

ASK SCOTT

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

2002 (Year 6)

January 14, 2002

Scott, you know Sturgeon's Law? "90% of everything is crap" (first proposed in the late fifties by late great sci-fi author Theodore Sturgeon?) Well, there's a corollary: "If it's popular, it must be bad." Your fans are humans of great discernment, therefore not legion. Don't abandon us -- there's not enough to look forward to as it is.

I got *Attractive Nuisance* and thought it was OK -- maybe showing a little auto-piloting -- the thin end of the wedge that prys open the door that leads to THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL. Then I couldn't get "720 Times Happier Than the Unjust Man" out of my head. Now it's "Backward Century". It's the interface of the lyric and the "melody." Your songs aren't melodies that lyrics are set to -- the melody acquires significance from discerning the lyric. Not the usual thing, as you must know.

Along with W.B. Yeats, Reid/Brooker (of Procol Harum,) Guy Kyser (*Thin White Rope*), and Wallace Stevens (maybe Frank Black, too), you are one of the greatest influences and comforts in my life. As Alfred Jarry said: "Cliches are the armature of the absolute" -- you're never going to know the depth of my personality, nor I yours -- we'll be Brownian motion to aliens and insects -- but if anything matters at all, your music does -- please don't stop making it.

Bill McKinley

Scott: I'm grateful for the note. It gave me two more reasons to consider doing more music: (1) I'm at the point where I don't just want people evaluating a release of mine according to their existing aesthetics, I want the release to have some input to their aesthetics, and in turn some little input to their view of life, and your note indicates maybe I didn't finish up in a place of no ability to do that. (2) I may be in some competition with Guy Kyser for influence on your soul, and I should perhaps not sleep at the task of prevailing. I enjoy his work immensely -- it's probably quite a bit superior to my own overall -- but I perceive him as being for a somewhat nihilistic response to the world.

from the protocol harem

--Scott

Scott, it's my opinion that metaphors usually don't bear close examination, and places are usually hard to write music about, except of course if you're Van Morrison, who can basically get away with anything twice or more (witness "Ancient Highway").

Here's my too-long-windedly-led-up-to-question: have you ever written a song about a place as the result of being there? "Inverness" is a work of mindblowing genius (you may blush), but for instance, was it written as the result of your personal impressions there, or was it just made up as something you thought would fit a mood you were in?

Scott: Just a mood, and the sound of "Inverness" rhyming with "loneliness." I've never been to Inverness, Scotland. I hope that's not a disappointing answer. I don't mean to downplay my own success at songwriting in the case of that song; to get a good lyric, you have to arrive at a few words that happen to paint *a* picture; it's not practical to start with the particular picture you want and hope to capture it using that restricted art form.

For the same reason, it's odd to me when someone wonders which real person a song of mine is about. About the closest that gets to validity is when it's a nasty song and someone made me feel nasty toward him or her in that way. But my point is always to say "this is a human pattern" rather than try to prove how extraordinary *that* event was in particular. When lyricists try to indict in particular, I think they tend to fail. I'm thinking of John Lennon's "How Do You Sleep," about as giant a flop lyricwise as he ever produced in my opinion.

Second part of this question: the initial background sounds are of rain and thunder, but during most of the song it's absent. Also it occurs to me that the almost staccato sound of the clinky piano (and a mandolin?) adds a kind of restraint to the song, like someone vainly trying to be happy indoors while the weather is bad.

However, the chord progression is not one of your darker ones, and in fact it seems to lead the listener slightly higher at the end of many lines, again as if trying to put on a brave face but coming across unconvincing. I find this intriguing, like a Brian Wilson kind of vibe. If you'd care to let us have a look inside the mind of Scott, I'd appreciate it.

There's not too much like what you describe going on as a mental process, though it sounds like a good description of what I was looking for as a result. That sounds contradictory, I know, but songwriting is sort of like you wish you had some little melody and either: voila, it's suddenly there in your mind and your wish is granted, or voila, nothing, and you just have to go do the dishes or something. I used to say it's like talking: you don't say to yourself that you're going to use a noun, then a verb, then a strong adjective, you just sort of ask your brain for a sentence, and there it is in your mouth. I guess it's just training your brain to speak the language of pop songs. I mean, nothing would prevent me from thinking "the chords need to take the melody higher at the end of the line than what I have now," and sometimes I do revise somewhat along those lines, but in practicality, stuff like that goes on at the level of instantaneous, barely-conscious decision making. If someone asked you "what goes on in the mind of a sentence-speaker?" how can you answer in terms of actual control over the process? "Well, if I think of something to say, and it's really dumb, I can *sometimes* stop it from coming out of my mouth."

The process that's interesting to describe comes in constructing harmony, arranging for a band, and recording, only it sounds like you are well on the way to figuring out everything

we did: use the weather sounds from a sound effects library, add (right again) a mandolin, add a sampled piano, and so forth.

Here's one strange thing about my mind though -- I've made the odd discovery that there's a melody playing in some corner of my consciousness virtually 24 hours a day (even when I'm sleeping; if you wake me up, I can sometimes tell you what it is), and I can either pay attention to it or not. Usually it's nothing interesting enough to make a song into, and in fact I don't usually get song ideas from that, but rather from humming randomly over guitar chords and seeing what leaps out, but sometimes I have a background melody going that isn't too bad and I write a song with that.

Wishing I were cleverer,

Ken

wishing I were kissing to be cleverer,

--Boy Georgeless

January 28, 2002

Scott, first, following protocol, please allow me to say how much I have enjoyed your music lo, these many years.

I was just reading your August 21, 2000 Ask Scott, and I was interested to see you implying that that you don't think your audience thinks *Attractive Nuisance* measures up to your "good albums like *Lolita Nation* or *Plants and Birds*." Now, I think *Plants and Birds* is one of the best records ever, so I would be one of those heretics that would say that *AN* doesn't match up. But I also think that *OK Computer* and *Loaded* and *Raw Power* and *Pet Sounds* don't match up, so don't feel bad about that. I like *AN* very much.

Scott: Thank you!

But this brings up an interesting question, and one that must play on many artists' minds - - Alex Chilton and Tom Verlaine, for instance -- and I hasten to add not yours I hope, because you have clearly developed hugely as you have progressed through your career. But what do you do if you think you've done your best work early on, on your first album even? Stop? Surely the artistic impulse wouldn't let you do that. Stop publishing? Easier, but surely frustrating.

The artistic impulse isn't really as monolithic and mysterious as all that. You can break it down somewhat into how much benefit your audience seems to be deriving, and what you call "benefit." The artistic process is a little old and rickety in 2002. It used to be that few enough people had the sheer skill to be writers, painters, musicians, etc., that the specialness of it was a viable conduit for conveying deep feeling.

To digress, we don't like to acknowledge the truth of what I just said; we prefer to think we could experience any art directly, independent of the prestige associated with it, but in reality, without a system of prestige -- buzz, if you like -- people don't really know what to think about any art. They don't know if Norman Rockwell paintings are brilliant because they're well-crafted and they speak to the viewer, or they're awful because they traffic in bourgeois aesthetics. Hype and prestige mediate 99% of every artistic experience, and of the unmediated communication going on in the remaining 1%, 99% of *that* is not really the artist expressing anything, but the artist soliciting your approval -- maybe with the goal of actually expressing some second thing in a way that will catch you unawares, maybe just to profit from your approval and to leave it at that. Not that the artist probably knows this is going on (to us artists it's all one big unexamined "heigh ho, another great idea from me"), but as no one asks why *ultimately* we do anything anymore, there's more than enough ambient existential noise for any issue of that kind to get lost in.

So it used to be that, say, superskilled operatic tenors, or supersensitive painters of light and shade, were mythologized as conduits to a more valuable experiential reality. But that mythology has been deconstructed (sorry, that word again) relentlessly in the recent past, in some respects for good, in some respects not. The "artistic impulse" has to have a viable component of "I'll win an audience with *this* excellence, so I can deploy *that* package of human feeling," and I'm fresh out of ideas how at age 41 I can win an audience without there being many good forums for excellence around that aren't just *fashion*, and at which I would have any chance of distinguishing myself.

So if you feel like you're out of steam in that sense, it makes limited sense to continue with a *lot* of unpublished stuff, the way you did in youth when you were trying your hand, because what you're now trying your hand at is viability, in a business sense or at least a cultural sense.

Obviously thoughts of an artist stopping work is brought to mind by your announcement that you're unlikely to release anything again -- although the end of your response did kindle a little flame of hope. But you say you would want to be sure you aren't just doing it to do it. Why else? If you persist, as you have, in creating challenging music surely you can't expect to get paid like Puffy?

Or does this signal the start of your Goo Goo Dolls period??

I've discovered how easy it is to cheapen your past work by trying to sound good to people. People have good noses for pandering and very bad noses for true artistic worth, so there's some incentive not to rock the boat of what reputation I have as, say, a worthwhile lyricist.

Artistically speaking, a move on my part to *avoid* (even to continue to avoid) sounding like the Goo Goo Dolls or other successful groups would be exactly equivalent to a move on my part to *attain* success by appropriating successful aspects. In a way my impulse is: I don't want to even play the game until I can somehow slap some sense into the world on this point. Only a few worthy artists play that game well enough to make so many friends that the greater number of their enemies doesn't matter. Kubrick comes to mind as the master of it in our time, and surely the world was finally ready to bury him for *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Then there's the open question of whether I'm worthy at all, which just sounds like I'm begging for more compliments.

Looking forward to whatever comes down the Miller pike,

Grahame Davies

thanks, I do value the encouragement,

--Goo Goo Dali

Scott, I have been meaning to write this note to your site, not really expecting that you will see it, but I just read your responses to the writer who sent in the Jeff Buckley quote and it moved me to try to commit to writing what I have been thinking for some time (I haven't written a "fan letter" in a long, long time). I have only recently (within the last two years) become a listener of your music... OK, I am a *huge* fan but at age 39 it seems ridiculous to say that... and I have been following your announcements of retirement with great interest and also regret. Your Loud Family work is the most original, creative, captivating and sonically brilliant music I have heard in a long, long time -- and I have yet to get into your Game Theory work! So, although I would never dare to ask you to keep on going (way too selfish), I wanted to first thank you for giving all of us the incredible body of work you have composed; and remember, great art is never appreciated in its time. And yours is great art that has made a difference in my life.

Scott: I'm most grateful to you for saying so.

Now my question, it's kind of inane but I hope and think you can relate, hearing how carefully you engineer the sound of your music: I guess from your lists that you hold the Beatles in high regard, as do I. I was listening to the remixed CD "songtrack" that Capital put out last year for the *Yellow Submarine* movie and was struck by the great job they did in cleaning up those tracks; it made me wish that they would think about remixing the whole catalog. I expressed this to another fan and he recoiled in horror. I guess it's like when they restored the Sistine Chapel, some people thought they were revealing the brilliance by cleaning it up; others viewed it as near vandalism. I was then listening to *Interbabe Concern* and how great it sounded, and it made me wonder: what side do you come down on, do you like what they did in the remix process, or should it always be as the original masters intended? Even if you hate the concept, you have to admit that the remixed "Only a Northern Song" and "Nowhere Man" just sparkle.

I agree; I don't hate the concept at all, except that sometimes a lot of artistry went into the initial mixing or mastering, and the knowledge of what the people involved were striving for at the time is long gone by the time the engineers of the future get to it. I think the records of mine that are just right as is, sonically speaking, are *Big Shot Chronicles*, *Plants and Birds*, and *Interbabe Concern*. The others have varying degrees of little things that annoy me here and there that I could see wanting to clean up.

Scott, you're incredibly talented and I will always be a fan. Thanks again.

Sincerely,

Tom Pierno

I am in your debt for such a flattering message.

thanks much for writing,

--Sir Fix-It-In-the-Mix-a-Lot

February 4, 2002

Scott, thanks for doing [the inventory on my record collection](#). I don't have every single thing on there, but we match 96%. I was glad to see *In Excelsior Dayglo* on someone else's list.

Scott: Thanks for calling attention to that wonderful album. The one of Christmas's that went unreleased for a while, *Vortex*, is possibly even better. The songs "Superheroes" and "Almighty" are beyond stunning to me. I used to correspond with Michael Cudahy a bit back in the pre-e-mail days, but I haven't talked to him at all since the whole Combustible Edison thing. He's extremely witty, and one of those few people who are authentically eccentric in a good way.

I'll search out the Solipsistics, they are in good company.

And speaking of eccentric! I saw them once live and was really taken. I think I'd start with *Whatever Makes You Happy*. The first two songs are a more or less perfect introduction to their considerable merits, although *Wish In One Hand* is certainly remarkable in its own way -- probably a contender for the creepiest record ever made.

Anything new to recommend?

eRacerX

Nothing that isn't pretty big indie news, really. I wouldn't want to be without *Mass Romantic* by the New Pornographers. *De Stijl* by the White Stripes is quite nice, and *White Blood Cells* has its interesting points. *Touched* by Ken Stringfellow is superb: the songs "One Morning," "Uniforms," "Find Yourself Alone," and "Reveal Love" are all absolutely first rate (the last two were released on a single last year under the band name Saltine). I like *Howdy* by Teenage Fanclub. It's funny, I always think there's not enough to their songs when I first hear the record, then I always end up thinking one or two are excellent and a few others hang right in there. "How It Goes" by For Stars is kind a classic little song. Also "Working Girls" by the Pernice Brothers. I keep trying to like recent Radiohead more than I do.

