

ASK SCOTT

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

2007 (Year 10)

February 12, 2007

First off, congratulations on the birth of your 2nd daughter. I'm a father of a girl who is 9 now. Best thing I've ever done!

Scott: Thanks very much!

I've been a fan since I heard "I've Tried Subtlety" as a college DJ in 1986 in Richmond. Thank you for all the great music. Your songs are intricate and totally unique, but always accessible too. This is rare.

You're too kind.

As a fan of the indie / punk scene from way back, I didn't listen to much classic rock, but I loved the band Rush for the same reason. Too many bands trade melody for complexity or business today... (A well known band down the street in Charlottesville, VA who shall remain nameless is probably the worst offender of this.)

I don't know that much Rush, I'm sorry to say. My band in high school did a song called "The Best I Can," but it was one the other singer sang, and of course Kenny Kessel's epochal deployment of "By-Tor and the Snow Dog" in the Loud Family 2000 DVD.

Now for my question(s):

Do the names of girls in your songs relate to actual gals you've known? (Erica, Linda, Joanie, Carol, Allison, Penny, etc...)

No, that just always struck me as a common lyrical style that had an almost magical incantation aspect, for which I was rather forlorn about the world losing the knack. It's hard to explain, and it's funny that you mentioned finding my songs totally unique, but I'm always conscious of trying to sound like something else, mostly something pretty old. The time when I started having record deals was unfortunately the time I thought the whole music business was finally going right down the eye of the toilet. I was really naive enough to think that groups like the dBs were going to rise triumphantly and define the 1980s, whereas of course it was, you know, Madonna. I remember feeling it was essential to hold on to this mid-sixties way of talking about a particular girl with a particular mysterious complexity the way Bob Dylan would, or something.

I like the fact that your lyrics contain no cliches. Who is your primary literary influence?

Oh, my lyrics have their share of cliches, but I appreciate the thought. My primary literary influence is T.S. Eliot, surpassing James Joyce about ten years ago. Now there were a couple of fellows who could avoid cliches if they wanted.

Can you tell me what the song "Crash into June" is all about? Thanks again for all the great music—I'm ordering *WIIW* now.

**Be good,
Clay Asbury**

"Crash Into June" was one of those songs that I was so convinced was a failed piece of writing as we were working it up that I've always had a strange grudge against it, but nowadays it doesn't seem worse than anything else I wrote around then. The lyrics are about coming to terms with impulses toward nostalgia, and how that involves a feeling that the good times, such as they are, are necessarily hurtling past and can't be latched onto.

remembering the fabulous 19Hades,
--Scott

March 5, 2007

I've been listening to *SMiLE* tonight, again. As you no doubt know, after all these years Brian, strained through a generous helping of Darian, finally squeezed it out in between hallucinations. In a rather perverse way (I suppose), I somehow miss the days when the closest thing I had to the real article was the French import of *Smiley Smile*, clipped and psych as it was (or was that me?); I always worry when the salesmen return from the tent where virgin art once lightly dozed, self-satisfied smirks painted on their greasy faces like cheap red lipstick—nay, shun Lolita: I hate being supposed to like something.

Scott: Wow, can anyone's hat not be off to you for that characterization?

Personally, I consider *SMiLE* the "real" *Pet Sounds*. Okay, so Brian is now worn out enough to be propped up on stage by his handlers without seeming too crazy, except sometimes... and of course angelic genius still lurks in that murky, chaotic, spinning, fragged olive-drab and mustard-yellow twister called the Mind of Brian; but is it still art, seeing as it's now in a million tiny angelic pieces?

You know, far be it from me to suggest that Brian's mind might have some company...

I've been wondering, since I got the DVD and went to the legendary gig at Montalvo Winery down the 85 (ticket stub in scrapbook): what did you think of the finished *SMiLE* product, released 35 years late?

I thought it was fantastic—considerably better than I expected. Some of the material positively came alive; I'd never quite flipped over "Wonderful" or "Wind Chimes" before, but the new *SMiLE* versions are gorgeous. I always thought "Heroes and Villains" was a little on the rinky-dink side, and "Surf's Up" was more art-damaged than brilliant, but you put them

together in the same project, especially with the recurring musical themes, and they really start to add up to something. Outside of any rational critique I could offer, it gives me an eerie feeling of someone having salvaged discarded pieces of American life as I've known it and stitched these into a sort of tapestry, that says, "you thought you had disowned all of this, but whether it's good news or bad, it is not really gone."

