

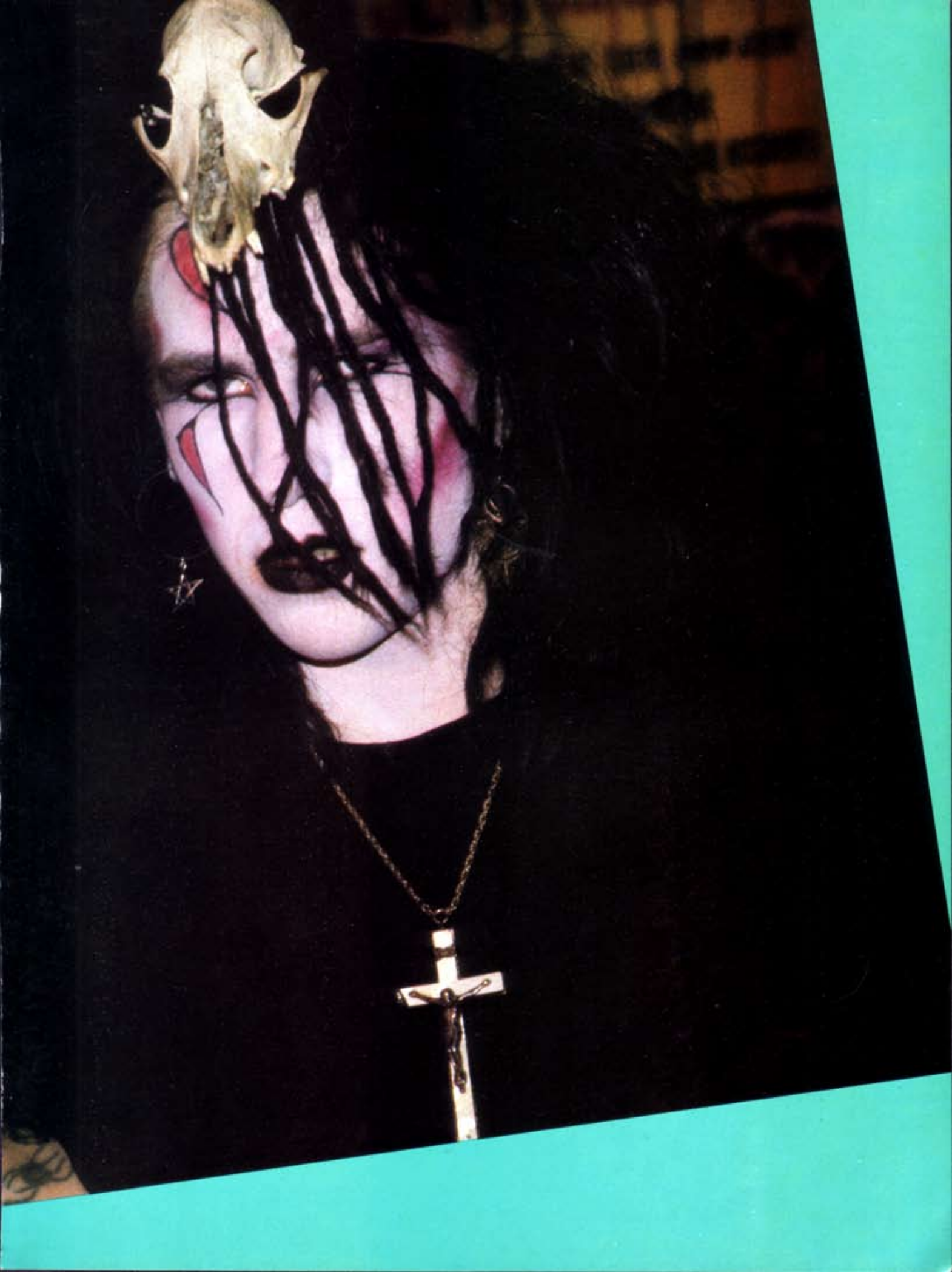
DEATH

ROCK

"They're just young artists struggling to get ahead. Underneath their painted faces and strange clothes, they're good kids."

