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PORTFOLIO • MUSIC WRITING

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BOOK EXCERPT

Dear Tape

***20,000 Things I Love* (Chapter 4)**

March 2017

My Dear Tape:

You may wonder, since we broke up so very long ago, probably before the turn of the century, officially, why I've chosen to write you now – why send a kiss-off letter nearly a decade after the body's gone cold? But you and I both know we were seeing each other deep into the first decade of this new and terrible century, perhaps as recently as last month, when I was stuck in my mother's Acura, driving back and forth to my grandmother's house, up and down the Turnpike playing that Bible cassette Alex made for me, *Eureka* on one side and *Walking the Ghost Back Home* on the other; I also played the other tape I'd left in the Vigor, *The Singular Adventures of The Style Council* and *Lloyd Cole and the Commotions, 1984-1989*. My return to New York brought us back together for a while, but it's all over now, for good this time. I'm moving to Cyprus and I'm not taking you with me.

Remember how intense it was at the beginning, when I bought my first Walkman? We went everywhere together. I filled you with Who albums, The Police, *Born in the USA*...it's thanks to you I acquired my first Elvis album, *Rocker*, a 1984 hits compilation, and Buddy Holly's *20 Golden Greats*. Speaking of Elvis, remember when Record Mill had a bunch of CBS/Columbia albums on sale in a cardboard bin near the door, three for \$10.00? I bought *This Year's Model*, *Armed Forces* and *Almost Blue*, probably the first country album I ever owned. It's also thanks to you that I found Sinatra, after I recorded my mother's friend's copy of *Live at the Sands*. I drove all over Millburn and Short Hills playing "You Make Me Feel So Young" again and again.

Do you remember my junior year at the University of Rochester, when my brother mailed me a copy of *Rattle and Hum* on cassette? How many times did I play "Desire" in that exhausted Nissan Stanza hatchback I drove all year? How many pizzas did we deliver during the winter of 1989 when I worked at the Pizza Hut on Mt. Hope Avenue, stoned as a quarry, the only tape in the car the one with Rod Stewart's *Every Picture Tells a Story* on one side and The Replacements *Don't Tell a Soul* on the other? How about when my brother and David Sternberg and I drove out to Colorado in June of 1990? We must have played that copy of The Black Crowes *Shake Your Money Maker* three or four times a day at least.

We spent almost all of our time together in the car, didn't we? It was the most American of romances – there were occasions when I shelled out for new albums on cassette just so I could play them while driving, like Rickie Lee Jones's *Flying Cowboys*. I'm sorry to have to hurt you like

this, but I wish I'd spent the money on vinyl instead. In those days, though, it was all about expedience, about immediate gratification, and you were available, willing to go anywhere, do anything...

Also, if it hadn't been for you I couldn't have spent the second half of 1989 and the first half of 1990 trying to be a Deadhead – a Deadhead without tape is like a surfer without a board. Though I took a short-lived and perhaps half-hearted detour down that golden road to unlimited devotion, you made it possible.

I was there for you, too. Remember all the times you were caught in the head of a tape deck and I had to retrieve you? I was horrified to see you so naked, folded like a bellows, broken in half...I always tried to rewind you with a pen or pencil and piece you back together with scotch tape. Yes, our relationship was harder on you than it was on me, I admit it – the constant rewinding, the hot automotive interiors, the cracked and disappearing cases, the general disregard in which I held you once I gave my heart back to vinyl, the ever-increasing square footage I began affording my CDs as the Nineties kicked in...but the whole thing is done, finally, after almost a quarter of a century. We lasted longer than most bands stay together, longer than the lifespan of most radio stations.

We had some great times, but we won't relive them. We are never getting back together – I don't think my folks even have that old Acura anymore. My music collection is mostly CDs and MP3s now, and though one day I'll be playing my records again, once we're reunited, you and I will never have even a semblance of what we did. I won't forget what you did for me, but I'm only keeping you around, taped up in a cardboard box in my parents' basement, because I can't bring myself to toss you in a dumpster. I gave you my youth. I loved you once.

David

I spent the summer of 1990 in Boulder, Colorado. One of my best friends from college, David Sternberg, and my brother and I rented the basement of a house five blocks up from the Boulder Mall from a bunch of hippie kids, most of them Deadheads. One of the kids had a VW Microbus, of course, with a bumper sticker across the rear fender, "Don't Tax Tape." Here in Cyprus, 22 years later, my brother-in-law has a t-shirt I love. The front of the shirt features an illustration of nine cassettes, and beneath them it reads, "icons on the brink of extinction." Two decades to go from battle cry to artifact.

Up until about 1994 or so, tapes were how I acquired music and largely how I listened to it. Beginning in 1980, when I turned 12, I started collecting cassettes, although I would alternate back and forth between cassette and vinyl (which is why I still have vinyl copies of *Born in the USA*, *Marshall Crenshaw*, *My Aim Is True*, and James Taylor's *That's Why I'm Here*). My copy of *The Best of The Doors* and most of my Who albums were all tapes I bought in record stores or copied from friends' albums, as were all of my Police albums, *Wish You Were Here*, my first Buddy Holly compilation, *20 Golden Greats*, and the brunt of my Elvis Costello collection. At first

my collection of cassettes was small enough that it only occupied about half of one of the shelves in my room, and once, as a prank, my dad took every tape I owned and hid them in one of his drawers.

During high school I DJ'd friends' parties with cassettes: I used a two-player deck, and I would spend most of the afternoon prior to the party rewinding tapes so I could play a single song off each one. We all loved The Clash, Elvis Costello, Dire Straits, Bob Marley, The Police, Bruce Springsteen, Squeeze, The Stray Cats, The Talking Heads, UB40 and U2 – we all had the same record collections, since we were listening to the same classic rock radio stations, watching MTV and copying each other's albums, so it was pretty easy to put together a well-received set.

Blank tapes were the CD-Rs and flash drives of the Eighties and Nineties. Tapes, even the good stuff, like Maxell XL-IIs and TDK SA-90s (or XL-IISs or SAX-90s!) were far cheaper than new vinyl or even brand new cassettes. They came shrink-wrapped in packages of two, with blank inlay cards so you could write down all the song titles. The higher-end cassettes supposedly sounded better, perhaps degrading at a slower pace through repeated plays, and we tried to stay away from the cheaper stuff, like TDK D-90s, and the cheapest stuff, like Intermagnetics cassettes, which came in a plastic bag. I think XL-IIS and SAX-90 cassettes were Chromium Dioxide, which was the highest quality tape available (other than reel-to-reel, I suppose) – in the spring of 1983 *Synchronicity* was released, and it was a big deal that the cassette version was Chromium Dioxide. It was stenciled on the actual cassette.

It was the technology of the time that inspired most of my cassette purchases. Boom boxes, which we also called ghetto-blasters, and the Sony Walkman were our preferred method of listening to music, which was far more portable than it had been when our parents were in their teens and carrying boxes of 45s to each other's houses. I had a turntable and a collection of records, but I needed to carry my tapes around with me, and it was often cheaper to buy a new cassette-version of an album than to buy the vinyl version and a blank, although I did so once in a while. Bob Marley came to me via a cassette recording I made of my friend David Labiner's copy of *Legend*, as did the Talking Heads' *Stop Making Sense* and *Little Creatures*, with which I spent so much of my senior year.

This was all prior to the spring of 1986, when CDs first appeared and record stores would display the CD, vinyl and cassette versions of new albums – Peter Gabriel's *So*, released in May of 1986, was on sale in all three formats at the Record World at the Short Hills Mall. Deep into the early Nineties, when I bought my first CDs, including Van Morrison's *Hymns to the Silence*, Billy Falcon's *Pretty Blue World* and the two albums Springsteen released in 1992, the overlooked and unfairly maligned *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, I was still taping everything so I could play it in the car.

So it was only two decades ago that tapes were still my life. Even after I moved to San Francisco, in August of 1992, I was still taping friends' CDs, and my friends were still taping albums for me. The first Cracker and Wallflowers albums made their way to me via cassette, as did the Gin Blossoms' *New Miserable Experience* and Sugar's *Copper Blue*, all of them released

in 1992: a friend of mine visited me during my first winter in San Francisco, and he sent me a stack of cassettes to thank me for my hospitality when he returned home. I was still buying tapes, too, and that year I purchased brand new cassettes of Luka Bloom's *The Acoustic Motorbike* and Shawn Colvin's *Fat City*. This was also the period when record labels stopped issuing albums on vinyl. I didn't yet own a CD player, nor had I brought a turntable to California with me – perhaps I just didn't think I would have the space in my apartment for a collection of vinyl which amounted, at the time, to three boxes.¹ So I was still in the thrall of tape. But in 1994 my parents bought me a five-load CD player, and in October of that year I had a bicycle accident that required a night of hospitalization at San Francisco General – my mom flew out to California to take care of me, and when she walked into my hospital room she had my turntable in her arms. My era of tape came to an end soon thereafter.

Technology outpaces us. It's designed to leave behind its predecessors and their baggage. Even CDs, bright and shiny little flying saucers, no longer seem modern in the presence of spiffy external hard drives stuffed with music – like tapes, they only had a two-decade run. A few years ago I saw them start to recede into the distance beside the cash register at Starbucks, one of the few places left where you could actually buy them, and I knew it was finished.

The best thing about tapes was mix tapes. Was there any better feeling than sitting up late at night making a mix-tape for someone you'd fallen for? Those were some of the best nights I ever had. I was still making mix-tapes for friends and girlfriends into the late Nineties – I think I made my last one in the winter of 2002, a hastily-compiled Eighties mix for my fiancée, Antigone, which I recorded mostly from vinyl for her to play in the used Saab we had just purchased. I finished it in haste the night we picked up the car, and I think there was still plenty of blank tape on the second side, the ultimate mix tape crime (there's no excuse – even if you only have a minute or two, you can add "Your Majesty" or "Please, Please, Please Let Me Get What I Want"), and I didn't make her any sort of cover. Thus my empire of tape ended with a hurried whimper. The shame still burns.

The covers of my mix tapes were my first foray into visual art (in 1999 I started a comic strip, *Pretty Sure*, and I took up photography as a pretty serious hobby in 2003, when I started shooting photos with my father's 1981 Canon AE-1, which I still have). At first I just cut photos and taped them to the inlay cards: family photos from a trip to Seattle for my parents' birthdays one year, a Marvin Gaye mix titled "You're Marvelous" for my dad, a Stevie Wonder mix, "You're Wonderful", for my mom. My folks drive a Prius and a Mini now, neither equipped for cassettes, so I'm sure my mix tapes are moldering in a box or basket somewhere in their messy home office. After that I made a tape for my dear friend, John Ferguson, "A Black Tape", which

¹ I acquired the boxes themselves from my grandparents, who owned a grocery store in Caldwell, New Jersey – they were rectangular, waxy and pink, with the words "Jersey Peaches" printed in bold blue cursive on their longer sides.

featured *Back in Black* on one side and the underrated *Black Love* by the Afghan Whigs on the other. The cover itself was black paper, perhaps a reference to legendary albums by Metallica and Spinal Tap. A late period mix-tape, one of my last, featured a guy from an airline safety card opening an emergency door in the middle of the sky above some indeterminate East Coast forest – as the song says, I'd fallen on black days...My mix-tape covers were my Faberge eggs, artistic statements on the heads of pins, and the work I did helped me later on when I began adding clip art to my comics. My tapes, and those bestowed upon me, many of them crafted with as much or even more love and care than my own, are now boxed up, taped up, tucked away on a shelf in my parents' basement, where they keep my vinyl company. At some point I hope to contribute some of my friends' and my own mix-tape covers to some sort of gallery show, which will no doubt be thronged by nostalgia-drenched members of the 40+ set. I'll serve Bartles & Jaymes wine coolers.

After we moved back to New York, in 2005, I spent a lot of time in my mom's 1990 Acura Vigor, which only has a tape deck – it's probably one of the few cars on the road that still does. Our drives, usually to my grandmother's (over the river, through the woods, down nearly the entire length of the New Jersey Turnpike...), were given over to whatever cassettes had been abandoned to the compartment between the two front seats. I remember, during a rather difficult period with *Antigone*, by then my wife, driving south on the Turnpike playing Jackson Browne's "Doctor My Eyes" and sobbing. It was a sad but appropriate end to our 20 years together. I loved you once.

FILM REVIEW

The Man Who Knew Too Much

Altered Minds DVD Review

November 2016

Released on DVD in June 2016, *Altered Minds* is the much-lauded psychological thriller from Generation X auteur Michael Z. Wechsler, whose 1999 comedy, *Slaves of Hollywood*, was a sly insider's view of the bottom rung of the film industry, an absurdist Swingers. Mr. Wechsler took a decade to bring us *Altered Minds* (originally titled *Red Robin*) and, given the craftsmanship on display in the film, it's obvious why it took Mr. Wechsler, who wrote, directed and produced *Altered Minds*, so long to bring us such a dark, troubling and carefully-made film. *Slaves of Hollywood* was a lot of fun, a "piss-take," as the Brits say. To describe *Altered Minds* as Lord Alfred Tennyson might have, here "gloom the dark, broad seas." The film is a great leap forward for Mr. Wechsler and an award-winner: after its world premiere at the Montreal Film Festival, *Altered Minds* won a Jury Award for Excellence in Filmmaking at the 2014 Gasparilla International Film Festival and awards for Best Screenplay and Best Cinematography at the Oaxaca Film Festival. It was also an Official Selection at more than 20 festivals worldwide, including Glasgow International Film Festival, Fantasporto Film Festival, Palm Beach International Film Festival and Woodstock Film Festival. We may have found ourselves, luckily, in the midst of Mr. Wechsler's great leap forward.

Dr. Nathan Shellner, as played at perfect pitch by underrated American treasure Judd Hirsch, is the paterfamilias of the Shellner family, longtime residents of a leafy, sleepy enclave in suburban Philadelphia. Dr. Shellner is a loving husband and father and a renowned psychiatrist, the founder of a clinic, and a treatment method, for American veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, a physician described by LBJ as "a true American patriot." From this coruscation we wade into the darkness (and yes, read on, what I'm about to tell you certainly shades the film, but your knowledge of it won't minimize the suspense Mr. Wechsler has in store for you): Dr. Shellner was also part of a group of doctors who, for reasons best described in our current parlance as "homeland security," performed mind-control experiments on some of the veterans in their care.

Welcome to American cinema (and television) after Abu Graihb. Torture, once a rarity in most films and shows - or played for laughs, as in the Pit of Despair in *The Princess Bride* - is a dominant theme, from *24* to the remake of *Casino Royale* (2006), in which arch villain Le Chiffre, played by Mads Mikkelsen, chains Daniel Craig's 007 (already battered and stripped naked) to a chair and whips his testicles again and again with a thick rope. We have eaten a bitter apple, and its aroma and taste have suffused much of our film culture (*Deadpool* (2016), anyone?). Of course, the justification for what we did at Abu Graihb, at our "black sites" and at Guantanamo is the capture of intelligence crucial to the defeat of an amorphous, sinister enemy with immense resources and no fixed address, one who, should it achieve its objectives, will take delight in the utter destruction of the world. We are told this intelligence will save American lives, French lives, British lives, Spanish lives, Turkish lives...and thus we must procure it by "any means necessary," even if those means include beatings, sleep deprivation, stress

positions beyond what the average human being can handle, waterboarding...even if they are immoral (to say nothing of illegal).

What decisions did Shellner make when he permitted the use of his patients as guinea pigs? How did a loving father and a patriot come to participate in the torture of his own countrymen, all for the sake of perfecting torture to be used against whomever our current enemy might be? So *Altered Minds*, in the person of Dr. Nathan Shellner, asks the question we have been forced to ask ourselves since the discovery of what was done to Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib: what wrongs are we willing to essay, what sins are we willing to commit, for a greater good and what is that good? If we are each charged with creating our own moral universe with a set of fixed thresholds, thresholds that define who each of us is at the core of his or her being, what makes it possible for us to cross them? Once? Repeatedly? And, regardless of the crimes we may commit against others during travels we swore we'd never embark upon, who are we once we've done so? Every performance in this terrific ensemble piece is carefully measured and pitch-perfect, and none more so than Hirsch's. Dr. Shellner is a loving, empathetic father and husband and a brilliant psychiatrist, and Hirsch gives him a palpable dignity and a bookish elegance, such that we understand Shellner's "villainy", if we can use such a term, was forced upon him. Twice. So *Altered Minds* is a post-Iraq film because within its narrative torture is a tool and our boundaries, familial and personal in the film and international beyond it, are insecure.

Dr. Shellner has been stricken with lung cancer, and *Altered Minds* opens on the evening of what may be Dr. Shellner's last birthday party. The cast of characters includes Dr. Shellner's wife, Lillian (Caroline Lagerfelt); the Shellner's one biological child, Leonard (Joseph Lyle Taylor), a psychiatrist who has now runs Dr. Shellner's clinic; Tommy (Ryan O'Nan), a horror writer and Julie (Jaime Ray Newman), a photographer, adopted as siblings by the Shellners, and Harry (C.S. Lee), a concert violinist adopted by the Shellners from Vietnam. The Shellners, whatever their faults, are loving parents. Throughout the film we are in the midst of a loving family. Like Almodovar, Mr. Wechsler has a penchant for unique, expressive faces, and much of what's communicated in *Altered Minds* is done with a shrug or a grimace, with a tear or two but little more, by each member of the film's outstanding ensemble cast.

All the symbols of family and comfort are present when we arrive at the Shellner household: a blazing fire, a piano, a hearty lunch of brisket and string beans...five or so holiday cards have been affixed to a bulletin board to the left of the kitchen sink, and one reads, in capital letters, "Joy. Noel. Peace." We're also greeted by Edmund Choi's anxious, wintry soundtrack, however, as well as icicles as long and sharp as Crusader swords and faulty household wiring that makes the lights throughout the house flicker and buzz, devices all used to engender our sense of dread. Mr. Wechsler takes great pains, through his lighting and set design, to create a claustrophobic atmosphere, and there's a feeling of being cramped and constricted that calls to mind Woody Allen's *Interiors* (1978), which was Allen's homage to his beloved Bergman. We are made to understand from the get-go that there will be drink and despair, perhaps even fisticuffs, will ensue. The exterior scenes, all snow and the bare trunks and branches of deciduous trees, might remind you of the scenes in the maze at the Overlook Hotel toward the

end of *The Shining* (1980), another painstakingly-crafted claustrophobic thriller. The exterior scenes are lovely and stark, reminiscent of great black and white photographs.

I appreciate Mr. Wechsler's other thoughtful touches, like when Tommy builds a snowman on the front lawn. He lights a bent cigarette with a Zippo lighter, and we hear that familiar click and spark (Mr. Wechsler has given as much thought to what we hear throughout *Altered Minds* as to what we see) – the Zippo then becomes crucial to a discovery made later in the film. Mr. Wechsler has built *Altered Minds* around a very particular set of images, objects and sounds, and he returns to them again and again, consistent but never tendentious. And it's this care and consistency that make watching *Altered Minds* such a satisfying experience.

In a recent review of *Alfred Hitchcock: A Brief Life* by Peter Ackroyd, Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* writes: "More than a century after his birth, Hitchcock remains our contemporary because the world of menace he conjured embodies our deepest, most existential fears. Fears (especially resonant today) that the universe is irrational, that evil lies around the corner, that ordinary life can be ripped apart at any moment by some random unforeseen event..." This is exactly what Mr. Wechsler accomplishes in *Altered Minds*, and it's all done without gore, CGI...things go bump in the night, but nothing explodes, arrives from space, races across an Australian desert in a go-kart made out of human skulls...it's a thriller, yes, but a very old school thriller, the way Hitchcock and Roman Polanski used to make them. The story is jarring, repeatedly, but the film itself, as an artistic endeavor, never strays from what might be construed from its opening scenes as its *raison d'être*, its mission statement. Its winter hues and its soundtrack – which is reminiscent of the sound of winter rain, replete with water dripping from icicles – create a chill, one that never warms, even with the blazing fire in the Shellners' fireplace.

The film belongs to O'Nan, whose Tommy, haunted to the point of terrified, sick to the point of self-destruction, drives the action much the same way Jack O'Connell did with his phenomenal portrayal of Kyle Budwell in Jodie Foster's recent *Money Monster* (2015). We watch *Altered Minds* to find out if Tommy is a boy crying wolf. Wechsler keeps his cards close to his chest, and we trail Tommy throughout the Shellner household and across its front lawn trying to deduce if this is someone with a mental illness or a personality disorder, or if this is someone who has been abused and neglected but has a sinister theory about his childhood and adolescence that travels far beyond this? The madness afflicting Tommy seeps into his siblings and, toward the middle of the film, Harry, seated in front of the fire, admits he can't sleep, that when he dreams he "sees children on fire...I wake up and I feel...like a murderer." What seems to be affecting Tommy seems to grow systemic within the Shellner household. Harry says, "I don't know. I just need to believe nothing went wrong in this house." And then we wait to find out...

