

(S4,E3) Reparative Juggalo Studies

I'm going to give you a peak behind the curtain when it comes to writing episodes for this podcast. I am a clown. Just a silly little goose. People who have spent large amounts of time with me can probably attest to the fact that sometimes I will say something with such conviction it will sound as though I have a well thought out point or have done a lot of research about the topic. This is almost never the case. One of my work colleagues once watched me do this and said, "Thank god you hate yourself, because otherwise I think you'd start a cult and I would probably be all in." Which is harsh but fair.

Anyway, about 75% of the ideas for these podcast episodes come from me saying something very confidently to someone, and then realising I have very little to back it up and thinking "Shit. I must be prepared for the next time someone asks me about this one very specific thing." Thus far, no one has asked me about any of the things, but now I have four seasons of a podcast and a lot of useless information about the cultural landscape. Some people become survivalists and learn to survive in the woods for days on end. I hoard small morsels of pop culture facts so I can survive a lull in the conversation at any given dinner party. Which is how we ended up at this week's topic.

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner – the podcast edition – and today I'm thinking about Juggalos.

So, if you can cast your mind back to 2020, you may remember that weird heady period where everyone was banding together to support each other and enact public health orders. It lasted for about four minutes, and it gave us a bunch of celebrities, including notable Palestinian genocide denier Gal Gadot, singing an off-key cover of Imagine like it would fix anything. In the midst of all that chaos, you might have seen a combination of praise and public surprise at horrorcore rap duo Insane Clown Posse's statement regarding the 2020 instalment of the annual Gathering of the Juggalos. In short, the event was cancelled. The statement read, in part:

"With tens of thousands of deaths due to the COVID-19 outbreak, we can't possibly in good conscience even consider trying to put on a Gathering... the bottom line is simply that we REFUSE to risk even ONE Juggalo life by hosting a Gathering during these troubling times."

Now, this is not out of step with everything else happening at this point, but people were surprised because the reputation of Insane Clown Posse is one of terrible music with gruesome lyrics, and the

reputation of their fans – the Juggalos – is one of cult-like loyalty, poverty, violence and drug use. So when the band came out with a cohesive statement that aligned with public health orders and expressed concern for human life, the American media class was awash with awe and praise. They were interviewed by large music publications and some profiles were written which generated quotes that revealed (shock, horror) that not only were the band complex people, but that they had thoughts on the world that weren't destructive or exclusionary.

I shared some of these quotes with a friend of mine and joked that it was time for 'Reparative Juggalo Studies'. Because my primary memories of Insane Clown Posse and the Juggalos was their song Miracles that went viral in 2009 for the iconic line, "Fucking magnets, how do they work?" [insert clip here] And I thought that can't be all there is to them. So then I read some writing on the Juggalos, and I was shocked to find that everything that has ever been written about them is fucking stupid. I got really annoyed about classism, policing and the American legal system. And guess what... I'm about to make that your problem. I thought we could take a little poke around the history of the Insane Clown Posse, their fans' classification as a gang by the FBI and their radical approach to humanity and inclusivity. Let's get into it shall we?

For a little bit of background, Insane Clown Posse formed in Detroit in 1989 as a white gangsta rap duo made up of childhood best friends, Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope. They're best known for their horror-inspired lyrics,

elaborate stage shows and wearing distinctive clown grease paint as part of every performance. All of their music is thematically centred around a Dark Carnival, and each album is referred to as a Joker's Card that builds on the narrative of specific characters from the Carnival mythology.

Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope both grew up poor, and their music often incorporates stories of abuse, poverty and neglect which are heavily drawn from their own life pre-fame and then sensationalised through their characters. This obviously touches something in their fanbase, and their natural showmanship has meant that they continuously built on the pieces of their performance that resonated most with their audience. They started to develop a cult-like following, and fans were dubbed Juggalos after a 1994 performance of the band's song The Juggala, where Violent J used the word to refer to the crowd who, by all accounts, lost their mind over it.