Were you inspired by the work?

I was definitely inspired. It's not clear to me what exactly I should be doing with that kind of inspiration at this point in my life, but I was.

Do you see any of your records as being on the same level, either statement-, cohesion-, or composition-wise?

I've certainly labored to achieve those categories of effectiveness, but I have to think if I were having anywhere near that level of success, there would be some obvious body of evidence, like steady healthy sales or constant critical attention.

Hint on last question: I do, but I'd rather you go first.

**Your pal and Brian's,
Ken S. Nixie**

Thanks, that's very kind of you. Actually, supporters occasionally remind me that some of my albums go for collector prices, so maybe based on that I'd be willing to claim that they have at least as much literary merit as a Nolan Ryan rookie card.

He gives speeches but they put him back in bed,
--Scott

April 2, 2007

Across all your records I have a very strong sense of the "album as artifact", each one a carefully sequenced set of songs that rewards playing in full.

Scott: That's very true; when record labels have changed my sequence, it's seemed insane to me. In Europe, they would only release one disk of the *Lolita Nation* material, and it sounded like a pathetic album to me.

There are lots of lovely architectural features, like the linking tracks on *Days For Days* or that same skronk that starts *Lolita Nation* and *Plants and Birds*, the little descriptions of songs, the things that always make it fun to get a new Scott Miller record, to see what you've done! Was this something that you agonised over or a process you undertook for pure pleasure alone?

There's no question that I agonized over the earliest one of those, *Lolita Nation*. That was in late 1986 to '87. It was a fairly low period of my personal life, and I thought that not only

had the music business as a whole descended into a godawfully stupid state, but I wasn't sure my contribution made any practical sense—I was feeling that the more I got things right, the fewer people liked it. *Lolita Nation* was a really stubborn attempt to do everything as an exaggeration of my own idiosyncrasies, and I was feeling depressed that this would just drag the band's career down for no particular higher purpose. I deliberately sang more in that high, airy way than ever because I thought that was the only way to capture the feeling of being in a kind of dream state that social reality couldn't commandeer. It seems a little misguided now that I try to explain myself, but I pretty much succeeded at the task I set myself.

If I had to describe a theme behind the "architectural features" of my albums, it's that I often feel a compulsion to go off the page and come up with a sort of meta-narrative commentary. Songs have a tendency to just say the things songs always say; different art forms suffer from different variations of that pathology. I want to get across that besides playing the making-albums-to-please-listeners game by the usual rules, there's this other thing to be expressed. For instance, on *Days For Days*, I wanted to create a venue where the same listener is expected to enjoy both relatively conventional pop music and relatively unconventional compositions. It's strangely not done. There's a weird social fiction that you're supposed to position yourself as a listener of one or a listener of the other, but the reality is that even not very sophisticated listeners are more than capable of appreciating both forms of expression. In fact, maybe "sophistication" is the problem; it conditions someone not to be sympathetic with some so-called "unsophisticated" point of view, sometimes arbitrarily.

And now that you aren't making a record every couple of years, do you miss making these artful packages for your songs?

I miss the couple of weeks right after a release when it's possible to imagine that people are going to enthusiastically embrace it.

Thank you for everything!

John Allison

thank you for suggesting there is an everything to thank me for,
--Walter Skronkite

Is it possible to get the new cd autographed; are there plans to tour europe one day (and esp. belgium)?

filip dejongh

Scott: Buy the album directly from [125](#), and we will get it pimped out for you. (The editor adds: put a note in the comments section of your PayPal order and we'll see what we can do.)

I'd love to tour Europe; I've only ever toured in the U.S., Canada, and England. Not to suggest that every man, woman, and child in Belgium wouldn't want a ticket were I to show up, but are there certain cities where, uh, perhaps semi-obscure 1980s college radio bands

do better than others? I've been even more out of the swing of the music biz than I ever was since I've had small children, but I got to Paris to produce Swan Plastic Swan last year so maybe anything is impossible. Or maybe not very possible things are really not very possible. Anyway, thanks for the note!