Shellner tells us, "if a man fails his family, he fails life," which harkens back to Don Corleone's sidelong admonishment of Sonny in *The Godfather* (1972), when he says, "...a man who doesn't spend time with his family can never be a real man." Mr. Wechsler's love of movies is obvious, and he's done his homework. He uses a number of devices from horror films and thrillers, but he demonstrates how much respect he has for our intelligence by using them sparingly and

strategically. He never overplays his hand which, to this viewer, demonstrates the influence of Hitchcock. To be honest, though, Hitchcock seemed to be having far more fun in his thrillers than Mr. Wechsler does here, but I believe this is because Mr. Wechsler is asking us two very troubling questions: How do we survive? And, if we do survive, how do we live?

It's a generous DVD, with a pile of deleted scenes and commentary from the affable Mr. Wechsler, who seems like the kind of gentlemen with whom you'd love to watch a film. The deleted scenes underline how precisely *Altered Minds* was edited – again, without giving anything away, had they been included, *Altered Minds* would have been a wildly different film from the version released in theaters and available on this DVD.

If you're a film lover, this is the perfect stocking stuffer. Unless you're heading home for Christmas.

ALBUM REVIEW

TRUE WEST

The Westies

West Side Stories

June 2015

All I ever wanted to do was write songs and tell stories, like my grandparents and parents did from a long Irish lineage. With that lineage came a proclivity for drink, for mayhem, and a wee bit of crime. I write what I know and what I know is, much of the time, ugly.

- Michael McDermott

“So here we are,” Bono says onstage during *Rattle & Hum*, “the Irish in America.” *Rattle & Hum* announced their arrival as the world’s most significant classic rock band, one that would change the landscape of the genre, which soon became home to bands like The Cure, REM, The Red Hot Chili Peppers and, ultimately, Nirvana. If video killed the radio star, it also helped classic rock consume college radio, which is where you might have found Michael McDermott and his first single, “A Wall I Must Climb,” back in 1990, where it would have fit right in, and quite snugly, beside The Alarm, The Call and just about anything from The Replacements’ *All Shook Down*.

I’m long divorced from these distinctions, in my late 40s, hoping not to die before I get old, living on alien soil in the Eastern Mediterranean. I spend most of my time these days with Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye, Husker Du, Springsteen, T-Rex...I’ve been playing a lot of Jellyfish in the car, where my son, Leontios, and I also enjoy repeated plays of Culture Club’s “Karma Chameleon” and Duran Duran’s “Girls on Film”. I don’t seek out much new music, content to submerge myself in the wall of CDs in our hallway or in the 500 or so MB of music I have on my external hard drive. I am, as the parlance would have it, “set.” Some things do make their way to me, thankfully, like The Alabama Shakes and The Westies’ *West Side Stories*, released in January of this year.

So here they are, the Irish in Chicago, midway through the second decade of the 21st century, banging out an album of impeccable classic rock, classic *American* rock. The Westies, named for an Irish-American gang operating out of Hell’s Kitchen during the ‘70s, ‘80s and ‘90s and famed for their extortion and loan-sharking expertise, are fronted by fallen angel, amateur hooligan, recovering addict, Irishman, troubadour and true believer Michael McDermott, who celebrates the 25th summer since his debut, *620 West Surf*, this summer. What have the past 25 years wrought? *West Side Stories* is dense with acoustic instrumentation, rich melodies and impassioned vocals, both McDermott’s and those of his muse and partner in crime, Heather Horton, whose voice calls to mind a bit of Ronnie Spector, a little Lucinda Williams: in The Westies, she’s Patti Scialfa to McDermott’s Bruce Springsteen, maybe Stevie Nicks to his Tom Petty, but the tone of their singing shares something with the Kate Bush and Peter Gabriel duet on “Don’t Give Up” from the latter’s *So*.

You'll hear both Williams and Springsteen throughout *West Side Stories*. Much like these two American treasures, McDermott has dismissed his demons and settled into a productive middle age (which might be the chief consolation of middle age). His voice is of course a bit more ragged than it was when faith was a wall he had to climb, but it's still strong and sure. He's always been a passionate singer, and his vocals on *West Side Stories* are the train tracks that connect each of the album's stations. His singing here reminds me of some of the vocals on Springsteen's *Tunnel of Love*, the world-weariness of which I imagine is dear to McDermott's heart.

Musically, *West Side Stories* is built around McDermott's acoustic guitar. It's heartland rock, all meat and potatoes: guitar, bass and drums, piano – no synthesizers, no drum loops, no guest rappers...let's say you're driving to or from Chicago, mid-November, maybe on your way home for Thanksgiving, plenty of late autumn miles to go before you sleep: you'll be lucky to find this in a CD case on the passenger seat alongside *Every Picture Tells a Story*, *May Day*, *Tunnel of Love* and *The Wheel*. It's simple, direct, dense with melody and crammed with down tempo sing-a-long choruses.

"Say It..." a duet with Horton, is the story of a troubled couple. The verses narrate their battles:
You drive off angry, drunk in your car
I just don't know who the hell you think you are
You're making me crazy, you're making me feel half insane

But the chorus is dulcet compensation for the turbulence:
If you say it first I'll believe it
Will you say it first,
babe you know that i need it
If you say it first
it'll wash all our troubles away

Horton again shines on "Fallen," singing a demure vocal alongside McDermott on one of his most earnest, unabashedly romantic songs:
I'm scared as night is still
So I search for a sign
In the arms of a saint
The only thing I know is you
What am I to do?
I've fallen in love with you

The rest of *West Side Stories* is much like these love songs, simple and heartfelt, a series of stories that underline Hemingway's contention in *The Old Man and the Sea*, "a man can be destroyed by never defeated." So here's to Michael McDermott, destroyed, by his own count, many times, but never defeated, and he's put together a gang that can shoot straight. May he and The Westies continue to give us the gift of such lovely, such *classic* rattle and hum.

Upcoming Shows

9 July: Goshen, IN – Ignition Music Garage

10 July: Chicago, IL – Irish Fest Chicago

Internet

<http://www.westiesmusic.com/>

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfn_QnnnjXA9tiPI2kacHyQ

Michael McDermott Discography:

620 W. Surf (1990)

Gethsemane (1993)

Michael McDermott (1996)

Bourbon Blue (1999)

Last Chance Lounge (2000)

Beneath the Ashes (2003)

In A Godless Night (2004)

Ashes (2004)

Noise from Words (2007)

Hey La Hey (2009)

Hit Me Back (2012)

FEATURE

Boys of Summer

Danny Wilde's *Any Man's Hunger* Turns 25

July 2013

The latter half of the 1980s was still a time when an urgent, American rock song, played with skill and passion, and often without a whiff of synth, could find its way to radio, to MTV and onto the Billboard charts. There were a great many great American rock n' roll records released between 1985 and 1989 that were undeservedly ignored, which is to say they never arrived at the decade's hit radio and classic rock radio stations or found heavy rotation on MTV. Sure, the singles from The Hooters *Nervous Night* (1985) and The Smithereens *Green Thoughts* (1988) enjoyed a ton of airplay, but some of the albums I loved best from that era have slipped out of print – which doesn't mean much in an era of iTunes and digital downloads – and into obscurity. I played a number of them to death during my final year of high school, 1986, and throughout a few snowy and rather wasted years at the University of Rochester:

Cruzados (1985), Cruzados

Hallelujah Anyway (1988), The Dancing Hoods

Johnny Comes Marching Home (1986), The Del-Lords

Jungle Boy (1986), John Eddie

The Knife Feels Like Justice (1986), Brian Setzer (produced by Little Steven!)

Mary Jean & 9 Others (1987), Marshall Crenshaw

Outside Looking In (1987), The BoDeans

Songs From the Film (1986), Tommy Keene

Ten Women (1987), Wire Train

Though it took me until 1991 to find my way to it, Danny Wilde's *Any Man's Hunger*, from 1988, deserves a place on this list. Bright, bold, big-hearted rock n' roll for a summer night's drive, the wind blowin' through your hair, it was cut at [Rockfield](#) under the supervision of [Pat Moran](#), the assistant engineer on Queen's *A Night at the Opera* (1975) and the producer of Iggy Pop's *Soldier* (1980), Hawkwind's *Choose Your Masques* (1982), Robert Plant's *The Principle of Moments* (1983) and Big Country's *No Place Like Home* (1991). *Any Man's Hunger* spent seven weeks on the Billboard Top 200 in the spring of 1988 alongside *Appetite for Destruction*, *Bad*, *Bête Noire*, *Faith*, *Green Thoughts*, *Kick*, *Introducing the Hardline According to Terence Trent d'Arby*, *Now & Zen* and Swing Out Sister's *It's Better to Travel*, ascending to 126 before shuffling off to a used vinyl bin at a small record shop on Haight Street in San Francisco, where I picked it up, along with a copy of Jude Cole's [A View From Third Street](#) (1990), during a trip west during my spring break in 1991. I was in my second semester at Rutgers University, trying my best to repair the damage I'd done, academic and otherwise, in the frozen wastes of Western New York. Was there actually a time when I spent hours in record stores? Even more astonishing, was there actually a time when I sat on a futon and smoked pot and drank beer and played the records I'd purchased in those record stores?

You know Danny Wilde from The Rembrandts. One of a number of Los Angeles musicians who began cranking out great music in the late Seventies and never stopped, he was a founding

member of The Quick, a power pop band whose members would later form legendary LA bands like Cruzados and The Three O'Clock. After The Quick recorded its debut and only album, *Mondo Deco* (1976), and disbanded, Wilde landed in another LA power pop outfit, Great Buildings, with future Rembrandt Phil Solem. Great Buildings would record two albums, *Apart From the Crowd* (1981) and *Extra Epic Everything* (1982), before splitting up.

Wilde released his debut solo album, *The Boyfriend*, in 1986, then amicably parted ways with Chris Blackwell and signed with Geffen, where he recorded *Any Man's Hunger* and *Danny Wilde* (1989) before Geffen sent him packing. By the next year, he and Phil Solem were already working on the demos that became the first Rembrandts album, *The Rembrandts* (1991). The rest, of course, is the stuff dreams are made of – The Rembrandts would record a number of hit albums, including the wonderful *Untitled* (1993) and *L.P.* (1995), where “I’ll Be There For You,” the theme to *Friends*, resides.

Any Man's Hunger still sounds fresh, earnest and forceful 25 years on: the guitars still chime and the drums still boom...it still swaggers, and its first and biggest single, “Time Runs Wild,” is on a par with the era's other great paeans to the summers of youth and the loves that were, for the briefest of moments, aflame within them, Bryan Adams's [“Summer of '69”](#) and Don Henley's [“Boys of Summer.”](#)

When I got home from San Francisco I made a tape, of course, with *Any Man's Hunger* on one side and *A View From Third Street* on the other, and I played it constantly. Summer arrived, and the time was right for racing in the street – sober for two years, I started running triathlons. I met a girl, a beautiful girl, and I spent most nights that summer in her bed in her mother's air-conditioned house, mired in a splendor I shall never know again. She was more than enough for any boy's hunger, luminous and thrilling, redolent of summer, of youth, like a girl straight out of an F. Scott Fitzgerald story, if F. Scott Fitzgerald had written about Jewish girls from northern New Jersey and their sun-darkened, caramel skin.

Unfortunately, at the time I was 23 and best-described by a few lines from “Visions of Johanna”: “little boy lost, he takes himself so seriously...” Summer ended, and I thought I was destined for something else, for someone else, for other splendors. I was too young to understand how lucky I was that this particular girl loved me, that she was willing to lavish herself upon me, that I had spent even a single evening adrift amidst the luxury of her tanned flesh. I thought I was entitled to such devotion, such magnificence. I thought it would happen again and again as I marched onward toward some imaginary mountain in the distance, my hair shorn, my shoes polished. It seems now, peering back over the decades, the silliest of parades.

Life was simple, she was mine. You know it took so long to realize...Danny Wilde puts it rather well, as does Leonard Cohen in one of his many exquisite poems, “Travel”:

Now

I know why many men have stopped and wept
Half-way between the loves they leave and seek,

And wondered if travel leads them anywhere –
Horizons keep the soft line of your cheek,
The windy sky's a locket for your hair.

Time runs wild. You might fuck it all up, or you might not. Either way, you get to keep the records. That's pretty much it.

Stereo Embers Magazine: Can you tell us about the music scene in LA during the Eighties? Some of your contemporaries included The Bangles, The Blasters, Concrete Blonde, Cruzados, The Dream Syndicate, FIREHOSE, Green on Red, Fishbone, Los Lobos, Oingo Boingo, The Rave-Ups, Stan Ridgway, Social Distortion, The Three O'Clock, X...

Danny Wilde: The LA music scene of that era was close-knit and familiar – everyone knew everyone. I started my first band, Kyxx, with high school chums Bob Davis (aka Chuck Wagon) and Karlos Kabellero, who went on to become [The Dickies](#). After Kyxx I joined The Quick with some other schoolmates, Danny Benair, Billy Bizeau and Steve Hufsteter. The Quick split up in '78, and that break-up produced [The Three O'Clock](#) and [Cruzados](#). Ian Ainsworth and I started a short-lived project with ex-Sparks guitarists Earle and Jim Mankey (who later became part of Concrete Blonde) called Cigarettes. From there Ian and I recruited guitarist Phil Solem to complete Great Buildings...You get the idea. It was a pretty tight community. Bands would gig several times a week and could actually make money! It was an exciting time to be in the business.

SEM: What were you listening to while you were writing *Any Man's Hunger*? Was there a particular album that inspired you?

DW: My guitar player and co-writer, Matt Downs, and I were really into [Tom Cochrane and Red Rider](#). I could really relate to his music, killer grooves and soaring choruses. And I loved the production. A Welsh guy named Pat Moran produced Tom, and I knew I had to work with this guy!

SEM: You recorded *The Boyfriend* (1986) for Island, but *Any Man's Hunger* and *Danny Wilde* (1989) were both released by Geffen.

DW: After Great Buildings broke up, in 1982, I started working on solo material. That's when a friend of mine invited me to a Christmas party at Island Records in Hollywood. I had a cassette of my first collection of solo material on me, which I gave to Chris Blackwell. About a week later I got a call from Island saying they would like to sign me. Pretty cool!

A couple of weeks after *The Boyfriend* was released, the president of the label and the head of promotion for Island were fired. I loved Chris Blackwell, but my manager, George Ghiz, thought Island was too artsy and more of a boutique outfit, and that I needed to be on a label that had bags of money to throw at promotion. Blackwell agreed, and Island sold my deal to Geffen. It was very amicable.

SEM: Did you finish writing the songs for *Any Man's Hunger* before you left for the UK, or did you write some of the songs while you were recording them?

DW: All the songs were written and demoed before we set foot in the studio. In those days you couldn't really afford to experiment or come in with unfinished bits. It was \$1500 or so a day for the studio, so we were very prepared.

SEM: How did you come to write "Any Man's Hunger" and "In A Bordertown" with Nick Trevisick? What about Matt Downs, with whom you wrote "Every Goodbye," "Set Me Free" and "Too Many Years Gone By"?

DW: Nick Trevisick would show up at my apartment in North Hollywood in the morning to write. He always had great little bits, and still does: a melody for a chorus, a guitar part...we'd just run with it. I don't remember who came up with "Any Man's Hunger" – it was probably my idea, because it sounds a bit like Roy Orbison in places, but "In A Bordertown" was for sure Nick. We were messing around with the eighth-note bass synth part on that one. It really supports the bottom end and drives the song.

That's how Paul "Wix" Wickens entered the fold, as a programmer, but his contributions went well beyond programming bass lines. The sequenced "Baba O'Riley" banjo on "Time Runs Wild," for instance, is all Wix. I also play accordion, which is how we came up with the beginning of "Contradiction." Wix is amazing. I'm not surprised McCartney scooped him up.

Matt Downs is a great collaborator and friend, as well as a killer guitar player and a great songwriter. I was fortunate to be associated with all of these guys. Most of us have become lifelong friends.

SEM: *Any Man's Hunger* feels like a break-up album. Five of the songs – "Ain't I Good Enough," "Bitter Moon," "In A Bordertown," "Set Me Free," and "Wouldn't Be the First Time" – are about obsessive and unrequited love, while "Every Goodbye" and "Time Runs Wild" are about lost love. Even the two songs that seem to address enduring romantic love, "Any Man's Hunger" and "This Old Town," are nowhere near as celebratory and triumphant as some of the love songs on *Danny Wilde*, like "My Girl," "The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of" and "Velvet Chains."

DW: At the time and to this day I'm very happily married, to the same girl, so I guess that's just the nature of songwriting. In terms of the lyrics, I drew a lot from personal experience, but a lot of it was artistic license and not necessarily about where my head was at. Maybe Matt and Nick were having bad days...you'll have to ask them!

SEM: Although it's of a piece musically with the rest of the album, "Contradiction" is a thematic detour. From the lyrics, I assume you didn't think much of American policy in Central America during the late Eighties.

DW: One day during the whole Iran-Contra affair I was watching the news and that "contra contradiction" line came to me. I seriously wrote that song in about 15 minutes – they were practically handing me the lyrics, it was perfect. I felt like it was honest, and that I just said what I wanted to say.

SEM: I've selected some of my favorite lyrics from the album, and I'm hoping you might discuss how you wrote them and perhaps what you think of them now, after 25 years. From "Time

Runs Wild”: “...in the dark of night I pray/well, did I throw my youth away?/on a dream I’ll never realize/so I reach out to touch a time/life was simple, you were mine/you know it took so long to realize...”

DW: I guess that would be about making the right decisions. I’m not the kind of guy to wonder “what if,” but what if?

CITIC: From “Every Goodbye”: “I remember/summer nights on an open road/and the wind blowin’ through your hair/both of us runnin’ on overload/we were young and we did not care.”

DW: Ah, glowing youth...hot summer nights in the San Fernando Valley.

SEM: From “Any Man’s Hunger”: “She walks proud/she don’t have to wonder/she’s more than enough for/any man’s hunger.”

DW: I often tell my wife, Natali, that all my songs are written about her, except for the sad or naughty ones (ha!). But “Any Man’s Hunger” was definitely written for her.

SEM: What was it like recording at Rockfield with Pat Moran?

DW: Rockfield was a great scene, guys were always dropping by. I’d be in the vocal booth singing and Robert Plant or Lemmy from Motorhead or Dave Edmunds would walk in. We had a lot of fun making the record, at least at first. I don’t have any desire to work with the “A” list gang – if you’re in my band, we’re gonna have a good time, like it or not! Pat Moran, on the other hand, was all business. Don’t get me wrong – he was a good guy, and we had some laughs, but he was a perfectionist, and I get bored very easily. After 10 days in the studio we only had three finished tracks, and things got tense – after 15 takes of the same song I couldn’t tell the difference anymore. I don’t give a damn if the drummer gets a little on top or behind, I just want it to feel and sound great! But one of the key tricks in Pat’s bag was using programmed hi-hats and tambourines – all the cymbals would be overdubbed later on. Our drummer, Gordy Gale, wasn’t used to playing to that rigid of a time base, so Pat sent ‘ol Gordy packing and hired Simple Minds drummer Mel Gaynor to finish the album. *Any Man’s Hunger* rocks, but I feel it’s a little stiff in places.

SEM: You had Matt Downs on guitar, Rick Wilson on bass guitar, Gordy Gale on drums and Wix on keyboards, accordion, pedal steel and banjo. How did this group of musicians come together?

DW: Phil Solem was working on his own thing in Minneapolis, and Pat Mastelotto was on the road touring with Mr. Mister, so they weren’t available to work with me when I needed to get a band together for *Any Man’s Hunger*. We held auditions in L.A., and I hired Matt straight up. I had seen him play before, in Doug Fieger’s (The Knack) band, Taking Chances, and I thought he was great. I liked his vibe – and his hair! Sig Emerson was our bass player at the time.

SEM: Do you remember the tour for *Any Man’s Hunger*?

DW: Most of that tour was in a motor home, with me driving! We had great fun.

SEM: Did you read any reviews of *Any Man’s Hunger*?

DW: I read a lot of them. Anyone who tells you they don’t read reviews of their albums is full of crap. I love the good reviews, the bad ones not so much.

