



Ian MacKaye- punk rock icon known for his work in *Minor Threat*, *Fugazi*, *The Evens*, runs Dischord Records in Washington DC.

Q: you built your career from the ground up and have never dealt with any major labels or any such industry. How do you feel things have changed since when you started out in the late 70's to now? Would it be possible to do what you did then now considering how much more corporate the world, let alone the music industry, has become?

First off I can't really compare the two eras because the landscape is so different. I think factors are always the same, I mean, there is always going to be a dominant commercial entity known as "the industry" and the market is going to appear to dominate the field. And people who are coming into the practice of art are going to probably feel discouraged about the fact that it exists. But really what people have is an idea and they don't need an industry to validate that idea so in late 70's for instance, when I started to play music, my original reaction to the industry that I wanted to play guitar and be in a band but I couldn't figure out how to play guitar and it just seemed out of my reach but punk rock allowed me to change the source of light and get a different perspective of the reality of the situation, and I was then able to play music. But it was in despite of the industry, or in other words I wasn't thinking "well I'm going to knock down the majors" and didn't care about the majors, I was most interested in creating something, in building something. And I would say in 2008 the same situation exists but obviously they are different. Notably no one I knew in 1979 had a computer, nobody I knew heard of MTV, nobody I knew had email or text or internet. It was a really different era. However, I think if you interviewed someone 30 years before that in 1949, they would say you can't compare these two eras because so much technology has changed. However the reality of the situation is that there is always going to be a dominate industry, a commercial industry, that lays claim to all art and music and then it's up to the people coming into that decide if they are going to let that dictate what they do.

But I would say as long as they can be an overground there can be an underground. And where people get tripped up is that they want it both ways. On one hand they want it to operate independently, but then they also want to make a living. So their version of success, which is based on a monetary reward, is actually in synch with the way the industry operates. So in a way their practices consist of an industry, so they're not independent of the industry. However, if they are musician, and they have to make music, maybe they might work at different kind of jobs to pay the bills so they can play music. As opposed to instantly becoming dependent upon their music to live. That's the compromise often enters. A lot of times the compromise is something that is a result of parental instance. Their parents often challenge their children saying, "this isn't real, you can't make a living off of this, it just is not real." It's just an absurd notion. It's a perverted one. It's one based on the idea the only things that are real are profitable. And that's just absurd.

Q: You must make a living off of your music from all the bands you've been in as well as your lectures. Was that your goal early on to make your living off of music or was that something that just happened?

To counter the assertion: I make my living off of my work. For instance right now I'm not playing my music, and when you saw me speak [at Brandeis] I wasn't playing my music. I also wasn't making of a "living" I got paid like \$200, it wasn't any great shakes. But ultimately I work all the time. And when first started playing in bands I had three jobs. I worked steadily at other jobs until 1987 or 1988 so the first eight years of being in bands and running Dischord I also worked at a record store, a movie theatre, an ice cream store, drove a newspaper truck, you know, I just picked up work. At some point the label itself became too much work, it wasn't merely that I could go on tour and make all this money being in a band. But rather the label the label was my job and it was filing orders, or making records, and it became non-stop every day. And now I still spend the majority of my time not playing music and rather doing administrative things that are work, its just work. I feel like the reason I work is so that I can play music. As it happens over the years some of the bands I've been in have become more successful which then did generate an income. But ultimately I never made music to make money; I made music to be heard. So I feel really very clear about that. And I know a cynic could say "yeah well he is making a living from his music." But I just don't think that's the case. If I had never done the work I could never be where I am. In other words if I was just strumming the guitar, you wouldn't be talking to me.

Q: What would you say to bands that are intentionally trying to make their living off of music?

Good luck. I'm not going to be cynical about it. It's like the lottery. There are plenty of people who every day take a quarter of the money they made and they go buy lottery tickets. And their idea is that one of those tickets are going to hit and they're not going to have to work anymore. And many of these people who buy tickets have this notion that the more they buy, the more seriously they've invested in it, and therefore the more they're gonna hit. I'm not sure that's the case either. And think it's pretty random and statistically pretty remote. I think with musicians it's the same way. I think there are people who think the more money they spend, and the more they do things that they think is a professional approach to music, as in they provide something they think people want, that somehow that's going to result in success in terms of making money. But I think you'll find if you did some statistical research that the number of people who actually hit are vastly outnumbered by those people who dwell in obscurity.