--Mr. "New"-equals-less-than-three-years-old

February 11, 2002

Scott, I entirely respect your decision to throw in the sweaty towel although it will ruin my annual(ish) anticipation of the next SM statement to a mostly uncaring (and therefore ignorant) world. Your music continues to give me eons of enjoyment and this brief communication is to state/ask (delete as appropriate):

1. What does the 'DEFMACROS' etc. track refer to? I appreciate that some are snippets (good word -- sounds like a brand of dog food) of GT lyrics but I can't follow 'NEQBMERET'

Scott: They were computer programming language elements strung together. I remember that "DEF" was "define" and a "MACRO" means a little subroutine. "NEQ" was "not equal to." That's all of what you mention I can remember as far as specific details, but I remember, for the whole song-titling exercise in that passage, intending something like parody. There was sort of an intellectual fad going on where self-reference was the answer to the mystery of consciousness, and I wanted to have a sort of mock-heroic rendition of that formula, in the way I imagined dadaists and surrealists would have gone about a task like that. I didn't expect anyone to "get it" exactly. On that record I was committed to making every effort to try to get across the feelings I had to get across, no matter how much of a failure my means of communication seemed to me at the time.

2. *Lolita Nation* is my very very all-time favourite -- you probably won't agree but it is *the* complete record (*Plants...* comes close but it hasn't got "The Waist and the Knees"). Feel proud, lad.

Thank you very much. I still don't quite know what to feel about that record. I wouldn't blame anyone for hating it, but I'm glad you don't.

3. You probably aren't aware of the significant fan (awful word, I know) base you have here in Good Old Blighty but the lowest comment I have heard uttered about your music when attempting to convert the unknowing and uninspired is "worthy." I bet Phil Collins couldn't match this (ha!)

I greatly appreciate the kind word. I always thought that in theory, more English people should have liked my music than actually did, since I expended so much energy trying to master British rock skills, like having lots of chord changes and lyrics that are always depressing (and I mean that with the utmost respect).

4. Good luck in wherever George Bush Jnr. takes you (war with Canada isn't out of the question).

**Mick Kinsey
Wolverhampton, England**

Don't worry. America will never make such unstrategical use of our nucular arsenility.

my coat is shining after switching to YUMMY SNIPPETS,

--Scott

February 25, 2002

Scott, I've been a great fan and admirer since the mid-80's. Anyway, part of the appeal of your music for me has been the undercurrent of pessimism in your lyrics set against the wonderful pop tunefulness of your music; from "Last Day That We're Young" to "Slit My Wrists" to "Deee-Pression" (actually, when I first heard that song, I thought you were singing "fill that depression right now"; I was relieved to find out that it was really "fit of...") I always wonder, for such a cute, talented guy like yourself, where does that angst come from?

Scott: I am sorry to inform you that there are individuals out there who lack your obvious good taste in music and people in general. What is the result of repeated exposure to such individuals? Angst.

Or is it unavoidable for someone who thinks a lot? It's funny, the writer I most associate your lyrical style and outlook with is Douglas Coupland; in fact, in my mind I sometimes can't help but merge the two of you together in a sort of satisfying artistic gestalt.

Thank you -- he's very good. I hardly ever read contemporary fiction, but I've read a little of Douglas Coupland, David Foster Wallace, and Michael Chabon, in each of whom I've found quite a bit to like, but very different things in each case. Coupland has the least literary polish of the three, but maybe in the way that Emily Dickinson was comparatively unpolished -- there is a sympathy with the popular mind married to a need to pick away at its spiritual vapidly. The result is a gentleness you don't get when a truly lacerating storyteller's mind comes along, the last major one I can think of being Flannery O'Connor's.

I tend not to read for purposes of entertainment these days. Right now I'm reading Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, which cannot possibly have ever entertained anyone. I just finished Herodotus' history of the Greek and Persian wars. I think you could say I'm looking into the unvarnished truth of human affairs, which may begin to answer the question of why my lyrics seem to have a pessimistic aspect. As Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and a few other people have noticed, if you put people in a generally happy, enviable social arrangement, people's very favorite thing to do at that point is to turn it all into a despicable pit of resentment and general bad feeling. Why? You can get people not to do it, but it's forever a black art; what system works to cause people to get along? What used to be called the "civilizing" process is now a somewhat discredited concept -- full of implications of male hierarchy and other things we're lately taught, justifiably, to distrust -- leading some people to wonder if we weren't better off in our primitive state. Yet, you read a little ancient history, and you realize we weren't.

Ill-advisedly enough, people look for answers to such questions in popular entertainment, so I've been game to try to make popular entertainment which takes something of a crack at it (those who have been following along carefully will have noticed it was not popular). I don't ever mean to be pessimistic for pessimism's sake, as I think some artists do as a matter of being fashionable; but there's a fine line between trying to show the possibility of a world that is beautiful because problems are solvable, and trying to show the possibility of a world which is beautiful because problems are ignorable.

Well, I guess that's my own synapse problem. At any rate, I think it's one of the great crimes of pop music that Game Theory/Loud Family never broke bigtime in alternative rock. "Don't know what the radio wants when the radio taunts..." Me neither. All I know is that a new Loud Family album was always like a little treat from above that improved my day-to-day life in some indefinable but significant way.

Anyway, this has turned into a fan letter, so I should just shut up.

Dana Claycomb

I cannot stress this enough -- if you feel anything turning into a fan letter, do *not* shut up.

--Angstrum

March 4, 2002

Scott, the following quote of yours upset me: "but there's just not the slightest doubt that people need a rest from me. I feel like I'm putting stuff down that should be knocking people out, and it's not. Like a lot of middle-aged rock people."

I guess I can't speak for the world but I know that your stuff has always knocked me out.

Scott: Thank you very much. I don't mean to imply that I'm not grateful for the significant number of people who have bought my records, gone to my shows, booked my bands in their clubs, played my music on their radio shows, written reviews, written to this web site, on and on. People, I must say, have really in no way failed to give me a chance. There was almost never a point in my music career when I didn't get much more press and general media attention than my sales and attendance warranted. But -- artistic considerations aside -- the world just gets tired of giving you a chance, predicting your success and then not having you succeed. It had come to a point where far more people were having me shoved down their throats than were ever willing to swallow, and you'll have to take my word that it's a great relief to stop subjecting people to yourself when you feel that's the case.

I purchased the *Lolita Nation* LP new and scoured the used bins to find the early LP's shortly afterwards (poor college student) and every time a new release came out I snagged it. I have always felt your music was fresh, interesting and just plain sticks in your head. You say you currently don't have a label; I have 2 questions: (1) What is the possibility of your putting out your music yourself? From searching on the web, eBay and other sites, it seems the Game Theory and the Loud Family stuff definitely has an audience.

Thank you again. Maybe. Unfortunately, I'm not the kind of artist who can make an album by himself. I always need a drummer, a keyboardist, and at least some time in a pro studio. Even if I decided to put something out myself, this something has to come into existence first; you don't snap your fingers and have all the personnel and equipment you need. I don't think it's generally understood what a colossal amount of work it is to make any record that is actually going to appeal to, say, a thousand people. (And you need to appeal

to about 20,000 people for the release to have any sort of cultural presence.) I'd have to solve the difficult problem of finagling the means to get a quality result without having to re-enter the world of popularity concerns.

(2) Do you have any unreleased gems in the closet and have you ever considered putting them out (something like Martin Phillips is currently working on with his Chills material)? Thanks and for what it's worth, I look forward to being knocked out in the future by some Scott Miller project.

Gregg Conover

Thanks again. I have very little unreleased material, but, hey, you stick around this business for a while and you realize that one's regular catalog tracks of today are one's obscure gems of tomorrow!

just plain sticks in my head,

--Scott

March 18, 2002

Scott, your last column has sparked a debate within our Loudfan household. You mentioned that you are not reading for pleasure these days. My wife Celeste (favorite Scott song: "St. Therese") believes that it is impossible to read for anything but pleasure; that the brain won't allow it; that the eyes can't be dragged across a single sentence without there being some resultantly pleasurable stimulatory sensation to the brain. The act of reading itself, she would propose, is, essentially, a pleasure. I, on the other hand (favorite Scott song this moment: "No One's Watching My Limo Ride"), being the editor of a collection of pornographic websites which accept submissions from the public, know for a fact that even texts expressly intended to pleasure can be quite unpleasant to read. Can you elaborate on what reading for pleasure means to you? And by the way, your column is a tremendous pleasure to read.

Scott: My exact quote was about not tending to read for entertainment, as opposed to not tending not to read for pleasure. To me the difference has something to do with whether or not the author intended the manner of pleasure the reader is getting, and if what shared pleasure there is in the little revelations about human nature has to do with the author and the reader sharing vindication or contrition.

For example, I got a little heat from saying that DAS KAPITAL couldn't have possibly been entertaining to anyone. That was kind of a joke, but I do stand corrected. Let me say that such entertainment as Marx seems to me to have intended -- inviting a shared disdain of "the bourgeoisie" and "misers," for instance -- would not compel me to read any 700 pages of it. But as a document of the mechanism by which a great mind of the period captured the imagination of so many people for so long, it's very interesting to me.

It seems to me that the 19th century was the great era of overcrediting for a bright idea: if a thinker could dazzle with a few insights, it could easily be taken in a leap of faith that he was qualified to do extensive social engineering. It's a form of what in supposedly less informed times was called gnostic heresy -- by knowing more than someone else, you accrue ontological transcendence. There's an idea's use-value, as it were, and then there's its disguised value to transform its owner, Joe Blow, into a lofty thinker. It's something of a disguised reshuffling of the ancient and irrepressible impulse to differentiate the sacred from the profane. The raw agendum of deciding who is a somebody and who is a nobody is fundamentally no more or less sophisticated whether the differentiating factor is ceremony, birthright, fame, academic achievement, or populist political leverage. Marx wouldn't have agreed with that impression of mine at all; he would have been sure that if you removed hierarchy imposed from without (by, say, religion), a great peace of mind and spirit of camaraderie would bloom like springtime.

This is going on in my mind as I read Marx, and it is a form of pleasure, but Marx wasn't intending it. I appreciate his insights, but I am also aware of him being up to his tricks, and by extension, I discover tricks I am sometimes up to.

Speaking of the profane, if I happen to check out any of those pornographic web sites you mention, it's strictly for sociological study, you understand.

On the subject of pleasure, I found a ten-year-old Stax records CD re-issue of Big Star's #1 Record and Radio City (contains a wonderful history of the band by Brian Hogg). I'd certainly heard of these legendary songs and heard some of them -- "September Gurls," of course, and your sparkling to-the-note rendition of "Back of a Car." I am floored by these albums like nothing since the day I got my hands on your Plants and Birds... disc (at Amoeba Records while staying with a friend in Berkeley) and played this classic album of yours from SF back to Texas to the exclusion of all other sounds. "Even You" was the song that hooked me (still one of the most heartbreaking songs I've ever heard),

It is the friggin' Brian's Song of indie rock, if I do say so myself.

then "Aerodeleria" with its home-run ball epiphany verse. All of which brings me back to Big Star. "The Ballad of El Goodo" in particular is, like so many of your songs, haunting, joyful, and devastatingly beautiful. I don't have a question or observation to make about my discovery other than "gasp" and to thank you, again, for your contribution to all that is sonically magnificent.

Mark Portier

Thanks so very much, Mark. And hi to Celeste!

waiting for Goodo,

--Scott

Scott, you got the line/album title *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things* from "A Horse With No Name," right?

Lisa Letostak

Scott: Yes, "he" tells me things and sometimes tells me what to do. How did you know "he" has no name?

Thank you for writing.

WHAT IS IT NOW, MOTHER?!

--Scott

April 1, 2002

Scott, I'm a first time emailer, long time listener. Do you plan on doing a follow up to Attractive Nuisance anytime soon? Are you recording music? Anyway, I've always loved your records and look forward to another.

Scott: When I made *Attractive Nuisance*, I was thinking it was probably my last record -- at least my last regular release, that is, a full-length CD of original material, the ostensible point of which is to produce many thousands of the thing and make money in an economy-of-scale venture.

I've had a fair amount of encouragement to continue (thanks, everyone), so maybe I'm in a more softened-up state of trying to think of ways out of what I've come to hate the most about being in the music business: promoting myself where I'm not welcome. It's not obvious what can be done. I'm not so personally disposed to take the web music avenue; I'm too attached to both the physical embodiment of records and the human contact of the whole process in general. I like making a tangible thing in cooperation with musicians and recording professionals, then distributing it to people who like getting it, with the help of good-natured, nonmegalomaniacal entrepreneurs. I'm just doubtful that this many-variabled equation has a solution for not-so-terribly-popular me these days.

Also, this is out of left field, but I have an ongoing debate with some friends. What do you think of the word "class" as a self-antonym? For example, when you say "she's a classy lady" or "this is a classy place," you really haven't described what you've intended to describe. In other words, you sort of cheapen the thing you've tried to give value to. Or something like that. My friends think I'm wrong. What do you think?

Rick Ness

I might know what you mean. Usually "classy" is a legitimate compliment meaning something like "cultured enough to not act in a petty way." That's not the exact same sense as "classy place," or probably even "classy lady," but it's related. It means you should be able to expect that the place or the lady benefits from some sort of social tradition or pedigree.

But there's the rub. We're all suspicious of social traditions and pedigrees in modernity. If you come right out and say that "classy" means "appropriate to the upper class," you are dead in the water on the grounds of snobbiness. On one level, "classy place" and "classy lady" can backfire as compliments in more or less the same way they would for a pretentious hood in a Chicago gangster movie. But I think it's also reasonable simply to be vaguely uncomfortable with the fact that a classy lady is one who reflects well on her date or her associates, and there is a hint of arbitrary self-servingness in the choice of what cultural rule is being clandestinely called upon to separate the classy from the not classy.

but all is forgiven if you just need it to rhyme with "chassis"

--Scott

April 8, 2002

Scott, R.E.M. released a song called "What's the Frequency Kenneth" on their album *Monster* in 1994. I see that credits went to the several members of R.E.M. When I first became aware of this song's release, I remember being surprised and wondering whether they had covered your aural montage track from *Lolita Nation*.

