

A vintage portable cassette player, likely a Sony model, is shown in a top-down view. The device is black with silver accents and is housed in a red carrying case. The cassette tape is partially inserted into the deck. The background is a solid, vibrant red. The text is overlaid on the image in white, bold, sans-serif font.

PYX

**A Decade of Collected
Thoughts, Opinions, Delusions,
and Ravings About Pop Music
(2013-2023)**

By Matthew Thomas Meade

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“Review of Copperhead Road (Deluxe Edition)” was previously unpublished.

-For Noey, the greatest rock appreciator of his era, gone too soon.

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Introduction

I never meant to get into music criticism. It was never a goal. I had opinions and I found them to be hard fought, fascinating, and correct. In this way I was no different from any other music fan of my or any other generation.

Like so many other critics, writers, and freelancers, I am a failed musician. My best friend and I started a band that barely even existed. We started the band at the geriatric ages of 24 and 25 and things fell apart spectacularly before either of us turned 30, which was just about the most rock and roll thing we ever did. As the charismatic frontman, he disappeared to Alaska, popped up in South America and settled somewhere in Eastern Europe. I think the guy we were using as a drummer joined the military. As the bass player, I ended up as a writer, of course. As it should be.

Old School Record Review (www.oldschoolrecordreview.com / www.oldschoolrecordreview.wordpress.com) was as much a place to have a conversation as it was a music criticism site. A few friends who were having a few music related arguments via group text decided to formalize the endeavor. We had no idea there was such an appetite for long form think pieces, discussions of no label up and comers, and 30-something year old hot takes. But there was.

For a couple of years, we posted weekly about whatever we wanted, and we raised the ire of a Ryan Adams Facebook group, and the encouragement of Keny Loggins (of all people) in the process.

I developed several series including the “Albums I am Supposed to Love That I Actually Hate” which aimed to turn a few sacred cows into fashionable attire, and the “Never Heard of ‘Em” series which was designed to highlight exciting new bands that you might not have heard about otherwise. I also got to share my love of Van Morrison, a plucky North Carolina band called The Mineral Girls, and I developed a running Joke about Miley Cyrus that I am still not sure if I was serious about.

The success of *Old School Record Review* led to other music writing opportunities with outlets like RS500—which published one piece about every entry on the Rolling Stone Magazine’s 500 greatest records list—and Chicago Based Literary Magazine *Maudlin House*.

This book is an effort to collect all these writings into one place. I went through and tried to update all the dead links, which is the risk you run when you use the internet as a resource, and tried to correct errors where possible. Though the articles are a few years old, I think this text is a useful resource. The book is full of playlists, free downloads, and an endless stream of opinions.

I hope you find something in here that you didn't know, that you didn't remember, or you didn't know you needed. I hope it makes you realize how right I

am about all this and how wrong you are.

7 Albums I Am Supposed to Love That I Actually Hate (Part 1 of 7)

People who talk about popular music as if it matters like to take certain things as a given. Robert Johnson is the starting point for rock and roll music (rock wouldn't be rock without the blues, and the blues wouldn't be the blues without RJ (and the legendary peddling of his own soul, but that is a story for another day)). Other generally accepted, but still debatable, assumptions include: Elvis delivered rock and roll to the masses, Bob Dylan ushered in the era of the rock and roll auteur, and Marvin Gaye had the most perfect voice in the history of popular music. All are among the safest assumptions. More dubious assumptions made by music snobs and record geeks include: You should ever listen to The Sex Pistols (or PiL for that matter); The Arctic Monkeys have ever / will ever do anything relevant; Michael Jackson is somehow better than Prince... The list goes on.

Over the next week, I would like to slaughter a few sacred cows, and try to explain my position and convince you that these cows would make delicious hamburgers. I'd like to reconsider 7 records that are universally considered to be great records and explain why they are mediocre at best. It's easy to find people who would laud these records, and adopting others' opinions is more convenient, but it doesn't always mean it's right. Decide for yourself.

Case #1. The Flying Burrito Brothers, *The Gilded Palace of Sin* (1969)

I can't prove it, but I have a theory that the now famous outfits seen on the album cover for *The Gilded Palace of Sin* came before the music. The day Graham Parsons bought the Nudie suit adorned with pictures of naked women, and pot leaves, and a giant cross, he must have realized, "I better make a record to match these pants." And thus, the world has the hyper tight country of The Flying Burrito Brothers and

their debut record, *The Gilded Palace of Sin*. I am reasonably sure if Graham had purchased a beret and a turtleneck that we could very well be talking about the beatnik Jazz record Graham Parsons released in 1969 called *Blew All Over* with his band the 9th Avenue Bee Bopping Cats.

In this rock n' roll version of *It's a Wonderful Life*, Graham Parsons never makes *Gilded Palace of Sin* and instead *Blew All Over* is a top 10 record, Parsons never overdoses on morphine, and instead lives to the age of 70 and ends up walking through music's version of Bedford Falls (Cleveland) while the angel trying to get his wings (Jaco Pastorius) shows him all the lives that changed because Parsons pretended to be a jazzman instead of pretending to be a cowboy. CCR ends up only playing Pentangle style folk, The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's only outlet is as local professional wrestlers, and Ryan Adams forms a metal band called The Hung Over and he never makes *Heartbreaker*. All because of Graham's suspect fashion choice.

Now, don't get me wrong, all the things people write about The Flying Burrito Brothers are true. The songwriting is succinct (the record is a clinic on chorus-verse-bridge-outro song form), the approach accurately mimics the Bakersfield sound (there are twangy telecaster leads to spare), the harmonies are impeccable (being that they are delivered directly from the pop vintage provided by Graham Parsons and Chris Hillman formerly of the Byrds), and this endeavor introduced an entire generation of rockers to country music (these guys were on the forefront of the country rock hybridization that is still going on today. Have you heard Conor Oberst lately?), but should we really assume that had The Flying Burrito Brothers never existed that no one in the rock and roll world would have ever heard about Hank Williams and Buck Owens?

After all, this record came out the same year as *Nashville Skyline*. Buffalo Springfield released "For What It's Worth" in 1967, two years before this album jangled its spurs into the

record stores. The Band was playing with Ronnie Hawkins as early as the late 50s, when Parsons and Hillman were in high school. Are you really telling me that it's because of "Sin City," with all its artifice, is responsible for the existence of bands like Wilco, The Old 97s, and Will Oldham? Are you telling me this record has something to do with Neil Young's career? I'm not convinced.

But what about the music? If the songs are good, nothing else matters. But that's just the problem. All of those other rock and roll bands are using country music as a delivery system for their ideas, their emotions, their joy and pain. The Flying Burrito Brothers are a little more concerned with trying to show off the shuffle pattern they learned from listening to a Jimmie Rodgers record. When Graham Parsons et al. sing about sin, I just don't believe them. They don't seem to be singing about something they need to be delivered from. They are singing about a theme they picked at random from *Dust Bowl Ballads*. They could have just as easily ended up singing about mountain tops, train tracks, or Jesse James' murder. This all seems too inauthentic to deserve the kind of attention it gets. Everything from the name of the band to the too tight Nudie suits, to the fact that they even gave up titling their songs halfway through the second side of the record ("Hot Burrito #1," "Hot Burrito #2"...). It all comes off as a little instructional.

I don't care if I can learn how to play the pedal steel guitar from listening to this record, the songs on this record are stiff and stale, practiced and calculated. There is nothing messy about it. There is nothing desperate about the way country music is used to express an idea.

And the greatest gilded sin of all is that there are no cry breaks.

Now, if you've been listening to The Flying Burrito Brothers your whole life, then you might not know what a cry break is. Allow me to explain. Sometimes, when country singers are so distraught about the loss, or pain they are singing about, their voice cracks and they sing out of tune for a second. They do

this for effect, and it resonates with the audience. It makes the listener feel that tug of their heart strings just a little bit more. It's a unique tool available to country music practitioners. A single cry break might have saved this whole self-indulgent endeavor from itself. But these pop stars just couldn't bring themselves to sully the pristine vocal harmonies they were constructing.

Then again, a cry break may have been the greatest sin they could have perpetrated. It could have sounded phony and calculated and disrespectful to the original material. But I ask you, how would that be any different from the rest of the record?

The whole act finally unravels as the record comes to some kind of weird crescendo in the revivalist rant-rap that serves as the final "song" on the record. Graham Parsons plays the part of the old square/ hanky holding preacher as he plays out a scene that puts on display how the youth perceive the establishment's perception of the youth. It's some sort of ill-conceived reflection of a reflection of a reflection, the end of which is Graham Parsons' stuck up square of a character discovering that Hippies ain't so bad after all. I am not sure what this final piece is meant to communicate, but whatever it is, it surely doesn't work as a great rock and roll song. It is closer to the skits on *Stankonia* that I deleted from my iTunes long ago. Those poor vinyl buying saps in the early 70s had no such option. I pity them.

When all is said and done, what do you have left? I can surely appreciate the musical acuity, but that has sunk more rock records than it ever saved. If I squint my eyes, I can sort of see how these guys made an impact on the mainstream 45 years ago, but is it relevant today? I think nostalgia has clouded the minds of anyone who champions this band, because all I hear are some easy listening tunes written by music geeks. And now that we have all been introduced to how good country music can be, why don't we all just listen to some Hank Williams?

Song I would listen to if you held a gun to my head:
"Christine's Song," though it kind of goes on for way too long.
Or maybe, "Dark End of the Street."

Listen to this Instead: A.M. by Wilco, or anything by Townes Van Zandt

Never Heard of 'Em #1— Them Savages, Jungle, and Saintsena

There are few things more exciting than coming across a band no one else knows about. There is something intimate and personal about the relationship you form with a little-known artist. There is a thrill associated with watching the ascent of a new talent. Watching a young musician become who they were meant to be is one of the great pleasures pop music offers. However, it can be grueling to have to sift through so much trash before you find that hidden treasure. The internet has a lot of chafe and not much wheat, after all. Local clubs have a lot of goats and not many G.O.A.T.s. Life has a lot of shit, and not much sandwich.

This weekly column is meant to help you with these problems. Every Thursday, for the foreseeable future I'll present to you an obscure band who has not yet had their songs featured over the post-climax montage sequence on *Person of Interest* or been featured in a Chili's advertisement. Some of these bands might not even be signed to a label. Some of these bands aren't even bands, they're groups of drunk kids, accidentally recording really great songs. Not every band I write about in this column will be the next Van Morrison, but they will offer something interesting, and provide some hope for ways in which their music could one day evolve.

They are the artists who are buried deep in the annals of Spotify, Bandcamp, and Hype Machine. They appear on blogs and in the foldout of free local papers. They play open mics and open for The Dirty Projectors at Schubas. They live halfway down the roster of tiny independent record labels with names like Gonner, and Mint and Frenchkiss Records. But they shouldn't. And you'll soon see why.

I have tried to make it easy for you by collecting them all in one place. As if this were not already the best of news, all of the bands I plan to feature stream their full catalog

somewhere, and a good chunk of them even offer their music in a “pay what you want” format. They are just begging you to listen, and I assert that it is worth your time to do so. Who knows, your new favorite band might be in here.

This week I will start off with three bands who may be close to hitting it big. I won't usually write about three bands at a time, but I want to be the first one to tell you about them. I'm like that. Also, a couple of them are on tour, so I want to make sure that I let you know about upcoming shows, so if they are coming to your area, you can go see them, if that is the kind of thing you do.

1. Them Savages – No. Not The Savages, that neo-post-punk Sunny Day Real Estate with a chick singer. Them Savages. That spiritually conflicted duo from Flagstaff, AZ. These chaps manage to create the bucket stomping Americana noise so many bands four times their size struggle to generate. The vocals are rich and knowing, and the riffs are hooky. Check them out and shout aloud to the catchy melodies.

Website: www.themsavages.bandcamp.com/

Twitter: [@THMSVGS](https://twitter.com/THMSVGS)

Label: I don't think they are on any label. Do you want to sign them?

Best Track: “God's Hands”

2. Jungle – This UK duo has a knack for inserting catchy hooks into their, endlessly danceable tracks. Each tune is fun and harkens back an era of 70s Bee Gees-esque, KC and the Sunshine band scented, song making that I thought was over with until I heard these cats. The music they make is fun, but don't worry, there is a somber color (colour for you Brits) that streaks the bright dancebeats, so you don't even have to feel guilty for liking it.

Website: <http://jungle.bandcamp.com/>

Twitter: [@b3science](https://twitter.com/b3science)

Label: B3SCI Records / Blah Blah Blah Science

Best Track: “The Heat”

3. Saintsenaca - I have this theory that one day, history will look back kindly on all the easily accessible, shouty folk bands who dress up like they are taking one of those old timey photographs at an amusement park. In this day of future past there will be a documentary that will look back safely on Mumford and Sons, and Of Monsters and Men and celebrate what is good about them, instead of attacking what is pat or derivative about them. This film will invite the kids of 2065 to look back on these bands and to take them seriously in a way we cannot right now. If that future exists, Saintsenaca will be talked about like the Big Star of those bands, like the most authentic example of the sub-genre, like a perfect, little dinghy in a sea of ocean liners.

Website: <http://saintseneca.com/>

Twitter: [@saintseneca](https://twitter.com/saintseneca)

Label: Anti-

Best Track: “Visions”

Misunderstandings, Set to Music (Record Review)

[Goodbye, Cagoule World](#)

Benjamin Shaw

Audio-Antihero, 2014

I don't know what a cagoule (or Kagoule) is. Even after looking it up, and finding out that it's what the British call a lightweight anorak, I'm still confused. And don't even ask me what the record title is supposed to mean. How are we supposed to know the meaning of anything anyway? Isn't language just a construct? An inadequate one at that? Isn't that what Foucault taught us. Or Ferlinghetti? I can't remember. I went to state school, after all.

But even with my sub-par education, I can tell that Shaw's record is about the inadequacy of language. The first song on the record, "No One," begins with a recording of a group of children who are enduring a French lesson. At least, I think they are children. It's difficult to tell especially since the instructor has a thick accent, the recording has quite a bit of static, and the growing feedback (and Theremin?) keep us from hearing all but a few words. Are they French children learning grammar? English children learning French? Just a bunch of culinary students being fancy?

It's the first of many reminders on the record that no one can understand anyone else. As the French lesson fades away, as inconsequential to us as it is to the students, Shaw fires his opening salvo, "No one can love you." He speaks the line like it's an accusation, like he really means it. Later in the song, he elaborates, saying that "no one can love you like I do." Nice save buddy, but you're too late. By the time he gets around to qualifying his statement, we don't believe him.

How could we when we've already been reminded how useless it is to learn and use language at all?

The [record](#) is a bit of a patchwork of found instructional tapes and jazz zig-zags. It's a pastiche, of sorts, probably designed to work in contrast to the vocals that emerge out of

the near cacophony and are mixed in such a way to mimic the effect having them whispered in your ear. The fragile lyrics are close, as if that might make up for the fact that no one can ever really know or understand anyone at all.

Despite the fact that the record makes use of some pretty talented musicians such as [Jack Hayter](#) playing pedal steel (!) and someone named [Broken Shoulder](#) adding what is referred to as "Noise," the general vibe of the 7 track record is that there is no band, there is only a character named Benjamin, who couldn't even find a drummer to play with him, making use of synth and drum machines for the same reason he writes about burning bridges, and ending friendships. It's because Benjamin Shaw has trouble forming and maintaining relationships. No one can stand this guy. He's on his own in his musical endeavors, just like he is on his own in the romance department, and in life in general. But don't get all judgey and automatically think that makes him some kind of asshole. No one can stand you either. That's why you like the record. That's why no one calls you anymore. That's why no one responds to all those facebook requests you have pending.

When the repetition of the drum machine and the over-saturated synth parts are stripped away, like they are at the end of "Break the Kettles and Sink the Boats," Shaw is left alone, his voice more vulnerable and more clear than ever. It is a moment that is earned both by him and the listener.

In the penultimate track, "You & Me," the vocal runs almost seem to mock the idea of vocal runs and anyone who would bother to do them in earnest. The synth roars out like the engine on a bad race car simulator, impotent and fake. The violins and violas croak out notes just a bit off key. This guy is too exhausted to play by any of your rules. So exhausted, in fact, that he can't be bothered to write a lyric other than as an algorithm, "So here's a line about the system / And here's a line that's quite funny. / And here's a pop culture reference..." It is rare that a singer-songwriter shows this level of self-awareness, and this "singer-songwriter" (if you wanna be

so bourgeois as to call him that) is fussing with the parameters of the pop song and re-examining the rules of what it is to be a singer-songwriter. Even his lyrics are not him talking. His lyrics are lifted from other places, a sentiment that will be echoed in the title track when he claims, "I haven't the cards to make better words." He is tired of reading from the script, taking the cues, and fulfilling all those expectations. And rather than do that, Shaw offers a peek behind the curtain. By doing so he calls attention to all those exhausting cliches you've come to expect, though Shaw is not so exhausted that he can't turn his caustic humor inward, ending the song by offering "a lazy refrain: 'like you and me.'"

And just like we didn't believe him when he told his significant other that "no one can love you like I do," we don't believe him when he ends the record by telling us that "I'm not the problem / I'm perfectly fine." How could he be when his words are so meaningless, when he has so minuscule an effect on other people, and no one ever gets their point across.

The record builds to the final two songs which act as some kind of anti-crescendo. They are the best and most complete songs on the record. Some of the early tracks are nothing more than curiosities and barely warrant a repeat listen. It's a bit of a slog to get to the good parts, but they are worth the wait, because there are several truly great moments and some very solid songs. As an album it feels a little thin, and it helps to think of the effort as more of an overstuffed EP, rather than your classic Long Play record. But perhaps that is one more way in which Shaw is playing with the form. Using it for his own purposes.

It's a record about mis-communication, after all, a record about not meeting expectations. It's a record about coming to terms with how cagoule the world is, whatever the fuck that means.

The digital album is available on April 21st. You can download it, (or buy a *Goodbye, Cagoule World* stress ball)

at the Audio-Antihero website:
<http://audioantihero.bandcamp.com/album/goodbye-cagoule-world>

Here Fishy, Fishy, Fishy... (Record Review)

Guppy

Ben Shaw

Kirigirisu Recordings, 2015

I've spent the year since Ben Shaw's 2014 album *Goodbye, Cagoule World* listening to his back catalog. It sounds like he has too.

When Ben Shaw turned in *Goodbye, Cagoule World* he was doing it because it was time for him to turn in that kind of record. He had made his weird little sound collections and he was overdue for a record full of spare, solo acoustic songs about angst and depression. Because he is Ben Shaw, he also made sure to add a tesla coil or two as well as carefully positioned feedback from a [noise-core artist](#). But all that weirdness couldn't save it from feeling forced. The whole endeavor sounded like it was someone else's idea and Shaw was doing everything he could to make it work.

Guppy is something of a return to form. Shaw's back catalog is great. It's full of strange, damaged, and experimental songs and ideas, from the defiant [There's Always Hope, There's Always Cabernet](#), to the needy, [Summer in the Box Room](#), to the unstable and unparalleled [Rumfucker](#).

Guppy has far more to do with those records than it does *Goodbye, Cagoule World*. It is sumptuous and multilayered. And, yes, I know *multi-layered* is redundant, but somehow the word *layered* just doesn't do this record justice. This record goes all the way to the earth's mantle, all the way through the shale. Once you get to the inner core of the world, it turns out it's filled with piles of distorted soundscapes and allusions to long gone radio shows. It sounds like a room full of flitting insects and someone practicing a horn badly. In that strange chaos Shaw manages to find the pulse of songcraft and melody.

But these are not three-chord sad-bastard songs; there are no lyric based ballads about broken hearts and alienation

belted out like the coffee shop is closing. As a matter of fact, you rarely hear Shaw's singing voice. It's so rare an occurrence that when the commercials and found-sound of coupons being clipped out of the newspaper are all spliced into the songs, they seem to speak for him. The sound fragments are wry and caustic. They are sneering and malevolent, just like the songs themselves. Just like him.

Songs like "good arrows" and "Hell's Teeth" thump along and threaten with a strange drum beat or a David Lynch hum. A song like "Pride of Canada," creeps and lurks. After all, Ben Shaw is more about bizarre atmospheres than he is about anything else. He is someone who has clearly spent time with The Liars, The Books, Menomena and all those post-rockers who are sick of being told what to do, folks who would rather short out their radio than listen to "Brown Eyed Girl" one more time.

Shaw does all of this experimenting and upending without sacrificing narratives, albeit ones that are as elusive as they are abstract. For example, when Ben Shaw gives you a title like "Fishing with dad (no dad)" it's hard tell if he is earnestly writing about someone grappling with the loss of a parent or if he is mocking the whole concept of writing something so self-indulgent. Despite the abstraction, the song is moving. With the sound of crickets, the layer of conversation and the tuba buzzing like a confused swarm of bees, it hints at a kind of melancholy we all feel.

By the final song "Not today, Satan," all the wry eyebrow raising becomes a little overwrought. The somber squeeze of the music wrapped around the cringe inducing self-help speak doesn't work when it comes at you head on, but the failure of this song does little to derail the gleaming, vibrating triumph that is this record.

Because, believe it or not, the record is some kind of triumph.

Guppy is Shaw's apology to himself. It is him giving himself permission to make the bizarre kind of songs that he has

always wanted to make. It is full of violins being tuned, speak and spells begging to be put out of their misery, and telex machines scraping out their messages. It sounds like all the found-sound transitions of Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* stretched over the course of an entire moody record. Somehow Shaw makes that poignant and fascinating.

"Pylon pile-on" is one of the most affecting pieces on the record. With its bleeping melody and swirling progression, it could be the score to a film about futuristic race car drivers betting with their lives or drug addicts trying to recover at a beach resort. By not pinning it down, by not defining it, he opens something up for anyone to enter. Some cardboard cutout of a world, a diorama for us to populate with our own depression, our own dashed dreams, our own daily humiliations. It is a place anyone is allowed to go, as long as they are sad.

Never Heard of 'Em #2 — The Ketamines

The Ketamines are the first band since The Zombies to make that sound with their guitars. They possess the whimsy to play pretty authentic AM rock, and the recklessness to belch a dose of Ventures style psychedelic fuzz over the top of it, and the drug fueled insanity to rough it all up with Wire's lo-fi, art damaged approach.

Unlike those garage, surf and art rock bands of the 60s and 70s, The Ketamines aren't trying to get on the radio. If they were, they wouldn't have to resort to inspired gimmicks such as releasing a series of four 7 inch records, the covers of which can all be combined to form a larger image.

If you don't believe me, buy their last 4 singles and see for yourself. They just released the final 7-inch piece of the puzzle. For \$3.00! You should buy it!

Website: <http://ketamines.bandcamp.com/>

Twitter: [@Ketamines](https://twitter.com/Ketamines)

Label: Mint Records

Best Track: "Double Elevens"

Never Heard of 'Em? #3 — Superman Revenge Squad Band

Fear of people's umbrellas. Being a private detective for the love of it. Checking email 62 times. Ben Parker's ragged and weary lyrics are overly literary and specific in ways that can be unexpected.

He recounts the irrational fears he had when he was a child, the feeling he had when watching *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves*, the experience of coming across a Henry Rollins CD in a store, his sometimes preference for Anthrax over Bob Dylan, and his memories from the 90s (like listening to REM's *Automatic for the People* 1,000 times, and wondering why anyone would ever quote Joey from *Friends*.)

The analogies he makes and the pop culture references he uses, create a stage that sort of feels like the cluttered bedroom of a disaffected teen from Clinton's America (even though Ben Parker is clearly as British as can be, right down to being obsessed with America). These analogies at first seem ridiculous, but he sticks with them for so long that you end up believing in them earnestly. Examples include comparing himself to Paulie from the Rocky series; late period REM being a metaphor for middle age; and the following strange and heartbreaking description of a relationship falling apart: "If you leave me / I'll be left like Public Enemy without Flavor Flav / It'd still be functional / and records would still sell / after all Chuck D is the main man / We'd get through this somehow / But I don't think I'd want to fight the power without you / By myself."

I find myself rewinding songs to make sure "he just said that, right?" He is a more desperate John Darnielle, a more serious early Beastie Boys, a more delicate version of Minor Threat.

The songs are presented in the form of a list from a journal, but the content often surpasses being cluttered and instead becomes naked and desperate and honest and needy enough to be compelling. There is something voyeuristic involved. He lets us read the margins of his notebooks and

assures us that, “No, you are not the only weirdo who feels this way.”

Website:

<https://thesupermanrevengequadband.bandcamp.com/album/there-is-nothing-more-frightening-than-the-passing-of-time>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/BenSRS>

Label: Audio Antihero

Best Track: “Flava Flav”

The Only Person Who Can Save Rock and Roll...

I have good news for Bobby Gillespie. The Primal Scream frontman is the latest aging rock and roller in a long line of aging rock and rollers to declare that rock is dead. Speaking with [BBC Arts & Culture](#) he said, "Where's the anger and rage and confrontation in pop music? It's not there."

He may not be able to find it, but I have. He claims that pop music is too conservative, so I have turned to the mainstream rock press (the most conservative group out there) to find out who they are afraid of. Who keeps them up at night? Who do they want to keep their children from? It's not Odd Future and it's not Pussy Riot. The most confrontational rock and roller making music today, happens to be Miley Cyrus.

Just ask Ann Powers of [NPR](#), who recently griped that the latest Disney film, *Frozen*, is filling a void left by Miley Cyrus. Powers claims that the children who are begging their parents to take them to see this film and who are listening to "Let it Go," the film's hit single, "are girls that have been heartbroken by Miley Cyrus and her transformation. They need these kind of pure emotional songs."

Let's not even deal with the fact that *Hannah Montana* has been off the air for three years now and the young girls who asked for Miley Cyrus CDs in their Christmas stocking are picking their majors right now, while *Frozen* is being marketed to kindergarteners.

Let's not even get into the irony of a song about "becoming yourself," being used as a weapon against Miley Cyrus as she emerges from childhood into the sexuality of young womanhood, or with how silly is the claim that she broke the hearts of a generation of kids.

Let's not ask why her overtly sexual transformation been read as bad or wrong, or heartbreaking. Let's not ask when "pure emotion" and sexuality became mutually exclusive. I sort of already know the answers to these questions which is

that it is easier to shame Miley Cyrus for acting “overly sexual or sexy,” than to actually critique her music.

The real question has to do with whether or not Cyrus' vagina (great name for a punk band by the way) is more disgusting than the way Disney creeps its way into kids' minds, and onto their underwear (literally) and into their stomachs through happy meals and toothpaste displaying cross-eyed snowmen. The real question is why Ann Powers and NPR aren't writing more about whether or not Miley's appropriation of black culture is at all gross, or terrible, the way Wilbert Cooper of [Vice](#) is.

I am not sure if Miley's sexuality is breaking the hearts of a generation of kids, or if her twerking is racist, but I do have good news for Bobby Gillespie. Right now, in addition to being compared to some of the biggest selling acts in recent memory, Rihanna, Justin Timberlake and Madonna, Miley Cyrus is also being compared to some of the most confrontational and transitional music in history, like Elvis, and Eminem.

I can't wait until she actually writes a good song. Until then, there is [this](#).

7 Albums I Am Supposed to Love That I Actually Hate (Part 2 of 7)

Case #2. Joy Division – *Unknown Pleasures* (1979)

I am going to liberate you from a burden you have been carrying around for a long time. Are you ready? Here it is: You don't have to listen to *Unknown Pleasures* anymore.

That's right. You are absolved from keeping it on your iPhone, from playing it as background music when your friends come over, from letting it rattle through your headphones as you sit at your desk and write angry emails to your boss (and let's be honest, you are never gonna send those emails anyway). You don't have to make a big deal about it. You can just stop. And hey. Relax. I am not talking about *Closer*, you can listen to that one if you want (the *In Utero* of the 80s, or the *Eyes Wide Shut* of pop music? It's unclear, but I am still not convinced that the song "Isolation" isn't some kind of brilliant, Ali-G style hoax). And I know how tragic was Ian Curtis' plight. I know about his epileptic fits, his tortured bout with his own sexuality, and that he was rock and roll martyred at the age of 23. I know. I am not trying to be a total asshole. I am just trying to lift the burden you have been carrying.

And don't confuse the great album art for a great record, either. We can agree. It is a fucking great album cover. I know you had that cool, black shirt with the image on the chest that looked like a topographical map of the alien world where every disaffected kid has spent time. I know you would wear it to parties when you were in college, and it served as a litmus test because only angelheaded hipsters, and the coolest dropouts would know what it was. They would give you nods, and knowing looks that got you higher than the cheap beer, and bad coke you could find at the party. And I know that the girl you were sleeping with at the time, the one who had way better taste in music than you, ended up stealing it, and you pretended to hate her for a long time, but

you actually felt sort of good about the fact that she thought the shirt was worth stealing.

This isn't about her, or those parties you used to go to, or even all the top 10 lists the record somehow makes its way onto. This is about whether or not you want to listen to this record. And you don't. You really don't. We can agree that the record has some things going for it. It's raw, it's bleak, and it's angry. It did some new things with punk music, and it ushered in an era of post punk that made way for bands like Echo and the Bunnymen, and Primal Scream, but as much as the ideas are exciting, none of the stuff on this record works as music.

First, the kids who made this record are far from the most impressive musicians in mine, yours, or anyone else's music collection. These DIY boys, inspired by Sid Vicious, are trying too hard to stay on beat and it is embarrassing. The musicianship, or lack thereof, is not unforgivable. After all, I believe in all those shoegaze and post punk bands who exist in the wake of Joy Division, many of whom played their instruments in a compellingly inept way. But if you are going to go that route, you can't have too high a production value for your record. By the time My Bloody Valentine came along, they had figured out that you had to drench your poor musicianship in a batter of feedback and then fry it in noise for the music to be interesting. But Joy Division didn't exist for long enough to realize how far they needed to go with these techniques.

The production of this record should have been hands-off and should have tried to capture the energy of these kids at a pivotal moment in their lives and in their music. Instead, the producer, Martin Hannett, becomes a sort of de facto member of the band, shaping and reforming these impressionable and damaged adolescents into a band that they were not before. Hannett can't resist putting his greasy fingerprints all over this record. It is mixed in such a way that you can't miss a single clam, a single strained vocal, and

there are even wild effects added to create some sort of bleak, moody atmosphere. Some of the gimmicks used on the record come close to working, like the backmasking that starts "New Dawn Fades," or where Curtis sings certain songs through a telephone wire to create the appropriate sense of "distance." These are the kinds of things that you do when you are really committing to the process of making a rock and roll record. But some of the production choices are downright dumb. For example, there are so many bottles being smashed throughout the record that I sometimes start to suspect that *Unknown Pleasures* is actually a prog-rock style concept record that takes place during a turf fight between mutated frog people and well dressed, cane-wielding, amazon women. You think I am exaggerating? This is a record full of references to territory, and bloodsport, and traveling far and wide, and the "center of the city where all the roads meet." There is even a reference to *Interzone*. [I don't like having to denigrate William S. Burroughs, but no one should reference *Interzone* in their rock and roll record, not even David Bowie. When you do that, you reveal too much about yourself. It's almost like admitting to a friend what your favorite porn websites are. Your friend doesn't want to talk to you about it, so let's just not mention it, ok? You fucking asshole.] And if those nonsense ideas don't convince you that the record is ill-conceived and overproduced there are honest to goodness laser beam fights in the middle of *Insight*. Plural. Multiple fucking laser beam fights. More than one in case we missed it the first time, I presume. I mean, there is nothing more juvenile than that. I don't want to listen to that in the middle of a rock and roll record. Do you? You don't. I know you don't. You can admit it. Also, you go to youporn.com too, right? And if *Unknown Pleasures* not a sci-fi inspired prog-rock concept record that takes place in a post-apocalyptic, nightmare world, then what on earth are these songs about?

And look, let's be honest, Ian Curtis is not much of a lead singer. I know that you don't want to address this, but we have to. I know that he is doing the best he can, but his vocals are strained, and pitchy, and sort of all over the place. He is not quite sure where to put the emphasis, or how to use his voice. "But the lyrics!" you say. Ian Curtis gets a lot of credit for his lyrics. There are even some heartsick outsiders who go so far as to call him a genius. Let's address these claims. Sure, his lyrics are dark and evocative and suggestive, but he was an evolving talent. His lyrics certainly have intention behind them, but Curtis struggles to really put together anything profound, or revelatory, and more often than not, he is struggling to find rhymes for his wounded sentiments. Sure, the guy is a little more thoughtful than the Buzzcocks, but nothing on this record is more interesting than the lyrics from, say, "I Wanna Be Your Dog." When you compare Curtis' lyrics to Iggy's, the stuff from *Unknown Pleasures* seems safe and melodramatic. The guy even put the following lyric into a song: "We'll share a drink and step outside / An angry voice and one who cried..." Why not "the one who lied?" Why not, "the one who tried?" And he follows up this good-enough lyric with the following: "We'll give you everything and more, / The strain's too much, can't take much more." That's right. Rhyming "more" with "more." It's not even a homonym. This is the kind of thing scrawled in the margins of books of Sylvia Plath poetry, or dog-eared copies of *Love in the Time of Cholera*. He showed a lot of promise in a lot of ways, but he was 23 when this record came out. His lyrics sound like the poetry of a depressed college kid, because his lyrics are the poetry of a depressed college kid.

Sure, they were young, sure they were developing a unique sound antithetical to what was popular at the time, and of course their story is tragic. And I am not saying that New Order isn't a good band because they are, and "60 miles an Hour," "Age of Consent," and "Ceremony," are great tunes. But we are talking about *Unknown Pleasures*. Off key, off beat, over-

produced, undercooked, *Unknown Pleasures*. It's not good and you don't have to listen to it anymore.

How about this? You can keep the vinyl displayed prominently near your super hip turn table, just don't worry about ever placing the needle on the record or pressing play on the Mp3 ever again. You are absolved.

Song I would listen to if you held a gun to my head: "Day of the Lords," or maybe "Shadowplay." Ok, "Day of the Lords." Final answer.

Listen to this instead: [Marquee Moon](#) by Television. This band plumbed the same dark, mysterious depths of punk music, except with a true master of the guitar leading the expedition.

Never Heard of 'Em? #4 — The Sad Bastard Book Club

It's not just the name of the band that I love so much. It's the sparse hellfire of the lyrics. It's the warning label length song titles. It's the minor key guitar noodling. It's the Gregorian chant backup vocals. And, yeah Ok, it's the name too. But can you blame me? It's a great name that you wish you'd thought of for your band.

SBBC is a band that sort of sounds like what would happen if Vincent Price joined the Violent Femmes. It's sort of like what would happen if Modest Mouse sublet their apartment to a klezmer band collectively going through heroine withdrawal. They sound like Bill Callahan fronting a band full of Mark Kozeleks. That is to say, there is not much that is sunny about this San Fran band. They keep things heavy, the horns sounding like a death march, the drums thumping and reverberating like the heart beats of a man afraid for his life. Even the way they employ their sometimes intricate call and response backup vocals sounds like what would happen if the Local Natives were made up of crank snorting truck drivers.

The songs are built around ideas such as homes being razed, brothers being sent to war, families being torn apart. And throughout their creepy 2010 record, *Another Family Dinner at the Saturn Residence Ends In Tears*, pestilences spreads, people wander in the desert, there are prisons of all kinds, and it all takes place in some kind of existential Western the likes of which we have all collectively imagined and feared for years.

The whole effort sort of sounds like what the band from the Star Wars cantina would sound like if Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* had a cantina. But, despite the hostility of the world where these songs take place, all hope is not lost. Far from it. These cats have banded together to fight the raving hordes. They have their backs against the wall, and they are conserving their ammo. They recall all the best loose

collectives of unfocused and talented poets. Broken Social Scene, New Pornographers, Velvet Underground, Can. They combat the loneliness and the fear by singing songs about longing for the end of days and by making vague threats like "We've been waiting / We've been waiting," and "Things will soon be different and I hope you'll understand."

Now they just need to figure out how not to turn on one another.

Website: <http://sadbastardbookclub.bandcamp.com/>

Twitter: #TooCoolForTwitter

Label: Yeah right. We should be so lucky.

Best Track: "It's Touching Moments Like These That Remind Me Why We Don't Speak Much"

(If that title doesn't tell you what you are in for, nothing will.)

Concert Review of Justin Townes Earle at the Concord Music Hall, January 17th, 2014

[Justin Townes Earle](#) couldn't keep the crowd's attention.

Earle was doing nothing wrong, per se, but he was unable to engage the crowd. He was dressed just right, and he had a side man who played the lap pedal steel, or as I like to call it, the Theremin for cool people. The songs were well crafted, the banter in between should have been compelling. He was telling stories about his broken heart, about the ways his songs had been mis-interpreted, and how he told his label "to go fuck themselves." And still, he couldn't get anyone to care.

And don't get me wrong. He is good. And he was good last night.

He yowled with the best of them and played a couple pretty decent blues tunes, but no one could really be bothered with him. Maybe everyone was waiting for him to have another on stage temper tantrum / meltdown, like he's gotten a reputation for, and the fact that he wasn't delivering bored the schadenfreude hungry crowd. Maybe no one could take him seriously because his side man looked like Bill Hader doing a caricature of a sideman on SNL. Whatever the reason, the set was polite, starting promptly at 10pm and ending exactly at 11pm, and everyone seemed more comfortable after he left.

While myself and my fellow concert-goers talked about leaving, a band of vagrants took the stage and started thumping the crap out of the ramshackle equipment that had been left on the stage. It turns out that the gutter punks on the stage, making up a hoe-down as they went along, were called [The Felice Brothers](#), and even though they weren't on the Marquee for the Concord, or on the website, or the tickets, they were somehow the "headline" act.

A band from the Catskills playing a blend of country, rock and Americana, The Felice Brothers have been around since 2006 and have several albums available. Apparently, they

are signed to Fat Possum records and are currently on a national tour.

I was unaware of this band before yesterday evening, but they introduced themselves by singing songs about boxers, whiskey, and giving a girl a string of pearls. They were just gross enough, the guitar solos just rudimentary enough, the lyrics just incomprehensible enough to overcome some of the affectations they had borrowed from another rustic band from upstate New York who featured alternating vocalists and a multi-instrumentalist who transitioned back and forth from playing the keys to an accordion.

By looking at them, I couldn't tell if the music geeks had enlisted the help of their drug dealers, or if the meth addicts had some dirt on the music geeks, blackmailing them into joining their band, but whatever the case, they were having just enough fun for me to believe they were the real deal. And I wasn't the only one. The crowd, who had been so dismissive of Earle, embraced this band and lifted their arms in the air, clapped their hands and sang along to songs they'd never even heard before.

It just proves that you can be doing everything right, but if you aren't using the right delivery system, you'll never get over. It turns out that being children who shake off the exhaustion incurred by their own myth making to leap around the stage, foot stomping, and cheersing the crowd, is the right way to get the message out.

Never Heard of Em? #5—Diamond Doves

The lead singer's voice is rich, but not unique, the songs can be a bit predictable, the transitions are somewhat utilitarian, and the production style errs on the side of making the edges overly smooth.

I should be bored by this back up band, (formerly having worked with Elvis Perkins) turned sovereign group, but I am not. I am consistently compelled by the hooks, by the competence of the musicianship and the durability of their songs' construction.

Somehow Diamond Doves' psych pop vibe is more than palatable, and they manage a posture that is not easy to achieve. The songs sound confident and mature, but youthful and fresh. This is a band that is comfortable sliding from dance beats into crunchy guitar parts; shimmying from plunky piano sections into heavy bass hums; leaping from anthemic Killers-esque vocals to lushly orchestrated indie rock, yet they never seem to be showing off. They just seem to be closing in on a sound. And they aren't afraid to drop a horn section in every now and again to play off the squeaky lead guitars and the eastern spiced strings. They seem to be trying out all the tools in their tool box, the loud ones, the quiet ones, precision ones, the ones you need a permit for, and ones that look suspiciously similar to the tools that Grizzly Bear uses.

But it's all good. There is a pop friendly sheen on these songs, but one that does not ruin them. These cats are looking for their sound. They are testing their limits like a child with a new stepparent, or like some sort of musical version of sonar where they call in every direction to get a sense of where they should be going. They seem like they are one or two records from really figuring out what they want to be doing, and that is exciting. It feels like this band is one insane hairstyle, one weird cover, one unexpected performance away from really doing something uncommonly special. I want to be there when it happens.

Website: <http://diamonddoves.bandcamp.com/>

Twitter: [@DiamondDoves](https://twitter.com/DiamondDoves)

Label: ????????????

Best Track: "Hey Lady"

It's strange that a song that begins by borrowing the synthesized intro from "Sexual Healing," Radiohead's chiming "Creep" guitar chords and tone, and the drum pick up from Sgt. Peppers ends up sounding like what 90s alt rock bands (like, say, the Toadies) would sound like if they didn't have to worry about making bad MTV videos and whether or not their jacket looked cool when they were featured on the cover of Spin magazine. The vocal harmonies and touches of violin elevate this simple song in a way that makes it incessantly listenable... So, listen incessantly.

7 Albums I Am Supposed to Love That I Actually Hate (Part 3 of 7)

Case #3. Peter Gabriel, *So* (1986)

If you are one of the people who still thinks that the film *Say Anything...* (sic) is a sweet flick about true love, you have either not seen it in 20 years, or you are a sociopath. For those of you who want to defend this flick for which you have rosy remembrances and nostalgic feelings, let me re-introduce you to it. First of all, the central plot device of this romantic comedy is John Mahoney's embezzlement trial. Remember that whole riveting episode? The tragic fall of James Court? Second, the premise of the movie is this: An over-achieving daddy's girl is harassed into an on-again, off-again relationship with an aimless, 19-year-old, kickboxer who develops a pathological obsession with her. Not as charming a story as you remember? *Say Anything...* (sic) culminates with the kickboxer following the princess to England where she will ambitiously pursue a highly coveted scholarship while he will, presumably, spend his time not purchasing anything sold or processed, nor processing anything sold or bought.

The character of Lloyd Dobler, brought to life by a mouth breathing John Cusack, is often cited as the main reason for *Say Anything...*'s (sic) success. In an era where Hollywood was beginning to find careerism to be acceptable in a woman, the virile but emotionally capable John Cusack made manifest what film studios assumed were the fantasies of a new era of film going females.

The fantasy that *Say Anything...* (sic) presents is that of an impossible collection of attributes. Dobler is a manic-pixie-dream-boy who is somehow able to safely spill affection from his mouth in the form of constant compliments, but who is also a kickboxer, able to defend and protect, if necessary. He is smart enough to be paraded around dinner parties, but not smart enough to overshadow his lover's career. He is needy

enough that he desperately seeks approval, and he isn't so needy that he'll be a burden.

In reality, Dobler exhibits the anti-social behavior consistent with that of a serial killer. Yeah, *Say Anything...*'s (sic) hero, your hero, Lloyd Dobler, is almost as creepy as James Gumb. All Dobler talks about is his complete lack of ambition other than Diane Court, he records his thoughts and conversations onto cassette tapes that I can only assume he obsessively catalogs, like Kevin Spacey's marble notebooks from *7*, and he wears a friggig trench coat for half the movie. What does a trench coat communicate, in film parlance, other than violent bounty hunter, flasher, or disturbed potential maniac? And in the most iconic scene in the film, yes the boom box scene, he is patrolling the outside of her house, holding the stereo over his head, frowning and glaring, not like he wants to romance her, but like he wants to eat her alive.

"In Your Eyes" is, of course, not only the song that blared from Cusack's boom box while he wooed the "I'm too good for you," lone Skye, but is also a choice cut from Peter Gabriel's insanely popular 1986 record *So*. The song forever binds the film and the record, and just like *Say Anything...* (sic) is mistakenly credited with being a sweet and genuine love story, *So* is credited with progressing pop music with its lush production, tight songcraft, and liberal incorporation of elements from world music. And just like the film is far from being sweet, or genuine, the record is far from progressive. It is cynical, and capitalistic in the most regressive of ways.

