

Skott Cowgill

“I was coming out of the fire
and I needed a place to land”



We'd like to get some background information, which is what we do with these oral history interviews. Where were you born?

Cowgill: Rhode Island. But I spent most of my formative years in Pensacola.

Tell me about your parents.

Cowgill: Let's see, my dad was an FBI agent. My mom was really sick. My dad moved around a lot because of the job, and we landed in Pensacola because they had doctors that were available to do laser surgery—that was a new concept at the time—to correct my mom's vision, or to allow her to see. That's why we moved to Pensacola originally. I don't know, I got kicked out when I was seventeen.

Do you have any special memories from your childhood?

Cowgill: I wasn't really into it. I guess a special memory would be that my dad had a record collection, so I found a way to be locked in a room and listen on headphones to music. It was good for them because at least I was isolated and not causing any problems. I spent a lot of time just sitting in that room listening to albums over and over again. For some reason it brought me a lot of calm and was very interesting to me—the music world.

Where'd you go to school?

Cowgill: I went to Creative Learning Center, I went to Episcopal Day School. In New Orleans, I went to Jefferson Academy. But I was always a troublemaker, super hyperactive, always causing problems, so I went to a lot of schools. I went to Catholic school and got kicked out of there. I went to Woodham but only lasted a couple of days there,

and I got kicked out of Pensacola High School because I wrote “suicidal” down my leg. I was into this band called Suicidal Tendencies and I didn’t realize that was a problem. Then I went to Washington High School. I got kicked out of that. I eventually graduated from [Pensacola Private School of] Liberal Arts because I think they probably would take anybody. It was a good school, though, and they were doing some interesting stuff.

Okay, tell me about your earliest memories of the 309 punkhouse.

Cowgill: I was coming out of the fire and I needed a place to land. Terry Johnson had been very helpful in the whole situation. She was the owner at Sluggo’s, and we were really good friends. She found this place, and there was a big room available. The guys that lived there—one of the guys was on house arrest, the other was drinking himself into a stupor. There wasn’t much going on there, and there wasn’t much furniture either. But she secured the spot for me and got me the big room in the front, and it looked pretty great. So I moved in there, and those guys slowly started moving out. We started moving in all of our friends and people in the punk community, and it started gaining momentum.

Can you tell me about the neighborhood around the house during that time?

Cowgill: There wasn’t much around. The tracks were right there, so trainhoppers would hop on, hop off, and sometimes they would come in, and we’d put them up for the night. It was near the Civic Center. Van Gogh’s was there, which was a coffee place—it was a little overpriced, but it had a porch area in the back. It was really kind of a nice neighborhood, actually.

Can you describe what the house looked like then, how it was arranged?

Cowgill: We had a ramp in the back that the people before us had built. It had gotten rotten, but we had re-plied it and fixed it up. It was a two-story building, and there was a large porch on the front where we spent many hours eating boiled peanuts and discussing politics, and how to take over. There was a little side yard where we planted watermelons and various fruits and vegetables. Most of them didn’t work, but occasionally some came through. It was gray with white trim, and it overlooked a very quiet street. I think that’s all I got.

If I understand correctly, you lived at the house for a number of years?

Cowgill: Yeah, I was the first one to move in and start moving our folks in there. Terry moved me in there, and then slowly our old acquaintances and comrades started moving in.

Why did you decide to live there?

Cowgill: Because I needed a spot, and with the size of the place the rent was very agreeable. And when we met the landlord, J.P., he was a really good guy. Kind of a mellow surfer guy but into philosophy, and he backed us quite a bit on the things we needed fixed. For a landlord to work with a bunch of crazy looking punks is rare, because most of the time that's something you hide from the landlord. This guy we actually liked seeing, and when he'd show up we'd hang out with him.

So that was another reason to do it. Plus, we just needed a punkhouse. But the selling point was the ramp in the back. Having a ramp was a huge thing for us, huge thing for me. All the sessions we had back there, and all the people that skated there—there were some really great skaters that came through. So that was definitely a big selling point.

Can you walk me through a typical day at the punkhouse?

