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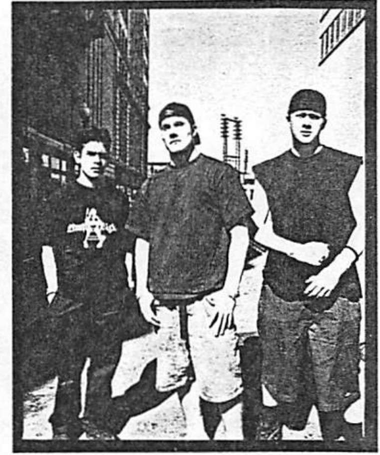


Among the Mooks

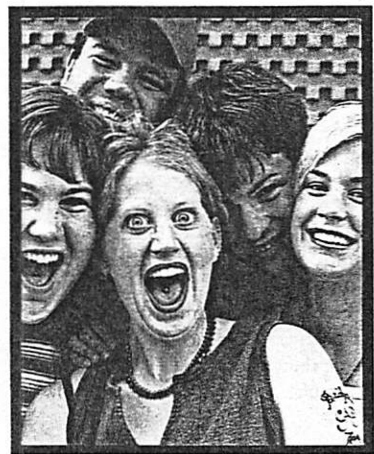
As entertainment entrepreneurs align the fantasy lands of rap, rock, wrestling and pornography, a generation of fans grows ever more brutish. By RJ Smith Photographs by Jake Chessum

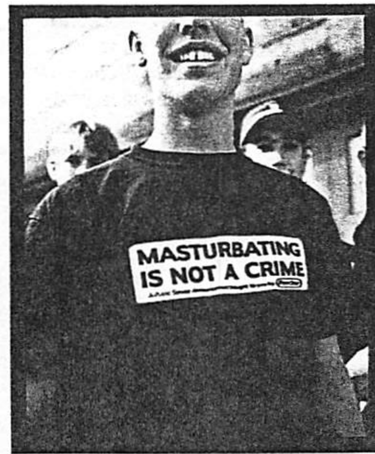
Jimmy Iovine, co-chairman of Interscope Geffen A&M, slips the videocassette in the player and plunks down in a comfy chair. He's screening an early episode of "Farmclub.com," a weekly music show he's producing on the USA network.

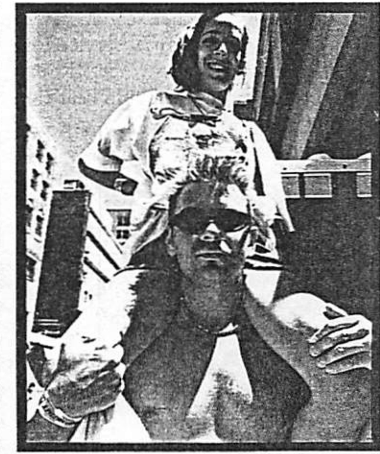
"Farmclub" runs right after the World Wrestling Federation's "Raw Is War," a let-them-eat-beefcake extravaganza that is cable TV's highest-rated show. The conjunction was no accident. Iovine avidly pursued it because he wanted to capture the young males who watch wrestling. The star of this episode is unquestionably Fred Durst, front man for Limp Bizkit, a group that minted rap-metal, the aggressive, hypermacho and extremely lucrative new pop-music genre that mixes rap with rock. "Watch this," Iovine says. "This is what 'Farmclub' is all about." Just then, on the tape, Durst, enraged that the show has just run the wrong version of a Limp Bizkit video, threatens to hide a TV camera somewhere on the person of a staff member.

This attitude is quite possibly the future of white male youth culture — camera-ready anger, staged to resemble wrestling. Iovine is an entrepreneur of rage. He linked arms with the rap label Death Row in the early 90's and made the gangsta rappers Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre household names. He signed Nine Inch Nails, whose transgressive lyrics are the target of Washington conservatives, and he, along with Dr. Dre, brought the world Eminem, the anti-role-model white rapper who has recently been embroiled in a public dust-up over virulent antigay lyrics. Iovine sees a great future ahead for artists who take hip-hop in new directions. "Do you understand the impact on young white America that hip-hop is having?" he asks. To illustrate, he

Generation *echt*: Fast, white and out of control, fans make their way to a Detroit concert featuring the rap-metal group Limp Bizkit and the rappers Cypress Hill.