It is everything that is wrong with music. The gleaming synth. The canned horn blasts. The computer generated funk. The mid-career reach for chart success. And just like Dobler presents himself as thoughtful and unique while he is actually planning his "assault on the world" (which begins now, by the way), Gabriel presents himself as passionate and insightful, while he is actually calculating and exploitative. The record appropriates from various sources, and it then aggregates the exploited parts into a meat grinder so that a slick, gleaming

link of chart topping sausage can be pooped out. Chunks of the original material still remain, like the gospel style turnaround on the piano in "Don't Give Up," like the African drums that thump across the record, like that stupid fucking Shakuhachi that may as well become the symbol of colonialism.

And through it all, Gabriel has the audacity to present himself as somehow socially conscious. "Biko" was bad enough, a Caucasian pop star appropriating the struggle of Africans, moaning for the man with the same faux concern shown by anorexic celebutants RIPing Mandella via twitter, but he also has something to say about Stanley Miligram's experiments? At least, mercifully, "We Do What We're Told (Milgram's 37)" is less a song, and more an ambient pulse with a title slapped on it. Gabriel commands us to think for ourselves moments before the groove dissolves and he is consumed in a cloud of self-righteousness. There is more liberation, more freedom, more understanding of what it means to be a free thinking individual in one Black Flag song than in Peter Gabriel's entire fucking catalog. There is something disgusting about his moralizing. There is something hypocritical about any stance he takes, as if a record that pushes 18 million units could ever be a protest of anything.

Now. Let's talk about "Sledgehammer." I think I am ready. So, "Sledgehammer" is the worst song of the 20th Century. Gabriel has claimed that the song was inspired by Stevie Wonder and Otis Redding. "Sledgehammer" is, I guess, what Gabriel thinks *Innervisions* sounds like. But the most offensive thing about the song is that Gabriel misunderstands those musicians. He does not see them as lusty and indulgent lovers, or crooners of rich poetic verse. He does not see the soul music of the 70s as lushly and lovingly orchestrated. He imagines Redding, Wonder, and anyone associated with Motown, to be merely the Walt Whitmans of their own phalli. Gabriel writes an ode to his own penis, and completely misses

on the levity and the joy cultivated by the artists he is supposedly mimicking. The lyrics don't possess any kind of humor, charm, subtlety, or whimsy, they are instead strange, and menacing. Somehow "Fuck the Police" is offensive, but this piece of calculated theft built in the shape of a cock, is pumped through the speakers of every supermarket, every minivan carting kids to school, onto every top 10 videos list. Gabriel wasn't really inspired by Stevie Wonder's and Otis Redding's music. If Gabriel wanted to mimic anything about them, it was their ubiquity. And he somehow did it with a song about his dick. MC Ren never said anything as disgusting and offensive as, "open up your fruitcage/ where the fruit is as sweet as can be." But somehow when gross Peter Gabriel sings it, it's clever, and fun! "Sledgehammer" was made by a man who fundamentally misunderstands soul music. This is evidence by the cool monochromaticism of Gabriel's sonic palette. The song sounds like what you would hear were there a Sega Genesis fighting game from 1991 featuring the legends of Motown recording. "Sledgehammer" would be the entrance music for when you picked Jr Walker as your character.

And the worst part is that he did it twice. No one else has noticed that "Sledgehammer," and "Big Time" are the same fucking song? No one? They even have the same stop-motion video. Gabriel smirks his way through "Big Time," like a college kid reusing his eleventh grade compare / contrast paper on the *Scarlet Letter* and *The Crucible*, for his American Literature 101 course. You've been fooled, America. Not once, but twice. Shame on you.

Not unlike the film that will always be associated with it, So is an impossible combination of disparate parts. A synth-soul record with a promotion budget bigger than the operating costs of a professional sports team, featuring a middle-aged, prog-rock front man singing songs about his own penis. It's more impossible than a sweet, damaged, articulate, boyish

kickboxer who will accompany you to London after your father disappoints you.

Listen to this Instead: *Graceland* by Paul Simon

Song I would listen to if Peter Gabriel held a gun to my head: "Sussudio," mother fucker. Now pull the trigger you son of a bitch.

In Response to Your E-Newsletter Re: Peter Gabriel's Upcoming Summer Tour Dates (Fiction)

Originally published September 1, 2016 in the online literary magazine [Maudlin House](#).

To Whom It May Concern:

This isn't going to be one of those long emails. Not like the others. I am only going to say enough so that it will be perfectly clear to whomsoever is reading this, that I do not want to be subscribed to your email service/newsletter any longer nor in any capacity. Your constant and insistent invitations for me to click on your links and purchase your products are met with, on my end, nothing but frustration. For some reason, despite my initial, measured requests to be removed and my later, more vehement protestations, your emails continue to arrive in my inbox. No matter what I do, no matter what button I press, no matter to whom I address my emails, I continue receiving these unwanted communiqués.

I have tried to respond to the emails that show up in my inbox, but that only gets me an automated response that says, "The email address you have reached is not monitored." When I have tried clicking on the "unsubscribe" button, which is all the way at the bottom of the email and in a font so small it can barely be found, that link just brings me to a website form that asks for my email address. Upon completing the form, I immediately, like right away, receive an automatic notification thanking me for subscribing to the Peter Gabriel Newsletter. I've done it nine times so now I regularly receive nine emails at a time from you people.

Frankly, your insistence that Peter Gabriel is the sort of figure one would want news about is baffling and your efforts to retain me as a subscriber are a little pathetic. We both know that Peter Gabriel has become irrelevant to the music-buying, concert-attending public and that you folks have to resort to these tricks to maintain some form of subscriber base. I know how numbers get manipulated. I know how the stats get jukeed. I've seen *The Wire*. My ex-wife Christina and I used to regularly watch that show, which is centered around different forms of institutional malfeasance, so I know that your refusal to remove me from your mailing list has something to do with selling product, but also more to do with the data you provide to advertisers who determine revenue. I'm not stupid.

So, no, I am not interested in his new single, nor his upcoming tour. I do not like any of the music Peter Gabriel has produced. Not his work with Genesis, which I consider to belong to my parents' generation, not his ostentatious solo material, which I consider samey and overly produced. Not his so-called "groundbreaking" and "moving" movie scores, and especially not that crappy World Music he pretends to care about, which to me sounds like indigestion with a time signature.

The only song of his I can even stand is "Red Rain," which I will sometimes listen to all the way through without changing the channel when it comes on PYX 106, which is the classic rock radio station around here. "Solsbury Hill" is okay too, I guess.

Despite these exceptions, it is fair to say that I generally find Peter Gabriel's music distasteful and I would be happy to trade ever hearing those two decent songs ever again if it meant I was saved from the soulless carcass that is the rest of his catalog, particularly his late-career stuff. The melodramatic later work is what led to me first being placed on Mr. Gabriel's e-newsletter mailing list, so I have a particular distaste for that saccharine and heavy-handed stuff. My girlfriend at the time, Christina, who later became my wife, and then my ex-wife, loved some song about a father and child that Gabriel wrote and played an uncharacteristically spare and naked version of. She loved the black-and-white video where Gabriel emoted all over the keys of a piano and the lens of a camera. Her feelings toward this song had something to do with her own father and her, I am guessing.

I was never sure of the whole story. I never bothered to find out. Maybe I should have tried harder. Maybe if I had asked about her more often we would not have grown apart the way we did. Especially at the end there.

Or maybe she felt like the song would eventually have something to do with the children she imagined we would one day have. We were unable to have children, it turned out, which wasn't the sole cause of the end of our marriage, but it didn't help. Various factors go into ending a marriage, you know. Whether or not we could have children, and whose fault that was, were merely contributing factors to what was, by the point we realized we could not have babies together, an already hostile and unhealthy relationship.

She had some kind of grand expectation for me. There was some kind of mold I was supposed to fit into, the existence of which I was unaware when the relationship began. And this is unfair, I think. She was measuring me against other men. Against men she had previously dated, against her father, and her very successful older brothers. Maybe a pastor or some high school English teacher too, I can't be sure. The point is: she wanted me to be a certain way. She wanted me to be a good father to her as-yet-unborn child. I wasn't in any rush to be a dad and luckily, vis-à-vis our little fertility issue, I was never pushed into that role.

As far as I am concerned, and if I could be so bold, fathers are overrated anyway. Most people long for some relationship with their fathers, and if they don't have it they want some kind of reconciliation, but I don't. I don't see the point. When I watch a movie or a TV show where the father tragically dies and the child must avenge him or whatever, like in *The Lion King* or in pretty much any *Batman* movie, I always end up hating that movie. They are better off without a father as far as I am concerned. Without a father getting in the way, the kid has to learn to think for themselves, and they can't be let down time and time again by some guy they wish was a hero, but who actually isn't.

But Christina was one of those people who wanted to reconcile with her father. He was the worst, though. Worked all the time, was never there for her, divorced her mom. All your classic bad dad stereotypes. Eventually she came to some kind of understanding with him. She was always trying to get me to go over there for Christmas and the like, and I just couldn't see why.

It just never made sense to me.

But I loved her. Even though I didn't try hard enough at being married, as they say. I didn't do all of the stuff I should have, I guess. I did the best I could though, and I used to do stuff for her all the time. Stuff like go to Christmas at her stupid dad's house with his new wife and all that. I would go over there in my dumb sweater and I would smile and be so polite and charming. Believe it or not, despite what you have seen in the various communications regarding, vis-à-vis, the newsletters you won't stop sending me, I can be very charismatic.

I also used to do other sweet stuff for her too, like rub her neck and feet and go to the store and buy maxi pads and all that other unromantic/romantic boyfriend/husband stuff. You know what I am talking about. The kind of stuff that when a guy in a TV show does it, you can tell he's a good guy. In real life guys don't actually get any credit for doing that stuff. Women tend to overlook those kinds of little annoyances and humiliations guys go through for them. On TV though you can tell very easily that the guy who ruins his favorite t-shirt painting the bathroom is the guy the girl is supposed to end up with, even though the guy is a little less handsome, and a little less cool than some other guy on the show played by Chris Messina or Dax Shepherd, or some jerk like that.

That is why I subscribed to your newsletter in the first place, as a matter of fact. Just because you bastards set it up so that you had to sign up for the newsletter in order to download that stupid goddamned father and son song from your website. I only did it because of Christina and her stupid dad. Because I am such a caring, charming, kindhearted damn guy. I would not have done it had I thought it would be so hard to unsubscribe from you bastards. I should have just let her do it with her own email account. She'd probably love getting these constant updates about where Peter Gabriel's next show is going to be and what musical endeavor he is working on. She probably still listens to him for all I know. I never understood why it appealed to her. Music is supposed to hit you in the gut. You know? It's supposed to mean something. It's supposed to be like an inside joke that only you and one other person get. Like that song by Lou Reed my dad used to love, or the one by Whiskeytown that Christina and I used to sing along to, or the one by The National that I can't even talk about right now. It's supposed to make you feel like it was written just for you, or just for you and one other person. Like you stumbled onto some deserted patch of beach that no one else has ever seen before. Peter Gabriel just doesn't do that for me. But it's not like I'm jealous of him or anything. It's not like I wish Christina would have romanticized the stuff I did as much as she romanticized the music of some washed-up pop star.

So, for all these reasons and a few more that I have not even mentioned here, I want you to remove me from your mailing list. You'll really be doing the both of us a favor because let me tell you: these tricks don't work. These little plays and plans and plots. I know from experience. It's like, you think just because you leave stuff at your ex-wife's place you can keep going over there and she is going to fall in bed with you like that one time right around the 4th of July. But I can tell you right now, it is never going to be like it was. She is never gonna laugh in that way she used to laugh and tilt her head a little bit and offer you a beer.

So, if I have to accept that about Christina, then you need to accept that Peter God-Damned Gabriel is never gonna headline the MTV music awards again. Or the Grammys. Or whatever other stupid awards show they have now. And Peter, if you are reading this, you need to just deal with that reality. That time in your life is over. It's time to take a good, hard look in the mirror and try to figure out what you still have to offer and who is interested in it. Maybe you can take the knowledge and the skills you have and the love you once had for music and apply it to teaching young people how to unlock their potential. Has that ever crossed your mind, Peter? Or maybe there is a band you can contribute to who really needs your skill set. Like really needs it. Not like Genesis, who clearly didn't need you and who moved on so quickly after you left without even blinking an eyelash. Or maybe it has nothing to do with music at all. Who knows? Maybe you are an amazing gardener or something and you didn't even realize it.

But whatever you decide, first you need to move on. You have got to give up on the past. You have got to accept that you are in a new phase of your life now. You have to give yourself a break on mistakes you have made. It won't be easy, but you have to do it. For example, I never should have bought that Nissan. Nothing good ever came out of it. All it ever brought me was trouble. I know that now. I can see that. And after the divorce, when I went to Christina's dad's funeral, I realized that the things I was pissed about were petty. I couldn't even be there for Christina when she needed me. It meant a lot to her that I came to the funeral and everything, but what was I supposed to say?

I can admit things like this to myself now. You should take a page out of my book because once you admit these things to yourself, you can finally move on. You can finally look to the future. You might be surprised by what you see out there. Maybe something even better is on the horizon.

I know you are going to keep emailing me. I know that you are going to send me newsletter updates for your new tour and your new record, and I am going to get annoyed. I am going to froth at the mouth for a second and tell anyone who will listen how much I hate you. Who knows who I'll be saying it to, but whoever it is I will tell them, "Screw this guy and his music . . ." But I won't email you again. I really mean it this time. That would just be encouraging you.

Eventually, I won't even bother to delete the emails you send me. Every new Peter Gabriel E-Newsletter that you send me will sit with all the other 5,000 unread emails in my inbox that I skip over until I get to the ones from my mom, or old high school friends. I will change my email address one day because I will be updating my resume and trying to sound more professional and I will stop even looking at the one I was using when I made the mistake of subscribing to your newsletter so I could download that free song for my then-girlfriend, who became my wife, and who is now my ex-wife. You won't have my new address and all those emails you send will be like letters written to an old apartment, or phone calls made to a closed business. I'll have moved on. I am telling you all of this now, for your own good. I am telling you this now from the bottom of my heart: I really do want the best for you, Peter, but if you think that emailing me is going to make you happy, you are wrong. And the sooner you accept that, the happier you will be.

Yours truly, so sincere, and all that,

Never Heard of 'Em? #6—fanshaw

The lead singer of this Canadian band / one person project is named Olivia Fetherstonhaugh (I know right !?!). fanshaw is the British, phonetic pronunciation of her name, though she pronounces her name like it is spelled. So... good luck with that.

On the 2010 effort *Dark Eyes*, Fetherstonhaugh puts on display a voice that is quite pretty, though she seems reluctant to be pigeon-holed as *that* kind of chick-singer, trying out various approaches throughout the course of the record. Across the nine tracks, she manages to simmer like Sharon Van Etten, twee it up like Traceyanne Campbell, and seduce like Stevie Nicks, but she never lapses into impression, always employing these various modes to whisper and creep her way through these wounded tunes. The half Portishead-jazz, half Belle & Sebastian style chamber pop arrangements provide enough variation, from splashy drums on "Vegas," to strained and spare electric guitar of "Checkerboard," to the horns on "O Sailor," to match her sulky, sultry tones. Despite this versatility there is a cohesiveness to this set of songs and it has a lot to do with the robust self-assuredness of Fetherstonhaugh's vocals.

Remember Interpol? Think of how much better they would have sounded if Bat For Lashes was their lead singer.

Website: <http://mintreecs.com/artist/fanshaw>

Twitter: Way too cool for social media. Exhibit A: She has a myspace page that she never checks.
<https://myspace.com/fanshawmusic>

Label: Mint Records

Best Track: The title track, "Dark Eyes," sounds like one of those Sonic Youth songs where Thurston Moore lets Kim Gordon sing, covered in a live show by the Magnetic Fields where Stephin Merritt lets Claudia Gonson sing.

Gene Simmons Makes Compelling Case for Segregating Rock and Roll HOF

This Thursday, April 10th, several bands and artists will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Included among the inductees is Gene Simmons' band KISS. To hear him talk, the induction is long overdue. Much like how Simmons decided to exclude original band members Peter Criss and Ace Frehley from the induction performance, (with Frehley hilariously calling KISS "half a cover [band](#)") KISS has been excluded from the Hall for years. The delay, according to Simmons, is due in large part to the Hall's annoyingly political selection [process](#).

"A long time ago it was diluted. It's really back room politics, like Boss Tweed. A few people decide what's in and what's not."

Now that he is inducted, it seems Simmons is angling for a job on this rock and roll inner circle, because in the next breath, he went on to speak for the masses about who should be excluded from the HOF.

"And the masses just scratch their heads. You've got Grandmaster Flash in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame? Run-D.M.C. in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame? You're killing me! That doesn't mean those aren't good artists. But they don't play guitar. They sample and they talk. Not even sing."

Who comprises these masses, I can't be sure, but I am guessing that it might include fellow purveyors of dog whistle racism from *Fox and Friends*.

Simmons thinks that the HOF selection panel is being too loopy with the definition of rock and roll by letting all those annoying hip hoppers, who sample, never play instruments, and don't sing. Maybe they should go ahead and create their own separate, but equal museum. (As a matter of fact, one already exists. It is apparently, entirely online, requires a paid membership, and is perpetually under [construction](#).)

Let's ignore the fact that Gene Simmons plays the bass, which is not the guitar (and I think we can all agree is one step above a kazoo in terms of complexity), and he doesn't always even do that since he's been known to pawn his duties off to Ace, or Paul. Forget too the hypocrisy of complaining about being excluded while you yourself exclude others. Simmons wants to decide who is pop, who is rock, who is in and who is out, and I think we should consider his selection process.

Simmons' criteria is the following: He doesn't want hip hop artists included in the hall because they don't play [guitar](#).

He also doesn't want bands who use sampling technology, which would mean the Beatles would have to get an asterisk since they [invented](#) it. (I guess he only means music sampling technology, since if he meant sampling Kabuki makeup and other band's songs, then his own band would be excluded.)

Also, only bands who sing should be allowed into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Now, I am not sure who told Gene Simmons that chanting his desire to rock and roll all night long is singing, but let's pretend that it is, and let's pretend that he can sing better than [Andre 3000](#), [Mos Def](#), or anyone from the Fugees, (even Praz). You might find this to be a devastatingly narrow understanding of rock and roll, such a narrow definition showing so little imagination (and what else would you expect from a band who has been putting on the same tired, ripped off, hackneyed show for 40 fucking years?) but Simmons is on to something here.

Let's continue to consider what the Simmons criteria might be. We may as well add to the list the things Simmons values in a band.

We can only assume that Gene Simmons' induction board would be most likely to include bands who have had a [reality television show](#), [released a disco record](#), and/or [exploited their fan base for decades](#). It's not clear if complete contempt for one's audience and a complete lack of a sense of humor is required, or just preferred.

Regardless, by that set of criteria, KISS should probably be the last band ever inducted into the HOF.

I am not sure if it is just being a wealthy, white male that gives Gene Simmons the attitude of privilege that leads him to believe the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame should be what he wants it to be, or if it his own self-professed brand of self-delusion. Whatever the case, why he thinks that his brand of ripped off fart rock is more relevant than "[The Message](#)" beyond me.

And I am not saying that he is wrong about the incompetence of the selection committee. I am saying that he is a dick. But that doesn't necessarily mean that he is less qualified to select who belongs in the HOF than the people who actually do the selecting. After all, what does this board who Gene Simmons is complaining about think about music? Well, most recently they have let us in on how they define rock and roll by [excluding](#) drummer Chad Channing from being inducted into the Hall of Fame with his former band, Nirvana.

This shows once again, the complete lack of awareness on the part of the Hall of Fame. It proves once again that once you proclaim yourself an expert, you have given up all credibility. Rock and roll is about asking questions, about talking to the disenfranchised, not cherry picking the most successful lineups of the most successful acts and organizing their pictures in a room.

In the early 90s some angry kids wrote a song called "About a Girl," on an album called *Bleach*. (Most people don't own it.) Whether Dale Crover or Chad Channing, or Dave Grohl is playing on the track is irrelevant. (Also, why aren't we talking about Pat Smear? The guy had a lot to do with one of the most important Nirvana efforts, Unplugged in NY. Wasn't he in the band? Is he also being excluded? If so, why?)

I say to Chad and anyone else not inducted: You dodged a bullet. Was that a poor choice of words? Too soon?

I think it is appropriate considering the fact that the bullet in Kurt's head doomed him to the kind of misunderstanding that is inherent in being inducted into a place as detrimental to the artistic integrity of music as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. That bullet doomed Cobain and Nirvana to become whatever record labels and out of touch institutions like the Hall need him to be so they can sell more coffee mugs that say, "serve the servants..." on them.

Never are they more important than when they died too soon. And never is their music more misunderstood than in its aftermath.

Because now that Kurt Cobain is dead, now that the band will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, we won't ever get to hear them the way we first heard them. We will hear them through decades of rock criticism organizing them as better than some bands and not as good as other bands and presenting them as some brand-name that they weren't. We'll get to rifle through their [rough drafts](#), make ironic use of their anti-corporate stances, and read their most [private thoughts](#).

Why is anyone, in this day and age of self-promotion, of tearing down idols, of sending music spinning off in a million new directions, still paying attention to what the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame says?

The only time the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame has ever been relevant was when Johnny Lydon (That's Mr. Rotten to you, kiddo), [refused to be inducted](#).

Lydon's infamous and grammatically notorious letter tells us all we need to know about the Hall. Real artists, real musicians, don't belong there. Come to think of it, Lydon and Simmons are finally saying the same thing; the moment you are inducted, you are no longer relevant. Maybe everyone would be happier if The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame included KISS in their hallowed halls and then never inducted anyone ever again. It can be the museum that it wants to be, and it can leave the art to the artists. It will create an actual

establishment to rebel against. Because rock and roll is dead.
Long live rock and roll.

Just ask this washed-up rock star (at [2:12](#)) who the new rock and roll stars are:

Never Heard of 'Em? #7—The Mineral Girls

I almost hesitate to tell you about this band. They're that good. It would not be a stretch to say that they are one of the reasons the "Never Heard of 'Em?" series exists. I needed a forum for talking about bands like this one. I needed a place to put all those messy feelings of nostalgia, and hope, and excitement that I get when listening to a band like the Mineral Girls.

Why did it take me 7 weeks (8 weeks actually; sorry about that week I missed...) to actually tell you about them? Well, once I tell you about them, they won't just belong to me anymore. You see, I have this need to possess the things I love. (And we are talking about music here, so let's stick to that.) I want it to belong only to me. I want Timber Timbre to be my special little secret, I want to be the only one who knows that a deep cut from a Roots album that no one owns is the best song they ever recorded. I don't ever want to listen to The Shins again, because... well you know why. But I've made my peace with all that because you should know about these guys, and these guys certainly deserve to be known about. I'm still a little wary of what might happen once the word is out, but that is my problem.

Just, please know how hard it is for me to tell you about this group of kids who scream their guts out in a way invented by desperate, angry-for-no-reason, 90s bands who broke up before the kids from this band even hit elementary school.

Listen to this track called, "Connecticut Girls." Listen to the open string arpeggiation that the guitarist probably learned a week earlier. Listen to how carefully choreographed the tempo shifts are and how they still barely pull them off. Listen to how the horns are lovingly painted on. Listen to how much they fucking mean it.

And don't even get me started on the hopeless sadness of the lyrics. The way the melodrama of the words chronicles the

way a series of lies make up every single relationship of anyone in their late teens.

You never get the sense that they are being coy. It always seems like they are using all the knowledge and ability they have at their disposal. That they are using all the chords they learned from a used Mel Bay book, all the tricks they learned from *Get In The Van* by Henry Rollins, all the poses they saw in Ondi Timoner's *Dig!*.

That's what it seems like. I can't say for sure because, the thing is, I don't know much about them. I sent them several emails to various addresses that they maintain, and none were returned. To be perfectly honest with you, though, that made me like them even more. I mean, these guys are authentic. Fucking authentic. So authentic, in fact, that when some fucking blogger sends them a series of emails, they can't even be bothered to respond.

Bad. Ass.

They are so authentic that if they told me that they had never gotten around to checking out the BJM, had never heard of Black Flag, and couldn't read chord charts in any instructional books, I would believe the little bastards. I would believe that the poses they strike are ones they made up themselves, the clothes they are wearing had been in their closets all along, and the songs they are singing are the only ones they can come up with.

I mean, shit. They can't even be bothered to pick a name for their band, sometimes being billed as Brett Green & The Mineral Girls (if that is your real name, Brett) and other times being called, simply, The Mineral Girls (for the sake of brevity, perhaps?)

There is an earnestness, a truthfulness to these songs that is impossible to fake. It's something like accidentally seeing a co-workers' naked selfies, or unearthing an old recording of your parents from before you were born. There is something about this collection of songs that smacks of being an artifact from their lives.

Don't get me wrong, though. It's not that they don't know what they are doing. They know exactly what they are doing. They have a knack for crafting sweet melodies, and for structuring a song to introduce a new element like a fuzzed out electric guitar, or a drunken sing along, mere moments before the repetition of their simple songs gets boring.

They are doing things that we have seen before, mind you. They didn't invent any of this, but one gets the sense that the form was made for kids like these. One gets the sense that the history of pop music exists so that when kids like these get their hearts broken, they will have these tools available to put them back together. And it's the way they are doing it, not what they are doing that makes them so authentic, anyway.

Hurry up and check them out (you can name your own price at bandcamp) before they get good at their instruments, step out of the drummer's bathroom and into a studio, get overproduced, and lose the tragic kind of sweaty magic that makes them so special.

Website: <http://themineralgirls.bandcamp.com>

Twitter: [@helloimbrett](https://twitter.com/helloimbrett)

Label: Scaredy Cat Records

Best Track: "Tennis"

nothing lasts forever (record review)

[something forever](#)

the mineral girls

self-released, 2014

I hate when anything is all lowercase. It drives me nuts. It feels like some kind of clever marketing gimmick to me. I hate marketing, I hate clever, and I hate gimmicks.

I used to love it, of course. I came of age in the 90s when all lowercase used to be some kind of pandemic among young, relevant musicians. When I first came across this phenomenon, I saw it as a revolution; a deliberate and brave form of civil disobedience. I found it to be a tasteful stylistic choice that conveyed an idea. What idea? There were lots of them: slint was lowercase to underscore the sense of minimalism the band was trying to communicate. silverchair did it to highlight their youth. Tori Amos lowercased the title of her record, *from the choirgirl hotel*, to emphasize the frail femininity of the songs.

Not capitalizing is to make some kind of vague point about how existentially exhausted you are; or how little faith you put into the prescriptivist rules of the amorphous "They" who tell everyone how words (and everything else for that matter) are supposed to work; or even to partake in some Marxist nose thumbing at the Adam Smith types who want everything conveniently uniform and obedient to an agreed upon rule set so it can be commoditized. I used to believe in what all lowercase stood for.

But now I am cynical and broken hearted. I have seen the ideas communicated by intentionally using lowercase letters overused and sullied by advertising, misuse, and overuse. No one born in the 80s can afford to have any heroes, because they always [let you down](#). They always [sell out](#) and they always [betray](#) you.

At this point I think everyone is lying to me and I now find the fact that nine inch nails designed an all lowercase font in an

effort to transform themselves from an angry industrial band into a merchandise empire not seen since KISS, to be manipulative, subversive, and dangerous.

I know that I am particularly susceptible to this kind of clever marketing and I am an easy mark because I want to believe. I need to believe. Knowing this about myself makes me extra vigilant about marketing because I don't want to fall for another one of those hollow bands with cool clothes and some sort of irresistible shtick built into the band's very existence. Because I am so self-aware, I am automatically suspicious of anything that is slick, or well packaged and I am always suspicious of any band or artist who uses all lowercase.

For some reason, however, I don't feel that way when the mineral girls (sic) released the first single "im sorry it has to be this way, but we have to put an end to all this mindless spending," (sic) from their record *something forever* (sic). I get a sense that none of that posturing is at work. The uploading and presentation of the album on Bandcamp seems like it is an afterthought to the music. Like it is some huge drag that lead singer Brett Green has to type in all this shit and he is too lazy to use his pinky to hit the shift key. It's not that he isn't excited about the music. He is. But he just wishes he could upload the songs directly into your brain, so he doesn't have to do all this fucking typing.

This is what it's like in the world of the self-financed, self-promoting musician. Some people are naturals at it and that is nice, but there is little that can make music sound better than an inability to properly market oneself. There are few things more endearing than an inability to present oneself as a product to be purchased, downloaded, or commoditized for advertisers. The fact that The Mineral Girls are bad at this makes the music sound better, the same way the décor of most restaurants is based around orange or red because warm colors makes you want to eat.

“im sorry it has to be this way, but we have to put an end to all this mindless spending” (sic) (Ok. That's the last sic. You get the point) continues mining old Melvins records, and the entire Sebadoh catalog for their churning, over saturated sound. Vince D'Ambrosio's drumming is urgent at times, but also subdued and supportive, like D'Ambrosio knows how exhausting all this is on vocalist Brett Green and he wants to help him out anyway he can. He is always right there, keeping everything together. Based solely on his drumming, he seems like a good dude. Like the kind of dude who would help you move, watch your dog, or not say anything when you park all fucked up and take up like two spots.

And the lyrics are just perfect. Restrained, thoughtful, and just abstract enough to avoid being cliché.

jesus robbed a bank
to pay for all your sins
i heard he used to save
but now he just spends
all his money on you

Not that the lyrics matter too much. They decorate the room while D'Ambrosio ratatats and the tele aches out creaky little notes.

I hate engaging in influence math, but I can't help but think of the so-washed-out-and-feedback-drenched-that-it-actually-sounds-good Jesus and Mary Chain, mixed with the so-fucked-up-and-simple-that-it-actually-seems-semi-profound nasal shouts of John Lydon. The whole record is like listening to a Girls record that Steve Albini took a blowtorch to.

Green isn't exactly a guitar player, but he has a propensity for the same kind of little riff featured in Wipers songs like “Over the Edge,” or a slow motion version of anything The Jam recorded in the 1970s.

If you thought authentic American music wasn't being made anymore, you were wrong. Just when you thought everything was pre-packaged and formulaic, some kid

reminds you that there will always be musical artists writing just exactly the kind of song you need to hear right now.

Don't get me wrong. Not all of it works.

"Xanax" is an example of where Brett Green's ambitions and imaginations outpace the capabilities of his equipment. In the hands of Modest Mouse, this song would be the opening credits for whatever quirky dramedy Matthew Perry signed up for now that *Go On* has been canceled. The song "video quilt" is not without its merits, the bass is particularly thick and veiny on this one, but it is, however, unlistenable. I love when a song is a mess, but even I have my limits.

For Green, who is recording these songs with a four track, a couple friends, a lot of beer and even more gumption, sometimes things get away from him. But even the failures feel like a young artist coming into his own, trying to push boundaries and experiment with new ideas. Green is at least smart enough to bury these misfires deep in the center of the record. Without failed attempts like these, however, the band would never be able to write and record an unqualified success like "hotel swimming pool," which is a beautiful, ramshackle mess of a song about the tragedy of ignoring what is good today to instead dread what tomorrow might bring.

when i was a kid
we took a lot of family vacations
fall asleep in the car
wake up in a different state
please dad, can we stay?
i don't want to go back to connecticut again
i don't want to go back to north carolina again

Here he is in the pool, the chlorine clearing his sinuses, the cool water lapping at his chest and all he can think about is how awful it will be when it's over. We don't want the weekend to end, we don't want to go home after the show, and we dread the post-coital rigmarole, so we don't have

fun at the party, we don't enjoy the concert, and we fail to enjoy how good the sex was.

The bittersweet highs offered by "hotel swimming pool" are found elsewhere on the record as well. The title track, "something forever" is about love's unique sting. The earnestness is so palpable it's like they don't even realize they are being recorded. Green chunks away on his guitar, the microphones pop and sizzle, bottle caps clatter on the cement floor, while the voices of whoever was around that day merge into (pretty much) perfect harmony over the sound of a banjo. On "you were right" the bitter comes to the surface, suppressing the sweet more than on any other song. The drums are muscular, the feedback is thick and menacing and even the admission of guilt sounds like an accusation as the life of a doomed relationship is howled in vain for.

The record ends with two songs that do something different than previous Mineral Girl songs have done and may hint at new paths the band will travel down in their next release. "a/s/l" is manic, frayed at the edges, just like rock and roll is supposed to be. This is the band at its finest. Jungle drums, hooky lead arching over the top of it, and lyrics of alienation and people desperate to make a connection.

A strange thing happens on "i'll never lie to you again." While Green is "singing" into the microphone through what sounds like a tube sock, a transformation occurs. For a moment he howls like Rick Danko from The Band during the doleful "Stagefright." That is to say beautifully. It is a bizarre and shocking transformation. It is one that, miraculously, doesn't distract from the music. In the end, the song collapses into something of a jam and approaches some kind of epic swell. As epic as The Mineral Girls get, anyway. It ends abruptly, of course. Like someone accidentally shut off the recording too early, or perhaps more appropriately things spiraled out of control at minute 6:19.

Green says that he works in a record store, but I don't know if I believe that. Are there really guys who work in a record

store and make Sebadoh / VU / NMH style inspired music, or does that only happen in bad movies? It is hard to believe that there is someone who makes this kind of music who wants to go to David Bazan living room shows just to give the guy a [hug](#).

Is this guy really so uninterested in marketing himself because all that matters to him is the music? Cuz I have heard that people like him exist. Just like I have heard that friends of friends have appeared on game shows, and that there really are people who like black licorice.

Or is this Mineral Girls project just the thesis of some marketing major?

It's hard to say, but I'll keep hoping that no one ever wants to buy them so that I can keep complaining about how fucked up everything is. I'll keep hoping that they continue to be just as fucked up and worthless to society as I am so that we can be misfits together. I know that none of this can last, I'll keep listening and hoping they never bother to capitalize, grammatically or financially.

Never Heard of 'Em? #8—yesper

"Cannibal King" isn't what you think. It's not a cookie monster vocalist gutturalizing all over a thrash metal track at 220 BPM. It's a delicate, gentle song by a talented singer-songwriter borrowing phrasing from The Flaming Lips' "Waiting for a Superman," and making coy references to "the quiet strength of the Carpenter's house..."

Not only is "Cannibal King" not a song released by a death metal band named Malevolent Sandwich, it's an EP by yesper, a bummed out guy with a wounded guitar, excelling at all the things bummed out guys with wounded guitars are supposed to excel.

He's got a voice that is scratchy and somber, guitar playing that moves adeptly up and down the neck to fill out the sound of a lone guitar playing a simple progression, and he is even handsome in that thin kind of "I just got contacts and it turns out I have perfect bone structure, but I used to be a geek last year, I swear," kind of way.

According to the artist, the songs off the EP were recorded at night in a "gigantic empty storefront in downtown Seattle."

At least that's what the artist alleges. I say that he "alleges" this because the songs sound exactly like they were recorded at night in a gigantic, empty storefront in Seattle, so I am somewhat suspicious.

Whether or not this is clever persona crafting it works very well (after all who doesn't want to record their spare, atmospheric, acoustic record in a location as cinematic as an abandoned storefront in Seattle? The only places better suited to be the back drop for your feel-rock would be a pink house in a rural area of upstate New York, or a cabin in the snowy woods of Wisconsin), The vocals reverberate with the perfect level of decay against the walls (probably populated by half torn down advertisements for brands of beer you've never heard of, and a cash register long ago emptied of cash and receipt paper) and the single piano key plunks bounce

gravely off of what I can only imagine to be a cement floor that is dirty in that cool way, not that gross and smelly way.

Best Song: "Hovercars"

With this standout song yesper is operating with the same musical tools as the other songs, delivering the spiraling fingerpicking, the delicate and echoey production, but he is in the most unique lyrical territory here. The spare acoustic song takes place in the same bizarre future as *Robocop 2*, or some Japanese graphic novel, but you don't get lasers and Nehru jackets. You get angst and heartbreak.

It's an interesting thought experiment since this kind of song, played on this kind of guitar has existed for at least 100 years and though the set dressing has changed, the topics have not. There is no difference between the types of song that guys like Henry Whitter and Fiddlin' John Carson wrote and played when trains and whiskey and rubella were the only things that people did for fun (I assume), and the songs written today that reference iPhones and email. These songs were then and are now about the same kinds of love, lust, heartbreak, and fear.

Yesper makes the assumption that this will be no different in the future when hovercars and jetpacks are finally a thing,

After all the "hovercars and robot stripper cars," are dealt with, the only thing left is death. All anyone ever wants to write about is death, and sex, and love, which we all know are the only things that really exist.

Twitter: Fuck twitter, we're all gonna die.

Label: Fuck a label, we're all gonna die.

Website: <http://yesper.bandcamp.com/> : We're all gonna die, so pay what you want for "Cannibal King."

yesper and his vulgar mouth (Record Review)

[senses sensei](#)

yesper

self-released, 2014

A lot of bands ([Destroyer](#), [Ducktails](#), Bon Iver for that last [track](#) on their 2011 record) think it's cool to sound like the 80s. They are wrong. There is nothing cool about the gauzy, neutered studio sounds of that era. There is nothing cool about the glowing sheen lacquered onto bands like Genesis, Foreigner, and Stevie Winwood.

The songs on yesper's 2014 release *senses sensei* are so shimmery and dry that I kept expecting a [Steely Dan](#) sax solo to pop up at any moment. There is even a song with a Phil Collins-esque song-long lyrical conceit about making contact through a radio. 1987 much?

Somehow, though, yesper gets away with it (just like he gets away with creating a portmanteau of "yes" and "whisper" to form the name of his one-man project; just like he gets away with doing that thing where everything is lower case including the name of the record, the songs, and the band). There is something post-police Sting about it all, but not in a bad way; in a really soothing and earnest way. yesper has produced a tight, compact record that exists in that vulnerable space that doesn't know it is being corny, but is just honest and sincere enough to be interesting and compelling. Somehow, despite the flaws, it works.

The songs are short and compact, getting in and getting back out on each track, the longest one being a luxurious length of 3:37. He doesn't linger after he paints you the picture. "You know what this is," he seems to be saying. "You get what I am doing. You know that I am good at it."

Just like on his 2012 record *Cannibal King*, the character of the recording venue is reflected in the sound of the record. Whereas *Cannibal King* was recorded in an "empty storefront in downtown Seattle," this one was recorded in "empty

penthouses of an unfinished high-rise above downtown Seattle." It shows. The cool quiet of it all. The lonely honesty.

Unfortunately, there is none of the bizarre lyrical territory explored on 2012's *Cannibal King*, though yesper is still fussing over the same problems of how to exist as a fragile-hearted guy in a cold, uncaring, and too technologically advanced society. He lets the arrangements and the above-average-for-this-type-of-record guitar playing come to the forefront, relegating the lyrics to a more perfunctory role. There also seems also to be a new commitment to percussion, employing a different percussion instrument for each song, a woodblock instead of a kick drum for the Decemberist's-esque "butcher's boy," the maracas keeping the ethereal "honest men" tethered to the earth. There are clacks and bangs, claps and shakes layered in, stripped down and solid, and it all helps to craft a stage for the scratchy, often melodramatic interplay of vocals and guitar.

Like I said, not everything works. "moving parts" is ponderous and even its tasteful guitar-solo outro can't save it from being unnecessarily drab. The backing vocals on "honest men," are a bit monochromatic and they serve as some kind of literal echo-chamber where the ooh and aahs are yespered by yesper himself. The practice of harmonizing to your own vocals is common and probably done for practical and economic reasons but it doesn't lessen the effect of these "back-up singers" acting as some kind of naked self-affirmations. It's a little like watching a fat guy look in the mirror, comb his hair back and tell himself, "Yup. I look like Ryan Reynolds."

The record is bookended though by its two most devastatingly successful tracks. "vulgar mouth," has the most character of all his songs and it opens the record. It uses the same descending bent note throughout to underscore the notion of drifting away on a wave of self-doubt. It smartly hints at the way words fail during courtship and flirtation and evokes the delicious and sexy moments in between the

public facade of a date and the end point that is the bedroom. "brightest minds," recalls the spiraling intro of the titular track on "cannibal king," and it serves as almost a thesis statement for yesper's work. It is about the inability to communicate despite the wealth of avenues for expression. The theme of failing to communicate is one to which yesper returns over and over and one that seems comes across as honest coming from this artist. Most of his work is about what he calls "inarticulate bastards of men."

If nothing else, yesper can be confident that he at least got that across. What else can you call a record that manages to communicate the failure to communicate but a success?

Stuck in My Head #2: "Tomorrow" from the musical Annie

-or- Sisyphus for the modern era, (and by "modern era," I mean the 1930s as seen through the lens of the 1980s which happens to be scarily reflective of today)

I have "Tomorrow" from the movie-musical *Annie* stuck in my head and I can't get it out.

I don't know why I put *Annie* on to begin with. It was suggested to me by Netflix because I had recently watched *The Muppet Movie*, (for reasons that are entirely Steve Martin related). Netflix must have assumed, based on this, that I have a fetish for movies about childlike characters living in squalor, who despite being completely vulnerable in a bleak and uncaring world, still manage to sing buoyantly about staring down unimaginable odds.

I'm not saying it was Netflix's fault. I knew what I was getting into. I watched it enough as a kid while being babysat by my mom's friend who's two daughters loved musicals (and maintained a dictatorial control of the VCR). *Annie* was their favorite so much so that if any other musical was to be watched, like the ebullient *Grease*, or the hallucinogenic *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (that's the one where Angela Lansbury is a Witch, Balloo is an agent of Satan, and David Tomlinson is English, oh so English), *Annie* had to be temporarily removed from its home in the VCR and then replaced once they were finished with the interloping film.

I used to pretend to hate it, but I secretly loved it for its melodies, colors, and the energy of the rambunctious street kids. For some reason the songs in those other musicals didn't have the same effect on me as *Annie's* did.

I really should have known better.

I should have watched anything else. I should have started *Boardwalk Empire*, Season 1, Episode 1, on HBO GO or *Umberto D.* which I have been meaning to watch and is available from the Criterion Collection on HULU. I've had a

DVD copy of Jonathan Glazer's 2004 creeper [Birth](#) laying around unwatched for like forever. It was Friday though, and I had let my guard down in that Friday sort of way. I was looking for some kind of intangible experience, but whether I wanted that experience to be escape or catharsis is unclear to me. Regardless, I pressed play on the film that starts with a song that would be stuck in my head for weeks after the final credits rolled.

Just to be clear, I am talking about John Huston's 1982 version of *Annie*. It's the one with a cast so good that it rivals one of those gimmicky anthology films they used to make in the '00s that were named after holidays, or major cities, and featured big name actors who only appeared in one scene ([Valentine's Day: The Movie](#), I'm looking at you). Albert Finney brings the same bug eyed intensity to his role that he brought to everything from *Tom Jones* to *Big Fish*; Tim Curry creeps as the deranged Rooster; and Carol Burnett, though scrawnier than the iron bars on the windows of the orphanage, feasts on the scenery. At the center of the film is Aileen Quinn, a freckled extrovert who manages to not be all Jonathan Lipnicki about it, who plays Annie, the ragged, bottom-dollar-betting orphan with the indomitable spirit.

So, the film is great and full of superlative performances, and it pulses with life and energy that fills the songs with blood in a way that the stifled and affected performances from, say, *The Sound of Music* do not. (If you'll recall *The Sound of Music* is that film about Nazis with character actor Christopher Plummer where he is somehow NOT a Nazi?)

Also, I love "Tomorrow" so much that it really shouldn't be such a big deal that I have it stuck in my head. I've had songs stuck in my head before and I don't really mind the experience. Some people claim that when a song is stuck in their head they end up hating that song, but that never happens to me. It can actually make me feel less lonely somehow, to be visited by some tune that seems to have a life and personality of its own, one that follows me around the

apartment and comes with me to the grocery store like some kind of strange friend or stray puppy.