--Belgian waffler

June 11, 2007

Every year at about this time I go back to the early period of the Game Theory catalog. I could probably ask you hundreds of questions at once, but instead I'd like to inquire about one of my favorite songs (that also seems to be one of your most chaotic/psychotic from that era), "Friend of the Family". I have enjoyed trying to untangle as to what this song is about for only 17 years now. The only rationalization that I have made was in the title/lyric "...friend of the family..." It seems to remind me of a news report wherein some sort of tragedy occurs and the report would end with a comment from "a friend of the family." Was that a good guess?

Scott: I like that way of putting it. It's a relationship song and these people are going around with an attitude of having to shake off the mundane in favor of something more vivid and worthwhile, but in an undisciplined way that just becomes desperate. I think I was trying to get at what sort of thing is on the mind of people who are on the verge of becoming dangerous troublemakers for no obvious reason. There is such a thing as assuming for yourself a borderline-outsider status like friends-of-the-family for some tragic event, just as a symptom of tending to gravitate toward something certifiably emotionally intense and focused.

As I have probably mentioned to you before, this is why yourself and Steely Dan can continually hold my attention for decades.

**Your friend,
Lance**

Steely Dan certainly hold my attention, but I always found their lyrics relatively direct, at least the general gist; is it just me?

no school like an old school,
--Scott

October 1, 2007

I'm a huge Game Theory / Loud Family fan from Norway (probably more or less the only one? At least the only one with a collection of your stuff also including ALRN album) Through being an REM fanatic since 1985 and my interest for power pop, I looked for related stuff like Mitch's Let's Active etc. and through this interest bought the first few GT albums.

Scott: Joe Becker, who played drums on a lot of the music I've recorded, is half Norwegian. I believe he has relatives accounting for at least one more fan in Norway.

REM wrote "What's the frequency, Kenneth?" for *Monster* album in 1995 on the Dan Rather, CBS News anchor, incident. It was sort of a hit for REM and a lot of fuzz around this story, even making Dan Rather sing the song on Telly. Your track "Kenneth, What's the frequency" included on *Lolita Nation* is not as well know, but I guess taken from the same incident. Tell me about it and your feelings on REM making their song 8 years later.

It was definitely referring to the same incident, although now I don't remember many details of that incident. The piece we titled "Kenneth, What's the Frequency?" wasn't a song, it was just a sound collage. That news item really struck me at the time as sounding like one of the more disorienting experiences a person could have. I thought that was the right mood to try to set at the opening of that album.

When R.E.M. came out with their song I don't remember being particularly dumbfounded at the coincidence or anything. I think I wondered whether anyone besides me would still remember the reference. The R.E.M. song was one of my favorite songs of that year (1994).

Lately I was introduced to Anton Barbeau's music through my friend Bill Forsyth at Minus Zero Records in London (a great shop for REM obscurities and power pop records) and really look forward to the new LF/AB album which I have now ordered.

I hope you like the album with Anton. I don't know for a fact that Joe's relatives like it, but I have a good feeling.

**Take care,
Skeeter
REM Collector & Fanatic**

No kidding, Bill Forsyth? I really like Bill Forsyth and have been lucky enough to cross paths with him a couple of times. I hope I can get back to London at least once more while there is still such a thing as record stores.

watch for my next recording, "I Feel Fine, and It's the End of the World"
--Scott

Recently, compelled by a move to a smaller space, and by my wife's insistence that "these HAVE to GO," I sold the majority of my LP collection. I had perhaps 2000, and kept something in the neighborhood of 300. 3 of the 300 were my original copies of *Two Steps...*, *Lolita Nation*, and *The Big Shot Chronicles*. They are precious to me, although I have CD copies of all three. I would not, could not part with them. Artistically (on your end) and personally (on my end), those LPs are precious artifacts of a time in my life that I treasure, and a time in the music industry when it occasionally seemed like anything was possible and the future was bright. I guess what I'm fumbling at here is that your music "looms large in my legend," as an old friend of mine puts it.

So thanks.

I got to thinking about how I'd found out about Game Theory in the first place, and seem to recall that my dopesmoking, guitar-playing, music-listening buddies and I had read that Mitch Easter was producing you, and since we knew and admired his work with REM and a buncha others, we decided that we should check you guys out. I, for one, was amply rewarded, and have been a fan of yours ever since, and would rank *Lolita Nation*, at least, in my top ten or fifteen of all time. I'm sure it's irksome to keep hearing praises for something you did 20-odd years ago, but it's goshdarn GOOD. So there.