SEM: Did you expect “Time Runs Wild” to land on pop and classic rock stations? What kind of impact did you expect *Any Man’s Hunger* to have on your career?

DW: The success of “Isn’t It Enough” (from *The Boyfriend*) at rock radio had pretty much opened the door for me in that format. “Time Runs Wild” was traveling up the rock radio charts, but it wasn’t crossing over to CHR (Contemporary Hit Radio), which is where the hits live. So Geffen put me in the studio with Jimmy Iovine, and I came up with the song “Wouldn’t Be the First Time,” which Jimmy liked a lot, though I thought it was a bit tame and kind of cheesy. Nevertheless, the band and I showed up at the studio to record it, but Jimmy had hired all these amazing session guys to back me up. We tried it out for awhile, but then I said ‘no fucking way,’ and the band and I walked out. That’s when the whole Geffen thing started to go bad. I felt like they were derailing my career, albeit unintentionally, just to have a hit. I did one more album with Geffen, *Danny Wilde*, and then I called it quits, which is to say Geffen dropped me. So I called up my old Great Buildings band mate, Phil Solem, to see what he was up to, and that was the beginning of The Rembrandts (“[Johnny Have You Seen Her](#),” The Rembrandts, live radio performance).

SEM: You’ve been in the music industry since the mid-Seventies. What’s your take on its 2013 iteration?

DW: The need to rock! More guitar pleeeeeeze!

SEM: What Danny Wilde projects can we look forward to?

DW: I’m just finishing up a buddy record with [Jesse Valenzuela](#) of The Gin Blossoms. We’ve been friends for years, and we’ve wanted to do this for awhile. We worked with Matt Downs, who’s playing bass and pedal steel, and with legendary drummer [Gary Mallaber](#), who’s played with The Steve Miller Band, Peter Frampton, Van Morrison and Bruce Springsteen, among others. The album has a very West Coast country-rock vibe – we tracked it live over a three-day period in my studio, with minimum overdubs. I think we’re going to call it *Valenzuela-Wilde* (pretty original, right?). And Phil Solem and I are trying to find a home for our new Rembrandts album, *Via Satellite*.

INTERNET

[Danny Wilde](#)

[The Rembrandts + Great Buildings](#)

DISCOGRAPHY

The Quick

Mondo Deco (1976)

Great Buildings

Apart From the Crowd (1981)

Extra Epic Everything (1982)

Danny Wilde

The Boyfriend (1986)

Any Man’s Hunger (1988)

Danny Wilde (1989)

Beesides (1999)

Scragglers (2000)

The Rembrandts

The Rembrandts (1991)

Untitled (1993)

L.P. (1995)

Spin This (1998)

Lost Together (2001)

Choice Picks (2005)

The Rembrandts Greatest Hits (2006)

INTERVIEW

GREAT GENTLEMAN OF SONG: CATCHING UP WITH MARSHALL CRENSHAW

Jaggedland

October 2009

In 1982, following the release of his eponymous debut, a young Marshall Crenshaw told Kurt Loder, “that’s what I wanted: to have a job to do and have it be music”.

Jaggedland, released on 429 Records this past June, is Crenshaw’s tenth studio album and his first since 2003’s *What’s in the Bag?* Featuring production by Jerry Boys and performances by a diverse group of industry legends, including Greg Leisz, Jim Keltner and Wayne Kramer, *Jaggedland* bears the usual Crenshaw hallmarks – dreamy hooks, thoughtful lyrics and impeccable musicianship. Two of the album’s finest songs, “Passing Through” and “Sunday Blues”, are heartfelt, melodic pop epics that can line up alongside any of his classic songs.

After 30 years, his music still evokes an era when pop songs were shimmering confections of less than three minutes, recorded in mono with analog equipment in Clovis (NM), Detroit, Memphis or London, to be played on portable record players and AM radios. “What you fall in love with at 17 does stay with you”, Crenshaw told John Bruenig of *The Stamford Advocate* in 2006. Without further ado, the Stereo Embers Magazine interview with Marshall Crenshaw. This is easy...

Stereo Embers Magazine: What did you love so much about Ry Cooder and Manuel Galban’s *Mambo Sinuendo* (2003)? How did this come to bear on the writing and recording of *Jaggedland*?

Marshall Crenshaw: One thing about *Mambo Sinuendo* that I loved, as it relates to *Jaggedland*, is just the sound of it, the way it’s recorded – it suits my taste exactly. Jerry Boys (engineer on *Mambo Sinuendo*) is just a really fine craftsman and artist...If you haven’t heard the record, I’d describe it as sort of retro-futuristic, highly sensual twangy guitar rock ‘n’ roll music from Havana – right up my alley. But again, the way *Mambo Sinuendo* influenced *Jaggedland* is that I wound up connecting with Jim Keltner (drums) and Jerry Boys because of it.

SEM: In the press release for *Jaggedland*, you are quoted as follows: “It’s getting pretty jagged out there”, and in “Eventually” you sing about watching *Headline News*: “Sociopaths and fools on parade/Of course we all will be paying for the mess they’ve made/There’s more dark business in the newspapers/And magazines on the shelf...” Can you expound on this “dark business” and what’s making it “pretty jagged out there”? This is the first time you’ve mentioned politics or social issues in one of your songs. What’s changed?

Marshall Crenshaw: My stuff isn’t what you might call “lyric-driven”, but I do have huge respect for the power of words, good writing, etc. I wanted to try and take things up a few notches this time, in terms of focus and quality, and to break some new ground in terms of subject matter. When I was writing the lyrics for the songs on *Jaggedland*, I wanted to make sure it all reflected what I felt and believed and cared about, whether it was a love song or something else...So a lot

of what I've been emotionally involved with over the last few years is in those songs. The lyrics you cite above were written in December 2008, just as the US economy was imploding. To just block all of that out and write another love song would've been weird...

SEM: "Passing Through" seems to be about walking through New York: "In our old shoes we walked last night/Sparkling concrete under the lights/Traffic sounds bouncing off the steel and glass/We traced our steps from the past/Shadows in the curtains on the second floor/I used to have a key to that front door..." Do you miss living in the city?

Marshall Crenshaw: You got it: the song is sort of a dream-like description of lone and me walking through all the neighborhoods we used to live in – the song also contemplates mortality, talks about ghosts, etc. Right now I don't really miss living in NY. I like where we're living now (the Hudson River Valley), plus NY isn't going anywhere – lone and I will most likely live there again sometime. I seem to have about a four-to-seven-year threshold, though – I get overwhelmed/overloaded after awhile, and I have to go back to the country...But it's a place we both love, and we never want to be too far away from it.

SEM: You've put a lot of work into your album covers – two of my favorites are *Good Evening* and *Mary Jean & 9 Others*.

Marshall Crenshaw: Well, the one time that I let somebody else handle it the results were so f#cking terrible, to say the least, and that was *Field Day*. It's just a matter of getting great people involved...

SEM: As an ardent student and practitioner of songwriting, can you explain what makes a great song? In 2005 you gave a songwriting workshop at the Watercolor Café in Larchmont, NY. Can you discuss how this experience might have helped you come to a greater understanding of the craft of songwriting and your own process? Can you give us a list of ten or so songs that, in your opinion, exemplify perfect songwriting?

Marshall Crenshaw: I hardly remember the Larchmont thing, but I do like being in those classroom/workshop-type situations. The first time I did it I was surprised at what came out of my mouth – I didn't realize I knew so much about songwriting. A great song is one that engages you, stirs your emotions, your imagination, etc., and a perfect song, to me, is just one that does the above and seems totally inspired throughout. I'm also a big fan of economy of language – that's just a personal thing. I once got a book of Noel Coward's lyrics, and in the foreword he said that he would never settle for an imperfect rhyme (you hear lots of songs where people rhyme "time" with "mind" – Noel Coward would never do that). I admire that kind of formal craftsmanship, but for my money the opposite can be just as great. I love John Lee Hooker's songs – he probably never did any of them the same way twice.

As far as a list goes, this is strictly random:

1. "Many Happy Hangovers to You" by Johnny MacRae, Jean Shepard sings it (get the original 1966 version). The lyrics are so perfect, you can really see it and feel it.
2. "Gimme Danger" by The Stooges. Iggy's one of my favorite writers.
3. "Murder by Mistletoe" by The Felice Brothers. Again, you can see it and feel it.

4. "Hooray for Hollywood" by Johnny Mercer. I just watched a great documentary about Johnny Mercer, my favorite guy in the whole Great American Songbook crowd. This is just one of his that I love.
5. "Leave My Wife Alone" by John Lee Hooker
6. "Highlands" by Bob Dylan. 16 minutes long and I'm just riveted every time I hear it.
7. "You Never Can Tell" by Chuck Berry
8. "Eleanor Rigby" by The Beatles. Jerry Leiber says it's the greatest song ever (I think I read that). I like Ray Charles's version, too.
9. "Lonely Avenue" by Doc Pomus. Speaking of Ray Charles...
10. I don't know, how about "Loudmouth" by The Ramones? That's a perfect song. I could name a hundred more...

SEM: Gary Stewart and David Gorman compiled *The Best of Marshall Crenshaw: This Is Easy!* (2000) for Rhino. Did you assist them in selecting the songs for the album?

Marshall Crenshaw: I had some input into the thing, suggestions about who they should get photos from, about who should write the liner notes (my good friend, the late great Cub Koda), but they wouldn't take any of my suggestions about song selection – they really wanted to run with that themselves, which I actually think is cool. For them the whole thing was a labor of love, which meant a lot to me.

SEM: In a 2008 interview, you told Bill Kopp of Skope Magazine Blog, "John Lennon was like a heroic figure to me". Can you discuss this in greater detail?

Marshall Crenshaw: I had a really keen sense of the absurd as a kid, and a mistrust of the adult world – John seemed to have that worldview also. He had the most acid sense of humor in The Beatles. He had balls, self-confidence, was obviously smart as hell, and all of that just really appealed to me. He seemed like a good role model.

SEM: I remember hearing "Better Back Off", the first single from *Life's Too Short*, on WNEW in New York and thinking, 'this rocks a lot harder than anything he did in the Eighties'. The drums and the guitar playing were much more forceful, and faster, than anything on your previous records. The Smithereens had made a similar shift in 1989, with *11*, and 1989 also saw the release of *Appetite for Destruction*, followed by The Black Crowes' *Shake Your Money Maker* in 1990 and the return of hard rock to the pop charts.

Marshall Crenshaw: On "Better Back Off" you can tell from the music that I'm trying to write a big Rock-radio anthem. But the lyrics don't quite get there – they describe an intimate conversation between two people, not very anthem-like...I liked what Kenny Aronoff (drums) and Ed Stasium (production) were doing right then, I liked them both personally, and I wanted to work with them, so off we went...

SEM: You've long been a champion of unheralded American songwriters, including Dave Alvin, Peter Case, Dwight Twilley and Ben Vaughn, among others. Can you talk about some of the current crop of people who fall into this category, as well as some of the American songwriters you feel never got the recognition they deserve?

Marshall Crenshaw: That's a hard one. For one thing, how do you measure how much recognition somebody deserves? Anybody I name, I would've heard of them through some media outlet or another, so they at least got some recognition – maybe they got as much as they wanted or “deserved”. I think most of the music that's mass-marketed these days is really crass and cheap-sounding, but I certainly don't hate all of it...I also think the “mainstream” ignores almost all of the best current stuff that's out there, but I barely pay attention to the “mainstream” anyway – fewer and fewer people do pay attention...As far as recent stuff that I've bought goes, I already mentioned the Felice Brothers. I like the Brian Blade Fellowship, I got a beautiful CD called *Ojos Negros* by Anja Lechner & Dino Saluzzi (from Argentina), and there was some cool stuff on Dan Auerbach's record (*Keep It Hid*, 2009)...I don't think any of this stuff had much mass popularity, but what do I care?

SEM: In your liner notes for *The Best of Ricky Nelson*, you write, “by 1958 he (Nelson) had begun to acquire confidence and an understanding of his craft”. Can you pinpoint this moment in your own career?

Marshall Crenshaw: I think I had it right at the start, a really clear sense about what I was doing as an artist, what I wanted to do, etc. It wavered a bit from time to time over the years, but I think it came back once I got out of the major label world...

SEM: Between 1982 and 1985, you released *Marshall Crenshaw* (1982), *Field Day* (1983) and *Downtown* (1985). Why was this such a fertile period for you?

Marshall Crenshaw: Actually I'd say that it was partly due to a mistake – I got talked into the idea that I should get a second album out really quickly after the first one had run its course...

SEM: In the early Eighties, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Prince and Springsteen all released massive albums, while the punk and alternative scene was exploding, with bands like the Blasters, Husker Du, REM, the Replacements and X all beginning their careers. You released your debut, *Marshall Crenshaw*, in 1982 – some of the other albums released that year include *Combat Rock*, *Nebraska*, *Night and Day* and, of course, *Thriller* (you mention ‘Michael on my radio’ in “Hold It”, the final song on *Field Day*).

Marshall Crenshaw: I was really engaged at that time, interested in current music, was still actually willing to listen to commercial radio, etc...All of the records and artists that you mentioned are really good, in my opinion...The '80s wore me out as they went on, though, and by the end of the decade I was less interested. For me the thing that really opened the door for a lot of witless plastic bullshit was the Linn drum machine, although I like the Prince records where he used one, and probably others, but for me drum machines mostly ruined R&B and pop music...

SEM: Beginning with “Theme From ‘Flaregun’” on *Miracle of Science* (1996), you've recorded a number of instrumentals, including “Jaggedland” and “Eydie's Tune” and “West of Bald Knob” (both from #447, released in 1999). What changed in the mid-Nineties that inspired you to start recording instrumentals?

Marshall Crenshaw: So much of the music that I've loved best over the years has been instrumental music, whether it's Bela Bartok, Link Wray, Thelonious Monk, or whatever. And as

you know I'm a big retro-rock guy – once upon a time instrumentals were a fixture in rock 'n' roll. For me it's just a natural mode of expression. I tried it once and it worked so I've kept doing it...

SEM: You haven't released any demos since *The 9-Volt Years* (1998).

Marshall Crenshaw: "Gasoline Baby" on *Jaggedland* is what you might call a "demo", just a quick and dirty recording I did at home. Also, the title track started out as a home recording – I did a lot of it in the spare bedroom of a house we rented during 2003 and 2004...But mostly I deliberately tried not to make the demos too interesting, so I wouldn't get "demo-itis", which is when you get hung up on the demo for some reason (probably narcissism) and are then disappointed with the record...

SEM: *Jaggedland* marks almost 30 years for you in the music business.

Marshall Crenshaw: Phew, the music business...I had a pretty naïve view of it going in, but I got a big reality check early on when I went to a party Warner Bros. gave for us when my first album came out. I walked in and immediately saw that the lead singer of one of the great rock groups of the mid-'60s, somebody who I was and am a big fan of, was the bartender at the party, and in that instant I became really ambivalent about show business. I think about people that I crossed paths with in the early days who were really driven, focused, and much more ambitious than I ever was...Over the years I'd say I've been relatively lucky – I've had at least a bit of success, have managed to hold onto at least some of my intellectual property, and am still doing what I love to do. And better than ever, I think...

SEM: Last question, from one of our staff writers, Don Ciccone – what did you use for the drums on "My Favorite Waste of Time"? It's a great track, and a great trick, whatever it is.

Marshall Crenshaw: If I remember correctly, when I did the demo for "My Favorite Waste of Time", I did the maracas first, then for a bass drum I muffled a parade snare drum with my hand and hit it just right, then I used the same drum as the snare drum. That filled up 3 tracks on the 4 track machine, so I bounced it all to the 4th track and added tambourine...I was in a really live-sounding apartment living room with plaster walls and a high ceiling, no rugs on the floor. We couldn't afford any.

INTERNET

www.marshallcrenshaw.com

DISCOGRAPHY

Marshall Crenshaw (1982)

Field Day (1983)

Downtown (1985)

Mary Jean & 9 Others (1987)

Good Evening (1989)

Life's Too Short (1991)

Live...My Truck Is My Home (1994)

Miracle of Science (1996)

The 9 Volt Years: Battery Powered Home Demos & Curios (1998)

#447 (1999)

This Is Easy! The Best Of Marshall Crenshaw (2000)

I've Suffered For My Art...Now It's Your Turn (2001)

What's In The Bag? (2003)

Jaggedland (2009)

INTERVIEW

Every Note is Sacred, Every Word's a Little Prayer...

Luka Bloom Goes to Eleven

July 2009

Released in March 2009, *Eleven Songs* arrives in the 20th year of Luka Bloom (the artist formerly known as Barry Moore). I first stumbled upon Luka at the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco, during his tour in support of *The Acoustic Motorbike* (1992), where he created an evening as liquid, blue and beautiful as the album itself, a lovely, atmospheric work of widescreen folk-pop that featured brilliant originals alongside covers of Elvis ("I Can't Help Falling in Love") and LL Cool J ("I Need Love").

Many of the songs on Luka's major label debut, *Riverside* (1990) were bristling folk-pop that wed the guitar work of early Billy Bragg (Luka disagrees with this, read on), Roddy Frame, Johnny Marr and Dave Sharp (the Alarm) to Luka's warm, haunted voice (fit for choir solos or leading a sing-along down at the pub) and propulsive fiddle accompaniment, while songs such as "Dreams in America", "Gone to Pablo" and "The Man Is Alive" were the beginning of the lushness endemic to every Luka Bloom album since, particularly *The Acoustic Motorbike* and including his live album, *Amsterdam* (2002), and *Before Sleep Comes* (2004), an acoustic chill album he recorded during a prolonged bout with tendonitis.

Innocence (2005), released the year Luka turned 50, is a pop pastoral that evokes Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*: "Salvador" and "No Matter Where You Go, There You Are" feature bossa nova guitar and Arabic rhythms and percussion, respectively, while "June" is Luka's "Sweet Thing". With *Tribe* (2007), Luka expanded his sound even further, adding electric, pedal steel and Spanish guitar, a mini moog and keyboards, which he had eschewed since *Salty Heaven* (1998). Album centerpiece "Sound" begins in the vein of Van Morrison's "Wavelength" or Joni Mitchell's "Blue Hotel Room" and builds into one of his most melodic, most atmospheric songs, again referencing *Astral Weeks*: "I Am a River" is dappled with reverb, while "Homeless" is a spoken-word narrative set to jazzy percussion and electric guitar. *Tribe* is Luka's most experimental and effects-driven record, but its ambitions never undermine its melodies, and its detours only prove Luka's simple architecture of acoustic guitar and voice is strong and supple enough for additions and adornments.

Eleven Songs (Bar/None, 2009) is a traditional singer-songwriter's album and a retrenchment. Co-produced, recorded and mixed with original Frames guitarist David Odlum, who also played keyboards on *Tribe*, *Eleven Songs* is full of big, urgent melodies that derive their drama from musical simplicity and emotional directness. A string section steps into the landscape here and there, and a choir helps bring home "Don't Be Afraid of the Light That Shines Within You", but most of the songs are Luka and his guitar, augmented with light brushstrokes of percussion and piano. "See You Soon" is a perfect, elegiac pop song, while "When Your Love Comes" features clarinet and piano atop a percussive acoustic guitar – it sounds like *Astral Weeks* meets the Waterboys' *This Is The Sea*. "Everyman" reaches back to *Riverside* and *The Acoustic Motorbike*, particularly "The Man Is Alive" and "Exploring the Blue", while album opener "There Is A Time"

references the Byrds' version of "Turn! Turn! Turn!" and features one of Luka's most affecting vocal performances: "There is a time we must fight for our lives...there is a time, we must sit with ourselves...we give in to the night..."

"These songs seemed to demand I move away from my comfort zone, and go to a large studio", Luka said, "to make a more traditional-style record: great room, great musicians and singers, old microphones. We wanted to capture an honest and hopefully beautiful performance of the songs."

Luka wrote album closer "Don't Be Afraid of the Light That Shines Within You" for the yearly feast in his hometown of Kildare, Ireland, held every February 1st to welcome spring and to celebrate Brigid, the Patron Saint of Kildare and the goddess of love, poetry and justice in pre-Christian Ireland:

Every year we gather to welcome the light into our world; and to hope that more light will shine in the world; and that someday out of the darkness of war, hunger, greed, poverty...will come the light of community, sharing, justice, music, dance, peace and love. This song is my prayer for the world, and I send it out...with love and hope in my heart for our shared future. Songs can also be prayers, blessings, and they can be a spark to ignite something beautiful in anybody.

