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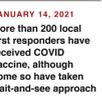
One night in Harrisonburg, a legendary Swedish band went out in a blaze of glory

By Calvin Pynn, Contributor
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Refused in Dundalk, Ireland in 1998. Photo by Rick Adam.

Editor's note: this story was updated with comments from another musician whose band toured with Refused in 1998.

By Calvin Pynn, contributor

1998 was a rough year for Refused. Much of the Swedish hardcore punk band's fiercely loyal fanbase reacted negatively to their new album, and their US tour ended up being their last as tensions between its members increased on the road.

The band called it quits and made its way to Washington, D.C. to fly home, canceling most of the remaining dates on the tour. Despite having broken up, Refused had one more gig on the way to the airport — in Harrisonburg.

And so, in early October, Refused — an iconic band now routinely labeled things like "hardcore legends" and "sonic revolutionaries" — ended up at The 401 House, a brick ranch on South High Street that was then a staple venue in the city's punk scene.

"They had never been to Harrisonburg, they didn't know anything about Harrisonburg. They had the rest of the tour planned, but there was nothing special about that show. It wasn't supposed to be their last show, they just decided to cancel all the other ones," said Matthew Strugar, who then lived at The 401 House while attending James Madison University.

Fascinated with the political message of punk music, Strugar was a fan of Refused and the band's aggressively left-leaning, non-conformist message. After 1994's This Just Might Be The Truth and 1996's Songs to Fan the Flames of Discontent, the band was about to release its third album, The Shape of Punk to Come, in the US.

Strugar and some of his friends got a sneak preview at the album when his roommate got a hold of some promo copies and immediately noticed a difference in style. It was an experimental leap from the band who — while still retaining its hardcore roots — mixed in unconventional elements like spoken word, jazz and electronica.

"We were like: 'this has upright bass, and techno, what the f— is this?'" Strugar remembered, laughing.

At the time, it didn't go over well for an overwhelming majority of their fanbase.

"To be fair, I think maybe it was just a little too experimental for the time, and people just didn't get it," he said.

The album, however, has since been embraced as a monumental achievement of hardcore music. Several publications, including Kerrang and LA Weekly, named it as one of the best and most influential punk albums of all time. Mainstream bands like Linkin Park, Blink-182 and Papa Roach have cited Refused as an influence, and their track "New Noise" became a favorite among emerging nu-metal and hardcore bands of the 2000s, who frequently covered it during their own live sets.



The 401 House. Photo by Calvin Pynn.

Stupid loud

That sort of legacy would have felt far off during Refused's ill-fated US tour in the fall of 1998, however. Tensions — involving a woman, according to Strugar — reached a boiling point and a fight broke out between band members in Atlanta.

Washington, DC-based post-hardcore band Frodus toured with Refused in 1998. Their drummer, Jason Hamacher — who booked most of the tour dates — dismissed rumors that most of the dates on the tour had been poorly attended, and that the Harrisonburg show was booked-impromptu as Refused was planning to leave the US.

On the contrary, he said they chose to play smaller venues.

"When I was booking the tour, we were given a choice to play mid-to-larger venues like the '9:30 Club,' or we could do a punk-rock fueled vacation. So, we went the small show route," Hamacher said.

He wanted to specifically book Harrisonburg, as Frodus had played there often and always had good experiences.

"I wanted to do a show in Harrisonburg because it was always a good time," Hamacher said.

But even before embarking on tour, all was not well in Refused's camp, he remembered.

"Mentally, they were so over it by the time we got [on the road]. Honestly, they shouldn't have come," Hamacher said.

By the time the burnt-out band, which did not respond to interview requests, reached Harrisonburg, word had gotten out that the show would be their last.

"Kids drove in from North Carolina and other places who were really into them," Strugar said.

Strugar remembered about 150 to 200 people packing the basement to watch Refused, a huge crowd for the house that normally drew about half that many for shows, often booked through James Madison University's radio station, WXJM.

"They'd book shows pretty often at our house because we were either cool or pushovers, depending on how you view it. We were pretty easy-going punks who were just happy to be part of the live music scene," Strugar said.

Many of Strugar's roommates played in bands at the time, including Fred Niemeke who, at the time, played guitar for DC-based melodic death metal band Darkest Hour. They hopped on the show as openers alongside Frodus and Harrisonburg-based band Union of the Snake.

Jeremiah Jenkins, co-founder of the Red Wing Roots Music Festival, was at the show to see Frodus. He recalled a radiant music scene in Harrisonburg at the time.

"The energy of shows back then — it was hot, it was loud, it was packed to the gills. There were plenty of people getting s—faced, but most people were there to see the bands," he said.

Although energetic, shows rarely got out of hand, Jenkins said, and police rarely intervened. Refused's show, however, was an exception.

