

The History of Punk Rock

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

Well, it's officially spooky season, Duncan, and so we've decided to unlock from our MFFI vault the After Midnight episode in which we debated the five scariest movies of all time, and you can find it right now in our free discord along with the most recent full episode of After Midnight which is always available in discord, and we'll leave that up through the end of October. Just a little bonus. That was actually the first After Midnight episode. Also the next episode this month will also be Halloween-themed, so look forward to that, and if you want even more Halloweeny goodness (weeny is the least scary word in the English language)—Halloweenish? Halloweenesque?—we also did an episode last year on the history of Halloween and it's a fun one so check out episode number 94 or if episodes aren't numbered in your podcast-player of choice you can scroll down to October of 2021. Back when we were innocent, naive young

podcasters, before these damn livestreams turned me into a rage monster. No, I enjoy the livestreams, just not the tech troubleshooting. Anyway, this week's episode is not exactly seasonally appropriate. It's only scary if you were a parent in the 1970s. We're talking today about punk rock music. And btw, I had a great time researching this topic. I didn't think I would enjoy it this much; I was mildly curious about the subject but not super excited when it won the poll. But I had a blast with this one.

Duncan, if you had to sum up punk rock music with one word, a defining characteristic, what word would you use? Most people would probably say "rebellious"—if we were playing family feud, that would be at the top of the board.

Now obviously, every new generation has to redefine rebellion. Especially when it comes to music. Elvis was scandalous in the 50s, but by the time Elvis's fans had kids, a pompadour and a hip shake wasn't going to strike fear into the hearts of the suburban masses. The children of the sixties had to find someone or something more extreme, which explains Jim Morrison and Keith Richards, and then kids in the 70s had to escalate even further. Teenage music is a rebellion arms race; it gets to the point where you have to go to almost comical lengths to scare your parents. Thus, goth and metal. My parents grew up as part of the sex and drugs

generation...that's how I ended up listening to Slayer and Megadeth, because I realized it was impossible to freak them out without resorting to Satan.

This might be a good time for a disclaimer: we are musicians, but not punk musicians nor are we experts when it comes to punk music. Are you even a fan of any punk bands? Well it's funny, I didn't consider myself a fan until I immersed myself in punk for this episode and realized how much of the music that I enjoy could be considered punk or punk-adjacent, and how many obscure punk bands have influenced some of my favorite artists. I was listening to "Suspect Device" by the Stiff Little Fingers, and if you had told me it was an early Green Day demo track, I would have believed you 100%. Same with Operation Ivy, so many of these bands were poured through a radio-friendly filter to become Green Day or Offspring or even Fall Out Boy. There's no My Chemical Romance without the Clash and the Buzzcocks. and Similarly; there's a direct through-line from bands like Black Flag to my beloved Suicidal Tendencies; this episode illuminated a new area of music history for me, it filled in some gaps and provided missing links for my understanding of musical evolution. This was the Lucy of rock. The missing link? So it turns out I'm more of a punk fan than I thought I was, there's just a ton of punk music that I didn't know I knew...if that makes sense. If you would have asked me a week ago if I

know any songs by the Buzzcocks I would've said absolutely not, and then I dialed up a random punk mix on Apple music and "Ever fallen in love with someone you shouldn't be falling in in love with" comes on and I'm like oh fuck of course. Punk isn't just hardcore, it isn't just the Germs and Bad Brains, it's as diverse as any other genre. Speaking of which, musically, what does punk sound like? If you had to describe the sound of punk to someone who has never heard it, what would you say? In general punk music is fast paced and simplistic—lots of two-finger power chords—featuring distorted guitar tones, with fast-paced riffs and white male vocalists. There are exceptions to that last one. The bad brains were 4 African American guys and Ron Reyes, one of the singers from Black Flag is Puerto Rican but they're really the exception that proves the rule. And the most famous singer from black flag might be the whitest white guy the world has produced: Henry Rollins, a neo nazi wet dream who is in fact not racist. I met Henry Rollins in 24 hour fitness, we shared a bench press. Nice guy. Very fit.

