

ASK SCOTT

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

2006 (Year 9 – 2004 was Year 8, no entries in 2005: 2006 starts June 23)

June 23, 2006

Scott, I look forward to LF/Ant's *WiiW* even more than I'm looking forward to Nintendo's Wii. Welcome back! In the wake of Neil Young's "Let's Impeach The President", do you ever see yourself writing a non-subtle political song? Or maybe a whole concept album?

Scott: It's actually only been a short time since I've seen myself writing a song! I thank you for looking forward to the results. I haven't heard the new Neil Young material yet, so I'm not in the wake of it. I liked the last couple of albums quite a bit. I'll be awfully happy to get a new president, but one of the things I dislike most about the Republican party is that they're election stealers, so I'd prefer not to stoop to mob mentality, which is what impeachments and recall elections I've observed have all been. I'd like to hope people have been nudged in recent years toward, when they're voting for a leader, selecting someone who has the skills to hold high office, but it's not like by lighting torches and going after Bush, statesmanship will blossom in the sheer void overnight. The going logic seems to be: (1) you don't need any particular skills to be governor, and (2) if you can be governor, you must be qualified to be president. We all need to do better than that.

I really want to see the Al Gore movie.

I got slightly serious about a concept album where there would be 100 short compositions, each about a year from 1900 to 1999. It would be a way of pointing to the important events as I saw them and putting slants thereon. The 1900 one was going to be called "Interpretation of Dreams." You get the point. Rather too plagiaristic of *69 Love Songs* to actually do, not to mention I wouldn't even close to have the resources.

Also, what are you listening to these days? Aside from the sweetly naive songs of the offspring, of course.

Roger Winston

Just lately, Cream albums and *Get Happy* by Elvis Costello. I want a T-shirt that says "I have listened to 'Toad' all the way through." A couple of the more recent Steve Wynn albums (saw Steve for the first time in years a short time ago—a great, emotional experience). Somewhat ditto for Jon Auer; "Songs From the Year of Our Demise" is very fine indeed. I love "Friends to Go" from the last McCartney album. I love the Sufjan Stevens album. "Just Friends" by Nine Black Alps is a ripping little pop song. "Lady Sweet" by Big Star is ravishing. "I Predict A Riot" by the Kaiser Chiefs is very nice.

Nice to hear from you, Roger!

Impeachment & Cream,
--Scott

July 10, 2006

Hi Scott. Been a big fan for years and I got the new album yesterday and LOVE it. Opening with "Rocks Off" was bold to say the least but you pulled it off—sounds like flies on sherbert for the new century or something like that. Anyhow, to my question: what relation to the aforementioned number does "Song About 'Rocks Off'" have (is that bad English?)?

Andy (almost) Twenty Years Later

Scott: Thanks for writing, Andy. Sounds like fine English to me, but don't be looking for too much book learning from a man carrying the torch for "Like Flies."

Anyway, here's the story about that song. When I was first getting into bands in high school and I was playing with Joe Becker, "Rocks Off" was one of the covers I used to push hard for us to do. I don't think I was actually allowed to sing it in the band, but I know I've heard myself singing it on tape, this incredibly weency 14-year-old voice singing crazed drug and sex lyrics without a trace of dramatic irony. Anton and I dug the song out for a live show we did together, and it had terrific energy; he suggested we record it and a couple of others, and I believe that was the first concrete bit of planning for this album. I thought (1) at long last singing a minimally respectable version would be a certain personal triumph if I could do it, and (2) it would be entertaining to write an actual song about my past vicarious relation to the lyrics.

As with any of my lyrics, a fair amount of art rock tends to go in before I think they do the job, so it's something of a leap of faith hoping that the details of the experience get across. For a while I wanted to name the album *Lords the Songs Taught Us* as a take-off on the Cramps' record. I think that expresses part of the point: if you're a young, impressionable person and pop music is your religion, the gospel can be a little arbitrary and dangerous. Yet, simultaneously I want to record my continued intense love for rock, the Stones, everything. I hope something listenable happened along the way.