Text by Charles Young

Photography by Edward Rasen



They eat a little taco, drink a little beer, get a little tired, and they go home," says Helen Guttman, middle-aged mother of two and proprietor of Helen's Restaurant on Melrose just before the Hollywood Freeway. The neighborhood is poorly lit and her sign is small, especially by L.A. standards, but you can spot the place by the crowd hanging out at the entrance. Helen's customers are distinguished from the local Chicanos because Helen's customers are dressed like corpses — lots of

whiteface, black eye makeup, hairstyles ranging from Euro-decadent to recent-victim-of-brain-surgery. "They don't give us any trouble," she says. "There isn't enough room for them to get out of control."

Helen's is small, about the size of two classrooms and decorated like a converted barn, with antique tools hung from the ceiling. Always harassed by the L.A.P.D., usually shunned by the major record companies, often denounced in the establishment press, underground music in Southern California needs any venue it can find. On stage a poet named Jimmy Smack plays an electronic bagpipe gizmo at

ear-pulverizing volume. The reincarnation of some medieval woodcut hallucination of bubonic plague, he is dressed in a kilt, has painted his face like a skull, and is accompanied by dancing skeletons on two television monitors.

Death and darkness are in her eyes, snarls Smack. And all she does is spread her thighs.

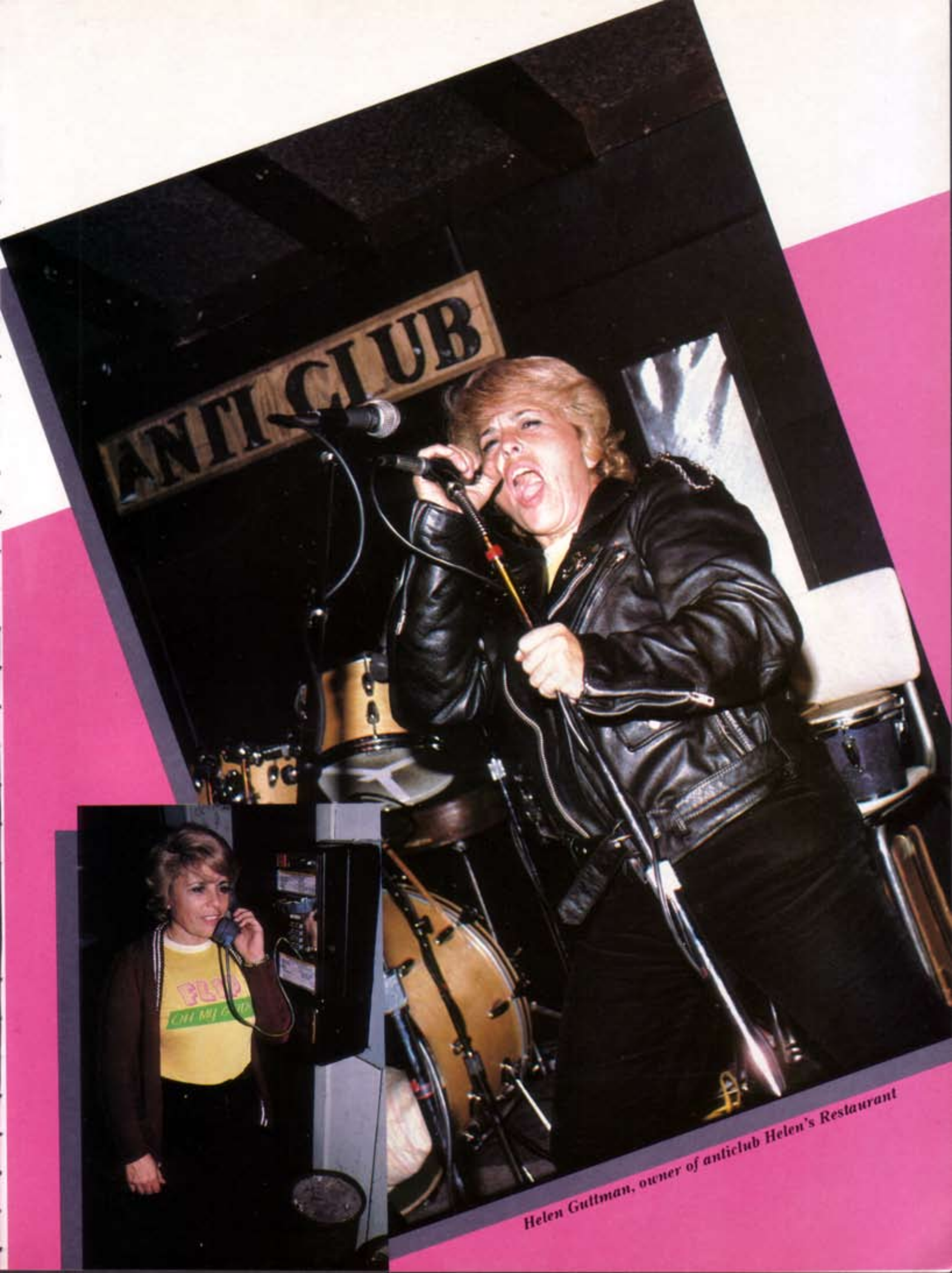
"Country-Western didn't work here," Helen shouts in a slight Spanish accent over the din. Two or three inches on the ground side of five feet, Helen seems larger by sheer force of her cheerfulness. "Latin music they didn't go for either. We tried punk a

