

The Party's Over

By Lindsey Choo and Patrick Hagan

Months after the 1988 Tompkins Square Park riot, a TV news report blamed some of the violence from that night on a local punk band called Missing Foundation. Led by artist Peter Missing, the band was known for trashing venues, spreading anti-gentrification slogans, and – according to the TV report – even had Satanic beliefs. In this episode, Lindsey Choo and Patrick Hagan set out to learn who Peter Missing was, and what role he played in the riot, if any.

TRANSCRIPT

HAGAN

If you were in a band, in New York City, in the late 1980s, you wanted to play at CBGB's.

[CBGB archival montage of music from The Ramones, Blondie, Patti Smith, The Talking Heads, Beastie Boys]

This cramped, dingy dive bar in Manhattan's Lower East Side is where bands like The Ramones, Blondie, Patti Smith, The Talking Heads, Beastie Boys ... all got their start.

CHOO

It could get pretty rowdy in there...especially when hardcore punk bands were in the lineup. But there was one band with a particular reputation. It was called: Missing Foundation.

WATERS

At that point, they were starting to become notorious, for their live shows for being disruptive or whatever.

CHOO

That's Jim Waters. He was Missing Foundation's sound guy for those shows.

WATERS

Hilly Crystal, the guy that owned CBGB's, didn't want them to play there.

HAGAN

That's because, the last time they played at CBGB's, the band and their fans had been disruptive. The green room was trashed, and people in the audience banged on the walls with pieces of metal rebar.

WATERS

But Pete promised him that nothing would happen. He said: “No, scouts honor, we don’t do stuff like that.”

HAGAN

The band’s frontman – Peter Missing – had to convince the venue to give them another shot.

WATERS

And then, just a couple days before the show, they started going around telling everyone something’s gonna happen.

CHOO

And something did happen. A show that would become legend in the Lower East Side. There aren’t any videos or recordings of it, but we spoke to a few people who were there.

Like RJ Smith. He was a music journalist at the time and a regular at CBGB’s. And on the night of January 21, 1988, he could tell something was different.

SMITH

It was a lot of people I didn't usually see at CBGB, or at the clubs, it was a little different. Just intense, gloomy looking young males. I don't know. I just remember overcoats maybe and short hair, and a real angry look.

HAGAN

The stage also looked unusual. Sitting next to the band's instruments were a few metal filing cabinets, and a bullhorn. And Jim was given a secret plan to carry out.

WATERS

My job was to do the sound check and make it seem like everything's good, and then the moment the band started playing, to move all the faders full volume, so everything would be maximized and just feeding back. And as soon as I did that, the club people came over and tried to push me out of the way. And I just kept shoving the faders up.

[fade in "Posada" – Missing Foundation]

WATERS

Really heavy kind of dum dum tch, dum dum, you know, something and the guitars like just as heavy fuzz, you know, distorted wall of noise and right away, all these people run up to the mosh pit at the front of the stage, and just start slamming into each other and it just gets wild.

CHOO

For people in the crowd who'd come out just for a night of live music, it was too much.

WATERS

They left. It was like "Oh my God this is rock and roll! Oh shit!" So you know, it was too scary for them.

HAGAN

Then, the band activated what they called the "gravity switch," and started throwing stuff into the audience.

SMITH

Lit candles are flying through the air and broken glass.

WATERS

Mark picked up his whole drum set and threw it into the audience.

SMITH

Garbage barrels were lit on fire and rolled through the crowd.

WATERS

They had these big, massive speakers on each side of the stage.

SMITH

Really big monitors hanging from chains, and somehow, those guys in the band and in their fan circle, got that pulled down and brought one down crash onto the club floor.

WATERS

One of them was just lying on the ground.

SMITH

And for a second I thought "Okay I hope this didn't land on somebody, because that totally would have killed them."

WATERS

I heard that there was blood on the ground? I don't know, I didn't see any.

SMITH

There was definitely blood around.

HAGAN

Leading the performance like a maestro of chaos, was Peter Missing, who stood at the edge of the stage and screamed into the bullhorn.

When he wasn't screaming, he jumped into the audience and got in people's faces.

WATERS

I'm sure he was trying to get people to like riot, you know, like, that's typically what he would do.

[fade out "Posada" – Missing Foundation]

CHOO

And later that year, the band would be accused of doing just that.

CROWD (ARCHIVAL)

[shouts and cheers, whistle blowing, drumsticks tapping against each other, music in the background]

It's our fucking park! It's our fucking park! It's our fucking park! It's our fucking park!