Of course, the answer was no, they'd just written another song referring to a concept you had tipped your hat to 7 years before, albeit from a very different perspective. Yours was of course better, IMHO: much more to the point of illustrating the savage strangeness of the whole affair. While I know it's supposedly not possible to copyright a concept, I wonder what your reaction to R.E.M.'s song was, if any. In particular, I find it interesting that Mitch Easter was involved with the only two groups I've known of that have approached this entertainingly goofy issue. Furthermore, when I imagine that the members of R.E.M. were not guilty of some small form of plagiarism, even unconsciously, my worst, if wiser self responds with a petulant "Shuh, right."

Scott: To tell the truth, I would be flattered and not even the tiniest bit irked if they somehow unconsciously got the idea from my record, but I think Michael Stipe probably wrote the lyric, and I think Pete Buck was the only R.E.M. member who knew Game Theory at all, so it probably doesn't quite add up that it was a direct influence.

I'm pretty eager to take the side of the supposed plagiarist in any case where there's an accusation of idea theft in music; not *always*, but almost always. Music is more a matter of imitation by its very nature than people seem generally happy to accept. Even in cases where there is a definite nick of a part of a song -- "My Sweet Lord" and "He's So Fine," or Elastica's "Connection" and whatever that Wire song was [*"Three Girl Rhumba"* -ed.] -- if anyone thinks the success of the later song was actually due to the similarity, I think they're crazy, and if they think that every aspect of the earlier recording was a matter of promethean originality alone, they're crazy there, too.

Ironically, one thing I thought I invented on *Lolita Nation* that no one has offered me credit for is the media hook sense of calling something "[blank] nation." As far as I knew, there was no precedent of the "Bobby Flay's Food Nation" sort at the time -- I got the idea from the

Indian tribal government designation, which most kids my age knew about from Mark Lindsay's "they took the whole Cherokee nation/ Locked us on this a-reservation." Within a year or two there were Sonic Youth's *Daydream Nation* (excellent album!), then Fox TV's "Alien Nation," and then the usage quickly became part of the landscape.

In their song, the R.E.M. phrase-drop "Withdrawal in disgust is not the same as apathy" refers to Richard Linklater's *Slacker*. Naturally, I'm curious as to your view of this idea as well.

I haven't seen *Slacker*, so I'll take your word on the reference. The root sense of "apathy" (my wife Kristine knew this -- I needed a dictionary) is "without feeling," as in not far from the opposite of sympathy. So withdrawal in disgust is in fact pretty close to being the same thing as apathy, even if it isn't the same thing as slacking off. But yeah, if you're boycotting a system, that system will tend to come up with a mythology which says you're somehow soulless. Yet, neither attitude decides the value of the system; they amount to traded insults.

By the way, the frequency is 9192.63177 MHz, and I have this on good authority. It's Cesium, if you know how, and I'm not being luminiferous, ether.

So punny it Hz,

Frequency Kenneth

Thanks for writing, Ken!

--Super Freq

April 15, 2002

Scott, about a year ago I sent you the only fan letter I've ever written, and you were kind enough to jot a few lines in response. At that point I was trying to consider your feelings and to support your decision to retire from the music biz. I knew I wouldn't be able to replace you -- it's only a slight exaggeration to say that you've ruined me for other music -- but I figured I wasn't young anymore (42) and it was time to move on to other things.

Since then I've had a change of heart -- not about my taste, but about my role. I've decided that it's your work to decide to do with your future and mine, as a fan, to try to convince you how important your music is and to beg you to reconsider. I could go into incredibly tedious detail about what I've loved about your music, song by song, for the last, what, 17 years: from the strains of "Stairway to Heaven" at the end of "24" to the gorgeous harmony of "Motion of Ariel." Let me know if you'd like me to do that, because I would, especially if it would help you to feel your efforts had been heard and at least partly understood and appreciated.

Scott: Bill, thank you very much.

Anyway, I've been thinking about what to do about this problem, and I remembered your writing about patronage a while ago in this forum. And I got to wondering: If a bunch of your fans got together and chipped in, how much would it take to help convince you that you should make another CD? I'm not a millionaire, and it's embarrassing to put a price tag on art, but I'd gladly chip in \$500, say, toward this end. How much money would it take to make a difference?

I believe Momus was taking thousand dollar orders to produce a finished song that was actually about the patron, so I would think I could be expected to produce a song which was a ballad celebrating you and another \$500 patron, maybe like "Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy." Or maybe for \$100 you get a song about Momus.

But seriously. Your generosity is extremely admirable, and I doubt my worthiness as a recipient.

I'm sure I speak for countless others when I say that you've given me much, much more than I could ever repay.

Bill Belt

Thank you so much. The main problem is that lack of funds is only one of the reasons I wouldn't be recording again, and lack of desire on my part only one other. These could be overcome and there would still be release logistics, collaboration logistics, financial structuring logistics, and my own personal scheduling logistics, to name only a few. Then there's how bad I'd feel if people hated the result (which I have to admit for some reason seems all but inevitable).

Oh...

Of all the gamblin' men I've known
There's one I've always felt
Had nerves the hardest steel of all
That man was William Belt...

--Scott

April 22, 2002

Scott, in the January 2002 "Ask Scott" you wrote:

"I think the records of mine that are just right as is, sonically speaking, are *Big Shot Chronicles*, *Plants and Birds*, and *Interbabe Concern*. The others have varying degrees of little things that annoy me here and there that I could see wanting to clean up."

I agree with your selections re: sonic perfection -- especially *Big Shot Chronicles* -- God, it's gorgeous -- but am curious what you would "clean up" on *Days for Days*?

Best,

P-Bob (Photo Robert)

Scott: Hi Robert! Thanks for participating in the web forum. And thanks for your positive words.

On *Days for Days*, we went for a fairly expensive studio, and not too much time in it. This was the opposite of *Interbabe Concern*, which was medium priced studios, lots of ADAT recording at my house, and spending tons of time on everything, including mixing.

So I had to make a few hard mixing decisions on *DFD* that I didn't have to make on *ICon*:

1. Jonathan Segel played about three times as much violin and guitar on "Why We Don't Live In Mauritania" and "Sister Sleep" as actually made it into the final mix. He essentially laid a bunch of tracks down and said "use whatever you want," and it would have taken an extra day or so that I didn't have to work out a more liberal selection of combined tracks such that the arrangement still hung together. But his tracks were all great. "Sister Sleep" in general was too hard a mix to do in a half day, or whatever it was we had. It's really about four songs in one.
2. On the first three tracks, we tried to get more coherence than we attained with the false-start versions of the same song. The third one is the most perfect (the mix Tim Walters did), but the problem became how to start with the same energy, then build up from there. I didn't really nail that mixing task.
3. The guitar sounds were not as first-rate as they were on *ICon*. Again, it was just a matter of having an extra hour here and there just fiddling with the pedal settings vs. the amp settings vs. the pre-amp and mixer EQ settings. You can get a good enough sound by just throwing a mike in front of the amp and playing like you do live (some sessions I've done, e.g. *Kickball* by the Impatients, seem like there's no such thing as getting a bad guitar sound), but there's usually a golden combination of tweaks in there somewhere where you get a really satisfying range of life in the transients and whatever distortion overtones are going on. Some of the *DFD* guitar parts got in that pocket, and others I think just aren't really pulling their weight in the mix.

Oh, I can pick my stuff apart forever. I agree that for the most part *DFD* sounds terrific. All of Tim Walters's work was amazing, and when Tom Carr got to really stretch out on something like "Way Too Helpful," he could get great, expansive sounds. Listen carefully to the long-delay echo on the opening synth bleeps, or the power each of the song's three or four tambourine hits have.

Days Ex Machina,

--Scott

April 29, 2002

Scott, I'm in a Girardian reading group at Stanford (and Rene Girard is himself a member), and I was wondering what song or songs of yours best related to your reading of Girard's work.

John Steele
Palo Alto, CA

Scott: First of all, it's wonderful to hear from an appreciator (not to mention acquaintance) of Girard; for me, he is the greatest thinker of our time -- as important as Einstein would be if everyday life required that we all move around at close to the speed of light. I'm always excited to see evidence of more people discovering what he has to offer.

The songs of mine which relate best to Girard are actually the ones from the 1994 and 1996 albums, which are the two from before I first read his work -- this was *Things Hidden* -- in 1997. Probably like most Girard enthusiasts, I've wondered why his work doesn't catch on faster in the mainstream, and that becomes the same question as: what made me in particular like it right away? Part of the answer is that writing lyrics seriously for a long time caused me to chase certain social issues down into a corner, such that when *Things Hidden* came along, I couldn't miss its addressing in a systematic way problems which I'd been trying to address in a vaguer way.

But you have to believe there's a problem to be excited when you see a solution to it, and I think most of us don't ordinarily think of the terrible history of human strife as anything but one freak occurrence after another, all endable immediately with the mildest good intentions. Any inclination to systematize strife tends to be taken as sheer gloominess, or else a back-door attempt to dictate morals to one's own advantage per Nietzsche's typical complaint. Hostility thus enjoys a kind of de facto protection to generate what it may, as victimization has always enjoyed a peculiar set of immunities from intellectual scrutiny.

With that introduction for those who don't know Girard, I will now bite the bullet and embarrass myself by analyzing some of my own lyrics.

In "Asleep and Awake On the Man's Freeway," I say "I see ends before the starts, what it's like in prison, then the good and bad reasons for laws; the excuses, then the outcomes, then the cause." Having done this little riff on reverse causality in crime and punishment, it was not so outrageous to hear an assertion in *Things Hidden* along the lines that in a certain anthropological sense, punishing the despised one is more basic to the social group than the details of the law which supposedly justifies the punishment. This is no huge surprise, if only because we observe that less-evolved animals sometimes attack one of their own pack prior to their possibly reasoning about why one animal *deserves* to be attacked (this is not in Girard, I don't think, just my own interjection). Still, earlier in my life, this class of suggestion of dynamism in our idea of justice would have probably sounded like madness to me.

In "North San Bruno Dishonor Trip," I say "this [referring to some unpleasantness I don't feel like quoting] is how our cherished legends take shape, but from our favorite stories, can some truth escape?" I was trying to form the thought which I'd later hear Kierkegaard express as "the crowd is untruth," and which Girard systematized in the theory that myths

arise from violence so as to flatter the perpetrators. Before I had been made hungry (by life in general) to have that kind of feeling corroborated, I probably would have thought Girard's assertion came out of nowhere, and was offensive to the spirit in which Joseph Campbell and many others treat mythology as always noble and edifying.

I don't have any trouble mapping the "mimetic desire" and "model/rival" discussions onto ideas I associate with my lyrics in "Still Its Own Reward" and "Baby Hard-to-Be-Around."

Okay, I've run out of grit for treating my lyrics as worthy to go on about, but I think most of my attempts at artistic expression, and most of the art and literature I have valued, point to the truth of Girard. Also, I see occasional signs in filmmaking that the "things hidden since the foundation of the world" are a little less hidden all the time (*Changing Lanes* strikes me as a recent example).

Thank you very much for writing.

They'll stone ya and then they'll say, "good luck."

--Scott

May 6, 2002

Scott, I have been reading William Faulkner for the last couple of years now. I totally love *The Sound and the Fury*. I noticed it was one of your top ten novels (number 8). I was wondering what you thought of Faulkner as a literary artist, as you seem to also be a dabbler in high literature. What did you get out of *The Sound and the Fury*? Have you read any of his other novels? I am reading *Go Down, Moses* right now. Besides that, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Light in August*, his stuff seems kind of uneven. (I have also read *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, and am halfway through *Absalom, Absalom*, which is not uneven as much as it is indigestible unless read in very small (I suggest two pages every two weeks) excerpts. Anyhow, I just wanted to read your opinion on him.

Scott: It's been so long since I read *The Sound and the Fury* (which is the only Faulkner novel I've read) I shouldn't attempt too definitive a commentary. If I had to condense what I got out of the novel into a sentence, it's that it demonstrates, via a reasonable variety of mental perspectives, that the worldview in a social mainstream can typically be seen as destructively self-serving when viewed at any distance, and that a worldview that is *not* self-serving is typically the cause or result of social marginalization.

I just discovered Flannery O'Connor, and you seem to get a lot of the same effects that I have (as opposed to most of critical theory which just can't seem to get beyond the words "original" and "disturbing" with a "provocative" maybe thrown in there) and I wanted a further elucidation on what you thought of good ol' Billy the Bard of the Southern Renaissance.

In contrast with Faulkner, I've read almost everything by Flannery O'Connor. She would be my pick for Bard of the Southern Renaissance, so I will take the liberty of:

[...skipping to the second of your two emails...]

I think Flannery O'Connor's vision of the world with her transcendent Christianity, greatly influenced mine and the way I see my own Christianity.

How do you account for the difference between the apparent intentions of Jesus Christ, as seen through such transcendence, and the way that the Christian Majority works today? Christian fundamentalist are being more and more maligned these days, and are almost losing its foothold as a cultural force (well, Bush did get elected... never mind). What I'm trying to say through these ramblings is that the church seems to be very good at moral condemnation (and to some part social stigmatism) but not very good with spiritual solace. And do you think that this leads the world ripe for another, "fresher," spiritual leader?

