



If punk can be granted any significant role in the politicization of young people, it's because musicians like Federico Gomez have never separated music from the message. As one of the pioneers of the hardcore/punk scene in Israel, Federico played in several influential political bands including Nekhei Naatza, Dir Yassin and most recently, Smartut Kahol Lavan. He has been a longtime proponent of DIY ethics, a vocal advocate of anarchist politics and a harsh critic of Israel's systematic violence against Palestinians. His voice was, and is, a reminder of both the brutality of military occupation and the passion that fuels those who scream in defiance.

Born in Argentina, Federico moved with his family to a Kibbutz in the Upper Galilee region of Israel at the age of eleven. Within a few years, he and his brother discovered punk/hardcore and eventually helped to pave the way for Israeli DIY punk through the formation of Nekhei Naatza in 1990. In 1997, Federico and ex-members of Nekhei Naatza and USF formed

Dir Yassin, an outspoken anti-Zionist hardcore band named for the 1948 massacre of Palestinian Arabs in the village of Deir Yassin. Between 1997-2002 Dir Yassin released three singles, did two tours in Europe and sparked controversy due to their open solidarity with Palestinian causes and their criticism of political apathy and racism in the Israeli punk scene. Following Dir Yassin's break-up, Federico continued to perform in Smartut Kahol Lavan, a band named in reference to the Israeli flag that literally translates as "white and blue rag." Their recent release on Lengua Armada, entitled Spontaneous Violence, has garnered international acclaim in the underground and synthesizes the raw and aggressive energies of both hardcore/punk and political dissent.

Federico is not unique as an anarchist punk rocker, a dissident Israeli or a part-time activist, but his commitment to the struggle for justice, his explicit critiques of punk's shortcomings, his intellect, and his sheer persistence sets him apart from the crowd and inspires a

new wave of political punks to raise their voices against the occupation.

Interview by Zack Furness

**You recently moved from Israel. Where are you calling home these days?**

Well, I moved about a year ago to Sweden but I ending up spending some months in Israel during the summer. I had the luck of enjoying the "war," if you can call the bombardment of Lebanon a war. I was very close to Kiryat Shmona, one of the most affected Israeli towns during those weeks.

**Why did you move?**

My wife is Swedish and we decided to move there for various reasons. The ambivalent feelings I had toward Israel were making it harder for me to cope with living there and I think something similar happened to her. I actually tried to move to Sweden five years ago, but I had very strong feelings of guilt for not helping with the struggle

# FEDERICO GOMEZ

## PIONEER OF THE HARDCORE/ PUNK SCENE IN ISRAEL

against the occupation, so I moved back to Israel. I was lucky to take part in some important direct actions while I was there, although I was never a "full-time activist" due to the other commitments.

**Are you still playing in Smartut Kahol Lavan?**

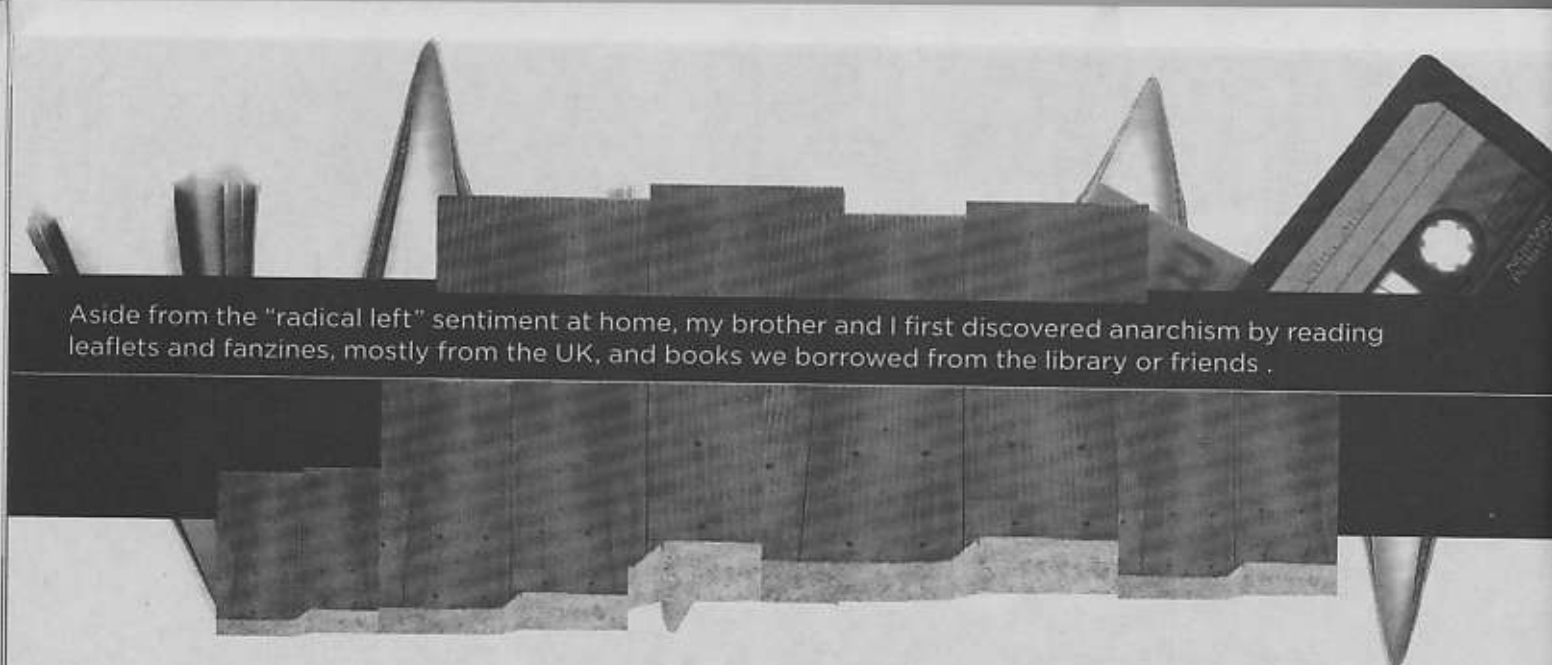
Right now the band is neither active nor split up. I think we all got the feeling that as a group we can create something we will be pleased with and still challenge ourselves a little bit. The idea is to find opportunities to rehearse, write some new stuff and maybe play some shows abroad, probably in Europe. There is also some material we didn't have time to record.

