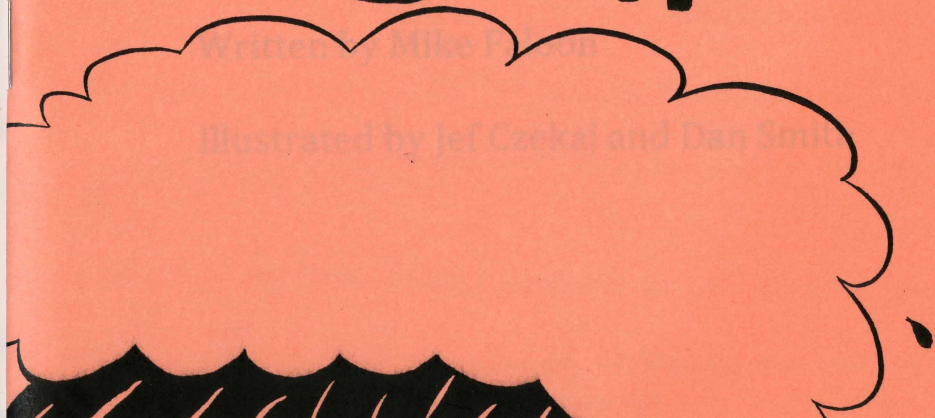


LEARNING to SURF

Written by Mike Hanson

Illustrated by Jef Czeka and Dan Smith





Learning to Surf

Written by Mike Faloon

Illustrated by Jef Czekaj and Dan Smith

"You're being coy. Don't be coy. I can tell what you're looking for but the student can't because of the way you've danced around the question. Be honest. Be direct."

I spent all of grad school hoping to catch moments like this, bits of wisdom that help me survive as a teacher. Her comments still echo in my mind. I strive to be direct when I teach but I wonder how well I do when I write.

This summer I outlined a couple of stories but I spent more of my time on personal essays, trying to be more direct. Inevitably they revolved around music. I wound up with a collection of essays that are like thank you letters to those I love (family, friends) or whose music I appreciate.

Either that or I've finally been effected by all of the Harry Chapin and Cat Stevens my college roommate subjected me to.

Read, enjoy, and send me your grades.

Mike

September '11

1	We Should Talk More – Ten Days with Black Wine's <i>Summer of Indifference</i>	6
2	Go with the Hernia	15
3	Minutemen Day Dream	16
4	Only 3/5 of the Feelies Wear Glasses	20
5	How Much Heart Can You Take? – Ten Days with the Future Virgins' <i>Western Problems</i>	22
6	A Small Lesson in Humility with James Taylor	30
7	Simple Pleasures in America	36
8	Bake Says U2 Is the Best American Band of All-Time – Ten Days with the Jennifers' <i>Well-Intentioned World</i>	38
9	Superchunk vs. Eric Clapton	46

This is from Richard Brautigan's "Gee, You're So Beautiful That It's Starting to Rain"...

I want high school report cards
to look like this:

Playing with Gentle Glass Things
A

Computer Magic
A

Writing Letters to Those You Love
A

Finding Out About Fish
A

Marcia's Long Blonde Beauty
A+!

This is from grad school...I was getting my elementary education degree. One of my assignments was to transcribe a conference with a student and play it for my professor. She read over the page and half pretty fast. She probably skimmed it. She seemed distracted. Her secretary came into the office three times while I was there. My professor rescheduled two appointments. She regifted a bouquet of flowers. I didn't expect much from the meeting but her observations put the transcribed conversation in a different light.

"You're being coy. Don't be coy. I can tell what you're looking for but the student can't because of the way you've danced around the question. Be honest. Be direct."

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September '11



We Should Talk More – Ten Days with the Black Wine's *Summer of Indifference*

Day One – July 8

When I hear a new Black Wine record I gauge how much rock they've included versus how much pop they've included—what's the ratio of stomping and thumping to sweetness and light. On first listen *Summer of Indifference* (Don Giovanni Records) leans heavy on the stomp and thump.

The album cover looks like a still from a Wes Anderson movie. Large, simple typeface. Subtle but deliberate color scheme—the band's dressed in black and white standing in front of leafy green trees. They're all at different heights (kneeling, sitting, standing)

On the back of their first album (*Black Wine*, Don Giovanni, 2010) they included a note that said "Recorded and mixed to tape—with no beat or pitch correction." I love that. It reminds me of the anti-synthesizer notes Queen included on their early albums. On their debut album (*Queen*, 1973) they declared " .and nobody played synthesizer " Were synthesizers that prominent in the pop and rock world of the early '70s? I love how forthright they were—*We are not cheating!*—and the implied wag of the finger at everyone else—*But they are!*

Queen continued on subsequent albums. *Sheer Heart Attack* (1974) and *A Night at the Opera* (1975) declared "No synthesizers" and "No synthesizers!" respectively. There were "No synths!" on *A Day at the Races* (1976). There probably weren't any synthesizers on *News of the World* (1977) or *Jazz* (1978) but there weren't any declarations in the liner notes. Perhaps Queen was thinking of crossing party lines during this time because when *The Game* came out in 1980 they confessed that "This album includes the first appearance of a Synthesizer (an Oberheim OBX) on a Queen album."

Translation: some member of the band tickled the ivories synthetically but his identity shall not be disclosed. Queen Inc. may have given in to the high tide of technology but we aren't about to identify the contaminated songs yet alone name names. Ours is a united front.

They went to the other end of the continuum when the *Flash Gordon* soundtrack was released later that year: "Music by Queen/John Deacon (Bass Guitar, Guitar synthesizer)/Roger Taylor (Drums, Vocals, Synthesizer)/, Brian May (Lead Guitar, Vocals, /Synthesizer)/ Freddie Mercury (Lead Vocals, Synthesizer)."

I've never quite understood why Queen was so insistent on staking out their reputation for authenticity. They seemed perfectly comfortable with irony and camp. Being perceived as "real" seemed pretty far down the list of priorities. First, their name. Second, their sound, which I love, especially early on when they swerved wildly and wonderfully from hard rock to vaudeville. I think Freddie Mercury once said they wanted to combine Jimi

Hendrix with Liza Minnelli. These are not the hallmarks of the real, the grounded, the down to earth. Love them or loath them Queen obliterated all the molds. Who cared if they had synthesizers?

I wonder if Black Wine use pitch and/or beat correction on the new record?

I listened to *Summer of Indifference* four times today but the power went out midway through spin number three so for some reason my iTunes play counter only registered two plays. This information should not affect me in the slightest. Yet it does. I feel a little cheated. I can't stop looking at that play counter I'm not wired to filter it out. It's like when I watch a ballgame and I can't stop reading the scroll of scores and updates. It's information I don't want or need yet I read it each time it crawls across my TV The play counter offers equally useless information but I can't resist it.

The last song on the album is called "Maycrowning." I don't know what maycrowning is. I'll have to look it up.

Day Two – July 9

There are nine songs on *Summer of Indifference*. Three written by Jeff Schroeck (guitar, vocals), three by J Nixon (bass, vocals) and three by Miranda Taylor (drums, vocals) The balance seems intentional.

There are considerable risks in putting out a record where three or more songwriters contribute relatively equally Most bands who tread this path either release an album that sinks them (Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Mardi Gras*) or should have (Emerson, Lake, and Palmer's *Works*)¹ Once in a while this approach helps a band strike gold but for every *Rumors* you get a *Tusk*. Democracy is a dicey proposition for bands.

I listened to *Summer of Indifference* once more today I'm still slightly leery of the stomp > pop imbalance, vet it's getting better with each spin.

Day Three – July 10

Allie was away so it was me and the kids. The only music I heard was Maggie and Sean singing songs from the *Rio* soundtrack. They jumped on the bed and used the ends of a jump rope for microphones.

I did think about the record later when we took a break from playing superhero tag.² I thought about the two 7" Black Wine released since their last album. Those in-between records can be helpful indicators for where a band is headed. Like when Peter Buck broke out the mandolin on those late

¹ I'm not including bands like Superchunk, R.E.M. or Van Halen that split songwriting credits evenly among each of the band members.

² Superhero Tag = Traditional tag + the kids wearing capes and masks

'80s R.E.M. b-sides. As much as some of their records disappointed me during the '90s, in hindsight, I should have seen it coming.

But it's not that easy with Black Wine. Their first single, "Tornado" b/w "Windy" (Art of the Underground, 2010) was lighter and poppier. Then they slowed down, really slowed down, for the follow up 7", the *Dark Energy* EP (Don Giovanni, 2011). The bands they covered on these 7"s give a good sense of where Black Wine were coming from. the Association, then Jethro Tull. But neither hinted at the sounds of *Summer of Indifference*.

Day Four – July 11

This past winter was really hard on our house. The pipes froze and our basement flooded when the snow melted and the ice thawed. Our back patio was ruined by the water and salt. The first two estimates we received were too expensive but we had to do something. As the cement dissolved—it was basically turning to sand with each successive rainstorm—the edges of the slate became exposed. Friends recommended Lou for the job.

The first time I met Lou half of his face was black and blue from a four-wheeler accident. He came over to check out the patio and give us an estimate. He talked about the accident but he never took out a tape measure. He walked around, sized up the patio and said he'd think it over for a couple of days. There seemed to be more intuition than math involved. I'd have been really skeptical but our friends swore by Lou. He called back a few days later. His estimate was a third less than the others. He was going to use sand for the drainage and planned to reuse a lot of the slate.

I was going to be working at home and felt a little uneasy about having someone out back even if I was working inside. I never really know what to do in those situations. How often should I offer something to drink? Am I interrupting their work if I talk? Am I rude if I don't? When I went outside Lou stopped working and started talking. That's to be expected with Lou and it's nice knowing. I feel more at ease that way.

I never know what's going to come up with Lou. We might talk about what to do with the oak tree that fell in our backyard a couple weeks ago. Or we might talk about his friend who's working on a treatment for Lyme disease or his son who has this undiagnosed sleeping disorder where he simply can't be woken up sometimes.

Summer of Indifference isn't as unpredictable as conversations with Lou but it's close. The album is increasingly easy to enjoy and equally difficult to peg. How did I miss the jangly guitar that runs on and off throughout in "Through the Foam" or the twangy guitar on "The Ocean's Skin"? Maybe there's a pattern here. Rather than write a grunge song or a pop song they wrote songs that merge both, and more. (If I'd heard *Summer of Indifference* back in high school I'd have pegged Black Wine as a metal band, especially

the guitar riff on "End of Days" or the lurching "castles will crumble!" toms-toms on "Hand.")

I started to pick up on the lyrics, too. "*I'll be home to the planet with no season*" ("No Season"). Maybe I'll take out the lyric sheet tomorrow

In the meantime, I traded emails with Jeff from Black Wine. "No pitch or beat correction on this record (though we did record to computer instead of tape this time), but I felt that we only needed to be obnoxious and confrontational the first time. I don't know if I told you about the original note, but it was gonna be 'If you use Auto-Tune, you're an asshole,' but we decided to soften it a bit. My 'If I Become President' list is first banning all guns, then criminalizing Autotune."

Day Five – July 12

I had the best sleep last night. Until five minutes ago it had been a lazy, peaceful morning. I felt like Peter Gibbons after his visit to the hypnotist in *Office Space*. I dropped off Maggie at camp, came home, watered the plants, said good morning to Lou. He told me that he knows the guy who nailed the deer antlers to our garage.³ I was zoning out too much to keep up with the conversation, though. It was that kind of sleep. I went inside, put on *Summer of Indifference*. I was really enjoying the record, but I didn't pay active attention until "Hand." That woke me up. "Hand" is the demonic blast that opens side two. "Very metal," in the words of Vivian from *The Young Ones*.

I stopped the song about 30 seconds in, grabbed the lyric sheet and started again. These weren't lyrics I could just mumble along to.

*When the bottle's half way gone
That's when the itching comes
What have I done to my home*

What have I gotten myself into? Is this song based on a horror movie I don't know about?⁴

³ We call our garage the Hunter Thompson Garage. There's a stone wall on the left. The rest is wood. There's a dirt floor and a sliding door. It looks more like a small barn than a garage. Over the years the previous owners decorated it with deer antlers, an America flag, a "No Trespassing" sign, and a sign for a fishing lure. I've never read it up close. It's up pretty high.

⁴ Later I looked up the title *Hand* on IMDB. I found a 1998 comedy. The synopsis doesn't synch up with the Black Wine song but the two would make a fascinating combination: "Three young friends—Hart, Dean, and Chad—defend a hot young ice cream parlour employee, Brooker from her abusive boss, Mikey but inadvertently kill him in the process, forcing all of them to go on the run from the law in the form of Mikey's father Police Chief Benton." I'd cast Henry Rollins as Police Chief Benton but I'd change the name of the hot young ice cream parlour employee. All of the hot young ice cream parlour employee flicks of the late '90s had characters with names like Brooker. I'd go with something less Choate, more public school, Anita or maybe Lisa.