Those are a whole lot of thoughts there -- I'm sure I can't address them all. But I do think that Christianity in the sense that Flannery O'Connor was a Christian transcends something which Christian fundamentalism doesn't transcend: the realm of cultural glorification vs. cultural condemnation. O'Connor functions in the proper biblical prophetic capacity -- revealing subtle and disguised social injustices -- whereas I see a lot of fundamentalists tending to act in anti-prophetic ways.

That is, they seem to have a personal distaste for the biblical *process*, which is the movement away from sacrificial and ablutionary ritual -- cleaving of the righteous from the unrighteous -- toward equality, rehabilitation of victims, and considerations which transcend the self and the social order (specifically the social order in its mob manifestation, misidentified as a vengeful God). Such a distaste must be the explanation for the fundamentalist preference for viewing the Bible as a static sacred directive, where ancient laws calling for stoning are on no worse footing than Jesus' rebuke of the mob stoning the woman caught in adultery. Which seems to me to treat the immense value of the Bible very shoddily.

The world hasn't seen fresher spiritual leaders than Jesus and Buddha, and I think if the world is ripe for anything, it's to start contemplating these two people's spiritualities more conscientiously.

One more thought: how effective would this so-called spiritual leader be if he/she did not have Hollywood answers to tough spiritual questions?

I consider Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Dalai Lama to be magnificent examples of modern spiritual leaders, and they don't really represent any trafficking in Hollywood answers.

Do you think the people, in this pop culture, have any ears for something that they may not want to hear?

G.L.

As much as I like pop culture, I think it's safe to define it as that which doesn't have ears for what it doesn't want to hear.

--the displaced person

May 20, 2002

Scott, I had the great fortune to see you a few times with the Loud Family -- twice at TT's in Cambridge, Mass., and most recently at the Hotel Utah in San Francisco (musta been around summertime, 2000). Fun and ballsy shows they were, and it's a shame we can't get any more of 'em!

Scott: Hi Brian! Very nice of you to write.

Before your set at the Hotel Utah, I managed to chat with you for a bit about your favorite bands. I gave you a hard time for not including *Magical Mystery Tour* on your 1967 favorite albums list (to which you replied something about it not being a "real album"), and then we talked about whether 1993 was the greatest year of all time for pop music. I maintain that it is!

Close, anyway. I suppose I consider the golden ages of modern pop music to have been 1966-69, 1977-78, and 1993. All of 1971-74 was better than okay, and really all of 1991-94 was decent except that 1992 was not that great (copying Nirvana was a rather unfortunate surliness-for-profit pursuit that occupied a whole lot of music careers in 1992). The albums I consider the big four for 1993, EXILE IN GUYVILLE, WHATEVER, FROSTING ON THE BEATER, and SATURATION, are just about as good a top four as you get in a year for impact + musicality + consistency. Of course, you may like 1993 for completely different albums.

Interestingly I was just rediscovering WHENEVER YOU'RE READY by Flop. Where are the Flop people these days?

Anyway, what are you listening to lately? Any chance you would update the website with your favorite albums of 2000 and 2001? You've turned me on to some great music through those lists, and I've got a Tower Records gift certificate that needs spending...

Thanks for staying in touch thru the website.

**Best,
Brian Neumann**

Thanks a lot for writing.

I haven't been able to be as conscientious about researching albums as I used to be, and without that luxury, I don't want to pretend to be too authoritative. The reality is that bands like Modest Mouse and Death Cab For Cutie have about six seconds of Amazon sample time to either capture my attention or be ignored forever, and that's not how I want to go about the task.

Also, I've had the good luck of becoming friends with a non-trivial subset of my favorite artists, and it's become just uncomfortable enough to be rating friends' releases relative to each other that I don't want to do it anymore.

But here's a not-too-well-researched list of albums I've liked from 2000 and 2001, in no particular order except that, for anyone's crony filtering needs, people I know are toward the beginning.

2000

BACHELOR NO. 2 - Aimee Mann

TONIGHT AND THE REST OF MY LIFE - Nina Gordon

MP4: DAYS SINCE A TIME LOST ACCIDENT - Michael Penn

17th CENTURY FUZZBOX BLUES - Anton Barbeau

GUEST HOST - Stew

MASS ROMANTIC - The New Pornographers

DE STIJL - The White Stripes

HOWDY! - Teenage Fanclub

FOLD YOUR HANDS, CHILD, YOU WALK LIKE A PEASANT - Belle and Sebastian

THIRTEEN TALES FROM URBAN BOHEMIA - The Dandy Warhols

RED LINE - Trans Am

2001

TOUCHED - Ken Stringfellow

NICE CHEEKBONES AND A PhD - The Posies

GARDEN ABSTRACT - Belle da Gama

TVI - Yuji Oniki

REVEAL - REM

OH, INVERTED WORLD - The Shins

THE TYRANNY OF DISTANCE - Ted Leo/Pharmacists

IS THIS IT - The Strokes

THE WORLD WON'T END - Pernice Brothers

WE ARE ALL BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE - For Stars

WEEZER - Weezer

I'M WAKING UP TO US e.p. - Belle and Sebastian

talk of tomorrow has spoiled the gathering,

--Scott

May 27, 2002

Scott, I've been reading all over the website this way and that and came up with some actual original questions you haven't gotten asked yet. First off, I notice a lot of bands are letting advertisers use their songs in commercials (Giant Sand's Diet Coke, Nick Drake's Volkswagen, Devo's Target, Amon Tobin also Diet Coke [I think] etc. and what not) and I

was wondering if one of your songs from either Game Theory or Loud Family had to be used, which one would it be and what would it be for? (My guesses: "Save Your Money" - Delta Airlines, or "Where they sell antique food" - MCL Cafeterias or Hometown Buffet)

Scott: Hi, David; thanks for writing.

I wasn't so sold on the idea of songs in commercials until I saw the Gap ad with the Marmalade's "I See the Rain," which I find really appealing. I don't know about commercials, but when I was writing a certain song from 1987 that I ended up calling "Choose Between Two Sons," I kept imagining it as a TV show theme.

Also... in all your life, have you ever stolen anything? And did you get away with it?

David Werking

I was just a little bit of a trouble-maker when I was about thirteen or fourteen, and I shoplifted several small items, for one of which I got caught. I was pretty chagrined when I did.

It's funny -- I'm reading Bertrand Russell's *The History of Western Philosophy*, which I recommend highly, and which I'm realizing is the source for the mainstream characterizations of many philosophers insomuch as they have trickled down to me in my education. I've always read that Saint Augustine had a "morbid" (to quote Russell) obsession with his childhood experience of stealing some pears from a neighbor's tree simply out of mischievousness. The story was always that Augustine produced page after page of apoplectic contrition over this "sin," text that would supposedly read to any modern as psychopathology. But having read Augustine myself, I didn't find that to be the case at all, but rather that he was simply systematically exploring the formidable enigma of it being a fairly normal human trait to take pleasure in causing trouble. And, being able to myself recollect some version of this, I have to say that I haven't seen Augustine's analysis improved upon, and certainly not by Freud.

free Winona,

--Scott

June 3, 2002

Scott, I don't know if this has been covered previously, but I was just wondering if you were concerned about putting a song like "Slit Your Wrists" on one of your albums. It is truly a great tune, but do you worry that anyone predisposed to such thoughts might find encouragement from your lyrics? Though I'm sure you don't mean for them to serve as a call to action, that subtlety might be lost on the casual listener.

Scott: If there's one thing in life we can know for sure, it's that someone who hears a song and then goes out and kills himself is *not* a casual listener.

But seriously. I don't know, should I be concerned? I think of it as valuable to put across the truth of feelings of depression as I see that truth, but maybe I shouldn't perform it anymore if there's any doubt. Can you easily imagine being inspired to kill yourself by the song? I can't personally see the incentive aspect; it seems to dramatize a very isolated frame of mind without -- that I can see -- glamorizing or recommending that condition. When I've been depressed, it's helped me to know I'm not all alone in that feeling, and that is why I wrote it; part of the song tries to empathize with the alienation of feeling like the world is one big, triumphant party except for oneself.

Maybe it's me, but I don't see novelists or screenwriters getting asked things like whether if they portray a suicide, they're worried that people will actually commit suicide -- but in music we think there's some Svengali effect at work.

In general, should songwriters feel a responsibility for censoring themselves on issues such as these? I always think about kids growing up in inner-city areas like Compton, where you often find a scarcity of positive role models combined with the constant barrage of songs inciting violent behavior and the denigration of women blasting from everyone's car stereos. This can't possibly be very beneficial to one's upbringing, but where do you draw the line?

Robert B. Disner

I guess I personally draw the line at songs which encourage victimization.

thank you for writing in,

--John Lemming

June 17, 2002

Scott, with the upcoming release of *From Ritual to Romance*, the Loud Family live CD, I thought I'd get your thoughts about live albums. Do you have any favorite live records? I didn't see any on your favorite albums list, but maybe you're just following the age-old "no live albums, no compilations" rule in your rankings.

Scott: Thanks for writing in, Steve! I didn't know the rule was age-old, but I guess my lists of favorite albums per year have more to do with songs than particular recordings, a slightly different focus from the buyer's guide approach critics tend to take. In my scheme, you only get credit for the first release of a song, so I would be rating live and best-of albums on the strengths of only material that was never released before, which usually isn't much of it.

Although now that I have my own live and compilation albums in the works, I'm not sure I'd encourage other critics to adopt so rash a view!

To answer your question about my favorite live records, the one that springs right to mind is *Yessongs* by Yes. I've seen many musical styles go in and out of fashion in my lifetime, and

that's just one of the most magnificent purely musical accomplishments to ever come to my attention. It's almost certainly the live record I've played the most.

The Who *Live At Leeds* is way up there. I actually like the Posies' *Alive Before the Iceberg* quite a bit -- I think it has the definitive versions of "Somehow Everything" and "Grant Hart," plus a version of "Surrender" that is almost as terrifying as the Game Theory Fan Club Christmas releases. *The Concert For Bangladesh* definitely has its moments; if someone puts on "That's the Way God Planned It" by Billy Preston, I guarantee I'm up on my feet. Nirvana *Unplugged* was plenty good. *801 Live* with Eno and Manzanera was extremely solid. Any Neil Young live has been terrific.

During your musical career, have you found performing live to be a ritual or a romance? A promotional necessity to sell records, or an enjoyable pursuit for its own sake? Could you see yourself continuing to play shows for the sheer joy of playing, or do you feel less motivated to play out now that you don't have a bigger purpose, so to speak? As the self-appointed spokesperson for your Bay Area fanbase, I hope you'll continue to play out, if only to give us all an excuse to get together and see each other every so often!

Well, thanks -- I like playing live quite a bit. It's quite hard to come up with a single live show. You have to learn, arrange, and train for just one night. What I wish is that I had something like a weekend cover band gig that would allow me to keep sharp as a player and singer, and now and then I could torture the good people with some of my own tunes. For all I know, that sort of bar band opportunity stopped even existing years ago.

For various reasons, including the gathering-of-the-tribes aspects to both shows, I think the 1996 and 1998 Loud Family homecoming shows in San Francisco were two of the best concerts I ever attended, and I'm grateful to have a souvenir of those shows. Do you have any regrets about not being able to book a local SF show on the 2000 tour?

I pretty much regret everything about not being able to book a local SF show on the 2000 tour!

I myself was able to catch a few shows from other cities on that tour, but even two years on, it still seems unfortunate that other LF homies weren't able to see the band on their final tour.

Lastly, this is probably a loaded question, but how do you feel about people recording your shows? With all the live MP3s up on this site, I'm guessing you must at least have some level of tolerance for it.

behind you with a tape recorder,

Steve Holtebeck

Tolerance would be the word. I don't personally like random live recordings of me to be publicly circulated like that, with the great focus of my displeasure being when someone's made a board tape without asking me. Yet I'm grateful to have people who are interested, and a site that is so supportive, so I try to keep it in perspective.

does anybody remember laughter?

--Scott

June 24, 2002

Scott, I heard on the news a month ago that some scientists had cloned the human embryo. Now I personally do not often watch the news, so maybe I'm completely mistaken (I often am) but to me this brought up in the back of my head a whole mess of questions I could ask you. In one way I just feel like asking something general like: talk about this. On the other hand, that might be just the way to not a question answered.

You've said yourself, as I recall, "do me a favor, forget me quick when I'm gone." Was this your real sentiment coming through in your song, or could you be referring to something else? Again I'm asking dangerously, either way you might get some attacks. Would you want to be cloned -- for real?

Give my mind some uneasy things to think about, and thank you for doing that as you have in the past.

Scott: What worries me the most about cloning is that unforeseen irregularities might be introduced into the human gene pool which hundreds of years from now turn out to lead to serious problems. Aside from the low survival to birth rate, cloned sheep have had a problem where despite the organism's youth, some of the cells somehow still reflect the cloned cells' age since pre-cloning, and the animal is prematurely geriatric. I don't see any benefit to the cloning of complete human beings which would justify the rather open-ended risk to such a precious resource as a viable gene pool. We aren't, after all, experiencing a shortage of human beings.

Do you think it's a fix for organ transplants, DNA research? Do you feel that science can ever go too far...to the point of playing God?

Dave-O (David Werking)

I know that some people envision farms of human organs for transplants. While I admit that this seems a little Frankensteinian for my tastes, I could imagine the process becoming dependable, and saving a lot of people who'd otherwise die young.

My main worry is that it will be hard to manage a period of conservative trial use. To invent a rather science-fictiony example, organ recipients or whole cloned people might well not be as happy as would be convenient to have their reproductive rights dictated by researchers.