So to trace the evolution of punk, let's take a step back and start at the beginning. You can sense the first bubblings of punk simmering on the grittier fringes of 1960s radio from bands like the Kinks and MC5. Listen to the kink's "You really got me" and "kick out the jams" by MC5, those songs are punk AF; either of those

bands would have been at home at the Gilman when we were in high school. We were at ground zero of pop punk, incidentally—the Gilman club on Gilman street in Berkeley was a popular punk venue in the 90s—though we didn't take part at all. And I wish I had. It was all happening just down the street, but I wasn't into punk. Our loss, really. But anyway, those classic 60s rock bands like MC5 would be a huge influence on artists like Iggy Pop and the New York Dolls in the first years of the 70s, and then dolls and Iggy's band the Stooges would crank up the angst and intensity to a new level while also pushing gender boundaries, flaunting androgyny and flipping the bird to musical and social conventions. But the genre wouldn't morph into what we consider punk until just before the mid 70s and it's not hard to figure out why. Teenagers of the 70s had been born in the 60's and they'd witnessed all of the wild craziness of the free love generation, but they weren't getting any of the benefits of all of the sex and drugs and irresponsible craziness that their older siblings and maybe even parents had enjoyed. Good vibes and marijuana and wild sex had been replaced by rampant crime and cocaine and STDs and disco. To put it bluntly, the hippie movement failed and I imagine it's a little tough to keep listening to songs about sunshine and world peace when everything you believed in has been undermined by Watergate and the war in Vietnam and a brutal financial recession. You can't

separate punk from the socioeconomic conditions of the 1970s in the US, Australia and the UK. In the documentary "Punk's not dead" Joe Strummer from the Clash put it bluntly when he said of his fellow punks "well if there was jobs then they wouldn't be on the dole, and maybe we'd be singing about love and kissing."

New York in particular had hit rock bottom. There was a plague of violent crime, there were garbage strikes that resulted in trash piling up on street corners so the entire city stank, rolling blackouts knocked out power intermittently. Everyone was just sitting in the stinky darkness waiting to be murdered. That's the recipe for punk music, apparently: Fear and filth...that tracks.

One thing that's really cool about punk music is that in addition to being a product of misery and hopelessness, in some ways it's also the result of the democratizing of musical gear. So in the mid 70s, the big labels started upgrading all of their equipment to the next generation, all of the synthesizers and midi rigs and drum machines that would define the 1980s. So that means that suddenly there was this flood of suddenly-obsolete gear from the 60s and 70s that was now dirt cheap. And so it became accessible to broke hooligans...to punks, basically. These were often people who had never taken music lessons, which is the other secret ingredient of punk. Punk has been described as raw and simple which is a diplomatic way of

saying that punk music was initially a product of musical ineptitude. No one made a conscious decision to write simple music...it was the just default setting. There was no other option. And that simplicity made it easy to play and easy to digest...there aren't any complicated key changes or syncopated rhythms; it's just fast strumming and palm muting without guitar solos or adornment.

So geographically, where did punk originate? Punk started in a filthy little club in a filthy, sketchy neighborhood in what was at the time a filthy and sketchy and—as we mentioned—garbage-festooned city. Club CBGB in NY's Bowery district opened in 1973 as a country music venue...CBGB stands for country, blue grass and blues. I didn't know that. It was founded by a guy named Hilly Kristal, for real, who had a very different vision for what his dive bar would become: he pictured wholesome, down-home country and blue grass music interspersed with poetry readings...ok. Hillbilly poetry...I shudder to imagine. Hilly Kristal doesn't deserve much credit for the direction of punk music...the legend goes that when he was first approached by the band Wayne County, he thought it sounded like a country band so he booked them. Wayne County were led by the first openly transgender rock singer, a foul-mouthed proto-punk who was originally named Wayne Richards but would achieve fame under the moniker