The best Luka Bloom songs are atmospheric pieces that linger at the interstice between pop song, standard and lullaby. Like the Pogues, Luka brought traditional Irish folk music into the pop milieu; he has also made it a point of embarkation, steering the music of his native Ireland through experiments with Arabic music, bossa nova, chill, electronica and the music of the Roma. Like Roseanne Cash, Tommy Keene, the Psychedelic Furs or Sade, he has crafted a distinctive sound that heralds the arrival of one of his songs within its first few bars.

In the end, Luka's folk music is soul music – it provides comfort and hope, with many of his songs serving as salve, or prayer, or both. As he sings on "Change" from *Tribe*, "we all rise up, my friend/rise up slow/we all rise up, to grow..." Meet County Kildare's favorite son and the man who recorded one of the best songs ever about riding a bicycle ("The Acoustic Motorbike"), and enjoy his far-too-generous and unexpurgated responses to the cumbersome stack of questions we sent him via email in June. These go to eleven...

Stereo Embers Magazine: On *Turf* you covered "Sunny Sailor Boy", and it shows up again on *Amsterdam* – both versions are lovely, and it seems as if this has become one of your signature songs. I also hear some of "This is the Sea" in "Don't Be Afraid of the Light That Shines Within You". Can you talk about Mike Scott and the Waterboys, as a fan, as a musician and as a fellow devotee of traditional Irish music?

Luka Bloom: I think it was 1990, I sang at a charity event in the Abbey theatre in Dublin. One of the other singers was Mike Scott. I loved the Waterboys through the '80s. They definitely influenced my desire to have a big acoustic sound at that time, and I felt very encouraged by them. And I love Mike's songs. That night Mike played a song he had just written. It was "Sunny

Sailor Boy". I was blown away. I asked him about it, and Mike said he had no intention of recording it. The next day I got the words and chords from him and have been singing it ever since. It feels like my song now, though Mike gets all the royalties! I love to sing it.

SEM: On "Fire", you sing: "Everywhere I go/everybody's cool/coming down with gadgetry/oh the latest little tools/living in your headphones/can you hear your dreams...everybody's gone online/where nothing is real/big fucking deal..." It sounds like you're exhausted with our hyper-modern times. Was this part of the impetus to record *Eleven Songs* in a traditional manner? Can you compare "Fire", which is a protest against alienation and technical dependency, to a more traditional protest song like "Rainbow Warrior" from *Salty Heaven*, which is about Greenpeace and the French atomic bomb tests in the South Pacific during the 1990s? Is it harder to hit your mark when the target is more abstract or diffuse?

LB: You are asking many questions here. "Fire" is just one of eleven songs on my record, and the only angry song I've written in a long time. The frustration which gave birth to "Fire" had no bearing at all on the making of *Eleven Songs* – I just felt, with "Fire", that all the gadgetry of the world, which claims to bring us closer, is in fact creating ever more isolation and individualism. "Fire" is completely different from "Rainbow Warrior". One is borne out of a development in society as a whole, and the other is borne out of a specific act in a specific moment. I always hit the mark for myself, otherwise I wouldn't release the song. It is up to others to decide whether or not I hit the mark for them.

SEM: You've mentioned Allison Krauss and Robert Plant's *Raising Sand* as one of the albums that inspired you during the writing and recording of *Eleven Songs*. Can you tell us some of the other things you were listening to during this period, and some of the things you're listening to now, and give us a bit of commentary?

LB: The only influence *Raising Sand* had on *Eleven Songs* was in a conversation with my producer regarding the recording process. I loved the honesty, and rawness, of the T-Bone production, and wanted to return to something more traditional by recording live together with great guys in a great room, and (to) love playing...That was a year ago, and to be honest I don't remember what else I was listening to. I'm on tour in the USA right now, traveling every day. I'm listening to music to help me come down and relax, namely Deva Premal's *dakshina*, Martin Hayes and Dennis Cahill's *Lonesome Touch*, and Anouar Brahem's *Le Voyage de Sahar*.

SEM: It seems *Eleven Songs* strikes a balance between upbeat, inspirational songs, such as "I'm On Your Side", "I Love the World I'm In" and "Don't Be Afraid of the Light That Shines Within You" with elegiac songs such as "There Is A Time", "I Hear Her, Like Lorelei" and "See You Soon". I want to give you a quote from a Bruce Springsteen interview in *Mojo* from January 2006, and I'd like you to respond to it with these particular songs from *Eleven Songs* in mind: "I feel about the same as I did when I was 24 years old. But part of taking your place in the world is letting that clock tick...and being willing to listen to it tick and understand that your mortal self is present and walking alongside you."

LB: When I was 24 I reckoned I'd be dead by 30. I feel absolutely nothing similar to when I was 24. I was always conscious of my mortal self, way too much so when younger. Now I am only conscious of this day. It is all that interests me. I am baffled by the juxtaposition of Bruce's

quote with the songs you specifically mentioned, especially “I Hear Her, Like Lorelei”. I think you’re too intelligent for me – I feel like you are asking me questions while already knowing your own answers. It’s interesting in a way, but basically I’m intellectually a bit stupid and am busy just being. I just write the songs. I don’t think about them.

SEM: *Eleven Songs* is your eleventh studio album as Luka Bloom and 21 years since the release of *Luka Bloom*. You’ve released four albums of original material in the past five years, the most fecund period of your career. How do you see your career continuing to unfold? Who are your models? James Taylor, who has been putting out quality music and touring for about 40 years? Someone like the ageless Cesaria Evora? Or maybe Paul Weller? I remember an interview he gave a few years back, when he told a journalist, “I’m just getting started!”

LB: All the great men and women who came before me give me hope, love, and comfort on my road. I have never met any of them, except Van, whom I briefly met in Dublin years ago. Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Doc Watson, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell...So many great people who have walked the road a long time, who have achieved enormous highs and deep lows. They move and inspire me, and add to the sense of privilege I feel at having this great job. I write a song, try to record it, release it, and get to sing for people in Sydney, Hamburg, San Francisco...And yes I love Cesaria, as well as Omara Portuonda. What a world.

SEM: Some of *Riverside* sounds like early Billy Bragg meets Roddy Frame. Can you talk about the Eighties a bit and what was happening during that decade that galvanized you, that brought you to the first Luka Bloom records?

LB: I heard U2 in the Phoenix Park in Dublin 1984, and I knew I was done with the folk clubs. The Clash, the Sex Pistols and the Waterboys were playing great music in an otherwise bleak decade. I set about creating a sound which could be big and brash and bold enough to survive on that stage, and it did for about 10 minutes. It was great fun. I admire Billy Bragg, but nothing I’ve ever done sounds remotely like him.

SEM: Let’s say (this is kind of hypothetical) my wife has never heard about you – please forgive her, she’s Greek and you don’t play bouzouki, nor did you have any top ten hits that she might find on an Eighties compilation. I’m going to make her a compilation CD of 11 Luka Bloom songs – tell me which 11 I should put on the CD, and why.

LB: This is an unfair question. I forgive her easily for never having heard of me. She has so much great music from her country to listen to. I love the old Rembetika Greek blues stuff, heartbreaking and beautiful. George Dalaras has made some lovely acoustic recordings. Make her a compilation of all my ballads from the records, and if none of them tug her heartstrings, I may have to throw in the towel.

SEM: You’ve covered songs from a variety of genres, including hip hop (“I Need Love”), reggae (“Natural Mystic”) and American rock n’ roll (“I Can’t Help Falling in Love With You”), while some of your original compositions flirt with bossa nova (“Salvador”), Roma music (“Gypsy Music”) and even Arabic music (“No Matter Where You Go, There You Are”), while “June”, from *Innocence*, and “Sound” from *Tribe*, reference *Astral Weeks*, particularly “Cyprus Avenue” and

“Sweet Thing” – “Sound” also evokes, at times, Nick Drake. Can you discuss how these influences find their way into your music, and how this might influence future projects?

LB: Man, you think about this stuff way more than I do. I hear a song. I like it. It challenges me. I learn it. Some work, some don't. I love all the music you mention, but I never really plan this as a concept. It just happens because I'm sitting in a room with a guitar in my hand...

SEM: Along with romantic ballads, brief memoirs, travelogues and character sketches, you've written a number of songs about social justice, human rights and the experience of immigrants. This list includes “Fire”, “Forgiveness”, “Freedom Song”, “I Am Not At War”, “Lebanon”, “Rainbow Warrior” and “This Is Your Country”. *Eleven Songs* arrives near the finale of the first decade of a new century and a new millennium, and the outlook isn't good: we're in the midst of the worst worldwide economic crisis since the 1930s, still torn by war and famine (according to the United Nations, one billion people will go hungry this year)...it seems we're failing to bring the promise of human evolution and the exponential improvement of technology, in all its forms, to bring about real change for the world's poor and disenfranchised. As someone who has always been paying close attention, we'd be interested to hear your thoughts. Feel free to be as candid as you wish.

LB: Look, the world has always been fucked up – we just didn't have YouTube to show us people dying in Sudan while we made dinner in Ireland. I refuse to buy into the prevailing negativity. We have so little time here, each one of us. I wake up every day, happy to be alive, and every day I ask if I can do something for one person today. The power of one is where it's at for me. I am aware of the overwhelming difficulties facing us on our earth, but I am also aware that I could be run over by a bus tomorrow. I am not a wise man, but I know enough to be able to do some good today, and that is all that interests me.

SEM: Do you miss New York? Can you talk about how the songs you've written in Ireland differ from the work you did in New York? How has your songwriting process evolved? How have your themes changed? How has the sound of your music changed? Was New York as enormous an influence on your work, at the time, as Ireland has been since you returned?

LB: Man, you've just asked five questions and called it number 10! As though they were just one question...I don't miss New York because I'm going back in 2 weeks. *Riverside* would never have happened were it not for New York. New York in the late '80s changed my life. And the people who worked with me there and then, who gave me a belief in the possibilities of my work unimagined two years earlier...Everywhere I am influences how I work, because I love being alive and mostly love wherever I am. And because I choose to be awake, I'm open to the influences physically present all around me.

SEM: Can you discuss your faith in the context of your music? In “The Shape of Love to Come”, from *Salty Heaven*, you sing: “...the god I love needs no house of stone, nor is her image painted onto glass...” Also on *Salty Heaven*, “Blackberry Time” includes the refrain, “everything is possible in God's time...” About seven years later, “Innocence” includes this lovely and poignant verse: “I still love the smell/the sweet smell of incense/since the prayers and bells...most of all I loved benediction/with an innocent child's conviction...” If we take your lyrics from “The Shape of Love to Come” as some sort of opposition to traditional Catholicism, should we see the lyrics

from “Innocence” as an acceptance of your faith, a rapprochement? A return? How does all this tie into a “life of good intentions”?

LB: While I really truly appreciate your efforts in researching my lyrics, you manage to ask 200 questions in the guise of one, which makes it really difficult for me, as I have limited time to give to this. I would need to cancel my tour to do justice to your questions, and I can't do that! Like many before me, I lost faith in the traditional church I grew up with, but I have always felt the presence of spirit in my life. I have no need to find a precise definition or understanding around this spirit – I am really content with the mystery of it all. I totally respect the choices people make in the context of institutional religions, but to date they play no role in my life. I have no 'opposition' to religions. I respect and accept them as part of our world. But I am very happy to be on my knees in the morning, to offer a humble prayer of intention and hope for my loved ones and myself. I pray to a being greater than I, whom I choose to call god. I know I am not in charge, and I want to be better each day. And I need all the help I can get. I am not very comfortable speaking or writing about this area, but very happy when singing. It is in the singing that the good stuff comes. Outside of the songs, I'm a weak and contentedly confused, sometimes adult human being.

DISCOGRAPHY

Luka Bloom (1988)

Riverside (1990)

The Acoustic Motorbike (1992)

Turf (1994)

Salty Heaven (1998)

Keeper of the Flame (2000)

The Barry Moore Years (2001)

Between the Mountain and the Moon (2002)

Amsterdam [live] (2003)

Before Sleep Comes (2004)

Innocence (2005)

Tribe (2007)

The Man Is Alive [DVD] (2008)

Eleven Songs (2009)

INTERNET

www.lukabloom.com

Eleven Songs is out now on Bar/None.

ALBUM REVIEW

Life Itself

Bruce Springsteen's *Working on a Dream*

March 2009

I am a 40 year-old American from a bedroom community in northeastern New Jersey now residing in Cyprus. I want to declare, today and for all time, that I love Bruce Springsteen so much I can barely describe it, and I've felt this way since I first heard him at the tender age of 12, when I tried to learn "Sandy" on an acoustic guitar. Most of the people now alive on Earth, and perhaps half of the people I know, haven't been alive for as long as I've been a Springsteen fan. His work is one of the intrinsic components of my personal mythology and one of the intrinsic components of my day-to-day reality; it rides beside me, and it always buys the smokes. I write this sitting at my desk in my apartment just outside Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, and above me, to my right, is the empty space that's been designated for the soon-to-be-framed poster of Springsteen that Borders gave away with every purchase of *Magic* when it was released in October 2007. I have everything he's ever done on vinyl and CD, laminated posters from the mid-Eighties in my parents' attic somewhere and a stack of bootlegs, on vinyl, procured in the Eighties from Greenwich Village record stores like Venus and It's Only Rock n' Roll.

Like most of Springsteen's fans from New Jersey, particularly those of my generation, I was fortunate enough to grow up in a landscape Springsteen made mythic. Before Springsteen, my home state was a tangle of fetid highways, moribund cities and gritty beaches, and Springsteen took it and made it beautiful. Much like the photographers William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, Springsteen took a bland and sometimes broken and embittered geography and imbued it with a lyric and cinematic beauty; like Newark native Philip Roth, he made New Jersey a place worth writing about.

When I listen to Springsteen, I can see New York through the windshield, off in the distance, across the river, as I drive from the 14C tollbooths on the Turnpike toward the Holland Tunnel, the sky behind me a chemical sherbet of pinks and oranges. I am, fortunately or unfortunately, a surfer from New Jersey, as is Springsteen, and when I hear him today, I can still feel the hot sun as I walk down the boardwalk from my parents' place on McCabe Avenue in Bradley Beach, my board under my arm, the smell of suntan lotion rising from the baking sand. I started countless bands, wanting to create something as incredible as "Rosalita" or "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out"; convinced rock stardom was not in my cards, I continued writing, hoping to craft something as beautiful as "Thunder Road," as perfect as "The River".

Growing up, Springsteen was our Che Guevara. My hometown of Millburn is a wealthy suburb of New York just 15 miles due west, down Route 78, from the Holland Tunnel, and it shares a school district, a town hall and police and fire services with Short Hills, an even leafier and greener enclave and home of the infamous Short Hills Mall. Springsteen's characters – and even Springsteen himself – were the kind of guys who pumped gas and fixed cars and cut grass in my town, but that never gave me and my friends even the slightest pause in the pursuit of our

obsession. *Born in the U.S.A.* held us all in thrall, but we were a sophisticated congregation and had been in the chapel for years – at sweet sixteen parties throughout 1984, usually held at local country clubs, we surrounded the DJ and demanded he play Springsteen. We would form a circle and take turns dancing across its center to “Working on the Highway,” but it was “Thunder Road”, perhaps an odd choice for a sweet sixteen, that made our night: we would again stand in a circle, this time singing to each other as loud as we could for the entire song. It was exuberant and ecstatic, and I look back on those moments as some of the finest I experienced during high school; I’m still proud my friends and I, in 1984, when the world was set ablaze by *Born in the U.S.A.*, had already memorized the lyrics to most of *Born to Run*. We also loved Elvis Costello, Bob Marley, the Police, the Smiths, Talking Heads, U2...we were pop music sophisticates, but our fanaticism for the Boss marked us as kids who grew up in Jersey, which meant Springsteen was ours, and we of course belonged to him. I took him with me to college, to the University of Rochester, where on a few occasions I waited until my roommates departed our stuffy triple, then hung this weird combination detergent packet and dryer sheet thing my mom had sent me from a bungee cord I had attached to the broken light fixture on our ceiling – once I had fixed up my makeshift air-recording studio, I put on side one of *The River*, picked up a battered racquetball racquet and started bashing along to “The Ties That Bind,” the weird combination detergent and dryer sheet thing serving as a microphone, absorbing my shout-along vocals: “You been hurt and you’re all cried out, you say!!/you walk down the street pushing people out of your way!!!/you packed your bags and all alone you wanna ride!!!” I spent the summer of 1990 in Boulder, Colorado, leaving town reluctantly that August to return home to finish school at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey (I had dropped out of Rochester). My dad came out to Boulder to travel back to Jersey with me, and as we drove out of town he popped in a cassette copy of *Born in the U.S.A.* he had purchased just for our journey. We were going home.

Of course it’s a cliché to wonder where 25 years have gone, to declare that you never even imagined being 25 years-old, let alone 40. There are ways Springsteen songs made me feel in the past to which I’ll never again have access. But while I can no longer avail myself of the romantic hope that “Born to Run” evoked in me, the song itself doesn’t mean any less to me, and new songs keep arriving: “I’ll Work for Your Love,” from *Magic*, and “Life Itself”, from *Working On A Dream*, that speak to what I feel now – which is my age, of course, and the sense that many of my dreams have come true, in spades, but that I have so many more in the queue and that I might not have time to get to all of them, that I will die unfinished. This is irrational, of course, but this makes it no less omnipresent. At some point we must confront our mortality – the lucky among us don’t do it until soon before it arrives, but we neurotics happen upon this confrontation earlier in our lives than perhaps we should, and we spend the rest of our lives shadow-boxing. So here I am, throwing punches.

As is Springsteen, at 59, but his punches always seem thrown in the context of title bouts, and in a world where individual albums, as currency, have lost much of their value, his records remain events, monuments and mile-markers. The kids are downloading MP3s the way we used to pop quarters into arcade games, and folks my age with similar tastes probably expect to see upcoming Springsteen releases on the counter at Starbucks. But even at 40 I am still my

inviolable adolescent self, except instead of racing off to the record store when Springsteen releases a new album I'm instead running over to Borders or logging in at Amazon to order it.

Listening to *Magic*, one heard the bitter whispers of everything that had gone wrong since September 11th, the despair and rage we all felt as the drive toward the Gulf War succeeded, when we learned of the torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, after we learned how the Bush administration treated our returning war veterans...the record spoke to its times in much the same way *The Rising* spoke to us in 2002. With *Working on a Dream*, Springsteen has returned to the terrain of albums such as *Tunnel of Love*, *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, albums that chart romantic relationships. This record is closer to *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, with its celebration of marriage, than it is to the elegiac *Tunnel of Love*, which, released during Springsteen's brief marriage to Julianne Phillips, bristled with doubt and longing.

Reduced to its simplest themes, *Working on a Dream* is the 59 year-old Springsteen's celebration of his marriage as he approaches the final quarter of his life. The chorus of "This Life" sums this up: "this life/this life and then the next/with you I have been blessed/what more can you expect." Much of the record is a profession of love, particularly in the context of a lengthy marriage between two people reaching the end of middle age. "And I count my blessings that you're mine for always/We laugh beneath the covers and count the wrinkles and the grays...my darling we'll sing away," Springsteen sings in the somewhat majestic "Kingdom of Days"; toward the end of "Life Itself", he confesses, "life itself in your heart and in your eyes/I can't make it without you".

It's a lovely record, both in its sentiment and its melodiousness, but the temptation with *Working on a Dream* is to compare it to the superior *Magic*. The album expands on the Sixties pop that found its way to *Magic*, but that album worked so well because it was a return to fundamentals, a hard-rocking Springsteen record more similar to *The River* than to *The Rising*, heavy on guitar and suffused with the E Street Band's classic Jersey Shore bar band sound. *Magic* featured plenty of Clarence Clemons's sax, which isn't as prominent on *Working On A Dream*.

The Beach Boys, the Beatles, the Byrds, CCR and the Left Banke are of course core Springsteen influences. They are secondary elements on *Magic*, however, whereas they overwhelm much of *Working On A Dream*; the Sixties pop sensibility which forms much of the album's architecture feels forced – it's a lightness that doesn't come easy to the E Street band, and at times it sounds like they've been handcuffed. This is particularly true of the album's rhythm – the E Street Band has always found a way to swing, from "Spirit in the Night" to "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out" to "The Ties That Bind" to "Mary's Place" to "Livin' In the Future", but bassist Gary Tallent and drummer Max Weinberg seem as if they've been hamstrung, permitted to cut loose only on "What Love Can Do."

