I was jumping to those rocking tunes, bopping on my feet
Then I heard those jungle rhythms, those crazy beats
Whey hey, well what can I say?
I got 1-2-3-4 psychobilly DNA
The only drug I needed was this music through my brain
Voodoo rhythms pump me up, drive me insane
Whey hey, well what can I say?
I got 1-2-3-4 psychobilly DNA
Now all these years later I’m changed beyond repair
Because I’m a psychobilly and I don’t care
Whey hey, well what can I say?
I got 1-2-3-4 psychobilly DNA

—NORM AND THE NIGHTMAREZ, “Psychobilly DNA,”
Psychobilly D.N.A., 2016

As my eyes adjusted to the dim light in the small club in Austin, Texas, I took in unfamiliar sights and sounds. This, I was told by my friend who had invited me, was the psychobilly subculture. I saw that participants had fused a 1950s aesthetic with punk elements. Men’s heads were shaved on the sides, as with Mohawk haircuts, but rather than sticking up into pointed liberty spikes, their hair had been combed forward into one flat-topped, triangular wedge that jutted out and up from their foreheads.
Some women had the same haircut, while others had their hair styled in curls and bangs like those seen on vintage pinup illustrations. Leather jackets, cuffed blue jeans, tight-fitting capris, polka-dot dresses, animal prints, kitten heels, and pompadours reminded me of the movie *Grease*, but the patches, buttons, metal studs, Dr. Martens boots, and dyed hair colors gave everything a punk twist. Bats, skulls, and zombies adorned clothes, accessories, and skin.

When the headliner, Nekromantix, came onstage, I saw a performer covered head to toe in tattoos furiously slapping a custom-designed upright bass that looked like a black coffin (see Figure I.1). He had a tattoo of the coffin bass on his neck. He poured Jägermeister on the neck of his instrument and licked it off while using his tongue to fret his bass, eliciting whoops and hollers from the crowd, who approved of the showy display. A catchy, pop-inflected melody accompanied lyrics about his girlfriend (or ghoulfriend?) getting horny in a hearse outside a cemetery, but other songs featured more shouting and growling. During a solo section, he opened his eyes wide and rolled his pupils upward as if possessed and then straddled his bass on the floor while continuing to play it at a frenetic pace with his feet and hands.

I started to feel like a sixteen-year-old punk again, registering that visceral feeling that came from abandoning myself to the noise and speed of the music. Old habits resurfaced as I found myself bracing against the bodies that slammed up against me. But the bodies in this “wrecking pit” moved differently from those in the punk circle pits of my youth. Instead of following one another in a counterclockwise direction, some staggered around slowly with their arms raised in front of them like Frankenstein’s monster; some threw hooks and jabs at others while they stomped around randomly; and a few stood in the middle of the chaos, letting their bodies rebound off others. The music, too, was different from what I used to hear at punk shows. The slapping bass, the clean and crisp Gretsch guitar solos, and the shuffling beat all signified rockabilly. But the aggressive energy, intense vocals, breakneck speed, and deliberately shocking attitude reminded me of punk. True to its name, the music seemed to be a “psychotic” mutation of rockabilly.

That night I discovered that an underground subculture that I knew nothing about had been thriving in my own backyard. As an ethnomusicologist specializing in popular music, I was surprised by this. I had been a graduate student teaching assistant for a history of rock class for years but had no idea that there was a style that brought together elements of rockabilly, punk, heavy metal, new wave, and shock rock. Why had I not run across this before? An acquaintance had told me about this show, and I bombarded him with questions afterward. Where had this fusion of so many different elements started? Why were the participants interested in 1950s
music and fashion? Did they adopt other lifestyle habits one might associate with a “retro” interest in the 1950s? How did people find out about this subculture, which is not featured on the radio or performed at popular music festivals? Were the lyrics usually like the ones I had heard that night, full of references to monsters, necrophilia, murderers, and insanity? Why did the music feel worlds apart from the gore of death metal or the gloom of goth, even when the singer was fantasizing about killing the cheerleader who called him a freak? Why were these seemingly macabre lyrics underscored
by a finger-snappingly pop music sound? On my drive home I thought about Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Dick Hebdige’s classic study of punks and mods, which I had read in one of my graduate seminars. Would that book provide a useful model for understanding how psychobilly fans “make sense of the world” through their stylistic play with signifying elements of rockabilly, punk, and horror (1979, 113)?

Psychobilly 101

I explore the development of psychobilly in greater detail in the next chapter. Here I provide just a bit of cultural and historical context to situate the theoretical framework I employ in this book. Psychobilly developed in England in the early 1980s, born out of a frustration with the clichés of the already subcultural and ideologically rebellious rock ’n’ roll, rockabilly, and punk scenes. Bands such as The Meteors, The Sharks, and Guana Batz wanted to shake up rockabilly, playing it faster, louder, and more aggressively than ever before—like punk. They found the themes that characterized 1950s music and its contemporary revival—pink-pegged pants, Cadillacs, blue suede shoes, going dancing on a Saturday night—outdated and irrelevant to working-class kids growing up in the economic recession of 1980s London. But they were not interested in adopting punk’s insistence on critiquing the British monarchy or drawing attention to the socioeconomic disparities that characterized their lives. Brandishing a “no politics, no religion” slogan, they injected their revved-up rockabilly with themes borrowed from horror and science fiction while also celebrating silliness, camp, and cheese. The subculture grew mostly through word of mouth but also through rare references in alternative music media to the development of “psycho rockabilly.” Fans of rockabilly, punk, skinhead, garage/trash, goth, mod, and new wave came together to witness the development of a new subculture.