The only problem I have with "Tomorrow," the reason its adherence to my brain is so unpleasant, is that it is probably the saddest song from what might be the saddest film ever made that is not called *Old Yeller*.

"But it's about overcoming insurmountable obstacles," you say. "It's about pluck, and hope, and love," you posit. "It's a film about optimism!!!!" you exclaim, a bit ridiculously, what with the four exclamation points and all.

To your assertions I respond: It's the optimism that makes it so sad.

The film certainly invites us to share in Annie's optimism. It is relentless about this, in fact, not even having transitioned out of the Columbia Pictures logo before it starts in on the fantasizing, telling us to "hold on 'til tomorrow," and "the sun will come out," etc. The film asks us to ignore the disastrous job market; America on the precipice of war; the near statistical certainty that Annie's adolescence spent in a developmentally inappropriate orphanage will lead to a substance abuse habit, flirtations with homelessness, or the prison system. It asks us to buy into this fantasy, even though we know, deep down that Annie is doomed. What is so cruel is that the film allows Annie, and by proxy the audience, to believe that things may actually work out.

The very first image we see is of Annie staring out of the window of the orphanage, imagining what her amazing parents must be like and explaining to the audience, and maybe more so herself, that her parents will be back to pick her up any day. She goes so far as to ascribe to them hobbies like needlepoint and collecting ash trays. She even hopes the kind of thing no parent-having kid would hope, "Maybe they're strict / As straight as a line," longing for some order to be placed onto the chaos that is her life.

The implication here is that she is living a life of chaos and misery, one from which only her dreams can keep her

insulated. This chaos and misery is embodied by the woman who runs the orphanage, Carol Burnett's negligently hypersexual Miss Hannigan. Not only is she dangerously lonely, but she also drinks so much that the kids in the orphanage start using her empty liquor bottles as toy microphones to sing into. So unbound is her libido that she spends a good portion of the film kvetching that "I'd like a man to nibble on my ear," and while the orphans are forced to clean the orphanage, she is busy telling the laundry guy, Mr. Bundles, that "it's time for a tumble with a bundle." She also has an interaction with a police officer that can only be described as alarmingly lascivious, at the end of which she actually purrs.

This moment is immediately followed by Annie being dragged through the orphanage by her ear.

This bizarre juxtaposition of overt sexual mania with wicked violence is the emotionally and economically impoverished state from which we find Annie attempting to escape. Through circumstances that are so absurd they seem downright perverse, she finds herself adopted for the week as part of some sort of PR move by "Wall Street Tycoon Oliver Warbucks." Upon arriving at the mansion, when asked by Warbucks' uptight and beautiful assistant Grace what she'd like to do first, Annie eagerly explains that she will start by cleaning the windows, then proceed to the floors. This reveals that Annie assumed that she was being brought to the mansion to clean it, yet still willingly and enthusiastically accompanied Grace just to escape the horrors of the orphanage.

Escape is the key word here. Despite the well-choreographed song and dance routines of the orphanage, Annie wants terribly to escape. The movie makes no secret of this and this is important to remember for later. Despite her wide grin, aw shucks dimples, and apparent ebullience, she actually wants desperately to escape this emotionally toxic and, at times, physically dangerous place. The girls she lives with are so used to Annie's escape attempts that they simply

groan exhaustedly anytime she puts one of her endeavors into motion. These attempts regularly put her into danger, and not just fear of reprisal from Miss Hannigan, but also vulnerable to the violence and harm of what is depicted as a savage world full of pick pockets, roving gangs of teenage animal torturers, and shockingly negligent Model T drivers. Her escape attempts always fail, but she continues to try to remove herself from the frying pan and, despite immense evidence to the contrary, she has no expectation of ending up in the proverbial fire. If that is not the premise of an almost operatically sad film, I don't know what is.

Where is she running to? Well, to a life with the strict, ash tray collecting parents she describes in the opening scene, of course.

What makes it even more sad is the fact that Annie doesn't ever get discouraged because she is convinced that her fate is to get what she wants. Even when Warbucks shows up to tell Grace that he wanted her to procure a boy from the orphanage and to send Annie back (a command he later retracts for unimportant plot related reasons), Annie greets his gruff revocation with typical cheerfulness, telling him that even though she won't be the orphan to benefit from his charity, she thinks adopting an orphan for a week is a "swell idea." She makes no effort to retain the prize of living in the opulent home for week because resentment appears to be something Annie has had removed like it is some useless appendage, but also because Warbucks and wealth and comfort are not her goal. She could take it or leave it. This whole living with a billionaire thing is just a pit stop on the highway to reunification-with-my-family town.

As the world metastasizes around, she just beams.

In a 21st century America where even children have become cynics, so much so that every single television show seemingly must include an eye-rolling, sarcastic pre-teen to point out what fools all the adults are, the notion that

someone as relentlessly positive and trusting of the world as Annie could exist is disarming. For the film to work on any level and for it to be so charming and not at all saccharine or dumb, or as naïve and unsophisticated as most films with a child protagonist is an achievement worthy of some kind of award or accolade. Too bad they don't present Oscars for Best Emotional or Psychological Manipulation in a Comedy or Musical.

One of the few accolades the film did manage to procure was a Golden Raspberry, awarded by the brain trust behind the third annual Golden Raspberry Awards who attacked the film by nominating it for Worst Picture, Worst Director, Worst Actress, and Worst Screenplay. This was back before the Razzies were the storied award granting committee that they are today. At the time I think they were trying to make a name for themselves and the highly public and beloved musical was the perfect big game for them to ironically display on their mantle. Somehow though they thought it was a good idea to "award" the film's Annie, Aileen Quinn, with the title of Worst Supporting Actress. The fact that the warm, precocious Aileen Quinn was given a Razzie (a dubious honor given to performers such as Alicia Silverstone for her slack jawed batgirl in *Batman and Robin*, Jessica Alba for her 90 minute [Stephanie Tanner](#) impression during *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*, and to Madonna for playing that same character she plays in every film she's ever been in), makes the whole thing even sadder. Ironically the newest Annie, Quvenzhané Wallis who will appear in the 2014 film version of the musical, has already dealt with this kind of bullying when some ["writer" for The Onion made a "joke"](#) about her while she was trying to attend the Oscars after being nominated for her performance in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

So, *Annie*, the film, is beset on all sides by the melancholy, and the depressing. It presents a bleak and troubling reality, with various songs that are secretly disturbing, or at least discomfiting, "Hard Knock Life," and "Little Girls," being two

that come to mind, however, there is a deeply troubling existential horror to “Tomorrow” that other songs of the musical fail to create, one that embodies the subtext of the film. I’m not even the only one who thinks so. YouTube is filthy with tattooed and damaged young women playing deeply affecting minor key versions of the [song](#).

They sing the song as if it is a cage for them to climb out of. Most of them do a really beautiful job, and they make my point for me because they all see in the song what I see, which is that it is a bleak reminder of what one does not have. What these dirges miss, however, is the absolutely saddest part of the song which is, as I stated earlier, Annie’s optimism.

This counterintuitive dose of existential depression is best expressed in the form of an old joke. It goes something like this:

“What is always on its way, but never gets here?”

Of course, you know the answer.

And that’s the thing. Annie, by definition, wants something that will never arrive. She wants her parents, who are dead, to come and bring her to a home that we the audience learn has been burnt to the ground. Stated psychologically, she wants to be loved unconditionally, to bask in the warm glow of parental approval. Stated socioculturally, she wants to live in a world where she experiences Christmas and can participate in touchstones such as the collective belief of Santa Claus. Speaking temporally, she wants it to be tomorrow today. These are all the ways she wants to get to tomorrow, but these are all things that are not going to happen. She is a pint-sized Sisyphus doomed by the gods to relive the same Hell every day.

The more she hopes, prays, and longs for tomorrow, the closer she gets, the more her anticipation builds, the more dangerous her circumstance becomes. Because when she wakes up in the morning, she is always staring up at the ceiling of Miss Hannigan’s orphanage, or at a panoply of toys she has no interest in in an opulent bedroom in the home of a billionaire who is using her to make him appear less like a

money-making cyborg and more like an actual human. It is still today. It is always today. It is never tomorrow.

Yet, still the optimism persists. Annie is so optimistic that she charms everyone she meets, manipulating adults who should know better, like Mr. Bundles and the dog catcher, and convincing Grace to select her to be Warbucks' PR opportunity without even having to speak. She even manages to coax Grace into undoing the up-tight bun in her hair even though not being uptight is seemingly anathema to her core beliefs. Annie is so optimistic that in the scene where "Tomorrow" is first sung, she gets dour Eleanor Roosevelt, who claims "I can't sing," and curmudgeonly Daddy Warbucks, who is a Republican, to harmonize with her and FDR in a rousing rendition of the impossibly positive, but also secretly virulent [song](#).

The saddest element baked into the songs, the part that makes all of the songs from the musical, particularly "Tomorrow," so sad is the fact that SPOILER ALERT it doesn't work out for Annie. Oh sure, she ends up being adopted by Daddy Warbucks, but that isn't going to make her happy. Being adopted by Daddy Warbucks is no tomorrow, it's just one more today. Daddy Warbucks, cold and distant, a man who, by his own admission, is obsessed with financial success ("I love money, I love power," he explains to Grace as an excuse for why he can't adopt Annie halfway through the film), a man who acquired his fortune by being "ruthless, hurt[ing] a lot of people," could never love Annie the way she so desperately wants. He could never offer the kind of unconditional love she trusts the universe to provide.

When Warbucks eventually does adopt her, he can't even summon the words to explain what he has done. He explains his adoption as if it was a business deal, "what I'm proposing would involve a long-term agreement." But Annie rejects him. She rejects him because she wants her "real" parents to return and take her home. Her own optimism stands in the way of

the reality that someone wants her. She is damaged. Beyond repair. By hope.

After Annie rejects Warbucks, the film meanders to a conclusion via a trip to the talkies a couple more dance numbers and a kidnapping plot. I'm not going to get into the near Lynchian heights of horror the film reaches in its climax atop a bridge where the guy who played Pennywise in Steven King's *It* makes you believe he is going to throw a preteen off a bridge while she begs for her life like Adam Goldberg in the finale of *Saving Private Ryan*.

I'm not going to explain to you that the finale to *Annie* is not the finale of a kid's movie, nor the crescendo of a light hearted romp of a musical, but rather the climax of a Cronenberg-esque body horror picture. I'm not going to explain this to you because you already know it to be true. It's why you secretly dread that part of the film. You always have and you are made uncomfortable by my mere mention of it, so I'll just drop it.

Suffice it to say that Annie is eventually rescued. Punjab (Yeah. That is the dude's name. So there is that...) appears in traditional deus-ex-machina fashion, dangling from a helicopter being lowered from the sky to make everything alright (...for now). This leads into a beatific, Busby Berkeley-style finale (with jugglers, fireworks and an elephant) where it is proven, beyond a doubt, that Annie is doomed.

"What?" you may ask. "*How does this prove that Annie is doomed?*" you ask, unable to think of any way to emphasize your words other than via italics.

Well, first we have Daddy Warbucks. He makes a big show of taking her in, but the film has already proven that he struggles mightily with showing real emotion. Sure he throws this party for her and even does a little song and dance, but this is an event being put on by a captain of industry. Oliver Warbucks is a man who is well familiar with the grand opening, the ostentatious event, the need to keep up appearances. Annie started off, after all, as a PR move. Do

you think a little soft-shoe is indicative of true paternal love? At one point they even stop dancing long enough to [shake hands](#).

Not only does Warbucks try to present a lavish party as a substitute for real love, but he uses his employee / employer relationship as a substitute for real intimacy, because at the finale of the film Warbucks has still managed to Won't his Will They / Won't They with the film's love interest, Grace Farrell. They love each other, obviously. Annie can tell right away and she states explicitly that everyone knows that there is an attraction, but Daddy Warbucks never does anything about it. Grace and Warbucks never address the fact that they love each other. The film ends with Grace stoically and repressedly standing by his side. Sure, he gives her a peck of a kiss, but it is no more familiar than the one he pecked on the cheek of the first lady. More importantly, by the time of the party Grace's hair has gone back up into a bun which, in the parlance of the film, negates all the progress Annie had made earlier in the film in getting Grace to literally let her hair down.

After the credits role Warbucks, who is basically a Richard Branson-esque self-made billionaire of the Depression era, will return to working 100 hours a week, continuing to amass his fortune. What will his relationship with Grace Farrell be like?

"They'll get married!!!!" you say, again with all the exclamation points.

Oh yeah? They'll get married and then they will end up working with her all day, only to then take her to bed at night? Has that ever worked for anyone in the history of mankind? If he married her, which he certainly would not do, but if he did, the first thing he would do would be to fire her as his ass-kicking private secretary. He would fire the fuck out of her. And this is the late 1930s remember. Not only was it the Depression, but this is before Rosie the Riveter, before Betty Friedan, and all those waves of feminism. Do you have any idea what kind of fucked up shit she had to do to become Oliver Warbucks' ass-kicking private secretary? You don't

even want to know. What's more is she is a "private secretary" the way Sancho Panza is a squire, because the film indicates that she is running things in a whole lot of ways. Look at the way he relies on her, the way he screams her name anytime he doesn't know what action to take, the way she handles his affairs, facing right into his bluster and guiding him to the right moves in all his business and personal affairs. Is she just going to leave that job, the one she fought and clawed to get? The one that has put her so close to the epicenter of all that political and economic power? She is going to leave that job just so she can be Annie's babysitter? Has anyone asked her what the fuck she wants?

It doesn't matter though, because that is not what happens between those two. The relationship between Grace and Warbucks will continue to be frustratingly professional until Warbucks fires Grace evidently for some trumped up slight, but actually because he finds out she is dating some patent attorney after having given up on him ever noticing her. After that, Annie will be raised by a series of servants, maids, au pairs, tutors and women who are like Miss Farrell, but who are far inferior to her.

Q: Do you know who Grace is, besides Annie's surrogate mother and the only stable and responsible adult she has ever met?

A: Her only friend.

Once Annie leaves the orphanage, how often will Warbucks invite a building full of orphans to his home? Once a year? Maybe? And what if they actually get adopted, or run away themselves? I think it's time to come to grips with the fact that the big party at the end of the film is the last time Annie will ever see most of her friends again. This kind of thing happens all the time, sure, and people move on. But where will Annie move on to? Will she be lovingly embraced into the bosom of friendship shared by the children of other rich kids who go to her posh boarding schools? Annie, the orphan, who is so animated she may as well be made with pencils and a

rostrum camera and will perpetually be an outsider among her own social circle? No. Those kids will eat her alive and all that spunk and get-up-and-go will be scraped from her like the layer of exfoliated dead skin peeled away during an unnecessarily expensive facial.

Warbucks will inevitably marry and then divorce one of these replacements, forever cursing her and the amount of money she procured in the divorce despite what Warbucks was sure was a rock solid pre-nuptial agreement. And who will be the casualty of that war? You guessed it. Annie. Annie who is such a fucking orphan she doesn't even have a last name.

But the even bigger and more troubling proof that Annie is doomed is that Annie never learns any lesson. She never learns, as we the audience do, that her parents died in a fire. She never expresses that she understands that Warbucks loves her, or indicates in any way that she will stop longing for her parents to come rescue her. Not unlike the cheerful raz-a-mataz of the orphanage that she was so intent upon escaping, this expression of joy does not indicate that she is content, nor that she plans to stay. As soon as that party with live animals and pyrotechnics that Warbucks throws is over she will look out the window of the mansion, a prison window not unlike the prison window of the orphanage that she looked out of in the first scene, and continue imagining what her parents look like and what their hobbies might be. The film does nothing to indicate she will stop this practice. Annie will deal with feelings of loneliness and abandonment her whole life and she will be perpetually waiting for a tomorrow where she will feel safe and happy and fulfilled, a tomorrow that will never come.

But hey. No big deal right? You're only a day a way. [You're always a day away.](#)

Never Heard of 'Em? #9—MenoPaws

Remember when you were in elementary school, and you would stick your tongue on a 9v battery and when your tongue completed the circuit it would feel crazy and then you would do it again? Well, listening to this band is just as stupid an idea as licking a 9v battery. I also highly recommend both practices.

Unrestrained and ferocious, but also surprisingly complex, with sophisticated drum parts and unexpected rhythm shifts this is not your typical Anal Cunt-esque noisecore band. They borrow more from the shoegaze movement, Sonic Youth and Ride than they do from grindcore heroes like Napalm Death. MenoPaws sprinkle in enough breaks and silences to distinguish the musical ideas from one another. Instead of getting one big swatch of post-hardcore gray, they quiet down just enough for you to see all the shades of black vomit, white-puss and blood colored blood they are mixing together to get their sound.

There is a moment on the song "Goodbye," a typically aggressive noise punk tune, where the guitars pull off a stadium rock, Muse sized soar. Their versatility surprises. The percussive cowbell and the tender moments between the razor wire screams can take you by surprise and it is that dynamism that distinguishes this band from other bands with names like, Scumbag Martini and The Sick Machetes.

On their debut, the final song, "Wasted Nights / Fin" starts with an insistent drum part, a nice guitar progression, and an even nicer lead, and it unfolds in typically punk rock ways. Then the song abruptly stops and a swirling piano phrase is played for two and a half stunning minutes. It's the loudest moment on the record.

This punk, hardcore band from Jersey is willing to take it down, all the way down, to get their point across. This is a band who realizes that you can't have loud without quiet. No fast without slow. No heartbreak without love. And it is this

awareness that allows them to get away with the tempo changes, and the cross-genre experiments. Even the "I miss you," piped through a bullhorn works.

"Chris' Song" is an insane stop-start ditty of stupidly serrated riffs and cymbals so splashy they get the bass all wet. Their math rock influences show up to take the song into Slint territory by way of Mission to Burma. Like the child who twists his broken toys into new and bizarre creations, MenoPaws glue their song ideas together, opting to make 9 memorable songs instead of 20 forgettable ones. Each song has something new and hooky and weird to offer. Lucky for you, you can download their records from bandcamp in a pay what you want format.

Website: <http://meno-paws.bandcamp.com/>

Twitter: [@menopawsband](https://twitter.com/menopawsband)

Label: Unsigned as Fuck

7 Albums I Am Supposed to Love That I Actually Hate (Part 4 of 7)

Case #4. Pavement, *Slanted and Enchanted* (1992)

It has been a lifelong goal of mine to become a Pavement fan. I love the bands who are Pavement's predecessors; bands like The Fall and Sonic Youth; bands not concerned with hitting the Billboard charts or squishing their ideas into some radio friendly template. And I love a lot of the bands who took after them; Les Savy Fav, Broken Social Scene, and Animal Collective, (stay tuned my upcoming article about *Merriweather Post Pavilion* for my complicated relationship with Animal Collective). And all the coolest people are Pavement fans; Built to Spill, Beck, Lester Bangs' nephew Lance, that friend of a friend with a pompadour who is a professional photographer and throws great dinner parties.

But I could never quite get it. I have often found myself, upon meeting a fellow pop music-phile, confounded by this hangup I have for this band. After swapping music geek references for a while, our enthusiasm giddy and bubbling as we agree on the superiority of bands like Neutral Milk Hotel, The Roots, and MC5, and try one up each other with crazy stories we've heard about artists like Van Morrison and Nina Simone, our conversation inevitably finds its way to Pavement. I am always left scratching my head while my new, cool friend, who I am trying to impress, tries to explain what it is I should like about Pavement.

I know they were unsentimental on purpose, but I need some *raison d'etre* for the music they made. They seemed so unsentimental that the music became disingenuous. "You don't HAVE to be here fellas," I wanted to say. "If you are too cool to be here, you can leave and I will go back to listening to Jay-Z and Elliot Smith," I imagined myself telling them. "It's no big deal, guys. Really."

I would often find myself getting frustrated because I could not hear what others heard in the band. After all, "Conduit for

Sale," and, "No Life Singed Her," are bad songs. Don't believe me? Go back and try to listen to them now. You started reading this article thinking that I am wrong about Pavement, and you are forming your arguments in your head. But, before you do that, I really want you to go ahead and listen to those songs and come back and tell me what you think of them. I can wait. I know you have this record. You're cool, after all. You are one of the cool people who like Pavement. You are one of the people who I want to be like.

You are listening to them now, aren't you? You are seeing it now, aren't you? These songs don't have the vigor of a punk song, nor the melody of a pop song, nor the lyrics of a folk song. They are little experimental, hybrid mutations, but they are failures. You are starting to wonder what you saw in this band all along, aren't you?

And the problem is Pavement. Were these bad songs played by bands who appeared to give a shit about the music they were making, it wouldn't matter that the songs are a little tossed off and weak. My complaint with Malkmus and the boys has always been that they are so smug and sarcastic that it discredits anything they do when the music they make comes close to being real. Sure, there is artifice to any artist. Every musician takes on some kind of persona. You could say that there are layers and layers of bullshit to The Band. They are Canadians singing southern blues-rock tunes. Muddy Waters, like any blues artist, makes you work because he is so entrenched in the traditions of the blues form (12 bar blues songs all utilizing the classic turnaround, and the "my woman left me," or "Hell-fire" subject matter). Vampire Weekend, The Talking Heads, even Pink Floyd, make ridiculous songs about wacky concepts, but if I walked around complaining about the artifice of *Animals*, I would miss out on some pretty gorgeous tunes, and the experiences associated with those songs. I know that.

But the artists who I love the most, the artists who pull me back in time and time again, are the artists who risk something.

They are the artists who do something or say something weird, or strange, or personal. Artists who are good at what they do, but then take that talent and do something with it no one expected. Pavement always felt to me like they were acting like risk takers, but that they never wanted to take any real risks. They seemed to have created this insular little club and they let the "I'm too cool for you" miasma take over.

There are a lot of ways they could have really made a leap and hoped that there would be people on the other side of the chasm when they landed. For example, they could have tried more cohesive lyrics. There is almost a random Mad Libs quality to their lyrics and album titles. *Brighten the Corners?* Why not *Sharpen the Circles?* "Spit on a Stranger?" Why not "Insult a Statue?" And why are their lyrics this way? I suspect that it is easier to say nothing, because then you don't risk being contradicted, or rejected. Because, for all I know these songs, are all about the same thing.

But it didn't have to be the lyrics. Sometimes non-nonsensical lyrics are more interesting than straightforward ones. Just ask Ghostface Killah. Instead, The Pavements could have made their sound more dynamic and nuanced, and less layered and caked on (all the instruments basically doing similar things in the same key). But that would have required that they make decisions and choices about the arrangements. *And arrangements are so uncool, man. Like, ya know?* It would have required that they actually honed their instruments and their craft. *But , dude, practice is like, hard. Ya see?*

There are a lot of ways they could have taken an artistic risk. But without some gesture on their part, there is something that is so insipid about them. That's what gets me really upset. We are all paying attention to you, The Pavement. You got us. All eyes are on you. What are you gonna do with it? What are you gonna say? Nothing? Really?

I will admit this to you, though. One day I heard, almost accidentally, "Range Life" on some mix CD someone gave

me. I am not sure if it was the context, or the circumstances surrounding my listening to the CD, but I had this deep emotional reaction to the tune. It's a song I've heard about a million times but all of a sudden it felt like Stephen Malkmus was shaking his floppy, 90s hair out of his eyes and singing right to me. I had an emotional reaction to the song on a far deeper level than made possible by even certain sad love songs that are designed for me (or anyone else) to identify with. The tune succeeded in doing what the rest of Pavement's catalog failed to do. It hit me on a gut level.

Something about hearing "Range Life," this one time hit me just the right way. It's not what he is singing about that gets me (cuz we all know his lyrics are about nothing but bull shit. Can we all just come out and admit that right now?). I guess that I finally stopped looking for something in the lyrics and I started believing in the song. "Range Life" started to remind me, for a second, of "Venus in Furs." It was so atmospheric and organic. And just like Velvet Underground made it seem as though they were recording their tunes in between a séance, and an opium fueled orgy, it sounded like "Range Life" was recorded in between smoking a bunch of bad weed, and hanging out at a bowling alley. "Maybe," I thought to myself, "I was just looking for some pristine Big Star-esque pop out of Malkmus and the boys, but I should have let them explain it for themselves. I should have met them on their own terms." Once that song clicked for me, I thought I was going to tumble into some long-term Pavement love affair, understanding all the tunes anew. It never happened. I tried approaching their records with no expectations and I found very little in the way of transcendence. I found little more than what seemed to be a prank played by kids who have yet to drop out of college completely.

Now, this admission about my brief love affair with "Range Life," doesn't do anything to support your argument that *Slanted and Enchanted* is a good record, because "Range Life" is off of *Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain*. However, it does

serve as evidence that I am willing to listen, willing to hear what this band is trying to offer. And it proves that they are capable of making music that is emotionally resonant and powerful, if they would just put their mind to it. As a matter of fact, this is what gets me really mad at them. It's the emotional blue balls I get from finally understanding what a song like "Range Life" has to offer, only to find that it's not a harbinger of things to come, but the totality of what the band has to offer.

There is no mission. No message. No desperate need. *Exile in Guville*, *The Blueprint*, *Rum*, *Sodomy*, & *The Lash*, these records burned from the souls of their creators. These records needed to come out. Pavement just made music cuz they could. They had the instruments lying around and they wanted to see if they could bend and break them into a record. The whole thing seems like it was based on a gag. "Do you wanna see if we can make a record by ripping off The Fall?" And they did (For serious. Listen to "Two States," and then anything off *The Marshall Suite* if you don't believe me.)

They never scraped together the violence of a band like The Jesus and Mary Chain, or the sheer, unglued abandon of Captain Beefheart. They never developed the musical, emotional, or lyrical vocabulary necessary to make the kinds of records Nirvana, or R.E.M. were making at around the same time. Their greatest success seems to be in becoming an unauthorized franchise for The Fall, selling something to American audiences that Mark E. Smith had been perfecting for London audiences for more than two decades already. Sure Malkmus and the boys looked cool doing it, but they don't mean anything to anyone. It just feels like a waste.

So I guess I'll never love Pavement. I guess I'll never be cool. I am fine with that. Leave me with my Coldplay and my Adele. Leave me with my U2 and my Kings of Leon. I'll be uncool and feel something. You should try it sometime.

Listen to this Instead: Anything by Dinosaur Jr, or [Slint](#). Oh god... If only Pavement was Slint.

Song I would listen to if you held a gun to my head: "[Here](#)"*

*Let me tip everything I just said on its head for a second because there is something about this song that hits me right in the spine. It contains lyrics like: "Come join us in a prayer / We'll be waiting, waiting where / Everything's ending here." And this song, not unlike "We Dance," and the aforementioned "Range Life," feel like proof that they could make this kind of music, if they felt like it.

But we don't feel like it, so fuck you, square... they seem to be saying.

These few songs suggest the possibility that maybe all the lyrics have been misinterpreted as ironic. And maybe, just maybe they were not too cool all along. Maybe just like Weezer's ironic love of Cheap Trick (a love that wasn't ironic at all), and Gordon Ganno's tongue in cheek references to Jesus, (references that were not tongue in cheek at all), maybe Pavement's coolly tossed off tunes and their appearance of apathy was just a desperate grasp for attention, for love, for acceptance. And maybe that's what Pavement, who played "Here" as the final encore in their final, farewell show, was doing all along. Trying to fill their empty suburban hearts with love. Our love. Maybe they are leaping across a chasm, hoping to be caught when they reach the other side. Maybe that desperation is what I see in their music. Maybe I see myself in them and that is why I resent them so much. Maybe that is why they disgust and frustrate me.

Or maybe they are just pretension, hipster assholes, unwilling to feel, or share a shred of human emotion.

Fuck you, Pavement. I'll never get to the bottom of you.

Never Heard of 'Em? #10—Youngest Son

I have been trying to write this review for weeks now. It's been difficult because the Christian imagery of this week's artist forces me to overthink every reaction I have to every part of the music. Someday I'll write about my complex relationship with Christianity and how I am simultaneously drawn to and repelled by artists who struggle with the concepts of heaven and hell, faith and atheism, belief and doubt. I am putting it off because I know that once I get started it will turn into some Book of Kells length document that no one will want to read.

Until that day, I'll just listen to Youngest Son.

Youngest Son is the passion (in more ways than one) project of Steve Slagg, a Chicago musician who moonlights with a very good Chicago Indie band called [Mooner](#), (stay tuned for that Never Heard of Em...). Slagg has two releases under the Youngest Son name so far.

All Saints' Day, released in 2012, is his first full length and it is a traditional, big splash of a debut in a lot of ways.

It is lyrically and musically ambitious, but it is measured in its approach and the songs are presented in a neat and accessible way. A host of talented musicians, banjo players, cellists, drummers, and vocalists, traipse through the studio on the carefully planned out record and they are used to great effect. The record was well received by press outlets and Slagg has used the impact to begin carving out a following.

I prefer the 2011 EP *Pigshit and Glowing* to the more polished *All Saints Day*. The EP is a little informal (how could it not be with a title like that) and on it Slagg's voice cracks, his piano groans, and he feels free to take chances. The songs are amalgams of stories about people he knows mashed together out of context. There is urgency present in these songs, like he didn't plan to write them, like they just came out fully formed.

Slagg's lyrics aspire to convention, but they often spiral into a conversational style. The juxtaposition of these two constructions creates a fascinating tone, and incidentally one that would have been unheard of a decade ago. Because of Sufjan Stevens and The Mountain Goats, you can do stuff like this now. You can juxtapose song lyricity lyrics like, "And the confessions we make / We make them together / And when our bodies change / We're all changed together," and almost prose like lyrics like,

I used to write lesbian bookworm erotica
and no one bothered me then
in fact, I got 500 hits a day
marched in the Annapolis Pride Parade
where we handed out rosaries

These lines come from a song Slagg wrote about a gay, female, chaste, Christian apologist. This is the kind of lyrical territory most writers never map out and to which even the most daring writers only allude. The rest of the song describes even more highly specific episodes in the life of this female character who Slagg is temporarily embodying. The song is a web of contradictions more difficult to untangle than your iPhone earbuds after they've been in the pocket of your sweatshirt all day.

The defiantly prose-like lyrics touch on well-worn topics, such as the death of a loved one, like in "Craters of the Moon," but do so in a way that is unique. Slagg unpacks the loss of his father through the memory of a car trip they took together when the man was alive.

Yeah, I was horny, lost and self-effacing
You just stared, slack-jawed at God's creation
We didn't know. Lord, how could we have known?
That death was bubbling up from underneath your skin ...
And now I drive West to Portland, Oregon
Cuz there are things you just beat up until they're gone
Like how you went home to Heaven without me
And how I'm driving in a car that is empty

In these songs God comes up in unexpected places, the way he does when you believe. It seems to surprise even Slagg when God makes himself known in the landscape, or when he ends up in Portland, while his father takes up residence in Heaven.

But it's not just his lyrics. There is something about the arrangements and his tone of voice that push any song he sings into a territory between catharsis and orgasm.

His most transcendent song is a cover of a little-known song by sulky indie darlings The National, called "Baby, We'll be Fine." It almost sounds like the song starts with the same non-diegetic MOOG synth that Kanye West uses to open *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. It's like the song has to come into focus for us and for Slagg. When the piano chords begin, organic and real, rescuing us from pop-music's disaffectedness, they resonate in a more profound way than most songs ever come close to achieving.

Slagg is able to simultaneously elevate this cover, and pull it down to his intimate level. He is having fun, almost winking when he sings the borrowed line, "say something perfect, something I can steal." He is more present than the lead singer of The National, Matt Berninger, whose style is built around a cool and removed baritone. Slagg uses his own vibrant and joyful voice to breathe life into the infamous monotone of Berninger's lyrics, adding an excitement where for Berninger there is only malaise. Berninger is bored when he says, "Baby, come over, I need entertaining," but when Slagg says, "I pull off your jeans, and you spill jack and coke in my collar," it is colored by the excitement of young person still thrilled by the transgression and novelty of a drunken sexual experience.

When Slagg gets to the end of the song he screams in a theatrical way, but not in a fake way. He screams in a dramatically heightened way, the way you might see in a Broadway play. The scream is like the screamed apology of

Mark Wahlberg's character from *Fear*, if *Fear* were adapted as a musical.

It's the kind of scream that would unnerve you and make you glad when it's over, but glad you heard it. Glad that unnamable thing was tugged out of you.

It's the scream that tells you everything you need to know about this artist. That scream is his Christianity, his sexuality, his theatricality and his intimacy all at odds with one another. He is neurotic, repressed, aching to explode. I have a lot of other things I could say about this artist. Instead I'll end by offering the following vastly unhelpful, yet obligatory comparisons to other artists:

Like Lady Gaga if she were at all conflicted about her sexuality (like even a little).

Like Perfume Genius but happier... which makes it more sad somehow.

Like Tom Waits if he used recording equipment from this century, and took a throat lozenge every once in a while.

Website:

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/60cKmc8DizlRYh45adV5wx>

Twitter: [@steveslagg](https://twitter.com/steveslagg)

Label: I don't know. Who even cares anyway?

Best Track: (and by best track I mean, the track I can't stop listening to) "Craters of the Moon"

Youngest Son Unrolls Another Dawn (Record Review)

[All Souls' Day](#)

Youngest Son

Self Released 2014

Once, while my nephew was noodling on his acoustic guitar, we had this pseudo religious, *Who's on First?* moment while talking about the charismatic singer-songwriter [Tallest Man on Earth](#). My nephew was playing "Troubles Will Be Gone," on his guitar as if the finger picking was something everyone could do.

"Tallest Man on Earth?" I asked, playing it cool. "I dig that band."

"Yeah. Me too," he sulked. (He doesn't mean to. He's a teenager).

"Tallest Man is a him right?"

"I'm not sure if it's a hymn or not."

"Yeah. It's a him. It's not a they. It's a him."

"Like... from The Bible?"

"No. Like from Sweden."

I'm not sure when we finally figured out what the other one was talking about, but that doesn't really matter because there is something accurate about associating the word hymn with the quiet contemplative music that Kristian Mattson plays. Aren't all his songs hymns, in a way? I sort of feel that way about the music of Youngest Son as well. Like Tallest Man on Earth (and Bright Eyes, Mountain Goats, Perfume Genius, and a bevy of other talented singer-songwriters), Youngest Son is also the solo project of one guy with the occasional assist from other musicians. In this case the him is Steve Slagg, a very talented singer-songwriter and piano player out of Chicago. Also like Tallest Man on Earth/ Kristian Mattson, Youngest Son / Steve Slagg is trying to reveal some of the same truths that hymns attempt to reveal. Unlike Tallest Man on Earth, Steve Slagg actually plays actual hymns sometimes.

All Souls' Day (self-released on July 29th) is the spiritual sibling of Youngest Son's 2012 release [All Saint's Day](#). There are more whispered admissions, more tender canticles about dawn and hope and whatever happens after things end. Again we

get the handsome and insightful website packed with what would have been called an album sleeve one million years ago. Slagg is releasing this record as a companion piece to his record from 2012, with tonally similar songs and the same fussy presentation, because the occasionally optimistic young songwriter is still exploring the same themes; he is still building the same church to raw sentiment and showtune sized emotion.

There is a cohesive brand development happening at youngestsonmusic.com [n.b. now, sadly defunct in 2023]. I guess musicians have to do that now and Slagg and Co. do it well. The site is handsome, crisp and just interactive enough to be interesting without being overwhelming. It was designed by some multitalented chap with the impossible name of Blade Barringer who also wrote the Sufjan Stevens like "Anticipate your Arrival." Among the website's lush fresco paintings of bleeding saints, a Sgt. Peppersesque funeral scene and a dower Jesus, there can be found Slagg's poignant mini-essays. These compositions contain admissions of guilt, expressions of longing, inside jokes, and the occasional insight into songcraft. And, of course, the website makes available Slagg's contemplative and sometimes devastating lyrics in which he almost compulsively overshares about those who have dumped him, died on him, and perhaps most revealingly, those who have saved him.

Slagg makes a habit of inviting talented musicians to record with him and the additional voices adds a communal feeling to Slagg's songs. The record takes on the feel of a habitat for humanity project, all brand-new flannels and pats on backs. The contributors seem to bring with them a lot of good feelings and warm wishes. So amicable is the collaboration that two of the songs on the record are sung by people other than Slagg, a curious decision for songs so personal. Allison Van Liere sings Slagg's "Hole in the Sky" and Mooner plays a song called "Long Year."

The former is overstuffed with vocal harmonies that never seem to take the song anywhere. I get the feeling that the idea for this cover was more ambitious than the song is capable. It is almost saved by the dulcimer's yearning clatter, but not quite. Slagg performs his song more compellingly on *All Saint's Day* where Van Liere also appears and where her harmonies make more sense against his breathy rendition. The song's inclusion here is meant to be a bridge between the two records but instead acts as a reminder for just how personal these songs are and how, like obedient pets trained by Slagg, they prefer their master's commands.

Mooney's treatment of "Long Year" is better. It works as a heartfelt paean to death. It is no dirge, however. It is light with bright woodwinds and a violin that major chords the gloomy lyrics into some even sadder abandoned parking lot somewhere, sadder even than if the progression was one of Glenn Hassard's. The voices are bright. The playing is assured. The message is genuine, hopeful even, which isn't the kind of thing you usually say about a record so concerned with death and alienation.

And the production, too, is adept, if a little stiff at times. Each instrument is meticulously cordoned off from each other, so to be featured, but also to be shuffled off to the side when it's time for Slagg to make it seem like it's all an extension of him and his piano. The competence of the musicians transcends the antiseptic and insincere sound of the production, resulting in something warm and earnest. Slagg's delivery feels intimate and knowing, the bass feels like a beckon, and the wire brush drums are little scratchy kisses on your face.

But what of Slagg's songs? He's the central figure here (besides the website's sexy and somber Jesus). This is an odds and sods record, after all, so the quality of the offerings tend to be a little uneven. "Blank Face" feels a little unfinished, like the intro to some ballad that a cross-over pop star would sing before they get to the Attention Grabbing Pre-Chorus, but it

works for Slagg mainly due to the Spiraling minarets of piano keys in between the chorus and verse and the lyrical entreaties to “unroll another dawn.” “Lake Superior,” which Slagg wrote as a teen, confirms that Slagg has not constructed the Youngest Son persona as a result of some calculation, but has always been this contemplative and sensitive.

In “Quiet Revival,” Slagg finds a fruitful metaphor when he describes a funeral scene that borders on the apocalyptic. Churches burn down, bodies are buried, “Pallbearers shuffled their feet across the ashy ground / And while the baby cried / Other people testified / For the lost / Who all felt the alter calling, ‘Come on down.” Despite this dark imagery, the mood of the song is jubilant. By describing how he deals with death, Slagg tells you something about the way you deal with death. Death invites the kind of celebration, rejoicing and prayer that your traditional revival brings about, but it all must be done in perfect silence. It is a reminder that the creator is at work, that death is a door, that the dead are no longer suffering, and that we are all still alive. Since none of this is supposed to be expressed as joy, Slagg finds this other kind of simmering outlet.

This EP doesn't really cohere as a single piece, not like his previous releases. It's not that the songs are not of a piece, because they are, it's just that they are of varying degrees of quality and of varying degrees of success. It is pretty much all nice, but there is little that is more than nice. The instruments and arrangements are immaculate, and the parts are so clean they actually squeak, but there is nothing on this release that moans like “Faith,” or vibrates with kinetic energy of “Craters of the Moon,” from this album's precursor *All Saints' Day*, and the affecting 2010 EP *Pigshit and Glowing*, respectively. I sometimes wonder what would happen if something a little unexpected, messy, or un-pretty jumped up in the middle of one of these songs. I'd like to think it would underscore everything that is beautiful about Slagg's music.

The only problem is that Slagg is so careful, so fastidious, that we may never find out.

Despite (or because of?) Slagg's near Kubrickian level of painstaking construction, there are moments of grace. "We Reset on Thee" is the final song on the record and it acts as the swirling centerpiece of the release. It is the aforementioned actual hymn (as opposed to the rest of the merely hymn-like songs) and it is overwhelmingly powerful. Slagg is again accompanied by multi-instrumentalist Van Liere whose contributions here are delicate and faultless, shimmering with hope and faith. Both musicians, adding their voices and various instruments including a banjo, dulcimer, accordion and (of course), piano, seem to be careful with their performances, restraining themselves for fear of the Arc of the Covenant level of power they may unleash from flawlessly incanting the hymn. And here the production is perfect. It is unobtrusive and coaxes warmth from each instrument, from each track, from each note. The song is a perfect triumph and a perfect and moving capstone to the record.

Slagg is using the song to once again make reference to his father's death, to once again transform loss into something other than pain and regret. At its core, the 100 some year old song is about facing foes and being protected from attacks, it is about firmly believing that there is a reward for fighting through pain and adversity, and it is also about warriors standing next to Jesus in battle and hacking their way to Heaven.

Don't dismiss hymns. They can be seriously fucking twisted.

At the end there are only my attempts to make sense of it all. This is particularly potent to me, because it involves me. And that is a trick of really, really good songwriters and performers. They convince you that what they are writing about is you. Slagg, when he is at his best, is doing that.

7 Albums I Am Supposed to Love That I Actually Hate (Part 5 of 7)

Case #5. LCD Soundsystem - *LCD Soundsystem* (2005)

When James Murphy is good, he is undeniable. When he is good, he is like that stupid 80s movie that comes on cable every once in a while. It's one of those parody movies where the gags are centered around spit takes and pratfalls and you scoff at it, but you don't change the channel. You watch that stupid movie on Sunday afternoon because despite how stupid it is, despite all its flaws, laughter is undeniable.

Similarly, when *Sound of Silver* comes on you scoff. "This guy again," you think. But you are happy that it's on because it is a record full of perfect dance riffs and undeniable beats. Undeniable. The bass thunks at just the right cadence. The intertwined drum samples create a golden glowing grid, teaching you where to step, making you feel like you are god damned Michael Jackson in the "Beat it" video. Some of the stuff on that record is so good, that I can forgive the smugly self-satisfied interview he gives everywhere from Fresh Air to GQ. (Dude, you were gonna write for *Seinfeld* but you just decided you were too cool for all that? That can't be how it happened. Stop saying that.) But he's not always good. He's not always undeniable. Sometimes he is just a clown, dressed up like your idols.

The record starts with a tune that has become a classic. It's a classic partly because it has a catchy bass line and some sweet handclaps, but mostly because it is funny. "Daft Punk is Playing at My House," tells the story of a kid who raises enough money to host a house party featuring Daft Punk. I am not going to say that it is not a unique idea for a song, but the vampire that we invite into our lives by applauding this kind of effort is one that is not easy to evict from our crappy little apartments.

The conceit of the song is based around in jokes and exclusive groups. The conceit is based around having hipster

currency to tender. There is an entry fee to get into this party. Murphy, the doorman for this party, even refuses to let the jocks in the front door. Even with the premium Murphy seems to place on originality, this cliché about jocks being assholes is one that Murphy won't eschew, presumably because he has some axe to grind with all jocks everywhere. He's holding the scepter now and he's going to wield it absolutely corruptly.

Even after the bloated double album (!) moves past the opening joke, the rest of the songs unfold as a tapestry knit from references that are not designed to be of use to the music, but to be understood (or better yet, not understood) by the listener. The references are not employed to serve the song and create something new, they are used as a kind of sonic Easter egg hunt calculated to reward those in the know, and to exclude those who are not cool enough to know (i.e. those jocks from earlier who were excluded from the party... fearsome is the tyranny of the oppressed).

