore he arrives on the scene as

the ultimate party pooper. He ruins traditions and fun for people with his ruthless morality. He has morality but he has no roots, he has no culture, he has no tradition in the society in which he finds himself. A capitalism which ignores the rhythms of the society in which it finds itself is a typically Jewish thing. That's why Jews are so attracted to law, because they're attracted to thinking rigorously and logically but they don't sense the vibes of the community that they're in. That gets the people in the community mad, and they don't express it too clearly sometimes. A good book to recommend is Maury Samuels *You Gentiles*, which is a Jewish critique of

Gentile society. Reading that book, I think you'll get a good sense of what Gentiles don't like about Jews, and therefore I think you'll understand better why a British working-class youth, in a very dim-witted way, sensed something that is accurate. **I'm still trying to see a connection between the attraction to punk rock and Jewish roots, and I think there is such a thing as Jewish roots even though it's not land, even though it just exists as this kind of amorphous mass.**

I can only speak for myself and say that I found in punk themes that were relevant for me and I like the music because I like my rock n' roll simple. I like it simple and I like it rocking, so if you go back to the 50's I would prefer Eddie Cochran to Buddy Holly. The bopping rock n' roll as opposed to the sweet,

more-developed artistic rock n' roll. **So you didn't sense the same kind of despair in the 50's rock n' roll?**

Well, with the highfalutin philosophical writers about rock n' roll, they try to weave that back into those guys. I think there's a certain truth to that. I think that what unites 50's rockers with punk is many things, but one is that they both had a fire in their belly. I don't think Buddy Holly or the Beach Boys had a fire in their belly. I don't think New Wave has a fire in its belly. I don't even think that hippie yippie late-60's music has a fire in its belly. There are certain forms of rock n' roll that have fire, you know? That fire was in those 50's rockers and it was in punk rock as well. I always wanted music and life to be sincere and real, and I found much more sincerity in that tradition than I found in other traditions. Truthfulness is a big thing in life. We struggle all our lives to get to it. **What do you think of people who criticized punk rock saying, "Oh this is just a bunch of angry kids screaming and yelling"?**

I'd answer it both personally and objectively. Personally, I don't care. I

once met Johnny Rotten when my students dragged me off to Tower Records because they knew about my interests, he was making an appearance there much later when he was in Public Image. I brought along my *Never Mind the Bollocks* lyric sheet. I gave it to him and he signed, "To Dearest Rabbi Schiller and we don't care. Johnny Rotten." So personally what I would say to those critics is I don't care. But I don't think that you can say about the lyrics or the music that it's simplistic. I don't think a song like "Bodies" is a simplistic song at all, depicting both sides of the abortion question in the most graphic and gripping way. I can point to many other songs in which I think both the music and lyrics are very very profound. Another book I would recommend is *Stranded* in which different rock n' roll critics select one album they would take to a desert island if they were shipwrecked. It's some of the best rock n' roll writing there is and there are two essays in it that you should really read. One is by Tom Carson about the Ramones and the other is by Ellen Willis about the Velvet Underground, and there you'll find very serious thoughts about those two bands which are similar to my own. Tom Carson makes the point that the Ramones bring a hint of the divine into the simple joys and agonies of urban existence.

Do you still listen to punk music?

(Laughs) Life has different stages. When I was young, I said that the day when I won't listen to "Fun Fun Fun" by the Beach Boys and smile will be the day that I know that I'm old. But the truth of the matter is life does have stages, and many of the things that you'll swear on a stack of Bibles when you're young will never leave you, I'm afraid do. This disconcerted me for many years and I didn't get to middle age peacefully. I always wanted everything to be forever, I wanted all of these enthusiasms to be forever, and it didn't work out that way.

Well I think everyone wants that to a certain degree. When you hit a certain point and are like 'This is good, this is how it should be...'

Right, right, it should never change. I listen to [punk rock] today far less than I did ten or fifteen years ago, but I think it's part of what I am and part of my spiritual makeup. At this point I've moved to other things, and it's just not a prominent part of my life anymore.

What are your musical interests now?

I could give you a whole speech now but I'll try to simplify it. I believe that music reflects the soul of the era or the people. More than historical, I believe it in an almost mystical way. If you're plugged into a certain era, I think you pick up the vibes of that era through its music. I've come to believe very strongly - and this will be, maybe not shocking but an interesting point - that the world in many ways derailed in the post-early-60's. At least the traditional world ended in the 60's, and

there's almost none of it left anywhere. I had a strong affection for that world and I find tremendous meaning in it. What I've been trying to do in the past few years is plug into the music of various pre-1963 periods in order to attach my soul to what those periods were. Right now I happen to be doing Civil War music of the south, World War I songs...

By "doing" you mean "listening to"?

