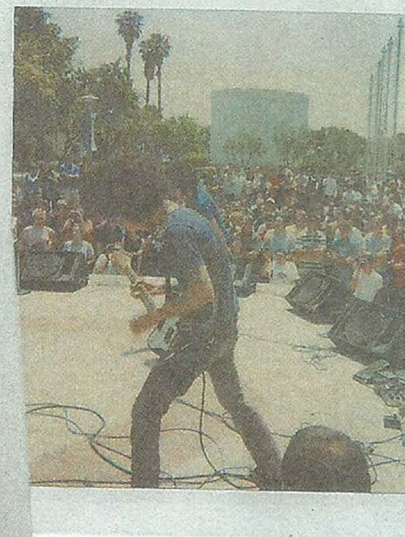




“A woman got shot not too far away from my club downtown last week—a stray bullet from a shootout in Juarez, which is maybe the equivalent of six or seven blocks away,” says At the Drive-In guitarist Jim Ward over the phone from his home in El Paso. “The violence rarely spills over, but you can feel it, you know? If you want to kill someone, all you have to do is go to Juarez, where the law is all but obsolete and the consequences are either retaliation or nothing at all.”

Could it be more felicitous that At the Drive-In’s sound was birthed in a mere few hundred yards from a city on the fringes of total anarchy? “I was trying to escape as a kid, and I was lucky enough to tour and travel young,” adds Ward. “But kids in these port cities, sometimes they just want to get the fuck away. It’s the same reason they get jobs on ships. When they tell me that, I get it.”

Ward freely admits to having a love-hate relationship with his hometown. It’s where he sired At the Drive-In at age 17 along with singer Cedric Bixler-Zavala, guitarist Omar Rodríguez-López, bassist Paul Hinojos-Gonzalez and drummer Tony Hajjar, and where they ultimately agreed to put it on hiatus some seven years later—a band break that never officially ended. But Ward is also quick to credit the town with helping birth their own *sui generis* brand of rock ‘n’ roll. It’s a sound that’s likely flustered many a fan who would attempt to describe it to a friend, if only in hopes of categorizing it: post-punk, noise rock. Sewn together with Zavala’s cut-and-paste prose, ATDI’s music played like a mutant brainchild between latter-day William Burroughs and a ‘90s, ADHD-afflicted youth. A counterculture hungry for something not too Blink-182 but also not too Mr. Bungle. A Frankenstein of sorts, forged from caustic beginnings in both El Paso and its violent Mexican sister-city.



“It was one of the most fucked up places back then,” says Jim of his hometown, where he lives now with his wife. “But it wasn’t anger fueling the music. It was just being frustrated from living in El Paso. It was such a cluster-fuck, but everybody was in it together. Everybody played with everybody’s band, everyone knew each other. It was like a gang.”

According to Ward, it’s this mentality that brought the band back together for this year’s Coachella appearance. “There’s no amount of money in the world that could make this worthwhile if it wasn’t for the friendships,” he says. “If it didn’t feel comfortable, we wouldn’t have done it. I mean, I love these guys. We grew up together. And in a way, you’re fucking with your history. You’re opening your book and starting to write again, and we were fine with our history. We can all sit in a room and get along, but if the music isn’t working...” he stops for a second. “It was only yesterday, when we plugged in and started rehearsing. Within a nanosecond we knew it was perfect. That was it. If that wasn’t there, there’d be no point.”

While Coachella 2012 also marks other reunion firsts, Swedish hardcore outfit Refused and the Buzzcocks’ classic lineup among them, there’s arguably few with as chaotic and confusing a past as At the Drive-In. Listening to Zavala and Ward speak, a lot of that chaos and confusion traces back to those formative days in El Paso. For any band currently laboring through the unforgiving times of music business ebb-and-flow and the dying throes of AOR rock, the singer says it really wasn’t much better in the mid-’90s.

“We were basically the black sheep of El Paso,” Zavala recalls of their first few years. “No one was really stoked on us. I think if there are any true fans there, they’ll remember that a lot of the time there were maybe three people at our shows—like Omar’s dad and two other people.”

Despite playing to small crowds in seemingly smaller venues, the band’s determination only grew. “If people hated us, it only incensed that gang-like attitude,” remembers Ward. “People would be in the front row, booing us and telling us we sucked, and we were just like, ‘Fuck you, we have the mic, and we don’t care if there’s a thousand of you. We’re still gonna do what we want.’” Eventually their on-stage performances caught the eye of fledgling indie label Flipside, who signed ATDI the same night the band played to a crowd of only nine people. Thus followed touring, three albums (the third, *Relationship Of Command*, on the Beastie Boys’ Grand Royal label), some MTV exposure via their video for “One-Armed Scissor,” and still more touring. Soon the road began to take its toll.

"THERE'S NO AMOUNT OF MONEY IN THE WORLD THAT COULD MAKE THIS WORTHWHILE IF IT WASN'T FOR THE FRIENDSHIPS."

"People kept trying to book shows," remembers Ward scornfully. "There was no record company telling us what to do, but the frustration came with touring and the exhaustion that followed. It kept going. No one ever stepped in to stop it, even though they could see what was happening to us. No one ever bothered to say, 'Slow down.' One day, Omar and Cedric said they were gonna go their separate ways, and I just felt this wave of relief." He's quiet for a moment. "It wasn't hard; we were just kids. It's not like we had mansions and mortgage payments to make."