Ultimately, the work comes off as overstuffed and pedantic and as something of a quote fest. It fetishizes knowing metadata over actual song craft, values references over creativity. Somehow no one complains when Murphy does it, but when Jet does the same thing with their rock and roll cover band, they are branded rip off artists. But maybe Jet's sin is that they are ripping off acts who are too obvious, acts like AC/DC and The Kinks, whereas Murphy purloins from slightly deeper in the record crate. For people who have been marginalized because of their geekish attention to pop music history, this record must be a special kind of drug.

By the time you get to the tune "Losing My Edge," you find out that admission to the Daft Punk party must have been knowledge of the obscure, the weird, the esoteric. The roll call at the end of the song is like watching James Murphy count his money. And I'll admit it. I had never heard of David Axelrod before I listened to the song. Or Mantronix, or 10cc, but why must these recommendations be embedded in a song? If James Murphy is as thoughtful and erudite as he

would lead us to believe, why won't he just write about all these artists rather than doing bad parodies of them. It feels like he is the world's greatest music critic and he has decided to go ahead and make a record. I guess that he was almost universally applauded because his taste in music is so impeccable. I am not being facetious about that either. The man knows good music. I think, perhaps, that the music writers were blinded by it. Or maybe they felt out geeked and they were afraid not to like it. They were afraid if they didn't gush over it, they would be ostracized and alienated from their community, which is just a collection of outsiders to begin with. Maybe they were afraid of being accused of being the only music critic to have never heard of The Creation, or ESG, the only critic to "not get it."

But getting it is different than liking it. When you put Mr. Murphy up against his idols, he feels like, at best, a tribute act and, at worst, a parody. Indeed Murphy's record comes close to being the best "Weird Al" Yankovick Record since the soundtrack to *UHF*. At times the music gets so parodic that it feels disrespectful to talk about his work in the same breath as artists who released great albums the same year as this one, (albums like Kanye West's *Late Registration*, The Hold Steady's *Separation Sunday*, and Antony & the Johnsons' *I Am a Bird Now*) or the artists he relentlessly name checks in his songs and interviews, (artists like The Stooges, Can, and Scott Walker). And somehow he presents all this in such a way that if you get mad at him, he wins.

I feel like if I point out that "Never As tired as When I'm Waking Up" is a straight rip off of "Dear Prudence," that Mr. Murphy will be "taking the piss out of me," as the Brits say. I feel like if I volunteer to be an expert witness for when Mark E. Smith sues James Murphy for copyright infringement for stealing "Movement" directly from a Fall record (any fucking Fall record), that James Murphy will somehow win. He won't win the court case of course, cuz the evidence is irrefutable, but I feel like he is some kind of Kaiser Soze-esque character

who wants to get caught. His master plan starts *after* he is found guilty. This is all some sort of insane prank designed to make anyone who loses their cool look stupid. "Can't you take a joke" he wants to know when I inevitable lose it and start screaming about what a smug, arrogant fucker he is. I feel like if I point out the audacity of a dance record producer making a super repetitive song called "On Repeat," that he wins somehow.

But music is a serious matter, so put down that fucking guitar James. Just cuz you paid for it, doesn't mean you know how to play it. Shit, just because you know how to play it doesn't mean you know how to play it. This shit isn't funny anymore.

Song I would listen to if you held a gun to my head: At least if you listen to "[Losing my Edge](#)," you can find out about some cool new bands.

Listen to this Instead: Something that is actually fun. I need to listen to some [Otis Redding](#) to cleanse my spirit after listening to 100 minutes of that blowhard.

Never Heard of 'Em? #11—Meadows

Being a post-rock band is a thankless task. If you decide to form a metal, or jazz influenced rock band with no singer, you do so knowing that you will be no one's favorite band. If you are more interested in layering textures than you are in snorting cocaine off of a groupie's ass, you won't end up on anyone's t-shirt. If you know more about modals than denim vests, you won't ever open for American Authors. If you form a post-rock outfit, you gotta do it cuz you love it. And Meadows loves it.

Meadows is a Latvian five piece (drums, electric guitar, electric guitar, bass, and fucking electric guitar) who do the things you are supposed to do if you are a post-rock band. They construct spiraling, melodious dirges that never really begin and never really end, they take small ideas and push them and toy with them until they are something new, and they pick song titles that could be on the cover of out-of-print science fiction novels.

The thing about post-rock is that when the vocalist gets out of the way, the music geeks in the band are free to do what they wish. What do the talented musicians in Meadows do when they have the space to try things they wouldn't in a typical hard rock band? The fascinating thing is that without a lead singer to compete with, the musicians become minimalists, eschewing most effects except a healthy dose of reverb, and trading self-indulgent solos for huge, whole note strums designed to build tension. Most good instrumental rock bands stop with the dueling leads early in their existence and tend instead to become some kind of Richard Lloyd influenced construction crew, and Meadows is no different. I assume they worked out all the head-cutting before they pressed the record button because on their first EP they don't compete for the spotlight, they help each other build to higher and higher heights like they are trying to achieve some

modern day, metal influenced, Phrygian scale supported Tower of Babel.

But the stuff they write isn't esoteric in any way. It's as accessible as it gets. The parts that they write could be the backdrop for a vocal straining ballad by someone like Daughtry or Bruno Mars. The song "Mornings" gently snakes through chiming, intertwined riffs that are quite subdued and pretty. Even the hyper aggressive bridge part at exactly the right time for a bridge doesn't feel forced or obligatory. But this isn't mere set dressing for a vocalist's wounded plea.

Instead, "Mornings," is a simple effort to evoke the sunrise, the smell of wet grass, the peace just before the world becomes populated again. Or at least that's what it seems to evoke. There's no vocalist to explain it to you, so it sort of belongs to you in ways that an Audioslave song never will.

This kind of storytelling is something fans of Pelican, or Tortoise are used to, but Meadows find ways on their five song EP to distinguish themselves. There are moments of warmth, where the music actually approximates heat glowing up off something metallic (although, for some reason the warmest moments come during a song called "Space"); there are moments of aspiration (the effects on "January 19th" are designed to build to some kind of catharsis); moments of anger (they try in earnest to aggravate your tinnitus on "66 + 6 = 666"), and it is all done thoughtfully and with an eye toward economy (their entire self-titled, name-your-price EP clocks in at under 20 minutes). There is competence to the arrangements and a peculiar vision to the progressions, like the repetition of the guitar lines is meant to advance some urgent, but exhausted communicate. You should listen.

Website: <http://meadowstheband.bandcamp.com/>

Twitter: [@MeadowsTheBand](https://twitter.com/MeadowsTheBand)

Label: Even if they were signed to a label, I am sure I would not have the diacritics necessary to list it here.

The Van Morrison Insurance Policy for the Soul (In 5 Parts)

Veedon Fleece

Van Morrison

Polydor Records, Warner Bros. Records 1974

Part I: Where I Tell you How Much I Love Van Morrison

I never would have listened to this record had it not been for that breakup.

Sometimes you need a good breakup to lead you into something. You use the end of the relationship as an excuse for working out more, or gardening, or maybe even something creepier like pursuing [lepidoptery](#).

Eventually that old relationship ending is what leads you into a new relationship, and you think, "had I never taken that cooking class, I never would have met this person..." When that person leaves you too and you are conducting the autopsy on yet another failed relationship, you can admit to yourself that you were not self-improving, but merely using an external object or activity to distract you from your pain. But every so often you will truly use the heartbreak to take another step on that well-worn highway between the town of Innocence and the bleak urban landscape that is Experience. Every once in a while your aching soul will lead you to a record like the oft overlooked *Veedon Fleece*.

I was a good Van Morrison acolyte, even before the breakup. I came to him the way many music fans of my generation did, by way of "Brown Eyed Girl," falling in love with the song before I was old enough to understand that it was a song that the man himself grouchily [dismissed](#).

I fell in love with Morrison back in those days when the fact that my parents also loved the guy was a good thing. They giggled while I danced arrhythmically to "Ro Ro Rosey" in the living room with my toddler's Buddha belly and peanut butter and jelly festooned cheeks. I can remember "It Stoned Me" coming on my mom's oldies radio station, probably crammed in between The Chordettes singing "Lollipop" in a round, and

the insane falsetto of Frankie Valli on "Walk Like a Man." We would belt out the chorus singing, "Ohhhhhhhhh the water... Ohhhhhhhhh the water... Let it run all over me," neither one of us were aware of the implications of the song.

I graduated to Morrison's more hip efforts via *The Last Waltz*. My father exposed me to Scorsese's concert film not long after he caught me listening to Bobby Brown's catchy and insipid "On Our Own," from the *Ghostbusters II* soundtrack. The old man was pretty ashamed that a son of his "was getting into stuff like that."

He sat me down in front of our Zenith and pushed the tape into the VCR (I knew that he was serious because I could see from the box that he had gone all the way to the Blockbuster on Altamont Avenue to rent the film. This meant that he had first gone to the more conveniently located Crazie Nick's Video, but had been frustrated by the fact that they only had porn and 27 copies of *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, at which point he must have driven all the way over to the other side of town to obtain this important document.)

"This is the movie I was telling you about," he explained.

I had no recollection of the conversation where he had told me about this film, but I nodded my head like I did. My old man was working hard to impart some kind of ancient wisdom to me, and I was going to listen.

At the time I didn't realize how famous and important these faces were. The mythical Staples Singers, the ethereal Joni Mitchel, the incomparable Ronnie Hawkins. Of course, I had heard of Neil Young, but I hardly recognized him because he was not singing "Keep on Rockin' the Free World," which PYX 106 had convinced me was his only contribution to the history of rock and roll.

I wondered where my dad had acquired the knowledge of these people whose names he called out as they trotted onto the stage, and how he knew all the words to all these songs. Muddy Waters, Dr. John, and Emmylou Harris may as well have been key grips and camera operators because

despite their supposed import, they had never been on any radio station I knew.

But Van Morrison I recognized. Van Morrison I understood. Even though I didn't know these songs, I knew what he was doing. Van Morrison acted like the concert belonged to him. He made it seem like The Band had not been Bob Dylan's band first, but Van's band last. Van kicked and howled his way through "Caravan," like he intended to smash his way through the television, trying to get at me, voyeur and imposter that I was, and I wasn't sure the glass was enough to keep me safe.

Suffice it to say it was a life changing experience.

After that, I made sure to keep his Best Of catalog handy, digging on "Domino," and "Jackie Wilson Said," when I needed a changeup from Otis Redding or The Animals. I learned a bit about Them and grooved on their version of "Please Don't Go." I discovered "Gloria" (by way of Jimi Hendrix, of course), and I came to hate the sexless and vapid John Mellencamp/ M'chel N'degochelo cover version of "Wild Night."

I bemoaned the grumpy, late career slide into MOR mediocrity that was happening concurrent to all the discoveries I was making during my adolescence in the 90s, but I refused to allow a bad word to be spoken in my presence. Only I could complain because Van knew I loved him. Van and I had an understanding.

Part II: The Part Where I Fell in Love with *Astral Weeks*

And then, as can be expected, a shaman like friend, one familiar with the dark arts and bad weed, introduced me to *Astral Weeks*. I bristled at first. I resisted its strange rhythms, its pulsing, mystic waves. I complained of the way it would tempt with the vaguest whiff of the accessible, carefree melodies of Morrison's early work, and then trap you when you fell for the trick, thereby imprisoning you behind the bars of its bittersweet musings.

Though I had resisted at first, I soon came to love, and embrace the record and then quickly eschew all other Van Morrison work once I realized that this 40 some minute record, impossibly made by a 23-year-old alcoholic, was probably the most extraordinary and perfect musical achievement of the 20th century.

As my teen years gave way to my 20s, my love for the record grew. I started putting "Ballerina" on mix CDs for girls I hardly knew, thinking this would surely make them love me forever. I told people on a regular basis that "I would never grow so old again," to which they would inevitably respond, "Bob Dylan, right?" Under religion on my Facebook page, I replaced the defiant and self-indulgent classification "Atheist" with the even more self-indulgent, even more defiant devotion, "Astral Weeks," (not to be adversarial this time, but to try to be honest with myself for the first time in my life (this all assumes that it matters one iota what you put down as your religion on your Facebook profile)).

And then I discovered that there was someone who loved *Astral Weeks* as much as I did. It made me feel like the kid running from song to song on that record, all fresh for the world and bursting at the seams with love. We moved in together and ignored all of our problems and listened to Van Morrison almost constantly. For a 6-month period in my early 20s we lived on nothing but tap water, 2-day-old pastries discarded by Starbucks, and the innocence and purity that gushed from the song "The Way Young Lovers Do."

And I am pretty sure I was sublimely content.

I won't go any further into what the contentment was like because it was special and private and a little embarrassing. It's also none of your damn business, and I'm not really comfortable discussing that kind of happiness, but rest assured it was magnificent, and rest assured the breakup happened soon after the apex of our happiness.

I got custody of the work of Jack Kerouack, Eldridge Cleaver, and David Lynch, and I didn't get custody of The Belfast Cowboy's masterpiece.

I had a physical copy, of course, but not an existential one. I played the tape at night, with the lights off, in secret, nude and wrapped in nothing but a sleeping bag. I would don my headphones and press play, but the imagery was too blinding, the smells too potent, the memories associated too vivid. The record was not just a shimmering achievement, existing in some vacuum the way the work of Radiohead or Deerhunter does. *Astral Weeks* leaves the aural space and enters the real world, occupying the room you are in. Like Chiang Sung from *Mortal Kombat* the record had the ability to take on the qualities of those it encountered and for me it had assumed the identity of my ex, torturing me with smiles and smells, allusions to, and images of happier times. Listening proved too daunting.

So for a period of time, my life was without Van Morrison.

Those were dark times. It led to a lot of comfort eating, and too much jerking off to weird porn.

I wasn't sure what I was going to do with myself. Then *Veedon Fleece* emerged.

I wasn't looking for it. I was actively avoiding all things Van Morrison by this point. But the record just sort of appeared, finding me in a way that was too supernatural and strange for me to get into here. Suffice it to say that I may as well have acquired the record from a mysterious curio shop in Chinatown.

Perhaps the strangest thing about it was that, I had never heard of it. If the title had ever come up I must have mentally lumped it in with all that out of touch late-period stuff that I thought I could ignore. Stuff like the too smooth *Wavelength* (1978) and the embarrassing *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (1983). But it turned out that this record had a reputation, like some legendary figure you hear about in your highschool, some hip thug whose name was called in homeroom

everyday, but who never appeared. I learned that Robyn Hitchcock had covered "Fair Play," C. J. Chenier (son of fabled king of zydeco Clifton Chenier) had done a zydeco tribute to "Comfort You," and Elvis Costello gushed about "Linden Arden Stole the Highlights."

It was Sinéad O'Connor who really confounded me. I had been using her music to nurse my post relationship wounds, ([like you do](#)) and I stumbled across [excerpts from an interview](#) on the Dave Fanning show where she did the unthinkable. She compared Veedon Fleece favorably to the record that everyone knows is Van's masterpiece.

"It is far superior to *Astral Weeks*," she said. "This is the definitive Van album with the definitive Van song, 'Who Was That Masked Man?'"

Some people never got over the fact that O'Connor tore up that picture of the pope. For me, daring to challenge the supremacy of *Astral Weeks* was a far more rebellious act. A far more daring demonstration. Not only that, but she compared *Astral Weeks* to a record of which I was only vaguely aware. I mean, had she said that *St. Dominicks' Preview* was doing something that *Astral Weeks* wasn't she would have been wrong, but at least she would have the celebratory "Redwood Tree," to bolster her argument.

What is this strange record? What did these others know that I didn't? Could they possibly be onto something that I had missed? Was I too busy obsessing over the contentious, [unreleased Bang recordings](#)? Was I finally being punished for complaining about how much of a pussy he sounded like on "Moondance?" (I had only been denigrating the song. I swear to god. Not the entire album...) Should I have been worshipping at the altar of *Astral Weeks*? Had I been doing it wrong all along?

Were I not in the state I was in, I would have dismissed these ideas without a second thought and I would have moved on. But I was newly bereft, and like some sap in a vaguely supernatural rom com who goes to a psychic, or wishes on

some magic dust, or [adheres to the instructions left by a dead husband in a series of cryptic letters designed to put the bereaved former spouse in a situation to sleep with the dead husband's best friend](#), I gave it a shot.

Part III: The Part Where I Talk About Veedon Fleece

Once I put needle to vinyl, it felt like I was somewhere familiar. Not home, of course, but a place I was supposed to be. It wasn't the place I was used to, decorated with [cracked steel rims](#), [smelling of Shalimar](#), with a clear view of Cyprus Ave. It was somewhere new. Incense and pot smoke were present underneath the splashes and strokes of the acoustic guitar. Mustiness stored for decades wafted up from the swirling piano. The flute was the steam from a mug of tea.

Though the record is serious, it doesn't bog you down with its own heavy sentiment, or mire you in unnecessary intellectualism. Here the soulful mysticism that you have heard so much about is fully on display, matured and leavened into a shape the likes of which could only be made by someone in their 30s.

Released in 1974, *Veedon Fleece* was recorded after Morrison's on-stage persona had evolved from the precocious, to the bold, to the eccentric, to the sublime. By the mid-70s Van Morrison had become more than just a rock star. He was spoken about in hushed tones by people who knew what they were talking about (scribes like Lester Bangs and Greil Marcus), and emulated by people who knew what they were doing (people like Bruce Springsteen, Elton John, and anyone who ever made looking like a [middle school math teacher](#) sexy just because of what they were saying).

Indeed, *Veedon Fleece* was released during this period, two whole years before the infamous, scenery chewing appearance in the *Last Waltz*. This record was made and recorded in the years where Morrison was girding up, but could not yet fill an Orson Wells sized trench coat.

This is a record made by an older, wiser version of George Ivan Morrison. Not the young, desperate lover [conquered in a](#)

[car seat](#). This record was made by a world weary guy closer to middle age than to his school days.

It was made in the wake of his fame and success blossoming into something he could no longer understand or control. It was made after having been bilked out of millions by [bad record contracts](#). This record was made by a man who had been divorced, a man who had experienced loss, a man whose home country was engulfed in the literal and figurative flames of The Troubles.

And that may be the most important element of the record. It was made by a man who had learned that oh so difficult lesson; that you can't go home again. That at some point you must leave and never come back to the place where you were young. That place where you [ventured in the slipstream, in the viaducts of your dream](#). You may have done everything in your power to allow yourself access to that home, but despite your efforts, despite your desire, the place that was your home may not be there when you return.

Maybe that is why so many of the songs, as well as the central conceit of the record, is about searching for something. For lost loves, for your distant home, for the veedon fleece.

What is a veedon fleece? Exactly? If I were to define it, if Morrison were to define it, it would sap it of its mysterious protean quality. If you really want to know, ask those kids heading out to San Francisco who Morrison is singing about in "Linden Arden Stole the Highlights." All people head out to SF in one way or another when they are young. All young people are searching for the veedon fleece. In the same song though, these young western-bound men get their heads cleaved off with a hatchet. No one said searching for the veedon fleece would be safe. No one said you'd live to tell about it.

Linden Arden becomes some kind of avenging angel. He is the kind of character Dylan was writing about at the same

time in songs like "Joey," and "Hurricane"; men conflicted by their own use of violence and its effect on their communities.

And he loved the little children like they were his very own

He said, "Someday it may get lonely."

Now, he's living, living with a gun

This final line becomes the introduction and refrain for the following song, "Who Was That Masked Man?" wherein Morrison asks "Ain't it lonely when you're living with a gun?" The generation who was making music in the late '60s and early '70s was learning all too well what a weight it is to live with a gun. But a gun is only one of many things the people who populate these songs have to learn to live with.

In "Who Was That Masked Man?" a butterfly trapped behind glass becomes yet another allusion to the idea of youth and beauty frozen in time. It is that same youth and beauty that seizes Linden Arden, that makes him so jealous, and makes him react so violently. Morrison knows that his days of [strolling the merry way, after jumping the hedges first, and drinking clear, clean water for to quench his thirst](#) are over. There are going to be new hedges to jump and new gardens all wet with rain to walk and talk in from here on out.

*

Should we talk about the way Van Morrison sings for a second?

There is something about it that is both absurd and beautiful.

How is it that he can sound simultaneously like a grumbling 66-year-old miner and a like a shrieking 13-year-old girl? The way he mumbles and squeaks, hisses and whines, makes him sound like some mad, animated caricature. Some distant, deranged cousin of Steamboat Willy. But everything he does and says, every kick, every howl and grumble is a part of some abandon the music is making this man experience. Some singular emotion he is channeling and trying to allow you, the listener, to experience.

And it's no wonder that the patron saint of this record is William Blake. The mystic. The visionary. A man seized by his creative ambition.

In typical, mystical, Blakeian fashion, Morrison chants:

*And our souls were clean
And the grass did grow
And our souls were clean
And the grass did grow
And our souls were clean
And the grass did grow*

*

The songs on this record are not about the evening fading into morning. But it's not about the darkness either. It's not a record about how things are over now. It's a record about the cruel heat of the afternoon, and how you can keep your body temperature low enough to survive until sundown. It's a record about how to keep going after you've lost your sight from staring for too long at the sun. A record about how the light can kill everything at the same time that it makes the grass grow and your soul clean.

The record blossoms from this heat and light, beginning with the first notes of the deceptive invitation that is "Fair Play" and evolving through the pristine first side. The suite at the end of the record, comprised of "Comfort You," "Come Here My Love," and "County Fair," is misleading. It hints at a soggy pastoral bliss that is dishonest in the context of the rest of the album. If there is a flaw on the record it is the way that this finale sort of meanders too pleasantly to a close. But that is no matter because any flaws, any failings of the record are incinerated by the blinding, radiant, near nuclear light of the record's centerpiece.

Part IV: Where I tell you about "You Don't Pull No Punches, but You Don't Push the River":

"You Don't Pull No Punches, but You Don't Push the River" is nine minutes long, but it presents itself as an even longer work. It sucks you into as if it were not a song, but some kind of lost

season, releasing you only after you've lived folded inside of it for a period of months, emerging to find bruises you don't remember acquiring and dry, dead leaves in your hair.

Now, if you hear the first few moments of the urgent 12/8 time signature of "You Don't Pull No Punches, but You Don't Push the River," and you don't know what the song is about, you should just turn it off, because you are not yet ready. You should go get in a near fatal car accident, or fall in love with a man who will never love you, or be accused of a crime you didn't commit, or some shit like that.

Also, the title is long, but we are not abbreviating it, ok? Don't call it, "You don't pull no punches...," or the something asinine like, YDPNPBYDPTR. It's called "You Don't Pull No Punches, but You Don't Push the River," so suck it up and deal with it, and stop acting like such a fucking cry-baby. Use copy and paste if you need to, but I type it out every time like a goddamn adult so if you decide that you want to CTRL+C, CTRL+ V, just do it and be discreet about it because I don't want to know about it.

Those first few scat-like utterances of "You Don't Pull No Punches, but You Don't Push the River," are the exclamations of a man who has gotten to "That Point." That Point is a place in your life where you realize how futile are your efforts, how unfair is the world, how exhausting is the plight. Which plight? The Plight. "You Don't Pull No Punches, but You Don't Push the River," is a paean to that realization. It's a building constructed to process the paperwork created by the kinds of anxieties people like Cervantes and Moses made careers writing about.

And that's the magic of the record. It gives you a place you can go when everything else has been taken from you. It doesn't show you snapshots from when you were young and thin and could ejaculate six times a night as long as you had a bottle of Gatorade and some cigarettes handy. It's a perfectly compact lamp you can put on your bed side table so you can read Graham Greene novels before bed now

that you're too tired for sex. It doesn't get you drunk and dance around barefoot in the rain with you. It offers you off-brand ibuprofen and an umbrella.

It does the kinds of things for people that the man who made *Astral Weeks* didn't even know people needed to have done for them.

Part V: Where I Pit *Astral Weeks* and *Veedon Fleece* against one another in some sort of Sick Mono Y Mono style battle To the Death

Now, I have no interest in pitting these records against one another in some sort of sick, mono y mono style battle to the death, partly because it's brutal, and partly because I would be worried *Veedon Fleece* would emerge from the Van Morrison cock fight pecked to within an inch of its life. (Though, you never can tell about these things. The record is elusive and chimeral, surprising you at every turn, telling you it is one thing and then emerging as another. It is a master of the stick and move, of the fake, the faint and the roll, and this just might keep its head attached to its body were it to fight the younger, stronger more Clubber Lang like and permanently younger *Astral Weeks*.)

But this isn't about which album is better. This is about whether or not you should listen to this record.

Because let's be honest, you probably haven't heard it. Or if you have, it was because you thought "Into the Mystic" might be on it. What I am trying to say is that even if you have heard this record, you have not really listened.

But, here is the thing: I am not recommending that you listen to this record.

That's right. After all my gushing, and after comparing it to the work of Bob Dylan and the author of the Pentateuch, I think you should stay away from this record. I have not even bothered to link to the record here, or to share any of the tracks in this review by any of the very easy methods that are available to me. And I know it would be easy for you to Google these tracks and listen to them on YouTube, or Spotify

(or whatever player I am supposed to be listening to music on, but I'm not because I am too old to bother with Google Play, or Grooveshark, or whatever...) You may be curious to hear these songs, but I urge you to refrain from doing so.

Having never heard this record, you have a unique opportunity and what I recommend you do is to take the following course of action:

I know that the time for buying CDs is over and we are almost past the point where anyone even buys vinyl, but I suggest that you go out today and buy this record in both of these formats. Then I suggest you purchase an affordable glass case.

This is your insurance policy for the soul. Try to imagine, if you will, a world where someone takes *Astral Weeks* from you. Try to imagine that you too have lost this record in a messy divorce, or you have contracted some strange form of Oliver Sacks type neurological Musicophilia where the songs from *Astral Weeks* no longer cohere as music, or that you have been enrolled in some kind of a *Clockwork Orange* style hypnotism program which will take from you the ability to enjoy gang-rape, ultraviolence or the effervescent "Slim Slow Slider." Because that is what happens, isn't it? It ends up her song. It ends up being associated with that time in your life. It ends up gone.

Buy the record for that eventuality.

I pray you don't ever have to use it, but won't you feel better knowing it's there?

Now, let me be clear, just because *Veedon Fleece* is under glass, awaiting your inevitable emotional collapse, it doesn't mean that you should stop listening to Van Morrison. You should continue spinning his records. As often as possible. You have plenty of options, besides *Veedon Fleece* after all. You could enjoy the hypersweet *Tupelo Honey*, the rich and soulful *His Band and Street Choir*, or *It's Too Late to Stop Now*, the great, two disk, live record which would be pretty much perfect even if it didn't include the superlatively boozy cover

of "Bring it on Home to Me." You could always throw on your trusty copy of *Astral Weeks*, of course. I do

(Yes, my heart healed to the point where I can again listen to *Astral Weeks*, though not without melancholy, not with the bitter to compliment the sweet, not without the kind of longing felt only by those who have traveled down the road from innocence to experience, those who have gotten to That Point. Which point? That Point.)

For my money though, I don't think you can do any better than the aforementioned [performance from *The Last Waltz*](#). In a single song, it sums up everything you need to know about getting your heart broken, putting it back together again, and loving Van Morrison.

The Youngest of Sons, The Middlest of Americas (Concert Review)

Wheaton, IL is a real Anytown, USA type of place. There's no litter, all the streetlights work, and there are a lot of skinny kids wearing tank tops (not "wife beaters," white, or black and menacing, but tank tops, bright and happy to be seen). The kids are healthy and ethnically integrated; board, but not mischievous. They stand in long lines for DQ and wander around the perimeter of the park, but don't go in because, of course, the park is closed after dark. No one jaywalks, no one frowns, and if anyone is smoking crack, they aren't doing it in the bus shelter.

Despite what any Wheaton College kid's facebook page will tell you, this is not Chicago. This is some good, wholesome Heart of the Nation type of shit and I hate it. There is no danger, I am not worried my car will be vandalized, or my iPhone stolen. I expect everyone to obey all traffic signals and even the train that zips though the center of town barely makes a sound.

River City Roasters is just like any local coffee shop across from a Starbucks on a main street in a harmless suburban downtown. It is playing the part of the underdog, pretending to half-ass it with its distressed brick, distressed wood, and distressed jeans on the baristas. Even the lightbulbs are from the same place every music video director from the 90s got theirs, dangling nude from the ceiling and glowing a special shade of fake-dingy yellow. But this wannabe cage has something very special inside it on Friday, May 9th, 2014, because on this day, Steve Slagg, or Youngest Son as he is known musically, is performing inside.

I've written about [Slagg](#) before. He's a good piano player, a good singer and has a rare gift for song-craft. When I see him in person for the first time I realize that Slagg, is one of these guys who is sort of impossibly handsome, symmetrical, like television's Aaron Paul, or like Ryan Philippe circa 2001, except

without the silly attempts at being a bad ass. He is clean cut, wearing brown slacks, and a tight blue shirt, and he plays a key board like he's trying to nudge it back to life. He is delicate with it, tender, but also methodical and insistent. There is a Peavey amp propped up on, of all things, a wooden chair, which by the looks of it, has appeared in countless Whistler portraits. An avuncular looking woman named Cathi is playing the cello alongside him and it sounds so warm and so commanding, my heart sways back and forth like a boat lost at sea. (After the show she wonders aloud if she sounded ok, not in a needy way, but in a truly inquisitive way, like she wants to know what it would sound like to hear herself play... Oh Cathi, if only you could hear what I hear.)

I show up late, but just in time to hear him play a song called "Untitled Memory Song." It's the one where people who have died call him out by name. They say, "Stephen we need you tonight." I look around the room at the other people in the room, people who, like me, have come to see this young, unique performer. Everyone here looks like they are the type of people who have first names for last names, like Andrew Bradley, or Donald Nathan, they look like they are the type of people who say "pardon me" instead of "excuse me," and who smoke an occasional cigarette without being consumed by the vice. There are a lot of hip, but worn out shoes and Buddy Holly glasses. Not a single hair is out of place, not a single shirt has gone untucked. It would seem the only thing I have in common with them is that I am moved by the music of this Steve Slagg.

The performance is precise and exacting. The songs in a live setting sound remarkably similar to the way they do on his recordings. He is a little too precise, but that is not a terrible thing. It's like, he has already revealed so much through his insanely personal songs that it seems as if he is using the construct of the song and the performance to protect himself. But we don't need him to be Jerry Lee Lewis. No one wants

him to be. We just want him to be as honest as humanly possible, more honest than any of us could ever dream of being.

We watch with inviting, solicitous, starry eyes. We want to be charmed, seduced, loved. We are arcing our necks, gaping our mouths, staring with wet, spinning eyes.

"The day of the living is coming," he tells us, and we believe in him because we have to. My eyes are spinning too and I am hearing the things I need to hear. We are all hearing the same now. And we all love him the same.

Because I am late I don't know if he has played any of his transcendent covers, like Harry Nilson's "Think About Your Troubles," or if he has played the perfect "Derek," the song where he combines the same four words in different ways to express every possible frustration and exultation of a relationship, "I came, I saw, I wanted / I wanted, I saw, I came."

But I do know that the final song he plays is "Corpus Christi" and when the song starts, we all look around and nod knowingly. Everyone looks at everyone else like we all belong, even me.

And I'm afraid we are all of a sudden connected. I'm afraid we are now all friends now and we'll have to go into business together, probably opening a bakery that is a lot of work, but thrives because the neighborhood where we open it needs and loves us for our breads and pastries. We'll rely on and trust each other until one of us lets everyone down and then another of us will come to that friend's defense and it will cause permanent rifts. We will all indulge in the petty bickering and self proclaiming that people do when there is something at stake and it will be difficult, and painful, and when it is over we will all wish we had never become such good friends that one evening at the Youngest Son performance at the River City Roasters in Wheaton, IL.

When the music stops, though, I open my eyes and look around.

If there is one thing I can be sure of, now that the music has stopped, now that we have made that weird transition from everyone being on the same wavelength while the music plays, to then no one being on the same wavelength once there is that post applause silence, it is that I am in a wholesome, kind place, and its a place that I don't belong.

I leave the coffee shop and walk through an alley of downtown Wheaton, completely unafraid that I will get mugged, or harassed, completely unafraid of anything except that nothing will change. I get back in my car and drive home.

Never Heard of 'Em? #12—Heccra

I like to experience music in a way that may be uncommon. I am typically sitting alone in a dark room, digesting all the constituent parts, the [YouTube video](#), the [band website](#), the [viral marketing](#) campaign, like it is all a part of some pastiche, multi-faceted found-footage film. Each song, each Instagram photo on the bandcamp page is another clue in some grand mystery.

The generation of music makers who are coming up now do all of this guerrilla marketing as a matter of course. A social media presence that functions separate from, but also in conjunction with, the artist is necessary, and expected. For misanthropes like myself it works out well as we can sit at home and puzzle over the band's internet presence like the entire public persona of the act is some modern, musical version of [Myst](#).

Heccra, a one-man project based in Chicago, does all this better than most. From the moment you go to his [soundcloud](#) page you are pulled into a world that is entirely populated by losers and grifters, arsonists and prostitutes, vandals and tweekers.

Each sub two-minute segment on *White Eagle* represents just a fragment on an idea, a few frames in a twisted little scene which Heccra uses to construct into a larger experience. It is built out of scraps of video games, vuvuzela, steel drums, sped up vocals, ukulele, and time signature changes with more odds than Todd Browning's *Freaks*.

The persona of Heccra, the mask he wears, are all a part of an immersive environment this artist is trying to establish. The beautiful nude girl holding the bunny rabbit that serves as the album cover is one of the more striking elements. Her soft skin set against the jagged edges of the music makes her seem like some kind of semi-virginal sacrifice (I say "semi-virginal" because no one is completely innocent in this universe).

The way the album is structured invites you to imagine the persona of Heccra as this down on his luck palooka who you root for. Who has heart. Who has dreams and needs that he is trying to realize and achieve in a world built of discarded fast food containers, spray paint cans, and animal carcasses. With song titles like, "Monster Cul De Sac," and "VHS Porn," I like to imagine him more like some gas huffing friend of Harmony Korine's who is going to end up in juvie any fucking minute now. Some extra in a film Korine is making about a homeless teen who dreams of becoming a vampire and wanders around this series of abandoned tunnels beneath his decaying semi-urban, semi-rural home town.

Playing the What Genre Is This? game with this music is difficult. Heccra has been referred to as post-hardcore, metal-core, chipmunk-core and often times screamo. There is screaming, but this can't be screamo. Most screamo is a [chore](#) to listen to, but Heccra uses various tools (sped up tape, drastic shifts in song structure, pared down musical ideas) to pull you in and make you identify with this character. And when he screams, it feels so good. Like you are doing the screaming. Seriously. When was the last time you screamed as loud as you could for as long as you physically could? It's been a long time hasn't it? And you look around now and you can think of at least a half dozen reasons why you can't scream until your throat bleeds. Well, let this kid do it for you. Let him be your angry, blood red, screaming avatar in this bizarre, dark world.

Heccra is the kind of guy who can write a record like *White Eagle*, about how shitty everything is and then less than six months later release a record like, *Last Weekend of the Summer* about what a bummer it is that everything is coming to an end. I'm gonna say it cuz I'm sure it's what we are all thinking, he is pretty much a modern day interpretation of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, exploring "the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

And the songs are so short, he avoids self-indulgence. Should I use the word restraint? It's like he doesn't want to overstay his welcome. He is afraid he'll be asked to leave at any moment, so he removes himself, but the result is that he creates perfect little scenes with his musical ideas, and he is able to avoid the verse-chorus-bridge-outro convention that bury most songs under cliché before the first note. Heccra is really only keeping the parts that work the best. The chanty singing parts, the strange sped up vocal parts, the deep guttural cathartic parts, the alien laser beam parts, the chugging, distorted guitar parts.

By the time "Camp Algonquin" comes around there is even some humor, with Heccra explaining that "I pissed off a ghost on top of this." As if the guy didn't have enough problems already.

There is something disarmingly honest about the way the music is made and presented. There are few attempts to fall into line with the tropes of the metal-core or post-hardcore genre. There aren't song titles named after diseases, or concentration camps, or violent acts. The track listing includes titles such as, "I Wanna Go on a Ski Trip with the Beach Boys," and "Best Dreams Ever," and "Roses for Darth Vader." There is no dumb headed taunts, or alpha-male mugging. If anything the records have some sort of boyish abandon to them. There is no apocalyptic warning... Ok. There is that. And there are the shredding guitars and blast beat drums, but overall there is a knowing understanding of what it means to be making this kind of music and that results in music that is much more complex, intelligent, and cathartic, but also, somehow simultaneously, accessible, heartfelt, and sad. It is a document of a guy's thoughts as he toils away alone as much as it is heavy guitars and guttural screams.

If you want confirmation that this guy is not your typical artist, just look at the way he is releasing *The Devil-Faces of My Old Friends, Beneath Me*. The record is coming out in sections, revealing the unfinished parts as Heccra completes them.

He's like a sculptor, scraping away at the marble in public, an LSD dropping Bob Ross painting angry little trees from blank canvas to complete canvas, like Lynch when he shows you the sets and costumes of *Inland Empire* while he is filming and then presenting that to you as if it is the film.

It should not be a surprise to me or you, that my favorite song turns out to be, "This is Cinema," from *Last Weekend of the Summer*. The song is one of the more complete songs available from Heccra. He starts off screaming at 11, inserts a soundclip of a cat meowing and then has children chanting over a metal drum beat before he creates a handclap sing-along oasis in the middle of his synthed out scream track where an electric guitar noodles sweetly and children sing along to a charmingly off key vocalist.

The lyrics hint at some kind of hope, some kind of understanding of the importance of holding onto something. But this pressure is a burden. The adult world has instilled a sense of urgency that saps childhood of its power, that preoccupies the young with a need to correctly navigate experience and to avoid squandering the gifts that every generation that precedes them has squandered.

Clench my teeth, my mouth
Throne room of my tongue
If my life was film, would anybody watch?

I hope I'm the last guy that you kiss
I swear there's no one better than this
This might be the one
And I pray it's not too early
And I pray we're not too young
(And we're not too young)

The song ends with a sense of acceptance and resignation. A brief respite from the pressures of falling in love, of being interesting, of finding the one, of being young.

The character Heccra has created is so mysterious and unstable, I wouldn't be surprised to one day check in on his

tumblr page and find no trace that he ever existed. Deleted in a late night fit, or the result of some ancient curse finally taking its toll. Either way, we'd better take a look at him now before he disappears completely. For the time being, speaking as a guy who is sitting alone in a dark room listening to the wild colors of this music, I am thankful that there is someone on the other end to provide the pigments, the pictures, and the angst.

Never Heard of 'Em? #13—The Canoes

The Canoes are a schlubby band from Evanston Illinois.

How schlubby are they?

Well, the cover of the “American English” single is a paunchy guy failing to spin a basketball on his finger. I ask you, what is more schlubby than that?

The band sounds like a sloppy and invigored Sebadoh if Lou Barlow was annoyed all the time. With stoned bass lines and agitated guitar parts that are as bloodshot and itchy as your eye balls after you burn one, these songs stick to your ribs.

It's fun. It's a hell of a lot of fun. Half of the songs on 2011's *Roger* even end with a tossed off ad lib like, “that was good,” or “sounds cool,” like all the songs were tracked live. Like it was some fun time they were all having, jamming together and not really worrying about the mistakes, or sound quality.

The Canoes nod and sway, Wilcoing their way through “Dealer's Choice,” stretching their metaphors about language and hang-ups made from chains, like the words are hot pieces of bubblegum stuck to your shoe in the summer heat.

“Great Lake Mistake” might as well be some lost Gang of Four demo. The echo, and the nana-nana bass are straight from 1970s England. So clever, so brash, so stripped down. Who do these guys think are? The Clash? The Pogues? Jarvis Cocker fronting the Buzzcocks? Where do they even get off?

On “Bobby Goat,” they get real American again (by way of Canada) and come close to sounding like the Band. They tuba their way through the song and indulge in a too long guitar solo before wandering back to the phoneme buffet for some da dee das.

It's like some barroom singalong played by a bunch of dudes from your neighborhood (Alex! My man! When did you get so good at the bass? I never knew...)

It's hard not to think of The Violent Femmes' shouty “American Music” when the boys are drinking their way

through "American English." Don't you like American music? Cuz... I like American music best, baby.

They are having so much fun with their oohs, ahhs, and la dee das, you can almost be excused for not noticing the dark, self-effacing critiques buried in these songs, deep in the DNA between the nucleic acid and the exuberant horn section.

Lines like "We are not safe / We are not safe," and "Kevin tossed his phone out the window / Thinking 'bout the CIA," hint at dissatisfaction, paranoia, fear and anger. The following lyric from "Middle West" belies an ignorance and vapidness that has become synonymous with the mentality of the everyday American.

I've got two books sitting on my night stand
I bought them last week at the mall
One's about the conflicts in the middle east
And one's about nothing at all

Despite what they would have you believe, these are not songs by, for, and about schlubby, cement-headed goons. These are tender-hearted poets telling smart little tales about aging, loving, and wrestling with what it means to be an American.

By the time they get to 2012's adeptly produced *Slim Century*, they are telling Springsteen-esque tales of a construction worker turned keyboard clacker in "Construction Sites," and Dead Milkmen inspired romps like "Drinking Underage." It's like they have started taking things more seriously. Rory McPhail's guitar is crisp and tasteful, the bass is at just the right place in the mix and the drummer is steady, aggressive, and let's be honest, probably shirtless. It's like they started to realize that their mission was too important not to take it all more seriously this time around. They even convince a pretty good female vocalist to join them on a song called "Updates." How do you think they got that done? This is all not even mentioning "TV's for Every Home" which is a song so

triumphantly tongue in cheek that it may as well just be triumphant.

They reminisce and complain about the kids these days and their DIY scene, they creak like old men and take the sarcastic angst of *The Hold Steady* one step further than Craig Finn ever dared to. Make no mistake, the Canoes are out for blood.

In the song "Each Town Once Was the Frontier" when lead singer Elliot Teller explains, "You know/ Everything will disappear/ Each town once was the frontier." It sums up their mission better than any other line in any other song. It is a lyric that is at once a heartbreaking reminder that we all must enter adulthood, as well as a halfhearted acceptance of the stark reality that is Manifest Destiny. In a way they are invoking Fitzgerald's words from the final pages of *The Great Gatsby*, "I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes — a fresh, green breast of the new world."

It's not such a stretch. That conflation of property and sex, birth and death, innocence and experience, childhood and adulthood, are exactly the concepts this seemingly humble band from Evanston are struggling with. Just like Fitzgerald. After all, *Gatsby* is about the American Dream, but it's also about a girl. The Canoes are a simple, upbeat bar band, who happen to have read [*Babylon Revisited*](#).

So, maybe The Canoes are not schlubbs? But what about the picture of the guy with the basketball? I'm just not sure anymore.

Somehow the songs they write sound like they are cribbed from the rehearsal sessions of bands like Echo and the Bunnymen, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, and Modest Mouse, and are also about man coming face to face with something commensurate with his capacity for wonder... and then ruining it.

After a while it becomes too tiring to figure out exactly where the sarcasm begins and ends and too exhausting to play spot the influence and too depressing to curse The Man

when he is obviously gonna win in the end anyway. After a while it is more fulfilling to just enjoy the solid songcraft, the fun hooks, and the delirious longing for girls who have gone away and an America that never existed.

Check out "Giving up the Ghost," for example. With the same gleeful cadence Michael Stipe used while inviting the end of the world, Teller explains geopolitics better than Noam Chomsky, informing us that, "Western nation's find / they're on a slow decline / Cuz every good time's gotta have an end," and then with melancholy and embarrassment and just a hint of pride at the stupidity of it all, he admits, "Well they cheer when they hear him say / God was born in the USA."

Where else would God be born? You tell me.