"Girls in Their Summer Clothes", from *Magic*, wasn't the strongest song on the record, but it was Springsteen's version of "God Only Knows" and a unique moment on a very strong record, much like "Worlds Apart" on *The Rising*. "Your Own Worst Enemy" was also a tribute to the

Beach Boys, but Springsteen's application of Brian Wilson's intricate pop sweetness never impedes the song's propulsion nor brightens its darkness. On *Working on a Dream*, Springsteen's pure pop aspirations overwhelm the album – with the exception of “Life Itself”, “Good Eye”, “Outlaw Pete” and “What Love Can Do”, Springsteen's chamber pop ambitions drain the record of real vigor and render it soft, rather than haunting – it seems the sleigh bells of *Born to Run* have been traded for triangles. It's a bit like asking Philip Roth to write a collection of love poems; if you wield a mighty hammer, why reach for a knitting needle?

There are many brilliant moments here, particularly “Life Itself”, which references the Byrds and a few Stephen Stills guitar solos circa *Crosby, Still & Nash*. “Tomorrow Never Knows” is the album's Woody Guthrie number, while “The Last Carnival”, which references “Wild Billy's Circus Story” from *The Wild, The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle*, sounds like “Buckets of Rain” from *Blood on the Tracks*, but with backing vocals lifted from a Cat Stevens record. “Good Eye” is a honking blues track that sounds like a harder version of “The Big Muddy” and “Souls of the Departed” from *Lucky Town*, while “Working on a Dream” is a Roy Orbison tribute, mining Orbison's “You Got It,” from the Jeff Lynne-produced *Mystery Girl*, right down to Springsteen's Orbison vocal and the chiming acoustic guitars. “Outlaw Pete” is a charming Western rocker that tells the story of the “legendary” Outlaw Pete: “He was born a little baby on the Appalachian Trail/At six months old he'd done three months in jail/He robbed a bank in his diapers and little bare baby feet/All he said was ‘Folks my name is Outlaw Pete’” - it's Springsteen's “The Devil Went Down to Georgia”. The two darkest songs on *Working on a Dream*, “What Love Can Do” and “Life Itself”, are also the album's strongest, recalling “Last to Die” and “Gypsy Biker” from *Magic*, while “Lucky Day” is a rollicking pop song in the vein of Seventies-era Stones.

Yet, ultimately, *Working on a Dream* sounds like the after-effect of *Magic*, and it lacks that album's mix of force and nimbleness. “Queen of the Supermarket” sounds like a syrupy, poorly crafted version of “I'll Work For Your Love” – one of the best songs on *Magic* – or a discard from *Human Touch*. “I'll Work For Your Love” begins with the piano from “Thunder Road” and blasts into a classic Springsteen devotional: “And I'll watch the bones in your back like the stations of the cross...I watch you slip that comb through your hair and this I'll promise you/I'll work for your love, dear/I'll work for your love...” Compare this to “The Queen of the Supermarket”, a piano-driven ballad built on Beatlesque background harmonies and Springsteen singing urgently near his higher registers, but perhaps the most flaccid song he's ever written: “With my shopping cart I move through the heart/Of a sea of fools so blissfully unaware/That they're in the presence of something wonderful and rare/The way she moves behind the counter/Beneath her white aprons her secrets remain hers/As she bags the groceries, her eyes so bored/And sure she is unobserved...” “I'll Work for Your Love” is a roaring declaration of love, while “Queen of the Supermarket” is its voyeuristic weak sister. Toward the end of the song Springsteen sings, “And I'm lifted up, lifted up...” as if trying to bring the song to the sort of crescendos that so effortlessly arrived throughout much of *The Rising*.

“Queen of the Supermarket,” and “Outlaw Pete” suffer from the poor phrasing that marred *The Ghost of Tom Joad* – the lines are too long for the music, the meter is off, there's something

forced...every song is a mouthful. While *Greetings From Asbury Park, The Wild, The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle* and *Born to Run* demonstrated the kind of phrasing which Sinatra must have envied, there have been occasions since *Lucky Town* where we've seen Springsteen battle to hammer his themes into cumbersome lyrics that betray the phrasing which seemed effortless on his earlier albums – think of the wordplay throughout *Greetings From Asbury Park* – and even as recently as *The Rising* and *Magic*.

Working on a Dream is another of these occasions. While the lyrics on *Magic* were taut and often chilling, they tend to sprawl on *Working On A Dream*, particularly on “Kingdom of Days” (“the wet grass on our backs as the autumn breeze drifts through the trees”) and “The Last Carnival” (“a million stars shining above us like every soul living and dead/has been gathered together by a God to sing a hymn over your bones”). “The Wrestler”, which Springsteen wrote for Darren Aronofsky’s 2008 film, is one of his most moving songs, particularly when Springsteen sings, “then you’ve seen me/I come and stand at every door/then you’ve seen me/I always leave with less than I’ve had before”. It’s an anthem for the beaten, but from the opening line it’s evident we’re not in the company of the same lyricist who wrote *Greetings From Asbury Park, The River* and *The Rising*: “have you ever seen a one-legged dog makin’ his way down the street/if you’ve ever seen a one-legged dog then you’ve seen me...” How does a one-legged dog make his way down the street? Did Springsteen mean a three-legged dog? How did the author of such lyrics as, “the screen door slams/Mary’s dress waves/like a vision she dances across the porch as a radio plays” (“Thunder Road”) and “well I was young and I didn’t know what to do/when I saw your best steps stolen away from you” (“Walk Like A Man”) and “...kids asleep in the backseat/we’re just counting the miles, you and me/we don’t measure the blood we’ve drawn anymore/we just stack the bodies outside the door...who’ll be the last to die for a mistake” (“Last to Die”) stumble into such carelessness?

Beginning with *Tunnel of Love*, Springsteen began to build his lyrics with symbolic images of a more universal nature, such as those taken from the American West, carnivals and gypsies, Christianity and gambling (as a simple representation of chance and luck). While many fans consider *Nebraska* Springsteen’s first foray into Country, it was *Tunnel of Love* that actually blended Springsteen’s love of Country with his pop sensibility, and the more he leans toward Country & Western, the more prominent these images become, the more they form the flesh and bones of his lyrics. For example, the narrator of the beautiful “Valentine’s Day” from *Tunnel Of Love* tells us, “a friend of mine became a father last night/when we spoke in his voice I could hear the light/of the skies and the rivers/the timber wolf in the pines/and that great jukebox out on Route 39...”, This change in Springsteen’s lyrics reached its apex on his two Southern California albums, *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, which are peppered with lines like “I’ll be your gypsy joker” (“Soul Driver”); “now my ass was draggin’ when from a passin’ gypsy wagon/your heart like a diamond shone/tonight I’m layin’ in your arms carvin’ lucky charms/out of these hard luck bones (“Better Days”); “and if we turn the right cards up/they make us boss/the devil pays off” (“Local Hero”); “now there’s a beautiful river/in the valley ahead/there ‘neath the oak’s bough/soon we will be wed” (“If I Should Fall Behind”); “...your body was the holy land...now you were the Red Sea, I was Moses...” (“Leap of Faith”); and “I went down into the desert city/just tryin’ so hard to shed my skin...” (“Living Proof”). In 1995

Springsteen released his first hits compilation, *Greatest Hits*, which included “This Hard Land” and the following verse: “...I can hear a tape deck blastin’ ‘Home on the Range’/I can see them Bar-M choppers/Sweepin’ low across the plains/It’s me and you, Frank, we’re lookin’ for lost cattle/Our hooves twistin’ and churnin’ up the sand/we’re ridin’ in the whirlwind searchin’ for lost treasure/Way down south of the Rio Grande...” *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, also released in 1995, is largely set in a Recession-era American West, home to “little desert motels” (“Highway 29”) Fresno methamphetamine labs (“Sinaloa Cowboys”) and an Appaloosa “kickin’ in the corral” (“Dry Lightning”).

Of course these images have been present in Springsteen’s work since *The Wild*, *The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle* – during “Rosalita”, the narrator tells Rosalita he knows “a pretty little place in Southern California down San Diego way...”; “Wild Billy’s Circus Story” also appears on *The Wild*, *The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle*, and “The Promised Land” from *Darkness On The Edge Of Town* begins, “on a rattlesnake speedway in the Utah desert...” But it is the images Springsteen draws from his life in New Jersey, in the early Seventies, that make *Greetings From Asbury Park*, *The Wild*, *The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle*, *Born to Run* and *Darkness On The Edge Of Town* so literate, so specific and so thrilling. On these early albums, “Spanish Johnny” drives in from the underworld (“Incident on 57th Street”), “sparks fly on E Street when the boy prophets walk it handsome and hot” (The E Street Shuffle”) and “Mary Lou she found out how to cope/she rides to heaven on a gyroscope/the *Daily News* asks her for the dope...” (“Does This Bus Stop at 82nd Street?”). These early songs are living, twitching, exuberant things and, wedded to the operatic arrangements of *Born to Run*, they became something that still shimmers in its perfection: “there were ghosts in the eyes of all the boys you sent away/they haunt this dusty beach road in the skeleton frames of burned-out Chevrolets” (“Thunder Road”); “from a tenement window a transistor blares/turn around the corner things got real quiet real fast/I walked into a Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out” (“Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out”), and, of course, “sprung from cages on Highway 9/chrome-wheeled, fuel-injected and steppin’ out over the line/baby this town rips the bones from your back...” (“Born to Run”). What does “south of the Rio Grande” mean to someone from New Jersey who’s actually driven along Highway 9, which passes through Freehold, Springsteen’s hometown? While I’m not opposed to the desert vistas and gypsy wagons with which Springsteen tells his stories, it was astonishing and thrilling when the mythology was less universal and more specific, such as it is in these lines from “Jungleland”: “they’ll meet ‘neath that giant Exxon sign/that brings this fair city light/man there’s an opera out on the Turnpike/there’s a ballet being fought out in the alley”. No one, not even Dylan, has ever written anything like it.

Springsteen has reinvented himself and his sound throughout his career, much like contemporaries Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Prince, Paul Simon and Neil Young; his attempts have been far less drastic than those of Mitchell, Simon and Young, however, and his body of work seems unified, sonically and thematically, which brings him closer to Dylan and Prince, in terms of a cohesive body of work. Pioneering, however, has been crucial to Springsteen’s development as an artist and icon, and most of his albums have been outright surprises, particularly *Born to Run*, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *Nebraska*, *Tunnel of Love*, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, *The*

Rising and *We Shall Overcome*. Each seems a measured and sometimes extraordinary step away from its predecessor.

Nebraska was stark and startling arriving after *The River*, a double album that mixed cautionary, mournful, somber ballads with raucous Jersey Shore rave-ups. *Nebraska*, not *The River*, is the album that follows the nostalgia and desperation of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* – *Nebraska* stripped the hard rock from *Darkness* but mined that album's terrain of bitter nostalgia, desperation and regret. *Nebraska* was successful as a folk or country album because it was a Springsteen album, one simply gutted of Springsteen's trademark hard rock and bar band soul.

The failure of albums such as *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, *Devils & Dust* and, to a lesser extent, *Working On A Dream*, is that they seem driven toward ideas, rather than by them: this is a folk record about American desperation in the Southwest circa 1995 inspired by the film version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, this is an album loosely built around the occupation and devastation of Iraq...*The Rising* and *Magic* work so well, and are so immediate, because although the former is steeped in the aftermath of September 11th and the latter in the corruption, deception and rapacity endemic to the presidency of George W. Bush, each album is a collection of magnificent songs that boil up to the surface, rather than a collection of songs shoehorned into an overriding concept. These albums also work because they are E Street Band albums punctuated by or painted with elements selected from outside the band's bar band milieu and blended with it, and because the songs on these albums sound like classic Springsteen. There's no "Mary's Place" on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, nor does a song like "Last to Die" emerge from *Devils & Dust*.

I've spent some time recently watching *Hammersmith Odeon, London '75*, which is included in the *Born to Run 30th Anniversary Edition* box – it feels like watching a soul revue as staged by a scrappy, scruffy kid from the Jersey Shore with the ability to channel Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison and Little Richard. Springsteen took the screaming exuberance and youthful hope of everything rock n' roll set out to do in the Fifties and Sixties – and everything it did, accidentally or inadvertently – and made it his personal journey, his cross to bear, his sword and his shield, and ours.

During *Wings for Wheels*, *The Making of Born to Run*, Springsteen talks about B movies, *Thunder Road* (the Robert Mitchum film, from 1958), of missed chances and crucibles, of varied experiences of light and darkness. This makes perfect sense, as he has created the most cinematic oeuvre in popular music. *Born to Run* and *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, especially, feel like films, as do *Greetings from Asbury Park* and *the Wild, the Innocent & the E Street Shuffle* – even *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, initially inspired by the film version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, achieves this unique effect.

What's funny and sad about Springsteen – with albums such as *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, *Devils & Dust*, *We Shall Overcome*, and a number of songs from *Working On A Dream* – is it seems he's trying to secure his place in American music as a latter day Woody Guthrie or Pete Seeger or Hank Williams, that he's trying to stitch his songs into some great American folk tradition, to

write songs that ultimately become part of our collective memory, part of our vernacular, much like Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land". What's ironic is, he's already done it, time and time again, and songs such as "Atlantic City", "Born to Run", "Hungry Heart", "Lonesome Day", "My City of Ruins", "The River", "Spirit in the Night", "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out" are just a few examples. The segment of the great American songbook for which Springsteen is responsible is a monolithic tower on our land, and this has little to do with the dustbowl ballads and folk anthems he's written since the commercial and critical failure of *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*. Springsteen has become one of the pillars of American popular music. He is rock n' roll.

How is it that Springsteen's songs manage to incite and quell my homesickness simultaneously? "Spirit in the Night" still makes me want to drink, smoke and dance, even though I no longer partake in the first two and rarely in the third, and "Darkness on the Edge of Town" still makes me feel unbeatable, even though I've been beaten so many times. Springsteen's exuberance has never failed me; his empathy has comforted me for a quarter-century: "I said, I'm hurt, she said, honey, let me heal it." Some of these songs are four-minute parties, some of them are four-minute elegies, and I would venture that all of them are almost as deeply felt by Springsteen's fans as they are by Springsteen.

I've often wondered if, as I grow older, my fever for Springsteen – and my fever for music itself – might break. That certain songs might lose the intensity of their meaning for me. What use should I have, at 40, for "Growin' Up" or "Night" or "Prove It All Night" or "No Surrender"? The truth is I find I need them more than ever. These songs remain the secret rooms in which I have lived since boyhood, the secret rooms where I am still my inviolable adolescent self. The secret rooms where I am still consoled and galvanized by Springsteen's voice. Where I remain, as always, transfixed by his cinema.

INTERVIEW

I LOVE YOU, TOO, YOUR MAJESTY!

An Interview with King Solomon Burke

Like A Fire

June 2008

My grandmother...told me when I was very young that “the old will become new and the new will become old; keep in your heart the 23rd Psalm.”

- Liner notes to *Make Do With What You Got*

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want,
he maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

- Psalm 23 (The Lord's Prayer)

An interview with King Solomon Burke requires no introduction. His new album, *Like A Fire* (Shout! Factory Records) was released on June 10th. Steve Jordan produced the album, which features songs written by Eric Clapton, Ben Harper, Jessie Harris (Norah Jones), Jordan and Keb Mo – Harper, Jordan, Danny Kortchmar and Larry Taylor all play on the record.

His Highness will be on tour this summer, including a stop at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival on June 22nd and European dates throughout July; he will perform at the Hollywood Bowl on August 13th. For more information, please visit www.thekingsolomonburke.com.

Stereo Embers Magazine: Sir, it is an honor to speak with you. An honor and a treat.

King Solomon Burke: Well, likewise

SEM: I hope you're well, and that all your children and grandchildren and great grandchildren are well.

KSB: How's your family?

SEM: Fine, everybody's fine. I want to congratulate you on a *Like A Fire* – it's a wonderful record. We've pretty much been listening to it non-stop the past couple of days, my wife and I, and we love it.

KSB: Thank you so much.

SEM: It seems modeled on the three albums you've released since 2002, *Don't Give Up On Me*, *Make Do With What You Got* (2005) and *Nashville* (2006), in that you're teamed with a great producer and a cadre of stellar studio talent. What was it like working with Steve Jordan, Danny Kortchmar and Ben Harper while recording the record, and how was writing with Clapton?

KSB: Writing with Clapton is always a thrill, and exciting, and always a challenge, because you're dealing with a genius, and a gentleman. It makes it so special because he personally wants to write with, and for a person, a real story, and he keeps it so real. That's what I love about Eric Clapton. He's a very special person, someone I think we've all learned to love and adore...his music, his personality, and his wit. He's just incredible.

SEM: He's become a real historian, and a preservationist.

KSB: He's a real soul, and he's really in touch with people, and this is what's important. He's not fake; he's not pretending, he's not putting on a show. He doesn't have to do this; he's doing it because it's what he loves to do. You can feel it, that's the fire burning in his soul.

SEM: *Like a Fire* has the same feel to me as a lot of the records Clapton recorded in the Seventies, like *Slowhand* and *Backless*. It's a rock n' roll record, but it's got an acoustic, bluesy feel to it.

KSB: It's just loose, it's just like I'm here with you. We're together; we're sharing this experience, this moment, this time. If you can lock into that, you can lock into the real feeling of what's going on, in someone's heart, in someone's mind.

SEM: I think Danny Kortchmar has played on every album recorded in LA since 1973. He's a real old hand compared to Ben Harper, who's kind of a young gun.

KSB: (laughs) As you said, Danny's been on every record, so there's no way in the world we could do this record without him, is there?

SEM: I was just listening to *JT* (James Taylor) a few months ago. It was released in 1977, and he's on it.

KSB: When you're dealing with legends, there's just a feeling of security it brings you, it's just that extra ounce of love in the music, and you don't put too much around it to cover it up or to drown it out, because you just want to hear the purity of it. It's like a great steak, you just want to taste the beef; you want to know that this is the real deal. You don't smother it with too much, just let it come out; let it be real and natural. That's what happens when you have Danny in there.

SEM: And with Ben Harper?

KSB: Ben is exciting and new, and to me it was a thrill to know him and to work with him, to write a song on the spot ("A Minute to Rest and a Second to Pray") – that was so fresh, and refreshing. And he is so aware of what's going on around him, and this is part of a message that I want the world to be aware of. Ben was excited about it; I was more excited than anybody. For someone to bring the message...that's what made me feel so good. This man is right on it, he knows what's going on. He sees today, he's feeling tomorrow, you know, and this is what the song is about.

SEM: He's kind of blazing his own path. I don't think Ben Harper falls into any particular category of rock music.

KSB: No, he's Ben Harper. Years from now they'll be talking about, 'we're doing this the Ben Harper way.' That's what he's doing. He's a wonderful young man...very respectful, very classy,

which to me was so important. I was very honored to work with him. I hope we have a chance to do more things in the future.

SEM: Steve Jordan has played with Clapton on a number of records –

KSB: Steve Jordan has played with just about everybody that's had a hit record.

SEM: How did working with him on *Like a Fire* compare to working with Joe Henry (*Don't Give Up on Me*), Don Was (*Make Do with What You Got*) and Buddy Miller (*Nashville*)?

KSB: Doesn't compare. It's all part of the plan; it's all part of the package. It's all part of that great movement that says, 'we're on a journey.' And it's important to connect the great passengers, you know, aboard this journey, and I am so blessed to have had the opportunity...to take this great journey.

SEM: I watched *Everybody Needs Somebody* (2005 BBC documentary), and it seems you are not only universally admired, but adored, which I think is rare. Take someone like Chuck Berry – people are in awe of him, but no one ever talks about what a joy it was to work with him in the studio or to play a show with him.

KSB: Yeah, Chuck is a good guy; I guess he's just waiting on the turnaround. (laughs) You like that one, huh?

SEM: Very much. But everybody, I mean, when you watch the DVD, Bill Wyman, Jools Holland, Peter Guralnick –

KSB: Oh, he's a doll-baby. He's one of my angels. His *Sweet Soul Music* (1991) was just an incredible book. He's an incredible man. Peter Guralnick has such a special place in my life...he and his whole family have just been...adorable.

SEM: In *Everybody Needs Somebody*, Guralnick says, "I don't think there's ever been a greater singer of American vernacular music of any kind than Solomon Burke."

KSB: I have to send a check. (laughs)

SEM: I wanted to ask you about another remark from *Everybody Needs Somebody*, this one from British author Bill Millar, who says, "he sang soul ballads with a religious intensity," and I thought if you wanted to elaborate on that –

KSB: He's right on top of it. You know, I'm me, it doesn't change. My religious beliefs are very strong. I'm a faith believer, I believe that God can do anything but fail, and I test that on a daily basis by just saying, 'you try it.' I'm not interested in pushing my faith, my religion or my beliefs on anyone – I try to live it so that you can see it. God uses the person or persons, and they're blessed by their belief. And through prayer, and God's precious miracles, these things happen. My journey is to deliver the message, in song, of love and peace and understanding, togetherness and hope, and faith, that there is a tomorrow, and it will be better.