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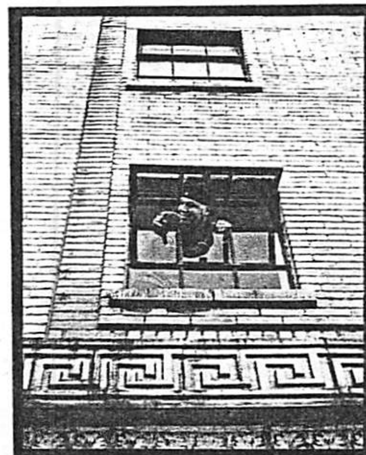
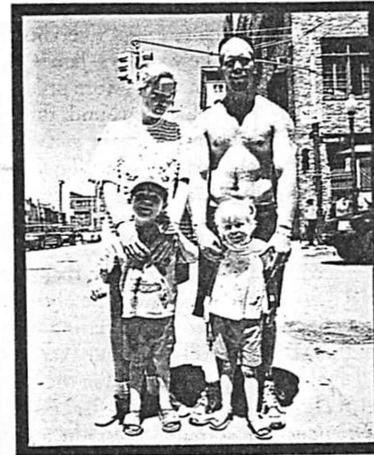
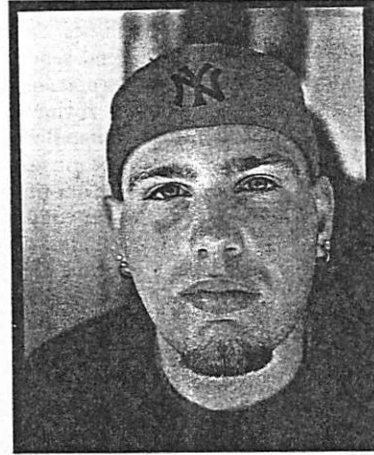
WOMEN'S ATHLETICS

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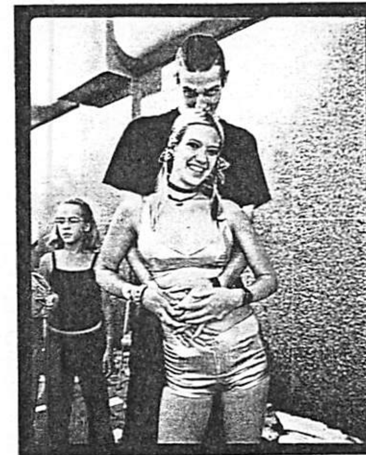
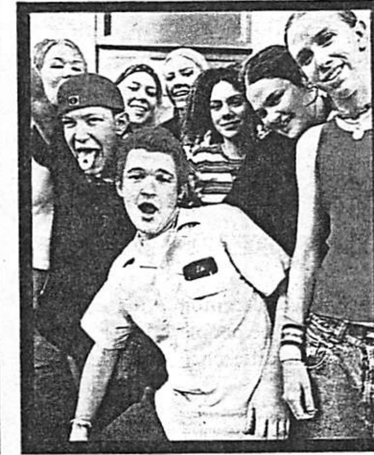
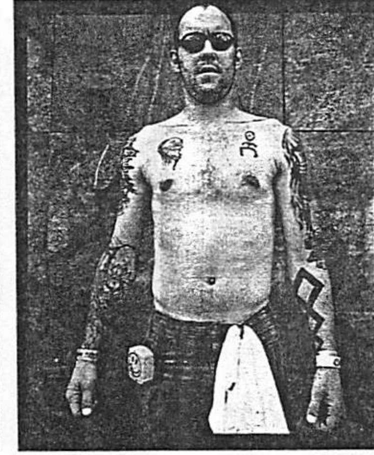
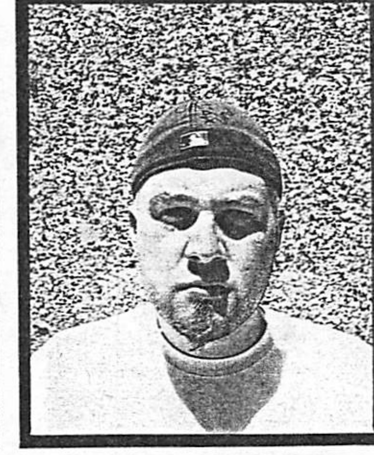
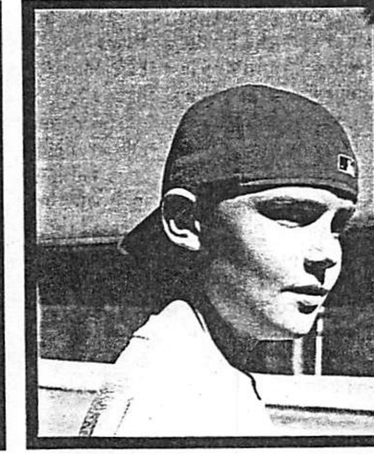
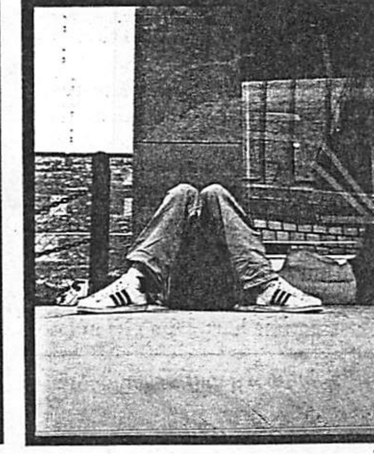