On the night of August 6, 1988, people gathered at Tompkins Square Park on the Lower East Side to protest a 1am curfew. But what started as a peaceful demonstration, turned violent.

DERIENZO (ARCHIVAL)

Police are charging down Avenue A. They're charging down Avenue A. Full gallop. Full gallop.

[fade out archival, sirens]

CHOO

The NYPD showed up in full force. They charged at protestors and beat them with nightsticks.

HAGAN

More than a hundred police brutality complaints were filed after that night. The NYPD later admitted that police actions were “not well planned, staffed, supervised or executed.”

And yet, in the aftermath, some people were looking for something other than the police to blame and started to wonder about this notorious band that destroyed venues, whose logo was spray-painted everywhere, and who allegedly played a show in Tompkins Square Park right before the riot.

TAIBBI (ARCHIVAL)

[loud guitar noise, Missing Foundation performing]

What you’re looking at, and listening to, is not music. It’s something new, something called combat art.

CHOO

Just two months after the riot, CBS aired a 3 part investigation called “Cult of Rage”.

TAIBBI (ARCHIVAL)

The group is called Missing Foundation. And it is not idle fancy or mere speculation to suggest a link between Missing Foundation and the violence that exploded here at Tompkins Square Park last August. The New York Police

Department and the FBI have been searching for the roots and the details of that link, we found them.

We wanted to know – did that link really exist?

[fade in Shoe Leather theme music]

CHOO

Did Missing Foundation actually cause the Tompkins Square Park Riot?

And were they as twisted as the media makes them out to be? Or were they simply making the wrong kind of music, at the wrong time?

I'm Lindsey Choo.

HAGAN

And I'm Patrick Hagan.

CHOO

You are listening to Shoe Leather, an investigative podcast that digs up stories from New York's past, to find out how yesterday's news affects us today.

HAGAN

This season we go back to the summer of 1988, to the Tompkins Square Park Riot.

This is season 4: It's Our Fucking Park. You're listening to The Party's Over.

[fade out Shoe Leather theme music]

WELCOME TO THE LOWER EAST SIDE

HAGAN

When we started reporting this story, the first thing we did was reach out to Peter Missing himself. But, he didn't want to talk.

He lives in Berlin now, and said he "lives in 2023" and doesn't want to revisit the past.

So instead, we went looking for people who knew him and lived on the Lower East Side in the 80s – his old stomping grounds.

HAGAN (ACT)

Hi, I'm Patrick nice to meet you. Thank you for meeting with us.

CHOO

And that's how we met Marguerite Van Cook. She's an artist, teacher and old friend of Pete's. She came to New York in the 70s, when she was on tour with her band The Innocents, who were opening for punk pioneers The Clash.

VAN COOK

We had a manager who said he had booked us here in New York. And so we came to New York. And then when we got here, none of the gigs were real. And we had nowhere to go back to so I stayed in New York.

CHOO

She settled in the Lower East Side. But at first, Marguerite was actually afraid of her new neighborhood.

VAN COOK

Everything was destroyed, and all the buildings were vacant. It was pretty scary. There was a lot of drug dealing going on.

CHOO

Here's what you need to understand about New York at the time: by the end of the 1970s, after a decade of economic recession, the city had lost over 800,000 residents. They left behind thousands of vacant buildings. The city took them over, but left most of them just sitting empty.

And the Lower East Side was littered with these abandoned buildings. In a lot of ways, they defined the neighborhood.

HAGAN

But where many saw ruin, artists like Marguerite saw an opportunity.

VAN COOK

These empty spaces offered us a place to be creative.

HAGAN

Marguerite and others banded together to convert some of those abandoned buildings into art galleries and music venues.

VAN COOK

We were able to take these empty spaces for very little money and turn them into creative sites of production, community, competition, and joyfulness.

HAGAN

These spaces attracted young, emerging artists from all over. Including a 27-year-old named Peter Colangelo, who would later go by Peter Missing. We don't know much about his life before then, just that he was born in 1953 in the Bronx, and that, for as long as he could remember, he loved to paint.

That's why he moved to the Lower East Side in 1980, to this growing community of artists. And that's where he met Marguerite.

VAN COOK

I love Pete. I'm just going to say, I love Pete, have lots of his artwork. He's brilliant. He's a creative. And he's such a sweet guy. Yeah, until he's not, and then he can be a real bugger. But he has never done that to his friends.

HAGAN

Pete was primarily a street artist, and his colorful, busy murals were all over the neighborhood.