I like the youth word "doing" more because I think it conjures up more of what I'm up to than just "listening". I'm trying to put my soul into that period and experience it. If you ask me why, I'd say in order to experience different things just to make my own life more meaningful, and to sound terribly pretentious, more beautiful.

But do you think that if you're listening to music outside of its era it can still be meaningful? If there's some kid listening to the Sex Pistols right now, will it mean as much as it did in 1977?

Only if he can put himself in the 100 Club in England, 1977. Only if he can hear the legendary quote of Joe Strummer of the Clash when they asked him "What's happening at the 100 Club" and he said "It's a whole new thing, man, it's a whole new thing." If this kid can feel that, then he can do it. You can't just listen, you have to

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enter into it. To try and feel what the singers and musicians were actually doing and experiencing, then I think you can arrive at whatever spiritual qualities one arrives at through that music.

I don't know if you're aware of this or not, but the punk scene has continued in a different incarnation. A "punk underground" still exists...

It's also entered the mainstream somewhat...

Right, yeah. Do you give any credit to that form of "punk"?

One of the things that the original punk movement endeared itself to me with was its truthfulness, its despising of profit and commercialism and mass attraction, its spirit of rebelliousness. I think that as punk enters the mainstream it's almost, as we say in the *Gomorrhah* a *stirah minei uvei*: it just contradicts itself. I don't know about the contemporary underground, but I would judge it much more leniently. I always have my doubts about things that are embraced

by lots of people or where lots of money is involved, but I don't know enough to really comment.

Do you think that punk is dead?

I would think so. Again, I don't know enough because I haven't really kept up with it that much. Johnny Thunders always had a certain attraction for me because I don't know if there was ever someone as loyal to the whole thing as he was. That's why I think he had Hasidim the way that very few other musicians had.

What do you mean by "Hasidim"?

He had followers that believed in him! There are certain musicians that have that. I don't believe that Jim Morrison has that, although every little kid that comes into my class here does. I think it's all nonsense, I've never felt the sincerity about that. But with Johnny Thunders there was a real love, there was a real soul attachment there with his agonies and his sympathies. Again, I would have to sit down and understand it philosophically a bit better, but I just think it's something very real. But I think that what I was looking for is no longer there.

I know I'm jumping all over the place but I have two completely different questions right now.

First, did you ever go to shows?

No. I did see them on video. You have to understand that my G-d and my orthodoxy is the core of my existence and I don't know if I would have allowed myself to be in that environment...probably just too much of a sense of drunkenness and immodesty about it all.

There's something sinful about the scene but holy about the music?

There's something sinful about the music also, I would think. When I said that the traditional world died in 1963, I think that rock n' roll had a large hand in killing it. My feelings for rock n' roll are not without ambiguity or nuance because I think that there is a certain rebellion against the norms of existence in rock n' roll. I could never attend anything but I tried as best I could through video and live music recordings...I had at one time all seven of the Sex Pistols American appearances on audio tape, I had Great Rock n' Roll Swindle, D.O.A., and there is a tape of just the concerts slapped together. Much of this has been lost over the years.

I'm curious about the connections and contradictions you see between *tehillim* and punk lyrics. *tehillim* are prayers, right?

They're psalms. I see the connections more in Biblical texts than in Talmudic texts. Well, I think there are truths and profundities and beauties that lurk everywhere in existence. If I read *Madame Bovary* or *Anna Karanina* or anything, there are things in the world views of those authors which are against orthodox Judaism, but I'm exploring them in order to come to a greater and deeper understanding of life. There are many contradictions between my job and the

things I read all day long, politically, socially and culturally.

What were the circumstances that you became religious under?

I was always worried about life's larger questions. Death, meaninglessness, hopelessness. It's a long story but basically when I was twelve it reached a head and I had to begin reading about Judaism and other religions. Shortly before my Bar Mitzvah I made the decision to become orthodox. I think it supplies life with meaning but I never wanted to turn a blind eye to anybody else's truths or strivings or strugglings, so I was always trying to pick up truths elsewhere. **Most of the people who I've spoken to about this project are young, Jewish and have pretty unanimously rejected it. If they still identify with Judaism it's only cultural, on the level of bagels and lox. But they're all pretty passionate about the punk scene, and the culture that it entails is really like...**

It becomes a religion.

Right, exactly. People have said that.

Is it a religion that one can worship in the church of when one is forty-five?

There are those who do. Do you think so?

It's very tough. Rock n' roll is a tough religion when you're fifty.

Why? Can't dance as easily?

There's something very young about rock n' roll. It doesn't seem to be able to do it for most people when they're old. I would be wary about a religion that cannot take you from cradle to grave. Have you ever read the play *Death of a Salesman*?