Limp Bizkit


searches his Los Angeles office for the F.B.I. tally of crime statistics he keeps close at hand. "Crime has gone down remarkably. And rap music has been the biggest it's ever been. So do guys like Tupac and DMX deserve the Nobel Peace Prize? I don't know. What do you think?" He's joking, but only just.

It's no wonder that Iovine frequently ponders the connections between outrageous music and outrageous behavior, if only because his artists and others like them often have a foot on both sides of the line. Take last year's Woodstock, where rap-metal had its messy coming out. The artists Rage Against the Machine, Korn, the Insane Clown Posse and Everlast all played there, all of them fusing heavy guitar sounds to boastful, profane hip-hop attitude. Promoters were hoping for a nice millennial assortment of good vibes, while audiences and artists clearly wanted to carve out a nastier slice of history. It was Durst who put his finger on the scale. Before the sea of Woodstock humanity, he announced: "They want us to ask you to mellow out. They said too many people are getting hurt. Don't let nobody get hurt, but I don't think you should mellow out." And then the seams split open. Limp Bizkit played their testosterone-drenched "Break Stuff," and the mood changed.

"Break Stuff" rants against "the he says-she says" and builds to a vow to "break your . . . face tonight." That's the quintessential rap-rock moment, when everyday pressures and the old he says-she says ignites in an updraft of rage.

At Woodstock one woman was reportedly raped as Limp Bizkit played, and a gang rape allegedly occurred while the band Korn performed. Crisis counselors say there were even more attacks, and at party's end, fires broke out all over the grounds as rock fans trashed vehicles, automatic teller machines and vendor stalls. There were few reports of anybody mellowing out.

Populist or fascist? The Rock climbing the turnbuckle at a touchstone of mook culture, a W.W.F. show.

Iovine thinks those who link Limp Bizkit to the Woodstock melee miss the point. Earlier that day, he informs me, a 6-year-old Michigan youth shot and killed another child. Iovine's artists have been blamed before when fans have engaged in criminal behavior, so he is quick to say now that music is not responsible for the Michigan killing. While he laments what happened at Woodstock, he contends that pushing audiences to respond is what great art does. "Whether it's Oscar Wilde, William Burroughs or Fred Durst," Iovine says, "the bar is always going to be raised on how you evoke and provoke emotions in people. There will always be people condemning it. And there will always be people relating to it. That's the difference between young and old."

There are plenty of women
Just taking your top off and surfing the mosh

IT IS A THURSDAY NIGHT, AND THE young in Fort Wayne, Ind., stand on thin ice. They have ripped up the plywood that covers the hockey rink at the Allen County War Memorial Coliseum, and they stand in their work boots and sneakers, elbow to elbow, packed like sardines on ice. Here in the mosh pit, there's no room to fall.

The lights go out, fireworks shoot over the stage and a punishing hip-hop groove plays on electric guitars. Kid Rock takes the stage: he wears a floor-length white fur coat and a black bowler with an ostrich plume and escorts an exotic dancer on each arm. He is a long-haired rapper from Detroit, but onstage he looks like a vanilla version of a blaxploitation pimp.

