

# The Ideas & Desires of the DIY Bandits

## Life Jackets Are For Capitalists

Benjamin Olson

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Born in 2004 out of the industrial ruins of Shelton, Conn., 75 miles north of New York City, a shifting cast of individuals led by soft-spoken, anti-leader, Pepe Chapowski, released records, threw shows, bootlegged albums, sent merchandise and artwork to randomly chosen addresses, wrote letters to prisoners and friends, destroyed property, published articles and zines, built sculptures from garbage, held neighborhood meetings, booked tours, and scammed real estate owners, under the name DIY Bandits.

For twelve years, this loose-knit operation released music as diverse as folk punk, rap, electronic, doom-laden symphonic pop, and spoken word, and put on concerts often known for a unique medley of punk and rap acts.

They literally broke barriers, having once fudged insurance documents to rent office space, threw a show in it, then knocked down the walls between suites when it got too crowded.

You can call the Bandits a label (they've accepted the term), but they never operate like one, with the chief difference being that they don't know how to. Most of their projects got their feet off the ground at the last yard, jumping over pitfalls to meet sudden deadlines. Profiting from such things was about as alien a concept to them as registering with ASCAP.

They never bothered with iTunes. They aimed for what Pepe calls the "human spread"—word-of-mouth, in-person sales, trades, and giveaways.

Their differing notion of success didn't stop them from gaining notoriety in the Northeast U.S. and throughout the country, in the UK, and further abroad.

Their reputation was established without online presence, and they prefer it that way.

Though Pepe has come to terms with being a Label, it's not what the Bandits originally sought to be. After a string of squats were raided by police, he secured a place on Canal Street in Shelton, advertising that he was "giving away a punk club" to whoever could make it functional.

Factory House, as he called it, was shut down by the city in 2005 after one summer, but it funded the early incarnation of DIY Bandits, which began as a way for Pepe and his friend Chaoflux ("an anarchist father and a Middle Eastern former Satanist," respectively) to put their ideas and desires into the world.

Inspired by the anti-tech writing of John Zerzan and others, Pepe's wish to see these ideas in our "dead culture," was a personal struggle. The torment of domesticated life is bodily and existential, felt in the bowels more than the intellect.

When Pepe met a teenage Pat The Bunny playing guitar outside an anarchist convention, it was clear that music was the way to release these desires into the world.

The best Bandits shows were arguably the ones they never put on. They planned to throw a concert sailing on a raft of garbage over the nearby Housatonic River with a banner reading "Life Jackets Are For Capitalists," but police found the giant trash boat and confiscated it.

Another gig required performers to sneak into a Yale University tennis tournament overnight and make their surprise appearance the next day in the middle of the match. No one would take the risk.

Police harassment of the Bandits is continuous. In April 2013, the home of Pepe and his partner, Lee, was raided by police while they were away. The cops stole Bandit funds, as well as their computers and letters from friends. They appealed the money seizure and won. A year later, Lee and Pepe were arrested for conspiracy, an ordeal that cost them several thousand dollars in legal and bail fees.

The amorphous nature of the Bandits had proven itself still vulnerable to the police. Forced to recover the lost funds through online sales (they finally set up a Bandcamp page), Bandits were no longer a viable or fulfilling operation.

In February, they released a split 12" between folk-rap hero Ceschi Ramos and folk-punk hero Pat The Bunny, announcing in the packaging that, effective immediately, they would cease to exist.

The release is explicitly vinyl only, and not available digitally anywhere. It comes with a zine designed and featuring artwork by Michael Crigler, as well as a 5-song CD by the author of this article. The first 500 shipped with free issues of the *Fifth Estate* and *Black Seed*. You can order the release at [diybandits.com](http://diybandits.com).

Like a compost of friendship and shared memories, the stillborn and glorious guts of the Bandits fertilize the next project by Pepe and Co., the first record label to actively remain offline. Fuck The Internet Records is the new hope for our culture's failure, effective immediately.

For more info, send a letter and extra stamp to, FT! Records, PO Box 101, Ansonia CT 06401.

# fifth Estate

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