In a video lecture he posted on Youtube a while back, he remembers how, when he couldn't afford brushes he simply cut off a lock of his own hair and glued it to the end of a stick.

CHOO

And from what we've been able to piece together, Pete couldn't afford much. Not even the cheap apartments in the neighborhood, where you could get a room for \$50 a month or a full apartment for about \$200.

And so he became a squatter – meaning, someone who moved into one of those abandoned buildings, without paying rent or having any legal claim to be there.

HAGAN (ACT)

Oh wait. On the street there. In the hat.

CHOO (ACT)

Where?

HAGAN (ACT)

In the beret kind of hat.

CHOO (ACT)

That could be him. That could be him.

HAGAN (ACT)

With the glasses. Let's see. Frank? Hey!

CHOO (ACT)

Frank Morales was also a squatter at the time.

MORALES

My name is Frank Morales, I'm an Episcopal priest, ordained in 1977, a lifelong resident of the East Village, Lower East Side, and was part of a squatter scene first beginning in the South Bronx in the late 70s. And then later down here in the East Village from 85, through, you know, the decade, decade and a half following.

HAGAN

He explained how all the abandoned buildings in the Lower East Side made it a prime location for squatters.

MORALES

At that time, in the mid 80s, there were vast numbers of vacant houses. All throughout this neighborhood, particularly East of A here.

HAGAN

Frank was actually a pretty well-known guy in the squatting scene, and got connected with Pete.

MORALES

So Pete and I, we go back a long ways and I love Pete. He was just somebody I thought that I would like to give the space to. Because that's what you do. You just kind of try to support people who are out there doing stuff.

So, Frank gave Pete his apartment in a building squatters called The Sunshine Squat. He took us there.



The Sunshine

Squat, 2023.

MORALES

We're at, what is the number here? 719 East 6th Street, between C and D.

CHOO

The front is painted red, and the door to the building has a rustic design made out of iron. Frank says it's the same door from when Pete lived in the building. It was made by the squatters in an effort to fix up the place. Squatters often took it upon themselves to renovate the buildings they took over, something they called "sweat equity."

But beyond just finding a place to live, squatting was also thought of as a political movement – one that was spreading across the world.

MORALES

And part of the zeitgeist at that point, both in, you know, throughout Europe, whether it's Berlin or Brixton, or, you know, Rome, Paris, squatting was on the agenda. It was happening everywhere.

CHOO

The way Frank saw it, squatting was an act of protest against gentrification.

And by the 1980s, there were signs that the Lower East Side was gentrifying. Real estate developers saw dollar signs in all those abandoned buildings and started buying them up, with the promise of "cleaning up" the neighborhood.

Pete's friends say he saw it coming.

HAGAN

This community, that was a haven for squatters and artists, and Pete's new home – was under threat.

MORALES

He and I saw eye to eye. He and I had just different ways of articulating it. But we're basically on the same page, you know, the world is fucked. People got to, why they're not screaming about it is beyond me.

HAGAN

Well Pete did want to scream about it, and he found the perfect outlet to do so.

ORIGINS

[fade in "No Friends" – Nihilistics]

HAGAN

Starting in the 1980s, local bands like the Cromags, Agnostic Front, and the Nihilistics, took punk to new heights, playing harder, faster and louder than ever before, channeling an ever increasing rage towards authority and the status quo among America's urban youth.

It would eventually be known as New York HardCore or NYHC.

CHOO

Pete entered the fray with his own band called Drunk Driving – but it didn't last long. Then, around 1984 he moved to Germany, for reasons we still don't know, and then returned a year later, with an idea for a new band.

[fade out "No Friends" – Nihilistics]

He called it Missing Foundation. The name apparently comes from a government organization that hunted down people who escaped from the Soviet Union. We also think this is when he started going by the name Peter Missing.

He recruited a group of musicians, and the band started performing around the Lower East Side in empty lots, art galleries, really anywhere that would have them.

HAGAN

If Missing Foundation had a theme, it was, quite simply: destruction. Physical destruction, musical destruction, but also the destruction of what they thought was an unequal society. As Pete wrote on his website – in all caps as if he were yelling through a bullhorn:

“IT WAS A STATEMENT BEYOND DESTRUCTION WHICH IS ALSO A FORM OF CREATION. IT WAS A REBELLION AGAINST A GOVERNMENT WHO LOST SIGHT OF CULTURE AND HUMANITY.”

TSAKIS

Pete was nothing if not an agent provocateur.

