



THE FEST EXPERIENCE

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THREE CONNECTING FLIGHTS, AN UNPLANNED CAR RENTAL, TWO HIGHWAY DETOURS THAT RENDERED ME HOPELESSLY LOST, AND ONE CLEVERLY DISGUISED CONVERSE-DESTROYING MUDHOLE LEFT ME WITH ONE CONCLUSION:
FUCK JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA.

I fled inland in my rented Sebring, following the westbound signs that read "Gainesville." I had a weekend-long date with the many reptiles of the college town: The University of Florida's namesake Gators; the actual alligators that inhabit the region's swamps; and the crocodilian senior citizens that inhabit every nook, cranny, and waffle house of the Sunshine State.

My story isn't unique, as a few thousand punk fans and over 300 bands were converging on the area for The Fest 8, an annual three-day punk festival held over Halloween weekend in Gainesville. If the increasingly accessible and corporate Warped Tour is "punk rock summer camp," then The Fest is a Pabst-fuelled bush party thrown by its drunk and sweaty counsellors.

The Fest is the brainchild of Tony Weinbender, a former employee of a major label, who grew disenfranchised with the lack of authentic passion within the corporate music business. Weinbender cut his teeth in the recording industry working for Gainesville-based punk label No Idea records. Upon quitting his job, he set to work, armed with only a computer to create what eight years later has turned into a global punk-rock pilgrimage.

To call it a pilgrimage is most accurate, of course, which is testified by the California and New Jersey license plates that populated my hotel parking lot, along with the Swedish and Japanese pinpoints on the map where attendees are

encouraged to show their places of origin. It's either a testament to one's financial irresponsibility, musical passion, or both, which lead people to Gainesville's tiny regional airport.

It's not accidental that the town is ground zero for this countercultural convergence. The aforementioned No Idea Records occupies a stately house in the city's core, just as many of the principles and values spread by the label and its bands have permeated into, at least, the city's dietary consciousness. Every restaurant I visited offered patrons extensive vegetarian and vegan options, a growing though still infrequent reality in Edmonton. One particularly delicious visit was to the Caribbean-themed Reggae Shack, which offered Red Stripe beer, jerk tofu, and a Buju Banton record above our table. For those of the carnivorous persuasion, alligator and "jackalope" burritos offered regionally unique options.

With great food and greater booze (and by "greater," I mean cheaper, exemplified by the American institution of free-pouring liquor, which is both a momentary blessing and waking curse) providing the fuel for the weekend, the music acted as the perfect accelerant.

Gainesville has given birth to a disproportionate amount of successful bands considering its population of just over 100,000. Punk heavyweights Hot Water Music, Less than Jake, and Against Me all hail from the town, as does that peaceful corpse Tom Petty.