They liked that the wild energy and the fast tempo made them feel a little crazy, especially when they threw themselves around in the chaotic frenzy of the wrecking pit and drank some “snakebite.” Fans of cheesy horror movies enjoyed lyrics about breaking out of a mental institution, becoming a zombie, or killing a girlfriend’s dad. Songs could also give them a good laugh, such as King Kurt’s ridiculously goofy “Banana Banana” (1984), replete with all the double entendres one can imagine. They were entertained by shocking and silly performances onstage, whether an act involved fake blood running down from the performer’s mouth or a giant wheel spinning attendees who were strapped on after they had consumed vast quantities of alcohol. Given their lack of funds during England’s economic recession, fans appreciated that the fashion reappropriated objects that were easy for them to acquire or
make: denim jeans they bleached themselves, secondhand jackets, work boots, and cheap hair spray.

They met others who shared both their unconventional interest in this obscure and eclectic style and their lack of interest in mainstream trends. Through the performative and stylistic elements of the subculture, including its signature fashion, music, and practices, psychobillies resisted normative expectations and refused complacency. They enjoyed a release and escape from the obligations, frustrations, and challenges that characterized their working-class lives. They had fun, drank excessively (as much as they could afford), threw their bodies into the wrecking pit, took every opportunity to “go mental” (go wild, act crazy), and sometimes topped this all off at the end of the night by hooking up with someone or fighting someone from another subculture outside the club. Psychobilly has since spread across the world, thriving in relatively small and geographically scattered but spectacularly distinct and enthusiastic underground pockets.

The Significance of Subcultural Identity and Participation

Over the course of ten years of ethnographic fieldwork, I came to appreciate how identification with this small subculture informs many aspects of my interlocutors’ lives. Many of them “look” psychobilly most of the time; their distinctive tattoos, hair, makeup, clothes, and other stylistic signifiers identify them as psychobillies whether they are at work, home, school, or a show. Others do not feel the need to express their appreciation for psychobilly music through their sartorial choices or do not have the luxury of doing so because of restrictions on their appearance in work or social environments, but they are nevertheless committed to their subcultural identity. Many of them indicated that the majority of their friends are psychobillies, both because they organize their social lives around subcultural events and because they have more in common with other psychobillies than with non-psychobillies. While there are inevitably varying degrees to which people’s lives are informed by their interest in psychobilly, the majority of my interlocutors identified themselves by saying, “I am a psychobilly” rather than “I listen to psychobilly.” For example, one musician expressed the totality of his identification with the subculture by saying, “I’m not a musician who plays psychobilly. I’m a psychobilly who plays music.” Likewise, in the song that opens this chapter, Norm Elliott of Norm and the Nightmarez identifies himself as a psychobilly; the “jungle rhythms” he listens to have even changed his DNA.

Through my research I attempted to understand why the psychobilly subculture both affects and reflects participants’ lives and identities so
strongly. What is it about psychobilly that attracts them? How does it represent who they are and what they care about? Why is the subculture such a meaningful part of their lives? What is it “doing” for them? One fan’s response was particularly revealing: “Psychobilly is the only place where I feel like me.” That fan, Pammy, did not say, “Psychobilly is the only music I listen to that makes me feel like me.” Rather, she chose to define psychobilly as a “place” in both imagined and real senses; she was trying to convey how her every engagement with psychobilly—whether listening to music on her own, going to the supermarket dressed in her psychobilly clothes, attending a show with friends, or participating in an online Facebook group dedicated to the subculture—allowed her to access an alternative world where she could express herself freely and completely. Her response also suggested that she did not feel that she could express her true self in non-psychobilly contexts. This feeling of alienation outside of the subculture was a recurring topic in my conversations with psychobillies. My interlocutors had in common a tendency to identify themselves as different from “the norm” and uninterested in “the mainstream,” their most common ways of referring to an ambiguous and vague “Other” against which they defined themselves. Their language at times suggested that they chose to identify themselves as nonnormative and differentiate themselves from “the mainstream,” deciding to reject values, trends, jobs, behaviors, leisure activities, music, expectations, and aspirations they associated with “normal” and “boring” people. However, many psychobillies also told me about ways they have been marginalized, excluded, and stigmatized by others because of their race, gender, sexuality, class, body image, style, behavior, values, or interests. And some felt that their race, class, gender, or geographic location automatically placed them at a social and structural disadvantage. Sometimes we discussed whether distancing themselves from “the norm” was a self-defensive response to having already been excluded from social and economic opportunities for “typical” success.