*I left my hands alone and unattended
And now I can't believe what they've done
I left my door unlocked and unattended
And now I've been left holding the gun*

I don't watch horror movies because the images take forever to leave my head. I'm not sure how much I want to investigate here. I wonder who belts out that Rob Halford-like scream at the end of the third verse, about 2.20 into the song.

Maycrowning is a ceremony in which a crown of roses is placed on a statue of the Virgin Mary, while other flowers are laid at her feet. Usually one child is chosen to carry the crown on a cushion and another child is chosen to place the crown on the statue.⁵ The tradition of honoring Mary in a month-long May devotion is believed to have originated in Italy, but spread eventually around the Roman Catholic world in the 19th century together with a month-long devotion to Jesus in June and the Rosary in October.⁶

This is the line that best sums up the song: "7,8,9,10—4 years of wondering when will you show yourself to me?"⁷ Being an adolescent in parochial school and wondering why you're learning about this. Junior high school and early high school seem to mess everyone up, and Catholic schools seem particularly well versed in compounding the chaos of those years.

Day Six – July 13

Allie and I had a lot of errands. We're going away in a week. We're renting a place in Gloucester, Massachusetts and we have to bring our own sheets and blankets. Time to get a rooftop carrier. Allie found one on Craigslist. That was our first stop.

Then we drove up to Patterson for a walk in the woods. There's a trail that cuts through a swamp and there were a lot of deerflies. We didn't mind when they hovered. We were okay when they landed. We turned around when they started to bite. After stopping at the p.o. box we went to our local idyllic coffee shop. The screen door creaks but doesn't slam. The tables don't match. There are books and magazines and puzzles and kids' toys all over the place. At this particular coffee shop, though, you have to deal with the grumpy old hippie at the counter. She was relatively nice to Allie today. She didn't frown once when Allie asked about the muffins. Grumpy old hippies disappoint me more than other people because I always expect old

⁵ <http://www.fisheaters.com/customseastertide5.html>

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_crowning#May_crownings

⁷ "'Maycrowning' is in fact about the Maycrowning ceremony Miranda had to do in Catholic school." – Jeff, email 7/15/11

hippies to be nice and wise and mellow, like all their time with those Arlo Guthrie and Jefferson Airplane records helped them figure out how to be better people

We saw a movie, too. We do this about once every six months, we see a movie that doesn't have any animated characters. There was an early showing of *Midnight in Paris*, the new Woody Allen movie. It was pretty good. Owen Wilson time travels back to 1920s Paris and runs into the Fitzgeralds and Hemingway and Gertrude Stein and Picasso and Dali. The best parts are when the characters monologue about why people make art.

When I got home I popped open a beer, thought about the movie, and listened to *Summer of Indifference*. A lot of my teaching colleagues come back to school in the fall talking about how they're ready to be back because they were bored at home. This perplexes me. I'd make a good summer consultant, help people find engaging ways to spend their free time. Just as long as they agree that hot summer afternoons are best spent with good beverages, movies, music, and conversation.

I'd listened to "Ocean's Skin" four times in a row by the time I started writing. It's a great way to close out side one. Along with the movie and the summer heat and next week's trip, "Ocean's Skin" was a perfect fit for today

Running past the railing

Chasing seagulls

Watching boats come in from the sea

"Ocean's Skin"⁸ would go well with Robert Frost poems or Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*. For that matter, "Hand" would go well with Edgar Allen Poe or H.P. Lovecraft. I'm not sure which writer would go well with "Maycrowning."

Day Seven – July 14

Thinking of which writers go well with various songs reminded me of when the Dogfish Head brewery released a beer called Bitches Brew to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Miles Davis album. I thought the wine crowd, if anyone, would lead the way when it came to pairing beverages with jazz records. I asked my friend Brian Cogan to pair "Ocean's Skin," "Hand," and "Maycrowning" with beers.

"Ocean's Skin" There's a hint of Husker Du, so German beer, a lighter spaten or Captain Lawrence's Liquid Gold.

"Hand" More complex, maybe a Brooklyn Black Ops, a good stout with lots of aging potential.

"Maycrowning" a lighter yet aromatic Belgian, Westmalle Dubbel.

⁸ "Ocean's Skin" is all gibberish nonsense." – Jeff, email 7/15/11

I emailed my friend Jennifer Whiteford and asked her which writer came to mind when she listened to "Maycrowning."

"I listened to "Maycrowning" a bunch of times and the writer that came to me every single time was Lynda Barry. That may not be the kind of writer you were expecting, but her work really matches that song. There's a kind of uncertain cowardice paired with a fascination with the unknown that comes up in the lyrics and those things are ongoing themes in Barry's comics and in her novel (*Cruddy*). Plus, the sound of the song evokes a scrappy kind of spazzy, youthful girl, which basically describes all of Barry's characters. To me, the song is about being expected to have faith in something you're not sure has your best interests at heart. Totally Lynda Barry."

Day Eight – July 15

Lou told me that he used to be into "primitive antiques." This was after he finished college after getting back from Vietnam. He bought a wooden icebox from a neighbor. This was 1971. The woman's husband had died back in 1929. She told Lou that she and her husband had lived without electricity and she figured she didn't need the stuff so she never had her house wired. When she died in the mid-'70s it was still acoustic.

I went poking around for Black Wine videos and I found a dozen or so. I also found a number of places where I can buy the record. These are good things. What I really wanted, though, was to read a longer piece about the record. I trust that a lot of other people are spending time with *Summer of Indifference* and I'm curious to know what they're thinking. It's been out for several weeks and no one's written about it, not at length.

I looked up Black Wine's first album, too. It's been out for nearly two years old and the longest write up I found was a five-paragraph review on PunkNews.org. I'm not dismissing it—it was an even-handed review, and at 400 words it exceeded the review I wrote for the *Go Metric* website—but where are the longer pieces about intriguing albums? Writing at length about older albums is a worthy pursuit but we've got great records coming out today. They deserve some ink and pixels, too.

Beyond that, I didn't want to think about *Summer of Indifference* today. I just wanted to enjoy it, which I did, twice. Then, about halfway through the new Harry Potter movie, which Allie and I went to see, I found myself wishing I'd brought a notebook. There are three reasons why I've forgotten the first. The second was a Jad Fair quote about how there are two types of songs: songs about girls and songs about monsters. I love quotes like this that arbitrarily carve up large chunks of culture, like songs, for example, and force them into categories. A couple of years ago I started working on a piece about all of the songs titled "Hold On" or "Holding On." It stalled out when I realized I'd wind up spending weeks listening to songs titled "Hold

On" or "Holding On." But it got me thinking about how most pop songs are about holding on or letting go.

I think Black Wine is a "holding on" band, though, thankfully, they never use the phrase. The closest they come is on "Favorites" "*So grab onto every tiny thing you can and clutch it to your chest until you can't.*"

The third idea has nothing to do with Black Wine. It's this: Lord Voldemort sounds just like Garrison Keillor *Come with me, Harry. Lake Wobegon beckons like a lone loon at dusk. Would you like to hear some Tom Rush on the way? Leon Redbone?*

Day Nine – July 16

I've had "End of Days" and "Favorites" in my head all day I love the way Miranda and J trade vocals early in "End of Days," then share vocals the second time they come around to the "*Psyche myself up for what might come*" part. Compared to the band's first album they're subtler about how they mix girl and guy vocals, though I kind of miss songs like "Strange, Amazing" or "Broken Arm Bear" where the harmonies were more prominent. I also wish there was a song like "We Belong," one of those long album closers that achieves the Neil Young and Crazy Horse effect—a simple, driving song that successfully locks onto a guitar riff and as far as I'm concerned could repeat said riff endlessly

That said *Summer of Indifference* may be the better record. Black Wine sounds more confident, more cohesive as a band.

I traded emails with J about "Hand." "It's my creation. Without getting too personal it's a story about when I paid the price for the stupid shit I do when I'm drunk because of a nosey stranger"

Day Ten – July 17

Things just came together today Maggie and Sean were in and around this year's kiddie pool all day Allie's dad came over They read the paper took naps, and watched the kids. Our neighbor's dog ducked into the kitchen a couple of times. Brian came over and we thought up two characters for the book we're working on. (Mr. Book and Mr. End. Less creepy versions of Mr. Kidd and Mr. Wint from *Diamonds Are Forever*) There was a lot of movement. It was a good test for the patio.

Knowing this was day ten I looked for signs of moving on or change. I found them across the street. There were new florescent yellow "No Trespassing" signs on the abandoned store. The owners had also hauled away most of the mobile home that had been rotting in the side yard. They took the shell but they left the trailer on which the mobile home sat. I don't know how or why they managed to do this. They left the toilet, too.

Go with the Hernia

I was playing drums for the Kung Fu Monkeys and we were asked to be the house band for a live talk show. This was about two years ago. As the first show approached the host, Chris Gethard, explained that he was aiming for something in the vein of Howard Stern or the Uncle Floyd Show. Part of this entailed having a lot of personalities chime in during the course of the show. He wanted to include the band, too. Early in the show Chris was going to ask what was on our minds and each band member would have a chance to respond. He gave us a couple of weeks to think about it.

Deciding to include the band was a generous choice. The rest of the cast performed regularly at the Upright Citizen's Brigade theatre. They were improvisers. They were comfortable being funny on stage. My bandmates were funny, but not on-stage, improvising funny.

In my case the decision was even more generous given what happened the last time I was on stage at the UCB theatre. It was the debut of a show called "Nights of Our Lives," a night of storytelling that Chris had put together. I'd known Chris for a while and he'd seen me read at a zine release party a couple weeks before. I went over pretty well and he asked me to read at the inaugural "Nights of Our Lives." I did and I bombed. Not in a self-effacing "I say I bombed but I did okay" way but in a truly ghastly "People didn't talk to me after the show because I made time crawl like an Ed Wood movie" way. I teach for a living. I get a lot of practice evaluating myself. I know what it's like to broadcast on AM when the audience has FM receivers.

I owed Chris for this wipeout. When he mentioned the "what's on your mind?" bit for the talk show I sensed a chance to redeem myself. I thought of a bunch of ideas. I discarded them all. I settled on one about a recent surgery that I'd had. I changed my mind just before the show began.

When my turn came I said, "Same as you, Chris. I'm wondering about Bill." This was in reference to a comment Chris had just made about our keyboard player, Bill Florio, being a wild card, a loose cannon. There was some polite laughter but it was a weak call back on my part. I'd blown it. My brother was in the audience that night. On the drive home he told me that his first thought was, "No, no. That's not my brother. He's funnier than that."

Here's what I should have said: "I just had hernia surgery a few months ago. I was laid up for a week recovering and the doctor told me not to play drums for six months. This is my first show since the surgery. The procedure was on my right side and I use my right leg to play the kick drum. There's a lot of force applied there, so tonight every time I push down on the pedal all I can picture is my small intestine pushing through a small hole in my body cavity, then getting stuck and having the blood supply pinched off. At any moment I could drop to the floor in a heap and I won't be able to walk yet alone drive home. That's what's on my mind pretty much every second I'm playing drums."

... SHORT, FAST, AND STORED
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Minutemen Day Dream

I should be paying more attention to where I'm driving. And how fast I'm going. I just got a speeding ticket last week. But I'm listening to the Minutemen's *The Punch Line*. It's my favorite Minutemen record right now. It's not their first and it's not their best, but *The Punch Line* is amazing. It's also overlooked. I've owned it for years but haven't internalized it, haven't fully absorbed it.

The Punch Line was the Minutemen's debut full-length record. It was their first chance to string together a big batch of songs. Eighteen, all told, in a mere fifteen minutes. In the documentary *We Jam Econo* Mike Watt says, "They (the songs on *The Punch Line*) weren't supposed to stand on their own. They're supposed to be part of this big river"⁹

Most of the time I space out when I listen that big river. I'll set out to listen to the guitar lines but drift into the bass lines. I love the way D. Boon's guitar melts right into Watt's bass. (Though in another memorable bit from *We Jam Econo* one of their friends says that Boon and Watt thought of guitar and bass as being independent of one another. They tried to put as much sonic space as possible between their sounds; guitar and bass were their own sovereign nations.) Other times I'll intend to focus on the lyrics and find myself air drumming. Most of the time, though, I don't give myself assignments. I just get lost. Minutemen records have so many ideas colliding into each other in so little time. I can't imagine how they remembered their songs, especially at a live show. A set list of song titles could only help so much, especially with a record like *The Punch Line* where 2/3 of the songs have one-word titles.