"We'd had this 'six-month rule' thing, too," he adds, "which meant that before we would break up, we'd take six months off to think about it. That's where it sort of went wrong. Nobody ever really honored [that agreement]."

Zavala doesn't hesitate to address all the other factors that supposedly led to ATDI's dissolution, including what was, by his own admittance, "just all my shit-talking and hiding behind things." A chronic pot-smoker back then, Zavala found band life difficult to adjust to. "I wasn't stepping up to the plate. I became a completely grumpy bastard, and I couldn't do anything without pot. You know Jon Stewart's character in *Half Baked*? I was like that. It was a great way of distancing myself from people. 'All I gotta do is smoke and then I'll get on stage and be fine.' Now I believe my choices were my choices. I'm not fully better or changed, in the sense that I still fight with my anger issues."

Zavala insists he's neither condemning or condoning his past behavior. "One thing I've learned is that I can't put other peoples' ethics in," he adds. "If that's what works for them then they gotta reach for whatever level in life works for them. All I know is that [quitting] is working for me. My life is awesome, and my wallet says, 'Thank you. Now we can spend money on studio time for your records.'"

Few would argue that a breaking point for the band came with the band's 2001 Big Day Out Festival appearance in Brisbane, Australia. Caught in a violent mosh pit during Limp Bizkit's set, 17-year-old Jessica Michalik was crushed by the crowd and rushed to a hospital. Despite being revived, she died of a heart attack five days later. It was an incident some might say the band was prescient enough to foresee. "We didn't want to be the soundtrack to broken bones," Zavala says, recalling their set earlier in the day. "There were people surfing on each other. I mean, they were literally taking boogie boards and surfing off each other's skin. It was painful [to watch], so we walked off. I don't favor the brutal. I favor the meek, especially in a situation like that."

"We'd always watch out for the kids in the front," says Ward, "but with that festival, people just kept on doing it. After that we had to say 'Fuck it.'"

A month after the Australian Festival, At the Drive-In officially broke up, citing mental and physical exhaustion. The six-month break passed. Ward, Hajjar and Hinojos-Gonzalez formed Sparta, while Cedric and guitarist Omar Rodriguez-López formed the Mars Volta (later to be joined by Hinojos in 2005). The five rarely spoke over the next decade.

In its own way, none of this intermittent chaos seems surprising to Zavala and Ward. Maybe that's because both, in their own respective ways, have been surrounded by death and drama their entire lives. Ward lost his cousin to an apparent heroin overdose in 2003. In 1996, Zavala's close friend Julio Venegas committed suicide, and friends Laura Beard and Sarah Reisler (both from another El Paso band called Fall on Deaf Ears) were killed in an auto accident that same year. Zavala credits being able to perform live as a primary reason he's still sane.

"I guess the affinity comes from the frustration of all those years, and channeling it into my live show. Sometimes I'm at a loss for words, and if I can dance it out, if I can freak out and break stuff and knock shit around, I'm tapping into that caveman. I'm tapping into myself, and when I'm doing it publicly, that's it. It's the truest form of who I am."

As for those stream-of-consciousness lyrics, how do they hold up 11 years later? Do audience members ever approach him, relating how they relate to them? The answer seems a resound yes, if not completely the way Zavala had anticipated.

"One time I got a phone call from my manager, who put me on the phone with this kid who was on a ledge, and I had to talk him down," Zavala remembers. "He was calling me from Sweden after we'd played a show there, and he was about to kill himself. He kept asking, 'Does this lyric mean this?' I just had to say to him, 'It doesn't mean that, but whatever you can get from it, I hope it's a positive thing.' I didn't know what to say to the guy. All I could think was that he was going to kill himself. There was no negative hidden meaning, but I couldn't explain myself, really. Just, 'Don't make life so short. It's worth living.'"

Between the touring and the drugs, however, Zavala admits he had trouble making himself believe such a credo. He still sounds unsure as to why. "I had to go play on stage, and before I went on other people would come up and tell me, 'This song has spoken to me because I had an abortion, and it helped me get through these things.'" Now you go back and look [at the lyrics] and you say, 'Holy shit! What the hell was I thinking back then?' It took me ten years to go back and listen and sort of realize that I'm just an antenna, that I'm really just picking up stuff. I mean, I grew up in the suburbs, my parents put food on the table, and I just got mad at the thing a young man gets angry at."

In addition to that rebellious attitude, El Paso also serves as a source of pride. "When I think of Texas, when I think of El Paso, I think of the Butthole Surfers and Scratch Acid," says Zavala. "I think of Fearless Iranians from Hell, bands like that. That stuff was really extreme. When I was just a teen skateboarding around El Paso, Zorlac Skateboards were the most sought-after board in the state, and it was mostly because of their 'Fuck You!' attitude. I remember their logo on a t-shirt, which read, 'Fuck You, we're from Texas.' We were coming from a place that broke rules all the time, and that was the feeling that came up when Tony contacted me last time. Just, 'Let's do it.'"

"We've done a lot of growing up over the past 11 years," adds Ward. "Finally you find yourself surrounded by people you trust and love. Those are these guys, for me."

photos: (top-left)
Cedric Bixler-Zavala
at the This Ain't No
Picnic Festival, Irvine
Canyon, CA, July
4, 1999 by James
Tweedy; (Polaroids)
At the Drive-In at Cal
State Fullerton, 1999
by Brad Stenke