HAGAN

That's Chris Tsakis, former guitarist for Missing Foundation.

TSAKIS

When he did his taxes at the end of the year, that would be his occupation, agent provocateur, because he really did like putting a thumb in the eye of anybody he perceived as part of the existing power structure.

HAGAN

Chris remembers his first rehearsal with Pete and the band.

TSAKIS

He looked like a skinny Italian guy, and he often wore a baseball cap backwards but for some reason it didn't make him look like a douche like it makes most people look like a douche. He seemed not all that concerned with his hygiene. Like one of those people that were, you know, deodorant, not going to use it

because it could be bad for me. And, you know uh, there was a lot of people in the band like that for whom, BO was a way of life.

CHOO

Chris says he found working with Pete to be...unpredictable.

TSAKIS

He seemed to not take himself all that seriously. But as soon as you would launch into a number, he was just all a ball of rage.

CHOO

And that rage would fuel Missing Foundation's music.

TSAKIS

You know, it was coming at him in this stream of consciousness type of lyrics that he would scream into this megaphone to where he was like red in the face, you know? And that band was a very violent band. They were about making a prolonged hypnotic racket.

[fade in WFMU archival of MF playing]

CHOO

At the time, Chris was working at a radio station — WFMU in New Jersey. So he invited the band to perform at the studio and got a friend to film it.

HAGAN

You can watch the video on YouTube. They're in a small room, with record shelves on the wall. On the left side, Chris plays guitar next to the band's bassist – Vince P. Both are a little stiff, focused on playing their parts, but also shooting nervous looks at the other side of the room, where members Mark Ashwill and Chris Egan – shirtless and slicked with sweat – bang on drums, percussion and metal cabinets with sticks.

In the far corner of the room, is Pete in his baseball cap, squeezing the mic with both hands, like he's strangling it.

At one point in between songs, the band apologizes for some of the damage.

BAND (ARCHIVAL)

That's the Missing Foundation and this is WFMU. Kaz, we broke your window, sorry...Sorry about the blood on the wall!

CHOO

At this, Chris laughs nervously, probably because there's actual blood smeared on the wall, next to the drumset. It looks like someone used their finger to draw the basic triangular shape of an upside down martini glass, and underneath it, some vertical lines that look like spilled liquor.

It was a symbol Pete came up with in the Drunk Driving days, and he attached a slogan to it: "The Party's Over."

By 1988, as Missing Foundation was reaching the height of its popularity, people were spray-painting the upside down martini glass all over the city. And soon, it was more than just a band logo.

KUBY

Their symbol, the upside down martini glass with the lines?

CHOO

That's Ron Kuby, a longtime attorney who represented a lot of activists from the Lower East Side.

KUBY

That ended up all over the Lower East Side all over New York City, and probably elsewhere, too, it quickly became the universal symbol opposing greed and gentrification.



The Party's Over

symbol in Brooklyn, 2023.

TAIBBI (ARCHIVAL)

The hints have been proliferating like a random virus all over the Lower East Side. MF, 1933, *The Party's Over*. By this summer, the symbolism was everywhere and spreading fast, reaching as far north as Fifth Avenue at 20th Street as far south as

the abandoned bandshell in East River Park. And everywhere you look on cars, killing every available patch of wall or brick in Alphabet City.

CHOO

Then in 1988, Missing Foundation released their most popular record, called: "1933 Your House is Mine." 1933 was the year the Nazi party took over in Germany, which Pete saw as a warning of what was coming in the U.S.

[fade in "Burn Trees" – Missing Foundation]

CHOO

The album's stand out song was called "Burn Trees," and would become an anthem for the neighborhood and for the fight against gentrification.

HAGAN

That's Chris Tsakis on the guitar.

TSAKIS

I mean, the whole idea of Burn Trees was about, like if you have trees in your neighborhood, it raises the property values and then people can't afford to live

there anymore kind of thing. So a lot of his writing came from this perspective of eat the rich and Occupy Wall Street and a lot of that stuff.

HAGAN

A New York Times review of the album described it as “mood music for urban chaos.”

And chaos is exactly what would break out on the night of August 6, 1988, during the Tompkins Square Park Riot.

[fade out “Burn Trees” – Missing Foundation]

And some would wonder – if Missing Foundation was somehow involved.

THE RIOT

CHOO

Here’s what happened in the park that night.

[fade in archival of riot]

Some residents in the neighborhood had complained about the conditions in Tompkins Square Park. The park was home to many of the city's unhoused. There was rampant drug use. And punk bands played blaring concerts in the park all night long. It had become the epitome of the gritty underbelly of the Lower East Side.