Jane County and was not remotely country. Oops. Hilly eventually relinquished control of the club's musical direction and contracted a couple of promoters named Bill Page and Rusty McKenna who began booking early precursors of punk, like the Revalons, a band that contained future members of both the Patti Smith group and Television. Eventually CBGB would regularly feature the Ramones, the Misfits, Television, Blondie, Joan Jett, and Bad Brains among other punk royalty. There were only two rules at CBGB: no cover songs, and bands carried their own gear. They probably should have come up with a few more rules...in 1990 CBGB would ban all hardcore punk shows due to violence. It closed in 2006 as the result of a rent dispute...I believe the landlord wanted them to pay it. Actually it's more complicated but anyway, it was not an upscale venue by any means. According to Jane County, "When I first played there, there was dog shit on the floor. Hilly had these big huge dogs...At times you'd be going up to see the band and you'd step in dog shit." Of the bathrooms..."There were no doors on the stalls." So it was like the Blue Lagoon, I've done comedy at venues like that. There's something very liberating about a place where there's nothing you can do to make it worse...the possibilities are endless.

Why *not* piss on the floor? You probably just washed away a layer of hepatitis. A glaze of hep C. And of course you uncovered a deeper layer

of Ebola. Those venues are fun, just don't touch anything.

The name punk...where did it come from? It was obviously an insult in the 50s and 60s, "Do you feel lucky, punk?" But in the early 70s it was borrowed by music journalists from Creem magazine to describe the budding music scene of 1960's garage rock, and then enshrined by John Holmstrom, Ged Dunn, and Legs McNeil, founders of the famous fanzine titled punk, which forever linked the word and the genre. (Legs McNeil sounds like a foxy crime fighter from Charlie's Angels.) The word punk btw has also traditionally been used in prison to describe a man who gets raped, that's unpleasant but true. So initially most of the bands themselves hated being called punks—there are some great clips of band members bristling in interviews at the word.

Now, I know that everyone listening right now wants a single genesis point for the birth of punk, a single moment and one particular band that created the movement. And of course life isn't that simple but fine, since you're demanding it, if you want to point to a single band that represents the birth of punk and also is the poster child for the movement—and again you should never do this by the way, it's dangerous, people are very invested in this stuff. But fuck it, the Ramones ARE punk. They defined and somehow even transcended most of the movement they started. They're effing

great. If I had to sum up punk with two songs (and again, you shouldn't) Blitzkrieg bop by the Ramones and Anarchy in the UK by the Sex Pistols would be those songs...the Ramones gave punk its infectious thumping momentum and the Sex Pistols gave Punk its snarl. It's amazing to me because if you listen to blitzkrieg bop, it's so melodic and catchy, it's totally punk pop, it's nothing like the chaotic stereotype we have of punk, it's a lot more like blink 182 than black flag. And yet it came out before any of them; the foundation of punk is actually closer to the pop version than hardcore. So punk begins in NY with the Ramones, who were an organic band; unlike the Sex Pistols they were not created and assembled by a behind-the-scenes puppetmaster (we'll get there). The Ramones were just four guys from the Forest hills neighborhood in Queens New York who started jamming together and wearing black leather and weirdly took the same last name despite the fact that none of them were related. Kind of culty. In the beginning they were nothing more than one of dozens of struggling local acts until a music reporter from the SoHo News named Danny Fields went to see them live and was so blown away by the performance that he immediately offered to be their manager. The response from the Ramones was basically "well, it would be nice to have a manager, but what we really need is \$3,000 for drums, so if you can get us the money you can have

the job." According to Danny Fields "\$3000 in 1975 was a lot of money for drums...I don't know what they spent it on and I don't care but I called my mother and I said I need \$3000. And she wrote a check and she said I hope you know what you're doing. So actually my mother is responsible for launching the Ramones." I love that. The most rebellious anarchistic movement in the history of music was kicked off by an old lady with a checkbook who was just humoring her son's little hobby. That's simultaneously the least and most punk thing I've ever heard. It's chaos theory. The least predictable origin story ever.

By 1976 the Ramones were making waves locally, but the punk movement was still confined to a few clubs in NY. Angry teenagers sitting in the stinking dark in Queens were feeling the vibes, but the rest of America wasn't paying attention. Luckily, across the pond, circumstances were converging that would create a musical powder-keg scenario; the Brits would crank this little American flare-up into a drums-and-distortion-fueled atom bomb.