As far as my being cloned, I'm against that, but should someone produce a clone against my wishes, just, for the love of God, *don't* name the new one Scott Miller; we're really getting too many of us.

Thanks for writing, Dave-O.

turning once more to Sunday's clone,

--Scott

July 1, 2002

Scott, John Entwistle died on the eve of a major summer concert tour by the Who, a band he had been a crucial member of for over 30 years. I was astonished to hear that the tour will go on as planned -- in fact, they'll be playing shows here in Northern California less than a week after he dropped dead.

Of course, everyone is saying "this is what he would have wanted." A friend of mine pointed out that there are probably hundreds of people other than the band members who make their livings from such a big tour, and cancelling it abruptly would be depriving them of their livelihoods, but still, it seems kind of disrespectful to immediately scramble for someone to take the place of a master musician like Entwistle. What do you think -- when adversity strikes, should the show always go on?

Sue Trowbridge

Scott: Sue -- always a pleasure! You have surely just answered the question more intelligently than I shall.

The first thought that crossed my mind when I heard that John Entwistle died was: "whatever will this mean to future Who farewell tours?" Having been a gigantic Keith Moon fan (he was my all-time favorite drummer), my personal disillusionment about replacement Who members is concentrated 24 years back into my sensitive youth, and in 2002 Pete and Roger have my blessing to carry on as if it were actually their own personal lives which were affected and not mine, continuing to play with whomever they see fit, be it Les Claypool or Michael Quercio.

I always loved John's bass playing, and I really admired that song "My Wife."

regretfully,

--debassed

July 8, 2002

Scott, a couple of us over 40's at where I work have started meeting twice a month to learn some songs and generally have some low-brow musical fun. I'd love to do "Sleeping Through Heaven," and know that you can probably pull the chords up out of your memory, as you did the song in Milwaukee (solo, as the band didn't know it) as part of the extended encore.

Scott: Here's how I'm remembering them, although I don't have a guitar with me at the moment to check.

[You can get the chords [on this page.](#).]

I actually rue the fact that I did not offer to put up some of the band at my place as I overheard a discussion about where to stay that evening -- guess you all just got in from Madison -- my self-excuse was that it was snowing and it was a half hour drive to my place. Guess I missed an interesting opportunity. Nevertheless, the Ask Scott part of your website may in part make up for missing a potentially interesting late night conversation.

Thanks -- typically the late night conversation you would have missed out on was "do you have an extra towel?" Sometimes the morning conversation was even more stimulating.

Why "Sleeping Through Heaven"? That and Mary Magdalene are distilled GT in my mind, they came first in my history and after listening to them one could tell that you were going to be something to look out for. It got tighter and there are some great songs later, but... An analogy is "If There Is Something" and "Sea Breezes" which were (and are) Roxy Music to me, to this day, although things got tighter and there were great songs later, but...

On another note, since the September incident is still causing quite a stir, I wonder if such may be the price we pay for our society in the context of the rest of the world. One could point out that 17K die each year from DWI incidents (the data is from a NPR program and I assume it's correct, though it seemed a bit high) and these deaths, a function of our societal set-up, are supported without the same level of consternation. Sporadic attrition by malcontents, be they local or foreign, appears to be insinuating itself as another factor. Perhaps what makes this a great place to live, and I think a needed part of planetary development, comes with these strings. Personally I was more scared that we will change in response in a way that will make us less like the US. This may be the anti-Viet Nam scenario, in which a war induces a swing to the right in a relatively organized way. The anti-domino effect -- we set up a "peace-loving" regime in Afghanistan, following that, force an Israeli-Palestine peace, after that reform the Saudis, after that... A Pax Americana.

At the risk of sounding like I favor unrestrained U.S. force, it should be noted that as offensive as some aspects of Roman morality are to us, the Pax Romana was one of the most fortunate developments in the ancient world from the point of view of about everyone involved excepting second-tier tyrants. As a great improvement upon Rome, to get the support it needs, the U.S. is required to sell the world on the story that its goal is to oppose victimization; while being far from completely immune to abuse, that much is a happy state of world affairs.

I'd like to solve the problem of genocide by turning the hearts of potentially genocidal people toward what I think of as a peaceful attitude, but I do support the opposition of genocide by force where that is the only practical alternative to a program of victimization. But as you note, that attitude is subject to some ridicule. We know that powerful people or groups are always at risk of making self-serving moral judgments. I try to be aware that there are Judeo-Christian, capitalistic, and democratic biases to my worldview which might

lead me to favor handling of interactions with radically different cultures in ways that turn out to be foolish. I try to keep love of all mankind in mind, and weigh the suffering of those I consider genocidal when I think of what it means to use force against them. As I've said before, it's a hard decision that if you can't talk the Nazis out of running a death camp, the next best course of action is to start shooting them.

In the end I remain optimistic, buoyed by the large moment of inertia built up in the society, which should make it hard for us to act like modern day Romans, being too busy being Americans to be able to seriously export our society using historical approaches, and thus evading major changes for the worse. In this way also avoiding falling into the trap of being like every one else that came before -- which would be pointed out by the instigators of these events. They would say, "See, the Americans, for all their espousal of freedom, human and religious rights, are no different than the Mongols, Turks, British and French."

It is a major difference that we have a vital culture of moral self-critique. What is most fragile about it is that when our intellectual mainstream puts its rational, philosophical hat on, it comes to the conclusion that our moral bases are arbitrary. If I were to write a book, it would be on something like the proper basis for a viable modern Western morality.

I've always thought that our strength has been our society within itself -- in an example mode.

I tend to agree with that.

This example, as imperfect as it still is, is strong one as can be sensed by the fear in those in the rest of the world that would like to keep it out.

Please consider the request, and thanks.

Jack Gorski

Thanks for writing, Jack.

--Baba Aurelius

July 22, 2002

Scott, I can't express how dismayed I am to find out that not only had you never been to Inverness, Scotland, but the song isn't about Inverness, California either -- that's the small town in Point Reyes near Olema that has, for some reason, not one but two Czech restaurants.

Scott: I meant no slight to the people of the Czech Republic.

I spent a weekend there long ago housesitting at the home of Matthew Robins (*Corvette Summer, Batteries Not Included, Bingo*), and the song has always made me think of being

in a beautiful but somewhat remote place that you couldn't really live in, both because it was impractical and because you just didn't fit in. A place where you can have the experience of feeling quite overwhelmed by beauty and tranquility and longing, but where all that feeling comes in a context where you know you're going to have to leave. I don't think any reading of the song's lyrics justifies that interpretation, but curiously I don't think the interpretation does violence to the song either.

I am bold enough to think that when I write something like "I'll bet you've never actually seen a person die of *loneliness*," it opens the door to that sort of impression, as opposed to, say, "I'll bet you've never actually seen a person die of botulism." And then you'd be up a tree when it comes to rhyming with any place, and could end up with a contrived, unlovely song, possibly involving Gus Grissom.

But I'm being very goofy now, and that was actually a very lovely evocation, albeit one apparently intended to chastise me about failing to write my song about the right place.

I am also delighted to read on your site that I'm responsible for Kenny Kessel joining the band. And I've never met him! Though curiously a friend of mine is a friend of Rob Poor's. And heck, I used to buy a croissant and a latte from Shelly LaFreniere every damn day -- back when I lived two blocks from Big Shot Photo. As you can see, I go way back.

Thanks very much for Kenny! Thank you also for helping Shelley's business, and for befriending the friend of Rob Poor, who I am not reluctant to speculate is deserving.

But as Art Fleming would say, I should rephrase my answer as a question. And I have one. I thought The Loud Family was an incredibly clever name for a band for just the longest time. Now that Lance Loud is dead, it seems, somehow, not quite as clever. That distancing embrace, the ironic reference, holding something at arm's length to express an appreciation for it it seems to crumble under the weight of mortal stakes. And I'm really only talking about what one naturally encounters in mid-life (like you, I was born in 1960). Let's not even get into our new-found fondness for firefighters.

There can be no excuse but laziness for an artist who says "I have raised false expectations by counterfeiting impressions of a town; my day's work is done," when there remains the unfinished business of packaging the result in short-lived cleverness.

What I might try to make a little clearer is that I didn't intend the use of the name "the Loud Family" as ironic in any way I can think of, but rather in a sense of evoking affinity with that family's having been scrutinized by mythologizing media. The press, I thought, sought to deny that the family was really average as a means of disowning aspects they considered aberrant, rather than saying "this is us" in a way that involves sympathy. (I also liked the name "Loud" for a pop group on that obvious silly level, but I wouldn't exactly elevate that to the term "irony").

So I'm not personally clear on the "ironic... holding at arm's length" part of that -- as a footnote, we actually contacted Lance and verified that the family did not for whatever reason object to us using the name -- but in a general sense I can at least imagine I am

seeing what you are saying: we should not objectify others, as our sadness at their death makes clear.

Once you've gotten a good draught of the blight man was born for, irony doesn't seem like much of a tool. It's like trying to fend off a hail of bullets with an umbrella. So what do we do? Do we just put irony aside? Is earnestness what's happening now?

Robert Rossney

To me irony is a tool for disabusing someone of a false impression. In literary irony, for instance, we remark how a character behaves when he or she doesn't know as much as the reader knows. But I think Heidegger would warn us not to let the tool cause us to see the world as exclusively a vast set of false impressions from which people must be disabused. There is a greater need for gentleness, love, and civility.

Still, it's the earnestness epidemics that do the serious harm in the world, when you think about it, not the irony epidemics, so it's not quite so simple as choosing earnestness.

Thanks much for writing and for enduring my probably dismal attempts at humor in response.

I AM IRONY MAN,

--Scott

July 29, 2002

Scott, why place *Help!* before *Rubber Soul?*

G.L.

Scott: Thank you for writing, G.L. if that is your real name!

To me a fair amount of the classic status I associate with *Rubber Soul* as opposed to *Help* has to do with the fact that when I was a kid, *Rubber Soul* was a lush, cool, atmospherically tuned album that started with "I've Just Seen a Face," and *Help* was a not very cool promo vehicle for a cheesy film with cheesy spy music padding the grooves where Beatle songs ought to be.

Of course, that was all Capitol Records as auteurs, not Beatles. What the Beatles delivered to EMI were two much more equivalent records, and that is what the world including America usually expends critical energy on these days. My rule is, when in doubt, rate the album according to the artist's release intentions.

It's close, but the short version of the verdict would be that the songs "Help" and "Yesterday" ("Yesterday" is on the British *Help* album) are just such phenomenal songwriting successes to me as to take on 800 pound gorilla properties; already there's practically no

beating it. Add to that "You've Got To Hide Your Love Away" -- and to boot, American RS staples "I've Just Seen a Face" and "It's Only Love" -- are actually on *Help* -- and it's all over.

To me, the strongest songs on *Rubber Soul* are "I'm Looking Through You," "Norwegian Wood," and "Think For Yourself" (Jim Shapiro of Veruca Salt actually made the case to me for "Think For Yourself" being key to the Beatles' later chordal mojo, which began the steady ascension of George's stock in my eyes in recent years). Great songs, but not as utterly stunning. "In My Life" started gaining sentimental value when Lennon died, but I have to admit that before that, I didn't really go nuts for the song, so I have to enforce a little objectivity there.

"What Goes On" and "Run For Your Life" are closer to crap than peak period Beatles material ought to ever veer.

I wouldn't need any convincing that there are several other very strong songs on *Rubber Soul*; I'm sure "Drive My Car" is better than anything I'll ever write, but there's something not-quite-varsity-team about it as an opener compared to, oh, "Hard Day's Night," or "Come Together."

use new EMITEX record cleaner,

--Scott

August 5, 2002

Scott, I read your Ask Scott with great interest on a regular basis. On January 14 you responded to Bill McKinley and said "I want the release to have some input to their aesthetics, and in turn some little input to their view of life." I think I can safely say for anyone who is a fan of yours that this is indeed the case. I also want to chastise Mr. McKinley for thinking that *Attractive Nuisance* "was OK -- maybe showing a little auto-piloting." I can't imagine anything Scott Miller works on being done on "auto-pilot." AN is IMHO your finest work.

Scott: Thanks. I'm happy a few people got what I intended for people to get out of it. I've always felt myself to be pretty far out of touch with what listeners want to hear. Bill McKinley wasn't alone in thinking I blew that record, I can tell you that. There must be some high comedy going on that no one will really ever know about in the area of what I think is good about a song idea, and what people actually get out of it. I'm always completely surprised by which songs or albums are audience favorites.

Also, I was startled to learn that Inverness was not particularly about Inverness, California. When I first heard the song it immediately brought to mind my first visit there and around Tomales Bay and Point Reyes. The spare, stark beauty of the place. Maybe the title started me on that road, but the melody and lyric took me all the way there. It must be a weird feeling for an artist to create a song from a specific idea and have it affect people in ways he didn't quite intend.

No doubt about it, I have to make the trip up to "Inverness" and discover the feelings behind that song!

Thank you very much for "Vado Via." You did an exceptional job with it. Your guitar playing (I assume it is you) is wonderful and your voice sounded better than ever. Great tune.

Tom Galczynski

Si, signore, e io che giocho il guitar. Grazie, grazie. It is a great tune (by Drupi, not by me).

--Scotto e mezzo

August 12, 2002

Scott, first I want to thank you for the mere existence of "Ask Scott." I discovered it last week and spent many hours reading every word, hooting with laughter every few minutes. It's incredibly generous for you to spend so much time making yourself so available to folks.