Website: <https://thecanoes.bandcamp.com/album/slim-century>

Twitter: [@TheCanoesMusic](https://twitter.com/TheCanoesMusic)

Splitting The Weed, The LP, and The Atom (Record Review)

[Dark Matter Presents: Split LP #1](#)

Wild Jesus & The Devil's Lettuce

Press Pot Recordings, 2016

The blues, jazz, and funk fusion ensemble Wild Jesus & The Devil's Lettuce Family Party Band have been lurking around the weird back alleys of Chicago's avant-garde indie music scene since at least 2011. They've released a number of madman LPs infused with Tom Waitsian growls, Steve Reich style experimentation, and a flavor of neo-psychedelia that's trippier than a mushroom experience at a planetarium on Mars.

They stir a lot of influences into their pot (yes, pun intended) including the funk of jazz legends like Joe McPhee, the slippery noodling of Sugie Otis, the drugged out head-bob of Tobacco, and the muscular bass lines of any blues rock collective worth its Rotosounds. They present themselves as if a demented Hoagy Carmichael replaced Wayne Coyne as the lead singer of the Flaming Lips. There is enough blues in there though to keep them from straying too far off into the noodling weeds. This is mostly due to the solid foundation provided by the rhythm section, but also due to the Bo Diddly style showmanship.

The band, which is populated with a menagerie of people named after animals (like The Hawk who, according to [facebook](#), plays "soaring sensual-luv sounds," and Smokey "The Bear" Mullen who is responsible for "putting out fires"), will sometimes stumble into the jurisdiction of late 90s jam-band appropriators like Sublime or OAR but Hawk, Bear, Wild Jesus, and whoever else is on the track always find a way to add something menacing and odd so they don't come off too vanilla. When they are at their best they add a husky Nick Cave bark over all the jammy writhing and can recall anyone from Modest Mouse to noise outfits like Jesus Lizard.

On their new release from Dark Matter Coffee's music imprint Press Pot Recordings they occupy side A of an LP split with doomy and erratic beer brewing outlet (and sometimes musicians) [Brain Tentacles](#). Bruce Lamont, the tentacle responsible for saxophones and vocals, even lends his wry, late-70s-ad-man-style vocals to the second Wild Jesus track, "Snakes on a Plain," where the band lays out a strange metaphor along with its slinking bass line and early ELP style piano insistences.

All of the vocals on these Wild Jesus tunes can be a little jarring. It's a little like when a drunk hangs out with a group of pot heads and affects the entire evening. Sometimes the too loud slur can be for the better and sometimes it can be for worse but it always makes for a more interesting time.

Opener "Simmer" is jazzy and crisp with elements of 80s cinema soundtracks and 90s color palettes while "Dragon Acid" adds a bright, citrusy zest. They end up sounding like the Talking Heads if they took the piss out of New Wave the way the B-52s did with rockabilly. The songs have unexpected turns and strange movements like Frank Zappa by way of The Swans. The whole endeavor has the feel of some Phish heads being put through a Cronenberg-esque body swap with a cassette of Lou Reed's *Berlin*. The strange horror, the bizarre imagery, the unintended consequences, and the unglued imagination of that imaginary fission process are all present in the music, but what else would you expect from a band called Wild Jesus & The Devil's Lettuce Family Party Band?

#293: The Velvet Underground, "White Light/White Heat" (1968) (fiction)

You know who Foster Campbell is even if you don't know him by name. You met him once in a hookah bar, or that time you got lost on the subway, or at an unsanctioned boxing match where you lost 250 dollars on a fight you are pretty sure was rigged.

He's the guy who's allowed to bring open containers into baseball parks, the guy who's been sleeping on your friend's couch for a month but your friend says he doesn't know him. He knocked your sister up once. He went to school with your cousin.

I first met him when I was at a house party in this weird neighborhood, which is sort of Foster Campbell's natural habitat. Lefty, who got that name by doing things with his right hand you don't even want to know about, had brought me to the party insisting I would love the scene. I think some things we had done together recently had given Lefty the wrong impression of what I was into, but I went anyway.

There were pictures of Easter Island heads on the wall and beautiful women walked around in their underwear and bathrobes and frowned. I'm not sure if they were hired to do so, or if they lived there and had just not been informed that there was a party going on around them. Neither would have surprised me. There was a guy painting a picture on an actual easel and he pretended not to notice the glue-huffing and dry-humping that was going on right next to him. Lefty ended up making out with this cisgender chick in the front hallway and I sort of hung around the untouched booze that was organized alphabetically on the kitchen table.

None of it would have bothered me too much if that record hadn't been playing on the turntable. It was either Galaxie 500's *On Fire* or a local band who was doing a pretty good impression of the Music Machine's *(Turn On) The Music Machine*. Everyone was doing that garage rock thing that

summer. The bass was humming and writhing and it sounded like it was recorded in a used Volkswagen. I went out back to sit on the porch and look out over the other buildings and other porches on the block, the ant farm of connected paths, alleyways, and backyards that make up every Chicago neighborhood.

He was already out there when I stepped onto the porch. And by "he" I mean Foster Campbell. I knew it was him, because I had heard he was coming to this party. Lefty might have said something about it, or maybe I heard someone talk about it when we first showed up.

You know what he was wearing. You've met him. He had a cool piercing, but not one that was too obvious or desperate. A tattoo snuck out from under his clothes. He seemed rumpled and like he needed a haircut, but he was still great looking.

I could have sat down across from him, but I wanted to lean against the siding so I could look out over the neighborhood and watch other people on their own porches. Something told me he wouldn't mind if I sat down right next to him.

"I love that T-shirt," he said. "I saw it when I first walked in. Hilarious."

"Hey thanks," I said and looked down at it as if I had to remind myself of which shirt I was wearing, though wearing it had been a very deliberate and tortured decision.

"Got a smoke?" he asked.

"I don't smoke," I told him.

"You didn't come out here to smoke?" he asked. "I've been waiting for 30 minutes to bum one."

"I'm pretty sure you can smoke inside."

"No one smokes anymore," he said and sighed the same way my dad did when he lamented how often basketball players traveled.

"I had to get out of there," I explained. "I just couldn't take that record anymore."

“You don’t like the Velvet Underground?” he asked.

“I thought it was the Wipers or someone like that.”

“Naw way,” he said. “It’s Lou.”

“It sounds like they didn’t bother to rehearse,” I said, trying to dismiss the record.

“Who wants to rehearse when you’re in a band?”

The argument made some kind of strange sense coming from him. There was a puzzle-logic to it that made me want to hear the rest of the record. He bobbed his head along to the manic tempo and tapped his thigh to the slapping sounds that constituted the drum beat.

“This is the best one,” he said.

Minute one of “Sister Ray” must have been recorded at the perfect frequency for that apartment because when the 17-minute ode to drugs, oral sex, and obliviousness began it felt like we were on an elevator getting shot into space. My stomach lurched and my mouth dried up. I was sure that when I looked over the side of the porch I was going to see the Earth shrink and disappear. He nodded his head and smiled at me.

That’s when I decided to do it. That’s when I leaned over and tried to kiss him. He pulled back and looked at me with the sad eyes that had made me want to kiss him in the first place, but now made me want to punch him.

“Are you trying to kiss me?” he asked.

“The fact that you are asking me that is a pretty bad sign.”

“I sort of have a girlfriend,” he explained and kept his eyes on me in case I tried something else.

“Yeah,” I said, turning away from him and looking back out onto the labyrinth of Chicago backyards while Lou Reed sought a mainline, “I do too.”

The insistent guitars were my frustration. The cranky, thrumming organ was my embarrassment. We sat with that song playing for a long time. Longer than its Ulyssian run-time, it seemed.

When the record ended someone put on Joe McPhee's *Nation Time* and the spell was broken. I looked over at Foster Campbell and smiled. He smiled back, but I could tell he was waiting for me to leave. It was my responsibility to go, I realized. I had been the one who had done something dumb and made everything all awkward and uncomfortable for us both. I stood up and pretended to stretch. He continued smiling, but not in a mean way. He didn't look like a sly fox, pitying the dogs who could not catch him. He smiled in the kind and polite way you did on Valentine's Day in third grade while everyone in class stuffed envelopes and tiny treats into the shoebox you had lovingly decorated with construction paper hearts and glitter glue.

I found Lefty and we left the party with a group of cute college kids who claimed to be the West Suburban College Debate Society. I tried to forget about Foster Campbell, but everyone talked about him all the way back to Lefty's place.

When I think about that record now I always think of Foster Campbell and I wonder what happened to him. I've heard he's working in a railyard in Wilmington and that he maybe owns a consignment shop in Tallahassee. Sometimes I wish I knew for sure. I'd like to ask him what he thinks about the jarring and spliced voices shouting back and forth during "Lady Godiva" or what the hell he thinks John Cale was talking about in "The Gift." Mostly I just wish I smoked back then.

When you run into him, don't mention that I was talking about him. He probably knows already, but still.

That party isn't something I like to talk about all that much. Or even think about. You're probably thinking, "What's the big deal? Who hasn't made out with Foster Campbell?"

My answer to that is: Well, me, for one.

Never Heard of 'Em? #15—She Speaks in Tongues

In the hip hop world, there is a practice that is referred to as interpolation. This is a practice similar to sampling, except instead of using the original recording, the segment is re-recorded by new musicians as a way to circumvent copyright laws, or to reinterpret the original song. The word is actually appropriated from the practice of inserting phrases in between existing parts in Classical music, which is itself lifted from the mathematical concept of constructing new data points within an existent range. It is, however, such a ridiculous sounding and looking word that it feels like the kind of neologism that has to be based, not on an existent concept, or even a clever portmanteau, but on an understanding so charmingly wrong that it becomes memetic. Interpolation is a word that reminds me of delightful word bumbles such as “secluse” (which is a verb that means to excuse someone into seclusion), “yesternight,” (which is different than yesterday), “dramastically” (which is an adjective which means to be drastically dramatic), and “Scientology,” (which means that you can be an asshole to anyone you want as long as you pay enough money to a shadowy cabal of accountants).

On her [Tumblr page](#) Kate McCandless, (the “She” from *She Speaks in Tongues*), explains that the songs from *Gloria, GUITAR* are some kind of experiment in appropriation and ownership. The idea goes something like this: She lifts ideas from existing and relatively well known songs such as “Saint Louis Blues” by Bessie Smith, and “Harper Valley PTA” by Jeannie C. Riley, and re-interprets them in ways that ask questions about who owns the material, and what does a modern day retelling of these stories do to the themes and ideas contained therein? She isn’t exactly playing these songs as covers. She is moving pieces around, looking behind curtains, shorting out circuits to see what happens. She is re-interpreting, or re-interpolating, the songs using the constituent parts to make something new,

something that merely hints at the original. The result is something fascinating and surprisingly listenable.

McCandless is slippery, evasive, and easily distracted, jumping around from one idea to another and twisting and rubbing them together to try to make sparks, interpolating the fuck out of each and every tune. "Girl Group" feels like a scene from a one act play where a bunch of drunk girls try to sing a bastardized version of the Shangri-la's "Leader of the Pack," which makes sense since McCandless claims to be an actress, a writer, and a director of performance pieces, and not a musician (though with that husky voice she could certainly fool you). The title track, "Gloria, G-U-I-T-A-R" comes across like she was caught in the middle of the performance and forgot how to spell Gloria (something I have been expecting [Anthony Kiedis](#) to do for a decade), and instead switched to a Joplin impression. McCandless even interpolates the idea of an insipid and rowdy Beastie Boys style skit in the faux address to the PTA that she makes in the song "Mrs. Johnson." Here she does it so that she can build tension out of the silly intro, the guitars seemingly wandering in, each from a different song, before they quiet down and begin to collude. They fade out before things ramp up again in a slightly more cohesive, but still sloppy, Ramones-esque wiggle.

She squeals like Blondie and affects arch vocals shifts much like Fred Schneider without his wardrobe. Unlike Schneider's brightly colored suits and Debbie Harry's eye liner, McCandless wears a burlap sack during her live shows, and for the past nine months at least, has performed with a baby inside her. It bears mentioning how completely fucking bad ass it is to even go to a show when you are pregnant, let alone to perform that show. This underscores the feminist bent to the music. She is literally doing the most feminine thing possible, and then playing songs by a who's who of female rock and rollers, swollen ankles, nausea, and fatigue be damned.

She's able to invoke all these punk icons with little more than gumption and frustration to glue all the parts together. She is invoking jazz and blues influences, spiritual and soul influences, and referencing everyone from Missy Elliot to 50s doo-wop, and funneling it all through the lens of a punk rocking theater geek. She is less interested in playing the music than she is in presenting what the music sounds like to her, an artist, writer, and performer. In so doing she is able to offer an exciting peak behind the curtain of these various genres.

The song that has gotten the most attention is the sometimes heavy, often rich, even quite groovy "Optimism." The success of this song should not be a surprise as the song is a re-imagination of the theme of *Reading Rainbow*, so it scratches the nostalgia itch and the pop-culture reference itch at the same time. It takes the tone of the best satire. You know the tone I am talking about. The tone where we are not sure if we are joking or not. Where we don't know if we are making fun of the object of our reference, or earnestly recalling our youth. The tone that could sorta be somewhere in between those two points on the map. "Optimism" manages to co-opt the synthy and iconic opening chirps and then take the song in new and unexpected directions. Its meanderings result in *She Speaks in Tongues*' most interesting track.

She ends the song by tacking on a repeated stanza of "I Can't stand the Rain." The inclusion of this song asks the question: Is she invoking the soulful Ann Peebles who recorded the song in 1976, or the hip-hop visionary Missy Elliot who re-introduced the song to a generation of listeners in the 90s? McCandless is certainly an intellectual and aware of the rich history that rock and pop have to offer, but she is also of the generation who was raised on Missy Elliot and introduced to soul music through the Fugees, DJ Shadow samples, and from that [Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth Sprite Commercial](#).

But does it matter? Once the song has been interpolated, it becomes something new and it echoes all the other uses of the song, the same way Kanye's "All Fall's Down" reflected

both the height of the Fugees and [Lauryn Hill](#)'s difficult (and unfairly maligned) Unplugged record, the same way MIA's "[Paper Planes](#)" appropriates The Only Band That Matters' "[Go Straight to Hell Boy](#)."

I hate to be the guy who makes all the obvious associations, but it's hard not to draw parallels to the Liz Phair who took *Exile on Mainstreet* back from her (mostly male) muso friends and interpolated it into something vital to her. *Gloria*, *G-U-I-T-A-R* is the same kind of joyful manipulation, and re-appropriation that Phair used to blow everybody's mind back in 1993. Judging by history, Kate McCandles will now make a record with the [Matrix](#) and show up on a [Gatorade](#) commercial. Until then, *Gloria GUITAR* is rejecting that kind of opportunism. For now *She Speaks in Tongues* is a project that is Robin Hooding those ideas back from the corporations that own these songs and giving them back to us.

Website: <http://shespeaksintongues.bandcamp.com/>

Twitter: [@shespeaksintong](https://twitter.com/shespeaksintong)

tumblr: <http://shespeaksintongues-band.tumblr.com/>

Christmas Carols with Genitals

-or-

Jesus Hates Christmas Music Too

-or-

Drink Up, Smoke Up, and Sing Your Heart Out

So, I fucking hate Christmas. I hate it for all the same reasons you do. I hate the crass commercialism, the fact that there isn't a war on Christmas but there should be; I hate it for the weather, and for the worship of a baby who may or may not have ever existed, or if he did was just a dude like you or me who probably hated Christmas too. But the thing I hate the most about this time of year is Christmas music.

With no such thing as a Thanksgiving carol we go straight from the [Silver Shamrock Halloween Song](#) into two full months of Mariah Carey and Bing Crosby. It can make you nuts.

You may not know this, I didn't for years, (and if you see or talk to Jesus tell him too) but there is actually good Christmas music out there. And I am not just talking about the bizarre and paranoid parts from [The Nutcracker Suite](#), the downright frantic [Carol of the Bells](#), or that RUN DMC [song](#) that [Aristotle from Head of the Class](#) is playing in the opening scene of *Die Hard*. There are legit rock bands who play Christmas music that does not make you want to splatter your brains all over the Beats display at your local electronics big box store.

Here is a collection of songs from some folks we have reviewed, interviewed, or who have generally been on our minds this year. There is even a youtube playlist at the end which includes most of these songs as well as over 90 minutes of Christmas songs by really great artists singing really cool Christmas music. It also includes Miley Cyrus singing "All I want for Christmas is You."

Lara Hope and the Ark-Tones

[Santa Clause is Back in Town](#)

There is something about this band playing a hip, swinging Christmas song that makes sense. Like some kind of buxom

Brian Setzer Orchestra, or corset wearing Tony Bennet, when Lara Hope and her Ark-Tones play the Leiber & Stoller tune "[Santa Clause is Back in Town](#)" they do it with the panache and the swagger of pros trying to sex up your boring holiday.

Benjamin Shaw & Fighting Kites

This Christmas (I Just Want to be Left Alone)

I don't make it a secret that Benjamin Shaw's depressive attitude suits my temperament. His [song](#) about feeling alienated and frustrated, holding his breath until the holiday passes by like a cop with a flashlight searching a park for vandals is how most of us feel. Suicide might [not actually occur most frequently](#) at Christmastime, but it sure feels like it.

Youngest Son

All Souls' Day EP

How about a Christmas gift? Through Christmas, Youngest Son's *All Souls' Day EP*, including the hymn cover "We Rest On Thee," is free to download.

Here is what I said about it back in July:

"*All Souls' Day* ... is the spiritual sibling of Youngest Son's 2012 release [All Saint's Day](#). There are more whispered admissions, more tender canticles about dawn and hope and whatever happens after things end."

If you don't want to read the [whole review](#), just know that Steve Slagg is a super talented musician and his work is well worth listening to,

Download the EP here: <https://allsoulsday.steveslagg.com/>

Molly Durnin

[Snowman](#)

While not technically a Christmas song, it takes place during the right season and god damn if it ain't slinky.

Me and the Horse I Rode in On

[Driving Home For Christmas](#)

Me and the Horse I Rode in On is a labelmate of Uncle Rico, and by "labelmate" I mean possibly the same person. The tune is melancholy, doleful and turns on the notion of lost

opportunities and being stuck smack dab in between the rock of one's past and the hard place of one's future. I guess we all are.

Sherwin Sleeves

[Christmas La La Song](#)

Any song with “la la las” in it is better than any other song.

Mineral Girls

Merry Christmas, I Hate Your Guts (from [SAD HOLIDAY](#) by [Scaredy Cat Records](#))

This is pretty much my favorite Christmas song of all time, but only because I hate your guts. It's from a collection Scaredy Cat Records put together in 2013 and it captures the sentiments of many of us who have a hard time keeping up the act during this time of year. The whole drunken, depressive endeavor of a record is well worth a listen, but obviously this is the best song on the record.

Reverend Peyton's Big Damn Band

[I'm Giving Plasma For Christmas This Year](#)

“Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do,” an unnamed audience member tells the good reverend when he reveals the name of this little number during a live performance in Dayton, OH in 2008. Truer words were never spoken.

Be safe this Christmas and do what you gotta do to make it through to next year. We want to see all of you back in 2015 because we can't afford to lose any of our readership. Happy Fucking Christmas, you maniacs.

Never Heard of 'Em? #16—Forever Cult

I feel that enunciation is overrated (I'm talking to you [Harvey Keitel](#). Why do you articulate every frigging syllable even when you are playing a prison hardened street tough? How about an apostrophe or two? There's not a "gonna" or a "haveta" to be found in the man's entire oeuvre.)

Being too articulate, or enunciating too emphatically is a waste of time, because most people are not paying attention to what you say anyway. I guess Kieran Clarke, of the Forever Cult, agrees with me because he mumbles magnificently through the songs on the UK band's free, and very good, EP FUXX, employing a universal rock and roll language the likes of which is used by Ellery Roberts from [Wu Lyf](#), Jónsi Birgisson from [Sigur Ros](#), or whoever sang "[Louie Louie](#)."

The [songs](#) this neo new-wave, English hardcore, 21st century grunge band make available on their bandcamp and soundcloud pages are packed with slow, solidly chimey REM guitar parts, and ethereal Ooh Oohs and Ahh Ahhs the likes of which were ubiquitous in 80s pop music, but has now been co-opted by moody indie rock bands. On some songs the bass and drums plod along, sounding like what Joy Division would have sounded like were they competent musicians, and other tunes are more aggressive, like on the gnarled and wooly "Sinking," where they sound like they would be comfortable on the early roster of Creation records, playing sets in between bands like Slowdive and Teenage Fanclub (and holding their own quite nicely). It's unclear if they are versatile, or if they just have not exactly found their sound yet. Either way, it's exciting.

The one thing they never seem to forget is melody.

On a song like "OCEAN OCEAN OCEAN" Clarke slurs soulfully, recalling the kind of sneer Elvis Costello used to affect, and sweats out the kind of grimy reverb 90s bands used spend years trying to perfect.

Their Clue Records release is well worth a listen, and so is their [demo](#) (perhaps more so). You won't understand any of the lyrics, but you will understand everything they say.

Website: <https://cluerecords.bandcamp.com/music>

Twitter: [@Forever_Cult](#)

Label: Clue Records

Best Track: "[Homewrecker](#)"

Miley Cyrus, I'm Gonna Leave You

This week Miley Cyrus did something, so I have to have an opinion about it.

She has recently posted a cover version of the famous Zeppelin version of the song "Babe, I'm Gonna Leave You." It sounds like a great idea. It sounds like an opportunity for a star who has a lot of attention, a lot of cameras pointed at her, to piss off the people she is supposed to be pissing off, (old white people) while tricking young people into a) thinking she has an understanding of and an appreciation for the past AND b) seducing those same young people into checking out seminal artists like Led Zeppelin and folk singer Anne Bredon (who originally wrote the song).

Before you cry foul, let me remind you that there is a long tradition of female vocalists covering Robert Plant's husky yowl, and cracking falsetto, and it often sounds great.

Tori Amos liked to play a very feminine and sultry version of "[Whole Lotta Love](#)" on her tours. Her rendition managed to reclaim for feminism the song about a guy waving his pecker around. By mashing it together with the sweetest commitment-based elements of "Thank You," and by vagina monologuing the fuck out of it with cat like yelps and breathy bosom heaving, she made the song somehow about freedom and transcendence instead of about conquest, all of which was probably lost on Plant, but probably led to him to consent to a strangely affecting duet version of "[Down by the Seaside](#)," with Amos for *Ecominium*. (For the record, this song is not good. It sounds like Amos has not bothered to learn the words of anything but the chorus and is being coaxed along during the verses by a befuddled and unhip Plant, but it is an interesting listen, particularly in the jazzy, neo-noir Lou Reed if he were on Twin Peaks type arrangement.) Karen O and Trent Reznor teamed up when the American version of *Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* came out and they made a surprisingly flat and contrived, yet effective for the

trailers, version of "[Immigrant Song](#)." Stevie Nicks has rock and rolled the fuck out of "[Rock and Roll](#)," and every artist from [Dolly Parton](#), to [Heart](#), to [Mary J Blige](#) have done Stairway to varying degrees of success.

This is all to say that Miley Cyrus singing "[Babe, I'm Gonna Leave You](#)," has the necessary elements for the song to be at least novel, if not great and it should, theoretically be another way for Cyrus to distinguish herself from her peers and to climb one rung higher on the pop superstar ladder.

Unfortunately, she fails miserably.

If anyone was rooting for this to be good, it was me. But it is paint by numbers and lazy.

The first issue is the approach she takes. She can't even decide if she wants to use a baby doll voice, a tortured outcast's, or a power-diva's. Many accuse her of not taking music seriously, of being shamelessly histrionic and a lot of pomp and no circumstance, and this just goes to prove that. Is her sound completely manufactured? I don't know, but it doesn't make her seem at all genuine that she does not seem to have any consistent emotional connection to the song whatsoever. If it were a cover and not a karaoke rip off, if it were done with any level of creativity, or care this would do a lot to show her vocal range, as well as her emotional depth. But it doesn't do any of those things.

I can just see her face twisted in "I know how to be on TV" faux concern while she skips from one verse to another. She seems like she is having fun with this song and if there is one song that you should not have fun singing, it's "Babe, I'm Gonna Leave You." This isn't even slick, well postured star making. This is lazy, slapdash, aping and it would have been best for everyone had this monstrosity never been made.

The production is awful. The static farts and sizzles while Miley flits from verse to chorus, excited to get to the part where she gets to pretend she is Plant and the whole thing is a real mess. Spin wants to call it "lo-fi," but that is an insult to actual lo-fi. That is like calling hitting yourself in the face with a

hammer, drinking a light beer because both get you dizzy. The biggest disappointment here is [Spin](#), who used to be a reliable source for music reviews and Chuck Klosterman essays. Now they are doing press releases for Miley Cyrus?

Here is a message for Spin: Lo-Fi sounds like garbage on purpose you dimwits.

As far as “Baby, I’m Gonna Leave You,” (sic) as she hilariously calls it, I could not wait for this thing to be over so I could cleanse my ears, and colonic my soul by playing the Zeppelin version, which is sophisticated, virile, tortured, nearly schizophrenic, and (of course) epic.

As far as I can tell, this is some kind of publicity stunt dreamt up by Soundcloud [who is going to start competing with Spotify](#), using the same business model where ads nudge you into signing up for premium access. If this is the kind of content they want to offer, they are going to have a tough time.

Also, Pink already did [this](#) much more competently in 2009, so why are we even talking about this right now?

#229: Aerosmith, "Toys in the Attic" (1975) (Record Review)

The RS 500 is a project that strives to, in their own words, "use each [of the Rolling Stone's 500 Greatest Albums] as a backdrop for equally great creative writing. From #500 (*Aquemini*) down to #1 (*Sgt. Peppers*)..."

I had the pleasure of writing about Aerosmith. Here is the May 11, 2017 article in its entirety:

I didn't go out of my way to choose [*Toys in the Attic*](#)—it sort of fell into my lap because no one else who writes for this website wanted to write about it. And I understand why people who love music wouldn't want to write about this band. Because of their longevity, Aerosmith has managed to be present in every generation of music since the Nixon administration, but also to be strongly associated with none of them. Even as they re-emerge with each new generation, they seem to belong to no single era in particular. Having been constantly handed down, they are always re-invented, but never different. They are a product—an LLC in 4/4 time. The band is everywhere, from everywhen, but belong to nobody.

Younger Baby Boomers, whose older siblings had greedily claimed Led Zeppelin and the Allman Brothers for their own, saw Aerosmith as ersatz versions of those earlier, better bands. To Gen-X kids, Aerosmith sat between Creedence Clearwater Revival and Cheap Trick as one of the only rock 'n' roll bands from their parents' collection that they could stomach, buoying those desperate rock 'n' rollers through the hair metal era until grunge could arrive. For millennials, Steven Tyler and Co. became ubiquitous and ever-presently acceptable. They were the white noise of rock 'n' roll, somehow evading the critical skewering they were owed for records like *Pump* and *Get a Grip*.

So, who would want to be stuck with the task of writing about a band as uninteresting as this?

I wasn't upset about the assignment, though. For me, it was a nice surprise. It was like unexpectedly finding yourself in the same place, let's say the juice aisle of the Walgreen's, with someone you haven't seen in awhile, let's say...your dad. Yeah, I said it: this record reminds me of my dad. Because, of course it does. Sure, my dad is the one who first introduced me to the band, but even if he hadn't been, I think we can all agree that for the last four decades Aerosmith has become the Dad of rock 'n' roll.

Mind you, I am not talking about the Father of Rock 'n' Roll. No, that honorific goes to Chuck Berry or Ray Charles or someone foundational like that. I am not speaking about the prolific, Genghis Khan-esque parentage of Elvis Presley, nor the Abrahamic father to nations of Robert Johnson. I am talking about the Hootie & the Blowfish type, sandals and socks wearing variety of dad. I am talking a good old fashioned, scare your prom date away, burn the brats at every barbecue, farts in his sleep kind of dad.

Aerosmith, also not unlike most dads, has a special knack for being impossibly corny. Their songs are the equivalent of knock-knock jokes, their shows are cringey, hours-long Adam Sandler impressions. Some of the earliest levers the band used to fulcrum their way into power are just karaoke covers of songs like "Come Together" and "Train Kept a-Rollin"—soon to be standards the band changed just enough to be able to put on their records, but not enough to distinguish them in any way from the originals. Similarly, their own catalog is just a series of near-parodies; "Round and Round" is a fake Motorhead song, "Kings and Queens" a limp take on Black Sabbath, and "Back in the Saddle" is a dusty Skynyrd rip off. The rockabilly innuendo of "Big Ten Inch" is an old Bull Moose Jackson record that Aerosmith legitimately plucked from the Dr. Demento show, making it an actual, honest-to-goodness parody. Aerosmith established themselves as a variety act of sorts. A dress-up-and-be-someone-else-for-a-little while type of act. Not unlike the detachable thumb trick that your dad

taught you, Aerosmith would pull any cheap gag just to get a reaction. And, just like your dad, Aerosmith inexplicably has cool friends, with Run-DMC and Willie Nelson popping up every once in awhile to lend credibility. People like to call Jeff Tweedy and Warren Zevon “dad rock” but there is no rock more dad-erific than Aerosmith. So sappy and melodramatic. So bland and cliché. So ubiquitous. (This is all not mentioning Liv Tyler, of course, whose movie career has made Steven Tyler one of the most famous celebrity dads in existence. But that is a whole other essay.)

They weren't always like this, however. Aerosmith is from a generation of artists who came by their fame organically. They were discovered, more or less, not manufactured. They wrote “Dream On” in a tiny apartment in Boston. It wasn't endlessly revised and tinkered with by songwriters-for-hire and image consultants. They are from an era of music that is often (for better or for worse) longed for wistfully by music fans, critics, and artists alike. They were even briefly considered dangerous, with the drug-addled Perry and Tyler referring to themselves as “the Toxic Twins,” and the music press sometimes calling the band “the Bad Boys from Boston” (though that was probably mostly because the moniker was alliterative.) It seems impossible that they are now commonly called “America's Greatest Rock ‘n’ Roll Band.” (Go ahead and google it.) I'm embarrassed to admit that at one time I too put them in league with the sexually explicit 2 Live Crew, the satanic Slayer, the violently angry Sex Pistols, and the vulgar Ice-T. Aerosmith just seemed so wanton.

I remember an older cousin mischievously putting on a concert film called *Aerosmith: Scrapbook* that I was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to have. I can still recall the image of a groupie who turned toward the camera, a stand-in for Stephen Tyler, and who pulled down her bathing suit asking, “Hey Steven...remember these?” I probably remember her small, untanned breasts, poking out pink-tipped and beautiful from her sun-browned body, better than Tyler ever could.

Looking back, the video seems so tame, almost quaint; the woman wriggling on stage next to Joe Perry, Tyler sniffing his gloved fingers, the strange physics of the way breasts moved when women, propped on their male counterparts' shoulders, bopped along to the beat of "Walk This Way." It is almost coy compared to what a lifetime of internet pornography can impart. Compare the messy fun of that concert footage to the near antiseptic chic of a video like "Blurred Lines," where the women are mere accessories, or to the exploitative faux-elegance of any Weeknd video. It is only the decades separating us from that Aerosmith concert film that teaches us how innocent all that cocksmanism was. The craven corporatism of the band in 2017 reveals how relatively harmless all that transparent phallicism was back in the mid-70s when *Toys in the Attic* came out and they were playing shows just to get laid.

Their relative inoffensiveness should make me hate them more, of course. Rock 'n' roll bands aren't supposed to be benign. They are supposed to be dangerous and scary. Your aunt isn't supposed to like the music you listen to. She's supposed to think it's terrible. But your aunt kinda likes Aerosmith. Everyone kinda likes them. Being kinda liked and accepted by as many people as possible has been their prime objective since they first became famous. In that way they are actually America's least Rock 'n' Roll, Rock 'n' Roll Band.

So, if they are doing this much posturing and most of their work is objectively terrible, where is the backlash? You'd think that now that the people writing for *Rolling Stone* (which we lately only read for the Matt Taibbi articles anyway, don't we?) and the people who make the A&R decisions about music—people who, just like you and me, grew up on the Roots and Pearl Jam (each of whom have just as valid a claim on being called the Greatest Rock Band in America)—might get wise to hucksters like Aerosmith. I submit to you that

it's because of dads. All of them. All of our collective dads. American dadhood in general.

Our dads are embarrassing, goofy, and lame. Their hearts are in the right place, but they try too hard at the wrong things. They are just guys figuring things out as they go, but by the time we realize that, it's too late because we've already built the resentments and anger towards them. They are guys who have a hard time realizing we aren't little kids anymore and that, as much as we'd all like that, there is no way to get back that time. So, even though a lot of the mistakes they make are understandable or even for the right reasons, it's still hard to forgive him. (Think of Liv Tyler, so emblematic of the catastrophe of American parent-child relations, being that she longed to know him, but couldn't because she was busy being raised by Todd Rundgren of all people.)

So, as you can see, my relationship with Aerosmith, not unlike my relationship with my dad, is complicated. I look back on records like *Toys in the Attic* and I try to look past *Revolution X*, that awful videogame they were in, their dumb cameos in *Wayne's World 2* and *Be Cool*, those desperate attempts to cling to stardom by aligning themselves with the pop world, and their insistence upon still gyrating their hips into their guitars past retirement age, but I can't. As much as I want to, it's hard for me to forget those scarves flying out of everywhere like some bad magician when I am trying to enjoy the surprisingly melodic "No More No More." It's hard to nod my head to the good enough "Toys in the Attic" without thinking about the Cocked, Locked, and Ready to Rock Tour of 2010, or the band's cozy relationship with professional phony Lenny Kravitz.

Even the problem of memory, though, reminds me of my dad. I'd like to think back to the time period when I first encountered *Toys in the Attic* without messy facts about my own dad emerging around the edge of my memory like detritus. I want to think back fondly on those days when he was teaching me how to work-in a baseball glove, how to

pump gas, and how rock 'n' roll worked, without the recollection being smeared by estrangement and hostility. I'd like to look back on those trips in my dad's car, driving around in the little blue Hyundai, listening to Aerosmith singles crackling from the radio, without looking past decades of debris; ruined Christmases, bitter arguments, or what his blood alcohol content was on his third DUI.

My dad was sort of an average type of dad and by that I mean he worked a job he hated, told a lot of bad jokes, and really liked Aerosmith. He had been in a band when he was a teenager. They broke up and reformed, replacing him with Tommy Hilfiger's brother Billy, of all people. I guess they ended up playing a few shows at CBGBs. I don't think my dad ever got over the fact that he never became a rock star. So, despite or because of the disappointments of his youth, rock 'n' roll was very important to him. He taught me that Richard Thompson had the gift of story-craft and that Neil Peart was the most important drummer since Buddy Rich but that Mick Fleetwood was his favorite, and that Clapton was God.

"That's Aerosmith," he explained to me when I was eight and we heard "Sweet Emotion" on local rock station PYX 106. When we got home he plucked the *Toys in the Attic* cassette from his own collection and he gave it to me. I guess that for the entirety of the rest of my life I've been trying to get back to that moment of first hearing them because it's been sort of all downhill for all of us since then.

Even though my dad saw himself as a failure, he wasn't to me. I would look at old pictures of him playing drums in a cowboy hat and long blond hair, or picking on a guitar in his dorm room and he was a rock star, right up there in the constellation that contained Hendrix and Dylan. Because that is what kids do. They look at their dads like they are superheroes. Until they don't. That is what kids do until they discover that their dads are just human beings, mixed-up guys who are doing the best they can, and often making a lot of mistakes.

Like most dads, Aerosmith is corporate, not living their dreams, but they are still going to work every day regardless. They are corny and silly. They are not the infallible superheroes we thought they were back when we were kids. They are flawed, sad, and human, making a profit on a product no one really wants, but doing it because they think that's what their kids need. In that way, it seems less like they are sellouts and more like they are just guys, doing a job. Just stuck in a bad situation they don't know how to escape.

And so now I'm a dad. I have my own hang-ups and problems, and one day my kid will hold resentments about all of them. So far I've taught him to love music, though, and I feel it's my responsibility to carry on the tradition of listening to Aerosmith in the car with my kid. Do I feel 100% on board with it? Not really, but there are other traditions I'm not fully on board with that I participate in because that is what dads do with their sons. Like Christmas. Like telling bad jokes. Like making a lot of mistakes.

While I can't look back on the songs from *Toys in the Attic* without seeing embarrassments like the Gap ad Perry and Tyler did in the 90s and terrible music like *Honking on Bobo*, my son doesn't have that problem. He just hears music for what it is and doesn't come at it with a lot of baggage, which makes me sort of happy. I guess only children can hear Aerosmith for the first time the way any of us did, before the *Armageddon* soundtrack, before Dad died, before MTV. In a way, it gives us all a chance to start over.

So, when I hear "Sweet Emotion" come on the radio, I will turn it up and, even though I won't be able to forget all the stuff that drives me nuts about them, I'll tell my son, "Ya hear that, kid? That is Aerosmith." Because that is what dads do.

7 Albums I Am Supposed to Love That I Actually Hate (Part 6 of 7)

Case #6. TV on the Radio - *Dear Science* (2008)

[Return to Cookie Mountain](#) is so good. It moves and sways and grows like a mold. It inhabits space and it bleeds like it's a living organism. But if *Return to Cookie Mountain* is so good, why is *Dear Science* so impenetrable?

Did they use up all the good ideas on the previous record?

It sounds to me like the worst parts of Prince, Duran Duran, and that band who sang "Your Own Personal Jesus." And those bands from the 80s all had an excuse for when they sounded like crap, or for why their records didn't age well. Their producers were all coked up and thought the high ends on "Got My Mind Set on You" would sound super fantastic. We know better now. Not only that, but everyone with a laptop has access to the pre-set beats and horns that TV on the Radio pack into songs like "Golden Age" and "Crying."

And that's another thing. Who named these fringing songs? This is a band weird enough to have songs named "Dirtywhirlt," and "Snakes and Martyrs," clever enough to call an early EP *OK Calculator*, so diverse in their tastes and influences that they opted to be a part of the Daniel Johnston cover project and of all his songs, the one they picked to wail tragically over was "Walking the Cow." This is a band so good at being a relevant rock and roll band that they introduced themselves with a song they called "Staring at the Sun" as if anyone but U2 could name a song something so dramatic and actually pull it off. And the best song title this creative, ambitious, super cool, super talented band could come up with is the same title of a song that sucky period Aerosmith had already used 15 years earlier?

The whole record is a lost and found of sorts. I spend the entirety of "Shout me Out" thinking about the far superior and absent of drum machine, "Running Down a Dream" by Tom Petty, while "Love Dog" recalls Radiohead's perfect intro to

Kid A's "Everything in its Right Place." I don't want to spend an entire record wishing I was listening to other, better records, especially when one of those other, better records is *Desperate Youth, Bloodthirsty Babes*, by the very band I am listening to.

I am baffled by the way this record was embraced by the press and by fans. I felt like this record was a forgivable misstep and I was ready to move on, but when I looked around I saw people everywhere eating this record up. And these were people whose opinions I respected. The blue slats of the so-phoned-in-I-don't-even-know-what-to-say-about-it album cover glowed from their iPods, and they championed songs I could not bring myself to finish listening to. Did we love *Return to Cookie Mountain* so much that we were blinded to this album's many faults? Maybe so. That happens. Oh well. At least *Nine Types of Light* was good. Or was it?

Song I would listen to if you held a gun to my head: The one profound exception to how bad this record is, is the song "[DLZ](#)." This is a moody and inspired piece that simultaneously recalls Prince's breathy work on *Sign o' the Times*, Radiohead's "Talkshow Host," and *BladeRunner*. It's so good it is almost worth listening to the rest of the record.

Listen to this Instead: You know what? Fuck it. Listen to [Dear Science](#). There are worse bad records out there. I just don't happen to get it.

Never Heard of 'Em? #17—Battle Ave.

I think I am having some kind of existential crisis. I am lying on the floor of my bedroom with my headphones on, staring at the ceiling, like I am some highschooler. I am typing this review into my phone as one super long text. My thumbs are like manic ping-pong flippers as I try to type all of this without my phone shutting down. I only have 11% of my battery left and it's dropping fast. I am sending this to you specifically because you are one of my best friends in the world and you are one of the few people in the world who can know what I am going through. It's just you and Jesse Alexander from Battle Ave. (I told you I was acting like a high school kid).

Sneering his defiantly fragile vocals, each word is like a rotten egg smashed against the side of a house on Halloween. Alexander sure seems like he is going through something too. His parents just broke up, or he got molested, or the guy he loves just hooked up with the prom queen or something. He is falling apart just like me, so these songs are just the right blend of abandon and melodrama for me right now.

You know how I am always talking about, "Show me the seams."? How I am always complaining about those pre-set effects, pro-tools drum tracks, and too-precise transitions from the second chorus into a bridge? You know how I don't like it when things are slick and flawless sounding and how I'd rather hear dumb rhymes and real life heart breaks than slick production and properly tuned guitars? How I would rather see pimply faces and hear failed experiments than see really gorgeous musicians playing something safe?

Well, Battle Ave.'s best song, "[Puke Lust](#)" is A) called "Puke Lust," B) is basically verseless and C) starts with a do-over.

Yeah. I know. Perfect for me, right?

It really gets my juices flowing. If it's artifice, it's the kind of artifice that belies the truth. And if it's real? If it's real, then it's delicious.

And you should hear their 2009 demo-debut. It has more hisses and croaks than the Reptiles & Amphibians exhibit at the Lincoln Park Zoo. The hiccupping rhythms, blasting guitars, and howling vocals are exactly the kind of bat-shit authenticity I like in my music. Most of it is out of tune and the songs go on for too long, but god damn if they aren't having fun. It makes sense that they would clean it all up for their 2011 release *Warpaint*, which I would dare to call very competently recorded. It's nice and I like it better, but I do kind of miss the amateurishness of 2009's *Batcep (+1)*. Even the name of the EP stinks of youthful disregard for convention and total contempt for the concept of marketability.

But, like I said, the 2011 effort is stronger. The female vocals that accompany Alexander in "Puke Lust," "K Divorce," and an unpronounceable song listed as "**," are unmistakably the voice of an ex, come to torture us. The juxtaposition works great as a way of ratcheting up the tension. It's a wonder his voice doesn't fall apart on us; he screams through most of the songs with little regard for his own well-being. He's even gone the extra step of gargling motor oil and chewing on gravel just to get the blood flowing.

Adam Stoutenburgh, the guitarist replacing Vaughn O'Loughlin on *War Paint*, is partial to ascending scales that he climbs like they are the stairs of a very tall building where there is a party on the roof. He isn't going to let little things like the collusion of the world bank and the IMF, the systematic deconstruction of social safety nets, the rise of vapidness in our cultural touchstones, the inevitable rise of sea levels, decimation of the ozone layer, the break down of our economic system and all that other garbage on the news, keep him from getting to his destination. There is beer up there after all.

I know these guys, or at least I used to know them when I was young and desperate to squander my youth on getting drunk and trying to get girls to go skinny dipping with me. These songs are the soundtrack of some juvenile delinquent's

first forays into criminal mischief. I feel like I am in the room with them as they record this record. I can smell the sweat on their backs, hear the bottles clatter across the cement floors.

Only 7% left on my phone. Just enough time to tell you that the bass lines are really mean. The guitar flirts with elation. Transcendence even. It is the trilling shout of someone in love, someone with the wind in their face, someone staring down the morning. There is something simultaneously old and new about the band, something that comes out of a deep need to connect, but a deep distrust of the status quo. Also, the drummer sounds like she is hitting the drum with a fucking club. Plus, the band makes use of horns in a way that makes me feel sorry for myself, which I love. The band asks the questions that rock and roll bands have been asking on behalf of the youth for generations: "How do we kill our idols and also get what we need from them?"

Oh no. That thing just happened where all of a sudden I only have 4% left. Time to attach adjectives to influences rather than actually trying to describe the band itself.

This band sounds like the Arcade Fire if they weren't Canadian.

These folks sound like Foster the People if they were starving to death. With horns.