British Punk exploded into public consciousness in 1976 via a convergence of events: the Ramones finally played in England and the Damned and Sex Pistols finally released their first singles. Most Americans hadn't caught on to punk but a few disgruntled Brits had discovered Ramones records and soon

the underground scene in the UK was popping off; by the time the Ramones made it to the UK their audience included Billy Idol, plus members of The Buzzcocks and the Damned, and of course one of the biggest fans of the Ramones was a guy you might have heard of even if you know nothing about the Sex Pistols because he achieved punk infamy for possible murder and suicide: Sid Vicious.

Side note: Punk fans in the UK famously show their enthusiasm by spitting on the performing band, that's true, and also helps explain why you and I never got into the punk scene. I don't think audiences did that here in America, but punk shows were just sketchy in general, there was always a threat of bodily fluids of various varieties and viscosities.

So the Ramones were an inspiration to Sid Vicious, but his infamous band—the one that would kick punk into the stratosphere on both sides of the Atlantic—was already in existence by the time of the 1976 Ramones tour. However, judging by the music of the Sex Pistols and their collective attitude, you probably wouldn't guess their origin story. The Sex Pistols weren't a few buddies drawn together by camaraderie and shared musical passion. There's a shadowy figure that you most likely haven't heard of, a puppet master who doesn't get the press or the legendary status of Sid Vicious or Johnny Rotten, but the Sex Pistols wouldn't have become a phenomenon without him. And this might piss off some punk purists but

it's true. Malcolm McLaren was the Lou Perlman of Punk. Do you know who that is? Lou Perlman was a sleazy conman and music promoter who assembled boy-band supergroups New Kids on the Block, The Back Street Boys, and N'Sync, and then was convicted of running a massive Ponzi scheme and died in prison in 2016. Not what you think of when you envision the origins of a punk group... the idea that a punk group can be assembled like a boy band seems unlikely and weirdly distasteful. But that's essentially what happened with the Sex Pistols. Malcolm McLaren owned a kink fashion shop called SEX—it sold fetish gear designed by his girlfriend Vivian Westwood. The two already had some experience with the music scene, having supplied fashion and accessories for the New York Dolls. Maclaren actually was instrumental in the band's demise when he designed the outfits for their tour: the costumes were Soviet-inspired uniforms featuring the communist hammer-and-sickle symbol. They were not a hit. In fact, they have been credited with tanking the band—oops—though of course infighting and rampant drug addictions probably didn't help. That's a vicious convergence of circumstances. So after nuking an entire band's career, Maclaren decided to create his own UK version of the New York Dolls with some of the local musicians who hung around his shop. He had been advising a musical trio made up of Drummer Paul Cook, guitarist Steve Jones and a

singer named Wally Nightingale; Maclaren matched them with a bassist who worked in his shop named Glen Matlock, gave the group the name Kutie Jones and the Sex Pistols, and then promptly ejected Wally from the band, and replaced him with an angsty Londoner named John Lydon whom he nicknamed Johnny Rotten. Finally he kicked out Matlock, explaining that Matlock had to go because he “liked the Beatles,” and replaced him with **Simon John Ritchie aka Sid vicious. He then shortened the group name to the Sex Pistols,** and the rest is history.

Well, there was a little more to it. Like for instance the moment that launched the band and might in fact be the seminal moment that made punk viable. Let’s talk about the TV moment that changed history.

There were only a few channels on British television at the time, BBC channels, and the ITC—incorporated television company—which featured one of the most popular shows of the era (actually one of the biggest tv shows of all time; since there were so few options, everyone was watching the same thing). So on that particular evening the band Queen had been booked to appear on the show but when they bailed, Malcolm Maclaren jumped on the opportunity to showcase his Sex Pistols. The group showed up with some groupies in tow. And here’s what happened. (Play audio)

Mclaren thought the band was toast, but would later take credit for the

supposed publicity stunt, which was actually a total accident. The next day the sex pistols were on the cover of every newspaper and tabloid in the country...one of the headlines I've seen was splashed across the entire front page of a publication and it read "the filth and the fury." You can't buy that kind of publicity. Obviously the Sex Pistols immediately became public enemy number one, but very much like when that moment when the Beatles debuted on Ed Sullivan, the television appearance caused a sensation that crystallized teen support, and punk was officially a movement.

