

# ASK SCOTT

Downloaded from the *Loud Family / Music: What Happened?* website and re-ordered into Jan-Dec

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2001 (Year 5)

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*January 15, 2001*

**Scott, over the last 2 decades, you were able to absorb all them heady books, make those wonderful records, have a social life and have a grasp of current events and pop culture. I like to believe that I at least achieved the last three. In some of the stuffier circles of this social group I belong to, they tend to be heavy on the books and the current events and not so much on the rest. With my grasp of pop culture, I feel as though I'm Rupert Murdoch crashing a Pulitzer convention. Fortunately, most of my friends are not of the stuffy fringe. Jeez, am I digressing or what? So to get back to the original question, how did you find time for it all or are you now finally getting some sleep now that your musical career's on hiatus?**

**Waxing narcoleptic and waning insomnic,**

*Jack L.*

**Scott:** Hi, Jack! Thanks for writing.

Having "a grasp of current events and pop culture" is pretty far from being any sort of bullet feature of my life nowadays. You say "Marshall Mathers," I think: "as the Beaver." And let us be kind and say that the demand for wonderful records is more than manageable these days.

So we're only really talking about balancing reading and socializing, and, well, Nietzsche had trouble, but this isn't usually a fearsome dilemma.

I read mainly on the train during my work commute. To Spain. No, wait! But, seriously, a train commute is so, so much better than a driving commute. If you can work out a train commute, do it. I'm currently on a binge of reading all the material in the footnotes to "The Waste Land." Jessie Weston's *FROM RITUAL TO ROMANCE*, Petronius' *SATYRICON*, Baudelaire's *LES FLEURS DU MAL*, etc. Thomas Aquinas's *SUMMA THEOLOGICA* in the background. To get the kind of time on your hands that you need to read the *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*, your options are (1) felony conviction, and (2) train commute.

riding the little surrey with the (stuffy) fringe on the top

--Scott

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*January 22, 2001*

**Scott, I've been listening to the new album. "Blackness Blackness" is definitely my favorite song on it. Another job well done.**

**Scott:** Thank you much. That one ended up being more or less a pleasure to do, but I remember when we were working it up, I couldn't sing it at all, and I *really* couldn't play the slide guitar parts at all. It wasn't just weak, it was a train wreck any time I came in. I kept saying, "well, that's good, uh, we'll come back to my parts I guess."

**Not to get all psychological on you, but I have to say that your lyrics have been very different over the last two albums. You now write like someone who is afraid to say directly the stuff that you feel the need to write about. T.S. Eliot was in that boat to a great extent, and I wonder if that explains his increased appeal to you of late.**

Don't ask me to speak for the great poets, but in my case it's not exactly a fear of saying things directly. Rather, the medium -- rock lyrics in my case, but all art -- has an unwitting code of what is the thing to say and what is not the thing to say, and if don't say the thing to say, your punishment is that you will be considered indirect.

Not to ignore the possibility that I'm not enough of a lyricist to write a good direct line like "I want you so bad/It's driving me mad," but my own ego-biased opinion is that that isn't the issue.

Usually I feel a desire to get something across in a lyric which I feel was not quite clear to me until recently. How do you do that? To start with, how do you do it *directly*? Listen to an expert, a top modern scholar -- Derrida, Heidegger, Deleuze, Wittgenstein, maybe Eric Gans, Julia Kristeva -- share as clearly as he or she can knowledge about being alive, and if you are like me, you will quickly start wondering whether you are so much meant to share in *any* knowledge, as to understand that in the past, sharing of knowledge has been flawed, and before we can share knowledge properly, hard technical repair work must be done to the machinery, the end of which is nowhere in sight.

Fine. But if you ask me, T.S. Eliot is much more generous in his efforts to share knowledge *while* tearing down machinery. To do this, he uses analogies, which because he is T.S. Eliot are difficult analogies. I think the academic fashion in our era is to reject analogy on the grounds that it introduces ambiguity about how exactly the analogy applies to the subject. But I've come to believe -- probably along with Wittgenstein, actually -- that analogy is the best we can ever do. All real understanding boils down to our ability to say "it is *like* this."

So I am for analogy, and for poetic analogy. But I like it to require reflection -- and potentially benefit from discussion -- in an atmosphere uncondusive to rash conclusions. Plato didn't want poetry in the Republic because he thought it represented the mere viral spread of ideas, and he had a point. Think of "Deutschland Uber Alles." Just because you can sing along doesn't mean it's ultimately desirable; you may be dangerously ignorant of the very real need that both Plato and Derrida saw (albeit in conflicting ways) to question the machinery of idea transfer. When the *Four Quartets* by Eliot presents an idea, it seems unclear, pedantic, and unfashionable because care was taken that we not absorb what we

are hardwired to absorb. It has the true potential to tell you something you don't already know. It works against the machinery.

When Eminem presents an idea, it seems direct and real, because it works in perfect harmony with the machinery. A great David Bowie line was "the shame fell on the other side." With Eminem, the shame falls on the other side. Some third party -- not Eminem and not the listener -- is the pretender, the deserver of criticism, weak, objectionable. Put just about anything in that structure, with the appropriate degree of subtlety for you or me as an individual, and we will think: how direct. How real.

If you're infinitely direct, you say infinitely little.

**By the way, how do you feel about slo-core as a music movement (i.e. Low, Spain)?**

What I've heard is pretty good. I think I prefer more chiaroscuro sorts of music -- different modes and feels played thoughtfully against each other for a dramatic, polychromatic whole.

**Here's hoping we get another Loud Family album in short order.**

*Eric Vogel*

Thanks, but it looks like that short order would be: Adam and Eve on a raft, wreck 'em!

--Essinem

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**February 5, 2001**

**Scott, I hadn't seen you performing since *years* ago: must have been Game Theory at the Rat in Boston. So I dragged my spouse to TT's, and y'all were wonderful, wonderful.**

**One question: The dB's cover was lovely ... but what would your Holsapple cover have been?**

*John G. Norman*

**Scott:** Hey, thanks, John. Thanks for coming to the show, by the way.

That's a good question. In a way I think of Holsapple as being to Stamey as both McCartney and Harrison are to Lennon. Stamey, like Lennon, is a natural modernist. In Stamey's and Lennon's early days, they lived to share ideas, but were always loath to cooperate very much with the going medium for sharing ideas. Being something of a modernist by milieu, that resonates strongly with me, and yet I have to say that as I get older I have more and more respect for McCartney and Harrison, and the same -- albeit very large -- amount of respect for Lennon.

The parallels aren't exact (if only because my respect for Stamey has increased, too), but for some reason I feel it instructive to explain how I'd choose a Holsapple song. In a word, I don't think one usually goes to Holsapple to be *shocked*. To me, "Tearjerkin" is still edgy and nervy even after twenty years, as are most Stamey songs from the period, and I wouldn't really find that card to play in a Peter song.

On the other hand, and somewhat unlike the Beatles comparison, Peter is typically more emotionally direct and freer from affectation. (And conversely, Stamey and McCartney were more responsible when it came to making sense in the context of a larger tradition).

I've always wanted to do "Moving In Your Sleep"; that might be my answer. There's some first rate melodic genius in that one -- the way he comes in higher on "there may come a day" toward the end, and varies the resolution upward, is an amazing touch. I'd do "Darby Hall" certainly. Any of "Black and White," "Big Brown Eyes," or "Change With the Changing Times" would be a lot of fun.

keep thinking too hard,

--Scott

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**February 12, 2001**

**Scott, 'twas a pleasure seeing your band grace Boston a few days (weeks, by the time you get this) ago. Such beautiful music!**

**Scott:** Thank you. Bostonians -- my people. I like an aggressive driving town like Boston or San Francisco, but somehow San Francisco aggressive driving is without honor, as if obstinacy or competitiveness were at work rather than a lusty delusion that we might all have a place worth getting to fast.

**Anyway, two questions.**

**Have you heard any particularly interesting / funny / touching / bizarre mondegreens to your songs from fans or bandmates?**

I should tell you that I have a vague recollection that "mondegreen" means a misheard lyric, but my dictionary doesn't have the word, so my apologies if I answer a question you didn't ask.

My wife Kristine reminds me that there is a clear standout here, and that is the bridge from "Inverness," which at least two people have heard as: "I used all I had / I wasted my dad." It is hard to imagine that being surpassed.

**And, what's the significance of the "song captions" on the rear sleeve of *The Tape of Only Linda*?**

They're just little blurbs I wrote in hopes of clarifying the tone of the lyrics. That album was the farthest out of my control any record I've made has ever been -- more or less because I was allowed to dominate on *Plants and Birds* a little more than some people in the band found enjoyable, and that left me in the position of having to back off. On a strictly lyrical level, though, I felt I had a little bit of a thematic breakthrough going on, and less than the usual range of deployment options. For one thing, mine weren't the only lyrics on the album.

Those notes were my way of exploiting the packaging stage in a last ditch effort to pull my intended themes into sharper focus. God knows it probably didn't actually *work* as far as listeners were concerned, but though that kind of move figures to be the stuff of supreme later embarrassment, I actually look back on those little things as among my rare correct crafting decisions on that project.

**best wishes in whatever you're doing now,**

[Pixie](#)

Thanks -- stop on by Cap'n Scott's Lobster Trap just off Highway 1 in Pacifica and find out.

--thwarted lobster

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***March 5, 2001***

**Scott, thanks for the wonderful new record. I have been traveling for a few months now, and I can testify that four out of five train trips are significantly improved when one carries a copy of *Attractive Nuisance*.**

**Scott:** Thanks very much.

**Unfortunately, the fifth trip in in Finland, which brings me to my question.**

**Finland, while otherwise a really interesting, nifty country, has become the center of the global epidemic of cell phone abuse. During a recent train trip, I noticed that a new feature allows cell phone users to substitute a snippet of a song for their cell phone ring. So far, I've heard "Hot Stuff" (the bridge), "Waterloo" (the chorus), "Smells Like Teen Spirit" (the intro), "Physical" (the chorus), "Living on a Prayer" (The chorus), "Mamma Mia" (the chorus), tons of eighties metal songs I remember but can't identify (various bits) and -- far and away the most popular -- "The Final Countdown" (the intro). Actually, I have Europe (the band, not the continent), to blame for the dreaded fifth train trip, during which you were sadly drowned out by endless repetitions of "The Final Countdown" in high pitched electronic bleeps.**

I have to confess here that I don't know that band or that song.

**This brings me to my questions:**

**1. Assuming that we cannot eliminate cell phones, which is better: incessant ringing, or the musical version?**

The little musical things I at least equate with someone acknowledging the human beings sharing physical space, albeit in a somewhat irritating way. It's kind of like, "haha, I put in a funny ring so we can share this witty gesture," which is okay, if not generally successful at actual hilarity. Most aspects of cell phones are less conducive to acknowledging that there are other human beings around. I have to be a little contrite about the fact that people are often having pleasant conversations on cell phones, and the fact of my being, say, trapped on a train near them makes me angry at them. I really ought to somehow be happy they're there enjoying life and chatting amiably. Still, are these people aware that none of the nearest fifty people around them can read a book or have a few moments of quiet contemplation?