Yeah, sure.

I always said that I want a religion that would give Willy Loman a reason not to kill himself in the final scene. Would rock n' roll do that? Even though Lou Reed claims that his life was saved by rock n' roll, I don't really know that Willy Loman's life could be saved by it. Pete Townshend once said that rock n' roll won't solve your problems but at least it'll give you the ability to dance around. I don't think that's true. I think you need *ultimate* meaning to have meaning, so rock n' roll is good in that it supplies certain needs but I don't think it can be the whole story, I really don't.

I guess this brings us to the connection between punk rock and nihilism, and Judaism by rule has to...

Have order.

Right.

Joe Pierce, who at one time was a big hero in the National Front and very friendly with Ian Stewart of Skrewdriver, told me that he always saw the Sex Pistols as being Nietzsche, and Skrewdriver as being the answer to the question. In other words, punk rock asked the questions of utter meaninglessness and nihilism, and the next generation of oi came along and gave

the answers. Race, nation, soil, community.

Do you think that nationalism would save Willy Loman?

More than rock n' roll. I still don't think it can be G-d, but I think it would come a lot closer because you feel a part of something larger than yourself. I don't know what Johnny Rotten's going to do for

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me when I'm fifty, I don't know what the Beach Boys will do for me when I'm fifty. They do something for me, but they can't be the whole ballgame at this stage of my life.

Well for many people, punk rock is their G-d right now.

I'm very sympathetic to them because I would assume that they are people with a soul who are searchers and yearners.

Whenever I see Jewish kids who are completely assimilated to American culture, I think 'Give 'em a few years, they'll come around.' Maybe it's an effect of my own upbringing, but I feel like Judaism is cyclical and after we look at punk rock and Buddhism and all these things, eventually we'll come back.

The problem with that theory is that America provides other alternatives, and those are security and capital. So what happens to most of these people is what happened to the hippies. A youth culture cannot sustain you into middle age. You take the hippie-yippie thing and it's gone, it's vanished, there's nothing left of it. And this was going to last forever! Charles Reich wrote about the Greening of America, everything was going to change...nothing, it's finished. It doesn't play once you come out of adolescence or extended adolescence. That's the same thing with all these different movements, they can't sustain you over a long period. What happens is the person can do what Jerry Rubin did and become a Wall Street stock broker.

And get hit by a car.

Yeah, right, exactly. I'm not sure that these people will come back. I would suspect that at this stage of their lives they are more turbulent souls than their more settled contemporaries.

That's a pretty generic symptom of adolescence and early adulthood.

Most of my students fit into their modern orthodox suburban upbringing. Most people fit somewhat, but these people

you're talking about probably fit a little less. I once asked a British soccer thug if he's going to worship the religion of Manchester United when he's fifty, and he had no answer. Once the game is over, once you've been a hippie and once you've been a punker, you're gonna become a lawyer or an accountant or something like that.

What a morose ending.

Well, that's why you can't make it the whole ballgame, there has to be something that adds to your life.

Do you think that happens because this is America, or because we live in a capitalist society, or because they're Jews...

Or "D", all of the above. I think it's America because America refuses to take things of the spirit seriously at the end of the day, and by things of the spirit I mean religion, politics, culture and art. They can be diversions but they can't be the essence of life. The essence of life is security, home, finance, settling down. All these other things in America become reduced to consumerism. That's a profoundly American thing...

But it's not profoundly Jewish.

I think that Jews who are stripped of their Judaism tend to fit very easily into such a thing. They become reductionist moralists and reductionist capitalists.

Can you explain that a little?

Yes. Jews who have nothing to do with Judaism maintain their morality or they maintain their devotion to capital, but they will never take art or culture or even politics seriously. Not the way a Goy will. There is something in the Jewish mentality that does not allow you to take things seriously. Religion maybe, morality maybe, but that's it. By "seriously" I don't mean liking it or following it, I mean *seriously*...a Jew could not have a riot over whether to root for Manchester United or Liverpool. A Jew could not punch you in the face because you root for Liverpool. He cannot take the mytho-poetic realm as an absolute, where the non-Jew can. If you have a very scientific mind, you'll want more sociological and psychological data on this but I hope you can take this in a much more intuitive way.

That seems a little stereotypical.

I think you need to preface the word "Jew" with something since it's so ambiguous nowadays.

I understand your reluctance but I would say that from the assimilated Jew to the religious Jew, there is an inability to take mytho-poeticism for reality. I'm not saying it's bad or good, mind you. Not all Jews [have this inability] of course, I'm sure there are Jews who worship the Grateful Dead and things like that...

I know several myself.

That is a religion that seems remarkably capable of lasting into middle age.

So is punk rock mytho-poeticism?

Yes it is.