Now, my "War Pigs," you really don't want to hear,
--Scott

July 17, 2006

Scott, I just wondered about your opinions about the mono-craze circa 1998. I noticed that many 60's re-issues around that time were billed as "the original mono-masters" or more-or-less the way the artist's vision versions. One in particular was Pretty Things' *S.F. Sorrow*. A re-issue in 1998 touted those very attributes... in the liner notes. I must confess that I bought that CD—totally unaware of the mono-purist contents within—wondering perchance if the X-tra tracks (the marvelous "The Defecting Grey" amongst others) were in rare stereo versions (which I realize now may actually not exist). Imagine my surprise

that the opposite was true... the X-tra tracks were the formally heard mono as well as the original album... Oh ma-a-a-a-n! To understand my dismay, you have to understand my first exposure to stereo. Granted it was contrived stereo (sic), not simulated stereo; simulated stereo is what I regard as merely the bass enhanced on one channel and treble on the other.

Isn't it weirdly embarrassing how that was the best simulation the industry could come up with? They couldn't put *some* highs in the left and *other* highs in the right? It was like a clever simulation of partial deafness.

In those days (1968) that I was an Iowa farm-boy with closet-autistic-savant tendencies, but I noticed that stereo records (particularly those with the afore-mentioned contrived stereo attributes) had a different groove reflection in front of the spindle from the reflection behind the spindle. (Gosh, I must have had a LOT of spare time!) Imagine my amazement when - after we purchased our first stereo phonograph—that there was a reason for those differences as well as the delight in listening to those records one channel at a time. I was even visualizing... er... contrived stereo versions of records that I heard only in mono. My point is those records were very much a product of their times regardless of their detachment—more-or-less—from the artists' intents. It is for that reason that the argument that stereo-ization is akin to color-ization—a process NOT a product of the times of the media that it affects—doesn't wash with me. What are your opinions?

Incidentally, *S.F. Sorrow* was re-issued in stereo in '01. Was the mono-purist craze just a fad?

Contrivially yours,
Jack L.

Thanks for writing, Jack!

You mean you think it's okay to remix in stereo, right? I think it's okay. Stereo just plain sounds better than mono to me, and since the dreaded 80s when people would occasionally "fix" good older music to sound like the 80s, the art of remixing has in general been on the right track. On the other hand there has always been a respectable enough case made for the value of original mono; I wasn't aware of any spike in interest around 1998. The usual argument is that a lot of work went into the mono mixes since those got by far the most exposure, which was probably a true enough assessment of how engineers thought through about 1966. I think I've heard that Brian Wilson didn't have full frequency hearing in both ears or something, so that would make it relevant that he wouldn't have any aesthetic input to panning decisions (how much a track is turned up in the left vs. right channel).

The way I see the issue breaking down is that people made some fairly slipshod stereo decisions in the early days just because conventional wisdom hadn't grown up yet (like, you usually pan bass, kick, and lead vocals about at center), and you got some nutty results like *Rubber Soul* with vocals on one side, everything else on the other. So in some cases the mono mix is simply where the mature artistry occurred, mix-wise. But we're talking about

deficiencies that to me are all in the realm of fun, acceptable variation. I don't believe in significant audio magic getting lost in phase cancellation due to stereo separation or anything like that. At least, that's nothing compared with the difference it makes that you're standing close to a back wall, or you have the "loudness" button on, or your system isn't flat, or your headphones are bright Sonys or dark AKGs, or any number of things that *unquestionably* matter a *lot*, that you don't hear people worrying about.