Meanwhile America still had this small punk subculture in New York, but ironically (in the non ironic sense of the word), punk didn't break through in America until the sex pistols—the quintessential British punk band—came to America. The Sex Pistols toured the states in 1978...well they toured a FEW states. They mostly played smaller venues in the south because Maclaren was bitter about his experiences with the New York music scene, and of course that was the worst possible audience for the Sex Pistols. It was a brutal, crazy tour full of taunting and violence and of course it caused a giant scandal and the press covered it incessantly. The final date of the tour marked the official breakup of the band. Within the year Sid Vicious had died of an overdose after murdering his gf (the details are disputed but he and Nancy had an abusive relationship and both were

obsessed with knives; Nancy was found stabbed in a hotel room with Sid Vicious, stabbed to death and Sid initially admitted to the murder before retracting his confession and then overdosing himself). The tragic implosion of the band and even more tragic implosion of Sid and Nancy contributed to the legendary status of punk rock.

So with the rise of punk popularity and the dawn of the 1980s, punk scenes sprouted in cities outside of NY, and bands began to diverge musically as well as geographically. There were pop and hardcore offshoots, and then there were side shoots like politically-oriented Dead Kennedys from the Bay Area. Hardcore included Washington DC's Bad Brains and Minor Threat, or the Germs and Black Flag in LA, and then you had the rise of a more accessible version of pop-punk that drew inspiration from the Ramones and Joan Jett and the runaways, bands like Stiff Little Fingers from Ireland, Bad Religion and the Descendants in LA and the horror-punk of Glen Danzig's Misfits from New Jersey. The latter bands would eventually spawn skate punk and the pop punk of the 2000s, the Green Days and Offsprings that would sound the death knell for traditional indie punk-rock while simultaneously achieving the kind of stratospheric popular success that had eluded—or been rejected by—their predecessors. And you've probably guessed that I'm much more of a fan of pop melodic

punk. I'm a pussy, basically. It's funny because I was listening to Megadeth and Slayer as a teen, which seems hardcore, but I never got into hardcore punk mostly because I gravitate toward musicianship. I enjoyed intensity and angst just as much as the kids of the punk movement but as a guitarist, I wanted the bands I followed to feature real musical talent. Say what you want about Megadeth, they're virtuosos. On the other hand, some of the sloppier punk bands like the germs are painful for me to listen to. I respect everyone's opinion unless you like the germs in which case you are wrong.

Hardcore punk also unfortunately ushered in an era of musical fascism. You had to be a badass, you had to dress a certain way and act a certain way and like only a few specific bands.

And now is probably a good time to admit that I've always been skeptical when it comes to music as a form of rebellion. Probably because I have experience with the hypocrisy of it all myself. I was an angsty teenager, and looking back it all just feels silly. We were all acting tough and wearing the same t-shirts and ripped jeans and in retrospect we were just insecure, awkward kids. Personally I've never understood how a supposedly "rebellious" art form even works. If an art form is defined by rule-breaking, the only way to truly be part of it is to reject the conventions and templates of the movement itself. Like, if you

decide to be in a punk band and then you conform to the style and format of other punk bands, that doesn't seem very rebellious. Bottom line, unless you were the first punk band that ever existed, being in a punk band doesn't seem very punk rock. To me. I get that other people disagree. This is a personal quirk, in general I'm skeptical of any movement that claims to be original or subversive...when you're all wearing leather and sporting Doc Martens and spiked hair and piercings and eye makeup, sure, I guess you're rebelling against conservative culture but you're conforming to a very specific fashion movement, you're wearing the uniform of rebellion. Which feels like an inherent contradiction. As we've discussed before, individuality in western societies is only allowed within a narrow spectrum of acceptability. Are you really rebelling if you're wearing clothing, just like everyone else, and playing music using the same instruments as every other band? Dress up like dinosaurs and play music with garden tools, sing all your lyrics out of tune in pig Latin, and then I'll believe you're rebelling. You won't have fans or money, but you'll have my respect.