Umm... MGMT if they weren't signed to a major label?

This is a band that sound like Titus Andronicus if they weren't dressed up like civil war re-enactors

When it comes down to it, I know I like these guys because when the record ends, I am sad. What more could you ask for from a band when you are undergoing an existential crisis?

I only have 2% left, so I think it's enough time to tell you that they had this song available on their bandcamp site for a while. It was called *The Sun* and the singer moaned and sulked his way through it that way only real sad sacks can. The song was a real slow burn. It reminds me of this time I was really young, like 5 or 6 and my brother and I were at the park near our house, heading home at dusk as the sky got darker

and darker. It felt more and more like criminals escaping capture since there were signs everywhere that made it clear we were not to be in the park after sundown. Once the sun was gone it was nice because we were energized by the darkness, but it was sad because the sun was gone, and the day was over. Battle Ave. took the song down for some reason, and it is sort of a perfect metaphor for how I feel about this band. What else am I supposed to expect? What else does the sun do, but go away?

Website: battleave.bandcamp.com/

Twitter: [@battleaveband](https://twitter.com/battleaveband)

Best Track: "Puke Lust"

New Release: 7" split with Pelican Movement coming in January of 2015

CORRECTION: December 19th, 2015

Vaughn O'Loughlin was the guitar player for the 2009 demo, but since the 2011 release War Paint, the lead has been Adam Stoutenburgh. OSRR regrets the mistake and also thinks that Stoutenburgh's lead playing is tasteful and, at times, sexy.

Also, the 7" split release will be released in conjunction with Kevin S. McMahon's "fictitious solo project" from upstate NY Pelican Movement, not the Chicago based Post-rock outfit, Pelican.

The article has been updated to reflect these corrections. OSRR regrets these and any other errors, including thinking, for a time, that Neve Campbell and Gena Gershon were the same person.

The Greatest Music Purchases I Have Ever Made (And a Year in Review at The Old School Record Review)

So, we have been doing this Old School Record Review thing for a year now. We've learned a lot about the music industry and what is happening out there. We have talked to a bunch of really, really, ridiculously talented people making superlatively great and exciting music. We have learned some strange things about what catches people's attention on the internet (Kenny Loggins, Buffalo Tom, sick slide guitar riffs, lists of things, Hell, Tom Petty, other stuff) and a few things about each other. It turns out [Dave Schwitick](#) and [Matt Rector](#) really love *Love and Theft* for some reason; [Dave Keneston](#) has a soft spot for internet memes; [Sarah Gray](#), not unlike Oz's Tin Man has a heart after all; [Josh](#) has a thing for Beck; and [Noah Kucij](#) is the greatest writer of his generation. Just playing. We already knew that.

We have written about a lot of what was happening before we were born, what is happening now and what is to come, but we still have a lot of ground to cover. We know have not written about enough hip hop, we haven't written nearly as many classic record reviews as we wanted, and there are plenty of artists we are still as desperate as a lovesick teen to cover.

It has all made me think about the way music is consumed in the twenty-teens. That's a little bit about what we are doing here. We are trying to wade through the confusing seascape that is the current music scene and give our honest opinions about it and what got us here.

And things are weird now. It isn't hard to find one-time music warriors who fought on the front lines of the culture wars of yore, who are now complaining about how hard it is to make it in the music industry because paying gigs are so few and far between and what a tragedy it is that no one buys music anymore. Because of the internet, members of the punk pantheon, the hippie movement, and former love addicts of

all stripes have made this complaint. These are folks who once accused the mainstream of being sell outs and craven thieves but who are now longing nostalgically for a time that never was. It can be pretty disappointing.

But with the proliferation of [easily accessible musical instruments](#), [musical instruction](#), and the capability to hear pretty much any song in the history of the world ever on Spotify (except Prince's and Van Morrison's, but they should be dead soon anyway) one could make the argument that now is the greatest time in the history of music. You can now listen to MC Hammer's later [work](#) any time you want.

One could argue that there has never been a better time in history to spend your days off mastering Ableton Live and recording a concept album about love in a steam-punk era that strangely mirrors our own.

But that is another argument for another day. I only bring all this up because I don't want to be lumped into that category of "back in my day" fogeys who long for the good old days. I love what the internet has done for music. And for all the bad stuff that has happened because of the internet, I am able to accept it.

Today, being that this is being published on the one-year anniversary of The Old School Record Review, I just want to muse and reminisce over those halcyon days before music was free. Next week we can get back to celebrating Bandcamp and Pandora.

I, just like most other people, don't buy music anymore. That is not to say that I steal it. I just have to really want something before I buy it. The last few times I bought music, according to iTunes was:

1/3/11 - Stevie Wonder - Innervisions – (Which is one of the greatest records of all time and I have no reservations about buying)

4/1/2012 - Julia Nunes – Settle Down (which was fine but not nearly as compelling as her youtube covers)

10/14/2012 - An episode of This American Life (which I should have just streamed)

1/26/13 - The Beatles #1s (which was probably a solid purchase)

6/18/13 - Yeezus (which I hated at first, but then came to appreciate, though I never listen to anymore)

6/1/14 - The Lion Sleeps Tonight (which I bought because my kid happens to love it and I somehow did not have it, but the file was damaged and that single glitchy purchase may be my justification for never using itunes ever again.)

The only things I've bought on Amazon in the last decade include the Japandroids *Post-Nothing* and The Strokes' *First Impressions of Earth*, both of which I pre-ordered because I was so excited for them to be released, but neither of which seemed worth the cost of shipping & fucking handling and the week it took for them to get to me.

I am slightly more likely to purchase music through Bandcamp because I know that it is a more artist friendly environment and it is filled with the kind of frantic art that appeals to me. The last three purchases I made there were the straight up ebullient *Projection Room* by my friends' band Sleepy Kitty, Zoe Keating's haunting, contemporary-classical, cello pop *Into the Trees*, and Sufjan Stevens' *All Delighted People EP* which is not *Seven Swans*, but is still pretty decent.

That is 11 purchases for a total of fewer than \$100 in a five-year period. For someone who listens to music every day and is supposed to be writing about music at least every week, that is shockingly little.

Not only do I rarely purchase music, I rarely even download music, even when it is free. If an artist is really trying to get their music out there and I really like what they are doing I will sometimes download a track just to have it, but I am even becoming discerning about that. Everyone my age has had the gluttonous experience of sitting in front of a Soulseek interface and pressing Ctrl+A, and watching cherished records seed and download, filling 2 terabyte drives with songs, only

to never listen to them. It becomes exhausting. You think you want the extended, 6 disks worth of songs from the *Melon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* sessions, but you don't. Billy Corgan gave them to us because he didn't know what to do with them. Even he doesn't want them anymore.

Artists will sometimes send me their music to review, which I really like and if I feel like I have something to say about it I will try to write about it. (I have about a dozen pieces in the pipeline, and that is just articles I have started that are stored in my `Old_School_Review` folder, and that dozen doesn't even include artists whose records I have listened to and have decided are fantastic enough for me to want to write about them but I don't even have the words nor the time to do so). But I sort of feel like my collection of music has reached its natural capacity at 16,800 songs, two crates full of vinyl and a [trunk](#) of disks I am not going to listen to again until my kid pops it open and asks me, "who are the Hoobastank?"

And people who are not musicians just give me music all the time. My friend Terry has hipped me so much great post rock (Mogwai, Tyco, El Ten Eleven, etc.) that I sometimes feel I may never get a handle on [it](#).

The stuff I feel like I need to hear because it is [culturally relevant](#), I can easily hear on YouTube, or Spotify, and I consume that like a television show. I listen to it once, form a shallow or cursory opinion and move on.

Even when I go to the gym I listen to a playlist on [SoundCloud](#) instead of listening to the "workout" music I own (which accounts for some of the more embarrassing purchases on my iTunes account history. AWOLNATION, anyone? Before you judge me, you try working out to Captain Beefheart and Times New Viking you fucking hipster).

Even still, I miss buying records. I miss finding out about albums from Hit Parader Magazine, The Source, or Circus and going out and getting them. I miss taking the risk. I miss wanting to own "Where the Party At?" but taking one look at the

[cover](#) of the record and knowing I could not live with myself if I purchased said CD.

I miss the discovery of it all, the thrill of failure, the investment. I really do. But what I miss most are those interactions with the holier-than-thou clerks who are so difficult to impress. The ones like the guys at Reckless Records who scoff at you because you want to listen to the new Ryan Adams in case it is cool even though he is not supposed to be cool anymore, but he might eventually be cool again, and you want to be there when he is cool again. (By the way Reckless, if you were actually a hip record store you would have 50 different records by Loudon Wainwright and 1 by Rufus Wainwright instead of the other way around because it is obvious to anyone who loves music that Rufus is maudlin and a little phony, while Loudon is one of the more talented writers rock and roll has ever seen and history will be on my side on this one.)

The reason I miss those miserable fucks in droopy sweaters and too tight jeans are because making a great purchase takes skill. It takes knowledge of the present and of history. It takes savvy and guts. It also takes a limited budget because spending \$400 on Beach Boys red vinyl is sort of beside the point and gauche. You are looking for content, mostly. And the only people credentialed enough to judge whether or not your purchase of Los Campesinos! *We Are Beautiful, We Are Doomed* on vinyl, a David Essex cassette single, and a handful of Skip James CDs is cool are those smug, self-righteous bastards behind the vintage cash register at the record store.

So, this whole article has been leading up to the following anecdote about the greatest purchase I ever made in a record store. But first, for the sake of context, here is a list of the great purchases I made leading up to the greatest purchase of my life.

5. Living with [Matt and Dave](#):

The fifth greatest purchase I ever made was when I came home from the f.y.e. with Wyclef Jean's almost there follow up to The Carnival called *The Ecleftic*, Ghostface's masterpiece *Supreme Clientele* (stay tuned for a good, old-fashioned, OSRR style review of that record), *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (brazenly at quarrel with Wyclef's record), and Dead Prez's rowboat tipping *Let's Get Free*. What I could not have known was that at the very same time as I was making my purchase, Matt Rector was making a life changing music purchase as well. In some kind of perfect coincidence Matt Rector, who I was living with at the time, on a whim, bought the exuberant *Zingalamaduni* for 99 cents at a flea market. The record was revelatory in ways that no one expected it to be. It was somehow protest music, roots music, hip-hop, R&B, World music, and experimental. We all wanted Arrested Development to be the future of music and we were sort of heartbroken when we found out that they were kind of full of shit, but *Zingalamaduni* was a pretty good constellation prize.

No one applauded us for our purchase, but the records colluded with one another and sort of transformed three white kids (me and two other OSRR contributors) into Assata Shakur quoting, Pan-Africanists who wanted Leonard Peltier to be freed. My five disk CD changer (somehow malappropriated as DJ Quattro) spun those five disks for a year straight with no one allowed to touch them and while we sold drugs, drank ourselves into stupors, wrote poetry, and played NFL 2K1 on the Sega Dreamcast until we weren't friends anymore and then, miraculously were friends again, and made love (not to each other, though we should have). A beehive of culture indeed.

4. David Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars* / Neil Young's *Rust Never Sleeps* from a Borders Books on Wolf Road in 1996.

This purchase made no impact on the hair gelled and gum snapping clerk at the Coconuts where I purchased the two CDs, but certainly made an impact on my neighbor Joe

Hyland whose passion on music and influence on my own love and understanding of rock and roll was second in those early days only to my father's. He happened to be at my parent's house when my mom and I got home from the mall and I'll never forget the Tex Avery face he made when I pulled the two disks out of the bag to show him my haul. I knew then that when I peeled the plastic away from the jewel cases I was going to find something life changing.

3. First shipment from Columbia House Record Club 7 cassettes for a penny deal in 1993 which included Wrex N Effex's *Hard or Smooth*, Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock, Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Second Helping*, The Spin Doctor's *Homebelly Groove*, Neil Young's *Unplugged*, C & C Music Factory's *Gona Make You Sweat*, Mountain's *The Best of Mountain*:

When I opened the box my dad alternately gasped in disbelief and groaned cynically as I took the tapes out of the box one by one. My dad informed me that he had not listened to Mountain in 10 years and he could not believe I had bought it. He picked up the tape and put it on and *Never In My Life* never sounded so huge. He kept the tape in his car and I never listened to it again, but I'll always think of Mountain as belonging to me. Also, even though he scoffed at them to start with, he ended up thinking The Spin Doctors were pretty funny.

2. Hail to the Thief & The Marshall Mathers EP from a Virgin Megastore in 2002:

I purchased these CDs when I was first trying to write fiction and it felt like Yorke and Mathers were the literary forefathers I was more interested in studying. The Faulkner and Hemingway of pop music. Milton and Pope of early 21st century post-911 angst.

Buying music was an art form. I spent most of the first part of my life crafting this capability. It has to do with sniffing out the phonies, knowing your own proclivities and covering as much diverse ground as possible. I am glad that music buyers are no longer subject to record companies' price gouging, cynical repackaging, and bait and switch maneuvers, but I still long

for the elegance of the system where an artist created a document and then tried to disseminate the document. Things are more amorphous now. While documents are still created and their worth is valued in a somewhat more honest way, we have lost the kinds of experiences that Kurt Cobain is talking about in this [video](#):

Which brings me to my greatest achievement of music buying. When I purchased *Blue Valentine* and *What's Going On?* from a used record store on Tremont Street in Boston in 2003.

1. Tom Waits' *Blue Valentine* and Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On?* From nameless used record store in Boston in 2003:

It was a small place. It was on a corner and it could have been another, bigger store's storage area. For all I knew it may have been at one point. The store differed from its neighbors, a tailor's, a high end electronics store, a sports apparel store with overpriced jerseys of every Red Sox, Patriot and Celtic on each of the team's respective rosters. The record store existed in a part of Boston that was a strange mix of tourists and wealthy locals. I always wondered how the store made rent. I walked in there on a Saturday in the summer where the foot traffic was so oppressive I felt like I needed to escape the throngs to get from the sidewalk to the front door of the record store.

I never walked into the place looking for anything. That was always the key. You have to be open to what they have. You have to conform to the shape of the store and see how you fit. I checked out the cassette tapes which, even at that point were pretty much free. I ran my hands along the towers of CDs. They had a couple hundred copies of Green Day's *Dookie*, it seemed, a few copies of Marky Mark and the funky Bunch's *Good Vibrations* single in order to walk the line between hipster kitsch reasons and local pride.

The final purchases came to me, of course, like they always do. They formed out of the shelving structure like some kind of bizarre musical constellation, where suddenly the pattern

came into view. Do you see how these records work together? Why they are such great selections? Both are passion projects by single auteurs, each with equally distinctive vocal stylings, though those stylings are as different from one another as possible. Waits is looking back, while Gaye is looking forward. One man is shedding a persona while the other is adopting one. One is trying to dive into the gooey sentimentality that his other releases lack, while the other is breaking the formulaic chains of the highly successful pop love song. Do you see? Do you understand how these records balance each other so perfectly they risk blinking the world out of existence? If you don't see by now, you never will.

Having found my purchases, or rather, having let them find me, I brought them to the register. The guy at the counter was a little older than me, worn out looking, and I want to say he was flipping through some kind of trade journal, looking for new records to acquire. He seemed like he might own the place, or be some kind of manager. He was annoyed that I was interrupting him. Being in such a centrally located place, I am assuming that he got a lot of people who treated him and his store like an outpost of the tower records (that still existed at that time and was selling great CDs for 8 bucks because everyone had just got word that music was free so every chain was all of a sudden selling CDs for a profit margin that was at least approximated sanity.) He must have had a lot of people coming into his store asking for *Let Go* by Avril Lavigne, or *Up* by Shania Twain.

When I placed the disks down on the counter, he was not quick to ring them up. But when he looked up from his paperwork, he finally saw what records I was purchasing.

"You want to buy these?"

He picked them up to see if there was a price tag and if maybe I was selling them, or trying to return or exchange them for a Korn CD.

"Yeah," I said, pulling out my wallet.

“This is gonna sound a lot better than the reissue,” he assured me.

It just so happened that at this time there was a big re-issue of all of Marvin's catalog and die hard fans were appalled with the re-mastering. I could not have told you the difference, but this dude thought I was some kind of hard core audiophile. And not just a hard core audiophile, out there looking for Marvin mixed at just the right levels, the high ends just creamy enough, the mid-range plump and sweet, but the kind of audiophile who went from early Tom Waits to peak Marvin Gaye in the same afternoon. I wasn't that kind of audiophile. I just loved good music, but I wanted him to think I was that kind of audiophile.

I nodded.

“Cool,” I said. “I hope so.” I was faking it and he was buying it.

I am not sure if he felt it happen, but there was a tipping, a sliding as I suddenly became cooler than him. He went from being the smug authority to the glowing admirer. Before his eyes I became the connoisseur.

“These are two great records,” he assured me.

Now, I am not exactly good with the come backs, I live most of my life in a state of what the French call *l'esprit de l'escalier*, but there was something about that day, propped up by Tom and Marvin where I knew the perfect thing to say.

“I know, I told him. That's why I want them.”

It had taken a decade, but I had finally showed that all the research, all the listening, all the slogging through Captain Beefheart and Sex Pistols, all the conversations about whether or not Ween was good, it had all manifested itself in this exchange. This guy could see through me, and only the good parts. I saw him see me as I wanted to be seen. As a guy with a killer taste. The kind of guy who had all of Radiohead's imports, who had already been listening to Outkast for years by that point. A guy who had opinions about Dylan, Public Enemy and Manson (not Marilyn, of course, Charlie). A guy

who could jump from reading Chaucer to reading Brett Easton Ellis, Shakespeare to Iceburg Slim, The Bible to Pynchon. I was complete. At least in his eyes I was.

“\$12.50,” he said and I gave a twenty and he made change.

When I walked back to the train that high was fresh on me and I looked at everyone else on the street that day knowing that I had done something great. I had purchased the right music in the right formation. The high would fade over the next few days and when I returned to the record store the gentleman there would not remember me, even when I bought *Rum, Sodomy, and The Lash* and The Wu Tang Clan's double album. Eventually that record store would fade into the ether and I would be left with scratched CDs and vinyl and this skill set that no longer applies to the world we live in. Now I know how the Luddites felt.

But, it's not like that changed the fact that I love music. It's not like it affected how music can affect me. I'm still finding those little moments that Cobain talked about, still finding those special little treasures. Like Youngest Son, The Mineral Girls, Reverend Peyton's Big Damn Band, and MaryLeigh Roohan. I am still leaping from gritty lo-fi acoustic records to slick, soaring chamber pop, to strange, ethereal IDM. I just have to find them in new ways and pay for them with attention, with presence, and with love. I guess that is sort of what Old School Record Review is all about.

Never Heard of 'Em? #18: Mardock The Sun God

Of course, our society is headed down the wrong path. Of course, we are all doomed. Campaign finance. Global warming. Infectious diseases. Nuclear proliferation. 21st Century Crusades. Monsanto. Something has gone terribly wrong and even us, here in the first world, can feel the cold bite of the impending Winter of Mankind.

But every once in a while, hope flickers like a bonfire in the distance. The beautiful, but unkempt music of a man named Mardock the Sun God is one such burning shimmer of hope. His vocals crackle and smoke like damp logs in the flame and the melodies writhe and coruscate against the nighttime sky. Mardock, I would venture, is not the man's given name, but it is the name he chose when he joined the collective where he lives and works and plays guitar. He works to live, the way you are supposed to and he plays guitar for the reasons people started playing musical instruments in the first place. He is not playing the guitar to get famous, get back at all those people who doubted him, and to get laid. He's playing guitar to entertain his loved ones, to communicate ideas, to make something beautiful... and, actually, maybe also to get laid. Like you are supposed to.

What we have with Mardock is a truly unique artifact. He is a person raised on all the same musical influences as any other young man with a guitar who was born in the waning years of the 20th century, but he is also a person who has transported himself to another context, another society separate from those musical influences where he can see and understand them all anew. He is an anthropological anomaly. The music he makes belongs in and is made for the community of [Acorn](#), a farm collective and an offshoot of the [Twin Oaks](#) community in Virginia, and yet he disseminates this music back to the rest of us squares living in the corporate controlled world. Knowing the context of the music creates a strange effect when you listen. Snatches of melody emerge like

Mardock's memory of radio from his life before he separated from our corrupted society, and his songwriting and playing are as rich and sumptuous as the meals he prepares with his bare hands, as gritty and raw as the vegetables he pulls from the garden.

Even when the songs recall Akron/Family's "Don't Be Afraid, You're Already Dead," or Bright Eyes' "At the Bottom of Everything," it feels like the kind of appropriation that is warranted, or at least forgivable in songs written and played for groups of exhausted forward-thinkers living on a near post-apocalyptic commune and needing some kind of entertainment, and some kind of catharsis.

It's sort of like that [scene](#) in *Reign of Fire* where Christian Bale and Gerard Butler act out *Star Wars* on their own Post-Apocalyptic commune.

It's not stealing if your heart is pure. It's not wrong if it's the right kind of theft.

There is something exhausted, something truly beat about the way he plays with calloused hands and worn out body, but emboldened soul. He sounds ready for bed most of the time, but happy to be awake (awake in more ways than one, of course) and playing in the twilight, rocking his melodies back and forth using what picking patterns from country and folk music are available to him. There is something virginal about his music. His fingers hunt for the hammer-ons, as if he is doing so for the first time, and his voice is sometimes searching for the right note or tone, but it is always brave. Brave, perhaps, in that way one is brave when he does not know any better. He sounds like what The Fleet Foxes with all of their Whole Foods shopping, progressivism, and CSNY records wish they sounded like.

The songs have names like "X Marks" and "All is Mind" which imply some kind of deep existential longing the likes of which fresh air and communal living won't fix on its own. The songs are not just about the feeling of alienation and being lost. They are about actively searching for an answer and sometimes

even finding one or two. Maybe that is what sets this Mardock apart from other six-string slingers. He isn't heartsick. He is heartstrong.

When the percussion shows up on songs like "Shoulda Gone, Long Gone" and "Ginger's Song," and the jangling "Look Out Boys!" it is welcome, like some kind of fence to set a few boundaries for the meandering Mardock.

Mardock is a wanderer at heart, god damn it (ask him about his upcoming bus tour), so the songs lope along without the tight constricts of the percussion. And maybe that is where the artist is in his life. He is still struggling with how much structure he needs in his life. How much we all need. We all certainly would like more freedom, less observation by the NSA, less subliminal advertising, less chemicals in our food, but what would we do with all that freedom? Mardock is one of the few people trying to find out.

The ground that these songs cover has been covered before, but so has farming and agriculture. This is an artist using what is known to be effective, (community, hard work, V-I turnarounds, a healthy diet, bass string pedal patterns, [organic seed sales](#)) and employing them in a way that works for him.

After listening to the whole album and a few other goodies available on his [soundcloud page](#), I still prefer the first song of his I heard. I heard it on Greg Carlwood's very entertaining [Higher Side chats podcast](#) where Mardock and a woman mysteriously referred to as Bella Donna really get into it. Maybe I like this song the best because hearing the song for the first time, so different and new yet so accessibly familiar, delivers a thrill and that thrill is the best part of the song. Maybe every time I hear it, I am reminded of the ideas he presented on that podcast, and those ideas are getting me off. Or maybe it is just his best [tune](#).

From Mineral Girls to Mineral Women (Record Review)

cozy body

the mineral girls

Self Aware Records, 2015

The mineral girls show up in my itunes in between The Microphones and The Minutemen and that feels just about right. (n.b. They actually show up in between Miles Davis and Missy Elliot, but I am ignoring that fact because that is not how the alphabet works and my beef with Apple over this point is a gripe for another time and place.) Having this band lodged in between the dreamy sizzle of Phil Elvrum's The Microphones and the stiff sarcasm of the Minutemen makes a lot of sense to me. After all, the mineral girls are some kind of lo fidelity loving post-post-post punk band, the prefixes of that somewhat meaningless identifier sapping it of all meaning and ironically making it new again and an appropriate term for describing this fresh take on a hardcore and emo influenced rock and roll outfit.

cozy body is the next logical step for this bedroom band of skinny North Carolinians whose sound was actually born in a bedroom and not in a "bedroom." On this echoey, lackadaisical effort they further define their sound. Gone are the delicate melodies and the pinned feedback, but those are the kinds of things anyone recording onto a Tascam 8-track relies upon. Perhaps *cozy body* is what the Girls were going for all along. Perhaps it is their most honest record to date.

It was produced, far more adeptly and assuredly than their last two records, by Bo White and like a lover finding a birthmark tucked behind your ear that gives your flesh a whole new kind of charm, he seems to have found something in their sound that they might have missed themselves. He brings out some of their more serrated sounds, the kind of tasty turns that Mission of Burma or a pre-hiatus Pixies might have tried.

The guitars are crisp, but the vocals are hazy. The room sounds scuzzy, and the bass can be felt but not heard. Plus, the drums are in just the right place. It's not as grubby as *something forever*, and not as charmingly remorseful as their debut but you can't keep doing that stuff forever.

The sound is still rough around the edges but there is a focus applied to the music that already had a direction and a purpose to begin with. White manages to bring some of the more ambitious ideas to the surface. Listening to the records one after the other sort of has the effect of a drunk getting his bearings after a black out.

White seems to know just what to do with these malcontents. Ever reliable drummer Vince D'Ambrasio adds the neat, feral tricks that hold the shambling tunes together and Dylan Fleming's rubbery bass lines are deliberate and chewed upon. His contributions have the unobtrusive feel of a child who was given a Rubik's Cube to keep him quiet on a long car trip and that kind of long-form un-puzzling works well for these kind of ramshackle songs.

The most noticeable addition is that of the battery-licking guitar playing of Mackenzey Ayers. Her playing gives the band something of a hot foot. She adds Television style counterpoint squeals to "It's never safe to leave your home" and the kind of fret board acuity that would appease Richard Lloyd on "feeder mice." The metal-esque, but not exactly metal, alternate picking that opens "I wanna be your child bride," is lifted right from *The Yeah, Yeah, Yeahs Fever to Tell*, and it is well-appropriated here.

Earlier releases have found lead singer and lyricist Brett Green fumbling with ways to express his feelings of frustrations and alienation and the same is true here, but never is he funnier than on this record. He has started to perfect the art of dropping one liners without affecting the somber and serious tone of the songs. He smirks his way through these bleak tracks like he's the illegitimate child of Vic Chestnut and Siouxi Sioux.

Take “sunshine biscuit club” for example. The song is about refusing to be accountable for the demise of a relationship. Green trots out the old trope about getting in touch with all your exes, but in this context, it is only the ones he's cheated on, and hilariously, he's only doing it to explain to them that everything was their fault. There is a sly and subversive humor to these tunes.

The song, just like the rest of the record, is told from the point of view of someone so immature and selfish that they are physiologically incapable of taking responsibility for relationships that have gone haywire. There is even a line that says, “These girls are like plants,” as if they were placed in his life by the government or a Bond villain. And yet, despite how defiant and petulant it all is, there is still beauty to be found. “I can love anyone I want,” they all sing. It takes a special kind of maturity and self-awareness to write a song so immature and self-obsessed.

And that self-obsession is warranted because ultimately this is a record about acceptance. Self-acceptance and all the other flavors of acceptance too. Take the horn-goosed title track which culminates with the line, “Was Jesus happy with the body he was given?” In addition to returning Green to the fertile ground that is songs-about-Jesus, the lyric also invokes a person whose physical description has been debated on a daily bases for 2000 years.

In a record that is about gender and sexual identity, body dysmorphia, and self-loathing, imagining our lord and savior perseverating on his own flaws makes a lot of sense. The idea of Jesus asking if his sandals make him look fat is funny, but it also subverts the whole idea of perfection. Poor self-conscious Jesus; now that the kind of savior with whom we can all identify.

Like I said earlier, this is some kind of progression for the band. The record is their most consistent and most assured. They leave some things behind, their feckless charm, their raw and adolescent yearning, but they trade those things for other

things. The threat of danceability, the commitment to craft. They shed the protection that is the amateur label like a stripper graduating to pornography. No more glitter and champagne rooms, now it's on to bright lights and grimacing through the money shot. This is the sound of a band coming into its own.

In some ways *cozy body* is the best thing they've done. They were always shouty, always rambunctious, but now they are developing thousand yard stares to go along with it. With the final song, "the most recent addition to" they establish an insistent beat that they can maintain for the foreseeable future. The piano melody is sweet and keeps an eye on the past as well as the future and the final, seemingly ad libed pronouncement that "that's the end of it," is clearly a lie. But it's the sweetest kind of lie. It's the kind of lie we tell lovers we have let down: "I swear I'll stop calling," "That's the last time I ever do mescaline," or "you'll never hear from me again." It's the kind of lie that tells us we are in it for the long haul.

Solid Gold Weirdos (Record Review)

Solid Gold Heart

Jad Fair & Danielson
Sounds Familyre, 2014

When I was nine, I used a Panasonic portable tape recorder to record a rock and roll song that I wrote entitled "Power Rock." There were no instruments. There was no band. It was just me singing the words of this song over and over again.

Power rock. P-p-p power rock

Rocking with the power of ...

Power rock. P-p-p power rock

That was the chorus. There were verses too. They were about what a cool dude I was. And how powerfully I rocked. And also, maybe, about *Double Dragon*, which I was really into at the time.

It was predictably terrible and embarrassing, especially when my parents unearthed it a few years later when they were looking for their dub of a Phil Collins record and they played my roughly recorded song on the family stereo and laughed at me.

I never recorded a follow up to what I conceived as a Jethro Tull-esque concept record about rocking and video games, but had I done so, the names of the songs would have been quite similar to the songs on Jad Fair & Danielson's *Solid Gold Heart*. I may have been able to come up with ebullient and seemingly banal songtitles like "Ready Steady," "Go Ahead," and "Rockin on the Good Side," some other artist may have had the gumption to write an 11 track LP featuring food as prominent metaphor, but no one besides these two nonconformists could have ever captured the technicolor vibrancy, the bizarre and beautiful tone that is on display on this record.

At first glance, the oblong intersection of the Venn diagram representing the overlap of rock and roll auteurs Jad Fair and Daniel Smith seems very small. On one side is a

deconstructionist No Wave innovator whose band is so stripped down it is sometimes only comprised of two people, and on the other side is the devoutly Christian frontman of a sprawling band the members of which often wear matching homemade outfits and who uses his music to minister to believers and non-believers alike.

But when you squint it becomes increasingly difficult to tell these two cats apart. I ask you, which of these two musicians enlists the help of his own family to complete his band, bristles at being lumped in with the movement with which he is most often identified, and who values genuine zeal over musical acuity?

Not so easy to tell them apart now, eh?

Both Fair and Smith have a sense of unshakeable mission to their work and each have the boldness to risk making something new and unique. They turn out to be more similar than originally imagined. They each dare dangerously close to writing hit melodies and then veer away from the sudden death of radio success at the last moment with yelps, shouts, or bizarre instrumentation. They were both originally suspected of trafficking in irony, but each have nurtured a cult following interested in (what is now clearly) an earnestly strange approach to music. Both musicians are known as collaborators and springboards for other artists to launch from, with Fair famously working with everyone from Daniel Johnston to Teenage Fanclub, and Danielson being some sort of ever mutating collective the likes of which helped to ignite the career of Sufjan Stevens.

So, their collaboration, facilitated by the Joyful Noise's "Artist In Residence" program, is not as strange a pairing as it would first seem. What is strange are the roles that each musician plays in the context of the record.

According to the Sounds Familyre website the songs were mostly composed by Smith who interpreted (and sometimes repurposed) Fair's mouth articulated and beat-boxed recordings of his ideas for how the songs should go. With Smith

tasked with keeping the train on the rails, the once upon a time enfant terrible of punk rock, Jad Fair, is positioned in the center ring. The effect is that of Fair being the Master of Ceremonies to Daniel Smith's wild and untethered talent. It is sort of the same concept as Captain Beefheart being presented to bellbottom-wearing kids by Frank Zappa (who was himself a bananas artist who the public often didn't know what to make of, though he at least had a novelty [hit](#) or [two](#)). But this arrangement works. They fit well into these roles. They manage to put together a record that is full of ideas and interesting quirks, but one that is not the sum of its parts. The project defies that kind of math. It is something else altogether.

The record never threatens to veer into disaster the way any of [Half Japanese's thrilling records](#) from the 80s do, so gone is that charge of terrified energy, the sense of potential doom that makes you understand a little bit of what the fucked up characters from [Crash](#) were after. It is also missing Smith's typically overt Christian hosannas. His faith is still on display here, mostly in the form of subtle allusions to apples and solid gold (possibly sacred) hearts, and not so subtle allusions to the inevitable triumph of good over evil like, "the side of good will win overall." I do miss the out-of-left-field, earnest Christianity Smith typically brings with him that is like a friend you invite over who doesn't mention he'll be bringing his mastiff, Hulk, who is actually pretty dope once you get to know him, (particularly since you know he'll be leaving as soon as your friend does). Similarly, I sort of miss the kind of unglued songwriting that is apparent in songs like "[Did You Step on my Trumpet](#)" and "[Grow Up](#)."

But the record is something different than all that. It is pivoting from childlike stubbornness into an organized structure the likes of which abound in the adult world, the kind that is necessary when two emissaries from very different lands meet up on neutral territory and start to communicate. This formalized playfulness is embodied in the song "Here We

Stand," where the drum beat is simple and pure and the lyrics bravely state how simple moral quandaries sometimes are. "Here we stand on the side of good / Here we stand on the side of good."

It encapsulates the childlike zeal of the record, the simplicity that embodies what is great about good music. "The future is ours," one of these peculiars shouts. And indeed it may be.

The title track is a little too smooth with its whispered verses and tremolo guitar, but it's nice to hear the overstuffed stanzas of the chorus and the strange lyrics that toy with the ancient cliché that is the song's central metaphor.

Solid gold heart
A solid gold heart
Will never, ever rust
Is filled with trust
Each and every dust
Particle in the world
Will agree with me
About this one thing

Though there is an effort to be more structured, the record is not without moments of abandon. "Rockin on the Good Side" and "Here we Stand" are wild and free in ways that are no longer fashionable. We all thought, when we were sitting around as children recording songs like "Power Rock" into tape recorders, that if music became easy enough to record, everyone would do it, and we as a society would experience the freedom to create whatever we wanted. It turns out that the easier it gets to record and make music, the less daring musicians get:

Just google "How to write a song" and you'll get results like [this](#).

It's the kind of mindless fascism that led to the ascendance of Mussolini and the career of Charlie Hunnam.

No YouTube tutorials for these guys though. These eccentrics are still making up all the rules as they go along and making the kind of shit you could never make if you had 1,000

monkeys banging on the keys of 1,000 Casio SA-76s, for 1,000 years.

“Ready Steady” is the kind of revelatory song that people who try to teach other people the formula for writing a hit song could never understand. It starts with Smith making the sound a rocket makes when it takes off. It has an insistent beat and an earworm hook that sounds like what the theme song to a long running and non-existent cartoon about lightning bugs who work at a mustard factory would sound like. It transforms an amateur scat into some kind of formal weirdness that one can only imagine comes about after imbibing at least a sip of marijuana.

The song concludes with the lyric: “We deserve chocolate cake / And we deserve apple pie / Enjoy your life.” The refusal to rhyme the couplet that Fair has been teasing the whole song is a holdover from the kind of I-do-what-I-want aesthetic both artists have trafficked in for decades. It’s what makes this the best song on the record. It reaffirms my faith in the future of rock and roll music.

When I wrote “Power Rock,” I was a child pretending (and failing) to sound like an adult. I was trying to capture something about what I perceived the adult world to be like, but I did not have the experiences required to do so. I can see now that I should have been making things that reflected the environment in which I was living, but even if I were trying to explain the child like world around me, I never would have come up with lyrics about chocolate cake, a goose, and unabashed love, with the unironic optimism that are included on this record. But I guess that is what happens when you reach adulthood. You long for childhood and if you do it right, you give yourself permission to love the things you took for granted as a child, the things you were afraid to admit that you loved so deeply. We need artists like these because children don’t have the vocabulary to express their oh-so-vital and valid needs and wants and most adults don’t allow themselves the innocence required to make art like this.

Top 16 Rock and Roll Show Tunes

When I was young (all the way back in the 1980s), before I knew how things worked (as if I know how things work now) I would wonder why great songs like "[I Dreamed a Dream](#)" from *Les Miserables* and "[The Jets](#)" from *West Side Story* were absent from the local radio station playlist. Sure the songs on the pop station Fly 92 were all current dance tunes, but I felt like "[What's the Buzz](#)" from *Jesus Christ Superstar* was just as catchy as "[Come Baby Come](#)" or "[Dreamlover](#)," and even though "[Music of the Night](#)" from *Phantom of the Opera* would never be as powerful as one of the local classic rock station's Get The Led Out marathons, it was arguably more relevant having been released in 1986 rather than 1966.

I was obviously a little confused, but can you blame me? By 1989 the distinction between the Broadway musical and rock and roll music was increasingly difficult to determine. I mean, just look at what [Prince](#) was wearing at the time.

For decades Rappers, balladeers, and rockarollers have been borrowing from the theatricality, sexuality, and musicality of Broadway musicals. Popular music has been show tuned. The work of The Magnetic Fields, Queen, Sufjan Stevens, The Scissor Sisters, and Elton John as we know it would be impossible without the popularity and mass acceptance of *Bye, Bye, Birdie*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Oliver*. And this trend did not become unfashionable in the 21st century. Take a look at Jack White's entire persona or any Super Bowl half time show for evidence of Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Bob Fosse. Or just turn on your radio. Fall Out Boy's "Centuries" could very well be ripped straight from some non-existent musical where rag-tag, apocalyptic soldiers jeté and goose step across a technicolor stage.

It is for the betterment of rock and roll music that this happened, of course. It was also inevitable. Rock, being progressive by nature, is designed to absorb influences better than more traditional and conservative forms of

entertainment are capable of absorbing rock. It's why a musical like *Spiderman: Turn of the Dark* could not work. The U2 scored musical collapsed under its own weight ([and the weight of hastily constructed scaffolding](#)) because the music of those Irish Christian rockers is so theatrical to begin with that placing it into a dramatic setting reveals it for how silly it really is.

So, obviously rock and roll has borrowed from the Broadway musical, and vice versa, but it seems there will forever be a dividing line between the two forms, at least as far as radio is concerned. I now know that FM stations will never play show tunes, but if they did, I think it would include songs a lot like the following.

Honorable Mention: Ziggy Stardust

This list only includes songs that were written for the stage, not songs from jukebox musicals like *Mama Mia*, or *Rock of Ages* or else this list would just be all Billy Joel songs from *Movin' Out* with "Great Balls of Fire" from *Million Dollar Quartet* mixed in there somewhere. Having said that, I want the first entry on this list to be a song that embodies what I love about musicals as interpreted by rock and roll. Just to prove to you that this is a show tune and not a David Bowie song, I've embedded clip of the song being played by the most theatrical band of all time: [Def Leppard](#).

16. "Aquarius" from Hair

The first song on the list from an honest to god musical is also a bit of a cheat. It is the closest song on this list to fulfilling my childhood fantasy where songs from musicals enter the popular culture via the same avenue as Pearl Jam's "Jeremy," and Lady Gaga's "Born This Way." "[Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In](#)" was lifted from the musical *Hair* by a band called The 5th Dimension and became a pretty big hit for them back in 1967. It didn't start a fad where songs from musicals became popular source material for rock and roll bands, but it did become the song [every terrible movie and television show](#) placed in the opening credits as a warning to any

potential viewer that what they are about to watch is total garbage. So, we can all be thankful for that I guess.

15. "[If I Were a Rich Man](#)" from *Fiddler on the Roof*

"If I Were a Rich Man" has the insistent beat and aggressive bass line typical of most hip hop artists. If that fiddler got a little less melodic and a little more staccato, coming in with his bow on the twos and fours, the song would pretty much be [every song Dr. Dre produced from 1994 – 2002](#). It even mirrors the genre's obsession with acquiring wealth and it participates in the practice of imagining how the affluent live their lives and how dope it would be if the singer of the song had access to the same riches.

14. "[At the Ballet](#)" from *A Chorus Line*

The story of escape has been a fecund garden for songwriting since homo sapien started banging stones together. Both rock and roll and musical theater boast songs about how to escape. This paean to getting away from it all, for example, has the same conceit as [most Mountain Goats records](#). Not only that, but its limber bass line, halting cadence, and tidy melodies are so slick and compelling, that if Stevie Nicks covered this song tomorrow it would revive her career.

13. "[Fame](#)" from *Fame*

What is cooler than the late 70s-esque workout music shuffle that is The Fame Song? Who doesn't want to live forever? Chuck Berry sure does. Cuz he's rock and roll. This could be played during drive time in between the news and weather report. It's like an uptempo Carly Simon song that is actually about something.

12. "[Mr. Mistoffolees](#)" from *Cats*

This song sounds as dope as any pop song from Ace of Bass. I know that might not sound like a compliment, but it is.

11. "[Whatever Lola Wants \(Lola Gets\)](#)" from *Damn Yankees*

A song that is sex charged, about the devil, and salsa inflected? It's the kind of slinky song Beyoncé has been trying to write and perform her entire career.

10. "[Seasons of Love](#)" from RENT

Take note. I didn't say I was listing the songs that rock the hardest. I said that I was listing the songs that are the most rock and roll. If this was a bunch of songs from musicals that RAWKED I would have picked "Out Tonight," the entirety of *The Starlight Express*, and other howling monstrosities that feature songs that open with wammy bar dive bombs. I didn't pick those songs because they are almost always terrible. The phony appropriation of other art forms is why musicals get such a bad rap to begin with. Musicals should stick to what they are good at. Lush instrumentation, evocative lyrical conceits, and hats. This song has all of that, and it also has the benefit of being the most rock and roll of all the songs from RENT.

"Season of Love" is a really gorgeous song about being lost and lonely, about being honest and heartsick, about life and friendship, loss and love. If that's not what rock and roll is about than I don't know what is.

9. "[Take That Look Off Your Face](#)" from *Tell Me on a Sunday*

The torch song. Perhaps the most perfect combination of the two forms. Peggy Lee, Frank Sinatra, Dolly Parton, Adele. And Marti Webb. What better use of the bombast, the melodrama of musicals than the torch song?

8. "[Ease on Down the Road](#)" – from *The Wiz*

This is an easy one. Stick pre-*Off the Wall* Michael Jackson in a scene with post-Supremes Diana Ross and you get one of the most enduring songs of the 70s.

Sure, it is a punchline to a lot of jokes by late night television hosts and sitcoms but it doesn't mean the song isn't great. As a matter of fact, I would argue that it's sort of what makes the song great (along with the chicken picked guitars, the bass line that dances like Mike Jackson's scarecrow, and some uptempo percussion that could make [Red Foxx](#) just straight up lose it).

7. "[Do-Doo](#)" from *Little Shop of Horrors*

The Doo Wop singers are clearly the best, most interesting part of this production. They aren't exactly characters, they exist only to fulfill the role a Greek chorus would, but in a story full of cowards, murderers, and liars, the blameless Doo Wop singers are perhaps the only people you can root for.

Sure they pop up during the iconic main theme, but this little number feels like it would fit in on an oldies station without even calling attention to the fact that its about a 15 foot tall man-eating plant.

6. "[Maybe](#)" from *Annie*

It's [no secret](#) that I find *Annie* to be one of the saddest, most beautiful, and compelling musicals there is. This one could be its saddest, it's most compelling, its most beautiful number. Maybe.

5. "[You're the One That I Want](#)" / "[We Go Together](#)" / "[Summer Nights](#)" / "[Greased Lightnin](#)" from *Grease*

How hard is it to pick a favorite song from *Grease*? Harder than it would be for Travolta to fit into those jeans ever again.