Scott: What a nice thing to say! Thank you. I only very occasionally get a direct reaction to "Ask Scott," so it's usually easy to get it into my head that it's become disappointing to people just lately.

In the "Ask Scott" archives I felt a fair amount of "Oh wow, this famous person whom I admire greatly is actually taking the time to interact with lowly me!" Do you think of yourself as a famous person? Do you remember when you made a transition between ordinary and famous?

I'm not famous enough to make a living doing what I'm famous for, and I suspect few people in that position sustain a true Greta Garbo attitude year in and year out.

Oddly enough, I remember the exact moment I went from ordinary to (not that) famous. I had a show singing in my high-school-sophomore band Mantis -- sort of a Black Sabbath and Pink Floyd inspired standard lame band -- at a nearby Junior High, and I overheard some girls talking to one girl who happened to live next door to my house, and one of these girls said "you live next door to *Scott Miller*?" Maybe the level of payoff of that needs explaining if you've never been a 15-year-old boy with not too much social cachet going in, or maybe it doesn't, but it took me many years to compute the faultiness of being profoundly at the mercy of such rather random perceptions.

Is the gradient of fame such that you would feel the same effect if some other famous person that you admire greatly were to answer your question on a web site? Or can you stand on your own plinth of fame and see other famous people for the once-ordinary people that they were (and may still feel themselves to be)?

Mostly the first answer -- I'm still really excited to receive attention from a person I greatly admire. I have to think the main difference is that I've experienced doing some of the mechanical tasks they do: signing autographs, doing interviews, etc. So compared to some people's reaction to, say, meeting David Bowie, I'm guessing for me it would be a little more of a welling up of appreciation of his abilities, a little less shock as if encountering an alien life form.

I'm sure you'll discount your own fame, but your music has obviously had an effect on quite a few people, and I count that as famous.

And on an entirely different subject, what do you think of They Might Be Giants? They seem to share your interest in found sounds, and in very carefully crafted music. And in working for years without "burdensome worldwide superstardom."

They're great, and one of those artists I'd explore a lot more thoroughly if I had more time and money. I make "Ana Ng" to be the second best song of 1988, which means I consider them capable of a result that is about as good as it gets. The song "They'll Need a Crane" is a classic in my book, too.

And finally, how do you decide whether to fade out at the end of a song? I have to say that I'm often disappointed by fade-outs. Are fade-outs a conscious choice, or are some songs just impossible to end otherwise?

I'd be interested in understanding your dislike of fade-outs. I've never minded them, and I wouldn't hesitate to fade a song out if there were the slightest aesthetic advantage over a full-volume ending. Non-fadeout endings are better drama, but over an album my ear also appreciates variation and moderation.

I really, really like your music, I like the interplay between the rhythms of the music and the line breaks of the lyrics. I like the guitars. And I like the way you sing. Thanks for makings and sharing such great music.

Diana Foss

It was very thoughtful of you to write such nice things; thank you.

--He Turns Out Upon Investigation Not To Be a Giant

August 19, 2002

Scott, every time you hint at the suggestion of a possibility that you might continue recording and releasing your music, my heart skips a beat. Telling your adoring fans of the melodies that float through your head is pure cruelty, Scott. Please, please, please stop keeping them to yourself.

Scott: Mark -- hi again! How is everything? Best wishes to you.

I've sent you a couple of recent fan letters but I'm not sure I could articulate the grand scale formative / informative influence your music has had on my adult life, the themes of both which seem to have been: loss, loss, loss redeemed by the joy of personal statement.

How can I attempt to explain what your music does to me? Your *Interbabe Concern* album is one of the greatest works of art I've ever experienced. Nabokov talks about the "spine chill" as the standard for judging what is and isn't a work of art. I can't once listen to that album without laughing ("Sodium"), crying ("St. Therese," "Depressed/School," "Just Gone"), screaming ("Headless," "Asleep") and simply going catatonic in goose-bump awe, captive to the sheer beauty you create ("Princess," "Classique," "Baby Tongue"). The courage, genius and artistry manifest in that album astound me every time I listen to it.

That is kind in the extreme of you to say, and I love the idea of someone reading "Ask Scott" for the first time and having a good squint at the potential for "goose-bump awe" and "sheer beauty" in something called "Baby Tongue."

For me, your work went from being great music to great art when you began producing your own albums. The command you have over your art, over every aspect of making and recording music, is unprecedent -- from the world-class modern poetry you write, to your musicianship (your guitar solo on "Blackness" is perhaps the most heartbreak thing of its kind since "Layla"), to your finessed producer's ear (your studio judgment is impeccable and daring. You push your music into ferociously original directions I can't imagine possible with anyone else at the knobs).

There are problems to producing yourself. I do think I got surprisingly lucky (in terms of my own tastes) on *Interbabe Concern*, but I typically miss having someone taking care of the day to day duties of bringing the project in on time and within budget, and making it sound good, where "good" means delivering at least short-term satisfaction to the ears of the intended audience. And when someone else's job is to make it sound good, I'm freed up to work on my dance moves.

That you are alive and in the prime of your artistic life during such a time -- when musicians can create fully fleshed out works with such a great deal of autonomy, from their back bedrooms, to their eager-to-download-it from-a-pay-website-for-say-\$99-a-year fans (HINT) -- would, I hope and pray, help give you the impetus (if only the means) to continue to bring your great, great gift to life.

Maybe if I can get the right kind of help. I'm not too much of a one man band; I can't play (or simulate on computer) drums or keyboards, for instance.

And I believe there is a much wider audience for you out there. I don't think my tastes are different than the American kids of my generation. I grew up reading Twain, Salinger, Anne Frank's *Diary*, *Flowers For Algernon*, and *Bananas* magazine while listening to the Banana Splits, Beach Boys, Beatles in the background. Moving on to Faulkner and REM, Joyce and Squeeze, Ray Carver and The Replacements. Your work has somehow taken all the pop and high culture that has shaped my life and become the next inevitable thing that I would hold dearest to my heart -- in delight, with fascination and with great

gratitude. Since the first time *Lolita Nation* exploded my subconscious mind, your music has never done less than make being alive to hear it a joy.

Ain't Too Proud To Beg,

Mark Portier

Okay, I think I said something negative about cloning before, but they should clone you. Thanks very much for your words.

baby tongues look just how they felt,

--Scott

August 26, 2002

Scott, did you catch the December issue of *Harper's* and Paul Limbert Allman's hilarious (and strangely compelling) article offering evidence of a "solution," intricately linking author Donald Barthelme to the Dan Rather "Kenneth, what's the frequency" incident? How cool, then, to see, a few months later, on the March *Harper's* letter page (p. 82), a letter (from Andy Davis of Jersey City, NJ) about your use of "Kenneth" on *Lolita Nation*!

Scott: Someone showed me that letter. I was excited to make *Harper's*! I didn't read the article in question, and all I've read by Donald Barthelme is a 1960s novel called *Snow White* (which I liked quite a bit, and thank you to the not one but two fans who sent me copies -- how could I not read it after that?). I hope Mr. Barthelme was not giving Mr. Rather any trouble.

Seeing you mentioned in *Harper's* and having read your "Ask Scott" columns for a while now kind of got me wondering if you are, or have ever thought about, writing an essay, if not something longer, about some of your experiences with Game Theory/Loud Family and the whole music business imbroglio you've touched on in many of your "Ask Scott" responses. Considering the critical notice of recent works like Michael Azerrad's *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, I think it's a subject whose interest goes way beyond just the readers of this website, and as one of the most literate voices in recent popular music, "underground," "independent" or otherwise, you're certainly someone who could provide some unique, entertaining insight.

It's almost impossible for me to imagine more than fifty people in the world having their interest held by my music business memories, which wouldn't include any coverage of the only publicly interesting thing I've ever done -- have girlfriend troubles.

I just noticed there was a compliment in there -- thank you for calling me literate. One of my greatest writing passions would be to go on and on about albums I like and why I like them, but that somehow doesn't seem like hot publishing property. Another book I could see writing is one on why *Star Trek* is a greater literary accomplishment than has yet been appreciated, and how it epitomizes a certain fairly recent phenomenon that might be called

"genius by committee with respect to a commercial market" that hasn't really been identified or explored -- the Beatles are another example. But yet another *Star Trek* book, or, of course, yet another Beatles book, is almost not an option. Finally, I could certainly write a book that was pure "what the big issues in life are," to zero interest, I'm a hundred percent confident.

I'd guess that some editors might be interested in your experiences and ideas precisely because of your place as an independent figure who writes with as much analytical wit and intelligence in full paragraphs as you do in your songs.

Editors, publishers -- if you are interested in any of the possibilities we have discussed, you know you can find me sipping absinthe at Vesuvio's almost every night, so just pop over and wave a hand in front of my face.

Anyway, thanks for all the great music *and* your contributions to this website. Good luck with whatever you might decide to do in the future, whether it's songwriting, skydiving or cake-baking...

Phil E. Young

Thanks very much for writing and contributing to my not shutting up.

unpopular, overground, dependent,

--Scott

September 9, 2002

Scott, just wondering: are you aware that a band from Dublin, Ireland called The Revenants recorded a song called "Scott Miller Said" on their last album, *Septober Nowonder*, which was released just over two years ago? Have you heard it? If yes, what do you think of it?

Scott: Actually, I had a copy which I thought I'd lost in a move, but I recently found it again. It's a terrific song (and album); I couldn't be prouder to have been referred to in it.

Personally I think it's excellent: it starts "Scott Miller said you can't get good in an afternoon" but becomes a stream-of-consciousness journey where the protagonist is walking around the area he once walked with his father, who we learn has since passed on. The song finds him documenting his innermost thoughts as he describes the scenery around him, finally ending up in the graveyard where his dad is buried. You're mentioned in it, I think, because he is listening to Game Theory on his Walkman as he rambles. It's a beautiful song about time, memory, family, nature and loss. It's only about 4 minutes but it's wonderful. I always wondered what you'd make of it if you heard it.

It reminded me a little of the early chapters of *Ulysses* by James Joyce (Irish, of course), where the character Stephen does a fair amount of walking around with an internal monologue going, in his case having to do with his recently deceased mother.

The Revenants aren't really still going, though I understand the singer Stephen Ryan is still writing lyrics, with a view to doing something with them later. They're also the only band I know whose drummer has a father who won the Nobel Prize for Literature. True! His dad is poet Seamus Heaney.

No kidding? I haven't read his poetry, but that's damned impressive. I'm sorry the Revenants aren't still going but, well, my band isn't either.

Anyway, on the back of that song, I checked out the Game Theory album, *Real Nighttime*, which I liked, especially "She'll Be A Verb."

I thank you. In case you're curious, the quote in the Revenants' song is from a song called "Andy In Ten Years," from two albums after the one you have.

One other thing: are you a different Scott Miller to the one who sings in a band called The Commonwealth, as they played in Ireland in May and I was initially quite excited before someone told me they thought it was a different guy.

Yes, different guy. I hear he's very good, but I still haven't actually heard the material. There's yet another Scott Miller who plays around San Francisco, too. Hard to believe "Scott" was a moderately uncommon name when my parents named me in 1960. What I heard was that there was a surge of popularity for the name in America when *The Great Gatsby* became required high school reading, and everyone started knowing who F. Scott Fitzgerald was.

Anyway, hope all is well,

Nick Kelly

Thanks much for writing,

--Whiny the Elder

September 23, 2002

Scott, my name is Lasky, otherwise known as warbling j. laskitude, an anagrammatic involution on the hop, and it would appear here that i am "adding myself to your lengthy list of Louders" (to rephrase a certain unctuous ode to Big Sur by the Beach Boys there) even tho it must be said that i have heard little of this latter-day combo, and must confine myself to a onetime raving enthusiasm for Game Theory... primary reason for this being a certain "renunciation" of music a few years ago to pursue the study-path; thus it is with some pleasure and even harmonious sense of rightness that, updating at last with your history recently, i find it lit up from stern to bow with Rene Girard and all that follows

from him... and i do but baulk here for a moment wondering whether to indulge in any amount of critical asseveration musically-speaking, or to shoot straight for that flying fk at a rolling donut called the origin of language/ otherwise known as culture, and ask if your two-year old comments on Eric Gans have borne any significant modification; and if in fact, sir, you would welcome an earnest invitation to join the (Generative Anthropology) GList?**

Scott: Thanks -- I'm honored! You imply my remark about Gans was negative (Jeez, Lasky, I call him "a top modern scholar"), but really it was just crotchety. I find Gans's writing difficult; having to speculate that this is because I'm not learned enough for it is not pleasant!

I said reading Gans and others makes you wonder "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." I like Derrida, but part of my unlearnedness causes me to think of Derrida's great influence as a kind of bridge troll for academic writing: you have to pay the troll by qualifying your text against "logocentrism" and "totalization" and a host of other totemic buzzwords I don't find meaningful enough for their proliferation, and I credit what I call this "repair work" on the "sharing of knowledge" with obfuscation -- contributing, e.g., to Gans being quite a bit harder to read than Plato or Nietzsche.

The main reason I like and respect Gans is -- and this is really my main criterion for philosophical genius -- that he unerringly gravitates to important issues. Strangely, being onto something in philosophy seems to be more important than what one does with what one is onto. Plato and Nietzsche came to very few certifiably right high-level conclusions, but they have immense value from my perspective for having rudderless thought in productive directions.