Regardless of whether they felt that they had elected not to “buy into” dominant norms or that structural inequalities and discriminatory practices had prevented them from having the opportunity to do so in the first place, it became clear that most of my interlocutors self-identified as “different” from what they considered to be “normal.” They rejected what Mark Slobin has called “the superculture”: “the usual, the accepted, the statistically lopsided, the commercially successful, the statutory, the regulated, the most visible” (1993, 29). For them, psychobilly is a subcultural arena that celebrates rebellion and nonconformity and offers them an escape from the expectations, disappointments, and challenges that characterize their lived experience outside of the subculture. In both the physical and virtual spaces of the
subculture, they belong; they find other “sick freaks” (as they affectionately call one another) who see difference from the “mainstream” as a virtue, and together they perform a refusal to become “boring squares.” They use their bodies in ways that are normally frowned on or prohibited: they throw their weight around in the violent and chaotic wrecking pit, where they might even crack a rib or lose a tooth (or worse); overindulge in alcohol; tattoo and pierce their skin to excess; style and dye their hair in unconventional ways; cultivate an alternative style of clothing (anti-fashion); and leave evidence of their revelry through vomit, sweat, blood, and spilled beer. They break taboos through their bodies and practices and then imagine breaking even greater taboos as they sing along with choruses about killing the cheerleader or having sex with a corpse in a graveyard. Most important, they survive, preserving their countercultural identities and practices despite hegemonic attempts to repress them, exclude them from opportunities for success, police their behavior, and subdue them. They take the quality of their lives into their own hands by finding a way to have a hell of a good time while helping each other get through hard times.

Subcultural Theory

I have always been interested in subcultures: subgroups of people who, while they are part of the larger society, express their “difference” from “the rest” in some way. As Ross Haenfler notes: “Many of us find subcultures incredibly fascinating. Circus freaks, sexual swingers, and extreme skateboarders can seem exciting or unsettling, and body modifiers who tattoo their entire bodies or implant horns on their heads are interesting and exotic” (2016, 3). Many academics who study subcultures do so because we have identified as “different” ourselves and have participated in subcultural scenes (e.g., Hodkinson 2002; Muggleton 2000; Purcell 2003; Haenfler 2006; Kahn-Harris 2007). My first love was heavy metal, which I picked up from my older brothers, and then came grunge in the early 1990s. I was becoming more aware of my difference from the “cool” kids at school, and I embraced and cultivated my nonnormativity. As I would learn decades later when reading subcultural theory, I was not the only subcultural kid who felt a sense of superiority about my dissimilarity from the “mainstream.” “They are all sheep; they are all just brainwashed by popular culture,” I thought at the time. Then there was that fateful moment when I learned that Kurt Cobain had taken his own life, and I wept copiously for a man I had never met, a man I felt had articulated the anxieties and frustrations of my adolescence so precisely on those cassette tapes I wore out on my Walkman (with critical hindsight, was I a sheep, too?). And then, when one of my brother’s friends
introduced me to punk, I found my subculture. Rather than prohibiting me from attending shows as a fifteen-year-old, my parents drove me all over Southern California, patiently waiting at a Denny’s for hours while I jumped and bashed around in sweaty circle pits at all-ages punk clubs. In these tiny, dingy, glorious venues, I chanted my heart out with my heroes, such as Dick Lucas from Citizen Fish and The Subhumans, feeling waves of overwhelming pleasure and a sense of similarity with the other “misfits” there:

_All of us playing the waiting game in a state of mutual desperation._

_No use saying, “Well, I can’t complain” if you want to change a situation._

_Imagine what the change could be if what was thought so constantly was said, not kept locked up inside our heads._

—CITIZEN FISH, “Can’t Complain,” Millennia Madness, 1995

More than ten years later, I found myself at the Nekromantix show described previously and felt an immediate sense of recognition. I noticed that the fashion, music, and behaviors I saw there reflected shared practices and aesthetic values—even while there was room for individual interpretation—and that the sonic and visual culture expressed a spirit of nonnormativity. I also registered the familiar sense of community, of like-mindedness, among a group of “outcasts” or “weirdos” who identified with one another instead of with “the mainstream.” These characteristics are representative of many theoretical definitions of subculture (but not all, for there are many perspectives). Ross Haenfler, for instance, defines subculture as “a relatively diffuse social network having a shared identity, distinctive meanings around certain ideas, practices, and objects, and a sense of marginalization from or resistance to a perceived ‘conventional’ culture” (2016, 3). The last item in Haenfler’s definition underscores how subculturalists may resist “dominant” culture, _choosing_ to express themselves in nonnormative ways, but also how they may be marginalized from “mainstream” culture by others, stigmatized (Goffman 1963) or labeled (Becker 1963) as deviating from hegemonic expectations, or even criminalized as “folk devils” that threaten the norms of society (Stanley Cohen 1972).