HAGAN

And so local officials imposed a 1am curfew, and the police were called to clear the park.

But some saw that as proof that the city was in fact trying to gentrify the neighborhood. Protestors came out to resist the curfew, and the police responded with brute force.

[cheering, yelling, whistle sounds]

CHOO

If you look at footage from the Tompkins Square Park riot, you can see a large white banner that says 1988 equals 1933, REVOLT – another one of Missing Foundation's slogans.

And in a way, it makes sense. The riot started out as a protest against gentrification, a cause Missing Foundation was now closely associated with.

[fade out archival of riot]

HAGAN

The NYPD was widely criticized for the way they handled the situation, and the captain who led the police response that night was fired.

But the NYPD also suggested that the violence came from somewhere else.

DERIENZO

So Captain McNamara comes out of his little headquarters trailer and comes out. And he's got this piece of paper with a Missing Foundation symbol on it and it says on it: If you burn our people, we're going to burn yours.

HAGAN

That's Paul DeRienzo, a reporter and activist who covered the riot.

DERIENZO

And the cop puts it in my face and he says, this is why we're here. This is why we're not leaving, because these are found on telephone poles in this neighborhood!

KUBY

I suspect that the NYPD was very interested in them.

HAGAN

Here's Ron Kuby, again, the attorney.

KUBY

The NYPD certainly recognized that when Missing Foundation was playing in public venues, often acts of civil disobedience and property centered violence would accompany them. So if you're looking for a bunch of anarchists and radicals and rock throwers and general disaffected people, if you're looking to find that group, you will find them at a Missing Foundation concert.

CHOO

There's this rumor that – just before the riot – Missing Foundation played a show at a concrete bandshell – you know one of those covered outdoor stages – in the middle of the park. Riled up by the performance, the crowd then went on to protest the curfew.

And here's the thing – Missing Foundation had been banned from almost all indoor venues in the city, because of their destructive shows. And so the outdoor bandshell was one of the few places they could perform.

But was there really a performance on August 6, 1988?

WATERS

I know that they didn't play that day.

CHOO

That's Jim Waters again, the band's sound guy.

WATERS

For sure. I mean, if they did, it was something impromptu where they just showed up and started doing something. But it wasn't some big planned event, you know?

HAGAN

We couldn't get a clear answer. We couldn't find any real, solid evidence that the band definitely played that day. But we also couldn't find proof that they didn't. We do know that Pete Missing and other band members were arrested at the riot. But Ron Kuby says that doesn't mean they incited the whole thing.

KUBY

I understand that people who went to that scene would often engage in activities that were considered to be antisocial, or in some cases, simply unlawful.

But no rational people suspected that Missing Foundation, whose music utterly lacks structure, melody, harmony, musicology or anything else, that somehow this group of anarchist musicians was deeply plotting rebellions.

So probably the strongest piece of evidence that I can tell you that while Missing Foundation certainly must have been looked at by the NYPD, nothing ever came of it. They were never charged with anything. There were people, lots of people, people I represented, who were charged with inciting the riot, who were charged with riot and Missing Foundation members were not among them.

CHOO

And yet, just a few months later, CBS ran a 3-part investigation suggesting pretty much the complete opposite.

TAIBBI (ARCHIVAL)

The group is called Missing Foundation. And it is not idle fancy or mere speculation to suggest a link between Missing Foundation and the violence that exploded here at Tompkins Square Park last August.

CHOO

Reporting from Tompkins Square Park, journalist Mike Taibbi looks like a poster child for an 80s New York City reporter. His dark beard looks like it's painted on his face, a long black leather coat hangs over his dress shirt and tie, and he's wearing one of those classic newsboy hats.

And in this multi-part investigation into Missing Foundation, he insists not only that the band was to blame, but that they might have been part of a far more sinister problem sweeping across the country.

SATANIC PANIC

HAGAN

In the second part of his report, Taibbi visits a basement apartment that Pete supposedly lived in at some point.

TAIBBI (ARCHIVAL)

Those first official questions about Missing Foundation led investigators to this basement apartment to Bowery and Sixth.

HAGAN

He and the building's landlord go down a dark stairwell, holding flashlights, as if they're entering an ancient tomb.

TAIBBI (ARCHIVAL)

The scene of destruction left behind by the apartment's occupants, David Kelly and Peter Colangelo was extraordinary, disturbing and in its unanswered questions, plain shocking.