**2. Why do hair bands seem to have found new life as cell phone rings? Is there something about poodle-metal that is particularly suited to cell phones?**

I have been spared this phenomenon. I mean, hearing that sort of music on cell phones. I was in fact not spared poodle hair.

**3. What snippet of song will you use for your cell phone when the Finns have taken over the world? (Assuming that that's inevitable...)**

I don't know, but if I ever develop a really intense grudge against some composer or songwriter, I'll know where to begin my plan for making him hated in posterity.

**Thanks again for a great record!**

*Hailey*

thank you again, care of cell 44,

--Scott

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**March 26, 2001**

**Scott, I am listening to a dodgy old Game Theory recording; it's great!**

**Scott:** A dodgy old thank you.

**I am asking about the couple of albums that you supposedly did to try and gain some commercial success and my friend tells me that you "did it for the band." I find this hard to believe. (I am referring to the album with the immortal line "she's not your little pony.") It would be an end to an argument.**

If "did it for the band" means I didn't have as much dictatorial artistic control as on the one before or the one after, your friend is correct. If "did it for the band" means the band were

demanding commercial success and I said okay, then your friend is wrong -- there was no discussion along those lines at all.

Keep in mind, to have any chance at bona fide commercial success, you need a big promotion budget, which we didn't have. It was smarter business for us to put out something that would strike the indie eye and ear as being fashionably uncommercial. Which wasn't any supreme motivation, either (if you're only giving a different set of people back a version of their own expectations, where's the improvement over being "commercial"?).

**Also with that philosophical knowledge you could explain Barthes' version of semantics.**

Oh, no. You need to buy the 1996 album to be able to do that.

All this while running a show and holding down a day job, ha ha ha.

**Ever read any Steve Erickson? If not then you should and thank 'em for it.**

Can't say I have. Will watch for.

**The Prune**

**Some base their claims**

**on tang alone**

**but i prefer a fruit that does a job**

**(Robert Shure)**

*Joanna Jackson*

Thank you for that moving poem, and thanks for writing, Joanna.

--Prune-Tang Clan

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**April 2, 2001**

**Scott, what are your thoughts on the use of the word "baby" in pop lyrics?**

**I'm fascinated by its use; why, contextually, it's completely cool when Morphine uses it and completely idiotic when Night Ranger uses it. Is it what's being said or who's saying it? Or both?**

**Scott:** My wife has been playing me some Scorpions with the purpose of getting me to say "womahn." I guess "baby" is mildly offensive to some people; it seems like I've heard that criticism before (I say "baby" in lyrics once in a while). As far as I'm concerned, it's an affectionate term for a lover, coming from early blues and crooner pop idioms. I wouldn't be too shocked if someone told me that's not 100% accurate, but at any rate, it had no negative ring in rock and roll that I can tell.

Maybe some singers can't deliver a hipster term very well -- I notice you didn't claim I do -- but I don't think it, say, begs deconstruction on grounds of gender bias. I grew up with the Ronettes and Ella Fitzgerald singing about their babies.

**Gushing Praise Dept.: Thanks for the great set at Nita's Hideaway. I had just described the LF to a friend earlier that day as power pop's answer to Yes, and lo, Gil and Kenny quote "Heart of the Sunrise" smack in the middle of "Waist and the Knees." Too much! *Attractive Nuisance* stuff sounded great, and I couldn't believe I was hearing "Tearjerkin'." A thousand thank-yous.**

**Slouching toward Tempe,**

***Jeff Owens***

Ah, those were the days. Every now and then one of these questions reminds me of how far behind I am answering them. The good news there is that things have been *much* quieter in the old in-box since my little vacation from market presence, so look for convergence with current questions in about three months. Anyway, thank you, thank you, gushing praise department! I finally listened to the MP3 of Aimee Mann and me singing "Inverness" that's on this site, and, well, my vocals next to hers -- ach, could I be *any* worse at what I do? -- so gushing praise makes me feel a tiny bit better about having groveled for so much attention over the years.

--power pop's answer to Sebastian Cabot

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***April 9, 2001***

**Scott, first of all I want to express how sorry I am for having missed the last two tours. I live in Houston, TX these days and the drive to Austin is not always convenient for a grad student income.**

**Scott:** I hear that. You should try the drive from San Francisco!

**My question concerns *Blaze of Glory*. I have been listening to my LP copy of it recently (I was not too impressed with the CD release. Seemed to ruin things that I loved about the album.) and was wondering ... Did you speed up the tracks or did the band really play like that way back when? The pacing is furious in places and the voices seem ultra sped up. Or did you use the old Paul McCartney "When I'm sixty-four" trick and speed up the tracks? I guess in my experience with drummers I simply find it hard to believe this is how the band played.**

That's how we played it, and for the most part it *was* too fast. The serendipity is that my voice naturally sounds sped up, so the listener can get decent results by just pitching the whole thing down a bit. On a related note, Joe Becker once alerted me to the fact that Queen's "Tie Your Mother Down" gains new life when played at very low speed.

**Or were there some early eighties vices involved?**



Hell no, there was no junk bond trading in my group.

**A long time fan,**

***Mike Fuller***

Great to hear from you, Mike!

--the wild pitcher

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***May 7, 2001***

**Scott, I've been a fan of your work since *The Big Shot Chronicles*, though I think your work with the Loud Family has even more depth and variety. I'm saddened to hear that it might all come to an end. An enormous, Everest-sized pity. I shall be lost without you.**

**Scott:** That's very nice of you to say.

**So, rather than heap praise upon you all day (which I can, incidentally, if it would cheer you up), I suppose I should ask a question so that my response might be a little more than "thanks." And I suppose it is what this forum is for. So, on to it, but not without a lengthy preface (I'll try to keep it short-winded).**

**As a fellow pop-culture junkie (I'm assuming you are for reasons I'm about to state), I notice you have a lot of references to world events, television shows, movies, etc. in your songs. To use an example from your latest effort, the "Slim on the Bomb" reference to a very cool actor Slim Pickens and a very cool movie (you Kubrick fan, you). I guess a question that has been plaguing me since I bought *2 Steps from the Middle Ages* is this: Is the song title "Room for One More, Honey" a reference to a "Twilight Zone" episode where a lady keeps having a dream about a scary lady open the door to the Morgue and saying "Room for one more, honey?" I could go on, but if this reference is correct, I'll let you finish the tale, if you so desire.**

**It is one of my favorite episodes of "The Twilight Zone," and excites me greatly that you would honor it in such a way. Also, if I am correct, why did you choose that as the title to song (if you still remember)?**

Yes, that's the song title reference. It's been thirteen years since I wrote that song, but I'll describe what I remember trying to get at. There are various "catch phrases" thrown out in the song that in my mind signify something like the promise of a new frontier; when I say "will it be our new America?" I mean in the sense of a new place to occupy now that all of America is physically occupied. The only literal action in the song is flying in a plane further Westward, toward Asia, as if compulsively chasing the American frontier past where the land runs out, perhaps to a promised land that is mental rather than physical.

To me, "elegance of line" and "sense of place" were somewhat overly abstract aesthetic terms that would seem to point to a transcendent, spiritual way of viewing the world, but

which related to me only as the vague and arbitrary privileging of some remote sensibility. Similarly, I noticed that Asian religions were, in Western popular culture, usually assumed to be much more profound than Western religions. What an odd mental tendency, in a way; I was trying to overlay a few images that conjured up that tendency for me, not attempting a real analysis of the elements. That is, "sense of place" may or may not have merit as a concept, I wouldn't know, but I was aware of being tempted to assume it did, without a shred of evidence, simply due to its exotic implications -- its seeming to me to be on the other side of some psychological threshold.

So, I was in a mood to be wary of the mechanism by which something presents itself as a promising direction in life, and I thought of that "Twilight Zone" episode, with the nurse in the morgue in the nightmare saying "room for one more, honey." The nightmare image isn't even of being *forced* into the morgue; it's as if some unwitting part of us might walk in voluntarily just because someone offered us the blind opportunity to be elsewhere.

**As someone who finds song creation fascinating (as well as someone who enjoys the little tales you hear about movie creation, which I why I love my DVD player), can you tell me a little interesting story about coming up with the concept or music or whatnot of one of your songs, or a particular lyric? It would bring a little joy into my bleak life.**

I'm afraid I'm completely spent just from that at best modestly entertaining recollection, but allow me to say that if you are after bringing joy into a bleak life, you can do a lot worse than cranking up "Sister Havana" by Urge Overkill. Now that is a rock record! Who knows what effect some of my gloomy old stuff is going to have?

**In closing, I'm writing a novel, and while I'm not striving for the Great American Novel (as you can see illustrated by this posting), I do want to say that a good part of my inspiration for the main character came about while listening to your music.**

Now there is a disturbing thought.

**I would like to thank you for helping me to write.**

***Cagliostro***

**the overwritten**

thank you very much for writing and best of luck with the novel,

--Rod Surly

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***May 14, 2001***

**Scott, about the time of *Big Shot Chronicles*, I saw Game Theory play with Daddy In His Deep Sleep -- a Bay Area band that I heard you later produced via Mitch Easter. Was this album ever released? And have you worked with them since?**

**Mike**

**Scott:** The album came out in 1987 on Reckless. Mitch Easter wasn't involved. They were a great band; they moved to Los Angeles and I've been told that for a while were going by the name "the Shivers" but they've been broken up for a long time.

daddy isn't here, Mrs. Torrance

--Scott

**Scott, I'm sure you hear this all the time...but it's so nice to have an intelligent band out there.**

**Scott:** Hi, Brianna! Well, that's a nice thing to say, and I don't hear it all the time. Thank you.

**When can we all see you guys play again? We miss you!!! Any San Francisco/Bay Area shows in the future?**

**Brianna**

On June 30th there's going to be a 125 Records party at the Starry Plough, Berkeley's favorite Irish Communist theme bar, and I'll be participating in what in 1983 used to be called a Hootenanny, doing some of my songs with Kenny Kessel, with some help from Yuji Oniki, Anton Barbeau (who's also doing a full set), and perhaps members of Belle da Gama (who are doing a full set as well).

Erin go Bolshevist,

--Scott

**Scott, do you know where/how I could acquire a CD of the Game Theory album *Tinker to Evers to Chance*? I've checked some internet stores, such as CDNow and Amazon.com, and they don't have it.**

**Todd Sherman**

**Scott:** Ytray ookinglay on ebay.

--piglatino

**Scott, my family and I have recently had the privilege of hosting a show by Pat DiNizio (of the Smithereens) in our home as part of his "Living Room Tour". As we enjoyed the experience, we have started looking for other artists to play in our home. We have already booked another artist for our second concert.**

**I was wondering whether you might be interested in participating in this type of event? I've been a fan for about 15 years and would love the opportunity to host you in my**

**home. I realize that you are from California and we are in NJ; however, should the opportunity present itself, we would be interested in hearing from you.**

**Scott:** Thanks very much! The Pat DiNizio show must have been fantastic. I heard he was doing that.

**We are doing this for our family and friends, and you can expect an audience of about 50 adults and a bunch of children.**

For a small additional charge we will appear as the Teletubbies.