But that's OK. I don't think they've wasted their time. If they made music they loved; then they succeeded. I mean, they may think that they've failed. But I don't, because I think a bands first success is the decision to be a band. The second success is the first practice. The third success is the first song. And from there on it's just a string of successes. I would always encourage people in any discipline they are in, in any practice, to love what they are doing. Because that way, at the end of the day, if they feel somehow that they were unsuccessful, at least they spent their time doing something they loved. Ultimately, all we ever really want in life is something to do. And if you want something to do, one hopes that what you do is something you love.

Q: You seem to be the spokesman in a way for DIY musicians and for the anti-corporate approach to making art. What are some of your philosophies about how to go about creating a DIY career?

I refute the notion that I'm a spokesman. Often with people that are in somewhat higher profile positions they raise up the ladder or obscure it. So that people don't understand how they got there. Like they see people who are in this apparent loftier position but they don't really know how they got there. And I actually am quite interested in discussing that. There's been a lot of people who I've been interested in their work and I've heard them speak and I feel like they often don't talk about themselves in any kind of real way. Somehow they've arrived as though driven there by God or something, because there was no special path they took, or no series of rungs that they've climbed. I think my original idea was that if people were interested, if they were curious, that I'd be happy to answer some questions. So for instance in the particular event where you saw me do a talk it wasn't like I called them and said, "hey book me." I was called; they were like "hey, we want you to

do a talk.” But I said I wouldn’t do a lecture but I would answer some questions if people had them. So I don’t really think of myself as a spokesperson but I do like the idea of being able to check out some ideas. Mostly what I’m really interested in is reminding people that everything is still live, that it’s all real. And that they shouldn’t be discouraged and think “everything that could be done has been done.” That’s just nonsense.

For me when I first started playing music people in punk rock really encouraged me, they were like listen “it’s yours to make.” Especially now with all these moving pictures that are some dominate, whether it’s the TV or the computer, and because the economical nature of video, there’s just a slew of documentaries, and most documentaries feature white men in their 40’s and 50’s talking about history, previewing wars, and how historical everything before this was, like that was it, that was history, everything now is a joke, that nobody could understand what they were going through then. I find those really unconstructive sentiments. If anything I just want to remind people that it’s all there if they want to make it. They just got to make it, They just got to do things.

Mostly I also want to feel like I’m connected to something that is living. I mean, here I was involved in something like punk rock almost 30 years ago now. I had my first show 29 years ago two weeks from now. I don’t mean that I think that people who are sixteen now don’t have anything interesting or important to offer. In fact I think sixteen year olds have more interesting and important things to offer they just have to figure out how to feel connected and get connected with that world. I’m interested in the living. I can talk about my experiences in the past. But I’m much more interested in what is going on now. My legacy, I’ve got it in a sack on my back, but the only way I can really feel well is to feel like I’m actually doing something active. I don’t want to merely be a diligent in my own life.

Q: When I saw you speak at Brandeis I was with Stephen Brodsky and he was really struck by something you said about someone who wasn’t thinking “well”, it was a very interesting concept and a unique way of describing how different people’s minds work. Can you elaborate on that concept?

Some people think unwell. I don’t know why. I think it’s interesting. The psychology of human beings has an immense effect on the world in which we live in. But it’s by and large, completely pointless. I’m not a Buddhist at all but I can really appreciate this idea that really it’s all nothing. It just doesn’t make a difference. Like someone was telling me that they knew someone who had died and they were saying that that person had been so excited about the upcoming election and they would never know the outcome, but I said, quite frankly, when people are reckoning with their own mortality, I don’t think they really give a fuck about who becomes president. It just doesn’t matter. Imagine you think about a dispute you had in fifth grade with someone, you’d look back it and think, “that was completely ridiculous” you were disputing over a headband or something. Essentially most of our structured life is about as important as that. Granted, I’m not trying to trivialize war,

murder, or any of that. If you really think about it, it just doesn't make any difference, it's so pointless. It just doesn't make any sense to me. So I think that really I would be of good service to try and always think well, and not unwell, so I don't have to waste so much time cleaning up after pointless messes.

Q: I know when I saw you speak you wouldn't even mention the names of certain social networking sites. Does that mean you've never been on one? And do you have any particular thoughts on them and how they've changed the industry?

The reason I'm reticent to mention certain brand names is precisely for the reason that I don't want to promote their brand. I think when you start using words that are pronouns used as verbs; just the pure repetition creates an advertisement.