SEM: So many great soul singers, including Sam Cooke, Marvin Gaye, Al Green and Aretha Franklin, have started out in the church, singing gospel, and have moved back and forth between secular and gospel music throughout their careers. It seemed as if Gaye could never bring these two halves of his music, and we've seen Al Green struggle with the same issue, taking a hiatus from secular music in the late Seventies to record gospel records (*The Lord Will Make A Way*, 1980), then returning to it (and to working with producer Willie Mitchell) in 2003 (*I Can't Stop*). For you, though, it seems like it's been the same path, one straight line.

KSB: Well, it's only one way to go. You know, it's not the idea of straddling the fence, you're either the highway, or the skyway, there's no in between. And if you have a message, you have the message and you don't change that message. And if you believe, you continue to believe,

you don't let anyone turn your belief around – you make it work for you, and you make it work for those who need the same guidance, the same help, the same spiritual uplift that you have, you share that, and the more you share shows the more you care, and the more you care, the more God gives back to you. And I'm preaching again, so...

SEM: It's fine by me, it's an honor!

KSB: My manager just came in and said, "No! Don't preach!"

SEM: It's absolutely fine. Is it true that you record most of your songs in one take?

KSB: Well, we try our best to do it within two or three takes. Once you put the song in motion, to be put onto tape or to disc, or that or this, or whatever you may call it, today or tomorrow, it's there for a lifetime, and it's important for you to capture that breath, that feeling, that expression. And if you do it seventy-five times, it's not real anymore...it's just somebody repeating words; you're not even hearing them anymore. But when you just say it, look at it, feel it, read it...you know, when you say to your wife, 'I love you,' and if you say it, if you're just saying it because you feel that, you can't repeat that moment again. That's the secret, to capture those moments that become lyrics and a story right away, as soon as you can, seal 'em up, and then send 'em out there. Send the message out. It's like writing in stone. You know, once you misspell it, keep going, don't correct it, (laughs) you'll mess it up. So it didn't turn out to be a G, keep going. You know? (laughs)

SEM: One of the most interesting songs on *Like a Fire* is the album closer, "If I Give My Heart to You" (composed by Jimmy Brewster, Jimmie Crane and Al Jacobs, the song was a hit for Doris Day in 1954) – it's a standard and quite different from the rest of the material on the record. Have you considered recording an album of standards?

KSB: Oh, I'd love to do that. That's another part of my dream. "If I Give My Heart to You" is a song that was around when I was a little boy, a song I remember from the radio, but it has a message. After finishing this CD, the new part of the journey, you know the highways of life change every day, and when they change every day they change in many ways, and as we go into this moment in time, of history, where changes are so important, where it's important for us to leave a mark, one that says to the young people, 'you don't have to be crazy, you don't have to be silly, you don't have to be on drugs, you don't have to be an alcoholic, you don't have to be completely out of pocket to understand or try to deliver your art, or to show someone that you're good, that you're talented, just be real.' So here we are, and we've got this whole CD – we've got the message, we've got the story. But then I wanted to say, before you criticize me and say, 'this is that' or 'this song is that' or 'this writer is that,' or 'why did you put this writer here,' or...I just wanted to say, 'come back to reality.' I've been doing this for six decades, since 1954, and I want you to know that every one of these songs that are new to me, each one is all in my heart, and everything old is new. You know, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first...When you take this, and just drop it unexpectedly into the CD...thank God I had the opportunity, and the right, to do that, the freedom to do that. I'm with a record company that allowed me to do that, to say, 'this was me' on this CD, there's one doesn't match, that doesn't work, that doesn't go with the rest of the songs. No, but it goes with the story, because it says, 'Pay attention! Listen to me! If I give my heart to you, if I give it to you, would you handle it with care? Would you treat me kind and tenderly? And in every way, be fair?' That's just a question. I'm not asking for an answer. I just want to send that question out there, because we're failing to give our hearts, now. We're failing to give true love, we're failing

to give the real reason, we're failing to realize that once we say we love somebody and want to be with somebody, that should be for a lifetime. We're failing to dedicate ourselves completely. Life is serious, it's not a game. It's a beginning to an ending...and that's why I put "If I Give My Heart to You" in there. Just give me the piano and a bass drum, don't do nothing else. Give me somebody strange on the piano, I don't even want to use the same people, just, just...give me somebody who knows this song! And just let me sing it. I don't want to make it perfect. I want to sound hoarse, I want to sound tired, I want to sound...sincere.

SEM: Which is what you get if you listen to *In The Wee Small Hours of the Morning* or Nat King Cole's *The Very Thought of You* –

KSB: Just a little place! Just a little piano bar, or just a living room, you know?

SEM: The kind of songs that permit the voice to break with emotion when it's felt.

KSB: Yeah, you didn't have that cup of coffee, you didn't drink the glass of water...it's something that was coming from within. It's my personal moment in time. Thank you for recognizing it.

SEM: If you ever put together an album of standards, I think it'd be phenomenal.

KSB: I'd love that. I need your voice out there to say that.

SEM: I don't think Rod Stewart should corner that market. I think you should have your shot.

KSB: (laughs) I would love to do that! You know, some of the greatest songs in the world...Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Nat King Cole, Perry Como, you know, Doris Day –

SEM: Ella.

KSB: Dinah Washington, Brooke Benton, we could keep going, Al Hibbler...you know, this is why Ray Charles was so great, he could take a song and bring back a memory, bring back a feeling. You know, we don't want to lose that journey; we don't want to lose that road. This is the highway, we want to take it, we want it to be the interstate of love, the interstate of life, the interstate of music. We want you to travel on it.

SEM: Are there any young soul singers with whom you're particularly impressed, whom you might want to work with? John Legend, Alicia Keys...

KSB: I think John Legend is totally, totally in the time, of a memory, that we should not let go. He's something very special to me, musically. I adore what he's doing. Alicia Keys, Christina Aguilera, Norah Jones...well, of course Beyoncé is incredible...If you put all these people together in a choir of songs...I don't know if you could take it! It would just be a night that you could never forget, let them just sing their hearts out. You know, don't orchestrate it; let them sing what they feel. Put a great orchestra behind it, that could be forty pieces or one piece, you know, and just let it flow. This is music, this is soul. This is that fire burning within us, that so many people can't see; allow them to feel it, to touch it, and know that it can get as hot as it needs to be. Or as cold as it should be.

SEM: Soul music seems eternal. After more than fifty years, we still have artists like Alicia Keys and John Legend making records that reach back to the Sixties and Seventies, Al Green is recording new music that evokes his golden era...

KSB: It's magic. Can you imagine putting Aretha Franklin and myself, in a group, in a circle, with these wonderful people, and surrounding them with an orchestra, and then surrounding it with people, and having that moment in time?

SEM: It would be fantastic. Maybe it's time for you to start a new Soul Clan (Solomon Burke, Arthur Conley, Don Covay, Ben E. King, and Joe Tex, circa 1969, *Soul Meeting*).

KSB: (laughs) I agree! And you know the beauty of it is? And this is something that's very important. The soul within us can be released by our feelings...we are all enriched with the soul of life. Whether you're a singer, a writer, an actor, a musician, a cook, a teacher, a professor, a painter, a carpenter...when you release your inner feelings, and whatever you are, a basketball player, a football player, a nurse, doctor...this is when you release your soul, when you let go and let God, that's soul. When you write this article that you're writing, you're not going to write exactly everything I say, you're going to write what you feel that works for you, that will be released through your soul. That's what makes it soulful. That's why when you say soul music is always around, it is always around, because it's up to us to release it, in whatever we do, however we do it, that soulful thing within us. Right now we're going through a phase of life where our soul and mind and heart and spirit are being challenged, politically, financially, physically, mentally and spiritually. God bless...God bless this country, God bless each man, woman, boy and girl, but most of all – give your soul a chance.

SEM: I'd like to ask you how you feel about the nomination of an African American as the Democratic candidate for President, almost fifty years after you toured the Jim Crow South by bus. It's been an amazing four decades.

KSB: It's been part of the journey. We go all the way back to the Mayflower, we come all the way up to now, and you realize what goes around in life comes around. And when you create a moment in time, that moment exists...we're living in a time of history, when we're realizing, this is what we've created, this is what we've worked for, this is what we said we would do, this is what we said we would change. Not only do we have a black American running for President, we also have the greatest challenge in the world of a female running for President. This should show every man, every woman, every boy and every girl that the opportunity of life is wide open. Use it. Take it. The whole thing should be now that we should push education so strongly to our young people, to let them know the world is in their hands. It is their responsibility. They can't lose it by misusing it. They can't lose it by losing their lives to drugs and confusion and alcohol, and to being wild and crazy, but learn to be who you are, and take advantage of it. Because tomorrow, it may be their opportunity, to be President, to lead a new world.

SEM: Unlike a great many artists, you've never really disappeared into the darkness, and by this I mean a period of drug abuse and personal...trials, if you will. Am I right to assume it's because of your deep faith?

KSB: Well, my faith is very strong, it's from my upbringing. I was raised by my grandmother, who was a very religious woman and who taught me to believe in God, and not in unnatural things, to survive. She taught me to know that through it all, God would take care of me, to have that faith and trust, to be able to step out on nothing, believing that something's there. And this is what a lot of us fear, that we can't do it, that we don't have enough strength to handle it, that we don't have enough faith to deal with it. So they need the drugs, so they need the booze...you know, this is a letdown, because it's artificial. All of my twenty-one children, I've had problems, I've had some children with problems, and I've fought it and I've fought them back. And I keep fighting and I let them know it. I don't condone it. And I'm gonna condemn it and I'm gonna let them know if you deal with it in that way, Dad's not going to help you. I'm going to pray for you, and I'm going to pray to God that you turn your life around fast, and I'm going to keep pushing, and pushing, and telling you you're wrong. And that's what we have to do, we have to let our children know, and our children's children know, that life, this

life, is to be pure and positive. You know, you can't survive on drugs and pills and booze, that's not the answer. There's too many other great things to do. There's too many other wonderful things to enjoy. I wish I had time to go into it, but, it's an amazing feat when I can say to you, 'yes, I'm drug-free, my only rehab is trying to eat that next biscuit (laughs), you know, trying not to make that special ribs'...It's just amazing how important it is for us to try to fight against drugs, and against alcohol, and against all the confusion we're going through. And you know, one step at a time, but we have to take giant steps with it. To protect our children, to protect our children's children, and to protect our loved ones. Because it's all around you, I mean, it's demonistic – it's the spirit of the devil that's tempting you to destroy yourself, to destroy others. This war against drugs has to continue, the war against alcoholism has to continue, the war against poverty has to continue. These things have to change; we have to make that change. All of us.

SEM: Given the way the current administration has done things, I have to say it'd be great if the war on poverty could actually start.

KSB: Right (laughs). You're right. And we have such an opportunity now, and I'm hoping that what we've seen in the past six months, these campaigns, will change our hearts and minds to know that, that we're not gonna be fooled, we're gonna make good choices, we're gonna make wise decisions, and we're gonna help our government, and one another, to achieve these goals. Let's not just watch houses being built on television in an hour, let's build some houses, let's build some dams, let's correct some problems here in America. Come on, we can feed the hungry! We can house those that need homes; we can open up doors...why are we in the financial state that we're in? Why are we having the problems with oil and gasoline and prices? What's the problem? Somebody's profiting from this, and it's not the good thing – we need to turn it around now. It's up to us. It's up to us – I don't want to see your children suffer. You don't want to see them go through a depression. We don't want to stand in lines again to get gasoline. Let's do other things, let's do something greater.

SEM: I can't imagine what kind of world our children are going to inherit.

KSB: That's why we have to stand up and fight for it. And we have to fight for the right to be real, and make ourselves real, and let other people know that we're real. And this is why a simple little thing like a CD is sending a message to you: we don't want it, we don't need it, we can do without it. You know, a minute to rest, and a second to pray, this is the message I'm sending out. If you listen, I'm talking about those who have been lost, some of those we'll never get back again, the memory's gone, we have to move on to greater things, we have to pick it up and travel. All of this is understanding. Do you really understand? Do you really comprehend what I'm saying? (laughs) Are you with me? You know, so many times in concert I might stop and say, 'are you with me?' It's just to say, 'are you there? Can I just get a few people to focus in?' Or what I'm trying to say is that I love you, and that love means something today. It's stronger than hate. And if we can conquer each other, with the word love, and understanding, we can conquer all the demonistic spirits that try to take us down and turn us around, that try to destroy our children and our children's children, and our loved ones...Message of today, and the offer will be raised in ten minutes. (laughs) Thank you. Thank you for listening, and thank you for being so patient.

SEM: Oh, absolutely. I love it. I absolutely love it. Okay, my final question: What's Heaven? What's waiting for us? What's coming?

KSB: Heaven is what we make it, what we receive by our belief. It is up to us to get out of Hell; to turn our lives around, to enjoy the sweetness of life. You know, to hang up this phone when you get finished with me, and turn around and pick up that phone and call the one you love and say, 'I want to tell you, I don't care what today brings, I want you to know, I love you, and I love you because I love you. Because you're real. And I want you to know that my love for you is real.' That will make a change, that will make a difference, not taking today for granted, not taking tonight as a positive situation, but every moment in time should be a moment of tomorrow. Another day promised. It's up to us to make it work. It's up to us to make it right. It's up to us to say yes. That's the fire, burning in my soul. (laughs)

SEM: Thank you so much.

KSB: Don't give up on me, my friend.

SEM: Not possible! Not possible! You're gonna be one of the last guys standing!

KSB: I hope so! (laughs) Or sitting!

SEM: I have to say, seeing what you're doing in your sixties, maybe making some of the best music of your career – it gives me hope!

KSB: Well, thank you, and God bless you. We've got a long way to go and don't you dare give up!

SEM: Never.

KSB: I love you. God bless you, thank you again much for the opportunity.

SEM: We wish you the best of luck with your new album and on tour this summer. We will be cheering you on.

KSB: Keep me in your prayers.

ALBUM REVIEW

STEP INTO LIQUID

Air Traffic

Fractured Life

Astralwerks

May 2008

Marrying the crispness of British New Wave to the force and melodicism of Britpop, *Fractured Life*, the tour de force debut from Wessex youngsters Air Traffic arrives on these shores as perhaps one of the most assured first albums by a band since *Definitely Maybe*, The Black Crowes' *Shake Your Money Maker* or The Thrills' *So Much for the City*. Throughout the album, lead singer and songwriter Chris Wall's vocals are remarkable; perhaps one of the most singular vocal performances since Jeff Buckley's vocals on *Grace*, Liam Gallagher's on *Definitely Maybe* or Conor Deasy's on *So Much for the City*. Wall's singing is a revelation, and we may well remember 2008 as the year we first heard his soaring, urgent voice.

One of the great new bands of what might one day be defined as the post-Radiohead era, Air Traffic crafts the kind of smart, muscular anthems that evoke Blur, Jeff Buckley, Coldplay, Oasis, Radiohead, the Stereophonics and U2, while reaching back to the glam guitars and drums of *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars* and a smattering of Smiths songs, including "I Started Something I Couldn't Finish," "Panic" and "Sheila Take a Bow." Wall is quite young (his gap year after high school, which he spent surfing in Queensland, Australia, was in 2005), and his songs are steeped in the music of the Nineties. Drummer David Jordan and guitarist Tom Pritchard first noticed Wall at a 2003 school concert in Bournemouth, where Wall performed a solo rendition of Radiohead's "Go to Sleep." Current bassist Jim Maddock joined Air Traffic after Wall returned from Australia and prior to the recording of *Fractured Life*.

Air Traffic recorded *Fractured Life* at Rockfield Studios in Wales, where such booming, echoey masterpieces as *Definitely Maybe* and *(What's the Story) Morning Glory* (and much of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody") were recorded. The sound of the entire album is enormous, big piano leads entwined with effects-driven guitar lines that propel soaring, shout-along choruses that smack like cold ocean waves. These are narratives of youth, bowed by love and other sorrows, yet still triumphant, performed by a band of boys whose age belies their impeccable musicianship.

Almost every song on *Fractured Life* feels like an epic. Album opener "Just Abuse Me" begins with Wall singing over piano, then breaks into a pounding full band performance that sacrifices none of Wall's melody: "I'll let you use me, and just abuse me, but girl I want you to be mine." "Charlotte" combines the angularity of Franz Ferdinand with the bashing melodicism of Material Issue, while piano ballad "Empty Space" is similar to Lennon's "Jealous Guy" until the song's operatic finale, when it becomes more aria than pop song, Wall singing his angels up from the sea.

"I Like That" is powered by stomping drums and a restrained guitar squall, with atmospheric boogie woogie piano and a nonsensical refrain of "la-dam-ba-ba-ba-dam..." sung to the tune of the Kinks' "Sunny Afternoon" at the break. "Never Even Told Me Her Name" is simple New Wave ecstasy suffused with a reference to "Suffragette City," while "Get in Line" sounds like the Smiths' "Girl Afraid" rewritten by Weezer. The song features a percussive guitar lead during the verses, and it's here you realize that Pritchard, often playing in Wall's shadow, is a stunning guitarist and Air Traffic's secret weapon, the co-architect of songs that move liquidly from crescendo to crescendo.

The album's final two songs (excluding the hidden track), "I Can't Understand" and "Your Fractured Life," are elegiac beauties. "Fractured Life" ends with the refrain of "please don't let me down" repeated again and again, much like the refrain of "how long, to sing this song" at the end of U2's "Forty." It's the most anthemic track on an album with a surfeit of anthems. The song features an especially plangent, hopeful vocal from Wall: "you've got the strength within, don't give up there's so much more to see, so many things beyond your wildest dreams...the world is at your feet."

In *The Bushwhacked Piano*, his first novel, Thomas McGuane writes, "a famous man says that we go through life with a diminishing portfolio of enthusiasms: and these, these these *children*, these these these these *little children*, will soon not be able to feel this way about anything again."

And so, to the gentlemen of Air Traffic – here's hoping they can keep it rolling.

ALBUM REVIEW

SAVAGE GARDEN: Gutter Twins Powers Activate!

The Gutter Twins' *Saturnalia*

Sub Pop

So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached ever where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.

- Mark 16: 19-20

How could I love thee, O Night, were it not for thy stars, whose light is a language I know...

- Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*

I find it hard to restrain myself from hosannas when discussing the work of Greg Dulli. As a longtime and rabid fan of the Afghan Whigs and the Twilight Singers, I am enamored of Dulli's brilliant confessional lyrics, his careful, dense musicianship and his furnace blast white soul vocals. I have played *Gentlemen*, the sorely underrated *Black Love* and *1965* to death, and I am rarely far from some format of the Twilight Singers' *Blackberry Belle* (2003) and *Powder Burns* (2006). While I am not as familiar with Mark Lanegan's work, I am in possession, like many of my compatriots, of an oft-played copy of the Screaming Trees' *Sweet Oblivion* (1992).

Lanegan's is one of the unique voices in rock music, and one of its most compelling since Bon Scott – his baritone is a velvet snarl, a freight train, a desolate interstate. There is something metallic in his voice, rusted, as if long-abandoned to frigid rains and sunburnt afternoons. It is one of the most forceful and most recognizable instruments in rock, and it courses through every song Lanegan sings, unopposed and unyielding. While not a singer on a par with Lanegan, Dulli's voice conveys the force of his personality, urgent and unabashed, and there is something resigned, perhaps even dolorous in it, which has always added a dimension of intelligence and depth to his music. What they have in common, as vocalists, is that each of them sings with the fervor of the saved.

Lanegan has played with numerous people throughout his career, including Kurt Cobain, PJ Harvey, Duff McKagan, Queens of the Stone Age and Isobel Campbell (their new record, *Sunday At Devil Dirt*, is currently available, and follows their first disc, *Ballad of the Broken Seas*, from 2006). "Collaborating for me is what keeps me interested in music," Lanegan says. Dulli is also known for his thirst for collaboration, including past turns with Afterhours, Intramural, Lo Fidelity All Stars and Muggs (Cypress Hill); he also performed live last year with Lucinda Williams.

