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Social Sciences

On the Lower Frequencies: A Secret History of the City
Erick Lyle aka Iggy Scam
Soft Skull
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Before the blog came the ‘zine—an abbreviation of fanzine which described a fan-created, small-circulation publication directed typically at a subject or subjects of shared interest: a band, perhaps, or a grassroots political issue, or any one of a number of cultural “scenes.” ‘Zines tend to be narrowly focused, reproduced using mimeographs or Xeroxes, and written and distributed by a single individual or a small group.

Author Erick Lyle, also known as Iggy Scam, is known among West Coast punks as the man behind several ‘zines including *SCAM* and the unfortunately- but provocatively-titled *Turd-Filled Donut*, which chronicled and commented on street life among the fringier subcultures of San Francisco in the 1990s and the early years of the new millennium. It’s a world filled with homeless people, squatters, graffiti artists, punk musicians, poets and writers, and petty criminals—some of them simple outcasts, others political activists deliberately opposed to the consumer culture, middle-class values, the gentrification of inner-city San Francisco, and the war in Iraq, to name a few.

This isn't a book for everybody, although it's articulate, observant, often funny, and sometimes downright eloquent. The readers who appreciate it most will bring a fairly high degree of familiarity with such subjects as the geography of San Francisco, the ups and downs of local politics, and the general tenets of the punk philosophy and worldview, as the author provides little in the way of explanatory context. He doesn't explain, for instance, what "wheatpasting" or "generator shows" refer to, though an attentive reader will soon figure out that the former is the practice of slapping up posters, manifestoes, and the like, and that the latter describes concerts, art shows, and similar events staged in vacant buildings or street venues where ordinary electrical outlets aren't available. These practices and others like them are apt to be illegal to a greater or lesser degree, and skirmishes with the police is a recurring motif throughout.

Still and all, you don't need to know who Gavin Newsom, Harvey Milk, or Wavy Gravy are in order to appreciate the author's set-piece vignette of *Hunt's Donuts* (Open 25 Hours a Day), a low-rent landmark once described by a San Francisco official as "the Epicenter of Crime," nor need you agree that "property is theft" to share the glee of punk activists as they dream up new strategies for flouting authority. Indeed, by the time you've finished reading *On the Lower Frequencies*, you may well conclude that a purple Mohawk can coexist with a lively intelligence and a welcome sense of humor, and that the punk sensibility is more than just defiant nihilism.