I try to picture playing *The Punch Line* from drummer George Hurley's point of view. I imagine charging through a song like "Ruins," squinting at the set list to see what the next song is and seeing, let's say, "Issued." First of all, there is virtually no time to think about how to start the next song because "Ruins" is only 45 seconds. Second, "Ruins" is really hard to play. Hurley could have played a straight cut time, polka beat—eighth notes on the hi-hat, alternating quarter notes on the kick and snare—but of course he didn't. He mixed in brief snare fills as well as eighth notes on the kick drum.

Then there are the two breaks in the song. The first is always longer than I expect it to be. It's four measures where most bands playing a song that short and that fast would pause for only one measure, two tops. The second break is only half that because Hurley comes in with a fill. You could think of it as a conventional break—because it's just two measures—but it's different than the first. That's what I love about the Minutemen even when

⁹ The Minutemen = rivers; Yes = oceans.

they were following the rules, they were bending them. And that's all in 45 seconds. Hurley couldn't afford to think about upcoming songs. He couldn't get ready for the next song by glancing at the set list and thinking, Oh, right, "Issued" starts with four clicks and then we come into together. It had to be pure reaction, reflexes. And knowing the Minutemen they didn't even use a set list. They probably just called out song titles. By the time of *The Punch Line* the Minutemen had released 28 songs. It's safe to estimate that they had 1½ times that amount in their live set. That's 40 some odd songs, all of them brief but distinct blurs, stored in muscle memory. And that's by 1981, three years before the 46-song onslaught of *Double Nickels on the Dime*.

Other times when I'm listening to *The Punch Line* I notice the pauses between songs. That's when the distinctions among the tracks become clear—who starts the song, how they start the song, the tempos. There's an incredible amount of variety. And for all of the intricate musicianship—and there's a ton of that, too—there's one simple part that keeps grabbing my attention. It's the open, then closed hi-hat that opens "Search," the first song on the record. A crash or snare hit? Four clicks of the sticks? These are common ways to start a song. Maybe a snare roll. These make sense. These are expected opening moves. No one in punk rock opens a song, yet alone an album, with an open, then closed hi-hat. Punk rock, especially the hardcore days of the early '80s was all about tension. But Hurley opens the record with a moment of release.¹⁰

I didn't know what to call the "open, then closed hi-hat" bit. I emailed a few reliable sources and here's what I found.

Rev. Norb (Boris the Sprinkler, *Razorcake*): "That, my friend, is called a Tsssssoomp. Tsssssoomp. Four s's, three o's."

Pete Hayes (The Figgs): I don't know if there is a technical term. I call it a "scoop." I made that up, but I think it is a good term for it...and it's a cool Townsend record. It's really a tied eighth note, or quarter note on the high hat, which is what a sustained note is called in regular music, I believe.

Frankie O'Malley (The Safes): "Did anyone called it a shoush? I'll claim that one if it isn't taken."

I also found these on drumchat.com: the hi-hat bark, hi-hat swish, half-hat, TEEEST, the shoop sound, pea-soup ("because it's like *peeeeeaassshuupp*"), and "the sheeeehooooo sound that accents things so nice."¹¹

Back to the car. I'm turning right and *The Punch Line* still occupies more of my mind than driving does. I've already committed to turning when I notice the "No Turn On Right" sign. I'm paranoid because of the ticket I got

¹⁰ Ironically, the second cut on *The Punch Line* is called "Tension."

¹¹ <http://www.drumchat.com/showthread.php/hi-hat-technique>

last week. I look for flashing red lights in the rearview mirror. I don't see any so I drive up the hill, swerving left to avoid the pothole that's been growing for the past two weeks. A strange scenario plays out in my head.

The cop knocks on my window and asks for my license and registration. I take them out from wallet and glove box, respectively, but I forget to turn down the volume on the music before rolling down the window.

"What are you listening to?"

"The Minutemen."

"Sounds patriotic."

"They were. A lot of funk, too."

"Like James Brown?"

"More like Gang of Four."

"Before or with Sara Lee?"

"Closer to *Entertainment*, but faster."

"Wire? The Pop Group?"

"Yeah, wow, you've heard of those bands?"

"I love Wire but I've never heard the Pop Group. Recommend any of their records?"

As unlikely as this daydream was, it's no further removed from reality than what actually happened when I got that speeding ticket last week.

I was late for a committee meeting but unlike most teachers' meetings I cared about this one. I felt an obligation to the other people in the group and I wanted to be on time, hence the speeding.

The cop walked up to my car, and he apologized. "Sorry to pull you over, sir. You were going 52 in a 35. Can I have your license and registration please?" He was armed. He was in the right. I was neither and yet he apologized to me, a little dude driving a Corolla too fast.

I turned down the music. I listened to the passing traffic while he wrote the ticket. He returned a few minutes later and he apologized again.

"I'm sorry about this, sir. We've had a lot of complaints along here." Next he offered some helpful advice. "Just in case you travel this way often I should let you know we'll be here all week. Over on North Street, too. Hopefully you won't see me again this week. Have a nice day."

Only 3/5 of the Feelies Wear Glasses

The tension in my right shoulder equals that in my left. Another one of those weeks. My mind is scattered. I'm taking a taxi from Grand Central Station and my thoughts are moving much faster than the car. But I'm not bored. I'm going to see the Feelies. They were fantastic when I finally saw them in '08, so while I'm still tense from work, I'm not bored. I can find things to think about. Or rather, things to think about come to me, like what's the most successful acronym. I think it's SCUBA. It works so well it's become a word. Or LASER. It's odd to see them in all caps. They've graduated.

The taxi hits a bump just past the Union Square exit and I start thinking about my last cab ride. It was a month ago. I was going to the Bell House in Brooklyn. My cabbie's name was Enrique. I like to read the drivers' information so I know who I'm working with even though I've never addressed a cab driver by name.

Enrique had the radio on loud enough for him to sing along. It was a salsa song. In my experience most cabbies keep it so low I can't tell what they're listening to. It's their work place. Why not enjoy some tunes? They can dig a song without pulverizing me with the volume.

Enrique changed the channel moments after the next song began. And either he was short in the limbs or the dial was poorly positioned in the car because he really had to reach for the button. Despite the necessary physical commitment he reacted swiftly to the apparently inferior salsa song. The next station struck a chord and he ceased his search. I heard a faint mix of horns and guitar. Enrique turned it up just in time for the song's chorus.

"Twenty-five or six to four"

Chicago. Early Chicago.¹² Enrique drummed on the steering wheel. He accelerated the taxi. Why not crank the Chicago, I thought, the rest is beyond our control.

My Chicago flashback ends when we hit traffic. As we creep along southbound on the FDR Drive I notice a storage shed beneath a bridge. I think it's the Williamsburg Bridge. (Twenty years in and around New York and I still guess when it comes to bridges.) The storage shed is an eyesore, especially compared to the magnificent structure it sits beneath and it, the storage shed, is off center. So much time, effort, and consideration went into what they built upward on that location. Why so little regard for what's been placed beneath?

The Feelies wouldn't have been so careless. They would have found another place to store the salt, or at least centered the shed. They'd make

¹² From their second album, *Chicago*, which is not to be confused with the band's debut album, *Chicago Transit Authority*. Chicago would avoid any subsequent confusion by using Roman numerals to name their next 17 albums, except for one: *Hot Streets*. Man, if you're going to break up a pattern go all the way *Hot Streets!*

great municipal leaders. They wouldn't leave a single eyesore in sight. Everything's perfectly placed on Feelies records. There's nothing careless or asymmetrical or out of balance.

They're not the most obviously charismatic bunch though, and that's a potential pitfall in their line of work. At tonight's show their stage banter is limited to "Thanks."; "We've got a new record out."; and "Thanks. Good night." Two sets, over two hours of music, four sentences spoken from stage.

Last spring Allie and I went to Carnegie Hall—a concert with a program and ushers and comfortable seating. I don't want to sound too much like Jethro jawin' by the cement pond but being handed reading material as I'm escorted to my cushy seat is rare.

We were there to hear the music of Steve Reich. It was his 75th birthday. The first piece was performed by So Percussion. Two marimbas and two vibraphones. They played "Mallet Quartet." It was built on a repetitive base, simple and static. Then there were subtle shifts in the other parts. Or maybe it was one static part and three that changed. It varied and it was hard to pin down. There was an optical illusion, too. I could see everyone playing but I couldn't be sure where each line was coming from. I could analyze the music or just get hypnotized. I liked having the choice.

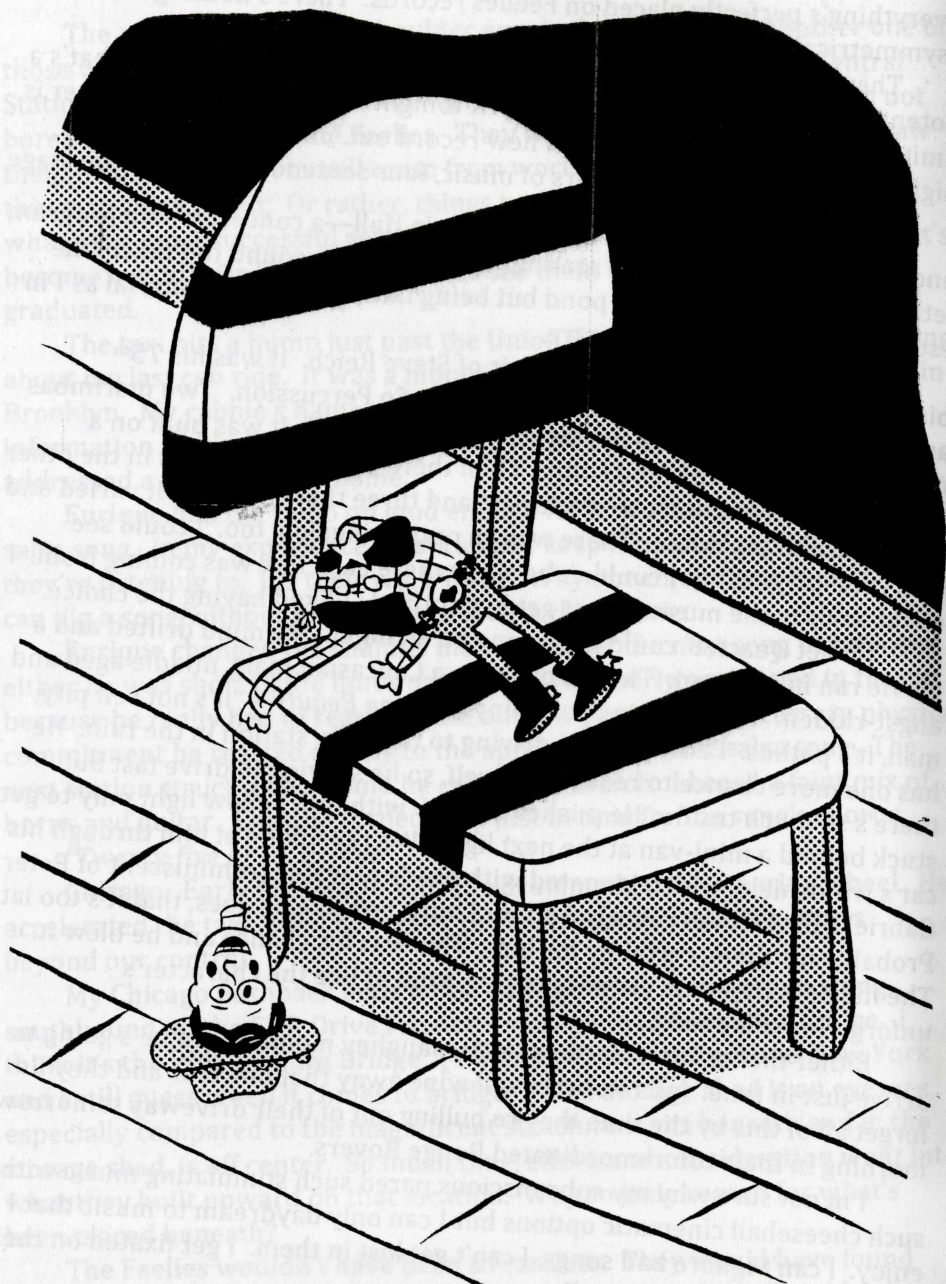
"Mallet Quartet" could have gone on all night. My mind drifted and a movie ran in my head. There's our star, a Caucasian male, middle aged and angst-ridden. Think Kevin Spacey in *American Beauty*—"it's not self pity, man, it's pathos. Pathos!" He's driving to the train station in the rain. He has one more chance to redeem himself, so he's trying to drive fast but there's so much traffic. He pushes his luck with that yellow light only to get stuck behind a mini-van at the next light. We're looking at him through his car's windshield, which is coated with beads of water (reminiscent of Peter Gabriel's first album cover). And we know, just like he does, that it's too late. Probably for them, certainly for him. This was his chance and he blew it. The music is hypnotic yet unrelenting, kind of like the character's unforgiving self doubt.