**Maybe it's a little too early for nostalgia or hindsight, but I'm curious about how you went from living on a kibbutz to being in the first anti-Zionist punk band in Israel?**

Even though I spent all my teenage years and many years after that in Lehavot Habashan, my house was very politicized and

radical views were accepted. My father was a trade union activist in Argentina and he was kidnapped and murdered by the military regime. My mother was also a grassroots political activist and was really lucky not to be murdered by the same scum. My uncle spent years in jail because of his involvement with a guerrilla group and many of my family's friends were persecuted, assassinated, or had to go into exile. My mom's new partner, who was the main reason we moved to Israel, was also very interested in politics and although he was a Zionist, he was a true socialist and very active in both the community we lived in and beyond. ¶ I found out about punk music/subculture through books and Argentine political magazines that ran features on the punk boom that was taking place there in the mid-1980s. At that time in Israel (1987-1988), there were many people who dressed "punk" and were into the music, but there was no scene really. Eventually we found out about a group of people who

shared our beliefs and they even had a real punk band (Noon Mem) but by then we already got the main ideas and music through our own initiative. We wrote to all the addresses that were on the records by the Dead Kennedys, Exploited, and Conflict, and from them we got more addresses. We ended up corresponding with literally hundreds of people all over the world that would send us tapes, records, fanzines and leaflets. Even though we were too poor to buy all those records from the stores in Tel Aviv, we had access to free mail in the Kibbutz—so we ended up getting flooded with music and information through really great pen pals. ¶ In any case, there were like three people in high school into punk/hardcore: a guy called Oded from a nearby Kibbutz, my brother, and me. There was also Oded's brother, Yonni, who liked some of the stuff and together we started Nekhei Naatza. Those of



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us who eventually formed Nekhei Naatza were very critical of the Israeli occupation and supported the Palestinian Intifada, which started around the same time that we found out about punk. I would say that we became really anti-Zionist in the later years of the band. Early on we didn't know about the post-Zionist historians and we didn't have a vast knowledge about the history of Israel itself. Despite our criticisms of the Oslo Agreements, we actually thought it would start a dynamic of peace by allowing Israelis to talk freely with Palestinian political groups—something that was forbidden until then. We thought it would break judicial and technical barriers between radical Palestinians and Israelis, and that it could create the possibility for a united struggle—a grassroots effort to achieve a more just solution than Rabin's miserable offer to the Palestinians. In some ways that happened, but the struggle also became much tougher. Even before Rabin's assassination we were already aware of the infinite problems that the Oslo Process would cause the Palestinians and how, in the end, it would worsen their situation.

**Who were some of the other people that shaped your political views at that time?**

Aside from the "radical left" sentiment at home, my brother and I first discovered anarchism by reading leaflets and fanzines, mostly from the UK, and books we bor-

rowed from the library or friends. I cannot really point at a specific thinker that helped shape our political views: we read many of the classic anarchist thinkers but although we sympathized with the basic anti-authoritarian beliefs, we acknowledged the different realities they addressed.