And there's no arguing the fact that punk—along with many other music-based subcultures—can be aggressively conformist. From a "culture trip" article titled the *fall of American punk rock music*:
"American punks, or, fans of punk

rock, decided to build their own authoritarian system to govern clothing. The attire was a conscious step towards looking tough; this meant wearing dark colors, Dr. Martins or Converse Classics, and having crazy hair. ...Fashion made it difficult for people to attend punk shows in America. In the 80s and 90s, it was common for people to see others receive physical abuse for wearing the 'wrong' thing. Wrong shoes, wrong jacket, or even having the wrong 'look' could get your teeth kicked in."

And speaking of which the specific styles of hardcore punk are so funny to me...do you know how much work it takes to create and maintain a Mohawk? Or even worse, one of those sea-urchin hairdos, with the spikes going every direction? You have to use more hair product than an Instagram model. You have to sleep with your head in weird positions, you have to be so dedicated to your appearance, it seems like the ultimate hypocrisy to be giving the finger to materialistic culture while you're preening for hours to get your hair perfectly starched and gelled and looking down your nose at anyone who doesn't match your aesthetic.

So hardcore thankfully started to burn out after a few tumultuous years of band members and fans beating the crap out of each other, but the bands who had focused on melody and actually learned to play their instruments birthed a new, more mainstream-friendly movement. NOFX

and the offspring and penny wise and Rancid; this was a movement that formed around surfer-skater culture. This was the tony hawk era, the skate-punks in LA who weren't quite as directionless and angry because their surroundings were less stinky and dark and miserable and hopeless, and also because they channeled their energy to skating and surfing. That's huge. You have to have hobbies, that's the key to a happy life, I believe that. You have to have an outlet, somewhere to direct your energy and angst. These new punks were still energetic and testosterone-fueled but they had shit to do. By the 90s you had the rise of the Riot grrrl movement, all-woman or female-fronted bands like bikini kill, Buggy bear, Bratmobile, Slant 6. Often androgynous or queer-friendly, these bands waged full-frontal assault on the conventions of a male-dominated genre. And this new generation of melodic punk bands made savvier choices; their songs became the soundtrack of skate videos and surfer compilations and popular video games. I remember bootleg skating videos, they were like jackass before jackass, montages of guys falling on their faces and breaking their elbows all set to NOFX.

The first true smash hit in punk history didn't come until 1994.

That first hit: any ideas? Come out and play (keep 'em separated). by the offspring. Kind of a weirdly racial song, in retrospect, but I lived it when I

was an angst white kind worried about getting beat up by gang members. Kind of a problematic song in retrospect but whatever.

The Warped tour might be when punk officially lost its teeth. Soon you had pop bands that wouldn't have existed without the Ramones but had bled out any rebellion and replaced it with sanitized tongue-in-cheek silliness, groups like Blink 182 and Sum 41 and Good Charlotte and Bowling for Soup. Bands I enjoyed by the way, but SOOO far from where it all started.

If anyone is interested in learning more, I highly recommend the excellent four part docuseries on Epix simply called PUNK executive produced by Iggy pop. You can subscribe to Epix free for a week long trial, plenty of time to watch the series and then cancel it because I feel reasonably confident that there is nothing else worth watching on Epix. Trust me on this one.

And if you want some recommendations for a playlist to get started we'll post a list in the discord, we'll do a tour through punk in chronological order but here's a quick version: you can't go wrong with blitzkrieg bop by the Ramones, then anarchy in the uk by the Sex Pistols, and then if you think you can handle it, and are let's say older than 15, go listen to my favorite punk song of all time: the misfit's last caress and even the NOFX version. Then you should

move into the late 80s with bad religion's suffer—that song and entire album, including delirium of disorder, they set the table for pop punk, and while you're at it also listen to Sorrow—both the original and the acoustic version to see how melodic punk can be—And then you know what? Listen to all of dookie. Green Day deserves more credit than they get for being a legit punk band. Listen to songs like Minority and Holiday and tell me that's not catchy, fun, energetic punk.

We have a new Maniac! I jumped the gun but it's because I'm excited. Maniac is our highest tier, so welcome Caitlyn, you are awesome.