Either that or it's a Matthew McConaughey moment and he's going to arrive just in time. Julia Roberts will wipe away that one tear and they'll forget all of this by the time they're pulling out of their driveway tomorrow morning in their color-coordinated Range Rovers.

I'm not sure why my subconscious pared such stimulating music with such cheeseball cinematic options but I can only daydream to music that I enjoy. I can't ignore bad songs, I can't get lost in them. I get fixated on their flaws. They're like bad smells.

Kronos Quartet performed next. They did a piece called "WTC 9/11." It stunk. They had pre-recorded tapes, which included well-intentioned but clunky dialogue that I couldn't ignore. Neither could Allie.

After intermission, as the next piece was beginning, she leaned over and said, "I hope there's no words."



How Much Heart Can You Take? – Ten Days with the Future Virgins' *Western Problems*

Day One – July 19

"Did I tell you about this little tick I pulled off my leg this morning? It was the size of a pinhead, so I put it under the microscope at work and it was still holding a tiny piece of my skin. It was so small I could see through it and I could see it was injecting this stuff into the skin. They have this stuff that's like anesthetic and that's what it was trying to do." These are the stories Allie tells me as we drift to sleep.

Earlier today I broke out the new Future Virgins album (*Western Problems*, Plan-It-X South/Starcleaner). I'd just finished a 10-day journal on the latest Black Wine record and I figured I'd wait until we got back from vacation before I started a new album, but I gave in. Partly because I found the cover art appealing. It's saturated with deep, dark purple. It reminded me of a Wonderstuff record, the one with "Don't Let Me Down Gently." Who doesn't like purple?

But mostly because I've liked every one of Future Virgins' four singles and I'm curious if they can make the leap to a full-length record. Much as I dig those previous records it's always taken a couple of spins to adjust to the vocals and usually with bands like that small doses are best. That's meant to imply differences not flaws. Episodes of *The Wire* are 60 minutes. Episodes of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* are 30 minutes.

Halfway through side one I couldn't get the Replacements out of my head. Not actual Replacements songs but my sense of them as a band that would have taken over the world if they hadn't passed out in the doorway trying to leave the house. Flawed characters and romantic yearnings combined with punk rock yelling.¹³

It didn't take long to think that listening to *Western Problems* every day for the next 10 days would be a good idea so I stopped the album and started recording it onto my mp3 player. It took forever because there's no space between "Waiting to Disappear" and "Nowadays" and with my computer I have to place a marker between tracks in order to separate the songs. The same thing happened with "Nowadays" into "Troubled Heart." It was the first time I'd wished for a download card with a new record. I got so frustrated I considered downloading the album from iTunes.

¹³ Hindsight? I was way off. Future Virgins outlook is vastly different than Westerberg's, far more optimistic.

Day Two – July 20

My son, Sean, woke up at 5:30 this morning. He cried, rolled out of bed, ran into our room, climbed into our bed, and crawled under the sheets. He was back asleep in minutes. Allie and I weren't. We rested and we dozed while the ceiling fan pushed the cool morning air around the room.

I had to go into work today. I volunteered to be on the social studies committee. For a couple of miles I drove behind a truck with a Bible verse written on the back window. All I could make out was, "Behold, I stand at the door...Rev. 3, 20."

I listened to *Western Problems*, too. The first song, "No Echo," starts off like "Brown Eyed Girl." First, one jangly guitar. Then a second. Then tambourine on the quarter notes. When it pops into gear thoughts of Van Morrison quickly fade. From what I know of their other records, Future Virgins write lyrics that lean toward the sensitive and vulnerable, which seems at odds with the volume and tempos. They're devoid of self pity, too, and that's worth noting. Sounds like a description of the first two Dag Nasty records.

I think I'm misunderstanding some of the lyrics, though. For example, "Waiting to disappear" from the song of the same name. "Waiting" is not a verb I associate with Future Virgins. Neither is "disappear," for that matter. Seems too passive for these guys.

Day Three – July 21

Sean and I were up early again today. He softened the blow by asking to hear "the Candyland band." By this he means Underground Railroad to Candyland, specifically their song "That I Don't Know." I had my mp3 player on shuffle one night when I was doing dishes. The kids wanted to dance and the more I spazzed out to "That I Don't Know" the more they laughed. On the way to my office to listen to the song Sean stopped by the playroom to get a plastic baseball bat and a tennis racket. He had air guitar on the mind. I was exhausted so I sat down. "Come on, dad, you have to stand up." Sean is a good man.

I didn't see the Revelations truck this morning so I looked up the passage. "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Revelations 3:20). I thought about relating it to lyrics from *Western Problems* but the heat and the guitars said otherwise. It was 100 when I got home. I had some work to do outside. I put the iPod speakers on the backyard table and brought the garbage to the curb. I broke into a sweat halfway down the driveway. That concluded my manual labor for the afternoon. Still, *Western Problems* sounded great. It isn't a headphones record. It's best enjoyed out loud and in the sun.

Day Four – July 22

A few years ago I saw a movie called *Russian Ark*. I don't remember the plot. All I remember is having to turn it off after ten minutes because it was one continuous shot. There were no edits. A clever idea and probably a technical nightmare—there was only one camera but there were a bunch of different sets. I love labor-intensive ideas but this one was impossible to watch. I needed to blink, I needed those momentary breaks that come from changing camera angles. Maybe it would have worked for a short but not for a feature.

I can get that way with punk rock records, too. A short blast of certain bands, a single or an EP, is more effective than a full-length. I have four Future Virgins 7"s. I'm used to hearing the band in small doses, so I made a playlist that intersperses *Western Problems* with Mike Watt's last record, *Hyphenated-Man*. Side one of Watt, side one of Future Virgins, then their respective second sides. The Watt album has 30 songs, and that's too many for me to take in at once. I'm a sieve-minded man.

Western Problems works really well as two EPs. It's not as frantic as the band's early records, in some ways it's not as dynamic. In some ways it's more intense, though. Once they kick into a song they just go. There aren't as many breaks. (They work their drummer, Cole, like a dog.) It's a relentless record and there aren't many chances to blink. But whereas *Russian Ark* gave me a headache I keep going back to *Western Problems*.

There was a pause after I turned out the lights tonight. Then Allie said, "I think I'm neutering a goat tomorrow."

Day Five – July 23

Allie had a dream last night where she was on a cruise ship. It had something to do with Harry Potter. She was with a group of people. They were trying to find a sacred door. The hallway was covered in snow. When they opened the door they saw a mountain. It was covered in snow, too. "Then we had to go in this cave. It was so weird. One girl in the group wore high heels all the time. I remember looking at her and thinking how can she wear those?"

We stayed at her sister's house last night. Allie and Sean stayed downstairs. Maggie and I slept upstairs. Sometimes divide and conquer is the only way to get our rugrats to sleep. We read books and then listened to music. I had my mp3 player and we shared headphones. Even if it's songs you're not crazy about there's nothing better than sharing music with your kid. Maggie didn't fall asleep as fast as I expected. Instead, halfway through the second song she took out her earbud, said, "You, too, dad," and took mine out, too.

Today we went to a family party on Cape Cod. We walked along the shore, Allie, me, and the kids. Allie picked up everything of interest she found, living or dead.

When I went up to the house to get some drinks I thought about *Western Problems*. I thought of recurring themes in the lyrics: friends, break-ups, late night conversations under starry skies, secular faith. My last break up is pre-Clinton so I can't relate to those songs as much but Future Virgins optimism is irresistible. How many bands write break up songs that give equal weight to both parties? "*I want her to stay but she had other plans*" ("Half Life"). The song ends with this line: "*In the end I see you glittering.*" There are even fewer bands that can get away with any form of the word "glitter."

It was raining when I went back to the beach. I started to run but the rain on my back felt cool, so I slowed down. The ground was spongy and I could feel sand and wet grass and clovers. When I looked up there were bits of ocean grey between the pine tree branches.

Day Six – July 24

I woke up before Sean this morning. I knew he was tired last night because he didn't cry when the head fell off of his Woody from *Toy Story* doll. (Can't just refer to it as his "Woody" or even his "Woody doll.") As I lay in bed, resting because Sean was still slumbering, the phrase "tearless reaction to a headless situation" popped into my head. It sounded like a Future Virgins lyric. I spent the day singing it to the tune of "No Echo."

We're staying in Gloucester, Massachusetts for the next week. I spotted a Bible in our rental house and picked it up (the book, not the dwelling). It reminded me of the Revelations truck. Allie gave me a "What are you doing?" look. It may have qualified as a sneer. I started to read Revelations but was quickly confused by it.¹⁴ I found a note that said that it's the only book in the new testament that focuses on prophesy, what will be. It's a 180 from *Western Problems*—Future Virgins are devote followers of the here and now—especially the last song, "Posi Jam."

*There's no gifts from heaven
And there's no point in waiting
For some kind of lesson
It's up to you to start creating*

¹⁴ I have to confess that I don't always give Bible thumpers credit for being among our intelligentsia yet at same time the few times I've picked up a Bible I've understood precious little of it.

Day Seven – July 25

I went running on the beach today. I am not in good shape. There's no dodging that. It's only been a couple of weeks since I started running again. I'm far from the point where my mind can wander. As I came to the southern end of the beach where the boats were moored the sand gave way to salt marsh. I had a medley of Future Virgins songs in my head, bits of "Half Life," "Static," and "Nowadays." They distracted me from the exhaustion. Then "Key Largo" barged in, the Bertie Higgins song. It went like this:

(Ashley from Future Virgins, Righteous Punk Dude) *Don't let me drift away!*

(Bertie Higgins, Yacht Rock Dude) *Here's looking at you kid*

(AfFV, RPD) *Don't let me drift away!*

(BH, YRD) *Just like Bogie and Bacall*

It was incongruous but not unpleasant.

Day Eight – July 26

Why did Bertie Higgins interrupt my Future Virgins medley? I figured it out this morning. I was in a used record store yesterday and I saw a copy of the Bertie Higgins album with "Key Largo" on it. I'm all for unexpected juxtapositions but I prefer to know their origin stories.

Yesterday on the beach was like having a Bob Arctor moment. He's the main character in Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*. To his friends he's stoner Bob Arctor but he's also Fred, an undercover cop. His brain is slowly becoming like a worn out cassette where the sides bleed together, bits of side two are audible when side one is playing. The two sides of Bob's personality start blurring, the personas bleed together. To make it better Fred is spying on Bob unaware that he, Fred, is Bob. It's probably the best Philip K. Dick story.

Day Nine – July 27

One thing I love about being on vacation in eastern Massachusetts is that every seaside town has a used bookstore. A few years ago I decided that I wasn't going to have any unread books. I'd read the ones I already had and I'd only buy other books once I was caught up. I have not been successful. Browsing through used bookstores is too great a joy. Browsing in a used record store is even better.

Gloucester has such a store. Mystery Train. Gloucester is first and foremost a fishing town. They've got a monument with the name of each

local fisherman who's died on the job. The list goes back to the 1700s. It's not a town in which I expected to find long rows of used vinyl, turntables to check out the records, and employees who talk about old Flying Nun releases.

I made my second trip to Mystery Train today and I hit the motherlode. I found a dozen records, took them for test rides on one of the turntables and bought half of the albums. I didn't feel like a total glutton because I returned the other half. There was a modicum of restraint, however faint.

Meanwhile, Allie and the kids were at the beach with her mom who was staying for a couple of days. I felt a bit guilty, indulgent, taking that time for myself. It seemed like I was gone for awhile.

It was low tide when I got back to the beach. Allie was reading. Her mom was off with the kids.

"Did you have fun?"

"I could have stayed longer."

"You should have."

That put me in an even better mood. When I went to the snack shack to get lunch for everyone "Nowadays" came back. "*Don't let me drift away.*" Best line on the record. It's the line I was singing to myself when I walked past a Dodge Durango, one of those just-short-of-a-Hummer behemoths. The beast was idling and its back gate was open. A lady was changing her baby. Her dude was on a cell phone. I judged them instantly and harshly and I'm fairly certain that if they had *Western Problems* in their lives they'd know to turn off the engine, leave the cell phones at home, and trade in their gas guzzler for a sensible mid-size.