A bigger issue to me is that vinyl mastering used to be a somewhat different art form. Cutting the disk used to be a point at which some intense focus and audio wizardry occurred, sometimes involving the artist, and all of that gets somewhat unavoidably replaced by a one-size-fits-all approach for the CD reissue after the original people and their passionate concerns are long gone. Not that there aren't people doing great mastering work (having Bob Ludwig work on two of my CD masters was a highlight of my music career), but think of Picasso assigned to recreate a Monet canvas. It's just going to be different and not quite as good, but not because Picasso isn't as good as Monet. It would be interesting if there were future technology which could import from a master tape and *also* from a mastered disk of the same material, compute any loss that occurred from either tape deterioration or groove defects like pops and rumble, and also figure out the EQ and compression that occurred in mastering so as to support recapturing it—combining to synthesize a super reissue source that's better than any one surviving best source.

Back to Quad,
--Scott

August 14, 2006

Hey Scott!

Scott: Hey, Derek, thanks for writing.

It's an honor to be sending you an e-mail you probably won't read. I've been a Todd Rundgren fan since I was capable to like music, and I was wondering what your favorite Rundgren album is? I think I went through a period when I was younger when I thought the *Todd* (1974) LP was human creativity at its apex.

My personal Todd favorites are *Something/Anything* and *A Wizard/A True Star*—they're about tied. Calling your own album *A Wizard/A True Star* is too much genius to ignore. "Couldn't I Just Tell You" has always been one of my favorite songs to cover. And I produced a French band recently called Swan Plastic Swan (CD should be out later this year or maybe early next), and I might soon be doing on a cover of "The International Feel" with some or all of them.

Todd is an amazing listen for sure. But some of people's usual favorite songs don't grab me that much, for instance "A Dream Goes On Forever." And for me *Todd* has a somewhat less friendly vibe than previous Todd. Sometimes it works for me, as in "Useless Begging," sometimes it has kind of the same you're-so-uptight-what's-wrong-with-you attitude that

can work against my liking certain Frank Zappa material. Still, I do love the album and discover new things to like when I go back.

Also I know you have an affinity for art-rock too, so I wondering what you thought of early Genesis?

I'm pretty ignorant in the Genesis area, actually. I believe there's a song in 7/4 time called "Dancing with the Moonlit Knight" on *Selling England By the Pound* that sounded really good, but I could have made wrong mental notes there. Is that one "early"?

I notice vague similarities between *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway* and spots of *Lolita Nation* now and then when I'm thinking too much.

I really don't know that album. My friend Tris McCall swears by it so I have to check it out one day. But it wouldn't be an influence.

Have you listened to Guided By Voices much, what do you think of Robert Pollard's lyrics?

Yes, I've listened to Guided By Voices a lot. They're one of the maybe five most important artists of the nineties for me, and probably for a lot of people. Not that they're any less important this decade. I love Pollard's lyrics. Even when his lyrics are somewhat free-expression I always have a feeling of understanding and of it being good, solid entertainment. It helps that he has a great voice.

They seem to have the same slightly surreal, literate quality yours do... (going on and on and on)...

That's quite a compliment to me; thanks very much.

Have you done much travelling independent of touring? Is there anywhere in the world you especially like?

I've been to many places I like a lot and not too many I don't like. I love London and Paris, but having lived for years in San Francisco, I'm used to big cities. There's a myth that Parisians are rude to Americans; I've spent a total of about seven weeks in Paris and I've never seen it. I've seen American tourists treat average Parisians as they would the operator of an amusement park ride that's not functioning, and despite the French person being gracious beyond the call of duty, probably going away with a story of rudeness. You kind of have to imagine, oh, a group of French people walking up to a crowded American cineplex candy counter, and asking, in French, all about the movies, and how to get to their hotel afterward, and just not going away. "Uh, I don't understand, what I do understand, I probably can't help you with, wish I could, and I'm very sorry but I'm *really busy* right now." Horribly rude, right?

One place that I found just over-the-top safe and pleasant is Greece, including Athens. If you find Greek people rude, you're just insane.

Oh, and finally since I'm 19 and desperate for a surrogate father (let's pretend it's the Ithaca episode of *Ulysses*), do you have any advice about life and stuff?