We need members R, W, & A to Respond! Reticence, alas, is everywhere evident on the forum in the face of a theory so brilliantly succinct in its formulation that its almost saliva-depriving! I noticed with some amusement your assertion in abovementioned comments that you suffered at that time from a certain reaction to the discussion of signs 'n' signifieds, and i do wonder, as i say, if you have since had occasion to acquaint yrself more closely with that formidable and yes, quite mind-boggling work of intellection of Gans' that is known to some as the Formal Theory of Representation -- this to distinguish it from the Institutional Theory of Culture worked up by Girard, and if you have ever, ever had pause to appreciate that no thought would really be possible without acute paradox, then this forum is for you!

My main problem with being a worthwhile contributor would be that I fall short of "getting" the originary scene theory. I've only read *Signs of Paradox*, and I should be doing this with at least that book in front of me, but let me provide you with a check of my understanding: the origin of language is the point at which early man is dividing a kill from the hunt, and instead of giving in to the mimetic urge to replicate another's grabbing gesture for an available piece of food, which act would lead to social conflict, an individual aborts the gesture. This gesture

of retracted acquisition constitutes the first sign for an object which is shared between multiple consciousnesses.

Okay, objections to that I-can't-say-how-flawed conception of the theory: If, say, a hyena runs for a scrap because it sees what it thinks is a less-dominant hyena running for it, but when it gets close it recognizes that the other hyena is dominant, and yields, we have the same mimetic cognition structure occurring as in Gans's originary scene, but no language origination. Why? Also, it's easy to imagine language developing out of any old grunt being accidentally associated with a beneficial direction of attention; and against a background of many such easily-imitated events, community-wide vocalization habits developing incrementally. To use a term of Gans's, why require of "verticality" a scene of social crisis? Isn't it more economical merely to require incremental advantage, since language grows incrementally? Finally, where is the actual *benefit* of language in the originary scene? Sign innovation is supposedly cognate with the aborted gesture, but aborting the gesture already alleviated the crisis; what is the added value of the sign structure?

Apologies if all this retreads an old rut worn by people who don't quite read thoroughly and intelligently. Perhaps you could give me feedback.

I have delighted in those most elegant articulations on this site o' yours, especially of course the sections where it is manifest that yr intellect has been irrevocably triggered by your readings of Girard... and feel that they could only receive another mighty boost into the very midst-of-things by a huge helping of Gans. i myself am vastly intrigued by whatever "predilection" it might be that makes folks fall for either one or the other, and not so often it seems for the head-on collision of the two. But one could hardly settle for less than this wild juncture, i reckon, as the issues hinge on the question of nuthin' less than how thought can be possible, how it is possible if we refuse to settle for assigning it a sort of immaculate conception and insist instead on an evenemential origin... and methinks the likes of EG's "ceaseless oscillations between recognized inviolability and imaginary possession," at the putative site of an originary scene, make just hideous-kinky amounts of sense but perhaps i have already exceeded what is welcome here in terms of size, so i shall shrink back into my rap... again, bonza to see you have so much going on -- i wish i could make music and philosophical/religious headway all at once!

all kindsa sincere,

L (in NZ as it happens!)

Thanks for a very interesting "Ask Scott." Yes, I often wonder what keeps Girard from catching on in a bigger way. Maybe I am just around the corner from feeling the same way about Gans. Would you recommend a good, ideally not too long, introductory read?

we put the GANS in *FINNEGANS WAKE*,

--Scott

October 7, 2002

Scott, a zillion jillion congratulations on becoming a father! Life is about to change sweetly -- and comprehensively.

Scott: Gigathanks!

We parent types certainly all have dreams for our children, and when we're expecting them (the children) is mostly when we have time to develop and dream them (the dreams). Perhaps much later we will have time to be bemused by them (both). If asking is too personal, this'll languish in the "Ask Scott" slush pile, but still I wonder, what are your grandest hopes for your baby? What do you want your child to know, and what are you most excited to teach?

I wanted to wait until we actually had the baby before I answered this, so I could be as clear as possible about my feelings, and little Valerie is here now.

Midway through Kristine's pregnancy, I had a vivid dream about my daughter at about age 6 or 7 (we were apparently floating rather freely in time) and she spoke her first words to me. She looked out at the world, then at me, and with concern and a kind of mild detachment asked me "so, who set all this up?"

It is, it seems to me, a question in whose answer I must ground any grand hopes and excited teachings. It's odd to carry a baby around in your arms and realize that she can look outside at the sun in the sky, or over at a lamp on a table, and not be clear from birth which is the more significant and prior of the two. Similarly, it's only after a lot of study and experience that we sort out what in our psychology is fundamental, and what is interpolation, custom, accommodation. I think for that reason I wish my daughter to have what might variously be called a prayerful life, a literary life, a contemplative life, a meditative life. Full personhood requires more perspective and contextualization than we absorb just making ends meet and pursuing happiness; we need to receive the gifts of the great traditions. This need affects us in different ways at different ages, but, at least for an adult, functioning well in the social order requires (somewhat paradoxically) moral resources that transcend the social order. To put it in a simplistic way, we have to in some circumstances be capable of choosing "the road not taken."

One aspect that applies even to childhood is the simple absorption of Christian values -- and I'm sure I need to clarify what I mean by that. I don't mean Christian as opposed to, for instance, Jewish, or Buddhist, or atheist. What I mean can, I believe, be stated in saying that if any one of us were transported back in time to the early Christian era, we would find life among, let's not even say Jews who followed Christ, but Jews who understood the late prophets, fundamentally tolerable. We would basically be among friends. If on the other hand we found ourselves among Roman citizens, it would not be a week before we found ourselves to be in a world that was unimaginably alien and cold-blooded, and wish for any way out of it.

It is easy to think we are all born with a distaste for seeing, say, a woman and a dwarf man armed with blades and forced to fight to the death in the Coliseum for the audience's delight in their bloody suffering, but you would find only a few wet blankets -- men or

women -- in Rome who saw anything slightly objectionable, and they would be Christians. This is worth reflecting on. The mind which objected to, e.g., the Coliseum, was born fairly suddenly and dramatically into the Western world, and it was the mind of Christ the Jew, in what we often dismissingly refer to as the "Judeo-Christian" tradition. Of course, all people always found it unpleasant to see the suffering of *certain* people -- relatives, friends, and allies -- but the world did not always tend to identify with victims *as victims* the way it does today, in our culture. It was, after all, always glorious to kill an enemy in battle, and the idea of staging a version of that glory as entertainment was simple good showmanship.

We are not born with the mind which objects to victimization on principle, but we absorb it in upbringing, from variously attenuated cultural sources. I'm not a card-carrying doctrinal Christian by a lot of people's standards (I don't, for instance, believe that Jesus died to appease God's wrath against the sins of man), but I think this absorption is probably the most important ingredient for happiness in this world. As complicated as life is, it is usually good when there is peace and love, usually bad otherwise.

I feel the urge to add that anyone who conflates "Christian values" with "family values" or "American values" is badly confused. The principle of identifying with kin and developing an insulating layer between kin (or countryfolk) and the possibly-corrupting remainder of mankind may sometimes be as expeditious today as was for the ancients, but it is central to what Jesus is responsible for dismantling in the world.

In more mundane but still keenly important matters, what songs do you look forward to singing, and what stories will you tell? (They will be private performances for an audience of one -- two if Mom is around -- but as this is a fan's query, I'll mutter an aside about the potential of recording a children's album while you're at it...)

I plan to play a lot of Bowie, Beatles, and Dylan, and of course much more. At this moment I'm thinking "Kooks" and "Yellow Submarine." I've found the urge to write original songs (one with her name in it) and sing them to her. Mom likes to hear me play when I'm not annoyingly repeating a certain song again and again (hey, it's called *practice*).

Stories, I will honestly need to research. Suggestions? No doubt some time-honored cautionary stuff for getting by in the world (like the boy crying wolf), plus a lot that is just for fun and imagination. I'm sure Beatrix Potter and Dr. Seuss books will be involved from an early age. Down the road, it will certainly be hard for this child to escape *A Wrinkle In Time* by Madeleine L'Engle.

And in Very Big Things, how would you change the world now if you could?

By revealing to the world the following bizarrely well-kept secret: cloth diapers via a diaper service are both cheaper and easier to use than disposable diapers. People: all you do is put the used diapers in a bag in a hamper, put the bag out once a week, and elves replace it with a bag of clean ones. No going to the store, no fretting about managing your trash to stay within the pickup limit.

Enjoy the attention and the excitement, and the last few good nights' sleep (I'm writing in early mid-August). The whole earth anticipates your little one. Blessings.

Janet Ingraham Dwyer

Thank you so much, Janet.

--Julius Seizure

October 14, 2002

Scott, you're probably sick of these questions, but... who has the rights to Game Theory albums? A friend said you wouldn't re-release *Lolita Nation* because you didn't like the sound (or something else)? A real rock tragedy that some of the best '80s music is essentially unavailable. Seems like this is the kind of thing Rykodisc usually jumps on. Any interest there?

Scott: Thanks, that's a swell thing to say. Rational Records (in the form of a person named Scott Vanderbilt) has the rights; it was licensed to its original label, Enigma, which is long out of business.

What I've wanted to do for some time is re-record a few of the vocals, remix a few of the songs, and remaster for CD. I think that could be done for not too much money by transferring the multitracks to ADAT or 24-bit hard disk, then doing the new work. The two things I like about doing it that way are (1) people would get to hear a "what the singer would have done if he'd had a few more hours and dollars" version, and (2) it wouldn't really compete with the original for fans' historical attention. (2) will be a stupid consideration by some people's reckoning, but I have some suspicion of rerelease projects which sneakily introduce current electronic aesthetics, which can turn out to be bad ideas in retrospect. I prefer something analogous to a "director's cut," which announces its difference from the first release.

Two problems: (1) "not too much money" is still far from cheap, especially if I were to try to get producer Mitch Easter and original mastering engineer Eddy Schreyer involved. (2) the clock is ticking; I'm 42 now, and I'm guessing there are only a few more years that I'll be able to sing those songs right.

P.S. I don't know much about how the music biz operates.

If you can find a detailed, start-to-finish documentary on the making of sausage, it's pretty much the same process.

P.P.S. When are you coming to Minneapolis? It's warming up -- 30 today.

Ken Binner

I love Minneapolis, but I've always had thin attendance there, so probably not soon for music biz reasons. But thanks. Last time I was there, Grant Hart was hanging out in our backstage area, which was fun, and surreal. It would be great to see Ed Ackerson again!

who can turn the world on with his '80s indie nostalgia factor?

--Scott

October 28, 2002

Scott, do you think there are a lot of cliques in heaven?

DaveO

Scott: As all midnight movie dorks know, in heaven, everything is fine. If you feel left out of a clique, that is not fine. Therefore, there are no cliques in heaven.

thanks for visiting www.westernreligion.org

--Scott

Scott, your music has lately seemed to me a study of decline, even as the quality of each new LF increases every release. I have been listening to you Game Theory, the LF, etc., since early high school in San Luis Obispo, and still find your work musically and lyrically beyond compare. This despite the fact that I am all grown up, publishing philosophy articles on Kant's aesthetics, teaching in the Cal State system, etc. -- something I give you at least a bit of credit for, although I also think *Lolita Nation* was clearly a central factor in why I was forced to take a sojourn from college, waste money pretending to be a writer in Dublin & London, and yes, exactly what you'd expect -- and ought to have long since had my fill of teen-angst and other Californian themes. But, alas, "the charm still works on me." But I wonder why? I have spent thousands of hours listening to more and more depressing albums, have been driven to meet you once (*Bottom of the Hill*, sometime last century), walked all the way across Berkeley (where is Big Shot?)

Scott: It's gone now, but it was on the corner of Ashby and something -- I want to say either Telegraph or Shattuck. Northwest corner.

to listen to you play at the Starry Plough, and now I am writing this letter. As you might expect, I am a little curious if you have any insight into your staying power for well, a born-and-bred Californian Scott Miller fan.

It occurred to me that while English music has long been depressing because of the decline and fall of the British Empire, the steadily worsening state of parking in central London, Thatcher, and all the rest of it, Game Theory, Anglo-centric stylings aside, presented an advanced form of Californian optimism. Until quite recently, California had some claim to being the center of the Western world, and, well, it seemed sort of like we would have every opportunity to make our mistakes young.

From my point of view, California has been in some ways the center of the world for a while, mostly on the strength of Stanford University plus the U.C. system, and Hollywood--as in the film industry. As for how long "a while" has been, let's make it since the demise of the golden eras of Broadway, Bell Labs, and the Roosevelt presidency. By "recently," do you mean that the center of the world became Seattle due to grunge, Microsoft, and Starbucks? Due to the Posies, maybe!

Girls might give one a hard time -- from your songs, they apparently arrayed against you decade long campaigns of emotional torture and aesthetic entrapment -- but in the end, the Californian could be confident he had local access to Philip K. Dick's backyard of end-of-the-world, edge-of-the-West, Euro-American technology and barnyard haircuts. And be confident that from Tokyo to Helsinki, people would be imitating him. Generally, it was fly-over good feeling. What I am wondering then, does your music reflect the end of all this Californian over-confidence?

Well, besides overconfidence, California has a dimension of fatality, being the last major global frontier, where, to boot, a major gold rush came and went. I like that about it. Part of my family actually settled in California before the gold rush, which is a rarity among non-Indian non-Hispanics. Like they, we were just here for the avocados.

Obviously, the general cultural and social decline of the West is rather disturbing stuff, to make no mention of the record industry or the fact that LSD is no longer legally available in Contra Costa County. But is your music also about Californian tragedy, the burst bubble of that left-over dayglo optimism that no outside the States could find a supplier for anywhere but here? Specifically, do you think the "child-free" nature of central SF, the shrinking of the Anglo population in NorCal, and the decline of humanities education in the UC and sister institutes play a role in the despair you express?