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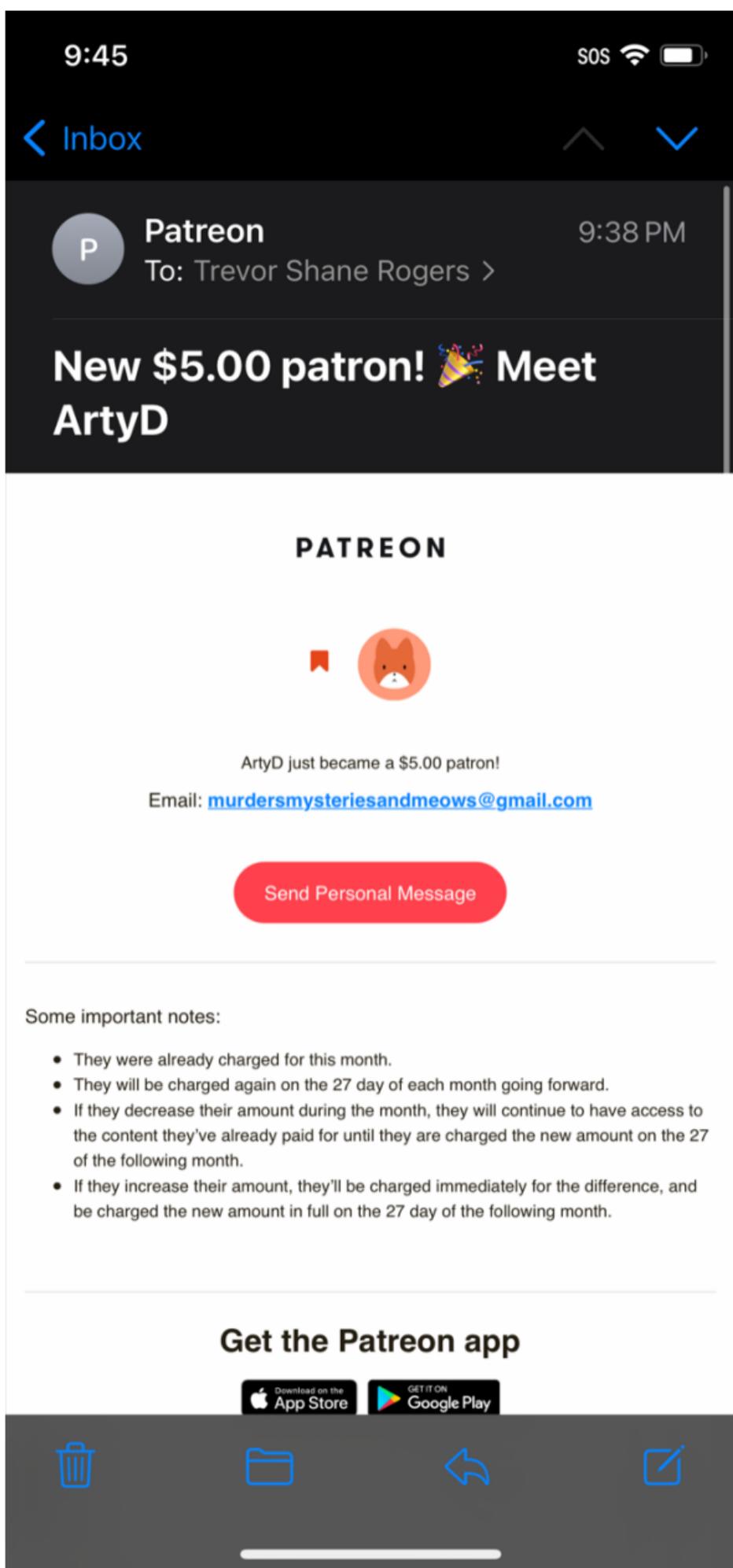
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We also have a new menace! And this is a special menace...and probably the most literal menace in our patreon. I happen to know that this insomniac, ArtyD, is 3 months old and has been subjected to MFFI since the womb. This is the son of June, one of the first insomniacs and the listener who actually started our discord, and I suspect she might have helped Arty

join the patreon but who knows.
Maybe he's very advanced for his
age...he was raised on MFFI soooo....



Also we have a couple of new minions!



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A new review!



Hilarious!

These guys are great! I will be spending many additional sleepless nights learning new and interesting things. Nicely done!

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Midnight Facts for Insomniacs



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