HAGAN

They then enter an equally dark room, and their light beams reveal that it's just full of junk. Piles of trash, pieces of wood, empty metal cabinets, and a broken sink on the floor.

TAIBBI (ARCHIVAL)

And then there were the other hints amid the rubble, that something beyond mere political sloganeering had been going on in this windowless place. One wall spoke of hate, hate. Another, no pigs dead pigs, slashed over the MF poster. Helter Skelter, the Charles Manson battle cry was splashed across another wall. A gruesome photograph of a man impaled on a bed of nails sat astride a life size replica of the same bed of nails. The odd bone or vial of liquid was there pamphlets from satanic cults, a candelabra with the black and lavender candles using the Satanic black mask.

HAGAN

Essentially, Taibbi was accusing Pete of performing Satanic rituals. Of being a Satanist.

CHOO

And it turns out, Taibbi's story was just one blip in a media firestorm over Satanism in the 80s. Only a month before Taibbi's report, NBC aired this one-and-a-half hour special.

GERALDO RIVERA 2-HOUR SPECIAL!

DEVIL WORSHIP

EXPOSING SATAN'S UNDERGROUND



Geraldo reveals the many faces of Satanism: Human Sacrifices, Ritualistic Killings, Black Mass, Satanic Teenagers, Bizarre Cults! Tonight, learn what evil can do.



8PM 2, 4, 25 

PARENTAL DISCRETION ADVISED

Geraldo Rivera NBC

Special poster, IMDB

NBC NEWS (ARCHIVAL)

[music intro]

The investigative news group presents Geraldo Rivera's special: "Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground".

RIVERA (ARCHIVAL)

Whether a Satan exists is a matter of belief, but we are certain that Satanism exists. To some it's a religion. To others, it's the practice of evil in the devil's name. It exists, and it's flourishing.

HAGAN

There were plenty of news segments like this at the time, and watching them, you would think that Satanism was actually flourishing in all 50 states.

But, it wasn't. What was actually going on requires some context.

[fade in music]

CHOO

In the late 1970's America saw the rise of a new socio-political movement called The New Christian Right. Faced with an increasingly secular society, the New Christian Right wanted a return to traditional, Christian, family values. They

formed lobby groups, political action committees, and soon became a notable force in the Republican party, helping to elect Ronald Reagan in 1981.

Television played a major role in this movement. In the 1980s, there was an endless number of shows hosted by televangelists like Jerry Fallwell, who warned followers about the supposed Satanic forces taking over the country.

FALLWELL (ARCHIVAL)

Right and wrong don't change. Nothing is relative in God's economy. What was wrong 100 years ago is wrong today. Abortion has always been wrong. It will always be wrong. Pornography has always been wrong. It will always be wrong. Immorality, homosexuality is moral perversion, no matter what Liberace and Rock Hudson may have done to the minds of the people of this country.

HAGAN

Now, popular music has long been accused of spreading indecent or immoral messages. But televangelists took this to a new level by convincing people that the music industry was actively targeting whole segments of the population in order to corrupt them, and they could prove it.

In January 1982, the popular talk show Praise The Lord aired a segment demonstrating clear evidence of Satanic messages embedded in Led Zeppelin's classic song "Stairway To Heaven."

[fade out music]

CROUCH FAMILY (ARCHIVAL)

I've actually taken the exact piece of tape that you've just heard it off of. I've reverse-threaded the machine and I'm going to play that exact piece of tape backwards now. Okay?

You've not doctored it.

I've not doctored it in any way.

All right let's let's go ahead and start.

["Stairway to Heaven" played backwards]

Okay.

I heard something there.

Alright listen for, I live with Satan exactly. Might want to turn it up just a little out here on the floor. I live with Satan listen again.

["Stairway to Heaven" played backwards]

Okay.

I live with Satan.

How many in the audience heard that? All right.

[fade in music]

HAGAN

They later claimed that these messages could be subliminally absorbed by unsuspecting, innocent children even if they listened to it forwards. Horrified, Christian parents across the country started listening to their kid's records backwards, finding all kinds of Satanic messages. They contacted their local representatives, and in California a bill was proposed that would require record companies to label any music containing what they called "backmasking."

It didn't pass, but by the end of 1982, "backmasking" was all over the news.

[fade out music]

It was the beginning of a phenomenon we now call: Satanic Panic.

DOWNS (ARCHIVAL)

In addition to groups that are blatantly satanic, there are also many recordings, which some believe may contain Satanic references in the form of backward

messages. What's a popular song that has a reference to the devil in it? Chris Edmonds is a Detroit disc jockey.