Actually, I did have terminal difficulty fitting into the U.C. Davis art department, and that could be related to what you're talking about (not that I would bet money I know what that is), although I would sooner look to my lack of talent.

The last part of that is where I get really lost. Do you mean that since I'm "Anglo," and SF is "child-free" in the sense of having a low Anglo (?) birth rate -- which I don't know the statistics about -- do I have some sort of a back-to-the-wall, standing up for the dignity and identity of my people feeling? Kind of the opposite: I'm all for being part of a group that's voluntarily lowering its population, for ecological reasons. And I don't have much of a Chuck D. thing about my own ethnicity -- it's not like historically things were pretty dead around China and the Mediterranean, and then one day the Celts and the Vikings dragged us all out of the stone age.

I know these are all rough ones, but this is the sort of thing I experience and am brought to think about when I hit "play" on *Attractive Nuisance*. Inevitably I am adapting your art for my own ends, which is fine with me and I hope with you. But I am curious about the particular nature of my adaptions here. So a good solid Davis try would be deeply, deeply appreciated.

Your loyal fan in the sticks,

Marcus Verhaegh

Nothing about *Attractive Nuisance* was consciously intended to be peculiar to California, but I think you could say there was a general theme of trying to look past instinctual clinging to personal destiny, and it wouldn't be a completely futile exercise to compare that to the way people conceptualize California. But here I am getting serious and scholarly about some little rock and roll songs I wrote, and that's embarrassing.

thanks for writing and best wishes,

--Surfer Rosa Parks

November 18, 2002

Scott, I loved reading through your favorite album lists! :) One question... I noticed Teenage Fanclub's *Grand Prix* is missing from your top 20 of 1995. Are you not a fan of that album? I think it's one of their best -- much much stronger than *Songs from Northern Britain* (some of which sounds a bit too fake-Byrdsian to me, if that makes sense!). Anyway, *Grand Prix* = "Sparky's Dream", "Neil Jung", "Don't Look Back", "Tears"... lots of great songs.

Scott: I absolutely agree. I don't like to radically revise those lists over time, but sometimes either I hadn't heard an album at all when I made the list, or I couldn't afford the time to let it sink in, and it seems only fair to those albums to slip them in according to a later impression, which I should do. Mabye you don't agree, but to me later Teenage Fanclub songs tend to seem bland on first listen, and then you start to realize they have a sort of phantom emotional content.

"Sparky's Dream" is a perfect example. I first thought "here we go again, a British band doing that music hall descending scale thing *one more time*, with a bunch of braindead jawing about crystal balls and shooting stars." But now that part with "fading fast from taking this too far" comes along, followed by that little solo fuzzy guitar line, and it seems to have this uncanny charge to it.

For *Grand Prix*, figure top ten definitely, and probably top five for that year.

I do totally agree with *I'm With Stupid* as the number one album of 1995. I loved Aimee's stripped down, focused but fuzzy guitar sound (i.e. "Long Shot", "Par for the Course") combined with some great melodies ("Amateur", "That's Just What You Are", etc).

And that's not even mentioning the devastating "You Could Make a Killing."

Also, I'm a big fan of your work... only found out about Loud Family and Game Theory a couple of years ago (I'm 21 years old)!

Yeah, sure you are. And I'm sure you just *happen* to own a lot of Phil Ochs and Spirit vinyl.

But thank God! It was like discovering Big Star or something. I wish I could rework that Paul Westerberg line "I never travel far/ without a little Big Star" into "I always carry/ a little Loud Family" or something! Hee hee. You're the best... thanks,

Patty Cottrell

That's awfully kind of you to say. Okay, I guess I do believe you're only 21, because otherwise you probably would have heard to avoid Alex Chilton comparisons because of my alleged sensitivity to it (although the truth is I'm always flattered when someone considers me worthy of it). I very much appreciate the feedback on my lists, too.

P.S. Are you into graphic novels at all?

I've always had a passing interest. I used to like underground hippie comics like Zap, and later Eightball and Chris Ware comics and things like that. Recently I got something called "Optic Nerve" by Adrian Tomine, the story of which is actually set at my high school (Rio Americano in Sacramento). It's sort of the teen psychodrama stuff you'd expect from a hipster publication, but really well-crafted and unusually attentive to little details of human nature.

--Middleage Fanclub

November 25, 2002

Scott, I've had several opportunities over the years to gush to you about how much your music has meant to me, so I won't waste space here. You've written about how "there's a melody playing in some corner of my consciousness virtually 24 hours a day" and that, at any given time, you decide whether or not to pay attention to it. With no immediate plans to record, are you not paying attention? or do you still jot down chord progressions or play guitar riffs into a four-track or keep a notebook of lyric fragments?

Scott: All that. And, of course, forget most of it.

The last time that you took a break of longer than two years between recording, of course, the result was *Plants and Birds*, likely the consensus all-time favorite album of those reading this page. Is it reasonable to hope that -- perhaps around 2005 -- we might be the beneficiaries of an explosion of pent-up creativity?

It's not inconceivable I could do an album about then, but that's getting pretty far ahead of myself. Between now and then I'd like to do a little to improve my skills as a singer and a producer, if it did happen, and presuming I'm stuck producing myself again. I just did a live show opening for Aimee Mann and that was good singing practice, as is the record of my old stuff I'm doing with Aimee and Michael Lockwood. Watching them work is definitely inspiring. Actually, Aimee and I were going to try to write a song together for this project,

and that hasn't quite gotten rolling yet, but if it does that would probably be one new song in 2003.

On another subject altogether: How do your daily co-workers acknowledge your music career? Are they all aware of your godlike status among a small but influential demographic?

Actually I'm usually pretty mum about the whole thing. I imagine them getting ahold of some of my lyrics and thinking: wow, Scott's a bit of a disturbed cat.

Matthew Budman, who herewith pledges \$250 to Bill Belt's finance-Scott effort and won't even expect a celebratory ballad

Much honored, sir; thank you! You just put that in an interest-bearing account (well, with today's accounts, it's hard to tell), and we'll watch signs for the advent of the new system of democratic patronage.

"he's got writing in his blood, man..."

--Scott

December 2, 2002

Scott, my friend John is a musician. He is a very gifted and talented singer, songwriter, guitar player, recording engineer... not to mention a warm, caring, funny, intelligent soul. I care about him deeply. The other night someone stole his guitar from the stage after a gig. Being a musician yourself I am sure you can appreciate all the reasons why this stinks. In fact, being a musician, it is likely that you have even had a similar thing happen to you.

Scott: My 6-string acoustic got stolen on the road, and the dark blue Stratocaster I used to use a lot was stolen in a burglary.

What really makes this situation so horrible is that this guitar had extreme sentimental value to John. He and his dearest friend and mentor, Jim, found it and put it together over many a long afternoon the year before Jim died. Consequently, playing that guitar was not just a way to make music, it was a way for John to stay connected to Jim and to all the things Jim taught him -- a way to honor him. I know John will recover from this loss eventually, and I know that someday John will realize that he honors Jim's memory with or without the guitar, but in the meantime I am hoping that you have some words of wisdom and comfort to share with him.

Thanks,

Judi Winn

I recommend two ways to think about it, versions of which have helped me in the past, and they're both fairly bitter pills to swallow, so let me preface them with some heartfelt

sympathy. It's hard and bitter to lose an irreplaceable embodiment of an aspect of life, and it's hard and bitter to be touched by human victimization.

First, this may be treated as a challenge to make sure the music takes up the slack that the guitar was carrying, and thus bring what was proprietary within the relationship to people listening to the music. To endeavor to bring the feelings across on a new guitar is to remove reliance on the old guitar, and, in doing so, very probably to get more actual feeling across.

Second, I've tried to endure such suffering as I've experienced (nothing too noteworthy) with the attitude of the great mystics who regard it as a privilege to be called on to absorb it from the world. Say, for instance: "thankfully, this suffering falls upon me, who can take it, because I know what it is like to be one of the people who could not take it, and it is immeasurably preferable that those people be spared."

let's go sufferin' now, everybody's learnin' how

--Scott

December 16, 2002

Scott, I write this with the utmost of praise in mind. *Lolita Nation*, imho, was a brilliant statement, a highwater mark, an album that any creative artist would be proud to call their own. Absolutely original, energetic, versatile, exciting without sacrificing your skills as a pop songwriter of nearly unequalled ability. I am 40, was a GT fan and LF fan. To me, *Attractive Nuisance* almost appears to be a deliberate attempt at recapturing all the best aspects of *Lolita Nation*, and it does. It appears that you may have thought this would be your last release, because I find its emulation of *LN* on target. I also attended the NYC Knit show around the *AN* release and found your generosity, energy and good spirits so refreshing. I will never forget GT at Maxwell's touring behind *LN* -- in '87? Brilliant. Gil Ray's contribution throughout cannot be undervalued -- you and he seemed like kindred spirits. All the best -- you will succeed at anything, because GT and LF are proof positive of that.

Don Adler

Scott: Don, thank you for writing and for being so complimentary. See below for some *LN/AN* commentary.

Scott, I saw Dylan Friday night in Virginia, and came away impressed again by his ability to rock, trade riffs with his band ex-tempore, confidently do covers (Zevon, Neil Young, Rolling Stones), and make his own material unfamiliar by changes of pace. He's a marvel -- hope you don't miss chances to see him.

Thanks a lot for writing. I've never seen Dylan live in the flesh. He's definitely a national treasure -- and he's on a great winning streak lately to be sure.

I also have followed Wilco/Jeff Tweedy for years, and note the same tendencies -- thrashing out familiar songs, or slowing rockers into ballads, or remaking a crowd favorite into something else. Music keeps remaking itself and changing clothes, though staying in familiar forms.

I guess I pretty much agree with that statement. I'm not a huge fan of all reinterpretation as musical expression (I usually find other-artist remixes uninteresting, for instance). I also have to admit that when Dylan changes a song live, I'm more used to thinking he's being lazy about his performance than that protean inspiration is occurring -- but Dylan knows more than I do about a lot of things including everything about making music, so I try to stay open to learning something.

But some rearrangements are amazing. When I was in college in Davis, CA, I was friends with Steve Wynn and Kendra Smith, who were later in the Dream Syndicate but at the time were in a band called Suspects (Russ Tolman and Gavin Blair from True West were also in that band). They both moved to L.A. at some point and then came back for one Suspects reunion show, and the first song they did was this beautiful version of "All Tomorrow's Parties," with Kendra singing the lyrics translated into German, and with all the lights out -- probably still the most memorable cover version I've ever seen anybody do.

All a roundabout way to ask you about you, your catalog, and watching it age. You've been pretty self-deprecating about your earlier work -- lovesick tortured young man stuff, and I really appreciate your reflection here. Some stuff it's hard to go back to, I'm sure.

I'm not all that apologetic about the lovesick tortured subject matter. I'm happy enough that I expressed what was on my mind rather than trying to manufacture some sort of more blasé point of view. But it would have been nice if I'd been a little more adept at some of the tasks I was attempting.

Watching yourself grow as a writer, as an artist -- watching rock grow up -- where do you see it all going?

Is "growing up" the right term? Was *Rubber Soul* really some kind of step in a mystical cultural striving toward *The Eminem Show*? I haven't made an ultra-serious study of what happens to artistic movements over the centuries -- painting, drama, whatever -- but my impression is that a spike of brilliant output is typically followed by a long decline into crap. I'm not inclined to think of good art as pointing the way to even better art by any sort of natural maturation process. At best, a lot of people see that a certain style wins favor, so for a while there's enough laboring in one area that you can cull a pretty good sampling of the best results.

Wilco (*Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*) and Radiohead (*Kid A, Amnesiac*) each/both spent two years imploding the rhythm and rock of their most daring convergence pieces (*Summer Teeth, OK Computer*). I won't say that this space is yours -- the overlaps and backdrops of dissonance and czura, but it's kinda been a trope that you used through the GT and LF years. You've been asking what's the frequency for a long time.

The benchmark album in that structure-expanding sort of style is probably the Beatles' white album, although *Freak Out* by the Mothers of Invention was an obvious forerunner to it.

I remember Lennon remarking that "Woman" was a remake of "Girl." It all circled back for him. Where does it go for you? Any opinions on the dissonance and dischord I threw you into with Jeff and Radiohead?

Long time fan. Mucho love to you and la familia.

Hairy krimble,

Steve G.

Dissonance and dischord are optional in the class of project you're talking about, and I usually try to avoid them except in small, well-integrated doses. My tolerance for non-music which is cast as music for the gestural value is really low. On something like *Lolita Nation*, my aesthetic model is more like A.M. radio with fast and silly edits than Cage and Stockhausen. Not in going for a fast and silly effect, but in trying to create something surprising and entertaining. I wouldn't have thought while making *Lolita Nation* "okay, it's 75 minutes of ponderous noodling, but that's what I want -- a challenge to the listener." Instead I would have been thinking, "those few seconds of ponderous noodling were fun, but before it gets tedious, back to the music."

I didn't want to try to have (what as far as I know will be) my last album, *Attractive Nuisance*, be any sort of fireworks-finale of breaking supposed musical taboos. Art like that tends to make an implicit promise that breaking taboos will set you free -- as an audience member, you'll join some elite group who see heightened academic beauty in it all. For the most part, I think that's a false promise, and definitely not the valedictory point I'd want anyone to key on. Not all formality is oppression, especially in music. I still stand by the sincerity of all my work that we might call experimental, but at the end of the day, there's a little voice saying, "we appreciate your taking the time to make your experiments; what is it that you conclude from them?"

fast and silly, the Mascara Snake!

--Scott