It's quite a sight, but not the most amazing one. As the music roars on, the fans raise the plywood sheets over their heads. Limber teenage boys leap up on top of them, as others pass the boards across the arena. Teenage girls climb up, too, and pull their tops off as the boys whoop. Every few minutes, a girl loses her footing and falls, sometimes headfirst, into a whirlpool of grasping hands.

This has happened before. The kids surfing over the roiling pit, the shouts at the girls to show their breasts, the clutching hands — there is nothing spontaneous to any of it. It already happened, of course, at Woodstock. This was a re-enactment of a crime, played for laughs the second time around.

"Everybody wants to slam, have some fun," says James Taylor, a 22-year-old at the show. "More or less, when you slam somebody to the ground, the crowd will pick them right up and make sure they're all right. It's all about having fun." Taylor traveled with his friends from Kokomo, Ind., to Fort Wayne in a white stretch limousine. "My parents still keep an eye on me," he says. "They're like, 'Oh, you're going to go down there and get into trouble, get stomped on in one of those mosh pits.' They think it's all violent and everybody's gonna get hurt. It's not about that. People get out there, they may hit you in the face, but once they see they hurt you, it's all about love, you know?"

In the pit, rage gets tested, stoked, shared. When rioters burned police vehicles and smashed windows in downtown Los Angeles after the Lakers won the N.B.A. championship, one witness told a reporter he thought he was at a Rage Against the Machine concert. Many of the rampagers were white kids, throwing rocks and flashing signs for gangs they don't belong to.

This is an audience that grew up immersed in hip-hop, for whom rap music wasn't an option; it was elemental. But if hip-hop is "for" everybody, it was created by African-Americans, and when white kids pick it up, they can't help but transform it. Right now, what white artists have taken from hip-hop is a towering sense of resentment. Rap today has a well of aggrievement, and when a black artist is sloppy about his rage, race relations have a way of focusing the issues for him. It doesn't take much thinking to imagine what a black rapper might be mad about. But when white kids start talking that talk, the rage often comes out inchoate; it appears and vanishes like a half-formed thought. And it doesn't take much to release it. A parking ticket, a dirty look, a crossed wire, and a whole mass of young men are ready to act as if a substitute teacher has walked into the classroom. All bets are off. And the easiest targets get flayed the worst: women, of course, and gays.

But for all the pushing and falling in the Fort

RJ Smith is a staff writer for Spin magazine.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAKE CHESSUM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Wayne pit, people are clearly enjoying themselves. Half of the 98 percent-Caucasian crowd is dressed for a tractor pull, the other half for a Puffy video. There are longhairs with John Deere caps and denim jackets drinking beer alongside pals wearing Fubu shirts and Avirex footwear. Rednecks dress like roughnecks, and people who in their daily lives keep a distance from black culture have given themselves a ghetto makeover. I ask one fan who loves Kid Rock, Limp Bizkit and even the Marxist, multiracial Rage Against the Machine if he has many black friends. He smirks and removes his baseball cap (red and turned backward, the same way Fred Durst wears his). He is a skinhead, and he knows he has answered my question without saying a word.

I grew up in Detroit — rap-metal's ground zero, home to Kid Rock, Eminem and the Insane Clown Posse — and I knew people who needed Kid Rock in their lives, an artist raising the self-esteem of doormats everywhere. The last time I saw my best friend from high school, he was standing on the hood of his car, smashing in the windows with his dad's golf clubs. I bet today he and his children are Kid Rock fans. Boasting that he comes "straight out of the trailer," Rock hurls the epithet of "white trash" back at the world, much in the same way gangsta groups like N.W.A. did with Compton and "nigga." At its best, the current fusion of rap and metal lets people who feel unblessed by the economy express some righteous anger. It tells them that what's happening to their lives is not their fault. But more often, rap-metal aims a lot lower. It tells people who feel they've been treated badly that it's O.K. to act badly in return. If the world makes you out to be a brute, why not throw the brute back at the world?