Haenfler uses “scare quotes” around the word “conventional” to describe culture, as I have around “dominant” and “mainstream,” to draw attention to the constructed and imaginary nature of such labels. Scholars have rightly observed that there is no intrinsically existing, stable, monolithic “mainstream,” no neat and clear polarization between “the dominant culture” and “the subculture” in any given society. In an early critique of this binary, Paul Willis stated: “There has not been a vigorous analysis of the status of the
Subcultural Participation as a Survival Strategy

A sub-culture is supposed to be ‘sub’ to. The notion implies a relative positioning which seemed to give an altogether misleading sense of absoluteness and dominance of the main culture” (1972, xlv–xlvi). As Willis suggests, the distinction between “us” and “them” is always and already an act of construction, framed from the perspective of whoever is distinguishing themselves from someone or something else (Clarke [1981] 1990; Thornton 1996; Muggleton 2000). Accordingly, my interest is not to establish what dominant culture is, but rather to understand how psychobillies identify and perform themselves as alternative to what they perceive to be dominant values, music, style, and practices (see, e.g., Baron 1989; Leblanc 1999; MacDonald 2001; Haenfler 2014; Hannerz 2015). As J. Patrick Williams points out, as amorphous as the mainstream might be in reality, distinguishing oneself against it is “powerfully linked to notions of selfhood and identity, as well as to social behavior” (2011, 10).

I thus situate this work within a discipline of subcultural studies that attempts to understand how and why subculturalists collectively identify and express themselves as different from (what they perceive to be) the mainstream. Key to the development of subcultural theory were scholars from the Chicago School and Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), who theorized that subcultures represent attempts by marginalized members of society to solve or deal with certain problems by expressing values, styles, and practices that counter dominant norms. Chicago School sociologists analyzed local gangs and street culture as responses to social, economic, and cultural struggles with urban life; they argued that members of these “deviant” groups adopted alternative norms and codes of conduct to attain the status, wealth, and sense of belonging they were unable to achieve through conventional means (A. Cohen 1955; Merton 1957). The CCCS was concerned with postwar structural changes throughout Britain that encouraged the “middle-classing” of society and consumerism even while the working class faced heightened unemployment, educational disadvantage, low-paying, routinized jobs, and the breakdown of communities as a result of urban redevelopment and relocation; Teddy Boy, mod, rocker, skinhead, and punk styles were seen as collective working-class responses to these changes and challenges, resisting hegemonic culture through their spectacular style (Hall and Jefferson 1976; P. Willis 1977; Hebdige 1979). These “classical subcultures,” as Dylan Clark observes, “were understood to be groups of youths who practiced a wide array of social dissent through shared behavioral, musical, and costume orientations” (2003, 223).

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the rise of clubbing and raving prompted some scholars to question the CCCS’s vision of subcultures as
collective, unified, working-class manifestations of resistance to hegemonic culture. “Post-subcultural” scholars argued that changes associated with postmodernity have made group affiliations and participants’ identities much more fleeting, fragmented, multiple, and partial (Bennett 1999; Muggleton 2000; Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003). They suggested that an individual's leisure choices and aesthetic preferences were not determined automatically by a particular socioeconomic experience but were freely and actively chosen from a variety of options (Bennett 1999) and that youth crafted a unique and hyperindividualized sense of themselves rather than committing to a group identity (Muggleton 2000). Consumers could shop in what Ted Polhemus calls the “Supermarket of Style,” putting on and taking off different styles and identities at will, regardless of their structural positionality: “We now inhabit a Supermarket of Style where, like tins of soup lined up on endless shelves, we can choose between more than fifty different style tribes. Jumbling geography as well as history, British Punk circa 1976 sits on the shelf next to 1950s American Beatnik or late Jamaican Ragga. You name it, we’ve got it. You too can be an anarchic Punk, a bohemian Beatnik or a bad ass Raggamuffin. If only for a day” (1997, 150).

For post-subculturalists, postmodernism had spelled the “death” of the classical subculture. To convey the transitory and individualistic ways people float between different group affiliations in the postmodern context, post-subculturalists developed new terms, such as “club cultures” (Thorn- ton 1996; Redhead, Wynne, and O’Connor 1997), “tribes” (Maffesoli 1996) and “neo-tribes” (Bennett 1999), “postmodern subculture” (Muggleton 2000), “scenes” (Sara Cohen 1991; Straw 1991; Shank 1994; Stahl 2003), and “lifestyles” (Shields 1992; Chaney 1996; Miles 2000). Post-subculturalists have been criticized for denying the continued existence of collective identities and practices and for ignoring how structural disadvantages (e.g., those having to do with race, class, gender, and sexuality) can impact one’s choice of leisure activities and access to them (see Blackman 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006).

Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars have debated the strengths and weaknesses of subcultural and post-subcultural theory. I find much of value in post-subcultural theory and recognize many of the criticisms of the CCCS, but I also see the applicability of broad aspects of traditional subcultural theory (see, e.g., Hodkinson 2002, 2016; Blackman 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006; Williams 2011). As Hodkinson points out, a “polarised understanding of the subcultures debate” has perpetuated an “inflexible” and “an unnecessarily narrow and CCCS-driven conception of what subculture might infer”—namely, an insistence on structural determinism, an affirmation of the complete fixity of youth groups, and the
inability to “accommodate even the smallest measure of individual diversity” (2016, 630–632). This, he argues, “underestimates the complex, multifaceted history of subcultural theory”; “leaves us with a caricature that few of its adherents would recognize”; and mischaracterizes contemporary subcultural theorists as necessarily defending all aspects of CCCS theory (632). He concludes that the perceived incompatibility of “subcultural” and “post-subcultural” scholarship has served to “mask substantial areas of possible common ground” (630), and he encourages “a continuing focus on the importance and operation of distinct youth cultural communities and a developing emphasis on the context in which they operate” (635). Indeed, my goal is not to defend every aspect of the CCCS’s theory but rather to draw on different subcultural and post-subcultural approaches to convey to the reader the creative and complex ways psychobillies engage in a community of like-minded individuals to mediate and improve their daily lived experience.