It feels good to hear you say that, thanks. It's nice for that album to have its little footnote status or whatever you'd call it, but trust me that there's not such a steady flow of praise that I just can't take any more.

I have come to realize that I've found MOST of the good music that I know through this method, a sort of "lateral" investigation. This method works best, of course, for the music fan willing to do a bit of work, a bit of research. I guess I'm trying to say that I'm a "music nerd" for lack of a better term ("aficionado" seems too gradiose and Hemingwayesque, although it might be more accurate), and that from what I've read in previous "Ask Scott" columns as well as gleaned from listening to your music over the years, that you might also fall into this category (although I'd never call you a "nerd").

I think I am a nerd. I definitely sound like a nerd when I read my own writing.

So, my question is this: How would you characterize yourself as a "listener," or as a "fan," or, if you wish, as a "music nerd?"

I'd say I've grown a somewhat sophisticated ear over these many years, but it's also true that pretty much any embarrassing fan-like characteristic you could name, I suffer from it. If you let me talk to Bob Dylan, I'm positive I'll be the guy who says "You know where you go, 'how does it feel to be on your own?' That is so awesome." I've also got mild techie geek tendencies. My wife ridicules me for having conversations about things like what vocal mike it sounds like people were using on some recording.

Tragically, much of my own teens and twenties bore an uncomfortable resemblance to Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*. I will admit to pestering the owner of the only decent local record shop for Game Theory posters. He could not produce one, so I ended up hanging the LP cover of *Lolita Nation* on the wall, since for a few months there, it never left the turntable long enough to need the sleeve. That's pretty nerdy, I guess. I rolled joints on that record cover, played it to every girlfriend I had, and used to liberally sprinkle mix tapes with "One More For Saint Michael" and "Together Now, Very Minor" and "We Love You, Carol and Alison." Yep, nerd. But that's OK. Anyhow, thanks for your time and thanks for reading this blather.

Yours in nerddom,
Chris Tanis

Thanks again. You know, I have to confess something here. When I hear that someone put *three songs* from a certain album on some mix tapes, honestly, nothing in my cultural

experience causes me to think, "Yep, nerd." Throw in that the album was something of an indie affair, *and* that while the tapes were being made, the packaging was serving as drug paraphernalia, and you could well be on the way to the kind of edgy hipster profile that would have bona fide nerds nervous that your next move could be to bust out some Chet Baker and go shoot up in their basement.

--pronounced "le NERD"

December 17, 2007

We've crossed paths a few times—you were kind enough to put up with my interview questions before a Knitting Factory show in 1994, for instance. I've never stopped listening to and enjoying your music, and I'm glad you were able to give us some new music last year.

Scott: Mike—it's great to hear from you. I have very much appreciated your openness to getting something out of my music, and then even passing that along.

My question regards *Real Nighttime*. It is probably my favorite Game Theory album, and I'm on record in Kim Cooper's *Lost In The Grooves* book as saying so.

Thank you for that piece. *Lost In The Grooves* was a great project.

In that review, I suggested the theory that *Real Nighttime* was, in large part, about graduating college and getting on with life in the world at large. "24" sets the age of the protagonist, and from there the lyrics are a long string of allusions to leaving the nest, growing apart from family and younger friends, and attempting to embrace adulthood with all its responsibilities and, paradoxically, its freedoms as well. (I felt much freer, for instance, when I got my first full-time job and all of a sudden had more than \$20 a week to my name.) "Coffee or beer?" "A year ago we called this a good time." "Give me all the gin I need, for I may not be this strong when I call my parents and tell they've been wrong."

And so forth. I wouldn't call it a "concept," but it's definitely a recurring thread throughout the LP. It's obvious that *Real Nighttime* has unusual personal resonance. So I'm wondering if you wrote the album with the above perspective in mind.