Thanks for your time,
Derrick

1. If you're in college, watch whether the graduation unit requirements shift from when you originally enrolled. It can be inconvenient and you don't really get any notification.

2. Have you read *The Brothers Karamazov*?

guided by guides,
--Scott

September 4, 2006

Greetings, Mr. Miller... and welcome back. It's been a lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely time waiting for some more mana from St. Scott's heiau. I can't wait to hear WIIW. But, in yet another desperate attempt to be "different" even though I really can't, and deep down don't really want to, and since everyone else is going to be asking about the new album all the way from fab initio to fad infinitum, I thought I'd throw some Witch Hazel in the Eiswein and ask if you've run across the movie/book/concept called "What The Bleep Do We Know," and if so, your take on it all. Thanks for the new work—all your Pal Joeys out here are hopping with anticipation to hear the new album. (rimshot w/cymbal)

Credo quia absurdum,
Kenneth Nixie

Scott: Thanks much for writing, and for the very generous comments. I haven't read the book or seen the movie, but I've heard it's remarkable. I just checked out the Amazon editorial review, and I can't resist quoting this magnificent observation:

How can I create my day every day? The answer to the last question is a resounding yes.

I can't quite tell you how, but in a bizarre way, that apparent typo illustrates the trouble I have with some flavors of scientific writing that mean to function religiously—that is, writing that means to get its audience so excited about scientific truth that readers are swept up in a wave of optimism. The poet John Ashbery began the poem "Absolute Clearance" this way: "He sees the pictures on the walls./A sample of the truth only./But one never has enough./The truth doesn't satisfy." I love that, and it had a tangential resonance with something I've been feeling for a long time: what we usually identify as love of truth is really something else.

If I hear of a regime oppressing its people through gross deception, and then the truth somehow breaks out gloriously to free the people, that is wonderful, but that's not love of truth; it's love of emancipation. Love of truth would have to be where if the people's freedom were thwarted by an inconvenient technicality, you love the technicality. My

impression is that at the most refined level of spiritual discipline, there is a kind of detachment which can be called love of truth, or complete submission to the will of God. For most of us, we're somewhat indifferent to the truth. I've gone to a Giants baseball game and cheered for the Giants, but I've never gone and cheered impartially because the better team prevailed.

So I think the truth isn't a good source of satisfaction in a populist sense. Science involves a passion for knowing what *is* (which is different from a passion for truth), and religion involves a passion for knowing what *should be*, and I think the two tend properly neither to combine nor conflict very much. Possibly the most exciting science in history was Einstein's 1905 papers including special relativity. I'm pretty sure people in 1905 weren't that excited. I think Einstein hit pretty strong resistance, even among experts. I definitely don't think you could have written a book in 1905 that got a whole lot of people excited about there being a new revolution in science: relativity. Yet, I'm pretty sure you could have gotten people really excited about science being able to measure spritual plasma appearing above seances or something like that.

So I go into any book like this with that kind of caution. Though that sounds like I hate all science-is-exciting books and the fact is I definitely have a bunch of them I think are amazing (*Hyperspace* by Michio Kaku!!).

spiritualized,
--Scott

October 23, 2006

Just wanted to say "Hi" and also as it slipped my mind a while ago, I'd just ordered *WIIW* direct from 125 Records this week. A friend of mine at work just came upon a near complete run of *Village Voices* from the late 1970's through 1985. Although I am compelled to keep "Snackbar Confidential" pure with its era (1966-1976), I found many interesting concert/club ads unusable to me but some of which I thought you'd really dig. So I'm going to Xerox some of the better pages and send them to you. Some of the ads may have Game Theory connections (or not) like The Three O'Clock, Let's Active, Pylon, Polyrock, China Crisis, The db's, The Fleshtones and lots more that I think you will enjoy seeing in their original context.