4. "[All That Jazz](#)" from *Chicago*

If you don't think Liza Minelli is rock and roll then you should see Scorsese's *New York, New York* and watch her go toe-to-toe with DeNiro (and this is 1977, pre-*Analyze This* DeNiro (and if you think a movie about Jazz can't be rock and roll than you've never seen *Straight No Chaser*)). DeNiro spends the entirety of *New York, New York* scowling and looking menacing and Liza just looks down her nose at him like he is asking her to do him a favor she doesn't plan to do. His mad sax player is a cross between Jake Lamatta and Travis Bickle, but more erratic. I know that no one has seen this movie, but if you think Daniel Day Lewis chews the scenery in *Gangs of New York*, you should see Liza Minelli tear the sets apart in this under-appreciated classic. Liza is tough and beautiful and refuses to let all the mean garbage that DeNiro is throwing at her stick.

Liza has a reputation for being one of the best ever and I am pretty sure that she is under-valued. She transforms

anything she touches and that includes, "All That Jazz" from the musical *Chicago*. Apparently Liza has never met a city that she couldn't level in under three minutes and four seconds.

Sure others have sung the song and done it justice, Bebe Neuwirth and Catherine Zeta-Jones, but no one has sung it like Liza. Any rock and roll diva could learn a lot from [Lucile two](#).

3. "[Wig in a Box](#)" from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

Hedwig is a celebrated success for many reasons. It offers bleak comedy as a backdrop for the often heartwrenching vulnerability of its main character; it is self-aware but shows no restraint; the show can also be self-deprecating as often as it is self-aggrandizing. That is to say it is complex. It claims to be punk rock, and though it doesn't quite get that right, it still manages to come across as fresh, modern and subversive. Its music is closer, in tone and style, to approximating the art-damaged New Wave and Post New-Wave artists that the 80s produced. Duran Duran, The Smiths, Echo and The Bunnymen, T-Rex, Depeche Mode, The New York Dolls, Boy George... Pretty much anyone with great hair and a high pitched voice. There are also, to the song's credit, ooh ooh oohs that sound like they come somewhere from somewhere between The Dandy Warhols and Oasis.

Despite / Because of its references to gender fluidity, the Berlin Wall, trailer parks, and pretending to be Miss Farah Fawcett from TV, the musical has made the transition from trying to copy glam rockers to influencing rock acts that came after it for a generation. The Scissor Sisters, Youngest Son, Antony and the Johnsons, and Perfume Genius all owe a debt to this wild musical.

Both Neil Patrick Harris' and John Cameron Mitchell's versions of the epic "Wig in a Box" are moving and rousing and I have linked them below. I am excited to hear what Taye Leo Diggs (as I assume he will now be known) will do with this, the most rock and roll song in a musical full of rock and roll songs, when

he takes the stage as Hedwig this summer at the [Belasco Theater](#).

2. [“Heaven on Their Minds”](#) from *Jesus Christ Superstar*

However great all these other musicals are, there is one that separates itself. If you doubt that this is the most rock and roll of all rock operas (including and especially the derivative *Tommy*) consider the fact that the musical features more flagellation than a G.G. Allen show, more revealing outfits than a [Power Girl](#) comic, and stranger sexuality than that episode of *My Strange Addiction* where that lady [eats dryer sheets](#). That's real rock and roll you fucking cowards.

The music from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, when first released, may have sounded thin compared to the bloodthirsty funk of Parliament and James Brown, but its authentic pentatonic grooves and pointed octave bass lines have sustained it over the years. The rhythm section is doing a pretty great Booker T and the MGs impression and it turns out Andrew Webber is familiar enough with the work of the The Funk Brothers to write songs that exist somewhere between Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem and the early work of Sly and the Family Stone.

The musical numbers from the film version are delicious enough that even the Vatican gave this obvious sacrilege of a film a pass and it eventually lead to Ted Neely making a career out of playing the son of God. The guy who steals the show, however, is Carl Anderson who plays Judas, the first guy ever to struggle with his Christian faith. Judas is the coolest of all anti-heroes and he gets the last word in this great musical about betrayal, capital punishment, antisemitism, and whores. Classics tunes include the triumphant finale “Superstar,” and the beautiful love song “I Don’t Know How to Love Him,” but “Heaven on Their Minds” is the most rock and roll of this rock and roll musical. Anyone who can’t imagine Anderson wrapping a scarf around a microphone stand while fronting a shaggy, coked out R&B band funk up the Isle of White, doesn’t love rock and roll.

1. "[Sweet Transvestite](#)" **from** Rocky Horror Picture Show

If ever there was a platonic ideal for a frontman of a rock and roll band Tim Curry in this scene from the film *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (which is, of course, not to be confused with the original stage production which is entitled [The Rocky Horror Show](#)) would be it. Where most musicals try to be edgy, confrontational, or upending, this one actually manages to do it. It is sexy and strange, vulgar and unapologetic; the entire musical is about people trying to lick each other, eat each other, or shoot each other with lasers. Also, Meat Loaf has something to do with it. While *Jesus Christ Superstar* may have the best music, *Hedwig* may have the most to say, and *Lion King* might be the biggest money maker, this song, with its epic reveal and Curry's complete control of the stage and music and audience, is hands down the most rock and roll a show tune can get.

Stuck in My Head #16: The Seeds—"I Can't Seem to Make You Mine"

Everybody wants things. You for example. You want something. You are chasing something elusive; a dream, a person, a goal, a state of mind. You struggle to achieve your goal and when it evades you, you look for solace. You are just like the rest of us when it comes to this because you try to find that solace, however temporary, in wine, in sex, in food, and in art. Sex, food, and substances work well enough, of course, but if you really want to wallow in your misery, you'll choose art. One of art's *raison d'etres*, after all, is to be some kind of tool for sharing this longing, for finding others who also long for things, and for identifying our struggle in them.

There is something fascinating that happens when you are reading a book, or watching a film and you identify with the protagonist. You gasp as she is confronted with new challenges, you long for him to achieve his goal. You are Hermione Granger. You are Rocky Balboa. You are [Jupiter Jones](#).

But music works differently. You don't leap into their bodies. You don't chart their growth and their hero's journey. Something else happens when you listen to music. You still identify with the loneliness, the longing of the singer, but you are not the one leaping into their body. It's like they are leaping into yours.

When The Seeds thump out their song of longing and loss, they are doing it from inside your chest, banging out the beats of your broken, lopsided heart. It starts with a neat little question mark of a hook and devolves into a sulking, slinking plea that becomes more ragged with each passing bar. The guitar strum chugs along, the sonic representation of what it's like to frown and when lead singer Sky Saxon, an Eric Burden influenced, proto-Iggy Pop says:

Come back baby, 'cause I'm all alone
Come back darlin', 'cause I need your love
Come back, 'cause I wanna love ya
Girl, I wanna love ya tonight

we know he will never get what he wants. And that is why we love him. That is why we long to be like him. [Just look at this sad son of a bitch.](#)

There is very little self-awareness here. The Seeds just set their mind to the task of wringing every ounce of pathetic gloom from their performance. The song is about frustration, after all. It's about deprivation. Even the bridge is a pretty little musical phrase interrupted by vulgar guitar stabs. It's the decimated lover, the deferred dreamer trying to put on a brave face only to realize that when confronted by the world at large, she doesn't have the strength. Saxon is howling by the end, skewered by his desires.

It's a tragic song that embodies failure and frustration. The song is the first song the band ever recorded and their first hit. I'm sure they thought it was only the beginning of a long Stones'-esque career, but it was not to be. The Seeds are relegated to Rock and Roll also-rans. Little did they know that the very dreams they harbored while they played this song in an LA studio would be the very thing they would be unable to make their own.

So just remember, when this song gets stuck in your head that The Seeds were never able to get what they wanted. What makes you think you will?

The Middle Age of the Wolf (Record Review)

[Apologies to the Queen Mary](#)

Wolf Parade

Sub Pop, 2005

The tragedy of young adulthood isn't that young people don't know their adolescence is precious and fleeting. Old people are known for blaming the young for wasting their youths on things like smoking too much weed, spending more money on shoes than they do on food, and watching every single John Waters movie (even [the one with Stephen Dorff in it](#)). The tragedy is that young people are all too aware of the importance of their evanescent youth and they are terrified of squandering it. This fear of losing the most precious thing anyone is ever given is why every young adult is so burdened by bad relationships, drug problems, and wasted opportunities. Young adulthood is the effort of a [half-formed human](#) to make the most out of something that will never happen again.

I bring all of this up because I recently came to the realization that one of my favorite records, by one of my favorite young and hip bands is about to be ten years old. You see, though I am well past adolescence, I didn't used to be ([that's how it works, I've been assured](#)) and ten years ago when I was all skinny and cool, cooking up some kind of impossible future, and making every possible mistake at least twice, Wolf Parade was what I listened to. I listened to them because that is what you listen you when you are skinny, cool, and young; when you are confused, good looking, and desperate.

Wolf Parade knew what youth was about better than anyone, which is why they made the kind of music they did. Music about doing the best you can with what you've got. Music about learning how to love things despite being ashamed of who you are, what you love, and where you come from. Music about the special kind of angst you feel

living in an era where you have no idea how, when, or why you become a grownup.

And just like any kid trying to distance himself from his family so he can do for himself in the world, they even named the record *Apologies to the Queen Mary* like they were trying to make up for their embarrassing [forefathers](#) who they loved more than air but whose antics were hurtful and confusing as much as they were inspiring and formative.

These guys were so heartsick and lacking of male authority figures that they couldn't even figure out who was supposed to be the lead singer. Dan Boeckner sometimes handled frontman duties, but Spenser Krug would jump on the mic whenever he has some feels to feel. Even the bass player snuck onto the mic every once in a while when no one was looking.

The band seemed restless, like they all wished they were in different bands (which they all would be, shortly. These young [canids](#) would each eventually form or join various outfits, all of them very good, including Sunset Rubdown, Handsome Furs, Operators, Divine Fits, and even the least well-adjusted band in Canada, The Arcade Fire). They should not have been restless. They should have felt grateful that they managed to form such a dope band. After all, theoretically Wolf Parade should have been something of a supergroup,

All the members arrived from varied, yet auspicious pedigrees. Dan Boeckner, the sinewy and mad-looking guitar player, was a former bandmate of a pre-Modest Mouse Isaac Brock, both of them having done time in Atlas Strategic; Dante DeCaro was plucked from The Hot Hot Heat to join the Parade, before the triple H was rediscovered as the hip, and criminally overlooked "The" band that we all should have been listening instead of The Vines; and Spencer Krug showed up from Mars, I think. But just like any relationship you have in your 20s none of us listening and none of the dudes in the band knew how good we had it.

For some youth-related reason Wolf Parade became a temporary thing, a friends-with-benefits type situation, an on-again-off-again brand of relationship instead of the marriage it should have been. Wolf Parade, for these kids, was merely that intense relationship you have in your early 20s, following the almost as intense one you had in your earlier twenties, before you move on to be a successful and functioning member of another healthier band that you will eventually cheat on and divorce.

But it's not like they weren't trying to make it work. They were young enough and dumb enough to really make a go at it. They were all showing up on time even though they were always hung over, they were pretty much dressing themselves like they were grown ass adults, they were getting the electric bill paid, and they were playing the fuck out of the mostly finished songs (some of which could have used an extra couple takes in the studio, to be honest, but there was no time for that so fuck it).

The way they presented things, it all almost seemed like a choice. It almost seemed like they wanted to eschew the polish and the craft of contemporaries like Spoon and TV on the Radio in favor of something more fevered and honest. And it's that kind of learn-as-you-go aesthetic that defines this record. Just listen to the words shouted out by Spencer Krug. It's like listening to some kind of improv game where the lead singer is hearing the song for the first time along with the listener and he is shouting impromptu lyrics back at the music (this is probably not how these songs were written, but it would explain why the phrases are so absurd and why they don't even rhyme sometimes). Simple lyrics such as, "bad things happen in the night," from "We Built Another World" and "I said nobody knows you / And nobody gives a damn" from "I'll Believe Anything" present themselves as the kind of profound little nuggets of wisdom you pick up from bearded gas station attendants, toothless truck drivers, and squinting landlords who allow a little bit of wiggle room on when the

rent is due. But somehow it works. After all, who wants Wayne Brady-slick when you can have Wesley Willis-style mania?

The record isn't all successes, of course. What else is young adulthood about if not a misfire or two?

"Shine a Light," borrows its title from The Stones and its melody from "Spirit in the Sky," but mostly it is just trying to rip off early Springsteen, going so far as to include the street hustle-rific line of poetry, "You know our hearts beat time / They're waiting for something that'll never arrive." It fails miserably, sounding instead like someone who doesn't speak English trying to capture the Boss' strange mix of machismo and fragility.

A song like "It's a Curse," feels misguided, like it's an attempt at a late '90s radio tune. It even goes so far as to include the random sound effects used by early morning DJs. With its opening chords chiming out and its insistent offbeats, it ends up sounding like 311 if that band had integrity but were still terrible at making songs.

"Fancy Claps" is a bit of a slog. They sound like they know it too, playing it up tempo to get through it quickly so they can move on to more effective fare like the very powerful, "Same Ghost Every Night," which sounds like the kind of drunken sway a band would play late in the night, once it had proven itself to an audience and everyone was willing to let their guard down a little bit.

Juxtaposing songs that work despite themselves and songs that don't even though they should is kind of what this record is all about. The fact that it's a bit of a bloated mess of ideas, influences, and cooks in the kitchen is what makes the record so damn charming. Sometimes the drums sound like the [Fraggle Rock kit](#) I got for Christmas when I was seven and sometimes they sound as tight and punchy as Questlove's do on that one [John Legend record](#). Sometimes the songwriting is assured, sometimes calculating, and sometimes it is a total mess, but it is always something honest.

By the time we get to songs like "Dear Sons and Daughters of Hungry Ghosts," and "I'll Believe in Anything," it's like things have started syncing up, like that point at a party where everyone is the same amount of drunk and the things you are saying seem funny even to people who you've never met, your references are recognized, you appear sympathetic, and people are really getting where you are coming from.

The la la las are earnest and the lyrics are strange and candid. Like:

Now we say 'It's in god's hands' / But god doesn't always have the best god damn plans does he?

...Or...

Modern world I'm not pleased to meet you / You just bring me down

... and ...

I got water and I got holes

These lyrics come from somewhere deep and psychologically true and are deranged and beautiful.

Overall, the atmosphere created, with the good songs being just weird enough to get your attention and the failures proving themselves compelling, is that of a competent and interesting record. It would be one more [also-ran](#), one more [pretty cool record you totally forgot about](#); one more band that you spend a lot of time thinking is going to be important and indicative of the future but then all of a sudden you realize no one you know has talked about [them](#) for nine years, if not for one song.

"You Are a Runner, and I am My Father's Son," is like a single mutant gene in an otherwise well-constructed biopolymer strand. It elevates a very good record to classic status, much the way "Jane Says" recontextualizes everything else on *Nothing's Shocking*. "You are a Runner..." is the record's first song, in more ways than one. It is the first song you hear when a vinyl copy is played on a friend's turntable, the needle on the vinyl sounding foreign and familiar at the same time; it is the first song you put on a mix for a woman you never got the

nerve to ask out; the song that triumphs from the shitty speakers of your used Suburu when you find an old, unlabeled CD tucked between the seats. Always “You Are a Runner, and I am My Father’s Son,” is the leader, bravely marching the rest of the songs and anyone listening into the unknown. [The song is a beguiler](#). It’s a monument of references and ideas asking you, perpetually, “recognize any of this?” But it knows you do, because this tune knows you. It knows the fuck out of you.

It begins with a deliberate and almost willfully rudimentary drum beat and then mugs you with off-kilter keys and a vocal style that approximates what a vacuum cleaner would sound like if a vacuum cleaner could sing falsetto. The insanely specific lyrics about a marathon training schedule are actually about your own relationship with your dad. They are because you want them to be. Or, are they about your current poor relationship with your own child; maybe after all these years you’re just now finding out what it’s like to be hated like that. Or are the sometimes delicate, sometimes jarring lyrics about your own impending death?

Because that is the real trick. The song only starts to make sense when you realize that it is about what an opaque and impossible human being you are. How malformed, how incomplete, how you will always be the unfinished young adult, striving to be like and not be like your parents. That’s the cruel lesson embedded in this weird, aching indie rock masterpiece.

Conclusions

When September 27, 2015 rolls around and the 10th anniversary of one of the most influential indie records of the 21st century is met with nothing more than a shrug by even the [tastiest](#) of [tastemakers](#) and even the most derivative of Wolf Parade wannabes ([Abe Vigoda](#) / [Born Ruffians](#), I’m looking at you) the prophecy will be fulfilled, the circle will be unbroken, the one ring will rule them all. After all, what better metaphor for the transience of youth than for the once young

to be ignored now that they have aged out of the demographic?

As I mentioned above, the guys from this band all made another few above average but forgettable records and then moved onto other things. They refused to admit things were over. They got together every once in a while and nodded at one another during in studio jam sessions and they [talked about scheduling difficulties](#), but none of them could look each other in the eye. They were all like estranged siblings trying to be cordial at a funeral, so brimming with things to say that they say nothing at all.

But they don't have to say anything. Not to each other, nor to us. They made one great rock record that summed up the experiences of a bunch of entitled young people who had it way better than they deserved and had no idea how to appreciate it and none of us will ever know how to thank them for it.

Stuck in My Head #19: Allison Moorer "Down to Believing"

You might not know who Allison Moorer is, but you probably know her ex-husband.

Last year she got a divorce from the guy she'd been married to for ten years and when I found out, all I cared about was him.

You see, her ex-husband is Steve Earle and I feel like I know Steve Earle. I know I don't, but I feel like I do. So, when the marriage broke up, he was the one I felt bad for. I also felt dumb for thinking this one would stick. That he would grow older and die at the age of 85 with Allison Moorer, only 17 years his junior, crying by his gravesite.

They were in it for the long haul, I could tell.

Sure, by the time I first heard Steve Earle's music in 1988, he had already been married five times, twice to the same woman, but that was back when he was using. That was back when he was fucked up and self-destructive, five o'clock shadowed and burly. That was back when he [looked](#) like a long shoreman back from a bender. That was then.

In 2005 the 33-year-old Allison Moorer married a different guy. She married the 50-year-old bearded poet who had relocated to Greenwich village. The reformed womanizer. The elder statesman of country/rock/folk. That guy was too busy [speaking truth to power](#) on his protest records, showing up in [David Simon shows](#), and stopping by [Democracy Now! to kvetch about oligarchs with Amy Goodman](#) than to wreck a marriage. Wasn't he?

When I found out they were divorcing, I only felt bad for him. I didn't know anything about her, and I didn't care. I felt this way because I am a bit of a misogynist, I guess.

And then I heard "[Down to Believing](#)."

It's hard on me because listening to this song lets me know a little bit about her too.

It's like staying up all night drinking with a buddy, listening to him complain about his ex only to run into her in the juice aisle

of the local grocery store and speak with her long enough to realize that the whole thing was his fault. Or at least more his fault than you had previously given him credit for.

And it's shitty that this whole article is about him because the song is great and Moorer is great. It's hard for me to separate the song though, from the knowledge that it's about Steve Earle. It's hard not to see his craggy, busted face when she says "Now you look so surprised cause there ain't none left / And you're just empty-hearted and sad." It isn't even the best song on the record. It doesn't have the doomy rumble of "Thunderstorm Hurricane" or the serrated swamp of "Mama Let the Wolf In." It's not the best song, it's just the one stuck in my head.

Why is it stuck in my head? It probably has something to do with the fact that it's a sad and bitter waltz. Or maybe it has something to do with how the guitar part blooms wildly and unexpectedly the way black ink does when it hits water. Or it could be the lyrics.

We found it hanging from a cloud that time we went up there

It looked like diamonds and pearls

It was so much of it I wore a little in my hair

Everyone said silly girl

I get where she is coming from. We are all coming from that same place. We all thought that what we found was made up of diamonds and pearls. We all wore it in our hair. We all thought things were going to work out. What else would we be doing here if we didn't think what we had was special. We are all silly little girls.

But she'll be alright. After all she's the one who says "life's too long to wake up everyday without someone /Who likes all your scratches and scars." Anyone who says stuff like that is going to be just fine. Then again, what do I know? I thought those two kids were gonna stick together till the end. Just take what you can from her doleful music and be happy that they

made a kid who is, by all accounts, pretty dope, plus we got a couple good records out of the deal.

But whatever you do, stop calling her Steve Earle's ex, god damn it. Don't be such a misogynist.

Never Heard of 'Em? #20: Bleeklino

What am I supposed to do? I am attracted to guys who are built like chicks, and I am into bands who sound like Animal Collective; so obviously I am into Nico Haag who is guilty on both counts.

And just because he has a slender frame, it doesn't mean he isn't manly. He is. [He very much is.](#)

And just because the music of his project bleeklino sounds a little like Animal Collective, it doesn't mean it is derivative. It's not. It's strange and unique and beautiful. It doesn't attempt to bury itself in feedback squeals and unlistenable off-beat drums and off kilter rhymes. This [music](#) comes from that tradition, but longs to be beautiful. It is meditative, trippy, and echoey and feels like it belongs in a cut scene from some sweeping and beautiful video game that makes itself more real than anything in your measly little life.

I think the coolest thing about Haag's songwriting and lyric writing is the commitment. Haag sings earnestly about philosophical concepts, conversations he's had, and slightly atypical sex acts and he does so in non-euphemistic terms that are not typically employed when discussing these topics in song (or anywhere else for that matter).

Take "[Feeling Missed](#)" for example.

It starts with some pretty typical lover talk: "I wanna touch your face / I wanna feel your skin..." then ramps up a bit with a, "Can we get naked all the time," and finally just goes for it when Haag announces, "I wanna fuck you from behind / I want you to touch my dick / I want you to suck my dick..."

From there it gets really crazy. But it all comes across as quite sweet and tender, believe it or not.

"[It's Christmas Time](#)" is another example.

It starts with a couplet akin to a joke:

"It's Christmas time and I'm really horny / All the time, but tonight more so than normally."

Later he says:

There is nothing we would be scared to say or do
We could get naked and touch each other where we
take a poo

I mean it's not even what I'm into

But I'd do it with you if you wanted me to...

It's the kind of next-level fantasy you have where you imagine yourself with someone who won't judge you for all your weird twistedness, and not only are they cool with yours, but they are also willing to reveal their own weird fetishes and proclivities to you, which are even stranger than your own fantasies, so you get to be cool with their weird fantasy. Which is hot.

There is a lack of shame here that only someone who is young and beautiful is allowed to have, but by describing it all so eloquently he lets us old, ugly, troll people in on it too. He describes these sex acts as if he were describing something as innocent and beautiful as folding someone an origami rose. And then somehow it becomes that innocent. Two people alone on Christmas, chasing each other around a studio apartment, half undressed, washing each others' hair, painting each others' nails, and licking each others' genitals... When he describes it, it makes you wonder why we don't describe sex that way in our every day lives.

It would be like this:

Dude you work with, (whose name is, like, Hank or Stan or something): What did you do this weekend?

You: I saw Fantastic Four. You?

Dude you work with: Oh, not much. my wife and I were actually about to go see that, but we got into a little bit of analingus and some role play instead.

You: Cool. Did you ever get to the movies?

Dude you work with: No. Maybe we'll see it next week?

You: Don't bother. Stick with the rimjob.

I don't know much about this cat. Haag's pictures sometimes make him look like [James Franco when he is trying](#)

[to look unattractive](#), (you know, *movie unattractive*. Bad sweater, facial hair, no 5 o'clock shadow, acting like he gives a fuck, like at all...) and other times make him look like [James Dean, except skinny](#).

He has a penchant for audio acuity with his many collaborations with DJs and sound engineers who put his sound underwater, in echo chambers and under layers and layers of masks and gates that still can't keep his spare and bold guitar strokes from muscling their way through.

Sometimes it all gets a little too far out there and a little pseudo-intellectual, like on "Closed eyes," but it's all tongue-in-cheek enough to get a pass until the next strange, beautiful tune comes floating by. And that is how I like to listen to this music. Without paying attention to where the records are supposed to begin or end, to what the song titles are. It's nice to be surprised by a nice harmony here, a cool digital effect [there](#).

As trippy and drugged out as it all is, tunes like "scuba diving in your living room" can't help but make you think about spring, blossoms fighting their way to the light, rain coating everything, libidos unleashed upon the world. And that's a good thing. The world can't keep going if it doesn't have those things and music can't going unless it has people like Nico Haag making sexy little nursery rhymes with a glitchy drum sample, a worn-out acoustic guitar, and a cut off t-shirt.

I guess he is working on a record right now, but the good news is his songs work even if they have a bit of polish.

Just About to Climax (Record Review)

[River Bones EP](#)

bleeklino

Self-Released, 2016

Judging by his [Instagram account](#), Nico Haag is doing something with his 20s. He is going to interesting places, taking pictures of random things, spending time with beautiful people, and growing ironic mustaches. He is also working on the first full-length from his bleeklino project, which will be entitled *Sleep Castle*. Having a sweet Instagram, stuff to do, and working on an LP would be enough for most people, but not Haag. He has just dropped an EP replete with all the stuff that doesn't quite fit on the forthcoming full-length.

On top of everything else, and in case you were wondering, the EP is a particularly stellar effort, especially for someone who seems like a side character's new boyfriend in a Brett Ellis novel.

[Since we last checked in on Mr. Haag](#) he's apparently been listening to a lot of Atlas Sound, a little bit of The Unicorns, and read the entirety of Henry Miller's work. The songs are insistent, sometimes coy, and always just aloof enough. At one point he threatens,

When I'm feeling low I get a tattoo
Or grow a mustache
It's nice I think, Sometimes when things can change to my own design
It makes me laugh

There is a lot going on in the roughly 15:00 minutes that make up *River Bones*, so much so that it doesn't seem like a bi-product of a larger process, but rather its own thing. The songs plod along like they have someplace to go, but are in no hurry to get there. Haag strums and huffs. The doleful reverb and click-bap drum beat makes for a sludgy, murky time. The guitar moans like a slinky, noir skin-flick. Something sloshes inside the song like Jello shots in a tub. When Haag harmonizes with himself over a self-produced track it's like

watching some sonic form of masturbation. And that's not a bad thing. What better metaphor for someone locked in their bedroom, seeking pleasure with their eyes closed than self love? In that respect the record is one big, writhing, one-man orgy. A neo-new wave onanism wiggle. A soundtrack for a circle-jerk fantasy where the same lithe male body is cloned and set to work on itself.

Also, there are songs. Sort of.

The songs aren't so much songs, but moods. "I'm On My Way" is a sometimes regal, sometimes ragged, barely-tuned Saturday afternoon waltz, designed for sharing cigarettes over. It is purposed for soundtracking your Spring day full of lazing around in your underwear. (Turns out April is the perfect month for this lush, plump EP about being horny and doing something about it).

"Evil Lies" borrows the tune from Will Smith's ode to his kid "Just the Two of Us" and places it underwater. Haag's song is melodically similar, but thematically the only thing it has to do with having children is that it discourages you from pulling out. It's a trippy, open-relationship of an exercise that can be fun, and even transcendent at times, but is also pretty confusing. Subjects are switched for objects for poetic effect, like when Haag says "I don't play my guitar/ My guitar plays me," and I am still not sure if the word "puddles" from the song "People Puddle" is being used as a noun or a verb. It's all an interesting experiment, though. It's essentially a guy playing with ideas and using his guitar as a chop saw for his heart.

Yet, there is something epic about it. Not epic like a story about a snake who undermines gods' relationship with man. Not epic like Asgardians fighting the entire pantheon of WWE Superstars with the survivors of the conflict punching holes in the firmament. I am talking small-scope epic. Epic like when you drive from New York to Chicago over the course of one harried evening, without stopping to pee. Epic like when you manage to eat 27 habanero peppers in a sitting. Epic like when you drunkenly decide to go to the circus and end up

challenging the strongman to an arm-wrestling contest. Just epic enough so that you remember it fondly, but not epic enough to change anyone's life.

The record soars, but not over a city scape, or the ocean, just from the dresser to the bed. The record surprises, but only in the way you are surprised when they play a rerun of *Law and Order* from the Chris Noth Era. The record is ambitious, but only ambitious in the way that it's ambitious to make "not hitting the snooze button so much" your New Year's resolution.

That is to say the record fits in your pocket, gets you from the subway to your apartment, gets you from last week's one-night-stand to next week's, gets you from Haag's disorganized smattering of songs on his soundcloud page to his full-length. But sometimes that's all you need.

Miley's Pet Cemetery (Record Review)

Miley Cyrus

Miley Cyrus & Her Dead Petz

Smiley Miley, 2015

When I first saw the [pictures](#) of Miley Cyrus with Wayne Coyne on Instagram, (because yes I am a man in his 30s with a family who follows Miley Cyrus on Instagram), I wondered if she was taking for granted her access to The Flaming Lips. I knew that they were her sometimes accompaniment on her Bangerz tour, but here she was paling around with the frontman, who has the coveted and difficult to attain position of rock and roll's weird uncle. What did all this mean? Was she just tossing her celebrity around to make manifest the musicians who she is most interested in listening to at the moment, or did she really need him to make her next project? Was she studying at his feet, or using him to accessorize?

Though *Miley Cyrus & Her Dead Petz* is not as good as most of the work of Coyne and Co., it is certainly of a piece with their work. The record shares a sonic palette with the Lips' brilliant '90s masterpieces *The Soft Machine* and *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*, but thematically Cyrus has cast herself as her own wild, beautiful, and long-awaited Superman, as her own scratchy-voiced and synthetically-created Yoshimi. Despite its similar soundscape to those '90s records, [Dead Petz](#) is a spiritual cousin with the Lips' laterday foray into the sloppily experimental. Cyrus' record cannot boast [Embryonic](#)'s muscular, Can-inspired workouts, but it does share the record's bizarre '70s drug-haze album art, and surprise release schedule, the record only having been hinted at by Cyrus and the likes of people as random as Kathleen Hanna and Mike Will Made It.

Despite its surprise release, the record is astonishingly well-ordered and intentional. It is filled with experiments like the way the drum breaks are cleanly and neatly attached to "The Floyd Song" like some kind of perfect parasite clamped

onto the exterior of the warm body that is the song, and the ear popping left to right panning of "Dooo It!" In addition to these and other attempts at the surreal, the record offers a few beautiful melodies like the "Mind Games" influenced "Karen Don't Be Sad" and the trippy echoes of "Tiger Dreams."

The songs are not fussy, but they are sturdily constructed by craftsmen. They are just tossed off enough to sound lively. The late '70s disco bass of "Bang Me Box" is delightfully gnarly, though also adorable at the same time. "Cyrus Skies" sounds like a deep album cut from a Pink Floyd record that is designed to be a valley, meant only to transition from one peak to another, sort of like "On the Run" from *Dark Side* or anything from *Meddle*. The synth on "Slab of Butter" is placid, almost pastoral and features funky break beats and leads over it, along with a hooky "I'm gonna get fucked up," cadence from Cyrus. "Fweaky" knows what it is and manages to achieve its modest goals, namely to be a sweet and honest love song with a muscular and simple piano part; "na na nas" in the chorus; a super slow boom-clap backbeat; and shocking, R. Kelly-esque '90s R&B confessions. It's pretty much fine. They are all pretty much fine.

Too much of an effort is given to showing the seams of this record (Cyrus babbles "keep that last one" to an engineer, or whoever she is currently dating ([I like to think it's Demi Lovato](#)), and keeps all of her rambling intros and swear word outros) but it adds a charm to this post-teen princess playing like she is a kid in her room, messing around with her toys.

Her lyrics on songs like "Milky Milky Milky," and "Slab of Butter" are strange and silly, but she takes them as seriously as the songs the Dead Milkmen, Ween, or They Might Be Giants used to treat songs about palindromes and space aliens. She keeps the gag up on "Pablou the Blowfish" until the very end. Even when she starts to fake cry though, you still wonder if this is a person trying to be silly, or if it is a crazy person pretending to be a sane person pretending to be crazy. So thoroughly

does she commit that I almost have to wonder if Pablow is a stand-in for her father or a lost love. Almost.

The final song "Twinkle Song" is sweet and maybe the most enduring because of its earnestness, simplicity, its images of a record store with yellow doors, and of David Bowie looking like Gumby (which is surprisingly easy to conjure). She even goes so far as to stretch out her vocals and they sound halfway decent. It is one of the few places on the record where she can be caught actually singing. If it didn't sound so much like "[I Started a Joke](#)," I might even like it.

However, the best thing on the record is "BB Talk." It is the brave honesty of a person who is admittedly rich and famous, but is also just a young woman struggling with her emotions. Cyrus realizes that, not unlike Eminem, Kanye West, and anyone running for office, that she is the product. She reveals her interactions and emotions because she realizes that that is what people are interested in. This is some kind of documentary, a strange vignette in the life of Billy Ray Cyrus' kid. Perhaps the most revealing moment on this most revealing song is during the cringingly honest opening rap where she talks about her "energy" and says "they say you gotta think what you want into existence" making the assumption that everyone just reads and internalizes *The Secret*.

The record as a whole has a good sound, but I have to wonder if The Flaming Lips are wasted on someone who is stunned by their ability to play their instruments. "But they're real musicians," she breathlessly told [Rolling Stone](#) in 2014 when she first started working with the '90s space-rock heroes. "They can change keys on a whim. I've never seen anything like it."

It's almost like Dr. Luke tried to convince her that all of the sounds on her favorite Rihanna and [Bob Iyer](#) records were pieced together with loops, samples, and auto-tune. Most of what is here is disposable, though and some of it is downright bad. "Lighter" is trafficking in the nostalgia for bad '80s synth

and drum music the likes of which Destroyer inexplicably are trying to keep alive and "1 Sun" is quaint and misguided attempt at a song with "meaning."

And she is still an entitled and spoiled little brat with a shockingly limited perception of the world and music, as evidenced by naming a song "Tangerine" and not even making a Zeppelin reference in it even though she first partnered with Soundcloud last year with an unfathomably bad cover of "[Babe, I'm Gonna Leave You.](#)"

Maybe it's for the best she stay away from Zeppelin altogether.

Artistically, she is far from precocious. She has had all the best teachers and lessons money can buy. All the practice she could want. She has dressed up like a cowboy and sold cheap guitars with her face on it, [hung out with Dolly Parton](#), and played sold out concerts before she knew that wasn't normal, but she is still growing. She is just learning to escape that programming. It's like she has been told how to form chords, read charts, and sing on key her whole life and now she finally gets to do it and she is lost. Just like any of us would be. She is fumbling around, trying to please, and realizing what she wants to do with her life.

But whether or not the songs are good is not the point. It is strangely immaterial, and I almost never say that. As a matter of fact, this might be the first time I have ever said that.

What is more important here is Cyrus' further attempt to define herself. She is still trying to trade on her barely clothed body which usually has about the same amount of sex appeal as a used rubber glove. She is no Katy Perry who presents herself as a sensual robot who is ready for coitus right out of the box, and she is no Beyoncé Knowles type sex goddess. Cyrus, who is of course a beautiful young woman, doesn't have the gravitas or the weight (literally or figuratively) to really command a covetous gaze the way those other performers do. For example, I guess she was trying to be [sexy on Kimmel](#), bless her heart, but I have to wonder if

she borrowed those pasties from Jessica Simpson. Her heart was in the right place, pointing out the hypocrisy of female nip aversion, but it was hard to take her seriously with those pasties covering up more of her torso than a tuxedo vest would.

It was far from the kind of thing that would give a dad a heart attack and closer to the kind of thing that would make him embarrassed for his adolescent daughter who was trying to be a little too adult. But seeing her try to be sexy is maybe part of her appeal. Seeing her wear mummy's heels and smear her makeup on is part of what endears her to an audience, male, female, trans, gay, straight, or [pansexual](#). It is that kind of awkward stumbling that makes her such a curiosity. The effort, the struggle to be sexy is not evident in the music of Shakira. That struggle is part of what makes Cyrus so human and, as she admits on this very record, awkward.

Some people criticize her for being the child of a country music star, a spoiled rich kid. They say that she somehow did not earn her fame but instead inherited it. I ask you: Since when is being the child of the guy who sang "Achy Breaky Heart" an advantage? I would argue she had more to overcome than anyone.

As far as being rich, all great artists have had their patrons and Cyrus, having been born with hers, has decided not to squander that. Like it or not *Her Dead Petz* is a sneakily important statement from maybe the most relevant artist making music today.

Cyrus offers this record not long after Neil Young, predictably and grumpily, [pulled all his songs from the streaming world](#), joining other curmudgeons like Van Morrison and Prince in harrumphing modern channels for exchanging music. I like to imagine over the hill rock stars talking to each other about the music industry, sounding like people in a nursing home trying to decipher what "ratchet," "on fleek," and "Kbps" mean. They are obviously wrong, but I like that they are so insistent that the business model established in the

late 50s remains intact. Meanwhile, people like Miley Cyrus are trying to figure out how we are going to share music now.

This is not as groundbreaking a release as Radiohead's pay-what-you-want format introduced with the release of *In Rainbows*, but it may be as profound a statement as Radiohead's follow up to that album *The King of Limbs* which, after IR had devalued music, began the process of revaluing it again by setting the price of songs at just north of a buck a song, pricing it at \$9.00 for the 8 song record.

Her Dead Petz is another take on the next President of the United States Kanye West's Good Friday Project where he, at the height of his powers and as he prepared to traditionally release his masterpiece, gave away one song a week to fans. While *Her Dead Petz* is not exactly a mix tape (though Big Sean is on it), it is an artist finding a way to explore the areas she wants to without wasting her fans' time or money ([though not all her fans feel that way.](#))

So, even though there is a Neil Young shaped hole on Spotify and YouTube, Cyrus has filled part of the void with the biggest streaming event of the year and in doing so has bravely paved the way for artists of every stripe to make big, bloated, experimental documents without being exploitative or manipulative.

Ryan Adams Gives Taylor Swift's 1989 a Coat of Staind (Record Review)

1989

Ryan Adams

PAX AM, 2015

On September 21, 2015, Ryan Adams released a track-by-track cover of Taylor Swift's 2014 release *1989*. After much pre-release [hype](#) it turns out that, more than anything else, it reveals something about who Ryan Adams really is.

Sure, he has a bit of swagger and he knows how to write a song that can get under your skin but it turns out that Adams is for the alt-country /Americana movement what Lenny Kravitz was for the neo-psychedelic / hard rock radio format in the 1990s. That is to say they are talented musicians playing dress up with the ideas and tropes of their respective genre clouds successfully enough to get people to pay attention. If you squint while you listen to Adams' music it's hard to tell him from Rhet Miller or The Kings of Leon. If you hear his music coming from the adjacent apartment you might guess that your neighbors are listening to anyone from Norah Jones to James Taylor. I have been worried that I would one day come to this realization for the entirety of Adams' career.

After the excitement over the lauded but, let's face it, overrated *Heartbreaker* died down, 2001's *Gold* sated us all. Though the smooth and radio-ready *Gold* (or as I like to call it: *The John Mayer Record*) suffered from some obvious failings, like being bloated and uneven, hinting at certain predilections that would grow to become career long habits, we were all just ecstatic that it was listenable and that it wasn't an example of the sophomore slump. I never liked "New York, New York" because I could never see past the nation collectively misinterpreting the song as being about post 9/11 healing, which is bad for a number of reasons I don't want to get into right now, and I also could not stand "La Cienega Just Smiled" because of that did-he-really-just-play-that

“reference” to Oasis in the pre-chorus, but “The Rescue Blues,” is a real sturdy tune and there is a damn song about Sylvia Plath on it. Overall, I thought it was a good-enough record. I especially liked that he was holding a gun in the liner notes. That always seemed like kind of a ballsy, rock and roll move. It turns out, however, that might have been the best thing about the record.

Rock N Roll was a pretty big turning point for Adams’ career with pretty much everyone agreeing he wasn’t delivering on his earlier promise. I thought it was pretty decent, contrary to [popular opinion](#), and made a habit of defending it even though it was uneven and included the song “This is It.” The song “Rock N Roll” was a real killer, after all, but I was worried things were falling apart. I was beginning to be able to predict what his records would sound like. He was becoming comfortable and that, as we all know, is the opposite of Rock N Roll.

Over the next decade we were distracted by Adams’ every-once-in-while ability to craft a great song like “Blue Sky Blues,” or to come up with a decent conceit like the one that framed the record 29. We liked the fact that he married Ashley Simpson or [whomever](#), and the fact that he did things like call up [Jim DeRogatis](#) and say all the things to that blowhard critic that we have always wanted to say.

In short, he acted like a fucking rock star (not a musician, mind you. A rock star). He showed up, did his job and we paid him what we pay guys like that (which means giving of our attention, maybe seeing a show, and perhaps even buying whatever stupid fucking Motorola product he was selling since people don’t pay for music anymore).

After his first few records we thought we might have had another Waylon Jennings, or maybe even another Bruce Springsteen on our hands. Over the ensuing decade though, we began to suspect that we were dealing with just another Gordon Lightfoot.

We collectively bristled as the quality tailed off, but anyone who can write a classic throwback to the cowboy songs of yore like “Bartering Lines,” or a song as ragged and bloody as “Note to Self: Don’t Die” deserves a little latitude in his mid-career efforts. As his catalog expanded, we politely called him “prolific.” What we meant was “he releases a lot of garbage.” But he seemed to be doing whatever he wanted, and we turned a blind eye for a while.

But last year we got his self-titled record. It told us a lot. It told us that he wasn’t just pandering, he wasn’t just having fun. It told us that he really meant what he was peddling. That after decades of playing music, he thought that he had finally got it right and that he was ready to put his name right on it. It was maybe when we were all finally able to collectively admit to ourselves that maybe he wasn’t that good to begin with. That maybe he wasn’t even that handsome.

Listening to the Tom Petty rip off “Gimme Something Good,” and the silly “Am I Safe,” it became apparent that his lyrics were often perfunctory, typically entreating someone to “stay with him,” or complaining that someone “broke my soul.” There is a lot of rain and a lot of broken windows in his songs. The way he says it is a part of the problem too, of course. His voice is fine but is almost completely lacking in character. Worst of all *Ryan Adams* the record sees Ryan Adams the artist committing the [cardinal sin](#) of pop music. He isn’t doing anything new.

Sure, he’s got great taste in music. You could put together a pretty sweet playlist of all his overt references, but even that can’t save a record with song titles like, “Shadows” and “Feels Like Fire.” The record finally began to reveal him for the Garth Brooks by way of Billy Joe Armstrong poseur that he has been the whole time.

Which brings me to Adams’ 2015 re-interpretation of Taylor Swift’s 2014 smash success *1989*. The project begs a series of non-rhetorical questions:

"What is this strange need to re-purpose this pop superstar's songs?" "Is he trying to one up her?" "Does he want to show us what a serious artist he is compared to her?" "Did Adams just happen to notice that both he and Swift like putting numbers in the title of their songs and records?"

And if you have not heard these songs, which I am assuming you have, but if you haven't, they sound exactly like you think they do. Exactly.

He says they are supposed to sound like [The Smiths](#), but they don't. He's just giving these songs a coat of the [Staind](#) treatment. That's where an artist with an (allegedly) hardscrabble exterior plays a [pop hit](#) with a tender and worn acoustic earnestness as a way to reveal his (always *his*) soft center. When guys do this, they always act like they are joking, but then they say they are serious, but then pretend they are joking again, like they are testing the waters with a girlfriend about her interest level in having a threesome.

I'm not saying this never works, of course. The history of pop music is filled with great covers from The Band's cover of Marvin Gaye's "[Baby Don't You Do It](#)," to Cake's sardonic "[I Will Survive](#)," to [Eef Barzelay's interesting project](#) where he has fans request songs that he cover and which sees him covering everyone from Demi Lovato to Leonard Cohen, doing so with wit, vigor, and a sense of fascination.