The Survival of Subcultures

As indicated by its title, this book demonstrates that classical subcultures are not dead. While I do not deny that many groups organized around a common leisure interest may be “post-subcultural,” characterized by heterogeneity, temporary and partial affiliations, little or no “group mindedness,” and no specific intention to express nonmainstream norms, these traits do not describe the psychobilly community I researched. As explored throughout this book, psychobilly is distinguished by a high degree of what Paul Hodkinson (2002) calls “subcultural substance”: the expression of consistent and distinct values and tastes, collective identification as different from an Other, committed involvement over long periods of time and throughout everyday life, and relative autonomy from non-subcultural networks. While post-subculturalists such as Steven Miles suggest that “rapid social, cultural and structural change” has resulted not in “the form of a deep-rooted sense of sameness, but in a flexible, mutable and diverse sense of identity” (2000, 158), I find that psychobilly demonstrates the continued longing of marginalized youth for a concrete and clear group identity manifested through a unified style and ideology that have changed little over thirty years.

At the same time, I do not suggest that the psychobilly scene is completely homogeneous, bounded, or stable. In fact, contemporary scholars have pointed out that Chicago and CCCS theorists acknowledged the diversity of values and identities within subcultural groups and were not as dogmatic about stylistic homogeneity as some post-subcultural scholars have suggested (see, e.g., Hesmondhalgh 2005; Blackman 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006; Greener and Hollands 2006; Hodkinson 2016). It is unre-
It is possible to expect total sameness among the participants of any group. I privilege here the diverse definitions of “psychobilly” and “psychobilly-ness”; the spectrum of values found within psychobilly; the variety of reasons people participate in it and the relative degree to which they do so; the diversity of their backgrounds; the multiple ways they express themselves through music, fashion, and practices; and the changeable nature of all these factors.

Moreover, because psychobilly values nonconformity, one might wonder if it can have any stylistic or ideological consistency. As psychobilly fan Pammy put it, “When your fans are rebellious at heart and hate labels, chaos ensues.” Many psychobillies, like many punks, “proclaim there should be ‘no rules,’ that individualism should rule the day,” as Ross Haenfler notes (2016, 43). However, as he points out, “maintaining some sort of boundaries or, dare I say, rules are perhaps essential to subculture. Otherwise, anything goes and it becomes impossible to determine an ‘us’ and a ‘them’” (43). Despite the inevitable plurality found within psychobilly, particular aesthetics, values, and behaviors collectively distinguish the subculture. Moreover, I agree with Hodkinson that plurality can coexist meaningfully with collective identity and style: “Abandoning substantive attempts to make sense of the workings and significance of such collective affiliations at the first sight of individual difference makes little sense when we could, instead, seek to understand the ways individual specificities and ephemeralities coexist with aspects of stability and community that can influence and shape young lives” (2016, 636).

This study of psychobilly joins contemporary scholarship in demonstrating that “spectacular” subcultures have in fact survived into the twenty-first century and that their participants still perform collective ideologies and practices that distinguish them from what they consider dominant or mainstream culture, while recognizing that a relative degree of internal diversity and fluidity exists within such groups (see, e.g., Kruse 1993; MacDonald 2001; Hodkinson 2002; Purcell 2003; Greener and Hollands 2006; Haenfler 2006, 2016; Goodlad and Bibby 2007; Williams 2011; Williams and Hannerz 2014; Hannerz 2015).

**Survival through Subculture**

My real interest is not that spectacular subcultures or “subcultures of substance” (Hodkinson 2002) still exist, but rather that they exist because people still meaningfully and actively construct and participate in them. Subcultures are still incredibly important to how many people live their lives. This is my main focus throughout this book: exploring how active engagement in the subculture allows psychobillies to negotiate and improve their lived experience, one generally characterized by socioeconomic mar-
ginalization from and/or frustration with mainstream culture. They find therein some “solution” to some “problem,” as the Chicago School and the CCCS suggested, but I do not claim that they all look to the subculture to solve the same problem or that their stylistic choices are automatic, homogeneous, and universal responses to social or structural changes. I argue that their interest in the subculture is motivated by a variety of structural and social experiences, a consideration that some early post-subcultural theorists failed to underscore. Thus I join contemporary subcultural scholars who address the diverse ways in which social and material processes impact subcultural identities and participation (see, e.g., MacDonald 2001; Hollands 2002; Böse 2003; Nayak 2003; Pilkington 2004; Blackman 2005, 2014; Shildrick 2006; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006; Williams 2011). The anxieties psychobillies seek to address through their subcultural participation are multiple, as are their strategies for alleviating them. This study highlights subcultural participants’ agency in creatively generating their own ways to improve their lived experience.