Scott: This is exciting—for readers who don't know, besides being an amazing painter (possibly his most famous image is the "King Missile" album cover), Lance Laurie publishes my favorite zine, *Snackbar Confidential*. It's an assemblage of low-res pop marketing artifacts—emphasizing snack food and mainstream entertainment—from "the era" with Lance's brilliant commentary, maybe slightly in the vein of the late great "Kicks." One might say that *Kicks* is to the Bobby Fuller Four as "*Snackbar Confidential*" is to the Left Banke—an exploration of great lost cheap thrills.

My main question (as I continue to look at fine print in the ads) is: Did Game Theory ever play in NYC in the 1980's ? If so, what month/day/year? Should I be looking at every tiny Maxwell's ad with a magnifying glass?

Thanks,
Lance

Wow, now I wish I'd written these things down on something I was going to keep for twenty years! Here's what I *think* I can remember about Game Theory's NYC area shows:

1984 Nov. 8 (okay, cheating here—I'm actually searching the web and someone claims to have a tape of this date): CBGB's

1985, Oct. 9 (more cheating from another web site): Danceteria

1986: Fall: almost positive we played The Cat Club

1988: Jan.: The China Club, also Maxwell's I'm pretty sure

1988: Oct 28: (again, cheating on the date) Maxwell's—if I recall, one of my favorite shows ever, with Stamey & Holsapple and some up and coming locals called Yo La Tengo!

I'm probably forgetting at least one show.

Thanks for writing, Lance!

"Look at how humble and undaunted the Kool Aid guy looked in the 60s and 70s. Compare that to the look of today's Radical Dood."

--Scott

November 13, 2006

I have read with much awe and amusement all the previous Ask Scotts, but never had anything to Ask Scott until now.

I've been a big fan of your various band lineups since first hearing *Lolita Nation* in the acid-drenched 1980s. Most of the Game Theory and Loud Family CDs are still in heavy rotation here. I like to play your music for friends when trying to demonstrate what best-selling music would have sounded like if the majority of young Americans were autonomous rather than sheeply.

None of which brings me to my question. On the *What if it Works?* CD (from which I massively dig all the Miller-led tunes), I especially love the lines, "I get it now how people see injustice/and want it to prevail." That makes it all the more thrilling to hear the second line repeated in the backing vocals after the lines "Don't bother me while I'm living forever/I'll check back next year (and want it to prevail)".

My question is whether this was a masterly songwriting stroke (repeating an unrelated backing vocal line from a previous verse), a digital editing trick to fill in a backing vocal where none had been recorded in the studio, or perhaps a little of both, or maybe something completely different?

Scott: Now that I think of it, that is something I do fairly regularly—have the backing vocals act as something along the lines of commentary.

We did deliberately have Anton sing variants on some of the lines from other parts of that song as backing vocal lines, although what we were concentrating on there was how the vocal harmonies worked out. The way actual lyric lines juxtaposed *was* a consideration, but more at the level of casually amusing ourselves. For the third verse, I just flew in all Anton's backing vocals from the first and second verse together, however they happened to fall, so where he simply sings an answer vocal on the first verse, he's answering a different line on the third. So the one you point out was just an interesting accident in that respect, though part of what made me decide it was a good move. Which is a lot the way making music typically works.

The backing vocal sounds to me like it may have been muffled somewhat to disguise the words while letting the melody trickle through, but I'm probably overanalyzing.

There's a ton of reverb on those tracks; that's probably what you're calling "muffled." I wasn't trying to disguise the words in any way when I was doing the mix, just trying to make it all sound good to my ears.

Anyway, the javelinas and I simply love your new tunes, and we wish to thank you one more time for all that glittering pop genius through the years. Your unique songwriting, production and (yes!) your singing have always given me the best kind of chills.

**Your devoted fan,
*Mr. Gil***

Thanks for all the very nice things you've said.

Pretty sure they were the acid-washed 1980s,
--Scott

November 27, 2006

Hey Scott—I live in Iowa City, and was there for your in-store at the Record Collector and show at Gabe's on the *Plants & Birds...* tour. Feels like it was yesterday but it must have been 13 years ago...