"This one was loud as f—," Jenkins recalled. "We were in the basement, but it was stupid loud."

Three strikes and you're out

According to Strugar, the evening's notably noisy show had already resulted in two early visits by Harrisonburg Police Department officers to The 401 House. The culprit, he said, was Darkest Hour, who played through full-stack Mesa Boogie Dual Rectifier amps during their set.

"The cops came the first couple times because Darkest—ing-Hour insisted on playing full-stacks in a basement — both guitar players. Like, you just don't play full stacks in a house show, there's just no reason to be that loud, unless you're just showing off," he said, laughing.

After two warnings, the cops returned a third time intent on shutting down the show. According to a police report obtained by The Citizen, Officer Bashaw (whose first name was redacted in the report) responded to the scene as Refused took to the stage and most in attendance had crowded into the basement.

"Unlike the first response to this location, where the throngs of people were spilling out from the house and onto the public sidewalk, street (sic), this time I observed a loud noise consistent with a band coming from the house," Bashaw wrote in the report.

As police arrested one person outside, Refused opened with "The Shape of Punk to Come," the title track from their new album.

Then, police headed to the basement.

"I saw those boots coming down the stairs, and I was just like, 'aw, goddamn,'" Jenkins recalled.

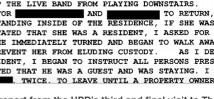
"You have no idea how loud it was though," he continued. "And for them to come down there, like, how do you shut that down? How do you tell people to stop? They don't know how to turn off the PA and it's hard to get through the crowd."

According to his report, Refused got louder and louder as Bashaw made his way through the crowd toward the band.

"The individuals formed a human barrier around the band to prevent access to the band platform," he wrote.

Jeremiah said the human barrier was simply the tightly-packed crowd.

"You couldn't move down there. It's a punk show, everyone was just arm in arm!" he said.



After playing an aborted show in Harrisonburg at the very end of a disastrous tour, Refused went on to critical acclaim. // band publicity photo

'This band's from Sweden, it's their last show ever'

At first, the officers tried to reason with Strugar.

"The cops were like 'hey guys, shut the show down,' and I was like 'this band's from Sweden, it's their last show ever, people drove from all over the country to be here, like, I'm not just going to do that,'" Strugar said.

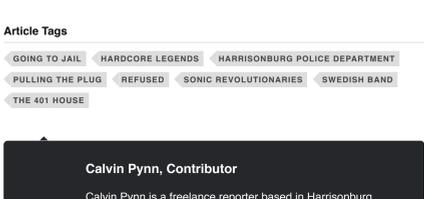
According to Refused, one of the officers then literally pulled the plug on the show, branding Strugar's career to an abrupt end in Harrisonburg. The band was about three songs into its set, halfway through the song "Rather Be Dead," and the crowd started chanting the lyrics: Rather be alive! Rather be alive!

Strugar and three others were arrested and charged with obstruction of justice and noise violations. He now works as a lawyer in Los Angeles, and although he only had to pay a fine after spending a night in jail, the charge still comes up from time to time.

"I still have to report it every single time I go to see a client in prison because I have to report every arrest and conviction as a lawyer — and I do a lot of prisoner's rights work," Strugar said.

Jenkins was also cited when he refused to leave while waiting to pack up the PA, which belonged to WXJM.

"They were just like 'get out,' and I was like, 'I can't get out, it's a student-run station, it's our PA, you don't just walk away from it,'" he said.



The police report from the HPD's third and final visit to The 401 House

According to Strugar, Refused almost seemed relieved that their arduous tour was over.

"They felt like they were saved by the cop from living out this last gesture about they had already sort of declared it over. I think maybe surprisingly they felt good about what happened, and they didn't want to still be playing music with each other at the time," Strugar said.

Afterward, Refused published a statement titled Refused Are F— Dead — their last official press release — which recounted their final show in Harrisonburg and vowed that they would never reunite.

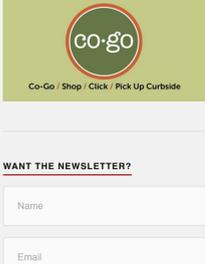
Eventually, a change of heart

Despite their 1998 post-plug-pulling vow, Refused reunited in 2012 with a series of small shows before making an official comeback at Coachella. In 2014, they reunited for good and have toured consistently since and released three new records. The latest, the Malignant Fire EP, was released on Nov. 20. Refused also recently recorded music as fictional band "Samurai" for the long-awaited video game, Cyberpunk 2077.

Twenty-two years after Act I of Refused's career ended in Harrisonburg, the show at The 401 House lives on in local lore.

"You would never see Refused in a basement these days. It's something you would want in a punk show," Jenkins said.

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