The first Gathering of the Juggalos was held in 2000, and featured Juggalo Championship Wrestling and a particularly rowdy performance by Insane Clown Posse that resulted in the venue shutting them down. By the next year, the Gathering had expanded to feature outside acts, including rappers like Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-n-Harmony, and punk acts like The Suicide Machines. As the Gathering has grown annually, so has the reputation of the Juggalos. Their distinctive style has morphed them into a sort of cultural shorthand for poor, white and under-educated. Despite having limited chart success and remaining an almost exclusively underground act,

Insane Clown Posse and by extension, their fans have become synonymous in the pop mainstream with the eccentric rituals associated with attending a concert – donning clown paint, being sprayed with the off-brand soda, Faygo, greeting each other with the phrase 'Whoop whoop!' and referring to their motley crew as a 'family' with unrivalled sincerity.

Despite writing horror show lyrics about death by hatchet, including a murder-based version of the Cha-Cha-Slide that went viral on Tik Tok recently, Insane Clown Posse preaches a kind of radical acceptance of each other and the wider community. In amongst the carnage, they have lyrics that oppose racism, bigotry, domestic violence and child abuse. For example, the song Your Rebel Flag off their 1992 album Carnival of Carnage, is about killing racists. It ends with a threat to scalp a skinhead and take a shit on the Confederate flag. Every now and again someone will resurface the band's merch that says "Fuck your rebel flag" in large red text, accompanied by an image of an evil clown burning said flag. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter Protests in 2020, the band actually brought back a re-print of the shirt. Is it my cup of musical tea? No, but the shirt rules. Were they like two decades ahead of their time for the mainstream flag-based culture war we keep having to have for some goddamn reason? Yes.

They have a deeply caring approach to their work and their fan-base that often shocks people when it breaches the mainstream. I think part of this surprise stems from an ingrained classism that people don't acknowledge often enough when they talk about Juggalos. The

band's fan base, in spite of their inclusive doctrine, has remained largely poor and white, though it is interspersed with more diverse members depending on location. Though they hail from Detroit, the bulk of their fanbase sits in pockets of rural America, which is why you'll often see the Gathering being held in places like Ohio and Oklahoma.

With that demographic makeup comes certain assumptions about the nature of Juggalo beliefs. Rural poverty is often associated with racism, homophobia and close-mindedness, and those assumptions often come from a mighty tower of "enlightened" middle class superiority that refuses to acknowledge that its own shortcomings are similar, even if they're dressed up in a veneer of the 'correct' language and self-satisfied liberal positioning.

One of the things that initially got me interested in looking into the Juggalos for an episode is a wide-ranging interview that Violent J gave to Stereogum. It's been shared repeatedly with the same kind of awe that people had at the COVID statement, specifically because of Violent J's discussion of the band's early homophobia. A lot of the context gets stripped of the pieces that are screenshotted for sharing, so I'm going to give you a quick summary because I think it's important. At one point, the interviewer brings up the group's collaboration with Three 6 Mafia in the year 2000 and, unprompted Violent J mentions that he has mixed feelings about the song because he's proud of the collaboration but he's embarrassed about the lyrical content.

The interviewer – perhaps tellingly – asks if he’s referring to the fact that he opens his verse by threatening to stab someone with an umbrella, and he says no – the thing he’s actually embarrassed about is that he makes a racially insensitive joke about children starving in Ethiopia. The interviewer – again, tellingly – says he’d never considered it.

Violent J says he is ashamed of the comments, before (again, unprompted) moving on to talk about the group’s homophobia. In their early days, they liberally used homophobic slurs to reference people they didn’t like and even entered into a notorious feud with Eminem which involved both parties implying that the other was gay. A lot of baby queers I know don’t remember, and it’s hard to picture because the needle has actually moved quite a lot culturally, but this was the year 2000, so even when slurs weren’t involved, implying that someone else sucked dick in their downtime was enough to be a phenomenal insult. Highbrow stuff.

Anyway, he mentions that the homophobia was so normalised for them at that point that even though their producer was gay, it didn’t occur to them to knock it off. It’s worth reading the full quote here because it speaks a lot to the Juggalo philosophy as laid out by Insane Clown Posse. He says:

“The amount of gay Juggalos out there is really surprising. I think about them doing their research and getting the old records, getting excited about it, and getting their hearts broke or something, you know? I tell my daughter, “For the rest of your life, when your friends ask

why your dad said that, say it’s because your dad was a fool. Don’t defend me. Say I was a fool then, but I’m not now.” There’s no excuse. I was going with the flow, and that’s the very thing we preach against – being a sheep. And that’s what I was doing.”