At the time I was told that you work as some sort of software engineer—is that still the case?

Scott: Still is. My degree was in electrical engineering, being at the time the closest thing to studio recording that passed as a respectable enough university avenue for my parents to pay for. But then doing software became a lot more obvious a way to make a comfortable living than anything right in my area of study, which I began becoming convinced would have to be something like 3-D terrain signal processing for cruise missiles. The only viable thing I'd probably rather do than what I do now for similar financial reward is produce

records, but the reality in my circumstances would involve too much traveling away from my family.

I make music and write software as a day job, and I'm kind of conflicted about whether I'd really be happier making music full time—there's something liberating about not having to worry about making money or appealing to an audience. My friend Josh 'Kit' Clayton works at Cycling 74 and has a recording/performing career, and he made the decision to never depend on music to make money because he didn't like the choices he had to make to make money at it.

I hear that loud and clear. But I can honestly say I found the '80s and '90s such an incoherent period of musical history that I wouldn't have been capable of making an audience-pleasing decision if I'd dedicated my life to it. Today seems a lot more normal. It seems to me someone like, say, Sufjan Stevens would have sounded great to most culture-savvy listeners up until about 1979, then sounded incomprehensible until about 1997, then ramped back up to sounding completely acceptable again. Is that just me?

Which could either be a completely valid artistic choice, or abdicating from actually building an audience, and grasping at more artistic cred than you deserve as an amateur. In Josh's case I think it's the former and in mine perhaps the latter ;-) On the other hand I have friends hitting their mid-thirties living in crappy apartments and sleeping in the van when they tour, trying to make a living as working musicians. They seem pretty happy about it, but you can see the fatigue in their eyes.

Yeah. The key to happiness in this life is to find enough of what, for lack of a better word, I'll call a spiritual path that you're able to conceive of and work toward personal validation outside the social order. And in no situation is that more challenging than when your living depends directly on pleasing audiences day to day.

What it came down to for me is the times when doing music seemed like it was a job, it wasn't fun any more. I'd rather try and make money to live doing something I didn't have an emotional attachment to avoid that feeling—that showing up to play in Oskaloosa was a chore...

Anyway, thanks for continuing your own particular crooked row...

Kent Williams

Thank you! It seems like making music always involves at least as much time spent not having fun as any bad job. There's almost no way for me to enjoy changing strings, working up to being able to sing or play hard parts without mistakes, spending hours a day in some continuum between isolation and social awkwardness, frequently with no clear plan for being able to eat, sleep, or use a bathroom, or going through contentious legal negotiations as a matter of routine. You just have to have an intense enough love for music that you're willing to let some portion of your life get pretty stupid to cause a few drops of good music to drip into the bucket.

Verse, Chores, Verse, Chores, Chores,
--Scott

December 18, 2006

The singer/songwriter Stew recently said, "It's not the job of the artist to GIVE A FUCK, only to GIVE." As an artiste yourself, I was curious what you thought of that sentiment.

Sue

Scott: Okay, so first I'll say Stew is a brilliant guy and I take his advice to artists to heart! But the question to me boils down to whether I'd be inclined to feel the same way if I didn't know who said it, right? I think I pretty much agree. An artist is different from an entertainer in that the entertainer is more interested in finding out what the audience wants and providing that, and the artist is more interested in informing the audience what it *ought* to want. I love this R. G. Collingwood statement: "The artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts."

Not that, speaking for myself, I'm 100% artist and 0% entertainer when I do music; I've always set out to be a mix of both. Or maybe I'd say that I've set out to be a mix insofar as we're talking about doing music as a "job," if we take that to be an important word in Stew's quote. A "job" is performed to someone's satisfaction; if you literally don't care who finds your results satisfactory, it's somewhere between a "hobby" and a "calling."

10% Fun!,
--Scott