"Nowadays" was still in my head when I walked past a guy with a *Theatre of Pain* tattoo on his bicep. He too was in dire need of Future Virgins in his life. If you're going to opt for early '80s muscle rock at least go for Van Halen, at least there was little bit of self-awareness to buoy the idiocy.

"*Don't let me drift away*" was in my head again when I was doing a back float and looking up at the sky. It was cloudy and I could feel the current slowly pull me south.

Day Ten – July 31

It took me a few days to make it to day ten. The whole idea of these ten-day journals was to enjoy a new record and use it as a warm up for other writing but lately it's proven to be more a barrier than a bridge, so I took a break. Things cleared up today.

Flipping through the albums I bought in Gloucester I read a quote on the back of Fred Frith's *Gravity* (Ralph, 1980):

"In 1937 Curt Sachs wrote of dance, that it represented 'the victory over gravity, over all that weighs down and oppresses, the change of

body into spirit, the elevation of creature into creator, the merging with the infinite, the divine' which may not have a lot to do with what's on this record, but it seemed like a good place to start."

Then I went kayaking with Sean. We'd moved on to Maine. We were staying with family on a lake. It was late morning and he was asleep half way across the lake. I put down the paddle for a minute. A water droplet fell from the paddle onto Sean's leg and slowly streaked down to his ankle. He had a bunch of cuts and scraps on his legs from climbing rocks on the beach last week. They were nearly healed. They were tiny and they looked like the top of a sand dollar. There was the slightest breeze as we floated in the kayak. The water pushed up, the sun pushed down, and we drifted for awhile.



In 1937, Carl Sachs wrote of dance, that it represented the victory
over gravity, over all that weighs down and oppresses, the change of

A Small Lesson in Humility with James Taylor

I was in Chicago to see a show. I was staying with Frankie and Patrick, the O'Malley brothers. We were going out for pizza and the oldies station was on. The Supremes and the Monkees gave way to James Taylor, and the conversation switched gears.

Frankie said he can't stand James Taylor. Patrick and I agreed. I said that James Taylor was like audio transfat. Unhealthy and unnecessary. It became a running joke that weekend. I thought about using it for the title of this zine but it was too glib for my tastes, maybe even smug.

When I was in high school I could give or take James Taylor. None of my friends listened to his records and he was too mellow for the radio stations I listened to. I rarely heard his music. That changed in college. It seemed like his *Greatest Hits* album was part of the same ubiquitous freshman year starter kit that also included Steve Miller's *Greatest Hits 1974-78*, Bob Marley's *Legend*, and AC/DC's *Back in Black*. They were records I couldn't escape. Every dorm room had them on hand. So did the local bars.

Still, the "audio transfat" anecdote stuck in my head. It seemed like it might work well with the other pieces in this zine. It became like a game of Tetris. Was there a way to rotate the idea to make it fit?

While turning it this way and that I read *U and I* by Nicholas Baker. It's about his obsession with John Updike. I read the following and thought of James Taylor: "You should not speak ill of any writer, living or dead, to anyone but your closest friends, and absolutely not in print. Simply don't talk about, don't give space to, things you don't like." (*U and I*, p. 120)

If the smart guys didn't condone unfounded cheap shots, why should I? I had other choices. I could forget about James Taylor. That would be easy enough. I could listen to his music and give it another chance, but that would involve listening to James Taylor songs.

There was also *Two Lane Blacktop* to consider. It's the one movie in which James Taylor has appeared and it's quite good. He plays the Driver. He and the Mechanic, played by Beach Boy Dennis Wilson, also starring in his first and only film, go from town to town running their '55 Chevy in street races. They pick up the Girl (Laurie Bird), a hitchhiker. Later they challenge GTO (Warren Oates) to a cross country race. No one uses names. No one gives a reliable backstory. There's not much dialogue and there's less of a narrative. Still, it's a compelling movie, a classic case of "less is more," and much of the credit goes to James Taylor.

Though I could concede that Taylor's performance was good, I was still a bit dismissive. He spends half of his screen time gripping the wheel of the '55 Chevy and staring ahead. I chalked it up to sustained brooding, a one-note performance. That changed when I was driving home from a show one night in July.

Allie was out of town so I got a sitter to watch the kids. There was a ton of traffic and I was going to be late. This is not how you keep good babysitters, so I was driving like a madman. I was passing cars on the curves of the Saw Mill Parkway at night, which is ill-advised, but I'd never felt more in control of a machine. I was perfectly focused, steering, braking, listening to the engine, feeling the tires bear hug the pavement, clutching the steering wheel at ten and two. It was intense. I wasn't tempted to put in a CD or turn on the radio. I listened to the changes in the wind, which got louder when I drove past a guardrail and louder still when I sailed past the cement barriers that separated the northbound and southbound lanes. It was a chilly night and I had the windows down but I wasn't cold. Despite the hour I wasn't tired or thirsty or hungry either. My first inclination is to say that it was like being on autopilot, that my senses were deadened but they were heightened. I was more aware of everything. More than once I thought to myself, I'm kind of like the Driver in *Two Lane Blacktop*, at least externally.

There are a few ways you can play a car movie. You can unbutton your shirt and camp it up like Burt Reynolds does in *Smokey and the Bandit*. You can unbutton your shirt and play it cool like Barry Newman does in *Vanishing Point*. Or you can keep your shirt buttoned and your thoughts to yourself while you drive and dwell and fester and wade through the stink of your own lousy existence like James Taylor does in *Two Lane Blacktop*. I'd never want to be the Driver or to be with the Driver or to feel like the Driver. I'm not even sure if I sympathize with the Driver because it's not clear how responsible he is for his predicament, where he sits along the perpetrator/victim continuum. He's an enigma, and the less I know about the character the more questions come to mind.

James Taylor wasn't just brooding. His performance was nuanced and it was great. He seemed perfectly natural. I was surprised that he didn't appear in more movies. Then I saw his interview with *Two Lane Blacktop* director Monte Hellman. It's on the extras disc of the Criterion Collection reissue. Taylor and Hellman met up in the fall of 2007. They hadn't seen each other since filming wrapped back in 1971. The movie was clearly a mixed experience for Taylor. In fact, at the time of the interview Taylor still hadn't seen *Two Lane Blacktop*. Even more than the movie itself, the interview made me consider the previously unthinkable: James Taylor can be a righteous dude.

James Taylor: Actors' Rights Advocate

The interview opens with James Taylor and Monte Hellman discussing why they don't watch their own work, Taylor his concerts, Hellman his movies. Hellman seems genuinely curious and comfortable. Taylor seems ill at ease. It's awkward to watch even though Hellman's initial question—Is it true that you haven't seen the movie?—allowed Taylor to naturally steer the

conversation to his music. He looks at the floor a lot. He looks away and he rarely maintains eye contact with Hellman.

At the 3:07 mark, James Taylor turns the tables and starts asking questions.

"*Two Lane Blacktop* was my only film. I've often wanted to ask you questions about your thinking about it. We were given a page of script or a scene at a time. I got the feeling that—perhaps not trusting us is the wrong way to put it—but you didn't want to include us, to give us an overall idea of what the movie was. We didn't see the script in advance. Many of us didn't. I suppose Warren Oates did. How about Harry Dean (Stanton)?"¹⁵

It's like a son finally confronting his father, tentatively asserting himself asking the questions he's held onto for years. I like that Taylor's speaking on behalf of his fellow actors, too. He might be voicing his grudge but he has Dennis Wilson and Laurie Bird in mind, too.

Meanwhile, Hellman isn't fazed. He explains that giving out the script day by day was an experiment. Given the nature of the story—characters in a cross-country race—they had to shoot in sequence and he wanted the actors to live as much like the characters as possible. Translation: It wasn't just you, James, it wasn't personal.

Nearly 40 years have passed and there is still a lot of confusion. Was Hellman's rationale not explained back in 1971? Was it not explained well? Was it misunderstood? Was it simply rejected?

James Taylor: Sly Dog

8:02 – Hellman mentions Joni Mitchell. She and Taylor were dating in the early '70s. She visited him on the set of *Two Lane Blacktop*. Later she performed the main and end title songs for Hellman on another movie. At the mention of Mitchell, Taylor gets a devilish grin on his face and looks down at the floor. Hellman continues talking about how great she was to work with but Taylor seems swept up in a memory, the kind that might brush up against the lascivious but doesn't seem to stumble into the gross or creepy. It's a lot to read into a look but I sided with him regardless. He tries to pay attention as Hellman continues with his anecdote but Taylor is gone. *Blah blah blah, Monte. Joni Mitchell, wow.*

8:50 – Taylor talks about playing on Mitchell's new album. "I've seen her recently, which was great. The album's fantastic. It's a thrill to have access to it again, her writing." He seems just as enamored with her intellectually, her talent stirs him just as much.

¹⁵ Harry Dean Stanton appears in one scene. He plays a hitchhiker picked up by GTO.

James Taylor: Mutineer

16:36 – Hellman asks if Taylor remembers his “mutiny,” when he refused to work without seeing the script. Taylor answers politely, “Uh, no I don’t. Did I insist on the script at certain point?” He seems to be thinking, Atta boy, Younger James!

Now Taylor is more comfortable. “It began to bug me that you didn’t trust me with my own character. It’s not that I got anything from getting the script it’s that I wanted to be included. We weren’t allowed to see dailies. I think that’s wise also.”

He’s more direct in addressing what bothered him and he concedes there was wisdom in some of Hellman’s choices. Yet there’s still an air of “but you still shouldn’t have done it that way, Monte.”

James Taylor: Grease Monkey

21:50 – Taylor starts talking about Jay Wheatley, the mechanic who built the three cars used in the movie. He wasn’t acting like the elite, aloof prep school pretty boy I’d imagined him to be. He buddied up with the guy who rolled up his shirtsleeves and did the work. And Taylor knows about cars. Check it out.

“I remember the day we were shooting the last scene and I destroyed the car and just by the luck of the draw did not kill the cameraman. There was a Hearse Linkage in there and reverse was very close to first. You couldn’t tell by feeling it. Jay had cocled down the engine, or somebody had, I can’t remember who. We had pushed the car forward and then put it in reverse and then backed it up to the position it was going to be filmed from.

“So it was sitting there in reverse, where in all the other shots it had been sitting there in first. Jay just said take it up to where you feel the valves float and it won’t rev any higher, which was about sixty-five hundred, and then just dump the clutch, just drop it. That particular shot was the first time I’d really driven the car completely. I did some burnouts in earlier shoots but that particular one I was loving, I was just loving it. And I remember as if it were in slow motion, seeing the front carapace (?) of the car, which had an air scoop on it. It just twisted off the car and went up in a spiral and I whipped my head around. The thing (the car) sprung to take a torque in a forward direction but if you gave it full torque backward it’s as if the two wheels were like drumsticks going bam! bam! bam! and the drive shaft snapped right off, came whipping up through the floor right between the cameraman’s legs and right back out again. Completely spun it out. Pieces of metal just flying all over the place.

“The rear differential just exploding into shrapnel and thank god although they had been shooting right behind it—taking these stills as we shot away into the distance down this abandoned runway—for that

particular run the battery was dead in the camera or it needed a new role of film and he (the still photographer) just happened not to be there that one particular time 'cause it definitely would have taken his head off."