**Thank you for your time.**

*Ira Rosen*

Thanks a lot for thinking of me/us.

--Poe

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**May 28, 2001**

**Scott, it was nice getting to see you and the gang in Phoenix. I didn't end up making it to Los Angeles due to poor planning and a sick spouse.**

**Scott:** How rare that we plan a spouse's sickness as well as we should.

**As a fan it is wonderful to be able to query you about lyrics and meanings, but as an artist do you ever feel like saying "gee, let the music speak for itself, I don't want to explain every little detail"?**

I used to think there was some indication that a lot of people (at least several hundred?) would be interested enough in my lyrics to discuss them well into the future, and my commentary would distract from that, since my unconscious agenda would always be to shade my meaning in a way that flattered me. Now I'm inclined to think maybe ten people in the world will have that level of interest in my lyrics going forward, so, really, what the hell?

**The lyric "Classify the lemur" from the wonderful "Cortex the Killer" makes me wonder which taxonomy system you subscribe to. Is cladistic taxonomy the way to go?**

Thank you for the compliment ("wonderful"). I prefer baconic taxonomy, where features of organisms are categorized according to their level of dissimilarity to Kevin Bacon.

**Also, you've mentioned building songs by trying something over and over until you find the thing that fits. What do you think of the idea that creativity is synonymous with a good search algorithm for finding items in what is a field of virtually limitless possibilities?**

It's definitely not synonymous. A good search algorithm doesn't care whether its result is original or not, it just cares whether it's correct, and creativity involves the opposite; creativity looks around like a classroom cheat to see what results others are getting, and decides the merits of its own result according to its novelty. Creativity even seeks to displace what is correct by seeking adoption of a new notion of correctness. In the worst case, creativity is simply another word for orneriness. Jack Nicholson's "the Joker" character is kind of a decent send-up of the "artistic temperament."

But taken less literally, the answer to your question could be "yes": a creative person would do well both to reflect on his or her "search algorithm," and to avoid being merely lazy about carrying out the "search."

**Thank you for continuing to create really good music. I know I'm speaking for a bunch of people when I say that I really appreciate it.**

***Dennis Sacks***

You are very welcome, Dennis! Good to hear from you and thanks for writing.

--Marquis de Clade

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***June 4, 2001***

**Scott -- big fan. Brilliant. Genius. A couple questions.**

**Do you have any opinion on Zen? It's been sorta "speaking" to me lately, and then I had this dream where someone (it may have been Noam Chomsky) accused it of "obscurantism." What do you think?**

**Scott:** I like Noam Chomsky, but he's not one of the handful of people I'd let influence my religion or lack thereof. I've been moderately interested in Buddhism and Zen (especially koans!), but at the end of the day I'm too much of a Westerner to ever do it right. It's difficult for me to feel I can talk about Zen because it is so intent on breaking down the objectifying mind; I have no quarrel with that agendum, but when the words "I" and "Zen" are off-limits as agreed-on concepts, it's probably optimistic to think an informative chat is at hand. Still, I think you can pin Gautama Buddha down, canonically speaking, to have proclaimed that desire is to be avoided if life is to be happy. That seems to me to be one way of saying a great truth, but it would be a long, great war to get my mind to address that truth that way, as livable reality. I am terribly, terribly, wrapped up in desire, in everything I do.

I've said before I take our culture to be in one sense a hybrid of Greek and Hebrew. The Greek mind would think desire is inevitable but *manageable*, able to be set off to the side of one's primary life, which is in relation to a cultural community. The Hebrew mind is restless to expose the centrality of desire -- to be prophetic in the biblical sense is more to expose human motivation than to predict the future. Modernity has made a somewhat incoherent stew out of it all, where desire is felt to be charged by a mysterious Freudian/Jungian sexual

unconscious, and happiness is tied up in some bizarro, subjunctive-mood act of -- how to say? -- refusing the gesture of decentralizing desire. That is, if you feel guilt in modernity, you have some disincentive to view it as an occasion for contrition, because you're treating the guilty aspect of yourself as a dark beast to be shoved back into the cave of the unconscious, and that's unhealthy in the Freudian dispensation.

Ontologically, modernity bears a superficial resemblance to Zen. The similarity is close enough that many moderns aren't cut off from Zen the way they're cut off from, say, Evangelical Christianity. Modernity and Zen are both post-religious operations which seem to have a nihilistic element -- a fairly blind faith that if you hack out enough mental and cultural deadwood, you will ultimately get to reality and bliss. Yet, both operations would take issue with faith (therein may lie enough "obscurantism" for us all to pass around). Practically, I wonder how much spiritual benefit Zen could offer non-acolytes; if you're not really committing, does it have therapeutic value as a subject of study? It would seem to be arrogant to think we are so very much more capable of getting it than the poor lifers who didn't get it until one day the master chopped off some body part or other.

**Do you think there's a point in a relationship (maybe, arbitrarily, oh ... two months) wherein it's "safe" to give up the L-word? (No, not "lobotomy," "love.") Or is it always a gamble?**

The way I see it, saying "I love you" in a relationship means you're proposing exclusivity.

**Do you ever read Hermeneut? Or visit [the web site](#)? It's good. There was an article and discussion on there recently about "The Simpsons" and its pop allusions comparing it specifically to Eliot's "Waste Land" and its more respectably Modernist allusiveness. If you've read this, I'd love to hear what you think.**

I have not checked it out yet (and I have to go to bed right after I finish this answer), but consider it publicized.

**I used write questions to Scott Miller, but it didn't make my life okay,**

**John**

thanks for writing, and for the interesting question(s) (and recommendation).

--hermeneut munster

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**June 11, 2001**

**Scott, I recall reading a blurb about Game Theory in an issue of *Spin* from '87 or so. In it, you indicated that you like to make albums alternately "weird" and "normal."**

**Scott:** It seems now that it was less a matter of "liking" than that being the somewhat inevitable result because of a lot of factors.

I have noticed that, by my definition, you have followed this formula faithfully (weird indicating a prevalence of short snippets, experimental tracks, etc.). *Lolita Nation*, current at the time of the *Spin* article in question, fits the weird list; *Two Steps* = normal; *Plants and Birds* = weird; *Only Linda* = normal; *Interbabe* = weird; *Days for Days* = normal, despite its alternating brief snippet tracks. I must admit I've yet to hear *Attractive Nuisance*; though that'll change eventually, as of now I have no idea if it follows the "formula." Have you consciously followed that formula, or is it all a grand coincidence based on a tossed-off comment?

If anything I have consciously avoided that pattern, for the sake of the structure continuing to bring anything valuable. I must confess a certain regret I usually keep to myself, which is that *Lolita Nation* really settled pretty easily back into a closed system where "experiments" and "snippets" and "self-reference" played a very similar role in my little college rock world to moon-in-June and rock-and-roll-all-night in the commercial world. It was the one time I truly connected with the in crowd, which is great, but I have to chuckle a little at my eagerness to take that as confirmation that I was laying down a fearsome artistic gauntlet -- and how now anyone who thinks of it at all considers it as a sort of comfortable, period collectable, maybe like *Smiley Smile*.

Now for the ridiculous and vague part of this message. For whatever reason, I've recently rediscovered *Days for Days*. I thoroughly enjoyed it when it came out, but after not playing it for a year and a half or so, I've been playing it a lot lately and have come to the conclusion that it's my favorite Loud Family record after *Plants and Birds* (which I'm convinced merited Grammy nominations for everything from Album of the Year to Producer of the Year).

I'm blushing!

For me, and this is part of its appeal, there is something palpable but not quite explainable about *Days for Days*: while I'm not quite suggesting it's your *There's a Riot Goin' On* -- it's not exactly zonked-out -- it seems to have a certain aura of detachment about it. I suppose one could speculate on this without listening to it, based on the existentialist tone of the inner sleeve's skull cartoon and titles like "Deee-Pression". But what I'm talking about isn't based on these things or even on any specific lyrics, rather an ambiguous visceral tone that seems to imbue many of the performances.

I hadn't read this far when I made my comments above, but I would like to think that you're getting some of what we shifted into the lyrics and the structuring in a way that was somewhat off-axis from the *Lolita Nation* approach.

This will seem like a real stretch, and I suppose it is: though I'm not comparing the albums to one another, the feeling I'm talking about is akin to some of the moments on Neil Young's *Tonight's the Night*. That album's not exclusively downbeat but there is always an undercurrent telling you something is going on (the Young-paraphrasing "Cortex the Killer" has nothing to do with this suggestion). So, what I'm getting at is this: without wishing or caring to pry into personal details, on a general level were these sessions the

**result of any sort of experiences or atmosphere that might explain the feeling I get from it?**

Two senses that I can think of. I imagine Neil Young in that period being interested in the reckoning of the young and spirited: your options are that you eventually either flame out or find yourself part of something outside the logic of what you thought of as burning brightly. *Days For Days* involved something of a parallel resolution, to my mind. It was the album where I made the heaviest use of my own dreams since the mid-80s, but I was now out to reconcile them with Western culture at a deeper level than simply the most convenient pop references. Also, I did a lot of my work on that record in a somewhat spacey frame of mind -- often late at night.

**Of course, it could all be in my imagination, but I thought you might be interested to see another example of how your artistic endeavors end up re- (or mis-) interpreted by listeners later on down the road. (By the way, "Sister Sleep" is a real showstopper -- your most epic track in my book.)**

You thought right -- I often feel pretty starved for feedback about whether the enormous amount of energy I put into songs and albums resulted in very much getting through. Me and a lot of bands, no doubt. Anyway, your letter is very much appreciated.

**Thanks for the music,**

***Chris Perry***

weird = normal,

--Scott

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***June 18, 2001***

**Scott, have you by any chance read a book by Sylvia Nasar called *A Beautiful Mind*?**

**Scott:** I haven't read that, no. I don't know anything about Mr. Nash.

**It's a biography of John Nash, a brilliant mathematician whose research into game theory while at Princeton in the 1940s-50s won him a Nobel prize in the 1990s. His quite horrific descent into schizophrenia and withdrawal from society is painful to read but at the same time riveting (as the pain of others so often is). This book made me think about the relationship between math & melodic invention; Nash quite often whistled Bach, whose music has been called mathematically perfect, while he did his thinking.**

I have heard people describe Bach's -- and Mozart's -- music as mathematically perfect, and I have to say I don't have any sense of what they mean. In Bach's case, it may be that the counterpoint always maintains pleasing intervals despite the variables he's juggling (I must have read that in *Goedel, Escher, Bach*); fair enough, except that would mean you couldn't reproduce any of the perfection by whistling it.



I have to say I think Bach and Mozart probably had their interest in structural challenges, but the music sounds good to us today primarily because they played well within cultural rules of expectation, familiarity, and surprise -- pretty much the same reason Beethoven and Iggy Pop sound good today.

Unless I'm forgetting one, I've never heard a deliberately mathematical approach to composition result in anything but drivel.