The CCCS was preoccupied with how the working class manifested a “collective response to the material and situated experience of their class” (Clarke et al. 1976, 47). Indeed, psychobillies often seek release from economic marginalization. Most of my interlocutors self-identified as working class and characterized the subculture as a whole that way. Unemployment, low-paying jobs, unfulfilling work, poverty, temporary labor, and slim opportunities for economic and educational advancement were common concerns. But their interest in the subculture was not predetermined by their class position, as the CCCS implied; moreover, their frustrations were not always or only economic. Their sense of marginalization from society can be related to other structural, social, and personal experiences, as other scholars have shown (e.g., Pilkington 2004; Blackman 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Halnon 2006a; Greener and Hollands 2006; Kahn-Harris 2007; P. Greene 2011; Hodkinson 2016). My interlocutors described examples of racial or ethnic discrimination, sexism, homophobia, body shaming, and other forms of social stigmatization and structural inequality. Many felt they just did not fit in—or want to fit in—with mainstream society and were frustrated by rules, expectations, and authority figures that threatened to repress their individuality, nonconformity, and preferred lifestyle. Others specifically rebelled against what they considered to be “mainstream” music, “seeking escape from the superficial world of corporate-sponsored music,” as Karen Halnon found in her study of shock metal participants (2006a, 202). Some were looking for a way to cope with personal matters, for instance frustration with family, friends, coworkers, and classmates, while others sought relief from emotional and mental health struggles, such as post-traumatic stress disorder after returning from
overseas military service. Moreover, Paul Greene observed that metal fans in Nepal “raged against a machine that was distinctly local” (2011, 111); given the global development of the psychobilly subculture, I do not assume that psychobillies in Europe and the United States rebel against the same things that those in other countries do. In short, participants may be drawn to psychobilly to “solve” a variety of different structural, social, and personal “problems” or frustrations.

They find in the subculture multiple and diverse “solutions,” and I do not presume that every psychobilly derives satisfaction from participation in exactly the same way(s) or for the same reason(s). I engage with contemporary ethnographic studies that recognize the plurality of solutions that subculturalists find by “creating a counter-world with its own rules and values that give meaning to their existence” (Schröter 2004, 54). Many achieve relief from frustration by engaging in transgressive or shocking behavior that is not permitted elsewhere. As Keith Kahn-Harris argues in his study of extreme metal, participation in transgressive behavior can help disempowered individuals experience a satisfying sense of control over their own lives: “Transgression is one way of surviving the fraught experience of modernity. It is one of the few sources of almost unrestricted agency in modernity. While modernity disempowers individuals within alienating systems and structures, transgression allows individuals to feel utterly in control, utterly ‘sovereign’ (Bataille 1993) over their being through practices that resist instrumental rationality” (Kahn-Harris 2007, 158). As this book explores, transgressive practices provide subculturalists with different types of pleasure, particularly as they liberate themselves not only from society’s restrictions but also from conventional norms of self-control over their own bodies (Bakhtin [1936] 1984; Frith 1981; Fiske 1989; Weinstein 2000; Kahn-Harris 2007). I also consider how the community provides a number of benefits that help subculturalists manage and survive external challenges, particularly through the circulation of economic capital and the socio-emotional bonds they develop with each other. The subculture provides psychobillies with opportunities to transgress societal regulations and constraints, express nonnormative identities, meet like-minded people, share economic resources, support one another emotionally and socially, have fun, and feel empowered as they stake out their own way to live.

One of my interlocutors described psychobilly as a “culture of survival.” He explained, “Just like psychobilly keeps rockabilly alive, psychobilly keeps us alive.” He could have been referring to the social, emotional, and economic resources that members of the subculture share to help each other literally survive hard times, but he went on to explain how participating in the subculture makes him feel alive. He has fun at shows, viscerally experiencing the ecstasy of the music, the wrecking, and the alcohol, all while feel-
ing the joy of belonging to a group of like-minded, nonnormative individuals. He can express his true self, indulging in the things he values, as his frustrations melt away. Participating in psychobilly helps him survive daily challenges and make the most out of his life despite outside attempts to suppress and oppress him. I thus see psychobillies’ performance of alternative, nonnormative practices, values, and aesthetics as meaningful and diverse self-expressions of distinction from the mainstream (as they perceive it) and as responses and “survival solutions” to various experiences of structural or social marginality or stigmatization. This book provides further documentation that subcultures of substance still exist because they are important vehicles through which marginalized members of society actively create ways to survive and enact sovereignty over their own lives.

The Survival of Resistance

A recurring debate within subcultural studies concerns the potential for subcultural “resistance” to hegemonic culture. Even while CCCS scholars romanticized the working class’s “heroic” resistance against dominant society through stylistic subversion, they ultimately suggested that this resistance was only “imaginary” because subculturalists could not fundamentally change the systemic structure that subordinated them (Clarke et al. 1976, 47–48). Moreover, Hebdige suggested that subcultural styles lose their resistant potential, however symbolic, once they are appropriated and sold back to the public as a commodity (1979, 92–99). Some post-subculturalists have an even bleaker view of the possibility for resistance, suggesting that “subcultures are just another form of depoliticized play in the postmodern pleasuredome” in which participants are looking for “a hedonistic escape into a Blitz Culture fantasy characterized by political indifference” (Muggleton 1997, 200). After surveying subcultural and post-subcultural perspectives, Shane Greene observes: “This is what most of the theorizing of subculture has left us with. . . . Subcultures routinely express structural antagonisms but do not breed a real revolutionary consciousness powerful enough to really fuck the system, provoking real systemic ruptures that result in real historical change” (2012, 581).