The interviewer tries to give Violent J an out, saying: “It’s cool to hear you grappling with it, though.”

And Violent J doubles down, saying: “It’s not cool. It shouldn’t even be an issue. We’re smarter than that. As Juggalos, we’re not judgmental... It’s a terrible thing.”

Now, like I said, these quotes have been pretty widely shared, I think because this feels like a contradiction to people. Because when people think of Insane Clown Posse fans, they’ve immediately pictured a poor kid in rural Ohio calling them a homophobic slur before whoop-whooping off into the distance. But, as something of an expert in the genre, I think this is maybe the best celebrity apology I’ve ever seen.

It’s come forth unprompted – no one is trying to cancel Insane Clown Posse. The mainstream isn’t thinking about them. It’s just extremely caring, loving and earnest. Violent J pictured some gay kids trying to connect with their music and become part of the Juggalo family, realised they might not be able to because of something he had done, thought about it and not only corrected course, but refused to accept being let off the hook by someone unaffected by his words.

In a world awash with notes of apologies prompted by bad behaviour being re-surfaced in the media, this is sincerity that appears to be motivated exclusively by care for the people that idolise them. Their philosophy for being a Juggalo is based on absolute acceptance of people, no matter the circumstance. This was an active choice born of their own poverty that they've continued to build on by ensuring that their fan base knows that they are cared for and part of something larger.

So, you're perhaps wondering where my irritation at the American legal system and policing comes in. Enter the National Gang Intelligence Centre, or NGIC, which was formed by the FBI in 2005. The NGIC is a multi-agency effort that serves as a centralized intelligence resource for gang information. Juggalos were on their radar and in 2011 the NGIC included them in their annual National Gang Threat Assessment. Juggalos are now legally recognised as a gang in Arizona, Utah, California and Pennsylvania.

I want us to take a pause here to think about our understanding of the word 'gang'. Merriam-Webster defines the word gang as "a group of persons working to unlawful or antisocial ends" or "a group of persons working together". That's a pretty loose definition – I think the average person is probably picturing something like the Crips or the Bloods, or a biker gang like the Hell's Angels or the Rebels. Even if your understanding of those gangs and their founding is tainted by too much copaganda to get through in 20 minutes, we can all agree that to do the sort of drug dealing and territory warring that's portrayed in

things like crime shows, which are ostensibly based on actual gang activity, gangs need to be reasonably unified and organised. Getting people high requires a weird amount of admin. Seems pretty reasonable, right?

Wrong, according to the FBI and the NGIC. The 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment Report says:

"Most crimes committed by Juggalos are sporadic, disorganized, individualistic, and often involve simple assault, personal drug use and possession, petty theft, and vandalism."

Now, you might be wondering, "Alex, if the crimes are sporadic, disorganised and individualistic, and mostly involve things like personal drug use, are these perhaps not just... crimes rather than gang activities? And perhaps, Alex, are these not crimes that are often associated with the kind of poverty we know Juggalos experience?" Don't worry, the report has you covered in its next sentence.

"Open-source reporting suggests that a small number of Juggalos are forming more organized subsets and engaging in more gang-like criminal activity, such as felony assaults, thefts, robberies, and drug sales."

Oh great, thank God there's open-source reporting to back this up. What are the open sources? That would be a combination of news media reporting and inter-law-enforcement-agency say-so. And boy-howdy, have they uncovered some crimes. For example, in Arizona a group of unhoused youths had organised and called themselves Juggalos. In fact,

According to the report, large numbers of transient or unhoused people had been identifying as Juggalos, and that made them more dangerous because they could move on and "have access to a support system wherever they go".

Oh no, people have been failed by the state and are turning to each other for mutual aid in times of crisis. The horror! Now, look. Not all Juggalos are saints. The Insane Clown Posse aren't saints. Having grown up in poverty and become involved at a young age in some street crime, both band members have been arrested at various points over the years. Violent J spent 90 days in prison at the beginning of his career, and both band members and their entourage were arrested for a brawl in a Waffle House in the early 2000s.