**You're known for being a brainy kind of guy; to what degree do you think your grasp of the "cold" sciences is responsible for your ability to make melodies that are so emotionally affecting and at the same time so, for lack of a better word, perfect?**

***Johnny Turner***

That's very kind of you, and I'm sorry to say you could probably find some disagreement. Of the actual disciplines, none really applies except to studio engineering, and maybe the very (very) rare thought about harmonic ratios. Yet, science teaches you to solve problems in an unsentimental way, and that helps put results on the table when it's all too easy for them to just swim around in your imagination (like they do with me these days).

thanks much for writing

--Einstein-on-the-Beach Boy

**Scott, scanning through some of your lyrics today, I was shocked to find out that you aren't actually singing "Need a low-slung Telecaster 1969" on "Nine Lives to Rigel Five" like I thought you had been for the last fifteen years or so. I guess there really aren't any lions in the street after all, huh? Any more mis-heard Scott Miller lyrics that you remember people bringing to your attention that you can share with the class?**

**Cryptically yours,**

***Rob Disner***

**Scott:** Hey, Rob, thanks for writing.

Another immortal one was from Kenny Kessel himself. I was teaching the band the song "Blackness, Blackness" over the course of a few rehearsals, and one day when I was telling Alison the words "oh baby, I guess I just am" for the chorus backing vocals, Kenny expressed surprise at learning that I wasn't saying "oh baby, I got such a stem."

oh, baby, I got ketchup on Chris Stamey,

--Scott

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***June 25, 2001***

**Scott, I hope you can take a minute to recommend any on-line music magazines that avoid the all-too-typical promo swill and snotty jive. Are there any sites that are both literate and truly eclectic?**

**James Hopkins**

**Scott:** The best is [The War Against Silence](#). I used to suspect my admiration to be an artifact of my own stuff getting reviewed well there, but contributors to the not-very-pop-music email list I'm on (which asks you not to quote anything so I'll leave it anonymous) immediately piped up with that site in answer to a similar query.

My favorite online audio streaming station is [3wk.com](#).

My favorite print magazine was *SPEAK* from San Francisco, but they folded. It wasn't a music mag, but it was so good I have to mention it. Any old copy is worth snapping up, and I'm eagerly awaiting whatever publisher Dan Rolleri does next (for comics fans, *SPEAK* provided my introduction to artist Chris Ware).

Anyway, start your own site and make it good!

--PoMo swill

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**July 2, 2001**

**Scott, I have a cassette that I purchased in 1988, the cover reads "Masi: *Downtown Dreamers*" but the tape inside is actually one of yours..."*Game Theory: 2 Steps from the Middle Ages*." Did you know anything about this oops?**

**Scott:** No, although that and the copies of *Lolita Nation* which went out in the "Metal Blade" subsidiary long box go a long way toward explaining why we drew big crowds for about a year there.

**After 13 years I finally typed in your lyrics on the internet to find out who the artist really is that sings the songs I enjoy so much. Any info you have would be greatly appreciated.**

**A fan for 13 years that never knew your name,**

**C. Rohman**

Expecting what I assume are the less earthbound sounds of Masi, it can't have been easy to give us a chance; I thank you.

Info: we broke up. I released five albums with another band. That broke up. '96/'98 live album soon! (maybe).

--nonMasi star

**Scott, a few weeks ago, I stop at my friend's oasis in the Bronx, a short stopover before I head to Israel. He plays music from a group I had never heard of and I am jammin' all the way to Jerusalem. I feel I know music well, growing up in New Orleans and such. Now I am on the plains of Nebraska and I am still jammin' to Loud Family. I have not been this excited about a group since my teenage years when Todd was God and Crack the Sky blew away ELO in the opening act at the warehouse in New Orleans. We gotta meet one day. Do you do jazz festival in New Orleans?**

shalom uvracha,

**Bar Sela**

**Scott:** I've been to New Orleans a few times, and none of those times could I tell you with any confidence that there was not a jazz festival going on. I've been to the plains of Nebraska, too, and there when no jazz festival is going on, one feels one can declare the fact with crisp certainty.

Thank you for writing and for the compliment on the music. I'd love to meet one day.

manov lamancha

--Scott

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**July 9, 2001**

**Scott, I just ordered your *Attractive Nuisance* CD. I always liked your music and would love to hear you play live. Your voice brings back memories of a great time in my life. What could be better than being young, in love, and immersed in live music? Although, as a side note, I must admit I have come full circle and now find myself living in the same neighborhood as George and Mary B.!**

**Scott:** Tina -- what a pleasant surprise! I hope you're doing well. For everyone else, (Dr.) George and Mary B. are the very wonderful parents of Game Theory/Loud Family alumni Jozef and Nancy Becker; they and my parents live in Sacramento, CA and are good friends.

Who, by the way, encouraged me to write. But, I digress. Now back to the main question... Do you have any upcoming gigs in Northern California?

**Tina Roberts Cannon**

Two, and you just missed them, but I seem not to know when to quit, so there will probably be more. I would like to do a show in Sacramento. What I'd really like to do is a 25-year anniversary show on the quad at Rio Americano High School in 2002, because it would be so effortless to recapture that atmosphere of playing "Astronomy Domine" and "Drive In Saturday" to a whole bunch of kids who were wishing we would just go the hell away.

fond regards,

--'Mentos

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**July 16, 2001**

**Scott, I read your June 4 "Ask Scott" reply and took particular note of your following statement:**

**"Still, I think you can pin Gautama Buddha down, canonically speaking, to have proclaimed that desire is to be avoided if life is to be happy. ... I am terribly, terribly, wrapped up in desire, in everything I do."**

**As I understand it, it is not so much desire itself, but the *attachment* to the desire that is the trouble. As Deshimaru in *The Zen Way to the Martial Arts* says: "Desire itself is natural and is harmful or misleading only when we cling to or resist it."**

**Easier said than done to be sure. What I, being a Westerner, find most difficult about Zen is letting go of my singularity, my "self." The self is such an intrinsic, essential element in Western EVERYTHING that to live and move in it and maintain the idea that the self is an illusion is proving to be extremely difficult.**

**Tom Galczynski**

**Scott:** Thanks for reading and writing back, and for making such a good point.

It's probably time for at least a little actual scripture. "The Fire Sermon" (Aditta-pariyaya Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya XXXV.28, translated by Bhikkhu Thanissaro) is [online](#). The Buddha addresses 1000 monks, and the "he" here is "the instructed noble disciple":

"Disenchanted [with the senses, the body, the intellect], he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is fully released. With full release, there is the knowledge, 'Fully released.' He discerns that 'Birth is depleted, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'"

I like the word "disenchanted" here; in my mind, it points to the same truth you bring up: the trouble isn't the senses, the body and the intellect, but rather their tendency to enchant and bedazzle, falsely projecting a point of fulfillment, a goal which if attained will deliver lasting happiness.

But I can locate my own trouble in application with the word "release," especially the release which comes with a "task done." 2500 years ago in India, Buddha could refer to a "task" and not have to convince anyone that human action had ultimate significance. It's my understanding (I invite correction) that any of Buddha's early adherents would have believed in reincarnation according to deeds, and Buddha nuanced within that general notion; Confucianism was entrenched in China, meaning personal acts conferred glory or shame on relatives living and dead with an intensity we can't fathom. If early Buddhists wrangled with desire, a lot was at stake. In the post-religious cosmos of either Zen or Western modernity, if you are "released" from the slavery of desire, it invites the question:

so what? What are you now free to pursue if you are disenchanted with all desire? Will your long, smug disdain for the improper cares of your less enlightened fellow humans really pass for bliss?

Can the "task" Gautama Buddha treats with such importance simply be not to have a task? I personally don't read Buddhist scripture as that sort of ur-existentialism. For *his* audience it is a wonderfully completing worldview, but without a "holy life," a spirituality of life and death, if you don't "cling to or resist" a desire, I'm not sure what third thing you can possibly do with it. For Buddha, or a Westerner as late as Dante, a third option is that you bring desire into coherence with a religious experience that transcends desire's initial, limited picture of personal reward. For the sake of plain speaking, I'll say that "transcendent religious experience" means feeling deeply that what "you" do will matter to "you" after you die -- and how you define "you" is, as you note, what is at stake.

It's historically dubious, but maybe correct at some level, to think of Buddha as observing the individual self emerging from the ancient, mythologically constituted societal self, and wanting to stave off the danger of personal advantage becoming everything, seeing as he did a truth larger than "existential" truth.

it really *does* depend on what your definition of "is" is,

--Scott

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**July 23, 2001**

**Scott, I was amazed at your top ten list 1980-1985 and could not believe how similar our lists are.**

**Scott:** That's great. Although I'm looking at them and I don't think I started being dead wrong starting with 1986!

And pre-1980, I think I've had a lot of hindsight swing my way, to the point that it's not even now apparent that this once reflected unusual taste. For instance, I can't tell you what a left-field choice *Lust For Life* was for best album of 1977 back in the day. The Iggy fans thought he'd lost it after *Raw Power*, and if you look at things like the (first edition of the) Rolling Stone record guide and Christgau, it and *The Idiot* always got these really tepid reviews. I was feeling vindicated around the time of *Trainspotting*, but now with the Pricess Cruise commercials or whatever it's on, I'm a little conflicted!

**I saw Bonnie Hayes on the list, and *Good Clean Fun* and *Bangles' All Over the Place* are my two favorite pop albums of the eighties. I am dying to find *Good Clean Fun* on CD. Any ideas?**

**Ken Jasch**

It probably isn't out on CD. Unfortunately, I wasn't even swift enough to pick up the album when it was in print. A bunch of great songs, though. "Shelley's Boyfriend" is just a masterpiece.

it was not all that they led you to believe it would be,

--Scott

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**July 30, 2001**

**Scott, your site must have the best content of any band site on the Web. The "Ask Scott" feature is my favorite... you've given me many ideas to pursue.**

**Scott:** Thanks, and I agree that the site is great -- thanks there to Sue Trowbridge!

**Here's a question that's been bugging me: what is it about Dylan that keeps him at the forefront of our culture? He's made a load of bad records... If he were writing books or making movies as bad, he'd have been written off long ago.**

**What gives?**

**Richard Cusick**

I agree with the many people who think Dylan may stand as the most important lyricist of the rock era, and for the very reasons he gives you and me trouble. It's funny; I was just crowing about my taste in underrated records, and you come along to remind me that I haven't risen to some real and obvious challenges, such as a number of Dylan records.

Dylan is rock's model for indifference toward the audience's initial reaction. It is because of Dylan that almost all pop artists emit big talk about making records for no one but themselves (as I certainly have). But Dylan did it with less obvious precedent because he has a deeper sense of prophetic structure than other artists. Most of us artists think our work will be misunderstood because we represent difference, that the audience is disturbed by the unknown. I believe Dylan is more likely to recognize that the trouble comes when an artist comes too close to showing us the *known* which we'd rather ignore -- the two sides to the stories that we'd much rather think have only one side.

The idea comes across in an easy dose in "Like a Rolling Stone." The singer upbraids a person who has become poor for having had contempt for the poor in the past. This is an important aspect of the prophetic: the revealing of what seems like a reasonable worldview as having really been self-serving. It's tricky business, though. Even if the lyric has the miraculous curative effect that you suddenly see the poor with charitable eyes this may simply be to serve your *new* self, which derives social benefit from casting the *rich* as the bad people. And even if you go on to be cured of that prejudice, too, you probably now divide the world up equally critically into the good, unprejudiced people like you and the bad, prejudiced people, like you five minutes ago.