**The tenets of anarchism seem to be at odds with the Palestinian goals of creating both a nation and a functional centralized government, seeing as how the one-state solution is rarely discussed these days. Does the anarchist ethos create tension with Palestinian activists?**

Most Palestinians, at least those I personally was in contact with during actions and campaigns, were not so interested in the particular ideological affiliation of those who came to help them and I cannot really blame them for that. There were sometimes conversations and discussions about politics and during those, there was always a respect for our views. The issue of animal rights was much harder for most to comprehend, and it was usually ridiculed, but that situation is the same in most societies where people feel compelled to tell stupid jokes about how animals are tasty, etc. But that's life and I don't think anybody made a big deal out of that. Sometimes there were also tensions between female activists and the local male population, but in most cases it was alleviated somehow. I would say that the different status between men and

women in Palestine was the hardest issue for us to deal with as activists in Palestine—it felt like we were using double standards in which military oppression was considered unacceptable but the patriarchal one was tolerated. This is not to say that Palestinian women have not played, or continue to play, a big role in the resistance against the Israeli occupation it's just that gender is always an issue. ¶ I was in several actions against what we call "the apartheid wall," and in many actions in the years before that, but I was never a full-time activist. My experiences with direct actions against the confiscation of Palestinian lands and the construction of the wall definitely turned my anger against the state of Israel into total hatred. It made me feel less a part of a society that, for many years, I thought I would live in for most of my life and it also made me critical of activism itself (despite the fact that most activists still command my deepest respect). It also transformed my idealization of Palestinian and international resistance against Israel's military occupation into what I believe is a more mature and elaborated one.

**What kind of reaction did the name Dir Yassin provoke in Israel?**

The name was chosen in order to provoke reactions and arguments and I think we were successful at that. Our first show was stopped after two songs because we criti-



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cized the club owner for not letting us distribute leaflets that explained the meaning of the name and why we chose it. Many kids learned about the Deir Yassin massacre from our name and some even went to the extent of becoming politically active (or at least not joining the army) due to our band, which for us was really the greatest achievement possible.

#### **How was it interpreted by Palestinians?**

Not many Palestinians knew about us I guess; we missed the opportunity to play a benefit show with Palestinian artists to a mostly Palestinian audience due to the illness of a band member, so I will always wonder what would have happened if we did. But some Palestinians who saw our band's T-shirts really liked the name and when it was explained to them that it was an Israeli band, they were positively surprised. The "Deir Yassin Remembered" organization also wrote us, telling how glad they were that a band in Israel chose the name and sang about the issues we did.

#### **So is there a substantial crossover between the punk scene and actual activism in Israel?**

There is something of a crossover and some of the most dedicated people in groups like "Anarchist Against The Wall" come from a punk background or were somehow involved. Many people involved in the punk scene tend to see activists as too serious and in some cases totally against their

views. Maybe places like the BA squat in Tel Aviv, where political punks and street punks live together, will make that crossover more successful.

#### **You have stated previously that your hopes of helping shape Israeli punk into something meaningful and positive, had completely died. Have your experiences with Dir Yassin and Smartuk Kahol Lavan reinforced those feelings, or have you changed your mind about impact that punk and hardcore can have in Israel?**

I think that my views of what punk is and also my relation to it have changed over the years, as it has changed in many others and the movement itself. To be honest, what passes for "political punk" nowadays—in all the scenes worldwide—is among the most uninspired and uninspiring musical genres within the underground. I think that our hopes were mostly for the creation of a DIY scene, disconnected from the music business, the idiotic press, and rip-off clubs. I actually think we succeeded. There are a couple of squats in Tel Aviv, an infoshop/vegan coffee place, venues, and many other projects that are directly or indirectly influenced by our efforts during the '90s. But again, the majority of what passes for "punk" is just pure commercial junk for trendy teenage idiots. I think a lot of those kids lack the honesty, energy, intelligence, ferocity, anger, cynicism and sarcasm I was looking for, and found, in bands as diverse as the Dead Kennedys, An-

gry Samoans, Child Molesters, Negazione, Articles Of Faith, Blitz, and Vegan Reich. The '70s, '80s and '90s are gone, but that doesn't mean I have to choose to either get stuck in the same aesthetics or to consume watered-down, fast, happy-pop or overproduced, TV-friendly metal/punk. So I just stepped out. In any case, it is not easy to connect with a scene where the average person is almost 20 years younger than me, but I still like the genre and the possibilities it brings; it tempts me to keep doing music.

#### **Does punk still matter?**

Punk rock nowadays is just a musical genre and most of its modern exponents plainly suck. But through its evolution there were many interesting phases, projects and ideas—some that are still being applied/actualized/improved. I don't really care too much about saving the name. I care more about music, and art in general, expressing discontent, anti-authoritarian sentiments and generally reflecting upon our existence in a direct, raw, primitive, simple, and angry way. Anarchism fits punk like a glove since the ethics of "do it yourself" and grassroots co-operation are primal in both, and I think only those parameters can bring truly inspiring art. I'm still enthusiastic and supportive of people doing similar things and if the occasion arises, we will be engaged again . . . fucking shit up in the Holy Land. ☺