*Your life's a mess/You couldn't care less/You need drugs to function/
Then, man, confess/Death is certain.* Jimmy Smack/Star Theater Production



Jimmy Smack





ANTI CLUB



Helen Guttman, owner of anticlub Helen's Restaurant

few years ago but there was too much destruction. Now we are New Wave and they just come for a good time."

Your life's a mess/You couldn't care less/You need drugs to function/Then, man, confess/Death is certain.

"They're just young artists struggling to get ahead," says Helen. "Underneath their painted faces and strange clothes, they're good kids. They may look tough, but you tap them on the shoulder and they melt, same as kids always. New music just takes time to be accepted. This is the beginning of a new era of music."

Your job's a bore/You just stare at the floor/The winos in the alley/Intrigue you more/Death is certain.

N

o, I don't think it's so loud," says Helen, leaving with a tray of beers for a table. "There's so much energy, I can't believe it. It's just tremendous."

The trees are burning fiery red, snarl's Smack, stripping down to a black jockstrap-like deal and leaping into the audience for his nuclear holocaust finale. In another few minutes, we'll all be dead.

"The scene isn't as polarized as it used to be," says Steve Sinclair, founder of Bemisbrain Records, label of *Hell Comes To Your House*, an anthology of Los Angeles death rock. "Art groups and hard-core groups can play on the same stage now and not get attacked. People get bored with homogeneity."

"Death rock is very unvogue," says a guy dressed like Captain Beefheart. "It was much bigger a year ago. I don't even know why I'm here."

Could he pinpoint the difference between death rock fans painting their

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Jimmy Smack/Star Theatre Production

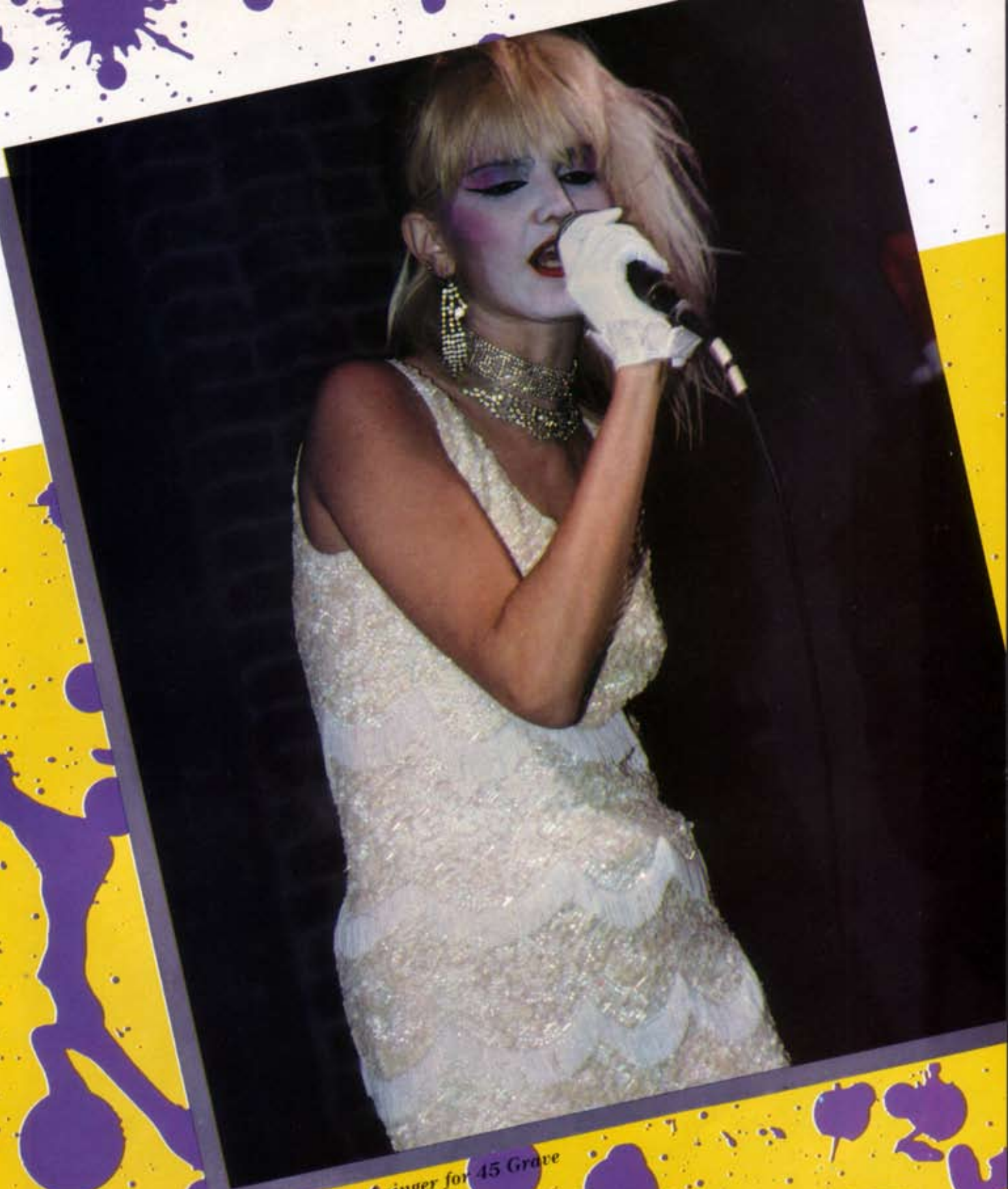


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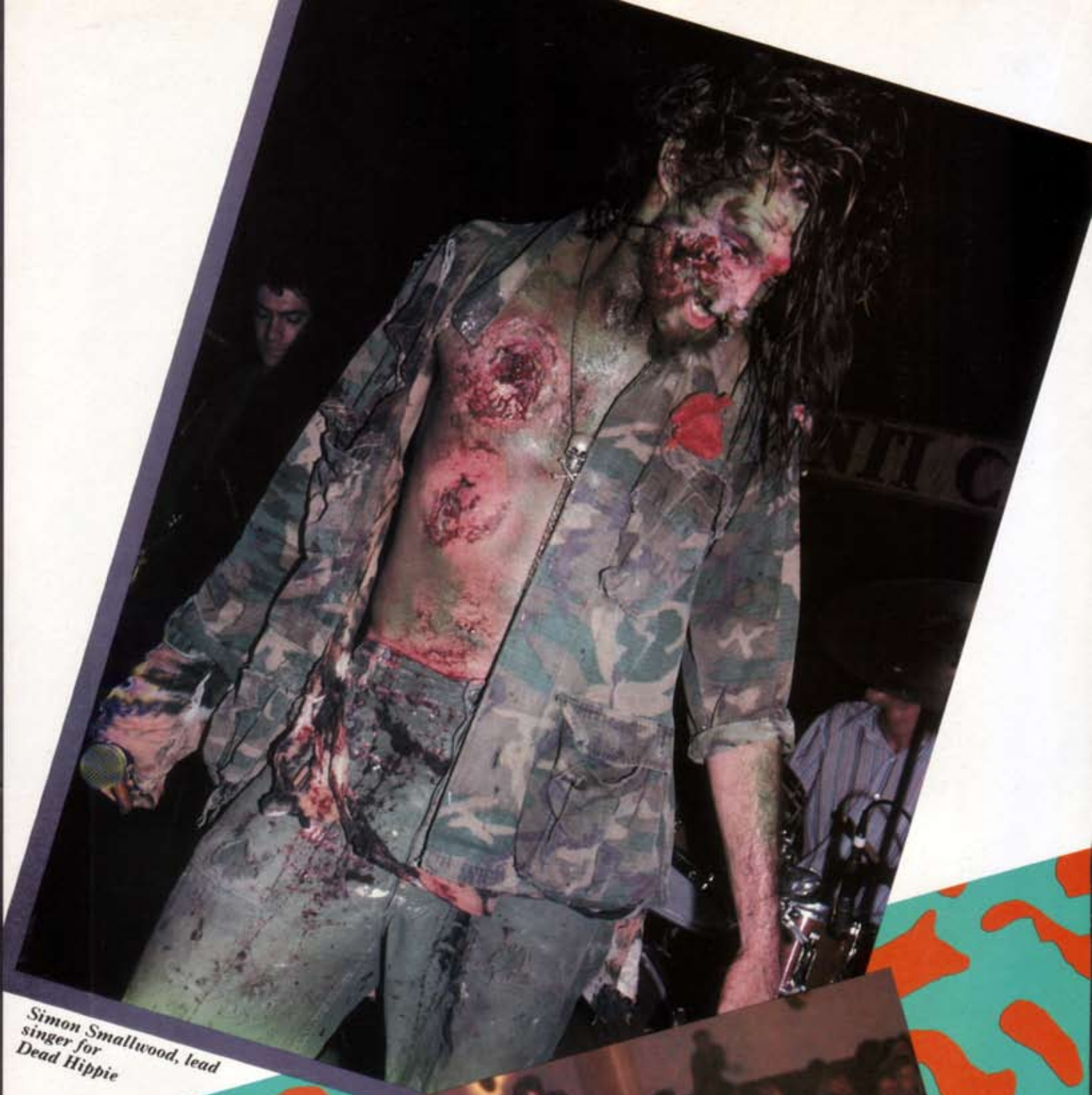
Lydia Lunch

Jack Grisham, lead singer
T.S.O.L.





Dina Carter, lead singer for 45 Grave



Simon Smallwood, lead singer for Dead Hippie



Slam dancing

faces and Kiss fans painting their faces?

"Death rock fans probably masturbate less," says the guy, "because they're dead."

"It is selling pretty well," says Sinclair. "We did 10,000 copies of *Hell*. That's a gold record by independent standards. We sold a lot of those overseas. For some reason, they really love death rock in Iceland."

"Death rock is still going, and it has been since Alice Cooper," insists Eva O., lead guitarist of Christian Death and the Super Heroines, both scheduled to perform later. Out of habit established by looking at everyone else in the club, one assumes Eva to be ugly at first glance, then is shocked to discover she is quite beautiful without

her outrageous vampire makeup.

Roz, lead singer of Christian Death, holds court before a crowd of admirers in the dressing room. Of indeterminate sex, Roz wears long, sweeping hair, a fedora and a pantsuit. He/she has painted his/her face white and shaved off his/her eyebrows.

"No, I haven't been able to figure out any use for eyebrows," says Roz, "except that my mother hates it when they're gone."