Still, it's an excellent song, but I think one way to speak of Dylan's exceptional value is that he has identified that pattern of self-redefinition and has not shrunk from the task of chasing it down to an unavoidable personal reckoning, though it has resulted in difficult work.

pouring off of Sue's web page like it was written in your soul,

--Scott

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**August 20, 2001**

**Scott, this isn't a question or anything. I just thought I'd say thank you for making this music that none of my friends (except a few who make music) seem to appreciate.**

**I thought I'd provide you with a little information that might assist you in marketing your next album.**

**Mostly I listen to the usual art rock (Yes, Blue Oyster Cult, Dave Matthews Band, Grateful Dead, ELP, Renaissance, Starcastle, Horslips, Spirit, Jethro Tull, Toto, Rush, Pink Floyd, Bruce Dickinson, Triumvirat are in my CD "to play" stack).**

**Scott:** Starcastle, Horslips, Bruce Dickinson, and Triumvirat are "usual"? The only one of those I've even heard is Horslips. There are a couple of very nice pop/prog numbers on "The Man Who Built America," I thought.

**I have never heard Game Theory or The Loud Family ever mentioned in any advertising or ever heard any of it played on the radio (my car radio is on modern rock, I heard more than enough Rolling Stones when I was young). Oh, I'm 43.**

"Modern rock" stations have been giving me trouble for about the last six years. For a while, KITS in San Francisco was unbelievably good; you would actually hear Kirsty MacColl and Echobelly in there with the NIN. Now it's awful techno or, if you're really lucky, Blink182. If you can get it, stream [www.3wk.com](http://www.3wk.com). There's *some* pretty half-baked college/alt material to wade through (God is still punishing me for my own sins in that area), but it's by far the best station I know of.

I found Game Theory by my habit of buying CDs from groups I've never heard of simply based on some combination of their name, song titles, and cover art. (Some other bands I found this way that come to mind would be Trilobite, Tesla, Mason's Box, Catherine Wheel, Boiled in Lead, Disappear Fear.) The reason I'm mentioning this is because I think that your cover art, song title choice and album name choice is important for sales. I studied mathematics for way too many years, so I naturally picked up a copy of Game Theory when I saw it for sale.

**I found Loud Family because one was in a bargain bin and it mentioned the connection to Game Theory. Finally, I got around to typing in enough lyrics to find the web site. I'll now get around to ordering the albums I'm missing, though I seem to have found 3/4 of them.**

I like the complexity of the music and the slightly cerebral lyrics, for instance "Why We Don't Live in Mauritania." My least favorite parts are where there's talking and too experimental stuff. (See the first interludes on *Days For Days*, an album that I can nevertheless listen to over and over, especially "Good, There Are No Lions In The Street" and "Sister Sleep.")

Yes, "talking and experimental stuff" has been a recurring subject here at "Ask Scott." I realize that sort of passage can get old fast, so when I have such a concept for a recording, I try to keep the actual clock time of it to a minimum. I was in fact afraid *Days For Days* would tax listeners too much, and for people who weren't overly familiar with my material, it did. In recent times, I haven't had any remix budget, so whatever was there at the last day of the session was basically it. I thought most of it came out great (thanks to Tom Carr and Tim Walters), but I'd have tightened up my production work on the tracks-1-to-3 section if I'd had that extra few hundred bucks.

Probably my favorite album is *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things*, and of this, my favorite cuts are:

"Sword Swallower"

"Aerodeliria" (This reminds me of how Starcastle fills the bandwidth from 20Hz to 20KHz)

"Idiot Son" (I love the lyrics.)

"Inverness" (A great song)

"Isaac's Law"

So keep cutting those albums, and I'll keep buying them. With production of only 10K per I don't see how this can possibly make money for you.

**Carl Brannen**

Thanks. I thought of the last Loud Family record as my last record when I was doing it, but if some day the occasion just screams for me to crawl out of my cave again one day, I'll keep the encouragement of people like yourself in mind.

we are the Mink Hollow men,

--Scott

Scott, as I know you are wont to make references to other artists' song titles and lyrics, does the title "Controlled Burn (Parts and 1 and 2)" have any connection to the James Brown tunes that he frequently and inexplicably divided into arguably undiscernible "parts?" I know your song has its own dividing line, but I can't help imagining that you tossed in the parenthetical title for Brown-derived kicks.

**Chris Perry**

**Scott:** I never really thought about it, but I think that's generally how my mind was working. I guess it seemed interesting to me to have the word "burn" as you might have seen it in a hot, dance-floor funk title, and then lyrics with a sort of inner turmoil quality. And as you mention, James Brown had the "parts I and II" business.



--a brand new man's, man's, man's, cold sweat bag

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**September 3, 2001**

**Scott, what was the prevailing thought on nuclear war through the seventies and early eighties in your immediate circle? It seems like the subject crept in to the new wave scene but in a characteristically detached way. I guess I am young for one of your fans, having been born right around the time of your first records, but in my catching up I hear a real resignation in the voices of otherwise impetuous artists. To illustrate, even your own songs with Alternate Learning have nuclear threat lurking in the background. But when you say there's a Fat Man aboard the Enola Gay it rings so matter of fact and hollow. It and Devo and even The Vapors' *New Clear Days* seem to lack the genuine concern and worry I read, for instance, in the works of Martin Amis and Paul Auster at that time (and that I get a sense of in your own later thoughts). Am I misinterpreting? Wax on...**

**Scott:** It's hard for me to explain the tone of a lot of the lyrics I've written, especially from when I was as lost a lyric writer as I was in 1980. I've always had a bit of a thing about Eastern vs. Western culture, and in my earlier and less coherent moments I'd typically just be trying to get down some emotion such as observing the love and hate relationships with China and Japan that that I'd seen going on in American popular culture in my lifetime. It's a good criticism that it wasn't even clear that I was emotional.

I was pretty dead serious about fearing nuclear annihilation at that time. Also, they had just reinstated draft registration for males my age. Vietnam had only been over for about four years, and war still felt close to home all the time. It's a pretty clarifying experience to be as disillusioned as young people were about U.S. foreign policy at that time, and, when a snag like Afghanistan comes up, to notice that someone's solution is to send random *other* people -- you -- to go take care of business. You realize that culture is full of loopholes; it's ordinarily considered socially unacceptable to decide you need some killing done, and to coerce an innocent bystander to carry out the killing at his peril, but there are any number of ways to get that to fly if we're serious about it.

If you pin people down with absolutely no escape to explain why they think the draft is okay, you will get an argument that goes something like this: well, my God, if we didn't draft 20-year-old men, we could get hurt! It was a long road for me to get past a sort of Pynchonian paranoid attitude, and aspects of it are all too valid.

**Also, can you help me out with Nabokov's *Pale Fire*? I just can't get through it. What is he getting at? Why should I read it?**

Why force yourself? The point is that the professor goes through the whole book grafting nonsensical and self-serving interpretations onto human relationships and what he considers high-minded exchanges of ideas. If it's enjoyable to have that sort of a juicy accusation lobbed at humanity (or some sector of humanity you think is being righteously picked on), great; otherwise, I can see it being on the dreary side. I still haven't gotten through the book of *Lolita*, just because it's too relentless. The movie was just my speed.

Your music has always meant an awful lot to me. You should know that while the first CD I ever bought was *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em*, the second one was *Lolita Nation*.

It's Millertime,

*Alex Knox*

Well, thank you, that does mean a lot to me. That title *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em* was always so amazing to me -- he's simultaneously the threat and the peace.

please, Carter, don't hurt 'em

--Scott

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*September 10, 2001*

Scott, you wrote, "I thought of the last Loud Family record as my last record when I was doing it, but if some day the occasion just screams for me to crawl out of my cave again one day, I'll keep the encouragement of people like yourself in mind." I'd like to throw another letter on that pile marked "encouragement."

Scott: I'm much obliged to you.

I'm always shocked to discover that the work of so many of my literary heroes -- from Melville to Nathanael West to you -- went underappreciated or ignored during their lives. I don't know how or why they kept at their work, but -- based on your comments above -- I'm hoping you might be considering continuing to record and release your music.

Your music is flat out my favorite man-made thing in the world. I've been a dazzled, spine-tingled fan of yours for twelve years now and, for me personally, your songs have been everything from salve (mitigating the disappointments of adult life) to salvation (quasiphonic-religious ecstatic experience listening to your work).

I consider you to be my favorite contemporary literary artist, one who is the practitioner of a form that has quite not yet been delineated and appreciated (I'm not quite sure what it is myself!) You'd be among my favorite modern poets (Larkin, Milosz) if you wrote only words.

Well, that's spectacularly charitable of you to say. I notice that I had said "if some day the occasion just screams for me to crawl out of my cave again one day..." and our readers will want it acknowledged that if you know one thing about the person who wrote that, it is that he should not be anyone's favorite contemporary literary artist. "Some day" and "one day" in the same sentence?

But you're being nice, and I don't want to digress from that. Actually, not only are you encouraging me by being nice, you're encouraging me by bothering to have a relationship to literary art -- a serious enough one to arrive at Philip Larkin and Czeslaw Milosz, who I'd

maybe agree are the two best recent poets I know anything about. There's Richard Wilbur, too.

**And your melodies are, to my ears, purely transcendent things. Songs like "Blackness," "Helpful," and "Princess" are to me not so much pop/rock songs, as objects of beauty.**

Thank you so much. You must realize that the math that goes on in my head these days is something to the effect of: if five people in the world feel that way, it's not quite enough, but if forty people feel that way, maybe it isn't too unforgivable that I've yet again troubled another couple thousand to confirm that it is right to dismiss it as being as dated and pointless as it sounds to them.

**I suppose I should wish you well-deserved happiness in your retirement from what seems to be a great calling but lousy business. But your response above got that Xmas morning/first day of spring/new Scott Miller release feeling stirring.**

Sincerely,

***Mark Portier***

I'll keep my eye out for an opportunity to do a project, but it will almost certainly be a while before one presents itself. I don't want to do something technically half-assed, but I don't want the budget to devastate any poor little record company, either.

randy for antique,

--Scott

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***September 17, 2001***

**Scott, from interviews and responses that you have written on your website, you seem baffled by both your successes and failures. I believe that your popularity status is due to the following:**

**1) You will always have a diehard (if perhaps small) fan base because there are many of us out there who are absolutely bored with the crap that radio forces upon us and need to be challenged by interesting music. You have consistently provided us with that kind of music. Not only that, you make enjoyable records to listen to. You have written many great melodies and have some great one liner lyrics.**

**Scott:** Thanks very much. Sometimes I look back on "one liner" lyrics with a certain amount of embarrassment. I know critics have always had a low tolerance for anything that the writer apparently thought was clever, and I can see their point; I'm glad some people like what I've come up with (you can't really help what ideas you get).