Greene argues that an understanding of subcultural resistance requires a redefinition of “real” resistance. It cannot only mean a revolution that completely topples the current system:

The insight is to imagine and identify in material-political practice other possible framings of the underground experience without giving in to the impulse to believe in an Enlightened Marxist idea
of revolution as some sort of total systemic rupture. Stop placing so much fucking faith in the idea that liberation lies only on the other side of absolute destruction followed by total revolutionary renewal. Stop dreaming of completely fucking over the system. Learn to under-fuck the system in your daily material practices. This is a task to which underground punks have long dedicated themselves. (2012, 581)

He asserts that punks in Peru have “under-fucked the system” by adopting a do-it-yourself (DIY) philosophy that disturbs the means through which the culture industry typically asserts and maintains its control. He also demonstrates that underground punks have held and expressed diverse political ideologies (and have faced dire consequences for doing so), revealing alternative visions for society that correspond to neither the status quo of the state nor the agenda of the Marxist revolutionaries. He thus argues that “under-fucking the system implies a series of refusals” that disrupt “systemic forms of power” (584).

Many contemporary scholars agree that everyday subcultural expressions and practices resist the totalizing control of hegemonic culture and may be expressed on micro or macro, covert or overt, and individual or collective levels (Williams and Hannerz 2014). Ross Haenfler, for example, echoes Shane Greene, noting that “meaningful resistance does not always have to be revolutionary, in the sense of radically altering the social order”; “countering hegemonic ideas (or frames) perpetuated by powerful people and institutions is a significant act of resistance” (Haenfler 2014, 44). He argues that by creating, fostering, and expressing alternative values and identities, “subculturalists of all sorts question the perceived hegemony of dominant groups and mass culture” (Haenfler 2016, 20). In his study of straightedge, for example, Haenfler considers how participants challenge normative assumptions about alcohol and drug use, not by engaging in direct action designed to change legislation but rather through leading by example and making visible their conscious rejection of mainstream behaviors and values (2006). Similarly, while some post-subculturalists have dismissed any political potential in electronic dance music (EDM) culture (e.g., Redhead 1993; Thornton 1996; Reynolds 1997), others have suggested that clubbers’ construction of an alternative vision of society that values PLUR (peace, love, unity, and respect) is an explicit refusal of dominant values and lifestyles (Greener and Hollands 2006; Wilson 2006; Riley, Griffin, and Morey 2010; Dimou and Ilan 2018). Borrowing from Maffesoli’s (1996) idea that neotribalists enact a “politics of survival” through sociality and pleasure, some have framed clubbers’ performance of alternative values as a sort of “everyday politics” that offers participants sovereignty over their own lives even
when they do not articulate a specific political agenda (Riley, Griffin, and Morey 2010; Dimou and Ilan 2018).

By “finding ways to think about resistance that neither inappropriately cast youth as heroic cultural revolutionaries nor reduce participants’ experiences to ineffectual consumerism” (Haenfler 2014, 50), scholars have forged a middle ground between traditional subcultural theory and post-subcultural theory that allows us to consider how subculturalists disrupt the absolute power of hegemony. Like EDM clubbers, psychobillies do not frame their performatively expressive difference from the mainstream as an explicitly political statement of “resistance.” They also do not want “their way” of living to become “the way” for everyone. Yet by “refusing to uncritically follow the rules” and “intentionally break[ing] with the mainstream” (Williams and Hannerz 2014), psychobillies “create moments in which to live out their own values, creating temporary pockets of sovereignty over their own existence” (Riley, Griffin, and Morey 2010, 348; see also Greener and Hollands 2006; Dimou & Ilan 2018). Building on Shane Greene’s theory (2012), I see this as “under-fucking the system”; despite hegemonic attempts to regulate their individuality and marginalize them socially and economically, psychobillies refuse to passively accept the status quo.

When Gramsci articulated his theory of hegemony, he noted that it depended on the “spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (1971, 12). He recognized the possibility that one might “work out one’s own conception of the world consciously and critically . . . to choose one’s own sphere of activity, to participate actively in making the history of the world” (58). This book considers how psychobillies actively make their own world. They defiantly enact a “politics of survival” by finding pleasure and excitement within their own community, where they can freely express their true selves; engage in practices, styles, and values that are deemed unacceptable elsewhere; and take matters into their own hands to improve their lived experience in substantive ways. For psychobillies such as Pammy, finding a “space” to express one’s true self is incredibly meaningful and represents a resistant act of self-expression in defiance of normative expectations.