EDMONDS (ARCHIVAL)

Stairway to Heaven

DOWNS (ARCHIVAL)

Whose specialty is finding secret recorded messages exhorting the devil by playing music popular with kids and reverse.

EDMONDS (ARCHIVAL)

A lot of people hear the phrase "my sweet Satan". Here, let me play this back.

["Stairway to Heaven" played backwards]

DOWNS (ARCHIVAL)

My sweet Satan.

CHOO

Backmasking would be blamed for all sorts of problems affecting America's youth, especially suicide. In several high-profile cases, parents whose children either attempted or died by suicide sued musicians like Judas Priest and Ozzy Osbourne.

Most of these cases were unsuccessful, because there was never any proof that a piece of music was the direct cause of suicide.

But the idea that popular music was brainwashing kids, stuck, and even spilled into mainstream politics.

In 1985, a group of women led by Tipper Gore – wife of then Democratic Senator Al Gore – formed the Parents Music Resource Center, or PMRC. And thanks to their political connections, the PMRC was able to secure a Senate hearing on September 19th, 1985.

GORE (ARCHIVAL)

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We are asking the recording industry to voluntarily assist parents who are concerned by placing a warning label on music products inappropriate for younger children due to explicit sexual or violent lyrics.

HAGAN

During the hearing, the PMRC brought out musicologists, child psychologists, and even a rock star-turned-priest to make their case.

Arguing on the other side, were record labels and musicians, including John Denver and Frank Zappa. But by far the most memorable moment of the event was when Dee Snyder, lead singer of the band Twisted Sister gave his testimony.

DANFORTH (ARCHIVAL)

Next we have Mr. Dee Snider, the Twisted Sister freefall talent group.

HAGAN

As soon as Snider enters the room, all the photographers leap up to get a better view. His hair is an explosion of curly yellow locks draped over his shoulders. He's wearing a tattered jean jacket, a black tank top, sunglasses and a cross around his neck.

DANFORTH (ARCHIVAL)

[gavel banging]

Mr. Snyder thank you for being here.

SNIDER (ARCHIVAL)

Thank you for having me. I don't know if it's morning or afternoon, so I'll say both: Good morning and good afternoon. I like to tell the committee a little bit about

myself. I'm 30 years old, I'm married, I have a three year old son. I was born and raised a Christian and I still adhere to those principles. Believe it or not, I do not drink. I do not smoke and I do not do drugs.

HAGAN

He then makes the case against any musical censorship.

SNIDER (ARCHIVAL)

The beauty of literature, poetry and music is that they leave room for the audience to put its own imagination, experiences and dreams into the words. There is no authority who has the right or the necessary insight to make these judgments. Not myself, not the federal government, not some recording industry committee, not the PTA, not the RIAA and certainly not the PMRC. I'd like to thank the committee for this time and I hope my testimony will aid you in clearing up this issue.

CHOO

But in the end, the PMRC got what it wanted. Two months after the hearing, the Recording Industry Association of America agreed to put a small, black-and-white sticker on some albums with the words "PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT LYRICS" – which we still see today.

HAGAN

So it looks like Missing Foundation was just another band swept up in a political crusade against all edgy, provocative music, blamed for all of society's problems.

But musicians knew that they had it the wrong way around.

VAN COOK

If there weren't problems, we wouldn't have to make the art. I feel that the art is being successful when it causes discomfort to people who are abusing other people.

CHOO

At this point we should say, Pete adamantly denies he was a Satanist. So do all the people we talked to about him. We also asked whether he lived in the apartment featured in Mike Taibbi's story, with all the disturbing images. Frank Morales, who set up Pete in his squat, said it's possible, but that any number of people could have come in afterwards to trash the place. He certainly doesn't remember Pete living that way.

We also tried to get a hold of Mike Taibbi, to ask him about the allegations against Pete and Missing Foundation. But we were never able to reach him, and our messages to his family members went unanswered.

THE AFTERMATH

CHOO

Ironically though, after his investigation into Missing Foundation aired, it was actually a good time for the band. Thanks to the attention they got from the stories, they booked a few European tours, and recorded a few more albums.

They even released a song that sampled audio from the riot.

[fade in "A Hunting We Will Go" – Missing Foundation]

HAGAN

But, inside the band, things weren't going so well. Based on what several former members told us, Pete wasn't the best bandleader, which might explain why members were constantly changing.