**2) I really cannot believe that you have ever really entertained the thought of having any hits due to the kind of music you write.**

I decided at about age 16 that I would never have conventional hits, but from about age 21 to 27 I was pretty convinced I was on track to have a slightly oddball yet sustainable career, maybe like Talking Heads or Sonic Youth. I never expected to have a really huge following, but when college radio went grunge, and then Moby/Stereolab, there sort of stopped being that community of a hundred thousand mildly-interested people that you need to have the records continue to have a just-decent-enough chance to sell. You could kind of play a Game Theory song after a Prince song, or maybe even a Cocteau Twins song, and people wouldn't hate you, but after a Mudhoney song, or a Chemical Brothers song, that was starting to be more of a hanging offense.

**The average idiot out there would never take the time to discover the pleasures of your music and is unable to get past your complex lyrics and unorthodox singing voice. There is no place for the Loud Family next to those who buy Creed and Matchbox 20.**

**3) The question I would ask is, were you able to create the kind of music that you set out to create? If you did, then you were successful, if not, then you did your best.**

**In my opinion, *Plants and Birds* is one of the greatest 10 rock/pop albums of all time. I have listened to it many times and still am amazed by the wealth of musical ideas in that wonderful album. An absolute masterpiece!!! (*Lolita Nation*, however, too weird!!!)**

***Mike Hogan***

I've always tried to make records that have both what I love about regular old pop songs and also what I love about more adventurous styles of music; every now and then someone thinks I got it just right (and *Plants and Birds* often being the album where they think it happened), but no doubt most people just think I occupy some uninteresting middle ground between reallybold composition and reallycatchy composition. Like you say, you do your best.

thanks for a nice email,

--Screedchbox

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***October 8, 2001***

**Scott, my friend was recently listening to *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things* while reading along with the lyrics on [loudfamily.com](http://loudfamily.com). She noticed that the site's lyrics for "Spot the Setup" read:**

**"I used to be the cold stare, don't care  
Stay fresh in the Fridgedaire  
I just assumed that was amore."**

**Both of us had been hearing the lyric as "a more," meaning a societal convention, rather than "amore", as in "when the moon hits your eye..." Despite the fact that "amore" does**

**make perfect sense, we thought "a more" was cooler. Could it be a typo or an intentional pun, or are we simply misunderstanding lyrics?**

I guess you could say it was an intentional pun. One reason I don't like printing lyrics is that there are opportunities for phonetic ambiguities, and if you print the lyrics, you have to pin an ambiguous sounding phrase down to one or the other way of hearing it. And unfortunately you just can't print "amore (a more)," as if you were *very proud* of that little touch. I'm trying to think of another time I've intended ambiguous hearing that would be worth noting; I know there have been a lot of them, but the ones I can think of right now are *really* non-life-changing. For instance, in one called "Chokehold Princess," I liked that you could hear either "right-there audacity" or "ride their audacity." That sort of thing.

**At the risk of sounding extremely redundant, we both absolutely love your music, and want to thank you both for the records and for one of the best-run official band pages we've seen. Your lyrical and musical complexity makes your albums get better every time one listens to them. Though no one else we know has ever heard of your music, it's most certainly their loss.**

***Teresa M. & Megan W.***

Well, thank you much for those very generous compliments, on behalf of Sue Trowbridge and also all the people who made the records with me. It's true that not a great number of people have been interested in them so it's that much nicer to hear when people are.

**[ps: Would you consider a button version of those bumper stickers?]**

I'd be all over a button that says "look for the Loud Family bumper sticker."

sounding extremely redundant (intentionally!)

--Scott

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***October 15, 2001***

**Scott, what do you make of all this nasty terrorism all of a sudden? (East meets west conflicts interest you, as you've mentioned.)**

**Scott:** I can't place the terrorist attacks in that category of concern. I do not think of Islam as Eastern in that sense for one thing, and in fact I don't really know very much about Islam. Like almost all Americans, I am eager to take the word of mainstream Moslem clerics who say the terrorists' actions had nothing whatsoever to do with true Islam.

We have to assume the terrorist suicide pilots considered themselves to be martyrs for a cause. I feel compelled to explain their failure on the level of martyrdom, and I suspect it would have been shocking news to them that their actions did not at least constitute an impressive martyrdom in the eyes of their victims' people.

The word "martyr" comes from the Greek for "witness," expressing that the early Christians would endure virtually any extreme of agony and still proclaim their faith -- even when the only ones to proclaim it to were the torturers. That is the cultural basis for the sort of martyrdom by which Americans would be impressed; we think "only a rare soul is capable of that." On the other hand, Americans are quite used to the occasional murderer killing a number of innocent people out of rage, then killing himself. That act requires some species of nerve no doubt, but it is not *impressive* to us. We would never ask "what is the truth to which such a one wishes to bear witness for the world?" We simply assume this was a vapid soul whose spitefulness got the better of all higher faculties.

Moreover, anyone staging an event in which he will play the role of a martyr is certainly not one. It is not the same bravery as the bravery of martyrdom to arrange a quick death on one's own terms. Martyrdom involves death on unwelcome terms, delivery into the hands of one's enemies; and a true martyr would be loath to take people with himself or herself to death, because these are precious witnesses and a martyr's motivation is that there be witnesses to the final truth he or she can convey. The terrorists' motivation, like that of American schoolyard snipers, reads to us as a matter of scratching the itch for control, for a cheap and fleeting experience of personal advantage, not of rarefied spiritual discipline.

**What do you think should happen vs. what do you think *will* probably happen? Ten points if you figure out who the terrorist group is before the president does.**

### ***David Werking***

I wish the world were such that I could say "we must not retaliate, thus teaching peace by our example." I really do believe that world will come some day. In the meantime, we must deal with the fact of people and groups to whom it is unrealistic to try to teach peace in a short time, and we must forcefully defend innocents they would murder if that is reasonably possible.

I trust the U.S. government's identification of the terrorist group, and I think we are doing the right thing by attacking them with as scrupulous as possible an avoidance of civilian casualties. I would not claim to know the minds of Osama bin Laden's followers well, but given their statements, they superficially resemble a fascist group. The fascist interpretation of a lack of response from their victims is that destiny approves -- fate is turning in their favor due to their actions, and these successes should be repeated. The means of fascism and the ends of fascism are inseparable. The aggression itself synthesizes the group's unity and direction. Aggression is what they do; they'll never decide America is injured enough, and now they will form a softball team. Their ability to do what they do must unfortunately be impeded by violent means (though not with vengeful motives, I hasten to add; we have to know when it makes sense to stop).

Long before the U.S. entered World War II, before the global Nazi threat was obvious, Thomas Mann (who was German) gave a brilliant lecture to American universities arguing that the Nazis had to be opposed militarily. If you have read Thomas Mann, you know that he is nobody's warmonger. It was clear to him very early that democracy would ultimately prevail, and it was also clear to him that Hitler would necessitate the full strength of its

opposition. He said that Americans did not understand fascism -- that there is no such thing as appeasing it to stop the violence, because violence is itself at the core of fascism. I think we must treat the terrorists as fascists, or even as a gang -- a group whose social solidarity depends on its own shared aggression--not as adherents of an ideology we can debate independently of how they carry it out.

thanks for writing,

--Scott

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***October 22, 2001***

**Scott, "Aerodeliria" is one of my all time favorites. What brought on the zany piano opening? I love the confusion and craziness that it exudes!**

***Sean MacMillan***

**Scott:** Thank you very much. Paul Wieneke played it, of course. I wanted something that sounded "delirious," like the song title. The track was a combination of sequencer (programmed in advance and played by computer), and real time performance. Impressively, he could recreate it pretty well live, as I am reminded from the live recording [125 Records](#) will hopefully be putting out once all the legal issues are squared away.

here come old laptop

--Scott

**Scott, [Which Bible Hero Are You?](#)**

**A bit silly, but good-humored. I figure you could walk us through your answers one by one, or just cut to the chase and reveal your secret identity!**

***Andrew Hamlin***

**Scott:** Hi Andy! I don't think it would be all that entertaining to walk through it since it was usually such a toss-up what my answer would be. For the record, however, according to the scientific computation at the end, I am:

25 - 34: JOSEPH. Self-assured and proud of it, you're leadership material through and through. Hey, can you help it if other people think you know it all? You do!

Wow, this could be the horoscope-like feature Judeo-Christianity has been lacking.

Conversely, how about: astrological sign icons set in tales of ancient desert tribal conflict? "It is up to you to defend the land of Zodiach, Sagittarius; our sacrifice of Aries did not bring fire from Baal!"

--odd Job

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**October 29, 2001**

**Scott, I really enjoy your combination of humility and sagacity in your Ask Scott exchange. Thank you.**

**Scott:** Hey, that's an illusion that I should probably take greater care not to shatter than is my current plan. But thank you very much.

**I also enjoy your lack of comment on 911. Thank you again; you show a great deal of brilliance by your poise.**

Well, that actually wasn't brilliance, it was being out of the country at the time. I ended up deciding to comment in favor of the U.S. military action in Afghanistan, mostly because I think there's no possibility that anyone who reads this site stands any chance of erring on the pro-military side, and in fact there's something of a pernicious mechanism tending in the other direction. Five years ago, before I'd studied cultural violence much, I would have read my opinion of last week, and I would have had this "Ask Scott" person all figured out: this Scott has succumbed to thinking in abstract nationalistic terms, in the logic of which a few innocent Afghan lives are expendable. The prick. I, on the other hand, hold every human life sacred.

I would like to explain myself to myself, so to speak, starting by posing an upsetting question. Which, of the following, is worse news?:

1. A thousand people have just died.
2. One person has just died, and it is your fault.

I will tell you that I think it goes near to the core of the human soul to have 2 be worse news; I'm not sure it could even be unlearned. I can say that I was greatly saddened to hear the news of the Kobe earthquake. So was everyone reading this. Yet, ultimately, well, terrible things do happen, and we move on. But let me compare that reaction to my imagined reaction if, say, I were visiting Kobe, and due to breaking a minor traffic law, struck and killed a child while driving a car. I would probably feel devastation beyond my comprehension. If there were some metaphysical choice between the earthquake happening or my killing the child, might I not secretly pray to the depths of my soul for it to be the earthquake?

Happily this mental exercise doesn't apply regularly to our lives, but I think it applies when confronting genocide.

We usually feel that we, personally, would have opposed Hitler had we been there; we all know that diplomatic efforts were continually tried and continually failed, but we think that in some unspecified sense, *we* wouldn't have *given in* like people at the time did. Let's imagine a leader contemporary to Hitler resolving to oppose the Nazis at an early enough



stage to save millions of lives. How would it go, picturing yourself to be that leader? For starters, some words come out of your mouth that you are not used to. Nazis aren't a distant historical icon here, they are people, maybe countrymen, and you are acutely aware that what you are ordering is basically for enough of them to be shot to death that there are no longer enough left to carry out their operations.

But you press on. Your resolve pays off, and you stop Hitler and prevent the Holocaust. Is there great relief among nations, and agreement that you acted correctly? Remember -- whatever you *prevented* is no longer available as evidence that you were in the right. Why, as everyone tried to tell you, we were at exactly the point where diplomatic means were working with Hitler! A day of peace was dawning, and here you came with your war machine, your overgrown boys and their destructive toys, and you caused a new, unnecessary bloodbath. Innocents were killed. In your naïveté, you failed to realize what any of us humanitarians could have told you, which is that by making war on the Nazis, you become *like* the Nazis -- as bad as they are. Well, this is certain: you acted without *our* approval. We know what you wanted: their resources, and power for yourself!