You know Amy and I had a kid in May and she called me when I was on a walk and said "oh can you pick me up some diapers, I ran out of cloth ones and could you just get disposable ones?" and I was like "yeah, sure." So I went by a store, and I went by three different stores cause I'm so interested in this, and I realized that of all stores you could only find one diaper that didn't have a Disney image or some corporate copyrighted logo on it. If you think about a seven-week-old child, that child doesn't give a fuck about any of those copyrighted cartoon characters, it means nothing to him or her. However the parents see it, and other people see it, and essentially the diaper might as well say "Exxon" or anything else. Its just advertisement, its another little billboard. And we're talking about essentially a piece of plastic that gathers up shit and piss and yet they put their logo on it. And this kind of stuff is so insidious, this information in our world; it just blows my mind that people don't stand up and say "stop, we don't need this on our shit containers."

In the same way I think that, especially with the Internet, those kind of sites become so pervasive, people just refer to them by their brand name. And the same with personal listening devices, they have these names and people just hear it over and over again until they are essentially the same thing as "water" or "air".

To answer of your question: I am not a member of any of those social networking things. I have, of course, looked at them, because so many people are on them, in terms of venues and bands, and quite often people will send me music via one of those sites. I know that on one of them I am able to monitor without having to be a member, but the other I had to join in order to use it, so I did join using a pseudonym, making up a fake name and using an email address I never use. And fuck that eventually didn't get uncovered, like someone I know asked me "why are you calling yourself such and such." Like this was some really random series of events but that's how those things work. I find it extremely weird. But I'm not in fact a member of any of those things. The telephone and the email and the paper mail and person-to-person is plenty enough for me. And lastly on these social networking sites, they create confusion, specifically from people missing in action. This was

connected to bands that are on Dischord who did not forward their address when they moved and then people we owed money to and they were using these sites to get in touch.

I also have to occasionally monitor those sites because people impersonate me often. And that generally is an absurd, benevolent, and occasionally malicious and painful result. Like I had a situation where a woman showed up on my porch with medical supplies, she had come from California, because someone impersonating me had convinced her that I was sick. She had made a special trip to the house here and when she was told it was a mistake and that I wasn't sick she was totally devastated. Because she had had this strange online romance with me but it was never me. Imagine someone impersonating me and someone writing them and saying "I'm a big fan of yours, thanks for all your work," and then the impersonator writes back, "why don't you fuck off and suck my dick," or something, it's ultimately no big deal, except that somewhere along the way someone thinks that I'm some big dick, it's just a bummer, it's a drag. So then I have someone in my office go on there and take them down. I'm in a weird place, because I'm not a genuine celebrity, but I'm a known person. So I think there are sites that automatically register that there are fraudulent posts or fraudulent pages, but they also don't have to account for the disruption that the impersonators can cause.

But mostly I think that if you are in a field and there is a single tree and there's a thunderstorm coming, don't huddle under the same tree. And that's the way I feel about most of those sites. It seems like so much energy goes into it, but ultimately it just takes one weird thing to happen and everybody gets hit. And maybe most people would say, "Well, what could happen?" I don't know what could happen. All kinds of crazy shit could happen frankly. Who would have every thought ten years ago it would have been inconceivable that the government would be so inappropriately reaching into our affairs. I think what they've done is outrageous. It's been incremental. But still they've got all your information in one place. It makes their job easier. The corporations that run those social networking sites, it's not as if they are these separate entities from the government, they are very connected. All the telephone companies, the internet providers, and the computer companies are all enormous corporations and they are completely connected to the government. I mean the government essentially works on behalf of the corporations at this point. Go look at the various adjustments to the laws because they are very corporate friendly because that's who pays the bills. So if the government then in turn says "hey we want to know everything about these kinds of people," they're going to share those files. It's not a conspiracy theory. I'm just being straight. It's already happened. I'm not talking about the Bermuda triangle. This stuff has already occurred. Verizon turned over police phone records. I was really surprised. They just turned it over. Or maybe it was AOL, it was one of these companies who just turned over their records. Google did it to, people's personal histories. So it's not like this couldn't possibly happen. In any event, my life outside social networking sites is fine. I'm happy where I am.

I'm surprised when I hear about the protracted bitterness that happens on these sites. It has nothing to do with the sound of anyone's voice, a gesture, or anything.

That kind or reminds me of a situation I got in about a year ago where one of the many bands who sends me unsolicited ads about their band got in a fight with me on one of these social networking sites. It was because for once I made the mistake of writing them back and asking them why they were sending me these unsolicited ads about their band because I'm another artist and it's kind of rude to send out generic emails to people plugging you shit. But when I asked them about it they got incredibly defensive and started writing abusive emails and posting abusive comments on my site because I had opened this door and it was hard to then shut it again because of the nature of those sites and the open dialogue format.