The new rap-metal frequently seems calculated — to offend, to rake in a quick, lewd buck. Consider the Bloodhound Gang and their new album, "Hooray for Boobies," which features many breast shots from the animal and human kingdoms, flaccid rapping, humor akin to "South Park" and a song dedicated to a porn star. A record company exec couldn't pander any more precisely to the new Woodstock Nation. The influence of pornography on this culture is worth noting. The band Korn, for example, garnered early credibility among fans by posting interviews with porn stars on its Web site. The Insane Clown Posse goes on cable-access porn shows. Fred Durst appeared in "Backstage Sluts 2." Porn gives bands cool points and boosts their fan base.

There is something creepy about the ongoing compulsion to wed rap and metal and from there to fuse it with wrestling and porn and seemingly every other precinct in popular culture. And it hasn't peaked yet. Recently, Eminem's new album broke records for first-week sales. And later this year, the W.W.F. honcho Vince McMahon inaugurates a new football league, the XFL, which has already been hyped by Dick Butkus as an ultraviolent game for men who aren't afraid to get hit.

Still, the music itself can sometimes be profound. Eminem, in his brilliant "Guilty Conscience," ponders robbing a liquor store, taking advantage of a 15-year-old and killing a cheating wife. He gleefully forces you to consider whatever differences exist between thoughts and deeds while making you extremely uncomfortable to discover that maybe the two aren't far enough apart. (And judging from recent reports of his offstage behavior, words and deeds might not be so distant for Eminem, either.) It is about the meaninglessness of good intentions and maybe even the death of them.

The heroes of this music are broken males, contorted by forces beyond their control. And among the fans, there is an unexamined bitterness just below the surface of their tattooed skin, expressed through a rare corner of popular culture that deals with class issues. At a time when even country music is less likely to express any working-class affinity than Al Gore or George W. Bush, there's a blatant populist appeal here. The Bloodhound Gang record alone references the Waffle House, trailer parks, lap dancing, Sizzler, Evel Knievel and Spam. I asked a record executive what was fueling this music, and he made it sound so simple. "Anger and fear," he said.

Call them knuckleheads or young white guys; Spin magazine lambasted them with the term "mooks," a label that has since been picked up as a badge of honor. And suddenly there are enough members of the mook club to fill up many Woodstocks. We've all seen them at the mall: kids who ostentatiously say "whuzzup" to one another; the frat brothers who wear stop-and-frisk fashions; the countless fans who recognize the porn star on the cover of Blink-182's last album; the legion who wish they, too, could vote for Jesse Ventura, if not Howard Stern. As Eminem raps, "There's a million of us just like me/who cuss like me/who just don't give a [expletive] like me/who dress like me/walk, talk and act like me."

White music fans have long been curious about black culture, but the wholesale interest in miming the black underclass is new. As far back as "On the Road," Jack Kerouac fantasized raptly, "At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching ... wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night." James Brown fascinated white kids in the 60's with a peephole glimpse of a world of grace and grit. But the black rapper DMX, and before him Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G., now offers a wide-screen movie of ghetto life, relishing the details, relating the intricacy of topics like drug dealing, brawling, pimping and black-on-black crime. Rap makes these things seem sexy, and it makes life on the streets seem as thrilling as a Playstation game. Pimping and gangbanging equal rebellion, especially for white kids who aren't going to get pulled over for driving while black, let alone die in a hail of bullets (as Tupac and B.I.G. both did).

And today black youth culture is no secret, nor is it about joy and kicks. Today a thousand arena spotlights shine on such race fantasies, and they are billboarded and exploited by media outlets and entertainment conglomerates. The fantasy lands of rap, wrestling and porn have aligned to shape a real audience, one that looks awfully hardened.

Woodstockers have been called spoiled brats, pacified suburbanites, testosterone junkies with no real reason to be angry. Their crime, to their critics, is one of insincerity. It's a powerful argument. But once the windows start breaking, rage isn't really earned or counterfeit. It just is. And at that point, rage is no longer the problem of a group of problem kids. At that moment, it's everybody's problem.

among the mooks, ready to assume their position in the revolution.
pit gives you momentary top billing.

THERE'S A REVEALING STORY TOLD BY THE Rock, the wrestler, in his best-selling autobiography, "The Rock Says." He describes his early years as Dwayne Johnson, the child of an African-American father and Samoan mother. The son and grandson of wrestlers, Johnson grew up in the ring. He apprenticed as a "baby face" (a good-guy wrestler), but one fateful day his trainer suggested he try his hand at playing the heel (the wrestler who gets booed). Both roles are crucial in the heavily scripted dramas of pro wrestling. To facilitate the experiment, his trainer had Johnson fight his father.