That is the sort of protective bubble I'm afraid forms around genocidal programs. There is at any time excessive disincentive to keep them from acting again. Essentially, a new round of their murders would be the Kobe earthquake, while our attacking their power would be us hitting the child in the car. Favor attacking, and *we* become responsible. God forbid someone point at *us* and say "genocide," even if the accusation is farfetched and indirect. The persecutors themselves play no such blame game. With a notion such as *the infidel*, they can designate certain people to be outside the realm where guilt accrues to their murderers. We have some vestigial versions of that concept (let's not kid ourselves), but nothing nearly so expedient.

For it to be possible to oppose genocide, we need not relax our valuation of life, but rather to ask of ourselves to treat incidents of mass murder as unfinished business, rather than presume at any given moment that the killing is over, simply on the unspoken grounds that presuming it's over is the path of least personal responsibility.

At any other period of time I will recommend that Americans be self-critical to their hearts' content, but right now asking ourselves why the terrorists would be so angry that they murder us is probably inappropriate. To refer to Nazi genocide again, it would have been damaging -- to humanity -- for the persecuted Jews to ask "how can we be better people, and not be so hated?" and for their kindly neighboring countries to say "here is how you Jews can *rethink your policies*, so you can *build a coalition of sympathy*." The victims of a mass murder become innocent by structure, and the only acceptable response -- by them and by the world -- is to proclaim that innocence, and oppose the persecutors. Which opposition always makes persecutors very furious and vengeful -- always *destabilizes the region*.

Let's not let our ultimate logic be that because it yields the greatest personal satisfaction to position ourselves as morally superior to America's leaders, it must never be considered possible that the actions of America's leaders could legitimately protect victims from persecutors.

Anything else you'd like to praise me for not talking about?

**I found myself printing out your lyrics as I listened to *Attractive Nuisance*, marvelling at the beauty of the thing you had much to do with making.**

**Unfortunately, as I read the lyrics to "Years of Wrong Impressions" I was disappointed to find myself categorizing the first few lines**

**Design your life  
To live as if you're in a movie  
And after three hours  
Anyone is going to think  
It's gone on too long**

Ah, the many ways I can disappoint on close examination...

**as also belonging to the category of "bitter about popular failure" that I had assigned many other songs on this album. Scott. For the most part, I think the first two lines are excellent advice, and it is sad to me that the last three lines cast doubt on the worthiness of applying the first two. Note that they do not say that you should expect things to *turn out* as though they were in a movie. Can you say that it would have been better if you did not live your life so?**

### ***Bruce Scanlon***

Well, you know, rock lyrics are always a little bit of a Rorschach test. They do better at pointing to issues than they do nailing down specific conclusions. But to play the game a little, if you mean it's good to live your life with a sort of lusty appreciation for being alive, and a measure of accountability, it's good to live as if you're in a movie. But it's possible for that to turn into a version of life that involves buying into what other people expect, playing to the cheap seats, you might say. Maybe one check on playing to the cheap seats is that it gets old. After you buy into several versions of Hollywood sentimentality, you realize they don't add up to much besides "following your dreams is good," where "your dreams" are to do better than the people around you. You'll want to have simplistic versions of "your dreams" cancel each other out over many periods of "three hours," so that at least you'll live life as if you're in a *good* movie.

Bonzo doesn't *even* go to Hollywood,

--Scott

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***November 5, 2001***

**Scott, what are the lyrics to the harmony being sung in the second section of "Sister Sleep" (beginning with "Last few holidays")? -- I have been unable to decipher them, and they ain't on the site.**

Thanks,

*Philip Welsh*

**Scott:** Hi Philip -- thanks for writing. For a while, I'm pretty sure it's just the same lines I'm singing, only delayed (sung by Kenny). Then they're different when Alison comes in, which I was going to say I wouldn't remember until...I just now found a note of them that I filed away:

Taking all the things we've found  
That come off easily  
Being all the things around  
That anyone could be  
Saying all the words that wait for us to say them

Every liberation comes  
That someone's waiting for  
Every generation is  
The one they can't ignore  
How imagina - tions run

Still in time for carolers to start arranging!

--sister sludge

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**November 12, 2001**

**Scott, first off, thanks a million times for your music; I've spent many hours enjoying it during our wonderful 8 month season of winter here in Minnesota.**

**Scott:** Well, I aim to make those long winters as intolerable as I can, but sometimes I slip up.

**I wanted to get your opinion of Chris Bell. My friend who introduced me to your music started my introduction to intelligent pop by handing me all of Big Star's records and a copy of *I Am The Cosmos*.**

Wait a minute. Are you saying I am an egghead, they are the eggheads, or I am the cosmos? Thank you! I'm here through Saturday.

**After reading various internet music critics (who are as common as air molecules, I might add) the opinions range from genius on par with Alex Chilton to some rather derogatory comments about his talent. It would be great to hear the opinion of someone with some credibility in the business.**

I have no shred of that I'm sure, but here goes. I think he and Chilton were/are radically different people who happened to both be really good at Beatles-style rock music. They stood out from that crowd because (1) they had real ears for music, and (2) they could both

put a nasty emotional edge on things when they needed to, the way John Lennon could. For Alex, I thought it was a little bit of a device -- a brilliant one -- where the schtick was getting adult, universal emotions across using adolescent language. At least that was the flavor I got from the funny spellings and not-quite-unironic hipster talk like "what's going ahn," "mod lang," "gurls," etc. You sort of feel just distanced enough by the style to not be uncomfortable receiving the rather bare-nerved subject matter. I don't think any such distance was happening with Chris Bell -- I think he just got infinitely serious in a lyric until it did some combination of breaking your heart and making you want to call him a cab home before he started losing it.

But to answer your question, Alex has blown my socks clean off -- as a writer, singer, and guitarist -- and I guess I don't think of Chris as quite having the firepower to produce song after song at the knockout level like Alex has, though he's done so in funny spurts, and undoubtedly there was a lot of wasted potential there because he couldn't get a good record deal, and he died very young.

**Also, my four and a half year old daughter says she loves "Inverness." I bet you never thought you'd be sharing mental space with "Elmo," did you?**

I thought we'd be meeting muppets in the cutout bins if anywhere.

**A big fan in the cold, wet North,**

**Corey Smith**

thank you very much for writing

--"Don't-Even-Think-Of-Tickling-Me, Elmo"

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**November 19, 2001**

**Scott, I've been an attentive listener since the friend of a girl I was dating at the time put on *Lolita Nation* while were all sitting around his Mom's living room. That was back when I was a freshman in college. Objectivity compels me to me to admit that the relationship itself was a terribly bad decision on my part, but I've always sort of felt that the exposure I got to your music as a result of the relationship was a great consolation prize.**

**Scott:** I can remember vaguely similar situations of listening to music as a freshman in college. The record coming to mind is *More Songs About Buildings and Food* by Talking Heads. It's strange to then think of making *Lolita Nation* as a wizened old indie rocker eight years later -- I was no longer quite making the record for which the hypothetical listener was the person I was in college. I no longer thought of making records that would be played for several people in a room. I remember going to an after-show party in Seattle in 1988 and they were playing *Lolita Nation*, and I felt this terrible chagrin, like "I wish I could have made this record differently for these people."

**Anyway...here's my question...as one of the very few pop musicians capable of discussing pop music sensibly, have you seen the film *High Fidelity* and what did you think of it?**

***Bill Carmichael***

I thought it was a terrific film -- not one that really ravished my soul or anything, but very good. You have to think the Beta Band were happy with it.

As for the ability to discuss pop music sensibly, pop music has a logic, but it's always the logic of all foregoing pop music. It's a different logic for different people depending on what you've heard. It's nice to have a community with the same canon so you can have a fruitful ongoing discussion of it. But young people are always throwing things off; they respond to marketing and tend to shove less deserving artists into the canon. It keeps things dynamic, but you get older and you get a weary realization along the lines of "this is never going to get anywhere."

hypothetical freshman consolation,

--Scott

**Scott, I was just wondering if you had any idea why the beans...**

***Bil Orland***

**Scott:** So many ideas it would bore you. For instance: the numbers were meant to (among other things) suggest the expression "bean counting."

--hasbean

***November 26, 2001***

**Scott, not really a question for you, but an observation. Your recent reply about the "weird job of trying to make a record" made me want to cry out "you not only still have the OLD magic, but your new magic is even better!"**

**Scott:** Thanks very much. It's not that I think that the last three or so Loud Family records weren't really good, it's that I'm not making much headway toward my goal, which is to make accessible music that gets my feelings across.

**It's obvious from a single listen to any of your songs that you are an intelligent and thoughtful guy. Maybe you are too close to the process to see why your music is not "a hit": simply, no one knows about it. The reason I became a Loud Family fan was through a comment Aimee Mann made in an interview. She said when she writes a song she thinks "I wonder if Scott Miller would think this is a good song" and keeps at it until the answer is "yes". That was good enough for me even though I had not heard a single note. I bought *Plants and Birds* and went on from there. Your latest to my mind is your best and most focused work. It's also my favorite.**

Don't think I haven't reflected on that Aimee Mann comment. Aimee is an example of someone who does what I want to do without introducing the layer of awkwardness my stuff has. Of course, she's a gifted singer and I'm not, but some people who aren't gifted singers still put together fantastic records with real emotional literacy that are well-crafted as entertainment -- Elliott Smith comes to mind. If I woke up one day and thought I'd figured out the key to doing that I'd probably try to make at least one more record.

**Scott, you have done your share in the process. It is your label that has let you down. Your job is writing great music. Theirs is marketing it. It's not your listeners who are not responding to your music or think it is depressing. Its the very lack of listeners due to non-existent promotion. Look at Aimee Mann or Elvis Costello. They had huge early successes but recently, despite incredible work, fail to sell. Poor marketing.**

I so appreciate the encouragement, but I just have to disagree with you. I'm not saying that for the right few people one of my records couldn't connect better, but taken in the balance, Aimee and E.C. have delivered where I haven't. As for labels letting me down, it's true if you look at it from a certain angle, but from my usual perspective it would seem kind of weird to point to the few people in the industry who have supported me at all and say "those people kept me from succeeding."

**I know that does little to change the present circumstances. I just didn't want you to think *you* had failed to make wonderful records. And thank you very much for having done so.**

Best regards,

Tom Galczynski

Thanks for a very thoughtful message.