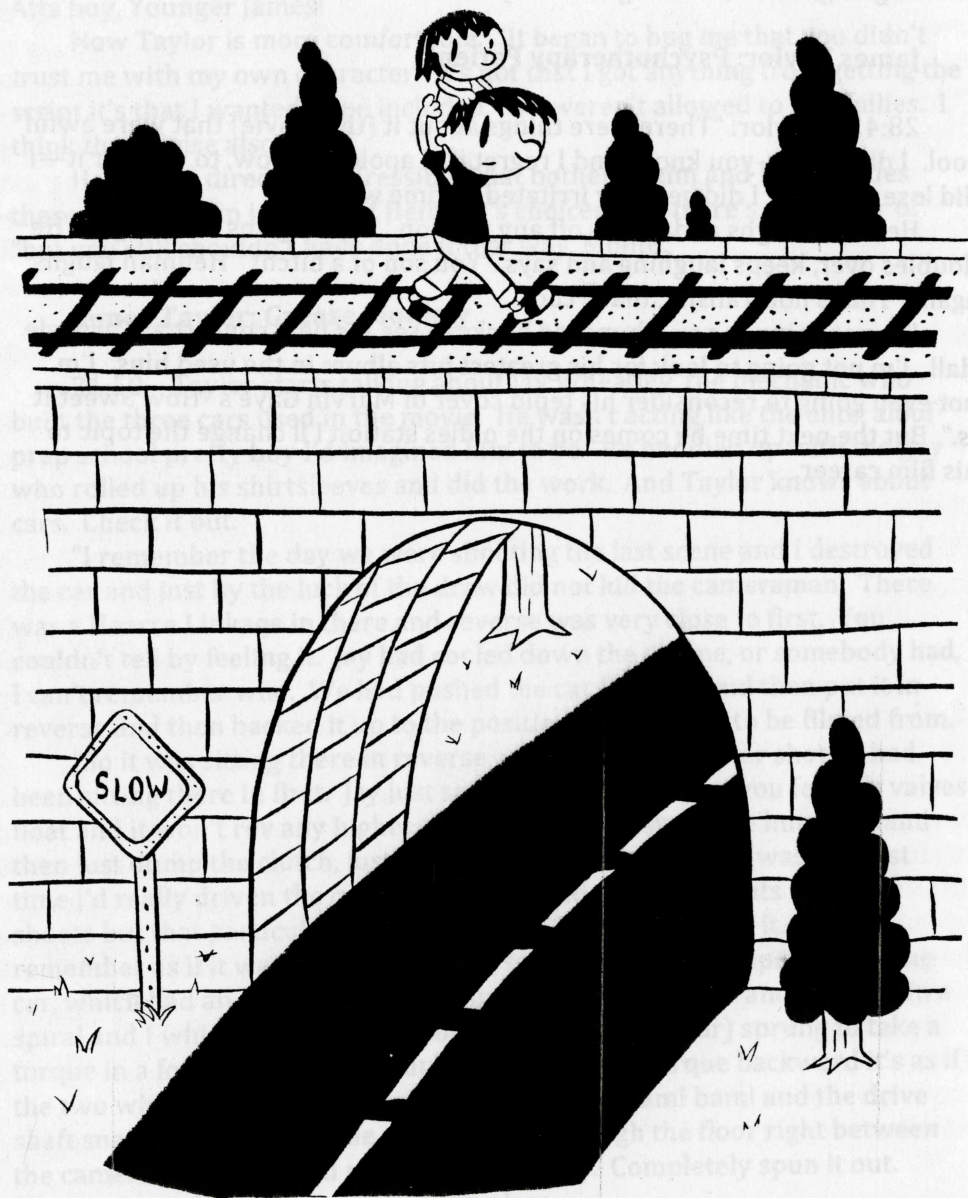
Throughout this anecdote Taylor is animated and smiling, gesturing and laughing, and wondering how they survived this freak accident.

James Taylor: Psychotherapy Patient

28:42 – Taylor: "There were things about it (the movie) that were awful cool. I did, I did—you know, and I regret it. I apologize now, to you, for it—I did lose my cool. I did get very irritated as time went by."

Hellman laughs and staves off any tension. Taylor grins and laughs. He doubles over, keeps laughing and says, "You son of a bitch!" Hellman laughs again. That's not transfat, that's cool.

I'm not going to pay a hundred bucks to see his next concert at Carnegie Hall. I'm not going to look for his greatest hits album in the used bins. I'm not even going to reconsider his tepid cover of Marvin Gaye's "How Sweet It Is." But the next time he comes on the oldies station I'll change the topic to his film career.



Simple Pleasures in America

I took a personal day for Maggie's kindergarten orientation. We slept in a bit and then she took me on a dinosaur hunt by pouring a bag of wooden blocks on a blanket. Those were the bones. Then we went on vacation, sitting on the couch turned airplane.

The orientation at school was brief. She went off with a teacher while I waited in the gym. She came back ten minutes later and the teacher told me how many letters and numbers Maggie was able to identify.

We went for a walk when we got home. We crossed the street and passed the decaying general store. The shoulder was narrow but I could tell from the way Maggie held my finger that the oncoming cars weren't making her nervous. They put me on edge, though, and I felt better when we got to the well-worn footpath that led us to the abandoned railroad tracks. They used to be part of the Old Put line that ran into New York.

Twenty feet into our walk Maggie wanted to stop for a snack. "Just to hold it," she said. The railroad tracks were so wide and she was so small that they were like sidewalks to her. She could walk at full pace. We slowed down when we came to the first bridge. There was metal grating to walk on but it didn't have railings and it passed over a road, so I picked her up. She's not good at masking her anxiety but she thought this was cool. She gave me a normal hug as I carried her; there was nothing like the pressure of a panic hug. A quarter mile later we stopped to eat the crackers she'd been carrying. The sound of traffic had faded. There was just the quiet ebb and flow of cicadas.

I thought of this day when I finally saw the Arrivals. I'd missed them so many times over the years that I decided to fly to Chicago to catch one of their shows. At some point in the middle of their set I had this sense of walking on the railroad ties, that something solid and reassuring was underfoot, especially the songs from their Razorcake EP and the song that closed their set, "Simple Pleasures in America." I got to talk to Isaac from the Arrivals about it after the show. He said he came up with the idea for the song while he was out biking with his daughter.

I tried to recall what Maggie and I had talked about on our walk that day but I couldn't remember anything. It was the opposite of the Truman Capote movie with Philip Seymour Hoffman. I was jealous because he could remember conversations so accurately. It stunned me that a person could do that, but thinking back to that day on the train tracks with Maggie I was grateful for my mental sieve. I'd hung on to the important bits—the way she squeezed my finger as we balanced and talked, the sun warming the back of my neck as I gazed down at the tracks, stopping for a snack, and seeing how fast we could go without falling.



Bake Says U2 Is the Best American Band of All-Time: Ten Days with the Jennifers' *Well-Intentioned World*

Day One – August 11

My plan for today was to listen to *Well-Intentioned World* after I dropped off Maggie at day camp and then come home and put XTC's *Black Sea* on my mp3 player. I was excited. I first heard bits of *Well-Intentioned World* about two years ago. It was fantastic.

The first part of my plan was undermined when a Dan Zanes disc got stuck in my car's CD player. Maggie wanted to hear his version of "You're Never Fully Dressed Without a Smile." I did, too. We were disappointed.

Then I came home to record XTC's *The Black Sea*. My copy has many skips. I've put off buying a new copy for years. Two weeks ago I yielded and bought a second copy. Of course it skipped. I borrowed a friend's copy, which also skipped. It had to.

This was a sign that XTC would wait and that the Jennifers would move to the front of the line. I listened to their disc three times and it held up to my recollections. "Simon Says" jumped out because the lyrics are about *The Wire*, which was set in the Jennifers' hometown of Baltimore. The song specifies Stringer Bell's fate, which led to at least one complaint when the Jennifers played it live. For awhile they had to announce a spoiler alert.

Last week I read that Felicia Pearson, who played Snoop, one of Marlo's hired guns on *The Wire*, pled guilty to conspiracy to sell heroin. I was so bummed out to read this.

I was even more disappointed by her solution to the situation. Because she pled guilty she was allowed to travel for work. Her way of avoiding drug-related problems in the future was this: "I'm going to move to Hollywood."

Day Two – August 12

With the clarity that a good night's sleep brings I see where I might have been going down the wrong path last night. It was late and I was going down one variation of the music geek's worm hole. I was digging up old records, reading about them on the internet, and bouncing from one link to the next. It started off firmly grounded. I saw a chunk of Steely Dan albums and realized that I hadn't listened to them in years, and then I cruised through them, putting the best songs on my mp3 player. I like to read when I listen to music, so I went to Wikipedia. I found out there have been two new Steely Dan records in the last decade and I considered buying them. Despite the late hour I stumbled over a bit of clarity and realized it made more sense to hear the records I already have, the ones I was putting onto my mp3 player.

A better idea perhaps would be to see Steely Dan live, check out one of those shows where they play a classic album from head to toe. They were playing a series of such shows at the Beacon Theatre. I looked into tickets but the website didn't list prices. I needed to move onto a new band.

Eleven hours ago the band that beckoned was Moby Grape. I bought their second album *Wow* (1968) about ten years ago and hadn't listened to it. *Wow*, as I discovered last night, is vastly inferior to Moby Grape's first record but here's the thing: side one closes with a song that spins at 78 RPM. The rest of the album revolves at 33 1/3 but the first side ends with a tune called "Just Like Gene Autry; A Foxtrot," which, by design, revolves at 78 RPM. (Kudos for the semi-colon, Moby Grape.) It was written and sung by Skip Spence, the infamous acid casualty who later created a legendary solo album called *Oar*. According to the liner notes Arthur Godfrey played banjo and ukulele.

I tried listening to it at 45 RPM to see if I could discern some sense of the song but of course that didn't work. I was 32 RPM short of proper speed. I thought about trying to make up for that 32 RPM manually, spinning the turntable faster but that seemed pretty dumb and unlikely to work. I should have gone to bed but I went back on-line. I spent the better part of a half hour searching for an obscure song from a second tier band from an era that is, at best, mildly interesting to me. Eventually I found "Just Like Gene Autry; A Foxtrot." It was a lot of work for a megaphone and ukulele tune.

Then I disconnected and went upstairs to sleep. Today was a different tale. First of all, I fixed my car's CD player and I listened to *Well-Intentioned World* after I dropped off Maggie and it sounded wonderful. Second, after six months of not being able to do so, I figured out how to record 45s onto my mp3 player. This allowed me to record Young Governor's amazing "Firing Squad" single. Two-thirds Big Star, one-third New Order. It was a day of technical triumphs.

Later we were driving to a friend's wedding. I told the kids we had two new CD's for the trip: a Muppets "best of" and *Well-Intentioned World*. The Jennifers have a video for the title song and my kids love it. Among many other fascinating visuals, the video has John Irvine (guitar, vocals) and Joe Tropea (bass, vocals) wearing t-shirts on which appear animated mouths that do the lip synching. Maggie and Sean call it "the t-shirt song."

Day Three - August 13

The wedding ceremony was perfectly one-of-a-kind. It took place in the planetarium at the Rochester Museum and Science Center. It was just what I'd expect from my bandmate Mike and his bride Chelsea. They chose great music, too (Big Star, Zombies). Great friends, good pop tunes, and astronomy is a potent mix.

I caught up with my other bandmate, John. We talked about books. He asked how teaching is going, and not just to be polite. He went to school for

teaching so he understands the job. We talked about the books I read aloud to my fifth grade students and about teaching ambiguity to ten-year-old kids. A lot of kids don't like stories with grey. They prefer black or white. As we talked I pictured the eastern borders of California and Maine.

I had extra copies of *Well-Intentioned World* and I was glad I brought them. This was a Jennifers crowd.

Day Four – August 14

We met friends for breakfast. The hotel restaurant was crowded. There were two soccer teams along with the wedding party. We sat for 15 minutes with no napkins, silverware or water. The hotel was clearly understaffed and our server, though outwardly calm, was overwhelmed. John broke the ice. He got silverware from the buffet table. Minutes later Allie returned with glasses of orange juice. Then she went into the kitchen for coffee. She poked around for a bit but couldn't find any mugs, so she asked the manager.

We joked about whose post-reception night was most decadent. John and his wife fell asleep half through an episode of *The Jersey Shore*, the fourth season where they're in Italy. Allie talked about her idea for a reality show about life in a veterinary hospital. Partly about the pet owners, mostly about what happens in the exam room. She wanted to call it *In the Back*. Consensus at the table was to keep the concept but change the title. Allie explained the origins of the title—"He's going to be okay, ma'am, but let me take him in back."—but this did little to help her cause.

When we were driving home the Beach Boys came up on shuffle. Based on the way the kids have responded to the Jennifers—they love "the shirt song"—I thought they'd like the Wilson brothers. But Sean objected quickly and loudly when he heard "Wouldn't It Be Nice." "Turn it off! This isn't kids' music!" He's right, of course. Even if you are well-versed in Beach Boys lore, the heartache is those songs is pretty apparent.

Day Five – August 15

This morning Maggie and I listened to "Well-Intentioned World" on the way to camp. She asked about the lyrics and her questions moved the Venn diagrams for *Pet Sounds* and *Well-Intentioned World* closer together.

"What's 'not well-intentioned boy' mean?"

"That's a boy who makes mistakes."

"What's 'not well-intentioned girl'?"

I kept my response short. "A girl who makes mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes." I thought of the Beach Boys, too. The people in "Well-Intentioned World" are like adult versions of the narrator and his girlfriend from "Wouldn't It Be Nice." They've been worn down by the intervening years but they haven't been trampled.

"What's 'best laid plans' mean?" This line reminds me of "*Wouldn't it be nice to live together in the kind of world where we belong.*"

"Those are the things people want to do. Like how you make plans for what you want to do after school."

"What's 'well-intentioned world'?"