Finally, I apply performativity theory to the framing of subcultural resistance. In Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Judith Butler suggests that gender is not “given” but rather constructed through “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” ([1990] 2007, 45). There is nothing “natural” about male or female identities; gender is “real only to the extent that it is performed” (527). In other words, we imitate, naturalize, and (re)inforce hegemonic
ideas about how we expect men and women to behave. Using Michel Foucault’s idea that “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” (1978, 101), Butler argues that it is possible to “trouble” gender expectations by performing alternatives. Drag, for example, parodies our assumptions about the naturalness of gender and draws attention to the very constructedness of those ideas (Butler [1990] 2007). Thus, if discourse and repeated performances shape our ideas about what we think to be true, then it follows that we can question those ideas through new discourse and performative acts and create the possibility of alternative ideas and identities. Accordingly, I interpret subcultural performances as ways of “troubling” normative expectations and highlighting the constructedness of them. By refusing to behave, dress, and live their lives in the ways that discourse and authority have reinforced to be the “right” way, psychobillies “make noise” (Hebdige 1979; Wong 2004) and “under-fuck the system” (S. Greene 2012), not only making visible subculture’s potential to resist hegemonic control but also drawing attention to the arbitrariness of norms. I situate this work, then, within academic discourse that understands subcultural practice not as “imaginary” and ultimately futile resistance, as the CCCS concluded, nor as individually motivated hedonistic consumption, as some post-subculturalists have suggested, but rather as evidence of the active ways subculturalists enact their agency, refusing to be passive pawns in the hegemonic game of life. While not articulating a political agenda, psychobillies nevertheless construct and perform alternative ways of being that illustrate the possibilities for subverting hegemony and winning sovereignty over their own lives: surviving the way they want to.

Dialogic and Polyvocal Ethnography

I am aware that I have just attributed “resistance” to a subculture whose participants have reminded me over and over again is apolitical. But I only do this after having thoroughly discussed different perspectives on resistance and subcultural practice with psychobillies. Throughout my fieldwork and writing process, I took to heart the critiques leveled against the CCCS for not engaging directly with subcultural participants and for not taking their perspectives and lived experience into account. In his classic text *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige admitted that “it is highly unlikely that the members of any of the subcultures described in this book would recognize themselves reflected here” (1979, 139). This was the case for David Muggleton, a punk who struggled to read the book and “was left feeling that it had absolutely nothing to say about my life as I had once experienced it” (2000,
2). Having reread the book after earning a degree in sociology and cultural studies, he “now knew exactly what it meant, and still found that it had very little to say about my life!” (2). I also recognize that my own background, my involvement in punk as a teenager (which was always “political” for me), and my intellectual leanings inform my instinct to read resistance into subcultural performance, and I am aware of Sarah Thornton’s warning about this tendency. She noted that many subcultural theorists “were diverted by the task of puncturing and contesting dominant ideologies,” perhaps in part because “their biases have tended to agree with the anti-mass society discourses of the youth cultures they study,” leading to conclusions that “both over-politicized youthful leisure and at the same time ignored the subtle relations of power at play within it” (Thornton 2005, 185).

I heed these critiques, and like many post-Birmingham scholars (Thornton 1996; Muggleton 2000; Blackman 2005), I use an approach that “privilege(s) the subjective meanings of subculturalists” (Muggleton 2000, 9). I am particularly influenced by Harris Berger’s methodological use of “critical phenomenology” in *Metal, Rock, and Jazz: Perception and the Phenomenology of Musical Experience* (1999). In “Phenomenology and the Ethnography of Popular Music: Ethnomusicology at the Juncture of Cultural Studies and Folklore” (2008), he explains that participant observation and preliminary interviews were his first steps in understanding the relationship between heavy metal music and what it meant to the musicians who performed it. He then engaged his interlocutors in critical dialogue, discussing with them what previous scholars had suggested about heavy metal and its meanings: “Respecting my research participants enough to engage them in a critical dialogue paid off, and the metalheads’ responses offered a realm of ethnographic insights” (74). Subcultural and popular music scholars’ interest since the 1990s in accounting for the subjective meanings of their research participants corresponds with the development of polyvocal ethnographies around the same time (Abu-Lughod 1990; Minh-ha 1989). Influenced by Third Wave feminist and queer theory, these works drew attention to the problematic ways researchers had traditionally excluded or misrepresented the voices of some of their research subjects, particularly women. This prompted scholars to more seriously consider and represent heterogeneous perspectives and to regard each viewpoint as equally valid.

I believe that gaining an understanding of meaning within psychobilly requires a dialogic engagement with my research participants, and my analyses are informed by conversations with psychobillys wherein we considered a range of phenomenological interpretations. I often went back to my interlocutors after the initial interviews to ask more questions and probe deeper into the meanings they had attributed to certain practices, styles, and signi-
fiers. Furthermore, in my intention to write a polyvocal ethnography, I represent heterogeneous perspectives I encountered during my fieldwork. I privilege psychobillies’ own interpretations by sometimes quoting them at length and offering more than one individual’s perspective on a topic. By allowing psychobillies to “speak for themselves” throughout this book and to do so in multiple ways, I strive to demonstrate the plurality of meaning and experience within the subculture. I hope this work represents their many voices, recognizes their creative expressive practices, and reminds us of the diverse ways people meaningfully engage with a subculture to shape their lived experience.