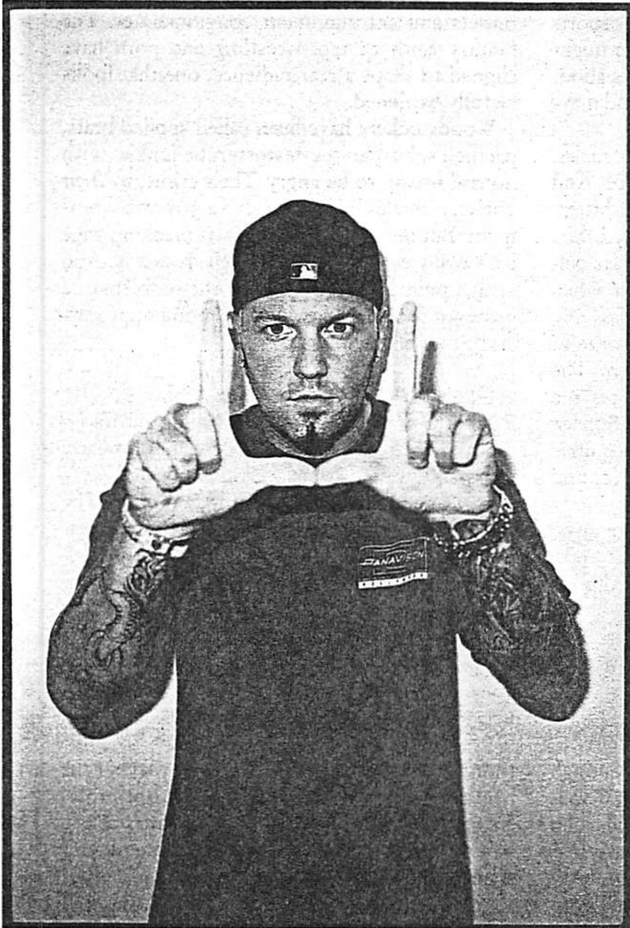
You never know how inspiration will arrive. "I bore in on my father," Johnson writes with gusto, "went right to town on him, kicking him in the gut, pushing him into the corner, nailing him with one punch after another." And then, the future kicks him in the gut.

"The character of the Rock first came to life that day. With each kick and snarl and grunt, I remember feeling rather intensely ... *this is more fun than being the good guy. This is me — a violent son of a bitch!*"

The father is vanquished and a hero is born. This is telling, I think. For the literature of mookography is full of family turmoil, of parents and children turning on one another. Take the weekly saga (run between matches) involving the W.W.F. overlord McMahon and his kids, who wrestle,

turn very, very bad, "marry" wrestlers Dad doesn't approve of, get "gang raped" and so on. Even professional wrestling is about family excess.

Making parents mad and recounting family tensions have always been a part of rock 'n' roll since Daddy took the T-Bird away, but today's full-out family trauma is different, and part of what makes rap-metal stand out in comparison with the other top-ranking pop music, teen bubble gum. Eminem raps about discovering that his mother was a drug addict. In real life, she's suing him for $10 million for defamation of character. Kid Rock once told an interviewer that he found career motivation in being kicked out of his parents' house for refusing to go to family therapy.



Fred Durst of Limp Bizkit: "All of a sudden there's these riots and someone got raped. Dude, if I'd known that, I would have stopped it."

The band Korn once put out a news release stating that some of its members were child-abuse survivors. Fans know the lyrics and the back stories and are drawn in because in these stories, they see something of themselves.

Seated two rows in front of me at the Kid Rock show in Fort Wayne was a group of people who sure looked like some kind of family. They had chartered two white limousines from Kokomo, arriving in style to see their favorite white rapper. There was a tattoo artist wearing a ball cap and a guy who worked in a metal-tube factory. There was a woman named Chase, who introduced herself as "the tallest dancer in Kokomo." And there was a 21-year-old stone-cold Kid Rock fanatic named Legs. He has muscular dystrophy and sat in his wheelchair dressed exactly the way the rapper was dressed onstage: same bowler, same white shirt, same black pants. At every high point of Kid Rock's show, Legs's friends would lift his atrophied frame out of his wheelchair and hold him high in the air. On his back was a tattoo of Rock's last album cover. On his wheelchair was a bumper sticker: Chick Magnet.