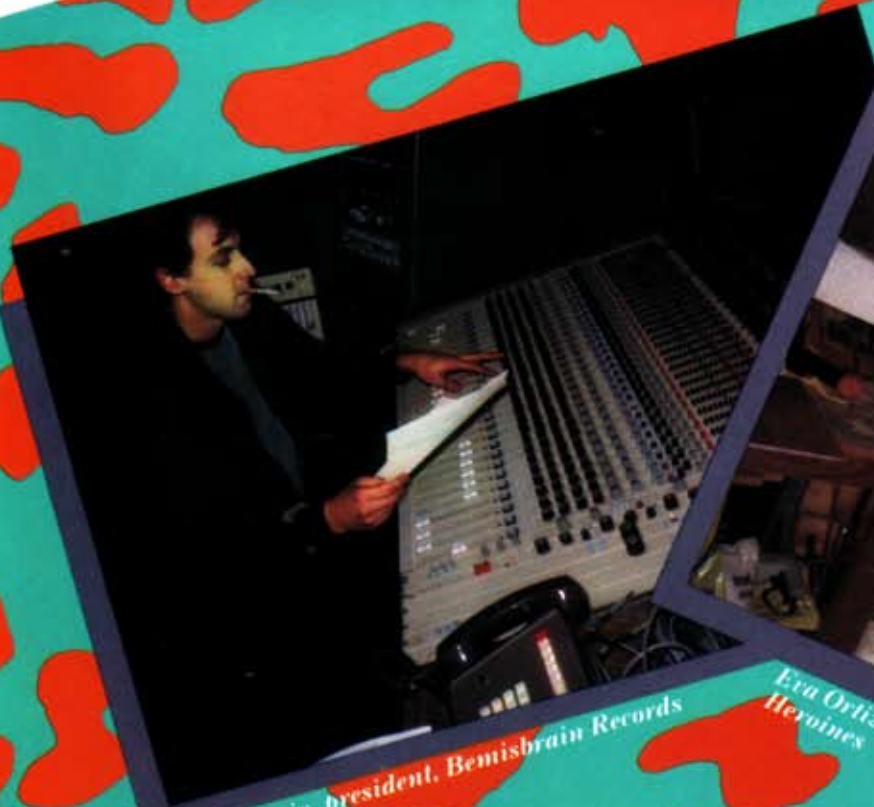
Roz is uninterested in further questions, but a 17-year-old photographer named Dina Douglas is eager to give a crash course on the rest of the local bands. Her portfolio is quite impres-

sive, with several dozen photographs of shaven-headed young men throttling each other on dance floors. TSOL ("Stands for True Sounds of Liberty.") the Mentors ("They dress like executioners.") Wasted Youth ("They were banned from nine or ten clubs because their fans tore them apart.") Social Restraint, Vice Squad, Bad Religion — Dina knows them all.

"This is Dave Grave from Voodoo Church," says Dina, in her second year at Pierce College. "That's a cat's jaw hanging from his ear. He knows where animals go to die and he makes jewelry out of them. At their shows, they throw meat and flowers that they stole from cemeteries."

The Super Heroines take the stage to a rousing welcome from the corpses

*Their razor sharp tongues/Invite to relax/As they slip
the skin on your eyelids back/Invasive spectators
get into the act/* Christian Death/Frontier Music



Steve Sinclair, president, Bemisbrain Records



Eva Ortiz, lead singer for the Super Heroines

and launch into 45 minutes of their greatest hits: *Death on the Elevator*, *Embalmed Love*, *Black Wedding*, *Remember to Die*. Visually, they are a shade too eclectic for maximum effect: The skinny male drummer has hair down to his butt in the manner of 1968 heavy metalists; the bassist is a bouncy rock & roller in fashion of Joan Jett; and Eva O. is entirely too sexy for a cadaver. They do, however, compensate with lines like *Sin touches my breast as I vomit/Perversion on your face*.

In the dressing room, Jimmy Smack packs away his kilt and explains how he got into his line of work: "I'm a dancer by trade and I got depressed

when the only classical ballet company in L.A. shut down. I can't find work, man. There's a real cultural depression going on in this country. You want a copy of my record?"

Is it as depressing as his act?

"The single is. The album is even more depressing, especially if you play it at 16 rpm. It even kills me. You think I should send one to David Letterman?"

Christian Death proves to be a major disappointment — Roz looking ready for some serious sacrilege and blasphemy but failing to sink anywhere near low enough for excommunication. Back at the bar,

Lloyd Mitchell, a neighborhood teamster, sucks on a Coors.

