

## Mike Ness

The leader of Social Distortion on punk, politics, and being inspired by boredom



Illustration by Nathan Ota

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ike Ness is a punk-rock lifer, an Orange County boy in black eyeliner and motorcycle leather, singing of hard times and worse luck. He's the loser who won, somehow surviving bad habits and bad attitude for 26 years as the leader of Social Distortion, and watching as the revolutionary punk movement he first knew as a '70s teenager became an international commodity safe enough for your nine-year-old. He's been on the radio, but his faith in the hardscrabble roots of punk is unshaken, fueled by the direct connection he feels to early country and blues singers. Like them, Ness writes and sings of personal troubles and unlikely redemption, of love and doom and private rebellion.

It's been enough to draw an excited, tattooed crowd of hot-rodders and punk-rock chicks to Social Distortion's regular multi-night stands at theaters in Los Angeles, Anaheim, Chicago, New York, and elsewhere on the road. Ness and the band will return for another series of Southern California shows in mid-December, and he says Social Distortion already has a new album half-written – a significant claim for a band not known to be prolific, waiting nearly eight years before releasing its most

recent album, 2004's *Sex, Love and Rock 'n' Roll*. But he sounds about ready for more: "You just can't get all this energy from your fans and from touring, and not let it pour back out."

–Steve Appleford

**CityBeat: Do you remember how you discovered punk rock?**

**Mike Ness:** I was young, and I was already into all the glitter stuff. I remember looking in the back of "Creem" magazine and seeing backstage photos of CBGB's. Oh, wow! I thought I was on the edge with Ziggy Stardust, but who is this Iggy Pop guy? And who's the Ramones and Lou Reed? I had Lou Reed's *Transformer* in the seventh grade, and most kids were just putting their GI Joes down.

So I was on the fringes anyway. It was just a matter of time before I heard the Ramones and the Sex Pistols. When I heard them, it was really like how I was feeling inside. It was an accelerant that I needed to go ahead and start my own band.

**Would you have started a band had punk never happened?**

Definitely. But the punk thing came along, and you didn't have to be a 12-year music major. You could be an average guitar player and drink a 12-pack of beer and get on stage.

**Wasn't it risky looking like a punk in those early days?**

Growing up where I did, society's reaction to us was very volatile. We were a threat to masculinity. I remember just walking down the street in a leather jacket and jeans and motorcycle boots and maybe vermilion-red hair. And a truckload of men – construction workers or jocks – for some reason, it just rubbed them wrong. I was masculine in a form that was alien to them. And because I was a young teenager, they felt safe in accosting me. They'd drive by and flip us off, and we'd flip them off back. An altercation was a daily occurrence, whether it was with the police or members of the status quo.

**So what is it like now to see jocks and construction workers in your audience?**

You know what? We set out to change things, I believe. Punk was a revolution, and maybe 26 years later society has opened their minds a little bit. To me, the whole punk thing was a kind of runaway train. We knew we wanted to change things, but there was no set goal we were trying to achieve. We weren't like an organized NAACP or whatever. We weren't organized and unified. But we set out to change things, and we did.

Punk rock is a major format of music now, no longer insignificant, as it was when the Ramones or the New York Dolls were playing. It was underground and deemed

insignificant. That was one of the most frustrating things about it: Oh, you like that punk shit? Hey, this is good music, real music. You need to open your eyes to this.

**How did the punk rock coming out of Orange County then differ from the Hollywood scene?**

It's an urban setting versus a suburban setting. We were kids that weren't necessarily street kids, though in Orange County we have places where you wouldn't want to stop at a red light, too. We were in neighborhoods, but there was also that cry of boredom. Maybe we weren't writing so much about street hustlers or whatever, but I grew up in a Republican county which suppressed just about everything. That creates just as much angst as being on the corner of Crenshaw and Adams.

**How do you feel about so much punk culture being absorbed by the mainstream?**

If I turn on CMT [County Music Television] right now, and I watch whatever can conceivably be called country music now, it's the same thing. It's been homogenized. Garth Brooks bought all of KISS's fireworks and pyrotechnics and brought pop and rock to country in a bad way. So it's no different than contemporary jazz or contemporary blues – these people don't want to hear about heroin and whiskey and women. They want to hear a softer version of the blues. It's the same thing with punk rock: Let's get a band that sounds like [punk], that are adorable and can jump in sync and sing pop songs, and let's market that. So, as always, you just have to look underneath the surface. Face it, record labels and radio pump out shit all year long, and every now and then a good band will come out of it. But it's 1 out of 10. That's the way it's been, that's the way it always will be, no matter what kind of music it is.

**In 1999, you made a couple of solo records that really dug deep into early country and rock.**

That's always in the back of my mind. It's something I'm still passionate about. Right now Social Distortion is hot, and I'm having so much fun with it, but it's going to be hard to decide when to take a break and go back to that. I love them both. Right now, this seems like where I'm supposed to be.

**How political do you want to be in your music?**

I would like to get more political. I feel like I'm still learning myself. I'm still researching. And I only like to write about stuff with 100 percent conviction. But I do feel that I have a certain responsibility, especially to a younger generation, to speak out. I consider songwriters just like journalists. They report what they see, what they hear. In that aspect, I do have a certain responsibility.

**You urged fans on your website to vote during the last election. It must have been on your mind.**

You never realize how much influence you have on someone 'til you're right there. You have a young kid who's looking up to you, and he values your opinion. There's kids that are on the fence and could go either way. If they thought I was a fucking white supremacist, they might go, "Ooh, that's cool." But to hear me say, "That shit's

fucking wrong,” that sticks with them. Sometimes they need that. I did. I looked up to older kids, and I valued what they were saying.

When I was giving my opinion on Bush three or four years ago, I got very mixed emotions from the crowd. It’s very interesting now, when I do the same thing, to see the consensus leaning a little bit more now toward “Yeah, fuck that guy.” 5 ★

*Social Distortion begins its latest run of local shows Dec. 18 at the House of Blues in West Hollywood, continuing there and at HOB Anaheim (and back again) through Jan. 4. For info, see [www.socialdistortion.com](http://www.socialdistortion.com).*

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