I paused and considered pulling over so I could figure out what I believe about the inherent good or evil in the world. How much is intentional? How much is just physics? Should I rent *What the Bleep?* I thought back to a conversation Allie and I had the other day. I told her about one of the Sean anecdotes I used elsewhere in this zine and she reminded me of a David Cross bit where he receives a phone call from a buddy. The friend has recently become a parent and he no longer hangs out with David very often. He's calling, rather excitedly, to talk about his infant son. "My kid looked at a grape!" Translation: I'm calling to share my enthusiasm for something my kid did, something all kids do but this time it was *my* kid doing it, hence my enthusiasm." (Track 6 on Cross's *It's Not Funny* CD is titled "My Child Is Enthralling, Especially When It Says Something Unexpectedly Precocious Even Though It Doesn't Understand What It Just Said!") What I'm aiming for is to dial in on something so specifically it opens that situation up to other people, whether or not they have kids or a marriage or a career. Ideally not even a shared taste in music would be needed to dig this zine but I don't think I've scaled those heights.

Responding to Maggie's last question I opted for the question that might have led to the lyrics, "It's whether the world is good or the world is bad." She said, "I wish the world is good."

Day Six – August 16

I heard that Ray and Dave Davies may have reconciled. I went to Ray's website. He has a new CD on which he performs Kinks songs with the likes of Bruce Springsteen, Metallica, and Alex Chilton. Bon Jovi's on there, too.

Those are weird pairings but they pale compared to what I found on DaveDavies.com. He is offering spots for The Dave Davies Satsang Weekend and Spiritual Retreat. It's a weekend at Dave's home in England. The event is just a month away but they haven't listed a specific weekend yet. The itinerary says, "The Friday – September."

And a fascinating itinerary it is. After check-in there's a meet and greet and group blessing. Then there's about seven hours of relaxing and meditating and talking. It reminded me of the Steven Segal Buddhist retreat that David Rakoff wrote about in *Fraud*. Among the disappointments was the fact that Segal let other people lead most of the activities.

After the relaxing and meditating the Dave Davies Satsang Weekend and Spiritual Retreat will move to the "music room for drinks" at 4:45. This sounds cool. I figured there'd have to be a least one other person who was there for the music. Dave plays from 5-7 and does a Q&A from 7-8. If only I

could endure the first portion of the day, I'd consider going. I mentioned this to Allie. Her look brought me in off the ledge but later I did send an email to the address listed on the website, just to see how much they're charging and whether Dave's playing solo or with a band. I wouldn't fly across the Atlantic for a solo show.

Meanwhile, I was listening to *Well-Intentioned World*. The line of the day was "*These words can't tell you anything that you don't already know*" ("Roses"). I love that they open the record with a lyric like that.

I thought about the cover of the CD, too. It has close ups of t-shirts with big, animated smiles. A blue shirt on the front. A red shirt on the back. They're stills from the "*Well-Intentioned World*" video. They look like the smiles in the storefront on Beach Boys' *Smile* bootleg. Despite the repeated mentions, *Well-Intentioned World* doesn't sound like the Beach Boys. It doesn't sound like the Damned or the Jam either, though the lyrics mention the likes of Captain Sensible and Paul Weller. I hear other bands—XTC, Guided By Voices, Echo and the Bunnymen, Luna, and the Soft Boys.

Day Seven – August 17

Allie had the day off. We met her dad at a nearby lake. I was about to go in when I saw a water snake. It was kind of hanging in the water like a squirmy pipe cleaner. Sometimes the great outdoors is best experienced on the sidelines. I sat out for awhile. Bits of Jennifers songs bounced in my head. Melodies and guitar lines from "*Around the World*" and "*150,000 Things*," mostly.

I haven't identified the source material of the lyrics to the extent that I did with the band's last record (*Colors From the Future*, Beef Platter, 2007). And I'm lost on "*Elephant Heart*."

How we gonna keep this love forever?
How we gonna tear these rabbits apart?
Why'd we ever tie those snakes together?
How we gonna feed this elephant heart?
Do we even need this elephant heart?
*And what you gonna do now?*¹⁶

¹⁶ "*Elephant Heart*" is one of those careful-what-you-wish-for songs, with someone wanting a big big love, but who's also aware of the entanglements that would come with it. When you are not having love/sex you are always trying to figure out how to get it, and when you are in it, you wonder sometimes, just how you might need to go about disentangling, or wish you didn't have to feed it so much. The rabbits and snakes are, I suppose, about sex. But all of this was determined after the fact - the song started out with just the guitar riff, and some nonsense place-holder animal-related words that fit the tune. But they were fun to sing, so they stayed and the rest of the song was built around them." John, email, 8/18/11.

After awhile there were 15-20 people in the water. Most of them were under the age of ten. None of them were complaining about snakes, so I manned up to the extent that I'm capable and went swimming.

I heard back from Dave Davies' publicist or handler or whomever is fielding his fan emails. She said he's playing with a small group. She didn't disclose the cost. She did write, "But please give me your number or call us and we can discuss." Her use of "us" suggested more of a group mindset that I'm comfortable with. Plus, in my previous email I'd said that I live in the U.S. and would not likely attend the event. I had the sense that, had we spoken, I would, at the very least, have ended up on a mailing list for *Aroma Therapy & Area 51: The Connections You're Not Hearing About!*, or some such.

Day Eight – August 18

I was up on the roof today. Part of the siding came loose and Allie and I cobbled together a plan for how to get up there and nail it back in place. A ladder, a power drill, heights, these are not elements I typically work with, but I made the climb to the lower roof and then the upper roof. I crawled to the edge. I tried tugging the siding into place but it wouldn't give. Something was hung up. I crawled closer, got that tingle in my toes that I get from being up too high, and I pulled on it again. A swarm of hornets flew out. Bastards had a nest up there and I had to scramble away.

Mother Nature – 1, Writer Boy – 0

I retreated to the safety of the great indoors and found that John Irvine from the Jennifers had responded to my email. I asked him about a line in "Simon Says": "*Don't worry about your crime/Simon says just be who you are.*"

John: "'Be who you are' is mostly about Snoop—and about (David) Simon casting real-life Baltimoreans, who have real-life rap sheets. The most interesting thing about that song for me, though, is how, when writing the lyrics, I unintentionally dropped in some *West Side Story* allusions. The original cast recording of that show was one of the records my parents had when I was growing up, so all those songs are tattooed on my brain. The parallels are kind of interesting—the east-side/west-side thing is obvious. But also "Little man you're a king" is what happens when you are a Jet, but in Baltimore, youngsters are referred to as "little man", and then, of course, young Marlo becomes the King, and little Kenard comes at the king and doesn't miss."

Day Nine – August 19

I woke up early. My friend Steve and I were meeting at his office to copy the new issue of our baseball zine, *Zisk*. It was the first time I'd heard an alarm clock in weeks.

It was cool and foggy when I went outside. I had to wipe the car windows. A mile down the road the traffic light looked like a Christmas light

in a blizzard, a fuzzy bit of red nearly lost in the soft white. I had "150,000 Things" on. When I peaked the next hill the fog cleared, the sun came out and John Irvine sang, "*It's just a tiny little winter in the middle of the spring.*"

On board the train I saw a Tanqueray ad with Stringer Bell. He was winking and making one of those "oh, this is so good" faces, which most people are allowed to make, but Stringer Bell is not.

My friend John is an actor. When he sees a friend on television his first thought is, Congratulations, you booked the gig. You beat the odds and got the job. I understand that perspective but I need that Tanqueray ad wiped away before I watch *The Wire* again.

We had to scrape our Zisk plans. The copier was out of toner. The replacement toner was locked up and no store in Manhattan carried the right cartridge. We mail ordered one and agreed to meet up again in a couple of weeks.

Day Ten - August 20

Bake called yesterday afternoon. We used to work together. He invited us over, which was perfect because Allie was out of town for the night and my kids could play with his kids, who aren't tattered or neglected or riddled with mange like you'd assume the children of a guy named Bake to be. He's a good dad.

I drove to the post office on the way. The town had just finished repaving Cornwall Hill Road. It was so smooth it felt like my car could coast forever. The kids dozed off and I put in *Well-Intentioned World*. I didn't think about it. I just turned the "fade" to F7, all up front, and enjoyed the hell out of the record. I'd been starting to think about school lately and I needed good music to keep those thoughts at bay. Summer's end is on the horizon. I like what I do but I'd rather work on projects at home. Like this zine. Or clearing off the last of the moving boxes from our back porch.

Bake and I stayed up until two in the morning. We talked about music. I was pretty sure he was lit when he brought out a cigar. I received confirmation when we started discussing the best American bands.

He'd been talking with friends recently about the best American bands of all-time. He was recalling which bands people mentioned. To what extent was he under the influence? Judge for yourself.

Best American Bands of All-Time (as recalled by Bake):

5. Phish
4. Metallica
3. Led Zeppelin
2. Red Hot Chili Peppers
1. U2



I woke up early. My friend Steve and I were meeting at a music store. I saw the new issue of our baseball magazine. It was cool and foggy when I went outside. I had to wipe a mile down the road the traffic light looked like a Christmas light.

Superchunk vs. Eric Clapton

In the fall of 2010 Superchunk released *Majesty Shredding*. One of my favorite bands of all-time was back for the first time in nine years. This was big news in my world. It had been so long since their last full-length that I assumed new Superchunk albums were a thing of the past. And *Majesty Shredding* ranked with the band's best. I listened to it a lot, especially the song "Learned to Surf." It was a great fall. My first book was out. I had plans to tour. I was listening to new Superchunk. But there was a turd in the punchbowl. The more I thought about *Majesty Shredding*, and "Learned to Surf" in particular, the more I thought about Eric Clapton's "Forever Man."

I had no idea how or why these two songs were linked. There differences are vast and numerous, none more apparent than their respective lineups which reveal a significant culture clash. Backing Clapton on "Forever Man" is a group of soft rock clock punchers such as Toto's Steve Lukather (guitar) and Jeff Porcaro (drums). Michael Omartian (Christopher Cross, Michael Bolton) played keyboards and Phil Collins produced. That's the kind of line up that should have the number for poison control listed beneath it.

Superchunk is comprised of a drummer-turned-comedian (Jon Wurster of Sharpling and Wurster), a former teacher (guitarist Jim Wilbur), and the co-owners of Merge Records (bassist Laura Balance and guitarist/vocalist Mac McCaughan).

While it's easy, and arguably well-advised, to side with the indie rockers over those with ties to Toto and Michael Bolton, it's worth noting that Eric Clapton also had Donald "Duck" Dunn (Booker T. and the MG's, Otis Redding, and countless other Stax recordings) on bass.

I wasn't surprised that the juxtaposition of these songs would have to go beyond staffing issues, but I was reluctant to delve further. I didn't want to ruin a good Superchunk song by overanalyzing it. I didn't want to go back to "Forever Man," a song I hadn't sought out in over twenty years.

"Forever Man" is quick to inform the listener that it is a product of the mid-'80s. The song opens with at least four lines of intersecting synthesizers. They're complemented by quiet hi-hat and distant roto toms where the beat will soon be. It's a quiet intro not beholden to any particular genre; everyone's welcome. There's a notable lack of guitars as the band builds anticipation for Clapton, rolling out the red carpet for the great guitar god waiting in the wings.

Clapton enters as the first verse begins. He strums a rhythm guitar part and politely delivers the lyrics. The background is decorated with female backing vocals and plenty of percussion to perk things up. Then there's the solo, the main attraction, proof that Clapton can still rev it up when he wants to. It's short and neat and trimmed, much like the beard he wore at the time well-manicured and equally suited for a night on the town or day in the

office.

Clapton solos again as the song fades out but the mix is awash with synthesizers; the guitar is secondary to the keyboards, which was a sign of the times. The same approach had worked commercial wonders for other guitar acts such as ZZ Top (*Eliminator*) and Van Halen (1984).

"Learned to Surf" is mid-tempo and upbeat. There are a ton of guitars, some melodic, some noisy. Mac shoulders all of the singing, pushing his voice to the high end of its range. Beyond that "Learned to Surf" is difficult for me to describe. As a song it makes perfect sense to me. In my world saying "It's one of the best Superchunk songs" should be sufficient. It's a song I want to be associated with.

That's not the case with "Forever Man." It was the first single on Clapton's *Behind the Sun*. I was excited to buy the album when it was released in 1985. It was the first time I was able to buy a newly-released Eric Clapton record. I'd be able to read about it in the present tense. I may not enjoy Eric Clapton's music now but I did in high school. In my senior yearbook I listed him as one of my favorite musicians. In hindsight, though, I wanted to like Clapton more than I actually did. I liked Cream's *Disraeli Gears* and his first solo album (*Eric Clapton*, 1970). I kept buying Eric Clapton records hoping I'd enjoy them as much. I tried *461 Ocean Boulevard*, *There's One in Every Crowd*, *Slowhand*, and *Backless*. I tried a live album (*Rainbow Concert*). I tried the side projects (Blind Faith, Derek and the Dominoes). None of them resonated.