--Aimless Man

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***December 3, 2001***

**Scott, I remember some time back I saw Game Theory at Maxwells in Jersey. Still one of my favorite shows of all time with Stamey and Holsapple and Yo La Tengo opening. As great as the performances were, two things stand out in my mind about that evening. First was going into the men's room and you following me in and some guy following you. You entered the stall and shut the door and the whole time the guy who followed you was talking to you and asking you questions from the other side of the wall. To my amazement you were very cordial and answered his questions despite the fact that you had other business at hand. Is there no line a fan can cross which would cause you to be defensive or rude??**

**Scott:** That line is the perimeter of the stall.

**Secondly, my friends and I were sitting in the bleacher seats (which were bigger then) and hanging out. You walked in and sat behind these two gals who were chatting away and**

**you just sorta sat there quietly. I then noticed you pull out a notepad and jot some things down, like you had been listening for someone to say something that caught your attention. I've always wondered if that was a way of gathering some lines for lyrics.**

It's not out of the question that I would hear something by accident and write it down, but that's rare -- maybe it happens something like four times a decade. It's out of the question that I would sit near a conversation because I gauged that someone was ripe to say something I could use in a lyric.

**And finally, had you noticed that The Young Fresh Fellows, who started the Seattle scene (not counting Hendrix or Heart) are still around making records and those bands that truly benefited from the Seattle exposure are pretty much all gone?**

I guess there's a fair amount of truth to that. The Posies are still here, too! The first tour show Game Theory played was in Seattle with the Fellows in 1984, and Seattle continued to be one of my favorite places to play right until it started getting depressing in the wool hat and baggy shorts era. I remember the club scene coming to resemble hell more and more literally. For one thing, that sort of [Frank Kozik](#) sociopathology-is-funny poster art aesthetic - a hoot in small doses -- increasingly took over every minute of arc on every surface, and there was no such thing as getting into a conversation that didn't have something to do with working an angle, getting industry attention.

**Hoping to see you play live again some day and also hoping Lauren Hoffman makes another record some day,**

Can't say as I know the lady.

***Frank from Jersey***

Hey, if you're from Jersey, go see [Tris McCall](#).

--young fresh fellow (ret'd)

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***December 10, 2001***

**Scott, I'm sorry that this is not about when and if you'll be putting out another great record. This is a question that concerns you as an American citizen. As I am living in Germany and the U.S. has always been the biggest cultural influence on me, and although this country is to blame for many things, I always defend it because its one of the few countries in the world which has declared and lived the utopia of a multi-ethnic democracy as its basement. But after the 11th of September, I, for the first time in my life, am really afraid of what America, or to be precise its government, might do.**

**Scott:** Hello, Bendrik! Thank you for writing this thoughtful letter.

**The Bush-Administration (a Regime, to be honest) really scares the shit out of me and the language that they're using clearly shows what they're made of and what they want (WAR, WAR, WAR!).**

Personally, I don't detect a particularly more warlike than usual attitude in the administration or the public, at least considering the circumstances of having suffered a pretty major terrorist attack. Bush is not a stupendously bright guy, and he makes unfortunate comments like the "dead or alive" quote, but I think his (and his handlers') motivation for such swagger is simply popularity, and U.S. military actions enjoy less and less popular support the longer they go on, until one day people start crying "another Vietnam." It seems like a good system so far.

**I'm also shocked about the American media and the unbelievable ignorance and "pro-war-hype" it has created in the last two months. Here in Germany it is very hard to even discuss the topic if "world-wide-retaliation" might be the appropriate answer to terror. If you do you are labeled "Anti-American" right away and the argument is called off.**

What's anti-American is trying to shut down free exchange of thought when it leads to a conclusion that is politically undesirable!

Not many discussions come close to being a true weighing of observations; they usually reduce to opposing self-interests cloaked in popular ideologies. I think somewhere therein lies America's value as a "superpower." The modern world has proven to be too irrational to solve global problems in the Hobbesian spirit of social contract; the logic of social contract is routinely usurped by the logic of fascism. The world's best hope is a set of prevailing populisms which will only cloak a *limited range* of self-interested pursuits. America (and its somewhat mythic role as preeminent democracy) will probably be an invaluable force of safe-enough populism for at least the next fifty years; to a large extent the American government's empowerment in the world depends on its being seen as acting in the interest of victims rather than oppressors. The world (unfortunately) needs a police force empowered in precisely this way -- it's been too easy in the last century for states which victimize *as part of their doctrine* to rise quickly and unopposed to horrific levels of localized power.

**I really don't know if you'd call yourself a leftist, or if I'm getting paranoid, but don't you think that there's something terrible, terrible wrong about the people that are ruling the United States right now???**

I am generally leftist and I did vote against Bush, but I haven't seen anything to indicate that Bush is more dangerous than other U.S. presidents. I was more worried about Bush Sr.'s attempts to abridge rights (his flag burning amendment, his gutting of rights to support his bizarrely cruel and obsessive persecution of those accused of drug offenses). The good thing about the "war on drugs" was that it's probably considered ridiculous by most Americans under 75 years old at this point, so when the federal government attempts a much less preposterous "war on terrorism," they have effectively cried wolf; there is more sensitivity to potential abuse than if there had never been a "war on drugs."



The presence of John Ashcroft, a war on drugs man par excellence, worries me. I'm honestly surprised he hasn't done more damage than he already has, but I expect him to do more.

As any reader of Doonesbury knows, one of the bigger worries in that area is that it's been a pretty long time that some of these thousand or so people of middle eastern descent have been detained, I assume without conventional due process (not that I claim to know particular details). It encourages me that I haven't seen any notable rise in prejudice against Islamic or middle eastern looking people in the general U.S. population -- with the possible exception of the moment of boarding airplanes.

I've also found [a very interesting article](#) about the topic by a former Special-Forces-Member named Stan Goff ("The so-called evidence is a farce"). And I'd really like to know what you think about it?

**Best wishes from Berlin**

**Your "Pen-Friend," *Bendrik Muhs***

Yes, this is interesting, but it also sounds pretty much like every other conspiracy theory. If I may condense the argument, it's something like: the U.S. already intended to invade Afghanistan, ultimately for oil, and were so keen to have a better excuse to do so that they either let the hijacked planes hit their targets when they could have prevented it, or staged the crashes outright.

Despite the fact the Mr. Goff makes a lot of good points, and thinks about a lot of things that people should be thinking about but aren't (for instance, what is geopolitics going to start to look like when the population outstrips the world's energy and food supply?), his analysis seems selectively focused, overpersonalized.

In conspiracy theories, you often run across preposterous instances of spontaneous and unanimous willingness to commit cold blooded murder in highly unlikely and weakly-motivated sociological sectors. I would ask Mr. Goff if he knows of chains of command this high and verifiable where an order to cause the death of six thousand nationals would float through in real time, no dissent, no leak, no "signature." Everyone just *knows* that this oil line to Southern Asia is worth the lives of whomever might be in those buildings.

But one of America's most valuable characteristics is its insistence on freedom of expression, and I'm glad Mr. Goff and others are out there; the more effectively they operate, the harder it is to get away with corrupt action. I will give the man this: before 9/11, I would have argued that these terrorist strikes were not even possible at the U.S.'s level of monitoring of aircraft, especially near the capitol; how it even happened begs for more accounting than has been offered.

ich bin Irving Berlin,

--Scott

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**December 17, 2001**

**Scott, algebra class is really bogging down my gray cells this month so here's a few standard holiday type questions:**

**1. What are you most thankful for?**

**Scott:** My wife Kristine. Awww!

**2. Big Christmas? Little Christmas? Big tree, little tree, plastic tree, any tree?**

Medium Christmas, pretty big plastic tree.

**What kind of tree -- a nice Douglas fir perhaps?**

I believe it is Douglas plastic.

**Are you Santa? Do you put on the white beard? Do you even celebrate Christmas: say, perhaps the target marketing gets you down, or say, you wouldn't call yourself religious?**

I would call everyone religious.

I am not Santa. Santa Scott has no presents! Has no presents!

I do even celebrate Christmas. I have accepted Santa as my personal shopper.

Target marketing gets me HOT.

**Do you rattle boxes -- do you prefer to not be surprised? What's the bestest gift you ever got?**

A Sears 5-speed bike when I was nine. It was the most intense ecstasy ever experienced by a human being.

I am against rattling boxes (what if it's a kitten?)

**What was the worst gift you ever got (you know you know...Precious Moments stuff, Ally McBeal soundtracks).**

I really like the Ally McBeal moment where it goes "I been...I been...I been down..." Now that I reflect, it may be pretty hard to get me something so shallow I won't like it.

**3. How much did the too expensive to be considered a toy piano cost?**

I'm pretty sure it was a Kurzweil K2000 -- which if you ask me is a *very* expensive looking name for a product.

**Edit these questions however you like...I just hate being inconsistent in letters. And plus, I don't have friends. Maybe this is why. Cos rock stars are better than normal people, they don't want to have us around. "Soi disantra, soi disantra!"**

**Anyhoo, back to algebra.**

**All the best during the holidays,**

***David Werking***

thanks for writing and writing, David,

--Screaming Lord Algebra

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***December 31, 2001***

**Scott, your music first caught my interest when I was thirteen. It was "The Waist and The Knees" that did it. That would have been 1993. I quickly gathered the rest of the Game Theory records, even the two EPs and *Dead Center* (ironically enough on Lolita Records),**

**Scott:** Sorry for the surreal delay in replying.

Well, I probably had the name "Lolita" in mind because I knew about the licensing deal with that French record label. So looking back it probably wasn't entirely coincidental.

**before moving on to The Loud Family material. You held the place in my life The Beatles must have held in yours, minus the international acclaim and meteoric record sales. Now that I am twenty and you are semi-retired I'm still rummaging your catalog and turning up relevant and satisfying surprises in your music. Lately I've been reading Larry McMurtry, a fine if sometimes dismissed novelist (see *Some Can Whistle, Duane's Depressed*).**

Thanks; I'll watch for Larry McMurtry.

**In his recent essay "Walter Benjamin At the Dairy Queen," he brings up a point that seems to serve well the nature of your music. Point being that you cannot make art from unredeemed pain. Offhand, do you agree?**

The statement could mean a number of things; I'd really have to read the essay to get McMurtry's point. I've found "redeem" and "redemption" to be among the most loaded words in literature, and I'm going to edit out a long rumination on their meaning in favor of saying I take the meaning of "to redeem" here as "to consider in a larger, edifying context."

**If so, what redeems your pain? At what point is pain redeemed enough to make art from?**

I would be inclined to call "making art" the redeeming process itself, since generally the idea is to find a way using language or sensory input to share a memorable personal experience. I think I'd tend to agree that if by "unredeemed pain" you mean you don't have the slightest

clue where your pain fits in the human experience, you're not going to get much good art out of your sheer agitation. But most twentieth century art -- paint splattering and dissonance and all -- was probably made in disagreement with that attitude, so you can take my puny old opinion with a grain of salt.

**Have you ever failed to write a song?**

To paraphrase Virginia Woolf, I obviously didn't fail nearly often enough.

**And finally, am I wasting my time digging through thousands of sleeveless records throughout California looking for *Painted Windows* and *Blaze of Glory*?**

The short answer would be yes. They're pretty much out of circulation, and good riddance. The best things I could say about them is that I intended some interesting music and lyrics that I pretty much failed to put across in execution, but enough effort went into them that as collector-motivated purchases go they deliver no less listening enjoyment than John and Yoko's *Wedding Album*.

Thanks,

***Brandon J. Carder* in Oakland, a down bay towel to wad and chew...**

thank you, pain webber

--Scott

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