Dulli and Lanegan have been each other's orbit for much of our current decade. In late 2002, Lanegan sang on "Number Nine," the final song on the Twilight Singers' masterful *Blackberry Belle* (2003). In 2004, Dulli toured with Lanegan and played piano on two tracks from Lanegan's *Bubblegum* LP (2004); Lanegan later covered Massive Attack's "Live with Me" on The Twilight

Singers' 2005 EP, *A Stitch in Time*. The pair debuted as the Gutter Twins live in Rome on September 11, 2005, and recorded *Saturnalia* in New Orleans and Los Angeles in spurts throughout 2007, releasing the album on Sub Pop earlier this spring. The storied Seattle label has released all of Lanegan's solo albums to date, and was home to the Afghan Whigs' *Uptown Avondale* (1991) and *Congregation* (1992) prior to the Whigs' move to Elektra for *Gentlemen* (1993), their mainstream breakthrough.

"I think that when we started to sing together, just casually at my house in L.A. eight years ago, singing other people's songs – we both are fans of music and keen interpreters – when we sang together on my back porch, I remember thinking that we sang well together and it was very natural," Dulli says in an April 8th interview with Amy Phillips of Pitchfork Media. "I've gotten to do a lot of things and meet a lot of people I admired outside of what I did. When you get a chance to play with people – informally is one thing, but when you hook up and make something that's going to last or mean something to someone, I take it very seriously."

The sound of *Saturnalia* is more brackish and metallic, industrial at times, than any of the recent Twilight Singers albums, wherein Dulli has blended elements of electronica and trance through his songs. Writing together for the first time, Dulli and Lanegan have composed a collection of dense, direct rock songs in the tradition of Led Zeppelin and Soundgarden, replete with squalling guitar solos, strings and muscular drumbeats. *Saturnalia* is a much more traditional record than anything in the Twilight Singers oeuvre – it's bluesy, atmospheric and haunting, with arena rock ("Idle Hands") flexing and bristling beside restrained acoustic ballads ("The Body"). Dulli has never forsaken loveliness for darkness, and the record is a sonic chiaroscuro delight, its songs crammed with jagged hooks reminiscent of post-*Revolver* Beatles and Led Zeppelin circa *IV* and *Physical Graffiti*. Lanegan's vocals ground the record in rich, gritty soil, but never compromise its grandeur. Twilight Singer staples Joseph Arthur, Scott Ford, Jeff Klein, Mathias Schneeberger and Greg Wiczorek all play on *Saturnalia*; other notable appearances on the record include drummer Brian Young of Fountains of Wayne and former Tricky vocalist Martina Topley Bird, who just released her new solo album, *The Blue God*.

Saturnalia was the Ancient Roman festival of Saturn which took place on the 17th and 18th of December, and it still describes any sort of licentious, excessive celebration, including orgies. It's a clever title for a record written and performed by the Philip Roth and Charles Bukowski of American rock n' roll, but *Saturnalia* is a somber collection, and its lyrics are more about redemption and resurrection than revelry. It is a gospel record.

"Thematic signposts reveal themselves, pointing you down certain roads," Dulli says. "I couldn't tell you what *Saturnalia's* theme is, but there's a seeking of transcendence that's new. I have never written songs like this before; it's a different temple I'm visiting."

"I hate to say this," Lanegan said, "but there's a more spiritual nature than usually."

The album opens with "The Stations," on which Dulli and Lanegan call out: "I hear the rapture's comin'/they say he'll be here soon...they say He lives within me/They say for me He died/And

now I hear his footsteps/Almost every night.” The second song, “God’s Children,” seems meant to bolster the faithful: “All God’s Children/Hold yourself up to the Light/It’s a free fall – I know.” Christ is perhaps addressed again in “Each to Each,” when the Gutter Twins sing, “the world will follow you/I know you’ll rise/I know you’ll rise,” while “Who Will Lead Us?” is an actual spiritual that calls out to God: “I think that chariot is coming/And should it please you Lord/I’ll give this trumpet up/Give it up to Gabriel/Who’ll lead us now Lord/Who’ll hear the sound of grieving...Out to the Kingdom though my wretched soul be chained/Who’ll lead us now Lord/Don’t you hear me, don’t you hear me crying.”

Even more prevalent on *Saturnalia* than the presence of God is the promise of Heaven. The devil has been a disappointment, as confessed on “Idle Hands” (“There’s nothing I can do/But be the Devil’s plaything, baby/and know that I’ve been used”), while Hell may be our corporeal existence itself, that from which we depart for Heaven. On “Circle the Fringes,” life is described as a dream that lies beneath the reality of Heaven: “And I still believe there’s a Heaven below/All I see is a dream/that lies beneath it all.” Two songs later, on “Seven Stories Underground,” Lanegan sings: “Heaven – so fine/Heaven – It’s quite a climb/from seven stories underground.” “All Misery/Flowers” mentions resurrection in passing before Lanegan confesses he did all he did just to get through to Heaven: “They’d shine, your eyes/gonna make me rain gonna make me rise/When I’m gone baby don’t you forget it/I did all I did just to get through to Heaven.” It’s a lovely idea, and fitting here, that Heaven might be our reward for just surviving our mortal lives. The song is a call-and-response dirge, but leave it to Dulli and Lanegan to craft one this infectious. “All Misery/Flowers” also features a couplet that should be in the running for best lyric of the year: “Little girls might twitch at the way I itch/But when I burn/it’s a son of a bitch.” When you hear Lanegan sing it, you believe it.

Bassist Scott Ford designed the CD package, which is exceptionally beautiful. The cover features a Frank Relle photograph of an empty lot in the 9th Ward of New Orleans, while the inlay card features Sam Holden’s saturated portraits of Dulli and Lanegan. As MP3s drive album artwork toward extinction, *Saturnalia*, as a work of photography and graphic design, is a Roman candle fired into the coming digital darkness.

“We enjoyed the process of making the record,” Lanegan said. “We enjoyed the results, we enjoy each other’s company, we enjoy traveling together. So I don’t know why we wouldn’t make another record. Whether it’s the next thing that we do or not, I can’t say, but I’m sure there’ll be another one.”

Saturnalia is a dusky, disconcerting (albeit lovely) ride. It’s mink, it’s butterflies, an oil slick on a dark sea, a tire burning in the middle of an empty highway, the battered cover of a leather-bound Bible...Messrs. Dulli and Lanegan have built a dark temple. Whatever it is, it burns like a son of a bitch.

INTERNET

www.theguttertwins.com

FEATURE

EXILED + ACOUSTIC

Gilberto Gil (reissue)

2007

...there were bossa nova collections in existence, but I felt that that was, however wonderful, only an inkling of the vast music riches this country has produced...(Tropicália) shocked Brazilian audiences back in the late '60s early '70s by incorporating rock and funk styles into Brazilian music...Os Mutantes, Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil and the rest.

- David Byrne

Tropicália is the opposite of bossa nova.

- Caetano Veloso

I cannot talk/I only gotta sing/loud, loud/a crazy pop rock.

- Gilberto Gil, "crazy pop rock," from *Gilberto Gil*

SAN FRANCISCO

Two jazz soloists play fresh, contemporary sounds from modern Brazilian folk music.

- From the liner notes to *Jazz Samba*, Stan Getz & Charlie Byrd. April, 1962.

There was a feeling of dissatisfaction – possibly the hint of war to come – and people needed some romance, something dreamy, for distraction. Americans are generally not very curious about the styles of other countries. The Beatles sang rock & roll in English, the common language – they were not really a foreign thing. Our music was Brazilian music in a modern form. It was very pretty, and it was exceptional for managing to infiltrate American music culture.

- Astrud Gilberto, from the liner notes to *Getz/Gilberto* (1997 reissue).

There is neither an American national identity nor an American national culture. To describe oneself as an American is to express something far different, and perhaps much thinner, than to describe oneself as Brazilian, English, Greek, Jamaican or Mexican. Americans are united by borders and laws, and perhaps by our powerful, sophisticated and ubiquitous broadcast and film media, but we are not united by cuisine, by film, by literature, and certainly not by music. A nationality is a shared history – ours is brief, and it is not the history of a single people. American history is a story of immigration and exiles, of modernism. We are more of a potluck than a melting pot.

American popular music, the world's most varied and diverse, is not part of a national consciousness, nor does it help shape an American national identity. Although we have music both familiar to and loved by millions of Americans, including country, jazz, Motown, Elvis, Sinatra and perhaps show tunes, we do not look to our popular music as something we share as a people, as part of a national consciousness. It is not folk music.

When Justin Timberlake moves a million copies of *FutureSex/LoveSounds*, it means little to me, and when Paris Hilton or Lisa Presley cuts an album, I find myself offended and reminded that we have become a nation known for its audacity, brutality and vulgarity. I know there are perhaps millions of dots to connect between Paris Hilton and Fallujah, but both enterprises speak to me of brazen fraud, delusion (both self- and national) and heartlessness.

A brief and incomplete list of a number of musicians and bands I love right now who are making what I consider “American” music includes Bob Dylan, David Garza, Al Green, Joe Henry, Alicia Keys, Chris Lee, David Mead, Aimee Mann, Marah, Angela McCluskey, Erin Moran (“A Girl Called Eddy”), Matthew Ryan, Michael Shelley, Todd Snider, Bruce Springsteen, Matthew Sweet, Paul Westerberg and Wilco. With the exception of Dylan, Al Green, Keys, Springsteen and maybe Wilco, how many of these artists can sell enough albums in the USA to be certified gold?

On April 9, 1993, my friend John Ferguson and I were living in San Francisco, and we drove to the Cow Palace, perhaps one of the worst places on Earth for live music, to see Nirvana, who were headlining a benefit tour for the rape victims of Bosnia-Herzegovina; the tour also featured Michael Franti’s Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, the Breeders and L7, who were playing the final song of their set when we sauntered into the Cow Palace, quite excited and rather high. Once Nirvana started playing, the floor of the arena became a giant, sweaty mosh pit. When the chorus to “Lithium” kicked in – “...in a daze, ‘cause I found God! yeah-yeah-ah-yeah! yeah-yeah-ah-yeah!” – I grabbed the guy next to me by the front of his shirt, he grabbed the front of mine, and we pogo-ed up and down like two of the world’s happiest madmen. It was a beautiful moment.

The British are often kinder to American bands than we are, and they are rabid about their own. In England in 1994, when *Definitely Maybe* commenced its ascent of the British charts, it was the bellwether album of Britpop. For the British, Britpop was a cultural and creative phenomenon and a point of national pride. The British have always been devoted to their bands, many of which never even established beachheads on our shores, including legendary acts like Blur, Nick Drake, the English Beat, the Jam, Madness, the Specials, the Stone Roses and Teenage Fanclub. A cursory look at some of the great British acts of our nascent 21st Century acts includes Badly Drawn Boy, Coldplay, The Coral, Franz Ferdinand, The Libertines, Radiohead and Travis. For millions of Britons, these aren’t just great bands; they are part of their national identity. These bands belong to them. They are part of an idea of home.

My first limited exposure to Brazilian music was via James Taylor, to whom I’ve listened since I found him in my mother’s record collection while I was still in grade school. I especially loved his 1985 album, *That’s Why I’m Here*, which was released when I was a senior in high school. Taylor had recently played at Rock in Rio, a massive annual music festival in Rio de Janeiro, and the album’s “Only A Dream in Rio” was an homage to what must have been an incredible event and wonderful trip for Taylor: “strange taste of a tropical fruit/romantic language of the Portuguese/melody on a wooden flute/samba floating in a summer breeze...” Recorded in NY in

1985, the only Brazilian musician who plays on the song is percussionist Aírto Moreira, who has also played with Miles Davis, Chick Corea and Stan Getz.

About a decade later, it was Stan Getz and his tenor sax who brought me to Brazilian music and, ultimately, much deeper into jazz. My friend and next-door neighbor, Don Ciccone, bought me a copy of *Jazz Samba*, recorded by Stan Getz and American jazz guitarist and bossa nova aficionado Charlie Byrd. Originally released in April 1962, *Jazz Samba* was the beginning of the American bossa nova craze. The album is entirely instrumental, and features future standards “Desafinado”, a hit single that year, and “Samba de Uma Nota Só,” both with music by Jobim and lyrics by Newton Mendonça. *Jazz Samba* ultimately reached the number one position on the U.S. popular album chart, which, according to jazz writer Doug Ramsey, was “unprecedented for a jazz album.”

Getz’s next foray into bossa nova was *Jazz Samba Encore!*, recorded in February 1963 with bossa novista Luiz Bonfá on guitar and Jobim on piano. *Jazz Samba Encore!* featured three Jobim songs, “Só Danço Samba,” “Insensatez,” and “O Morro Não Tem Vez,” with lyrics by Brazilian poet Vinícius de Moraes, with whom Jobim had written the soundtrack to *Black Orpheus* (1959).

Getz/Gilberto, was recorded in March of 1963 with Jobim and João Gilberto, one of the founding fathers of bossa nova and a living legend in Brazilian music and jazz to this day. The record featured seven Jobim compositions, including “O Grande Amor,” with lyrics by Moraes, “Corcovado (Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars),” with lyrics by American jazz writer Gene Lees and, of course, “The Girl from Ipanema,” written by Jobim and Moraes with English lyrics by Norman Gimbel and sung by João Gilberto’s first wife, Astrud. “The Girl from Ipanema” was a worldwide hit single in 1963, and *Getz/Gilberto* was the biggest seller of the *Jazz Samba* albums.

I wanted to live in those albums. To this day, they still sound like broadcasts from a better time. They are still for me, like so much of Brazilian music, the soundtrack to the loveliest of dreams.

For Americans in the early Sixties, bossa nova was jet set music, the soundtrack to middle class leisure and sophistication. In Brazil, bossa nova was the most recent evolution of Brazilian folk music and one of the marble slabs that to this day supports the country’s cultural identity, and the importance of João Gilberto to Música Popular Brasileiro (MPB) cannot be emphasized enough. Although Caetano Veloso claimed Tropicália was the opposite of bossa nova, the movement’s radicalism was political rather than musical. In *Tropical Truth*, Veloso describes João Gilberto as his “supreme master,” his “Brazilian hero,” and his “favorite artist in modern MPB.” Gilberto’s first LP, the landmark *Chega de Saudade*, from 1959, was the reason Gilberto Gil picked up a guitar. Like João Gilberto, most of the Tropicalistas, including Gal Costa, Gil, Veloso and his younger sister, Maria Bethânia, and Tom Zé were all *Baianos*, from the northeastern state of Bahia.

LIMASSOL, CYPRUS

...even today whenever any of us sings “Chega de suadade” – still bossa nova’s anthem – in any stadium in Brazil, we are accompanied by a chorus of tens of thousands of voices of all ages singing each syllable and note of the long and rich melody. This would not happen if one were to sing “Blue Suede Shoes,” “Roll Over Beethoven” or “Rock Around the Clock.”

- Caetano Veloso, *Tropical Truth*

The new leaders regarded themselves as the trustees of morality and Christianity...(they) condemned long hair on boys and mini-skirts on girls, and ordered both to go to church...they deprived the celebrated film star, Melina Mercouri, of her citizenship for criticizing them; they banned the songs of Mikis Theodorakis, a leading composer who was also a left wing deputy; and they censored the tragedies and comedies of the classical theater...the reputation of the dictatorship began to be seriously damaged with the widespread allegation of systematic torture practised on political opponents...in spite of obstruction by the Greek government, enough evidence was obtained to leave little doubt that the accusations were true – in fact, they were understated...in 1969 a further investigation was carried out...on behalf of the Council of Europe, which reported that the Greek regime was ‘undemocratic, illiberal, authoritarian and oppressive.’

- C.M. Wodehouse, *Modern Greece: A Short History*.

In 1967 a group of army officers effected a coup in Greece, postponing elections and installing George Papadopoulos, a colonel in the Greek army, as prime minister. The dictatorship repressed activists, censored writers and musicians, and backed a coup against Archbishop Makarios, the beloved president of the Republic of Cyprus, in 1974. That July, following the coup, the dictatorship “looked the other way” as Turkey invaded Cyprus, beginning an occupation that remains in effect to this day. The arrest, exile and internment of Theodorakis was particularly shameful, since Theodorakis had been part of the Greek resistance during WWII and had composed the soundtrack to *Zorba the Greek*, an Academy Award-winning film directed and produced by Cypriot Michalis Cacoyannis in 1964.

In April of 2004 I flew to Cyprus with my wife, a Greek Cypriot, for her best friend’s wedding. The groom, Kyriakos, and I had become fast friends a year earlier, when he and my wife’s best friend traveled to San Francisco to attend my wedding. Kyriakos’s bachelor party took place a week before the wedding. We started with dinner around 10:00 PM in a traditional restaurant in the old section of the city of Limassol, the largest port in Cyprus. By 11:00 PM a band took the stage near the center of the restaurant, replete with bouzouki and guitars, and began playing. The crowd was a mix of Greek Cypriots of various ages, and everyone knew every song.

We left the restaurant well after midnight for a nightclub a few blocks away. The place was packed, and just about everyone was younger than forty. There was a small, low stage at the front of a room crowded with long tables, and a bar at the back frequented only by waitresses, since it was improbable that you might stand up, leave your table and battle your way back and forth to the bar. There was a band onstage, and they remained there throughout the night.

Three lead singers, two men and a woman, took turns fronting the band, all three of them possessed of the kind of powerful, dramatic voices that soar above the bouzouki and bouncing rhythms of Greek music. Often the last song of one singer's set became a duet with the next singer, who walked to the stage while singing into a wireless microphone. Each set comprised one classic Greek song after another, and just about every single person in the club sang along with every song.

Smashing plates is a thing of the clichéd past, both in Greece and Cyprus and throughout the Greek diaspora – the new and far less costly tradition is to toss carnations. The waitresses brought baskets of red and white carnations to every table, in between rounds, and young Greek Cypriots, drunk on Heinekens, mixed drinks and hour upon hour of the Greek popular songbook, lobbed them at the stage again and again, until the stage and the floor of the nightclub were littered with flowers. At 5:00 AM the bar finally closed and groups of friends walked down the quiet, soon-to-brighten streets of Old Limassol, still singing.

LISBON

Is there a greater middle class privilege than travel, especially the Grand Tour? I took my first trip to Europe, also my first adventure with John Ferguson, in the summer of 1992. After crossing the Channel on a sickening ferry ride and sleeping in the rain beneath the intermittent flashlight beams of the Calais police, Fergie and I decided we could no longer wait to unpeel in the Mediterranean sun. We took the train from Calais to Paris and hopped a flight to Lisbon where, that same afternoon, we hung our drenched sleeping bags on the railing of our balcony; it turned out we were across the street and high above the Coliseu, an old Lisbon theater and the city's main performance hall. That night the Coliseu was host to David Byrne, who was touring behind his second solo album, *Uh-Oh*, and his band featured a number of Brazilian musicians. A hasty currency exchange, two floor seats and a lot of cheap Portuguese wine ensued, about 100 escudos per bottle, and we stumbled into the sold-out Coliseu, carrying a bottle of wine we hadn't consumed during our afternoon drunk on the streets of Lisbon. No one patted us down at the door or checked our passports. It was a level of civilization theretofore unknown to us. We were astonished.

The Coliseu is shaped like an octagon, with rows of wooden seats bolted to a wooden floor and boxes rising straight up the walls to the ceiling, the flat geometry and perfect acoustics of an earlier time when people simply stood on wooden stages and sang. The lights went off and the entire theater went dark. People hooted and whistled, and the air was full of cigarette smoke and hash. A pinpoint spot illuminated a small circle just right of center stage, and Byrne walked onto the stage wearing black and carrying an acoustic guitar and a boom box. He set the small stereo on the stage and pressed 'play,' and the beat from "Psycho Killer" echoed throughout the high wooden box of the Coliseu. Byrne stepped forward and began his syncopated strumming: "I can't seem to face up to the facts!"

From then on he had us on our feet and in his clutches. With each of the first few songs, musicians joined Byrne onstage, until a full ten-piece band had arranged itself behind him. Byrne bounced back and forth between his solo material, including selections from his 1989

solo debut, *Rei Momo*, and Talking Heads songs. People were standing and drinking and dancing throughout the entire show. We shared our wine with the couple in front of us, and they passed back a cigarette stuffed with hash.

By the end of the show, everyone was singing and shouting, pounding on chairs and stomping on the floor. Byrne came out for an encore and played a Portuguese folk song, something called "When the Fish Farts," and the Coliseu erupted. Everyone knew every word, and they jumped up and down and sang along. When Byrne finished his encore and left the stage, we continued pounding the chairs and stomping our feet for about five minutes, until the lights came on and we relented. Beneath the bright house lights, we left the theater smiling and shouting, a few empty wine bottles skating across the floor as we exited.