It couldn't be more petty. If you think about it, you're talking about probably one kid who is staying at home at a computer and they are just weird. I used to occasionally get in disputes with the mail, but that at least involves writing something down on a piece of paper, putting it in an envelope, address it and placing a goddamn stamp on it and then walk to a mailbox. But with a computer it's like a spitting match. So it just doesn't make any difference. And people send me shit on the email constantly, ads for their bands and whatnot, and I just delete them. My name gets signed up to all these mailings, for some reason I get contacted by dozens of different Italian promoters. But I don't live in Italy, and I can't go to any of these shows. And I can't even read most of the press releases because I can't read Italian. I always ask to get unsubscribed. And generally it's no big deal. But once or twice over the years when I ask to get taken off one of these mailing lists I get a really snarky reply from somebody whose just like "sorry, didn't realize we're not cool enough for you." And I'm just like "God, man, I'm just a human being, I can't even read things much less content them." Really I just think these things are so tiny, so pointless, I can't be bothered with it.

I think you did learn a good lesson: just delete it, don't respond.

However if someone writes to me and says, "hey, will you listen to our music?" I will listen to a song or two, and I'll write them and say "thanks, I enjoyed that, but we don't sign bands from outside of Washington." We've received thousands of demos over the years and now in some ways I prefer the online presence of music because I've thrown away thousands of cassettes. That's just the drill. I used to keep them all because I felt guilty to throw them away, but then I was like "wait a minute, it's not my job to own these things, it's my responsibility to listen to them, so I listened to them, I responded, and then I'm done." Interestingly I quite literally had boxes of cassettes of which I would never listen to again, and I thought that it was crazy, I couldn't recycle them, and I threw away the rest. So at a computer you can go to a site, and it's a real site that's great, if it's a social networking site it's a little more annoying but at least the music is there without packaging. What I find is annoying is that you can listen to the music but if you want to see the photos or read the blogs you have to be a member and then you get cut off. But that's just a design thing I guess.

Q: Considering you are anti-corporate but you still run a business what are the measures you take to make sure your label is a legit operation and that it abides by your own personal philosophies?

Yeah, be honest. Running a record label for so many years, a number of specifics could keep us on the phone all day but what it boils down to essentially actually giving a fuck about what you're doing.

Q: At the talk I went to one of the girls in the crowd asked you how you deal with fame but I remember you being a bit distant from the concept as though you don't see yourself as an icon or a musical celebrity or whatever. Is this because you don't consider yourself to be famous or because you don't really care about stuff like that?

Yes...yes to both of your points. Yes, I don't give a fuck about that stuff and I don't really see myself as famous. I appreciate very much that people are interested in the things I do. For instance you asked if you could interview me, I said yes, get in touch with me, and here we are. I'm not experiencing this as a very famous person. I'm experiencing this as myself. That is how it is. I'm just myself. So when someone asks me about fame it's actually outside my understanding, I don't see myself as famous, it doesn't occur to me that I'm famous. I understand the concept of it but I don't have that kind of relationship with fame. It doesn't really have a pull on me. I don't really care about it. So when she asked that question I'm mostly struck by what people's perception of fame is. Because it's not something I've thought about in so long and it sort of distracts from what's really going on in the world.

It's very interesting to me. I read somewhere that there's a television show where they just chase around celebrities with cameras, it's just so bizarre, while the paparazzi aspect of it an annoyance in fact all these people have their press agents orchestrate it. As in they call and say, "this famous person is going to go to this hair saloon or this restaurant." I have no idea. I don't understand that world whatsoever. But I think that has more to do with this very confused and perverted society, as in society has lost a sense of what's important, and replaced it with what appears to be important.

That's an interesting point because I get a lot of my news from the top news stories that pop up on my email. One is for the US top 5 news stories and the other is for the top 5 news stories in the world. Which is ironic because they are so different. For instance yesterday the number one story in the US was that Brad Pitt and Angelina

Jolie had twins. And I just was thinking that this information was so irrelevant to my life and certainly doesn't seem newsworthy if you only have room for the top five news stories in a nation of this size.

Wow. Who is the orchestrator of this? What is the criteria for making it the most important news? In any event, that really does illustrate what I'm talking about it. Meanwhile more money than you will ever know in your life is being spent in a day to hurl exploding pieces of metal at human beings for an absolutely pointless endeavor. It's all just a distraction.