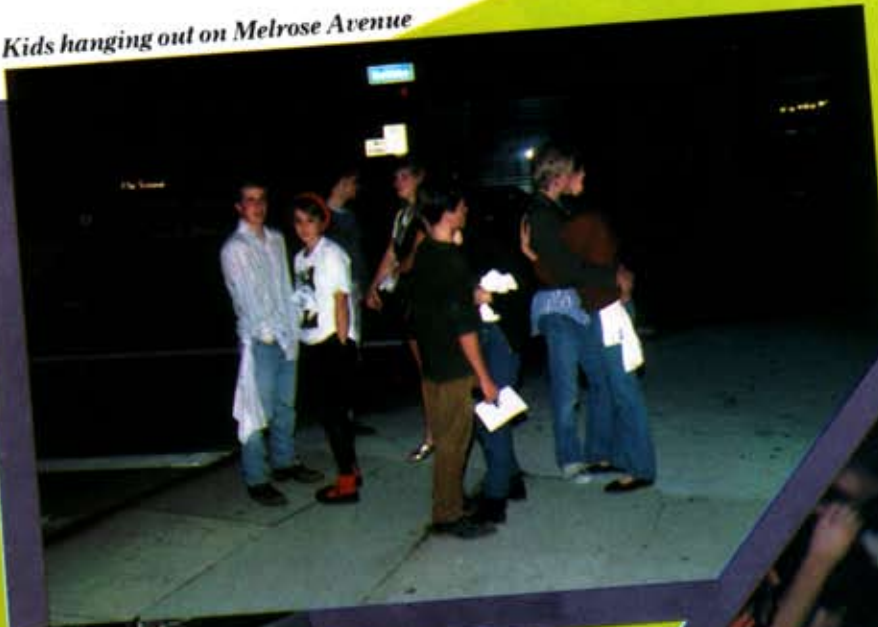
"Death rock ain't my favorite kind of music," says Mitchell. "I'm one of the highest paid unskilled workers in the world, so I got nothing to be depressed about. I talked to some people the other day who seemed to think there was some kind of unifying idea to it, but it seemed kind of vague to me. I'm just a dropout from the '60s myself."

So he had seen everything already?

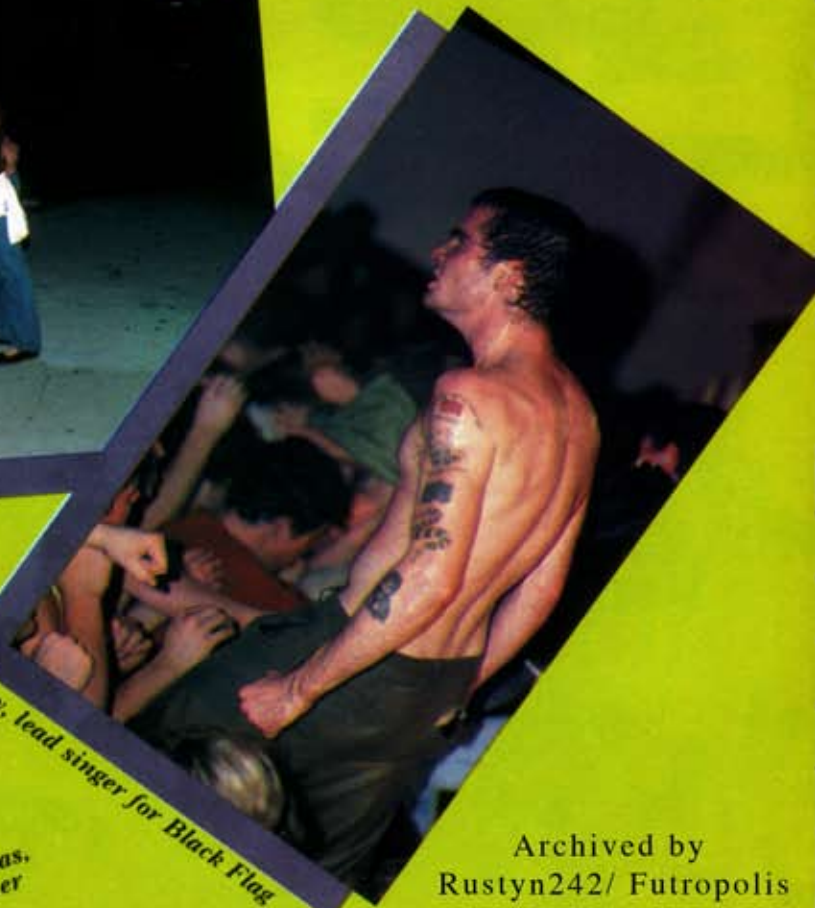
"No, I wouldn't say that," says Mitchell, stroking his goatee. "If you stop being surprised at the world, you might as well be dead." ■

*Sin touches my breast as I vomit/
Perversion on your face.* Super Heroines/Bemisbrain Records

Kids hanging out on Melrose Avenue



Henry, lead singer for Black Flag



*Dina Douglas,
photographer*