According to *The Economist*, Brazil ranked thirteenth in the world in 2003 for "music sales," which includes cassettes, CDs, DVDs, vinyl and video; the country doesn't rank among the top thirty nations, however, for annual book sales or for newspaper copies sold per 1000 people. By comparison, Mexico is eleventh on the list for music sales and fifth on the list for book sales, but it doesn't appear on the "daily newspapers" list, while Germany is ranked fifth for music sales, third for book sales and ninth for daily newspapers. Brazil and South Africa are the only third world countries to appear on the music sales list. While smaller nations can't compete with the buying power of the larger industrialized nations, the list for per capita spending for music sales is topped by Norway, with Iceland at number three and Qatar at number four; Ireland and Portugal are also included on the per capita list at twelve and twenty, respectively.

BRASÍLIA

I've never seen a more corrupt, more bureaucratic country than ours.

- Antonio Carlos Jobim

...many people were jailed and seized simply for suspicion; books that were considered subversive were burned by the agencies of state repression...professors, intellectuals, journalists and even some military officers were dismissed from their jobs. All means of communication were subject to state censorship. Anyone could be charged with treason on the basis of national security. Many musicians and artists were forced to leave the country...

- Antonio Pedro Tota, "The Military Regime." *The Brazil Reader*

The era of Brazil's military dictatorship began in 1964 with the ascension of General Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco to the presidency after a bloodless coup undertaken by the military, which alleged that President Joao Goulart, a populist and reformist, had planned a communist takeover of the government. Political and cultural repression accelerated under General Artur da Costa e Silva, Castelo Branco's successor, and reached its zenith under General Emílio Garrastazu Medici. Many political prisoners were tortured under Medici, the most brutal of the military presidents, and many disappeared. In 1974, General Ernesto Geisel commenced the gradual relaxation of the dictatorship, which concluded in 1979 with the election of military president João Baptista Figueiredo and the restoration of political rights to the opposition,

amnesty for political prisoners and exiles, and the reestablishment of a free press. On October 5, 1988, Brazil ratified a new constitution.

The right, in whatever nation and whatever its permutation – fascist regime, military dictatorship, Republican administration – always aligns itself against artists, intellectuals, musicians, students and writers, and always with the dominant corporate and religious interests. Is it any wonder here in the USA that during our darkest, most shameful hour, we are consistently deceived and humiliated by one of the most anti-intellectual and right wing presidents in our history? The right is always devoted to the obfuscation of truth. Thirty-seven million Americans currently live in poverty, many of them children who will grow up malnourished and illiterate in the wealthiest nation in the world, while we pump billions of dollars into an illegal war fought largely against poor Arabs, in an invasion with obvious and frightening parallels to Hitler's march into Poland in 1939. In 2003, prior to the war, everyone on the left knew Iraq had neither chemical nor nuclear weapons, and certainly not in any stockpiles sufficient enough to justify our invasion and devastation of that country, which we may perhaps now describe as an annexation.

In much the same way the military dictatorship benefited the elite of Brazil, the Bush administration continues to better the position of our privileged classes while sending our poor to die in Iraq, with obvious and frightening parallels to Vietnam. Veloso writes in *Tropical Truth*: "within the family or among one's circle of friends, there was no possibility of anyone's sanely disagreeing with a socialist ideology. The right existed only to serve vested or unspeakable interests."

According to the CIA *World Fact Book*, 2007 online version, the current population of Brazil is approximately 190 million. About 9% of Brazilians are unemployed, and 31% of them live below the poverty line (2005). In its Millennium Development goals project for developing nations, the World Bank reports that as of 2001 the poorest 20% of Brazilians held a 2.4% share of income or consumption, while 8.2% of Brazilians were living on less than \$1 per day. According to the BBC, in 2002 Brazil carried the world's largest foreign debt.

SÃO PAULO

Led by Veloso and Gil, the Tropicálista group included Tom Zé, Gal Costa, Torquato Neto, and José Carlos Capinam – most of them also from Bahia – along with Os Mutantes, an experimental rock group...the Tropicalistas updated the metaphor of *antropofagia*, first outlined in Oswald de Andrade's *Cannibalist Manifesto* (1928), which advocated 'devouring' the cultural heritage of dominant nations and creating a radical anti-colonialist blueprint for Brazilian cultural production...the Tropicalistas produced allegorical songs that underscored the historical contradictions of their society by juxtaposing images of violence and poverty with familiar national mythologies associated with the idea of Brazil as a tropical paradise.

- Christopher Dunn, "Tropicalism and Brazilian Popular Music under Military Rule."
The Brazil Reader

Tropicalismo wanted to project itself as the triumph over two notions: one, that the version of the Western enterprise, offered by American pop and mass culture was potentially liberating – though we recognized that a naïve attraction to that version is a healthy impulse – and, two, the horrifying humiliation represented by capitulation to the narrow interests of dominant groups, whether at home or internationally. It was also an attempt to face up to the apparent coincidence, in this tropical country, of a countercultural wave emerging at the same time as the vogue in authoritarian regimes.

- Caetano Veloso, *Tropical Truth*

Tropicália opposed both the military dictatorship and a class system circumscribed by one of the world's greatest discrepancies between wealthy and poor. "As we reached adolescence," Veloso writes, "my generation dreamed of inverting this brutal legacy." Tropicália was punk in its aims but hippie in its execution. The Tropicalistas were artists, intellectuals and hippies, Gil the most cosmic amongst them, as demonstrated by some of the lyrics from *Gilberto Gil*: "the last mushroom makes room for the unknown/I get inside the secret room" and "such an idea brings a moon beam/such a floating light thread/hangs on my little cabin, lonely cabin/my lunar Volkswagen cabin." The Tropicalistas, especially Gil, were enamored of the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix, and they were inspired by the counterculture movements of the Sixties, especially by the emphasis of these movements on artistic experimentation and the defiance of class systems.

Tropicalism sought to renovate MPB, to incorporate American and British folk and rock elements into the breezy melodicism of bossa nova, not to obliterate it. The Os Mutantes version of "Baby," from the band's first album, *Os Mutantes* (also available on the 1999 Luaka Bop compilation *Everything is Possible*), sounds just as sweet and lovely as Bebel Gilberto's version on her self-titled second album from 2004. At its hardest edges, Os Mutantes' music sounds like early Santana, but the gentler songs are reminiscent of the Mamas and the Papas and even the Fifth Dimension, although more psychedelic and not as glossy. The Tropicalistas' American counterparts might have been the Doors and the Velvet Underground, two psychedelic and hyper-literate Sixties bands: both bands created seminal, wholly original pop music that surprised audiences and brought the demimonde of late Sixties American culture into view.

Tropicalism was Brazilian culture's blow against the empire, a strike at the monolith of American culture, which by the late Sixties had already wrapped its muscular, pungent shadow around the globe. The Tropicalistas appropriated some aspects of American popular music and walked away from the rest, folding electric guitars, rock n' roll beats and psychedelic keyboard flourishes into MPB but without embracing rock n' roll itself. By doing so, the Tropicalistas redefined MPB and drove it into the future. This idea of renovation, of reaching back to the past, remains today one of the pillars of MPB.

LONDON

By this time, it had become clear to the military authorities under Castelo Branco's hard-line successor, Artur Costa e Silva, that the Tropicalistas' critiques of Brazilian society were

potentially subversive. Soon after the promulgation of the draconian Fifth Institutional Act on December 13, 1968, which suspended habeas corpus, Gil and Veloso were arrested in their São Paulo apartments (December 27, 1968) and later exiled to London.

- Christopher Dunn, "Tropicalism and Brazilian Popular Music under Military Rule." *The Brazil Reader*

Suadade. One of the first things you learn in Brazil is that the word suadade (sow-dah-djee) is ubiquitous and untranslatable. It means, roughly, longing, yearning, sadness, something akin to homesick.

- Gene Lees, Liner notes, *Antonio Carlos Jobim, The Man From Ipanema*

Stable, tranquil and insuperably fashionable, the English capital, for all its Nordic, non-Latin strangeness and its insufferable climate, seemed our most rational solution...those years were a cloudy dream.

- Caetano Veloso, *Tropical Truth*

I have a strange karma with London. It brings me concentration and focus. There's a feeling in London that makes me lonely, yet complete.

- Bebel Gilberto

Gil met Jimi Hendrix before Hendrix died in London on September 18, 1970. In *Tropical Truth*, Veloso discusses the influence Hendrix had on Gil's guitar playing, and how Gil in turn changed Brazilian guitar music: "His guitar style, born out of bossa nova and reworked through his attention to Jorge Ben and his objective of reinventing the Northeastern *baião* and melody, found in Hendrix's avant-garde blues the key to what would constitute a new milestone in the history of the guitar among us, leading me to consider...that the genealogy might be Dorival Caymmí, João Gilberto, Jorge Ben, and finally Gil. Gil...was in love with Hendrix. In fact, he had felt such passion for someone else's music only twice before – for Jorge Ben and the Beatles, and no one else."

Gil recorded *Gilberto Gil* in 1971, toward the end of his second winter in London. According to Veloso, while in exile Gil "studied earnestly, met musicians, and went to a lot of concerts." "That's the way life is," Gil said in a 2003 interview with Sue Steward of *The Observer*. "You move from one state of things to another."

The following is a list of records released in late 1970 and early 1971 that establishes a context for *Gilberto Gil* and suggests what Gil might have heard on the radio or purchased in the record shops of London. I have provided the month of release where possible. Most fans of American and British popular music will admit that 1970 and 1971 were extraordinary years for music, given some of the monumental and watershed albums on this list:

1970

- *Abbey Road*, The Beatles. 26 September 1969.
- *Abraxas*, Santana. September.

- *After the Gold Rush*, Neil Young. August.
- *All Things Must Pass*, George Harrison. 27 November.
- *American Beauty*, The Grateful Dead. November.
- *Atom Heart Mother*, Pink Floyd. 5 October.
- *Band of Gypsys*, Jimi Hendrix.
- *Black Sabbath*, Black Sabbath. May.
- *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, Simon & Garfunkel. February.
- *Bryter Layter*, Nick Drake.
- *Déjà Vu*, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. 11 March.
- *John Barleycorn Must Die*, Traffic. January.
- *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, John Lennon. 11 December.
- *Ladies of the Canyon*, Joni Mitchell. April.
- *Layla & Other Assorted Love Songs*, Derek & The Dominos. November.
- *Led Zeppelin III*, Led Zeppelin. 5 October.
- *Let It Be*, The Beatles. 8 May.
- *Lola vs. the Powerman & the Money-Go-Round, Part One*, The Kinks. 27 November.
- *McCartney*, Paul McCartney. 20 April.
- *New Morning*, Bob Dylan. 21 October.
- *Sweet Baby James*, James Taylor. February.
- *Tea for the Tillerman*, Cat Stevens. November.
- *Tide*, Antonio Carlos Jobim. May.

1971

- *Caetano Veloso*, Caetano Veloso.
- *Construção*, Chico Buarque, 1971.
- *Electric Warrior*, T-Rex.
- *Every Picture Tells A Story*, Rod Stewart.
- *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, The Moody Blues.
- *Gets Next To You*, Al Green.
- *Gonna Take a Miracle*, Laura Nyro.
- *Imagine*, John Lennon. 9 September.
- *The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys*, Traffic. January.
- *Mud Slide Slim and the Blue Horizon*, James Taylor. April.
- *Muswell Hillbillies*, The Kinks. 24 November.
- *Ram*, McCartney. 17 May.
- *Paranoid*, Black Sabbath. January.
- *Sticky Fingers*, The Rolling Stones, 23 April.
- *Teaser and the Firecat*, Cat Stevens, October 1971.
- *What's Going On*, Marvin Gaye. 20 May.
- *Where I'm Coming From*, Stevie Wonder, 12 April.
- *Who's Next*, The Who.
- *Young, Gifted & Black*, Aretha Franklin.

Gilberto Gil is an album of acoustic hippie bops that bring to mind the Beatles, Richie Havens, a jazzed up Cat Stevens or a more swinging version of early Joni Mitchell records. Bassist Chris Bonett is Gil's sole accompanist on the album's eight songs, seven of them Gil's own compositions. The only cover on the album is Gil's version of Blind Faith's "Can't Find My Way Home," and it's a passionate and poignant performance. There are echoes of Donovan, but Gil's songs are simpler in their execution and production. George Harrison comes to mind, but imagine his demos as sung by Al Jarreau, with a bossa nova lilt and melodies as sweet as the Mamas and the Papas version of "Dream a Little Dream of Me." The joy inherent in Gil's singing belies that he recorded the album while in exile, and his vocals on this album are reminiscent of Ella Fitzgerald and the first Crosby, Stills & Nash album, with intermittent scattling on some songs that reminds me again of Ella, of João Gilberto, and even of Mel Tormé. When Gil hits some of the higher notes, he sounds a bit like Al Stewart. Veloso writes in *Tropical Truth* of first seeing on TV, in 1962 or 1963, "a young black man singing and playing guitar like the best of the bossa novistas. His exuberant musicality, his perfect pitch, his rhythm and fluency thrilled me."

Gilberto Gil is an album that achieves the aims of Tropicalismo, in that it cannibalizes the best of American and British pop. By choosing to sing in English, however, Gil stepped into the burgeoning milieu of Anglo-American folk rock, ultimately freeing himself on *Gilberto Gil* from the idioms of both traditional MPB and Tropicalismo. *Gilberto Gil* is a true music lover's record, dazzling and delightful from its first play; you may not hear a lovelier, more exuberant album released this year. The Water reissue of *Gilberto Gil* features a short set of three songs recorded live in London: "Can't Find My Way Home," "Up From the Skies," and "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." All three are delightful and inspired versions, with Gil chatting in Portuguese between each song.

This record is a cloudy dream, the work of a virtuoso. Listening to Gil, it's easy to assign him to a category that includes Jobim, Marley, McCartney, Joni Mitchell and Paul Weller – it seems as if he is made of music. In his 2003 collection of essays about popular music, *Songbook*, Nick Hornby describes Paul Westerberg as "a born musician...just a man who thinks and feels and loves and speaks in music." We can without reservation say the same of Gil.

Gil has recorded about fifty albums since his first, *Louvação*, in 1967, and a ridiculously brief and incomplete list of the artists with whom he has recorded includes Jorge Ben, Jimmy Cliff, Carlos Fonseca, Bebel Gilberto, João Gilberto, the I-Threes, Marisa Monte, Milton Nascimento and Caetano Veloso. Gil fell in love with Bob Marley while in exile, and in 2001 he recorded a reggae version of the Beatles' "Something" with Milton Nascimento for *Gilberto Gil & Milton Nascimento* (perhaps taking his cue from Peter Tosh's cover of "Here Comes the Sun"). In 2002, Gil and his band made a pilgrimage to Tuff Gong studios in Kingston, Jamaica, where he recorded *Kaya N'Gan Daya*, an album of Bob Marley covers (and a few originals) with the I-Threes. In January 2003, Brazil's leftist president, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a former factory worker and leader of the Workers' Party, named Gil Culture Minister.

RIO DE JANEIRO

The Tropicalistas renovated Brazilian popular music, while simultaneously making incisive critiques of the political and social dilemmas of Brazilian society. It still serves as a key reference point for artists interested in formal experimentation and creative engagement with cultural products from abroad.

- Christopher Dunn, "Tropicalism and Brazilian Popular Music under Military Rule." *The Brazil Reader*

It is great to see that bossa nova can be rejuvenated, this makes it eternal.

- Roberto Menescal, Liner notes to *Uma Batida Diferente*, Bossacucanova

The renovation of bossa nova initiated by the Tropicalistas continues today. 21st Century Brazilian music has embraced electronica, combining new beats and sonic textures with classic bossas. While electronica has changed music worldwide, Brazilian artists such as Bossacucanova, Cibelle and Bebel Gilberto have cut wonderful records that blend traditional Brazilian music with electronica, while Zuco 103, a Brazilian band based in Amsterdam, has crafted a version of Brazilian music that's closer to modern dance music than it is to bossa nova. There are also the "new traditionalists," a group of singers that includes Marisa Monte, Mariana de Moraes and Rosa Passos, who are recording new material alongside updated versions of classic songs, and of course the members of the MPB old guard – Costa, Gil, Nascimento, Veloso, even Sergio Mendes, to name a scant few – are still putting out records. Today, as always, even with the introduction of electronica, Brazilian music is about virtuosity. As with Greek music, or reggae, Brazilian artists record classic songs again and again, so each performance draws careful attention to the song's arrangement, the instrumentation, the vocals and phrasing, the overall musicianship...since the songs themselves are as familiar as lullabies.

Where to start? Putumayo has issued five Brazilian compilations, *Acoustic Brazil*, *Brasileiro*, *Brazilian Groove*, *Brazilian Groove* and *Samba Bossa Nova*. Any of these albums is a great place to begin, as is *Getz/Gilberto*. These are the records that served as my embarkation point, but there are myriad Brazilian compilations available – any door will take you into wonderful rooms.

As you travel further, Bebel Gilberto, Joao's daughter, has made some great records. On *Tanto Tempo* (2000), she covers "So Nice (Summer Samba)," originally written by Marcus Valle and Paul Sergio Valle (with English lyrics by Norman Gimbel), which was a Top 40 hit for Valle in the US. On this year's *Momento*, which was just released, Bebel covers her uncle, Chico Buarque, on "Caçada" and Cole Porter on "Night and Day." In a nod to the Tropicalistas, Bebel writes on her Web site that the title of one of her new songs, "Os Novos Yorkinos," "is an homage to the 70's Brazilian band Novos Baianos (New Bahians) who played Brazilian funk, rock and psychedelia."

Marisa Monte is one of the giants of modern MPB. Her 1994 album, *Rose and Charcoal* (Metro Blue/Capitol) was produced by Arto Lindsay, formerly of the Ambitious Lovers, and features

Gilberto Gil on acoustic guitar on four songs. Monte also covers Jorge Ben's "Balança Pema," and sings a superlative version of "Pale Blue Eyes." This is an expertly crafted album performed by a great singer with crack accompaniment.

Bossacucanova is a Rio electronica trio featuring bassist Márcio Menescal, the son of bossa novista guitarist Roberto Menescal, who joins the band on 2001's *Brasilidade* (Six Degrees). The album features a Jobim instrumental, "Surfboard," and "Água de Beber," by Jobim and Moraes. On 2004's *Uma Batida Diferente*, the trio covers Chico Buarque's "Essa Moça Tá Diferente" and Buarque and Veloso's "Vai Levendo." The gentlemen of Bossacucanova return again to Jobim on this release, which features "Águas de Março" and "Bonita," written by Jobim with Gene Lees and Ray Gilbert. The song "Queria," written with Marcos Valle, features Valle on vocals and keyboard.

I've spent a lot of time with Cibelle's self-titled album from 2003. Cibelle's voice is lovely, a bit sultry, and her songs lean more toward modern lounge and chill than they do toward bossa nova or American pop. The one Jobim outing on *Cibelle* is "Inútil Paisagem," with Portuguese lyrics by Aloysio de Oliveira and English lyrics by Ray Gilbert.

Mariana de Moraes released her self-titled debut on del sol Records in 2000; though it's a bit obscure it's worth hunting down. This is a quiet album reminiscent of *Getz/Gilberto*, *In The Wee Small Hours of the Morning* and *Francis Albert Sinatra and Antonio Carlos Jobim*. Moraes is the granddaughter of the legendary Vinicius de Moraes, and she covers his "Medo de Amar" and Jobim's "Fotografia." She also sings "Como Vou Frazer" with Dois Irmãos on the Putumayo *Brazilian Groove* compilation. She's a delicate vocalist, in the tradition of Astrud Gilberto or Blossom Dearie.

When Tower Records went bankrupt and finally shut its doors last year, I joined the legions of the undead and picked through as much of the place as I could. A lot of Six Degrees albums were available, even toward the fabled chain's final hours, and I purchased two Zuco 103 albums, *Whaa!* (2005) and *Tales of High Fever* (2002). Lead vocalist Lilian Vieira has a big voice, and it holds up in a lot of beat-heavy songs. *Whaa!* begins with an electronica samba, "Na Mangueira," a song about Estação Primavera de Mangueira, "one of Rio's most revered samba schools," where "joy has no hour and sadness has no place." Roberto Menescal guests on the song "Nhá," while Lee Scratch Perry contributes lyrics and vocals to "Love is Queen Omega" and "It's a Woman's World." It's a collaboration that might take its inspiration from Tropicalismo and probably from Gil himself. He'd certainly approve.

INTERNET

www.bebelgilberto.com

www.sixdegreesrecords.com

www.vervemusicgroup.com