Cowgill: Because I worked at Sluggo's late at night, I'd wake up about 1:00 kind of groggy, get some coffee. Maybe go down to the Yellow Store—they called it that because it was painted yellow—and get some boiled peanuts, Hawk's Boiled Peanuts. Uh, sit on the porch and eat the boiled peanuts, throw the shells in the front there, and then I'd start painting. I'd go in my room and turn the stereo on full blast. I'd just paint, and then about an hour into painting somebody would knock on the door, and it would either be a Food Not Bombs¹ thing or a protest that we had to do.

I would try to finish my painting, but I had to go to the protest. So we would go to the protest, it would last about two hours. We usually outnumbered the other people there. At Food Not Bombs we outnumbered the people we were feeding. There's maybe ten people who were really stoked that we were there serving, but there were fifteen of us.

When we finished that up, we'd come home. We would have a group meal because some of the people that lived there were vegan chefs, like

¹ An organization providing healthy, vegetarian food to the hungry through thousands of independent local chapters.

Rymodee and Shari, and they made incredible food. It would be a huge meal, and a lot of times there would be a show that night, so we'd get ready to see whatever band we were going to go see. After that it would be late night skate sessions. If it was summertime we'd go to the beach. That was always good because the beach was only fifteen minutes away.

What are your fondest memories from that period?

Cowgill: All of them [laughs]. All the people that were involved were really great. There was an anarchist school going on. If you didn't want to do that, you could learn to cook with all these people that later on became incredibly good chefs, like Jen Knight. When we started doing veganism nobody knew anything about it, so we were just eating salads and basically garbage. People got sick of that so they started learning how to cook. I didn't, but the rest of the crew really took off, and some of them made careers out of it.

There was the Spare Change Cafe, which was a vegan cafe that we were all running in 309. Sometimes the trainhoppers would come off the train, and they were amazed because we took it really seriously. I would be a waiter, a snooty waiter guy. I would sit everybody down, and they were nervous because of how much it would cost. But then you would tell all three of them, it's a dollar. Also, I had a bar in the front called the Speakeasy. It only opened on Mondays, but it was a good place for people to get together and work on their ideas, plan for things to come, or organize a protest.

So it was a good learning house, and everyone got along really well. The idea was that you were so bored in the town, so you would want to do something positive. You were always trying to book shows, or set up something, or start a bookstore, or do a zine. There were so many zines. You were writing and writing and writing, sending it out to other cities. You were constantly challenged for good things instead of just sitting around drinking beer. That happened too, but after you did all of the work.

I understand. Are you a vegan?

Cowgill: No, I'm not, but I was at the time, for a really long time. I'm more of a strict vegetarian.

What kind of protests did you go to?

Cowgill: Well, when the war was around we were protesting constantly—also when the Klan was around, we'd protest the Klan. Ev-

erybody would get together with signs and stuff and we had built our numbers up pretty big, so we usually outnumbered whatever the problem was.

What were some challenges that you faced while living at the punkhouse?

Cowgill: The thing is, it was an easy lifestyle because everyone got along really well and were about similar causes. Instead of having roommates that were not into what you were doing, everyone was pushing everybody to do more. Oftentimes you didn't have enough time to yourself because you were so busy. That was kind of a challenge, but a good challenge because it motivated people.

Why did you eventually leave the house?

Cowgill: I had been painting—painting was my main thing at the time—but I had exhausted all the galleries in Pensacola, and most of the ones in New Orleans I could get into, and there was no place else to show. So I was interested in moving to San Francisco, where you throw a rock, you hit an artist. I thought it would be a better environment for my art, selling art, which turned out to be true. You do lose the community that you had, unfortunately. San Francisco is definitely more isolated, but there's more opportunity.

I'm going to ask you a bit of a broad question. What does punk mean to you?

Cowgill: The base of it is to bring up the people around you. Making everyone more aware of things that are wrong about the world—like racism, sexism, and homophobia—and trying to combat them. To bring new people into it, and learn those idealisms, but also constantly work to make things better.

It's based, of course, on music as well, but if you listen to a lot of the lyrics, that's what they're about. They're about positivity, about strength in numbers, about a bunch of people who were misfits for one reason or another but were accepted in the punk community. Even if you didn't know much about punk, in Pensacola especially they were willing to teach you—to help you learn about these new bands and new concepts and ideas. It was like college for people who weren't going to college. A different kind of college. Human rights college.