I was searching for albums that measured up to the myth. I read *Rolling Stone* frequently when I was a teenager. They wrote about Clapton often. He loomed large in the magazine's classic rock landscape. He was *Slowhand*. The first guitar hero. The axe man who inspired London hipsters to spray paint "Clapton Is God" back in the '60s. I was an impressionable kid. I accepted the conclusion that Clapton was a legend even though the supporting evidence eluded me.

I came to resent *Rolling Stone* and everyone associated with the Woodstock generation. I thought they were pushing an agenda of nostalgia, clinging to an implicit but persistently condescending argument that they'd accomplished great things and we, kids my age, couldn't and wouldn't. Our best bet was to buy the merchandise and sadly nod in agreement when we read that a band like the Doors would never even get signed today. I had a typical teen's tendency toward hyperbole and self-pity, with a bit of self-righteousness. I stopped reading *Rolling Stone* and I cut back on my classic rock consumption. I was tired of accumulating lackluster Clapton albums. *Behind the Sun* was the last Clapton record that I bought. All the more reason I was confused to have "Forever Man" resurface, repeatedly, years later.

Superchunk, on the other hand, I'd experienced from the ground up. I first heard them in 1990. I was a senior in college. I had a weekly show on

the school's radio station. That fall we received a package from a new label called Matador Records. It included the Dust Devils, the Railroad Jerk, and Superchunk's self-titled debut CD.

The music on *Superchunk* was strange and murky. It was noisier and more intense than the indie rock bands I was listening to. It was also muddier and weirder than the punk rock bands I was familiar with. The vocals were buried. Mac was fond of squawking and I wondered if maybe his voice should have been further down in the mix. Still I tried different songs each week. I was intrigued.

I was trying to acquire a new taste. In some ways it was like what I had attempted with Eric Clapton records, but much more gratifying. Superchunk's saga was just starting to unfold. They didn't have years of backstory. Their records hadn't been canonized, they weren't under glass. It was up to me to do the bagging, tagging, and cataloging.

I saw Superchunk for the first time at the NYU student center. They played a barbeque. It was the spring of '92. I remember not recognizing a lot of the songs but I bought a copy of their new album anyway. I think it was Mac who sat at the edge of the stage selling copies of *No Pocky for Kitty*.

I was playing in a band by the next time I saw Superchunk. They played Max's in Ithaca and it seemed like everyone from our local scene was at the show. My friend John was accidentally struck in the forehead by Laura's bass. Later Jon Wurster pointed his drumsticks at our friend Meg when the band acknowledged her persistent request for "Skip Steps 1 and 3." We talked to Wurster back by the pool tables after the show. The best part of the night was when a group of us exchanged looks of "Holy crap! Did you hear that?" during one of the new songs. My friend John remembers it, too. "It was the first time we heard 'Precision Auto,' before *On the Mouth* came out. We were totally struck by the minor key verse and the major key chorus." Nearly twenty years later and we remember a key change.

I picked up each new Superchunk record as it came out. When *Foolish* came out I was living in Queens. I was still playing in a band. My bandmates and I spent more of our rehearsal time talking about *Foolish* than we did practicing. I got married the year that *Indoor Living* came out and I started student teaching just after the release of *Come Pick Me Up*. The horns on "Pink Clouds" caught me off guard. They sounded like they'd been lifted Bruce Springsteen's *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*. I also recall how "Hello Hawk" helped me relax each morning as I walked across the playground at P.S. 116.

When "Forever Man" started colliding with "Learned to Surf" it was the first time I'd thought about Superchunk records as a whole, as a discography, as signposts to my life in the '90s. It made me wonder if I'd feel different about Eric Clapton if I'd followed him firsthand throughout the sixties and seventies. If my friends and I had gone to his concerts and followed his career album by album. I wondered if perhaps my love of

"Learned to Surf" and my loathing of "Forever Man" wasn't just about the quality of music, if it was about the immediacy of the experience, the distance between artist and audience. Or maybe it was about scale. Maybe if Eric Clapton were an obscure guitarist from my hometown and Superchunk were chart topping arena rockers all of this would be reversed.

Accessibility and relative distance are certainly factors in the grand scheme of things. But the more I thought about the two songs, the further apart the circles in their Venn diagram drifted. Initially, the lyrics didn't help either.

In the summer of 2009 my wife and I went on vacation for the first time with our kids. There was a lot of cleaning and chasing and refereeing. There weren't many quiet moments. The only time I listened to music was when I washed dishes in the tiny kitchen of our rental house. Fortunately, I'd brought along the new Superchunk EP, *Leaves in the Gutter*.

The stand out song was "Learned to Surf," especially the chorus: "*I stopped swimming and learned to surf.*" I mumbled most of the lyrics but I sang that line every time. I heard an older dude who's figured he can't do X anymore—or doesn't want to or feels foolish doing it—so he tries Y and it's all right. I kept picturing a painting, it may have been the one from *Good Will Hunting*¹⁷, two fishermen rowing against the pounding waves, and I figured that, even in a life like mine, which is filled with relative ease, there's enough of that, pushing against oncoming forces. I loved the idea of learning something new in middle age, not grumbling or groaning or acquiescing, but rerouting. I didn't know what to do with that realization but parenting and teaching were kicking my ass and it was a relief to hear that point of view.

Superchunk recorded a slightly different version of "Learned to Surf" for their 2010 album, *Majesty Shredding*. I started picking up on other lines from the song's verses. And the further I dug into "Learned to Surf," the more I thought about "Forever Man." I suppose that the more I came to appreciate the Superchunk song, the more my mind sought a contrast, an opposite, something to compare it to. Figuring out what something is not is one way I back into figuring out what something is, or could be.

"Forever Man" is a peculiar song. Its lyrical stance is equal parts awkward goof and half-hearted chest thumping. On the surface it might seem to be a song of allegiance—*I'll stick with you forever, baby*—but there's more of a "I'm an all-night man" attitude, perhaps a reference to the Dominoes' "Sixty-Minute Man." That would be fine if Clapton were kidding but his vocal delivery is so business-like. There isn't a wink or a chuckle or an elbow nudge to be found.

Most of the lyrics are devoted to a kind of listless bravado. It takes considerable jutzpah to proclaim yourself a Forever Man, linking yourself to the limitless, the infinite, but Clapton seems bored by such status. Maybe

¹⁷ I used to think this was a well-known painting but I found out that Gus Van Zant did it for the movie.

he's already been a Forever Man for a millennium or three. Maybe there's nothing new for him. *Been there, done that. Not sure I need to do it again.* Less Zeus, more drowsy Homer Simpson.

The guy in the song is still impressed with his staying power (has Viagra used this song?), but he doesn't give his lady friend much respect. He doesn't think much of her intelligence because he has to keep declaring his love ("*How many times must I explain myself?*"). By my count he sings the title phrase 21 times (and the backing singers chime in with five more). For a man with all eternity to work with he seems surprisingly annoyed by and impatient with the need to repeat himself. He is, at worse, a misogynist, at best, a bore. What kind of a jerk writes such a song? Well, in all fairness, not Eric Clapton.

Clapton signed with Warner Brothers in the early '80s. His first record for the label was 1983's *Money and Cigarettes*. It didn't sell well. He later said that the record's title reflected that "*that's all I saw myself having left.*" I want to be generous in interpreting this comment. I want to think that Clapton was acknowledging the lack of gas in the creative tank. I try not to take it as a cry of self pity. *All I have left is money, which I've a ton of because even when I phone it in, like Backless, my records sell truckloads. Oh, and cigarettes. I have those, too. I have to lean on them because I can't drink or shoot up or snort coke anymore and man, that's a drag. Being a wealthy sober guy is a hardship you can't likely imagine.*

Two years later Warner Brothers rejected the first version of his next album, *Behind the Sun*. They felt that it lacked hits. They insisted that Clapton use songs from another writer, in this case Jerry Lynn Williams, who wrote three songs for the album, including "Forever Man."

I turned 40 in 2009, about two weeks before I first heard "Learned to Surf." But it wasn't until this past summer, when school was out and I was able to begin researching all of this, that I found out that the members of Superchunk were in their early 40s when they released "Learned to Surf." I looked up Clapton's age. He was 40 when he released "Forever Man." These were mid-life records. That was the link.

I went back to "Learned to Surf." I picked up on the verses. Superchunk had always been more a music band than a lyric band for me. There was a steady stream of phrases that caught my attention over the years, but they took a back seat to the music. That started to change with lines like this:

*If I drift out in channels way too deep
It's because I can't stand the shifting sands, shells under out feet*

It's like, I'm antsy. I may get in over my head but I can't just stand here. That doesn't mean I'm going to buy a dumb sports car or put my paycheck on the Knicks game or worse, recede into the couch buried under old

memories.

I love the underlying idea of this line, too:

*Put your suitcase down and leave your shoes
Gently by the door, in a puddle, with your blues*

It reminds me of "The Pasture" by Robert Frost. It's two-stanza poem. Both stanzas end with the same line: "I shan't be gone long/You come too." The invitation seems genuine and kind but it's not completely altruistic; the narrator needs company:

*I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I shan't be gone long. You come too.*

It's not sad. It's not lonely or desperate. But the narrator has some mental house cleaning to attend to; it's someone giving himself a gentle but much needed kick in the ass. Very much like the narrator in "Learned to Surf."¹⁸

In the end, "Forever Man" is harmless if soulless, phoned in with the enthusiasm of a checkout clerk bagging your groceries. Granted, there are worse ways to work through your forties. *Behind the Sun* ushered in a new era for Clapton. He was back on the charts and for the first time he had videos on MTV. Within a couple of years he was contributing songs to Martin Scorsese's *The Color of Money* and making ads for Michelob. But all of this required him to let other people write his songs and produce his records and alter his sound. "Forever Man" is passive and tired. It's not just the song's instrumentation or lyrics, though each of those helps as much as a lead-lined life preserver. "Forever Man" is sonic shorthand for someone who's given up, a guy who's let himself fall asleep at the helm and is at the mercy of the prevailing currents.

"Learned to Surf," conversely, sounds like a band having a great time. Selling fewer records, no doubt, but making better music and maybe sleeping better at night. Two decades into their career, wading into their middle years and busting ass when they put foot to board. I hear the song and think, Okay, so maybe having a 4 in the tens place doesn't mean that the

¹⁸ I heard some of this echoed in a recent episode of Marc Maron's WTF podcast. He interviewed Jonathan Winters and after the interview Winters took him on a tour of his home. He'd moved his bedroom downstairs and hanging from the ceiling were 50-60 model airplanes. Winters said, "These are my planes. They're great, right?" Later, in his opening monologue, Maron said, "It was so pure, so great. There was that part of himself that he held onto, and he's always held onto, that is so young and everything else is just stacked on top of that but the momentum of his comedy is exuberant, just visionary, because he lives in that moment."

slide has begun.

I don't know. I'm still circling all of this more than I'm landing on it. I'm not out to vilify Clapton or canonize Superchunk. I just needed to untangle these songs. I placed this essay last in the zine thinking that it would be the funniest, a good closer. Now it seems more academic, half way to "heady" but not to the point where you're thinking "Now I get it" or "I have things to reconsider." It might be stuck in the grey area. Maybe I am, too. I'm not sure. I should kick on the proverbial sump pump before any more doubt seeps in. Wait, no. Wrong aqua-related analogy—paddle out and look for the next wave.

Credits and thanks:

Jef Czekaj drew the cover and pages 6, 23, 37, and 47. Jef is the creator of *R2D2 Is an Indie Rocker*. He DJs and illustrates kids' books. His latest is *Cat Secrets*. Catch up at www.czekaj.com.

Dan Smith drew pages 16, 31, and 39. He's contributed to *Go Metric*, including our last cover. He's also an amazing guitarist. He's playing with Muler these days: <http://music.mulerband.com/>

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Some context:

Whether it's playing in bands (Egghead, Kung Fu Monkeys, Lost Locker Combo) or editing zines (*Go Metric*, *Zisk*) I've been knee deep in the nonsense that is punk rock for awhile. My first book came out last year (*The Hanging Gardens of Split Rock*, Gorsky Press) and I'm co-editing another with Steve Reynolds (a *Zisk* "best of" titled *Pete Rose's Bloody Steak Napkin*). I've toured a bunch over the past few years. I'd love to read at your local bookstore.

Let me know what you think:

Mike Faloon
P.O. Box 469
Patterson, NY 12563
gogometric@yahoo.com

Dedicated to Pete Pallasch