So, on some level it makes sense that Adams would end up doing something like this. After all, this is the guy who loves to drop little quotes and references to other songs into his own songs. "Anybody Wanna Take Me Home," sounds a lot like "Don't Fear the Reaper," the song "29" is a sort of homage to The Dead's "Truckin'," and the list goes on. This is also the guy who insists on naming his songs after other songs, ("Wish You Were Here," "This is It," "Amy," and "Hotel Chelsea Nights"). This tendency has always seemed somewhat odd. He must know that these songs are not as good as their namesakes and inspirations and that they are destined to become mere

curiosities. He must know that much of what he is doing is disposable. Is Adams' 1989 supposed to be a mere curiosity?

Maybe not. Maybe, as he insists, he is really charmed and inspired by Swift's songs. There is some overlap in the Venn diagram of these artist's careers, personal lives, and musical stylings, after all. Both have been accused of being country artists; both have had public courtships and breakups with famous [musicians](#) and [celebrities](#); both have a strained relationship with [music industry](#) and [music journalists](#). Maybe Adams genuinely admires Swift, and he wants to celebrate her talent by recording cover versions of each of the songs off of her previous year's release.

The track-by-track cover record is an interesting idea and may soon become ubiquitous. The Flaming Lips scooped Adams by about a year on this however, with their Beatles freak-out [With a Little Help From My Friends](#), and Danger Mouse [illicitly](#) did a sort of inverse version of this with *The Grey Album*, but to record every song of another artist's record within a year of its release? I don't know of any examples of this in recent memory. It's a curious phenomenon, though one that I'm a little surprised pop history hasn't seen before.

Whether or not this is a novel idea, however, this seems like some sort of reach for relevancy. It's gimmicky and is designed to get everyone from Entertainment Weekly to Pitchfork talking about it; designed to get people from the pop, indie and country worlds interested; and even to get [tech stories](#) written about it (the webbie award for best marketing goes to Shazaam for how they offered "Blank Space" a day early if you used their app to listen to "Bad Blood"). It is the strangest kind of appropriation. I have to wonder if Adams wants people for the foreseeable future to have to distinguish between the records.

He almost pulls it off too. He is such a craftsman that arranging and recording these simple songs comes naturally for him. He has been such a pro for so long that he can yawn out three moody rock songs before breakfast. The problem is

that it is all dour, and somber Aaron Lewis cover versions of Swift's bubbly pop tunes. The lyrics seem all the more juvenile coming from the mouth of a 40 something. On "I wish you would" his vocals are affected, "Style" sounds like it wants to break free and become a jittery pop hit, but instead fizzles out. Despite a legitimately gorgeous lead guitar part, Adams' take on "Clean," not unlike the rest of these songs, is largely forgettable. Adams almost manages to do justice to "Blank Space" which he Bon Ivers with gentle-as-a-kiss finger picks and little heartbeat thumps on his acoustic, but even Adams can't save the JC Penny jingle of a melody that is the chorus. The best thing that I can say about Adams' version of "Wildest Dreams" is that, unlike Swift's, it no longer sounds like Savage Garden's "Cherry Cola," opting instead to bop along like a real radio-ready MOR tune. It is wrung of the fresh, bright, wine-drunk mania of Swift's version. This whole record is pretty dark and musty, actually. It's like it was recorded in someone's dad's scotch-soaked study. It is all furrowed brows and carefully-posed loneliness.

"Shake it off" is the one I was most interested to hear. Swift's version is a skittering, horn-spiked, neo-funk dance number with a catchy chorus and a marching band bass drum, so I was curious what Adams would do with it. He decided to go so far in the opposite direction that it sounds like he is covering another song. It sounds so much like "I'm on Fire," that I expect Springsteen to start whooping in the background. I don't know why I find that surprising.

It's not that he doesn't sound enthused, (though on "Out of the Woods" he sounds legit bored) but it is hard to not read the record as a little smug. It is hard to avoid seeing Adams as the big man on campus putting little sis Swift into a noogie and introducing her to his cool friends. This whole effort seems like he thinks Swift needs to learn a little something from big bro. The exchange they had on [twitter](#) certainly seems to suggest this. It's the smug and knowing, "ya did alright, kid"

tone that makes me crinkle my nose. He seems almost surprised that the songs are "holding steady."

If there is a single song that is worthy of being listened to it is "Bad Blood." It doesn't really distinguish itself from Swift's version, but it is just different enough to be a valid cover song. I do like that with Adams' inflection he turns "we used to have mad love" from the kind of faux street-beef phrasing white girls use when they go to war on twitter, to a man talking about the amour fou he had experienced with a woman. So, even though the lyric "Band-aids don't fix bullet holes" sounds even sillier on Ryan Adams than it does on Taylor Swift, it's a pretty ok song and probably the best one on the record. It's a testament to Swift's songwriting that "Bad Blood" is decent no matter who sings it.

While we are talking about Swift's songwriting, can I ask why are we [so pleased with Taylor Swift for writing coherent pop songs?](#)

It is like clapping for a toddler because they managed to pick the green crayon to color the grass in their coloring book. Sure, I know a lot of pop music is artifice, but that doesn't make actually writing your own music a special event. Good, era-defining musicians are supposed to write good songs. Taylor Swift is a rich and famous rock star, but that doesn't give her license to be a total fabrication. I get that it happens all the time, but that doesn't earn actual musicians who make actual music, even if it mimics those phonies, any extra credit for being authentic. It is supposed to be a demerit on Britney Spears that she can't write. You are not supposed to get a gold star for writing your own songs.

That is what rich and famous musicians are supposed to do. Ask Kurt Cobain. Ask The National. Ask Kanye West.

No one makes a big deal when a poor kid who grew up in public housing manages to string together couplets more clever than poet laureates, or release a masterpiece like *Illmatic* and *Supreme Clientelle*. No one was slapping known heroine addict Lou Reed on the back for not using a ghost

writer on "Stephanie Says." Why are we so impressed that a rich white girl who went to [great schools her whole life](#) rhymed "blood," "love" and "done?"

End of tangent.

It is apt that Adams' take on 1989 sounds like one of the countless imitators who released records after *Heartbreaker* got everyone's attention back in 2000. Ben Lee's *Awake is the New Sleep* and Pete Yorn's *musicforthemorningafter* come to mind. The subservient drum track and the slightly desperate, (but not really that desperate cuz I'm rich and haven't been actually desperate for attention and affection for a long time), chorus of "All You Had to Do Was Stay" sounds exactly what a late career grasp at relevancy would sound like. I am sure Adams could have come up with a song like this without poaching it from Swift.

By the time you get to the end of the record you start to realize just how self-serving this whole project is. It feels like once someone pointed out to Adams (who I would bet my Godzilla T-shirt is a vinyl guy) that "Wonderwall" is his most listened to song on Spotify that he said, "An Oasis song? Ugg. I'd rather it be Taylor Swift... That gives me a great idea. Get out the vintage mics, acoustic guitars and distressed denim..."

This is to say that it is all very disappointing.

Ultimately Adams' career seems to be little more than a triumph of marketing. He has the same ability to affirm that Mumford and Sons do. Because that is what this is supposed to do. It is supposed to affirm that the type of music that you listen to is the "right" kind of music to listen to. This is a record for people who say things like "If Taylor Swift could just play the guitar like Harry Nilsson and sing like Harry Chapin, then I could listen to her." If you like Ryan Adams' 1989 better than Taylor Swift's it's because you are afraid to get old, afraid to find out what comes next. Afraid that you will be replaced by the next generation.

Here's the good news: You will die and be replaced by the next generation no matter what you do, so you can stop

worrying about it.

The worst part is Adams is telling us things he thinks we haven't noticed about the record. He is pointing out that Swift is writing sturdy and interesting songs. What he fails to understand however, is that they are more interesting when she does them.

At least Swift can play with things like saying "hella," and "mad love" instead of Adams' effort to obscure them. They don't belong on his dusty, somber versions. But hiding that stuff is to his detriment. He is so busy making these songs sound like every other song that he doesn't have the time or inclination to be whimsical or experimental.

There is something lush about Swift's arrangements. There is a piquant of breezy class. The songs are modern and aware of radio-pop conventions, but they are a fresh take, at least. She is developing a signature. The heartbeat from "Wildest Dreams" or the mechanical ticking clocks of "Clean," are helping to define this era for current and future listeners and musicians. Twenty Five years from now this is the sound that will be parodied, maybe lovingly or maybe dismissively, when this era is discussed. If we are lucky Taylor Swift will re-record [Adams' 2014 record](#) so it will finally be listenable.

So, don't let Adams talk you into or out of liking Swift. Make your own decision about whether or not you like her. Don't succumb to Adams' jocky peer pressure, no matter how mischievously charming his smile.

*Correction: This article was altered to correct the spelling of Marvin Gaye's name, which was brought to our attention by a careful reader. Matt Meade made the error because he doesn't know anything about music.

Stuck in My Head #20: “Campaigner” by Neil Young

Neil Young has been coaxed, once again, into the current election cycle by that age-old political practice of [a candidate willfully misunderstanding what rock and roll songs are about](#). Back in September, Young yanked his Hubert Selby novel set to music, “Keep on Rockin’ in the Free World,” from one walking Rorschach test of a candidate and bequeathed it upon another.

“Keep on Rockin’ in the Free World” is probably second only to Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” in the contest to see how often a song can be misappropriated by suit-and-tied politicians who sport furiously low pop-culture comprehension. This recent dust up over “Keep on Rockin’” may be the reason I am thinking about Neil Young, but that is not the song I have stuck in my head.

“[Campaigner](#)” was written in 1976, in classic Neil young fashion, in one sitting after Young was inspired by some cultural event (in this case the stroke of Richard Nixon’s wife Pat). Young’s take on the event is a predictably and bravely sideways interpretation as he inserts into the Nixon narrative something America was yet to see; humanity.

“Guess I felt sorry for [Nixon] that night,” [Young would later say of the song](#).

Felt sorry for him indeed. The lyrics hint at notions of mortality vs. possibility, despair vs. hope, and the prison of our bodies vs. the infinity of our minds. It’s a Nixon who still yearns despite the global embarrassment of losing the American presidency, a Nixon who still dreams of making some kind of headway on high-minded ideas even when he is at his ill wife’s bedside.

Hospitals have made him cry
But there's always a freeway in his eye
Though his beach got too crowded for a stroll
Roads stretch out like healthy veins
And wild gift horses strain the reins
Where even Richard Nixon has got soul

Armed only with a tattered acoustic guitar, Young played the song for an audience the night he wrote it. I assume they had no idea what to think of it. It was released as something of an afterthought on the 1977 compilation *Decade* (an album which must have seemed like a fastidious and career spanning feast at the time, but in retrospect feels woefully incomplete considering what we now know about Neil Young and what we know his music is capable of mutating into). By the time the song was pressed to vinyl the news story about a former head of state whose wife suddenly became ill and then recovered was forgotten and replaced by some other piece of gossip. "Campaigner," by rights, should have relegated to the same cultural scrap heap as other songs about weirdly specific news items like Rush's "Countdown," about a 1981 space shuttle launch or the White Stripes's little ditty "The Big Three Killed my Baby," which is about corporate espionage in the automobile manufacturing industry.

Despite its hyper-specific references to Richard Nixon, a politician who hasn't even been alive since the 90s, let alone in office or on the campaign trail, the song contains some quality that keeps it from sliding into irrelevancy. What is it about a Canadian's warbling ballad to a politician broken by one too many rides on the election merry-go-round that makes it germane to the current American election?

Certainly, all of Young's sharply critical observations are present. After all, every election takes place in a world where "Traffic cops are all color blind / People steal from their own kind," but that kind of perceptiveness isn't the only thing that keeps the song relevant, nor is the tender, everyman brand of poetry that has seemed to come so easily to Young since before people started walking on the moon. The reason the song continues to resonate, I would argue, has more to do with Richard Nixon than Young's lyrical and musical acuity.

Sure, Nixon has been made into some kind of a metaphor for America and for politics many times over – Hunter S. Thompson made a career out of presenting Nixon as a

grinning and insane hydra whose evil tentacles wrapped themselves around American politics; Alan Moore used him in his revenge-fantasy, superhero melodrama *Watchmen* to represent the tendency toward authoritarianism in not just American politics, but in the American psyche in general; and Oliver Stone portrayed Nixon in his 1995 film as a Shakespearean tragedy with a five o'clock shadow, an overachiever whose own ambition had undone him, to name but a few – but Young's Nixon is a different kind of metaphor. It digs deeper. It reveals more. It confronts the listener more acutely than all those other Nixons.

Young's Nixon sums up the melancholy, the slow motion sadness of doing the things that we know we need to do, but that don't really make us human; going to work, getting a haircut, campaigning for president. Nixon is somehow the perfect emblem of all that. Sure, he is an easy scapegoat, Young seems to say, but who's to say we aren't all the Nixons of our own lives? Who hasn't been outclassed by a younger, better looking, Kennedy-esque smooth-talker? Who among us hasn't been a bit hubristic? Who hasn't been embarrassed by our tendency to eavesdrop?

Most importantly though, Young knew that when Nixon's wife Pat had a stroke, the disgraced president was coming face to face with something he could not negotiate with, buy off, or trade favors with. There is something very universal about that realization. Young saw the sad, broken man Nixon had become (and perhaps had always been) and Young explained him to us all. Like Professor X playing chess with a bested Magneto, Young offers a tacit defense of Nixon. After a career where Young had already written the blistering critique of the Nixon Administration, "[Ohio](#)," this song seems to say, "Hey man, we all make mistakes..."

Young's Nixon is the most weaponized form of metaphor. He takes the universally reviled Nixon, who betrayed his constituency and confirmed for Americans every twisted thing they had assumed about politics and transforms him into a

human being. (And yes, I know he got us out of Vietnam and went to China and all that, but he ushered into the American conscious a fundamental distrust of politicians and you know in your heart that you think of him as a slimy, paranoid liar and a person at whose legacy we dare not examine too closely). But Young succeeds in showing that somewhere deep-down Richard Milhous Nixon is actually a human being. And not just any human being. Young transforms him, deftly, subtly, grotesquely, into You.

Who is the "lonely visitor" mentioned in the lyrics? Is it Neil Young, the Canadian who is commenting on American politics? No. Could it be Nixon who is haunting the halls of the hospital where he fears his wife might die? No. It's you. You're just visiting this country, this planet, this plane of existence, and you'll be as dead as Pat Nixon in no time. Who "campaigned all my life towards that goal"? It's you again. You have been striving your whole life toward that goal. Which goal? Oh, you know. You know damn well.

So as we all piss each other off by supporting candidates who are [offensive](#), [un-American](#), [criminals](#), or just [too ubiquitous on Twitter](#), we should remember that we are all just doing what everyone else is trying to do. We are all trying to get noticed, we are all trying to make a difference, we are all trying to change something. We are all running for some office for which we aren't qualified. We are all facing our own mortality in the lonely hallway of a hospital. We all keep our humanity hidden deep down someplace where everyone has soul. Even Donald Trump you ask? Yes. Even Donald Trump.

7 Albums I Am Supposed to Love That I Actually Hate (Part 7 of 7)

Thanks to everyone who checked in on my 7 part list of records that are overrated, emperors in the nude, or simply constructs that I do not understand. Believe it or not, I have found my own negativity to be exhausting and I can't wait to follow this up with a platinum level, tongue scraping of a palette cleanse by offering up a list of guilty pleasure songs, super fun dance-pop tunes, or artists that I simply can't live without. Until then...

Case #7. Animal Collective - *Merriweather Post Pavilion* (2009)

This article is about the 2009 record *Merriweather Post Pavilion*. But I cannot talk about that record, without first talking about 2004's *Sung Tongs*.

It feels like *Sung Tongs* has been a part of my life for a long time. I know it is not possible, but I think I used to put "Kids on Holiday" on mix tapes when I was in middle school. I distinctly remember listening to *Sung Tongs* on the way home from seeing *Being John Malkovich* in the theater in 1999. I have no idea where I even acquired *Sung Tongs*. Downloaded in an attempt to hear every record on Pitchfork's list of Top 100 Albums of 2000-2004 during a fit of late-night completism? A CD given to me by someone with far better taste in music than I? Bequeathed to me by the ghost of Mike Love? It sort of feels like maybe the playlist for *Sung Tongs* came pre-loaded on my Windows Media Player alongside Beethoven and that smooth jazz song, "Highway Blues" that every Windows XP product used to be shipped with. (This reminds me. Has anyone ever listened to that awful David Byrne song all the way through? For all I know, it coulda ended with the coordinates for where Hoffa's body was buried, cuz as much as I tried, I could never listen to more than a few bars before I tapped out.)

That is what *Sung Tongs* does to you if you use it right. It kind of seeps into your brain and into your memories and it plays little card tricks with your awareness. Wherever the songs of *Sung Tongs* came from, it sort of feels like those tracks with those inane titles have always looked back at me from behind that 100 X 100-pixel jpg that I am pretty sure is two robots dressed like Slim Goodbody. I am not sure where I was temporally when I pressed play on "Leaf House," but I do remember that first whiff of sound.

Like the rest of the record, the sound of the opening song is pretty, but also handmade and simple. There is something authentic and spontaneous inside the pops and cracks that sizzle through the below average recording equipment of *Sung Tongs*. There is a stoned kind of innocence and abandon to the chirps and squeals, but there are also shades of melancholy to the thumping drums and those weird, paranoid chants. It feels like you are really listening to a performance, not a take that has been rehearsed until it is bloodless and frozen by rigor. More importantly, every single sound and bleep and bloop does not have its own dedicated track so there is some real mystery to these recordings. There is an obscenity to the act of recording every single sound and angle to perfection, and then laying the tracks on top of each other one after the other. It is a sound that has become ubiquitous, and it hints at a phoniness that I think we have all started to accept as normal. The unrehearsed sounds of *Sung Tongs* are so much richer than the plastic sounding pornography that is usually being hocked on the homepage of the iTunes store.

Here the harmonies and the instrumentation feel ad hoc, but necessary, like the guys who made the record (guys with forgivably silly names like Avey Tare, and Panda Bear) did it by shouting to each other: "Hey you! Play the drums. You. Yeah, you with the hippie dreads: Sing along..." And they do such a good job ripping off the Beach Boys that it is less a theft, and more some kind of spell or conjuring.

The impromptu feel adds a satisfying levity to moments like the one at the end of "Leaf House" when some guy (cuz the record is structured in such a way that there is an anonymity to the contributions) yells out "Kitties" and then meows. Meows! Can you believe how puerile? There is no more substance to any of the lyrics on the record, actually, but somehow this is a good thing. Somehow this works. The fact that the songs have no lyrical agenda is somehow freeing and it lifts some kind of weight off of me. They are telling me, "It's ok. You can let go. You can just enjoy it."

Most of the record, the spinning bike spokes, the clapping, the banging of pots and pans, and the creaking and slamming of doors, all sound like a musical version of one of those dioramas you would make in second grade. You know the assignment. It's the one where you use cotton balls, construction paper and popsicle sticks to depict Washington crossing the Delaware, or plants in the Mesozoic era. That crappy mish-mash is exactly what is fun about the record. It creates the same kind of vibe as that apartment of those stoners you knew in highschool who got a place together once they (pretty much) graduated. And it was so cool to go over there, remember? There was a sense that things won't always be so chill, but for now there is more than enough weed, no one has a girlfriend but people are getting laid every once in a while, and everyone eats cool ranch Doritos for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Songs like "The Softest Voice" kind of float out there and never seems to come back. It is light and one of the many songs on the record that, on its own, might be almost forgettable. But in the context of the record, it serves a purpose. In the context of the record this song and "Who Could Win a Rabbit," get us to a point where we are ready to listen to a tune as perfect as "Winters Love."

And I loves me some "Winters Love." I love the intro and, without fail I am always pleased and surprised when the song stops and picks back up again with those gorgeous melodies.

It is one of many perfect, little moments. One of many perfect, little musical haikus.

On the intro to "Visiting Friends" the guitars effervesce over a background of found sound and back-masking. The guitars stand in relief of all that weirdness, and then they switch and they sort of double helix back and forth drawing your attention to one sound or another. (Buy some headphones for god's sake). And so what if that song alone is longer than an episode of *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*. By this point in the record, it's too late. By this point, you don't care anymore.

It all feels like so much fun. I hesitate to call it "improvised," and align it with jazz masters such as John Coltrane, because that would be inaccurate. It feels more, unscripted. This unscripted vibe makes it feel like all the messy parts were left in on purpose. "We Tigers" is a good example of this. The drummer is counting out his beats and he seems to be discovering the coolest way to bang this huge drum while everyone else kind of chants this crazy song about tigers. I love that these guys recorded that and said, "That is a song." The wild yelping doesn't hurt either. It feels like they really just wanted to do something fun.

Full disclosure: I usually never quite get around to listening to the last two songs and I sort of feel like "Mouth Wooed Her" is a fitting finale.

And maybe if they had thought about it a little more they would have made that song the finale. But that is just the point, isn't it? Not too much thought seems to have gone into these decisions. It seems most of the songs emerge from instincts, most of the track ordering from gut reaction. It all feels, to me, like the whole record was recorded during one weird long weekend where everyone found out a lot of weird shit about each other, and maybe got mad at each other, but made up in the end, and in the process everyone made some pretty frigging strange, and pretty frigging cool songs. This record feels like a scrapbook from that weekend.

And perhaps it is because of those feelings of euphoria and catharsis that I achieved while listening to *Sung Tongs* that my expectations were raised so high for 2008's *Merriweather Post Pavilion*. From the very first moment I had heard *Sung Tongs*, I worried that it was some kind of fluke. Some happy accident that could not be repeated even if the same conditions were replicated exactly. Or maybe my distaste for *Merriweather Post Pavilion* is due to the incessant, year long hype leading up to the release of the record. Or maybe it is the uproarious ovation the internet gave the record once it did come out, an ovation that seemed to crackle through every Ethernet cable of anyone with a sweet mustache, or an ironically bad sweater. Maybe it's that old story of feeling like something secret and special is all of a sudden public and thus somehow changed, or ruined.

Or maybe *Merriweather Post Pavilion* is simply not a very good record.

The washing machine pump of a song called "In the Flowers" begins the effort. The song is meant to be some sort of pre-ambler, or overture. Some kind of statement of purpose. Much like "Leaf House," the sound effects hint at a pot clouded no where space, but it only takes a few seconds for the forced weirdness to reveal itself. A few seconds more reveals that the record is about to reexamine a lot of the same musical ideas explored previously by the band. I really knew things were bad though, when the handclaps started.

Handclaps are such an important part of so many great songs, from the relentless soul clap of [Archie Bell and The Drells' "Tighten Up"](#), to the loose pops of [Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl"](#), to the crisp call and response of [Arcade Fire's "Rebellion \(Lies\)."](#) Handclaps' place in pop music is as relevant and firmly established in rock and roll lore as Charles Manson T-shirts, and snorting piles of cocaine off of a grand piano. *Sung Tongs* extends that tradition by employing handclaps in a raggedly inept way that comes closer to the applause of an audience than having anything to do with percussion. But

here, on *Merriweather Post Pavilion*, all the handclaps are uniform, and they snap perfectly along with the beat. They don't sound like people clapping hands at all. They sound like a computer program responding to commands. Those handclaps turn out to be the beginning of an unfortunate trend. The songs of *Merriweather Post Pavilion* are so well constructed that they sound like they have run over straight from an Amazon Kindle commercial. There is nothing messy to wade through, no smoke to wave away, no magic trick to try to figure out.

The program continues with a song that feels somewhat affected. That "My Girls" hints at the theme song to *321 Contact* feels particularly contrived and designed to manipulate me into some kind of fucking bullshit nostalgia for the late 70s or early 80s. The attempt to introduce modernity to this nostalgia with the Timbaland style drum and bass blasts, and atmosphere with the circularly arpeggiated piano, results in a crushing failure of a mash up. Even the shouts of joy don't sound weird, or necessary, but compliant, or perfunctory in some way. Like the band (made up of guys with unforgivably stupid names like Avey Tare, and Panda Bear) had collected data on us, their listeners, and plugged us all into an algorithm and this soulless equation was what it chugged out. It all feels designed to release certain chemicals from my brain and even when it is successful, I feel like I am watching my self undergo what *Merriweather Post Pavilion* is trying to make me feel, the same way the score to a sappy movie can make me experience emotions of melancholy, or triumph, in some way, without me having to really feel anything.

And once the smell of contrivance gets in the air, even the whimsical sound of a voice distorted by someone hitting on the singer's back in the middle of "Summer Clothes" seems intentionally precious and played for effect. The song pulses away like the lights of a commercial sign flickering away compulsively in the distance, devoid of fun or joy. It sounds

like the kind of thing children raised on cheap toys that blink and chirp away meaninglessly would vomit. But please believe that music like this can be infused with some kind of beauty or purpose. Just listen to [Dan Deacon](#). He's been repurposing these bright, high-pitched sounds and collaging them into wild, brain-scan fits in a really compelling way over the course of many albums. It's not just the shimmering studio sheen. Nothing here seems particularly impromptu, or organic. What I loved about Animal Collective from the beginning is gone and what is left is clinical and synthetic. I am left with an album that makes me feel strangely unfulfilled, and weirdly heartbroken.

And, so, I return to *Sung Tongs*, though every time I do, I do so with grave apprehension. I have this irrational fear that, like some sort of musical version of the Polar Express, the songs will lose their magic one day and one day I will no longer hear what I once found so beautiful. Thankfully it hasn't happened yet. Thus far it has always been fresh and new and weird, but also familiar and comforting. It is always like crawling back into a dream after having been abruptly awoken, or like having coffee with old friends.

Maybe that is why *Sung Tongs* is so important to me. It creates this atmosphere, this whole world that I feel like I can fall into. A world where the dudes making the music are not overthinking, and their abandon gives me permission to not have to think so much either. It's a world where I can just give in to the stripped-down percussion and the vocals that reverberate and sound like they are floating away like a balloon released into the sky. It is precisely because they don't have any big crescendo, any big agenda that I want to walk into the fort they have made of their own bedsheets. On *Merriweather Post Pavilion* I can see what they are trying to do. But on *Sung Tongs*, no one can tell what they are attempting, because even the guys in the band have no idea.

The whole record is saturated in a real spirit of gonzo joy and happiness. When I hear the chanting, it makes me think of weirdo friends I have had and weirdo experiences I had when I was a kid. And I want to go back there. I want to go back to those feelings that percolated in me when I first listened to *Sung Tongs*, because that record made me feel great. But mostly I want to go back there to get away from *Merriweather Post Pavilion*. Because it doesn't make me feel great. It makes me feel sad, and manipulated, and alone. It makes me feel like I know exactly where the record came from and exactly what it wants to be, pornographically displayed on the home page of iTunes.

Song I would listen to if you held a gun to my head: "[Daily Routine](#)" is the only song that comes close to conjuring the weird kind of magic I found deep in the muck of *Sung Tongs*. But that song's echoes and calls and harks, and who goes there, can't quite move me. And it makes me sad. And it makes me long for those feelings.

Listen to this Instead: Have you tried listening to Prefuse 73's songs... Just kidding. [Sung Tongs](#) obviously.

Review of Copperhead Road (Deluxe Edition) (Record Review)

[Copperhead Road \(Deluxe Edition\)](#)

Steve Earle

MCA, 1988

This is a review of the 2008 Deluxe Edition of the 1988 classic record and it comes 35 years after the initial release and my first encounter with the record. It is nice to know that while I might have changed, the record never does.

Intro

The addiction and recovery genre of record (only slightly different from the clean & sober record, recently done excellently by Jason Isbell on *Something More Than Free*) is one that is as much a fixture in the history of pop music as love songs, breakup songs, and songs about objects in the rear view mirror being closer than they are. It is a genre that boasts such unabashed classics as Warren Zevon's album length amends, *Sentimental Hygiene*; Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, which is about the perceived safety that drug use provides as much as it is about the London bombings during World War II; and songs like Neil Young's "Needle and The Damage Done," Sia's "Chandelier," (as well as its accompanying quintet of videos starring professional muse Maddie Ziegler); and almost anything John Darnielle did before he started writing exclusively about [professional wrestling](#).

Part 1: The Record

At first listen, the songs from Earle's *Copperhead Road* don't seem to fit the template of the addiction and recovery album. The songs range from a holiday hymn ("Nothing But a Child"), to a story about a veteran returning from the European battle front ("Johnny Come Lately"). While the songs are about failure, loss, and redemption, they seem to only dance around the border of the topic of drug and

alcohol abuse and recovery. Listening to The Deluxe Edition gives you a better handle on the themes that have been buried deep inside the denim pockets of Earle's everyman opus all along.

The Deluxe Edition includes the original 10 songs as well as an entire second set of songs that Earle was playing live at that time. The live songs are full of rasp and enthusiasm and are recorded in a competent, but not overly fussy way. Hearing Earle speed through "Guitar Town," "Dead Flowers," and "Little Sister," gives a sense of what kind of organ-spiked, fiddle-drenched, road band The Dukes were. There is triumph in between the notes. Real joie de vivre. Earle's pre-song raps are unpolished, and it is interesting to hear him fumble through how to describe songs that have become staples of his live shows and mainstays of country radio. The recordings are far from essential, however, as Earle is often better elsewhere, and the additional tracks are unable to unseat the originals. They do provide those conducting an autopsy a good look at how the songs may have evolved, but beyond the purely documentary, the songs are merely a curiosity. The real benefit of the Deluxe Edition is that it gives us perspective on the man's music.

The 1988 "country rock" record *Copperhead Road* was written by a still-using addict, and it was about all the things he knew in his fragile, junky heart to be true. Steve Earle was writing about moonshining in the titular "Copperhead Road," about murders committed during drunken card games in the cautionary "Devil's Right Hand," and about wanting to believe in a panacea that will cure all your troubles in the darkly comedic "Snake Oil." By 2008, and the release of the Deluxe Edition, Steve Earle had become rock's weird uncle, a Texas Red Dirt songsmith refusing to give up the road, feeding his marriages to his muse, and expanding his already impressive catalog by, every year, cooking up new, Tex/Mex flavored versions of the sort of music Bob Dylan and Woody

Guthrie invented. By the 21st Century, Earle had transformed from a leather vest wearing rock star to a curmudgeonly, old, mountain goat. His voice had become creaky and his beard long. The flowing mane that majestically cascaded down his head and shoulders in the 80s had, by the time *Copperhead Road* had reached classic status, become mere smoke-like wisps that followed behind his always twitching and jerking head.

Most importantly, he became sober. He gave up on drugs, booze, and going to prison, and instead opted to craft a persona whereby he would become everyone's de facto sponsor. This turn was evidenced in the memorable acting performance he gave as a recovering drug addict named Marlon on the television show *The Wire*, in the essays about addiction he penned in books like Christopher Kennedy Lawford's *Moments of Clarity*, and in the advice he started giving during his encores. "Walk slow, drink lots of water, sleep as much as you can," he'd instruct in a way that made it clear he believed in doing these things. "And try and do your own time," he'd add, tacking it on in at the end in a manner designed to make you remember. By the time *Copperhead Road* was 20 years old, Steve Earle had become damn near responsible, sounding coherent when talking about chord progressions on *Austin City Limits*, wise when promoting his book of short stories with Terri Gross on *Fresh Air*, and downright erudite when debating Rousseau's social contract with Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now!*

But in 1988, this future teetotaler would fill a record with country parables, outlaw stories, and tender love ballads (or cunning pickup lines depending on how you read songs like "Once You Love," and "Even When I'm Blue"). While still using drugs and alcohol on an almost daily basis, Earle was able to impart the kind of defiant, honest, and hard-earned insight that most addicts in recovery don't attain until they have quite a few 24-hours under their belt. The record, taken as a

whole, is shockingly self-aware because it seems like it could only have been written by someone who had confronted their propensity toward addiction, not someone in the throes of it.

Part 2: Country Music in the 1980s

When Steve Earle's career began, his first record having been released in 1986, Country Music was in a state of crisis, being propped up by Titans of former eras who were quickly becoming parodies of themselves. The period saw Dolly Parton eager to multiply her waning star power by doing duets with everyone from Kenny Rogers to Miss Piggy, and it saw the George's Straight and Jones pumping themselves up with all the faux bluster they could muster in an effort to get now-settled boomers to purchase newly released greatest hits CDs.

Earle was positioned in the market as a sexy, neo-traditionalist, much like his contemporaries Dwight Yoakam or Reba McEntire. After that first record, *Guitar Town*, was nominated for two Grammys, Earle had the opportunity to become what both Billy Ray Cyrus and Garth Brooks would soon become in the 90s. Earle, however, opted out of that brand of fame. "I know I'm not country, and I definitely know Garth Brooks isn't. He's the anti-Hank," Earle told [The Chicago Tribune](#) in 1997. The comment reveals an Earle frustrated with his own inability to transubstantiate into the kind of country musician he longed to become. It also reveals his contempt for a music buying public willing to be seduced by the charms salesmen like Brooks (and the complicit record industry and music press) were peddling.

Earle decided, post Grammy, to make a genre defying hybrid of a record, one that wasn't stuffy and steeped in the tradition of wearing bolo ties and doing box steps, nor as calculating and craven as the music of some of the emerging stars of his era. Not only did he lace the whiskey of his country record with some of rock and roll's cocaine, but he put it all into the dirty glass of punk rock, embracing the aesthetic of

The Clash and The Ramones in a way in which mainstream country was incapable. Earle wasn't a punk rocker, but with *Copperhead Road* he was fighting against all the same things they were. He even went so far as to include Celtic punk band The Pogues on the record, probably because Earle thought it might be fun to share a drink with the maniacs, but also because of the anti-authoritarianism they brought along with them like it was another member of their multifarious band. Before Earle, no one who had a Nashville recording deal had ever championed bands like The Replacements, let alone [opened for them](#).

Always ahead of his time, Earle was finding commonalities between the Buzzcocks and Merle Haggard way before [Girl Talk record Night Ripper or Roy Kerr mashed up The Strokes with Christina Aguilera](#).

Earle's music was the shot in the arm that no one knew was necessary or even possible. This record is Steve Earle's *Swordfishtrombone*. It is him making an important step toward the artist he wanted to be and, perhaps more importantly, away from the artist he didn't want to be. The defiance, the protest of the music was built into the foundation of the record. But it wasn't the unchecked rage that would soon be heard in the music of N.W.A., The Beastie Boys, and Nirvana. It was encapsulating all that protest and frustration into the folk songform, one from the tradition of Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and of course, Townes Van Zandt.

With *Copperhead Road*, Earle gave New Traditionalism permission to access various kinds of pop music. He created a passageway from the hymns, hillbilly music, and bluegrass tunes that birthed him to all the rock, punk, and proto-grunge music the 90s had to offer.

But his songs also display the tendency to bury the magma of frustrations and disappointments under cubic tons of regret and resentment and to never think about the potential for eruption.

Part 3: "Copperhead Road"

For evidence that the themes of addiction and recovery, of searching for father figures and sponsors, have always been a part of his music, look no further than the record's title track. The song is in the long tradition of story song, the kind Earle does so well, and tells the tale of a marijuana farmer who was raised by a moonshiner. With the lineage established in the first couplet, "Well my name's John Lee Pettimore / Same as my daddy and his daddy before," the notion of passing down addiction and drug use through the generations is suggested. It purports to be a story about the war on drugs with the enemies being the IRS and the DEA, but it is also about a son refusing to learn from the failures of his father about the endless cycle of addiction and its impact through the generations.

Early in Lauren St John's biography of Earle, *Hardcore Troubadour: The Life and Near Death of Steve Earle*, Earle's family history of substance abuse is established. Earle's mother and maternal grandmother, known affectionately as Mudder, are described as having been reliant upon alcohol, his mother's brother, Nick, apparently preferred heroin, while Earle's mother's step-father lost his life to alcohol addiction. It is also here that Alcoholics Anonymous is described as having been an important element of the Earle family, even before Steve was born, having saved both Mudder's and Earle's mother's lives at different times. This means that even from before he achieved sobriety himself, Earle was steeped in the 12 step traditions the way some families complete religious ceremonies or establish Fridays as "pizza night." Even from the first notes of Earle's wild, mando-epic about what's become of the American Dream, Earle was writing about addiction, powerlessness, and spiritual longing.

Part 4: "Snake Oil"

Before the next song even properly begins Earle is ad libbing about being high. "I like that echo," he says to no one in particular as the piano boogie woogies and the guitarist percusses on muted strings. Earle continues, "It goes right

through my head. I had that happen once, but it was chemically induced." Now, I am not sure what that means, but two things become apparent. First: Earle is probably high while the song is being recorded and second: whatever Earle is talking about it involves drugs.

This is how Earle introduces, "Snake Oil," a whimsical, uptempo number replete with one-liners and a narrator with an outsized persona that puts the song just a few wisecracks shy of being a full-on, Dr. Demento-ready novelty tune. Earle showcases a bit of what would become an acting career with his performance as a salesman unencumbered by morality or the truth. The song is tongue-in-cheek, knowing, and topical in a way that most rock and roll songs aren't. With references to Libya and Grenada standing out as a critique of the Reagan administration, a listener could be forgiven for making the assumption that the whole song was a metaphor for politics. It is broader than that, however, as the *raison d'être* of the song seems to be to indict all the ways the duped collude with liars, salesmen, and pushers. The song, with its narrator who promises that "I can heal the sick, I can mend the lame / And the blind shall see again, it's all the same," is about how acquiescence is required for a lying politician or drug dealer to trick someone into purchasing their wares.

By having no come-uppance for the narrator, it tacitly points at the rubes who comply as being a part of the problem. Sure, the villains loom large on *Copperhead Road*, but it's a record where even the heroes are bad examples. Not unlike the charming losers who populate his songs, Earle had his own bad examples to follow.

Part 5: "Back to the Wall"

Townes Van Zandt's, whose musical influence on Earle was immense, had an even bigger impact on Earle personally. Van Zandt was Steve Earle's friend, mentor, and, according to Earle, the worst example Earle had in his life for over a decade. Townes can be heard all over Earle's music, as both

influence and inspiration, from the wordy story songs like “Ben McCullough,” and “Tom Ames Prayer,” to the poetic flourishes of “Down Here Below.”

“I emulated him to a fault. He was a good teacher and a bad role [model](#),” Earle told The Chicago Tribune in 2009 about his former mentor and deceased friend. The sly bit of advice that is “Back to the Wall,” is what most fathers would teach their kids if they had the words and the courage to do so.

Keep one-eye on the ground,
pick up whatever you find,
'Cause you've got no place to fall,
when your back's to the wall.

When Earle performs the song now, it seems to be about finding ways to keep from falling back into old, bad habits. Hearing the man perform it in sobriety is like hearing someone describe how to keep yourself out of trouble. But hearing Earle perform as a young man not-yet-30, it sounds like just the opposite.

Sometimes in the evenings
I start to get that feeling
Like I'm empty inside
I know I'm doin' good now
but tonight I'm headed downtown
Down by the riverside
I sit underneath the freeway
with an old friend from the old days
And a bottle of wine

That duality is essential to the genius of the songs on the record. And the song that follows “Back to the Wall” is no exception.

Part 6: "The Devil's Right Hand"

Much like the two songs that precede it, “The Devil's Right Hand” is a story song capable of throwing punches with heavyweights like Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Saturday Night Special,” and Kenny Rogers’ “The Gambler.” It is also a song about learning the wrong lesson from people who are trying to help

you. The protagonist in the song is told by his mother that pistols are “the devil’s right hand.” The insinuation being that it is best to avoid being seduced by the allure of handguns because of the certain doom they will bring, but throughout the song the character proceeds to acquire multiple sidearms, each more deadly than the last.

In the end we learn that the character understood the lesson in a way that divested him of all responsibility. In the final verse, after murdering a man during a card game, he explains to the judge that he didn’t shoot anyone because the trigger was pulled not by him, but by “the Devil’s right hand.”

Asked me how I pleaded, not guilty I said
Not guilty I said, you've got the wrong man
Nothing touched the trigger but the devil's right hand

The song falls into the long tradition of story songs the likes of which could be found in the catalog of Willie Nelson or Randy Newman. The production is curious, however. The decision was made to pep up the number with Garth Hudson-esque organ and a pointed pedal-steel solo that gives carnival feel to the harrowing song. Even with the misguided arrangement the song doesn’t lose its bite. It doesn’t lose that sense of wisdom and self-awareness that Earle seems to effortlessly infuse into his songs.

Part 7: Side B

From the very first reviews of *Copperhead Road*, the record’s Side B has taken flack as a weak set of perfunctory love songs, with Jon Pareles of the *New York Times* referring to “Even When I’m Blue,” “You Belong to Me,” “Waiting on You,” and “Once You Love” as “[four strictly average love songs.](#)” Rob Tannenbaum said Earle “has already examined this terrain and done a better job of it,” in his [Rolling Stone review](#). The songs are more than just mediocre love songs, however. They are meditations on longing and desperate need, the likes of which is typical of an addict. According to music writer Susan Fast, writer for *33 1/3*, U2’s Bono has secretly been using

a “rhetorical trick that makes the word ‘she’ deliciously ambiguous - referring, as Bono has often said, to the Holy Spirit, as much to an individual woman.” (pp. 110, Fast)

If Bono’s “she” can be a stand-in for The Holy Spirit, Earle’s “she” who demands that her lover strip his soul bare and threatens to bust him after one false move can easily be his addiction. If this is the case, then the second to last song on the record, “Once You Love” could be the song most reminiscent of an addict’s contact with his drug.

Once you love, once you trust it
Once you give your soul is bare
One false move and you know you're busted

The lyrics could certainly be talking about his famously turbulent relationships with women, however with language referring to being “busted” and the danger implied could hint at Earle’s relationship with substance abuse. **Seen through this lens, the song** could easily be read as Earle toying with the kind of delicate psyche for which addicts and alcoholics have become so famous.

Part 8: "Nothing but a Child"

The final song on the record, “Nothin but a Child,” brings the record to an appropriate close. Sam Bush and the Telluride bluegrass band add a sense of gravity to the song, making it the center of the record’s universe, the song that pulls the listener toward this masterful and underrated conclusion.

Despite its overt references to Christmas, it is easy to miss the allusions to Jesus upon first listen. Earle’s grumbled singing obscures much of the lyrics about “wise men” and being “guided by the light,”

The focus on the Messiah is further obscured by the very adult chemistry between Earle and his duet partner Maria McKee. Their simmering chemistry seems out of place for what is supposed to be a Christmas song. But the song is far from being exclusively about the birth of a messiah. In addition to being about Jesus and Christmas, it is also about deliverance, innocence, and longing to be as innocent as the children that

Earle and McKee are singing about. They make it almost seem possible.

And this longing goes hand-in-hand with the kind of spirituality pushed in pretty much any 12-step program. Earle's lyrics hint at wanting someone else, a spiritual entity to fix him, to take his burden from him and to guide him.

Nothing but a child could wash those tears away
Or guide a weary world into the light of day
And nothing but a child could help erase those miles
So once again we all can be children for awhile

This is not dissimilar to the AA notion that "We Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity" and "Made a decision to *turn* our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him." Though Earle had not given himself to the system, he had spent his early life "having grown up in AA listening to the tragic tales of people hitting rock Bottom," (pp. 286 Hardcore Troubadour).

Conclusion:

While the songs don't fit neatly into the 12-step template, because the man who made this record had not yet embraced the steps or how to work them sober, they are steeped in the language and the ideas of Alcoholics Anonymous. The record finds a man struggling with his spiritual condition and trying to find a way out of the prison he had made for himself. More than 30 years from the recording of these songs, this is clear. This turmoil and this longing puts the songs on this record alongside so many other records about addiction and recovery. "My spiritual system is 12-step programs. That's the only one I've ever had. I didn't have one before that," Earle told Salon.com in 2002. It's pretty obvious that this was true even while he was still using.

His spiritual system may have been in place even before he sobered up, creeping into and informing the songs he thought were about gunfights and catcalls, but were actually about identifying spiritually sick elements of his own psyche and examining them.

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