Likewise, various Juggalos have committed crimes on an individual level. A couple of other sections of the report refer to murders or violent assaults committed by Juggalos. The report has sources and I tried to track down the ones that were from the news media. After a cursory search, I could only find two reports still available and in both cases, the crimes were interpersonal disputes that escalated. In one of the examples, the reason the media report exists in first place is because state prosecutors were planning on seeking so-called 'gang enhancements' to extend one of the defendant's sentences because he identified as a Juggalo during the interview and had the Insane Clown Posse's hatchet-man logo tattooed on his arm.

Call me crazy, but it does seem like

something of a loop for police to be using a report about police wanting to classify Juggalos as a gang in order to provide evidence for the report where they seek to classify Juggalos as a gang. In fact, the Insane Clown Posse's lawyer agrees. Discussing the suit filed in association with the American Civil Liberties Union, or ACLU, against the FBI, to challenge the gang designation, Farris Haddad said this about the information provided by the agency:

"The first thing we received from the FBI, which was the main thing they gave us, was about 20 to 30 internet articles, it was almost as if you gave the assignment to a high school student and they just went online and printed out a few articles as evidence."

Which is horrifying when you think of the potential that gang affiliation has to cause real-world harm for people – they can end up in the gang database, which can subject them to more intense and continued scrutiny from law enforcement for the rest of their life. They can be denied housing and employment, or have their children taken away. Simple things like wearing an Insane Clown Posse t-shirt or having a band tattoo can characterise you as someone to be feared to a jittery and armed police officer.

Travis Linnemann and Bill McClanahan outline how the concept a gang is established in the public consciousness and reinforced by academics, news media and law enforcement, who they refer to as "gang talkers". They write, "The power of the gang talker, then – a power that establishes, reifies and nurtures the fundamental power of police – is in its

ability to craft a digestible and repeatable classification, and then communicate that classification socially until it is made real by the police power in the moments of confrontation, hunt, capture, or death."

In other words, by classifying the Juggalos as a gang, the police are ensuring that they continue to create the circumstances in which they are able to accuse Juggalos of engaging in gang activity. Recently the 6th Circuit court upheld the gang classification in the ACLU suit because the Insane Clown Posse and the ACLU have supposedly failed to provide proof that the label is harming them. That result stems from the fact that very few people are willing to challenge whether gangs or gang behaviour as defined by the FBI exists at all. In one paper I read, where the authors went out to talk to Juggalos at a march, the authors concluded that even though the Juggalos appeared pretty peaceful, they could still be classified as a gang because they engaged in violent behaviour, smoked weed, and performed gang identifiers by making signs with their hands and wearing gang colours and symbols. The researchers do clarify that by "violent behaviour" they mean the crowd started a mosh pit during the concert, and that by "gang identifiers" they mean that fans were making the letters J and L for 'Juggalo Love' with their fingers and wearing Insane Clown Posse Merch. By this definition, we have to start arresting every K-pop boyband member for throwing up finger hearts at their fans, and me right now, for wearing a t-shirt for a band I like. We also have to start raiding sports bars on game day, stadiums during concerts and probably the homes of people who are deaf or hard of hearing because their hands are

moving too much.

If this is the kind of high-level police work we're engaging with – where a band and their fans can be criminalised overnight on the basis of being too proud of being poor and too keen to help each other out – then picture what that means for every minority group throughout history. Think of everything you've been told about crime and who's committing it and try to engage critically. Like Violent J said, you don't want to be a sheep, and there's nothing more sheep-like than being a bigot.

Well, it got a little heated there at the end, so I thought I would leave you in the outro with this very charming anecdote from Violent J's autobiography: when he was little, he caught a butterfly with his brother. It died in the night, and the pair were devastated so they held a funeral and promised each other, "One day, we will make it into heaven so that we can make sure the butterfly made it too, and so that we can apologise to the butterfly face-to-face. (If insects are not allowed into heaven, we would ask to change the policy on the Butterfly's behalf.)" Every major accomplishment, including every Insane Clown Posse album, is 'dedicated to the Butterfly'. He says, "I made that vow when I was pure as could be, before the world got to me, when the only thoughts I had were my own and in my heart. I cannot let the world fuck me up so bad that I lose faith in that vow." Anyway, I didn't expect to cry reading a Juggalo autobiography, but here we are. If you would like to cry about Juggalos, give me a whoop whoop next time you see me at the pub! Peace!



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