Exactly right. Oddly enough, I wasn't too aware of that being a lyric theme at the time, but I can look back now and see all the things you're talking about. Also I had this intuition that freedom had a strong aspect of being bad news. What I've since learned from people like Dante is that at a pretty high level of spiritual discipline, we can attain a state where indulging free will is fruitful because our strivings are coherent and giving, but short of that, excessive freedom is typically a formula for trivial and unfaithful pursuit of what passes for personal advantage. "Curse of the Frontier Land" and "Friend of the Family" have the really poisonous descriptions of that, but even the jaunty or romantic moments have kind of a feeling of things being so okay only because you have yet to be discarded by someone for being no longer of use (in the case of the last song, discovering myself to be one of the discarders).

I'm also wondering if, during the writing process, you were conscious that this would be your first communication with a larger audience. There may have been a couple of college radio cuts off *Distortion*, but this was Game Theory's first proper studio LP, complete with the very in-vogue Mitch Easter behind the boards. Everything about it seems a step up from both *Alternate Learning* and the *Distortion of Glory*-era Game Theory records.

I recall that as being the first time I wasn't struggling against immense difficulties just to get the opportunity to do an album, and I actually found myself with the means to make one more or less to my own specifications. I didn't in fact have any sense of it being something special to communicate with a larger audience. I was pretty convinced since about age seventeen that the significant communication of musical feeling that occurs in the music business happens inside about the first five thousand sales, and if you go on to sell five million, it's to many more people with a much shallower interest. I still would have been interested in a big time music career, but I believed in mere stupid catchiness for achieving that, not a bankable ability to share thoughts. It felt like a long shot that many people were going hear those sorts of lines like "everything is in terms of next time" and take it as anything but a sort of twee wordplay, not something their life has felt like. And probably 2/3 of my fans just happened to like twee wordplay.

Lastly (and unrelated), are there any unreleased tracks from the last version of GT with Michael Quercio participating? The three *Tinkers to Evers...* recordings suggest a promising lineup.

We recorded one song Michael wrote called "[Free Ride](#)" which is really good. There's the version of "Dead Center" with the "every man had seven wives" lyric set. There are the two fan club Christmas recordings. There were covers of the Nazz's "Forget All About It," Eno's "Needles In the Camel's Eye," and some others I can't remember. The most compelling song project I had from that period was a reworking of the Beatles' "Yesterday" with a completely different melody and the lyrics shuffled around. That never got off the ground but I'm still curious what people would think of it if they heard it.

I hope all is well with you.

Mike Appelstein

Thanks and I you.

I guess like terrorists, I just hate our freedom,
--Scott

Have you ever been at a loss for words?

todd, in salt lake

Upon review.

--Scott, in lite syrup

December 31, 2007

I've been reading through all the "Ask Scott" questions on your site and they're incredibly "in depth" and detailed.

Scott: Thanks—I've kind of slacked off from it now that everyone has a "blog." It was a fun exercise to try to make an honest attempt at an answer to any question whether I had expertise in the subject or not.

I just wanted to say hello and ask if there is any chance of you touring to the UK again!!

I'm starting to think about doing an album again, but I'm pretty prepared for it to be one of those situations where when it actually comes out, a lot of people who thought they were going to care really don't because the community that used to be available to share the interest has moved on. Of course, there's the internet now, so you never know. If there's a shadow of an opportunity to come play in the U.K., I definitely will.

I got into GT and LF fairly recently (also through friend and London record shop owner Bill Forsythe, who I saw mentioned in another post) but now have all your albums and think they're superb. Especially like the later Loud Family stuff and just gutted that I never saw you live. Anyway great to get a new album recently and looking forward to many more.

Best wishes for the holiday!

James Boxall (London, UK)

Doing the album with Anton was relatively encouraging, mostly because in 2000 I figured I'd never again have the time or the business model to do an actual release, but with the advent of ProTools and 125 Records, I've been corrected to at least that extent. To my surprise, I've come to think I can really produce the hell out of a record on a computer.

It's funny, I've never been in regular contact with Bill Forsythe, but he and Minus Zero probably cross my mind at least once a week. It occurs to me for the first time as I type this that Minus Zero probably represents the last physical manifestation on the planet of the record buying experience as I knew it when I started making records, where I would walk into a store and immediately start enjoying like-mindedness with the proprietor.

Thanks for encouraging me by liking the later Loud Family material. It seems like for anything I write now, I think, "well, I like this, but experience indicates that no one else will." But I think I'm building an army of twenty or twenty-five people who will really get it.

Love Minus Zero,
--Scott