People often ask me who I'm going to vote for and I always vote for the person who is least likely to go to war because I think that ultimately whoever becomes elected President is what this country deserves. Either because they actually voted for that person or because they allowed the system to actually keep them in a way that it has for the last decade. In any event, that's what this country deserves. But the world doesn't deserve it. I think it's one of the many, many ways the US effects the world, the most direct effect is war. A vote that casts that would speak in the sense of the world and therefore whoever is least likely to go to war, least likely to shot a gun, a person I hope that is against capital punishment. Because that issue alone, capital punishment, is like the poster child issue of this country, the fact that this country murders people is just insane. Completely insane.

What I think is even worse is that the Republicans that support capital punishment are also against abortion.

Well of course, it's insane. I totally agree with you. I have to say that the prison industry is an enormous one, and they have a powerful lobby, so they're interested in that presence in society.

Q: lastly I have a little devil's advocate question that just came up. A friend of mine was staying with me last night and he actually goes to Brandeis where you did the talk where I met you and I told him I was going to do this interview today and asked him what he thought of your talk. And he said he liked it but that he didn't really agree with one of your comments that the best shows were in some dude's basement with like ten people. Because he's played a lot of those kind of shows and thinks they kind of suck. Granted he's trying to ultimately make a living off his music if not by performing than by teaching, but he feels like little shitty DIY gigs with a handful of people and no money at the end of the night are kind of drag. It's not that romantic. It can be a dead end. He felt that it was kind of easy for you to say since you do make a living at music. But I don't necessarily take his side. I like those shows too sometimes.

I just think it's an interesting argument, because ultimately I could argue the validity of both sides.

I think he missed the point. My point was that those moments with new ideas when something is really fresh it generally is not going to be hatched in front of like a thousand people. So I find small shows to be the most exciting. It doesn't mean that I think that people should always go to small shows. I don't think that. I always believed people should play rooms that accommodate the number of people that want to see them. So in Fugazi we played rooms with fifteen people and rooms with fifteen thousand people. I honestly didn't always want to play in basements. And would never want your friend to always play in basements. However, my point was that the shows that I found the most compelling for me were new bands who were hatching something new, and generally those shows were lightly attended because no one had heard of them before. So in other words if I came to see your band in the basement it doesn't mean I hope to always see your band in the basement. It means that I hope you kick my ass because you have a new idea. So I think he missed the point of that.

I think he did too. That's pretty clear. But I think that it's something that you see, people that struggle to play gigs and be lucky if they make their gas money, which is pretty much the way it works now for DIY artists. I mean, I tour a lot but right now I'm on a break because I can't see the point in schlepping around the country when gas is four dollars a gallon, however lame that sounds. But there's so many people that do it anyway, and they're easily frustrated by the futility of how hard it can be to get an audience.

I think people are insane. You want to fucking play music and there's someone who wants to see you play music and you can essentially come close to breaking even? And you can drive around the country and wake up in different places? People play music and can have these experiences! I don't give a fuck how much it is a galloon! That's life, that's like the best part of life. Sure, it's cheaper to stay home in front of a computer screen and get paid a salary. But that's a different kind of life. I'm merely saying that I understand why people get frustrated if they only think of their music only in terms of a career. But they should never, never under estimate the value of having music as a currency in which to exchange ideas and to meet people. I mean, music is why you're on the phone with me. It's a really important thing. If people can drive around and play music, then who cares if they make money. Kids who are broke can't drop thousands of dollars and go drive around and expect to make that money back. But there's a basic balance to it. You can drive around New England, go to Vermont to do a gig, whatever. I think that's a better thing to do than stay at home monitoring the social networking sites. That's all, I just want to speak sense to those people that are traveling, not that all those people are driving around fretting about

how they're losing money but how fortunate they are. If it's not worth it for you, than don't do it.

How do you make a living off of music? I don't know. Play music people like I guess...I don't know. But if you want to make money off of your music you're going to enter music as a service industry, and that's a different kind of music. The wedding parties, the bahmitzfah, the cruise ships, you get hired and you play what they tell you.

My first tour, to give you an idea, was in 1980 and six of us took a Greyhound bus to California. We had two shows, one in LA and one in San Francisco, we spent about \$3,000 or more accumulatively on transportation, we grossed a total of \$26 and it was a total disaster for our shows. But that experience was enormous. I'm so happy we did it. It was like a journey, it was incredible. Had I said no to those gigs because the money wasn't right I wouldn't be playing in public or having those experiences. Life offers itself up in many strange situations, and if you're closed, you just don't get to try.

Always keep an eye out for bitterness. It will shake you. Just keep an eye out for it.