TSAKIS

I never heard anything along the lines of, you know, what you're doing is good. Keep doing it. I would hear things like, what was that riff? What was that thing you were playing? Play that again? You know, it would be like that.

HAGAN

Here's guitarist Chris Tsakis again.

TSAKIS

Because I didn't even think I was told when I was no longer in the band. I just don't remember being invited to the next rehearsal.

HAGAN

Basically, he was fired. There's still some bad blood between Chris and Pete, they even had a legal battle over royalties. But that said, Chris can't deny Pete's talent.

TSAKIS

So while I give him a lot of credit, for the outward facing aspects of Missing Foundation, he could have been, he could have dealt with the members of the band a little better.

CHOO

And as for the park, after another protest by locals on Memorial Day in 1991, the city closed Tompkins Square Park for renovations, and demolished the beloved bandshell. The city claimed they did it purely for safety and sanitary reasons, but nobody we spoke to believed that.

KUBY

They didn't need to do that. But the bandshell had become such a symbol of everything that the cops thought was wrong with the park. They very much wanted it to go. And afterwards, attached to the wall, at the old ninth precinct

was a big chunk of concrete that was labeled Tompkins Square Park bandshell. They kept it as a fucking trophy.

CHOO

That precinct is also gone now, so we couldn't go see the bandshell chunk for ourselves. And the spot where the bandshell once stood, is now a playground.

In 1993, Pete moved back to Germany, and settled in Berlin. Over the next few decades, he continued releasing music under the name Missing Foundation, but now he's shifted his focus back to his first love: painting.

MISSING SPEAKS

HAGAN

On a Tuesday in late March, I got an email at 4am. It was from Pete Missing.

Over the past few months, I had sent Pete updates on our reporting – who we were talking to, what we found – and kept reminding him that, if he ever wanted to share his side of the story, we were ready to listen.

Well, now it looked like he was ready to share.

HAGAN (ACT)

Are you ready?

CHOO (ACT)

Yes.

[phone ringing]

It took a few tries, but eventually:

HAGAN (ACT)

Hello?

MISSING (ACT)

Hello, is this Patrick?

HAGAN (ACT)

Yes, is this Peter?

MISSING (ACT)

Yes.

[fade in music]

HAGAN

Pete asked that we not record our interview with him.

CHOO

And then he told us that none of the people we interviewed could provide the true story of Missing Foundation, that only he could tell us exactly what happened all those years ago.

HAGAN

But he refused to do so.

He was convinced that the FBI was tapping his phone, something that Pete has alleged for decades, but we couldn't find any evidence of that

CHOO

So, I suggested doing an interview over Zoom, or through email.

HAGAN

But he still didn't want to talk about it. We asked him why and he told us that it was just too painful for him to revisit such a dark time in his life.

CHOO

This was a surprise to us. Up until now, we assumed that the 1980s were Pete's "golden years".

HAGAN

I mean, his band was on the nightly news, his logo was tagged all over the city.

CHOO

And the squatting movement he was so invested in, was in full swing.

HAGAN

Based on everything we've heard and read and watched, this guy was at the center of a cultural revolution.

CHOO

Isn't that what every artist wants?

HAGAN

I guess not this one. He told that, all he remembers from that time is being terrorized by the police, and misunderstood by everyone else.

CHOO

It seems like all that attention, especially after the riot, took its toll.

He much prefers his life in Berlin. He says it's quieter there, that the people are more civilized, that strangers say hello back to you on the street.

[fade out music]

HAGAN

There's a video online posted by Berlin's Museum of Urban Contemporary Art just a year ago, about a new mural being painted on the Schöenberg Community Wall. The artist is a 69-year-old American man, wearing a baseball cap, hoodie and jeans, all of which are too big for his skinny frame.

He certainly looks like the Peter Missing from all those old grainy videos – albeit with a few more wrinkles – but he sounds completely different.

MISSING (ARCHIVAL)

My art changed, it was more political in the beginning of the 80s, and as I went along I started thinking of the younger generation, so now my work is more friendly. It can reach a 3-year old and a grandmother and everyone in between, so that was the main goal of my work in this time.

HAGAN

As he speaks, he's sitting in front of his creation: a giant cluster of colorful, abstract shapes. Nestled in tightly among them are a few cartoon figures: a fish, a sailboat, a person pointing in the distance, and a bird perched on top of an upside down Martini glass.

["Burn Trees" – Missing Foundation]

CHOO

Shoe Leather is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. This episode was reported, written and produced by Lindsey Choo and Patrick Hagan

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[fade out "Burn Trees" – Missing Foundation]