They invited me to visit them in Kokomo. And when we discussed where to meet, they all said there really was only one possible place: Big Daddy's Show Room. The way they explained it, Big Daddy's is one of the few places young people can go at night. Kokomo is a factory town of about 49,000 where Delco and DaimlerChrysler plants are the leading employers. Outside town, there are flat fields of corn and beans. "What's there to do in town?" James Taylor, who in Fort Wayne had described the pit as a kind of tough-love-in, thinks out loud. "Wash cars, tattoo and drink a lot. That's pretty much it."

At Big Daddy's, a no-frills room with a low stage, our table is near where Amber is performing to a Limp Bizkit song. Even here there is "stage diving." That's what regulars call a move when patrons lie on the stage, offering dancers dollar bills.

Mike, the beefy, hatchet-voiced club D.J., puts on Kid Rock's "Only God Knows Why." It's a ballad in the "Free Bird" mold. And a funny thing happens: the whole strip joint has a "Free Bird" moment. They recognize the tune instantly, and as Kid Rock sings his blues — "I take too many pills, it helps to ease the pain/I made a couple dollar bills, still I feel the same" — everybody starts singing along. Even the dancers look ready to hold up a lighter. A strip joint is a strange place to find a sliver of community, but all the same, Kid Rock and the boredom of Kokomo have conjured it out of a Saturday night.

At its best, the current fusion of ra
anger. But more often, it tells people who fee

RAPPERS LIVE OR DIE BY THE BOAST. BUT there's one place where their bragging rights and macho theater would be challenged for world supremacy. It's the world of professional wrestling, where fragile male egos are inflated to monster-truck proportions. If everybody in American culture, from landed pols to street kids, describe themselves as "middle class" these days, pro wrestling is the rare anomaly. It's an old working-class entertainment that has gotten only more violent and cheesy, and through that has sucked every social class into its audience. Not for nothing is the Rock called "the People's Champion." He constantly invokes "the people," with unmistakably populist — or is it fascist? — overtones. If Pat Buchanan could only smirk like the Rock, he might actually get somewhere.

The Kiel Center in St. Louis is a giant concrete salad bowl, and streaming into it this evening are the denim-clad armies of the W.W.F. They flow right on past the ticketless mother, father and son holding up a sign that says "Will Wrestle for Dental Work." They muscle around tables weighted with all manner of W.W.F. merchandise. They are the sunken-chested ring rats, and they smell blood in the air tonight.

Two 16-year-olds from a St. Louis suburb, Rodney Backus and Levent Ulak, take their ringside seats. They are painted a rich shade of green. Green hair, green faces; Backus has even dyed his goatee green. They look young enough to still enjoy trick-or-treating.

"I'm here to see the Godfather," Backus says. "'Cause he be pimpin' hos and everything." His affection is spelled out in Magic Marker across Backus's knuckles: P-I-M-P.

"He's got the nice women, and everybody knows he's a pimp, of course," Ulak says enthusiastically. "He comes out with, like, eight hos a week——"

Backus cuts him off: "And they're all dancing around in the ring, having a lot of fun."

Ulak chirps, "Pimping ain't easy."

You might think of professional wrestling as an all-guy activity, but the W.W.F. has changed that. Now teenage boys come to hoot at warrior women in black leather halter tops and at the miniskirted "bad girl" act of Stephanie McMahon. Wrestling has become just another jiggly entertainment, soft-core porn wed to fighting and better story lines.

Two imperatives are driven home by all the W.W.F. stagecraft. "Behave badly" is the first. The W.W.F. is a Rat Pack for the masses, an in-club where broads are broads and "sissies," as Vince McMahon says, can stay home. The other imperative is "speak freely": say things you could never say at work or in school. Talk the way guys "really talk" when women and authority figures aren't watching.

What comes out is a mix of sexual frustration and fear, as twisted and confused as you would get if you put the average 20-year-old before a microphone and paid him to vent. At the Kiel Center, packs of little kids chant "slut" and other sexual crudities at the top of their lungs, and the female M.C. wiggles through the abuse.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAKE CHESSUM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES