

ASK SCOTT

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

1997 (Year 1: the start of Ask Scott)

July 21, 1997

Scott, what's your favorite pizza?

Jeffrey Norman

Scott: My favorite pizza place ever was Symposium Greek pizza in Davis, CA, though I'm relatively happy at any Round Table. As for my favorite topping, just yesterday I was rereading "Ash Wednesday" by T.S. Eliot (who can guess the topping?):

*Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree
In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety
On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained
In the hollow round of my skull. And God said
Shall these bones live? shall these
Bones live? And that which had been contained
In the bones (which were already dry) said chirping:
Because of the goodness of this Lady
And because of her loveliness, and because
She honours the Virgin in meditation,
We shine with brightness. And I who am here dissembled
Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love
To the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd.
It is this which recovers
My guts the strings of my eyes and the indigestible portions
Which the leopards reject.*

A: pepperoni.

honest pizza,

--Scott

August 14, 1997

Scott, what's your astrological sign?

Erin Amar

Scott: Erin, wow! How are you?

Aries.

Do you think you are much like the publicized characteristics of that sun sign?

Some people, it's important to know their signs; not me. David Hemmings, Anne Rice, Mia Farrow - if you don't know *their* signs, you gotta be missing a rich other plane of being.

Do you believe in astrology?

Two star beliefs are popular: one, that adventures involving gods and animals ended in their outlines being traced in the stars, and their position at our birth imprints our personality; two, that long ago, matter was crushed infinitely close together until one day it exploded into the observable universe, which is still generally expanding.

What I personally believe is that people born at the same time of year have a weak tendency to share traits, and that light from distant sources is frequency-shifted as if we were moving away from it. I think the other two beliefs are abstractions from those, the logic of which seems shaky to me.

Keith Moon is in the 7th house; Donnie Jupiter aligns with Chris Mars,

--Scott

September 4, 1997

Scott, do you think that you would like to, at some time, pass on your musical/scientific/artistic/tennis genes to your progeny? Would you encourage your sons or daughters to be musicians?

Bill Holmes

Scott: Well, my mother plays a *little* piano, but other than that my parents don't do any music, science, art, or tennis, so chances are I'll have to go well beyond the modest biological requirements of fatherhood if I'm going to pass those interests on.

I wouldn't encourage my kids to be professional musicians. It's a difficult life. It seems like a bad idea to have kids for anything like a furtherance of your own scope and endurance on earth. I don't want to be like a dying tom cat trying to spray all over so his inconvenienced survivors will be forced to think of him as formidable. I hope if I have kids it will be a way of giving myself up, not a way of hoarding myself.

--Scott

September 8, 1997

Scott, apart from those included on [Friends of the Family](#), are there other songs you would like to see covered? Or, is there a particular artist/band you wish would do one of your tunes?

Bettina

Scott: Most of my songs have a sort of skin-crawly aspect that I have trouble imagining putting a lot of singers in the position of having to deliver. I mean, if David Bowie decides to do "Together Now, Very Minor," yippee, but I can't imagine him singing "look-at-me togs boxed up at mom's on the floor." Or Pavement either, for different reasons. Having said that, maybe someone like Chris Stamey, since he's to some extent the source of that style for me, if you can call it a style.

Do you listen to your own recordings often? Do you listen because you think it's a good album and you (like the rest of us) enjoy hearing it or because you want to critique some aspect of it?

Oh no, I wouldn't say "want." A whole lot of personal investment goes into an album and it's awfully painful when it occurs to you that something should have been different.

Have you always lived in California?

Yes. In fact, my family on my mother's side has been here since before the gold rush. They didn't save me any.

Has the thought of moving out of the state ever appealed to you?

What, and give up surfing? Not even, bud.

Traveling is great, but as far as where I live goes, I don't think it makes a huge difference given the focuses in my life, and just making a move is a big distraction from other things in a lot of ways.

How many pets do you have and what are their names?

Right now I have six pet rats whose names are Bat-rat, Princess Rat, Runty, Capar, Jim Scurrier and John McEnrodent.

drunk on civil rats,

--Scott

September 17, 1997

Scott, have you read the recent (well, last year) manifestoes from the Eliot Was An Anti-Semite camp, the Eliot Was A Product Of His Times camp, the Eliot Was An Evil Genius camp, and the rest? Has it changed your reading of his poems?

Aaron Mandel

Scott: Not only was Eliot *not* a product of his times, he was so much at odds with his times and in so complex a way that it's very easy to misunderstand him. Though it's easy to see why the 1920 poems are taken to be anti-Semitic, I don't think it's that simple.

First, let's remember that Eliot's favorite contemporary work was Joyce's *Ulysses*, whose "Nestor" chapter was as profoundly critical of anti-Semitism as you can get. Eliot read the "Nestor" chapter (which, as an aside, is my favorite passage in literature) in 1918 and it influenced his 1918-1920 poems deeply. The best of these poems, "Gerontion," is narrated with a voice not unlike that of Joyce's Mr. Deasy, echoing Protestant progressive-industrial Europe in feeble old age. Even years before his conversion, Eliot was firmly aligned with the Anglican/Catholic tradition and like Joyce, he saw the progressives as having an anti-Semitic streak he wanted to deconstruct.

The old man in "Gerontion" complains that his "house" is a "decayed house, and the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner." Elsewhere, caricature Jews are "thought to be in league," and a narrator sneers at "Bleistein" who "stares from the protozoic slime at a perspective of Canaletto." At first glance this might read as vile snobbishness about post-Renaissance art treasures, but it should quickly be noted that Eliot disliked the Renaissance ([footnote 1](#)) and the Enlightenment; his theme was that a certain pious humility was lost with the Medieval age. The diction of "protozoic slime" is obviously not Eliot's (if Eliot were pleased with himself for freshman name-calling, this be a sorry spectacle); "Protozoic" betrays exactly the sort of Darwinian mind-set that Eliot would think points up a failing of the "Age of Enlightenment." Eliot had no quarrel with evolution as science, but he (and Joyce) were appalled at the acceptance of it as the new LOGOS of sociology. In short, Christian "progressives" would think themselves superior to Jews precisely because 1900 years of historical "progress" had been made since Christ started this *ball of progress* rolling. I think Eliot the linguist is also noting that at least Judaism is "protozoic" in the sense of being generative of vitality. Eliot's complaint is that the narrators dislike Jews hardly out of any high-minded wish to revive Christianity, but because they have chosen a socialite commercialism they would associate with Jewishness, and simply resent the competition.

Now, this is dangerously close to wishing to unite Christians in their common distate for Jewishness, and Eliot deeply regretted that such a structuring was perceived; regarding such usages, in light of the rise of Nazism, he has said he "was a sick man." Yet, it is important to realize our own susceptibility to that sickness. Far more straightforward religious bigotry than anything in Eliot can be witnessed today; it just happens to be fashionably acceptable to refer pejoratively to Christian "moralists" whereas in 1920 it was fashionably acceptable to refer pejoratively to Jewish "bankers." Think of Sinead O'Connor tearing up the picture of the Pope; if some world power started mass-murdering Catholics, this might be a gesture history would never let her live down. The issue of whether Eliot was out-of-line or not has to be decided in the same breath as whether Tool, Public Image Ltd. and Nine Inch Nails have been.

Eliot's later poetry is my favorite of any poetry; it shows the way out of the scapegoating mentality, and celebrates the Old Testament, Buddhism and Hinduism as well as his own Christian faith in a way that avoids dogmatism and didacticism. "Prufrock" is the easiest as an introduction, "The Waste Land" the most spectacular, and *Four Quartets* the richest.

like a girl Moses,

--Scott

(footnote 1) I'm no expert in categorizing paintings, but I see a definite meaning in the choice of the word "perspective." The Renaissance introduced perspective painting, which, while yielding wonderful results, was a way of handing sovereignty over to the worldly self by, in effect, saying "what *you* see, the way *you* see it, is what is worth exalting in art."

September 22, 1997

Scott, what are your thoughts on the pros and cons of working with someone with whom you're romantically involved?

James Hogard

Scott: The "pro" is that it's convenient--for at least one party; the "con" has to do with that word "romantically," which means by definition that something or other is being romanticized. If part of the something-or-other is the very glamour or success of what one person is "working" on, it's obviously dangerous magic to break that aura of mystery by turning it into part of the daily routine.

--Dr. Ruthless

September 29, 1997

Scott, why didn't dating a supermodel make your life ok? And what will make your life ok?

Kelly

Scott: It's actually "supermodels," plural--that's how lively a (fictional) social life I was having. When I wrote the song, in 1991, people said "supermodel" pretty reverently, as if actually describing some new breakthrough in human desirability. Now it's David-Lettermanized into common irony, so I doubt I picked too durable a term. Anyway, the idea was that, surprise, even dating the most desirable person you can think of doesn't make desire pack its bags and say "my work here is done." Yet that's what human brains are hardwired to perpetually expect.

This year I read an utterly brilliant book on desire in the formation of culture and religion. It's called *Things Hidden Since The Foundation Of The World*, and it's by a French theorist at Stanford University named Rene Girard. Talk about a book with a pretentious title somehow managing to live up to it! If you put a gun to my head and said "make my life okay or else," I'd hand you that book and say "okay, you asked for it."

oh, the rich people want what the poor people got

--Scott

October 6, 1997

Scott, i love all three loud family albums.

Scott: Thank you. They love you, too.

How come *the tape of only linda* is the usual standard album format (meaning 10 songs - average 3 to 4 minutes long and like 45 minutes in length, while the other two seem to be less structured - 20 songs, ranging from 1 to like 4 minutes in length and a hour long or so)?

The short answer is that since 1986 I've been tending to write songs in that variable-length mode, but that doesn't mean I always get to do things exactly my way. A lot of people have input on records, and people sometimes raise the completely legitimate objection that too much experimentation distracts from how music is supposed to work. You try to strike the best balance you can, and you also try to avoid making an album that's uncomfortably similar to any of your other albums.

Also what exactly is interbabe concern anyway?

Ant

It doesn't refer to anything; it's just a phrase that popped into my head. I suppose it's deliberately ambiguous, if you can glorify thinking "aha, that's a good title, I'm not sure why" that way.

long and like 45,

--Scott

October 13, 1997

Scott, in listening to a live Loud Family tape I was struck by how your guitar sound translates so well live. Specifically the intro to "The Real Sheila." I'd like some info on your amplification set-up and effects.

Kenneth LaBarre

Scott: I play a Telecaster, which since about 1992 has for some reason been the guitar used by almost all alternative rock acts--probably just because they're inexpensive and pretty expressive compared to something like a Les Paul. By "expressive" I mean they're trebly and you can hear a lot of string transients, as opposed to having a purer, ringing sound. My "clean" (unfuzzy) tone has a lot of compression and an EQ in sort of a rolling hill pattern which boosts the lows and cuts the highs, except for a little spiky boost at about 3k. Marshall EQs are all but useless so you need an outboard EQ to get a bright guitar like a Fender to sound warm at all.

Fuzz pedals are sort of a black art. Each one has its own input volume and EQ it likes the best. I've had good luck with Bosses, which are dependable, Rats, which I guess you'd say have the most purely aggressive sound, and something called the Yardbox which allegedly has the electronics

used by Jimmy Page from 1966-68. Can't you tell? I never use Marshall overdrive (this just means you turn the first amp stage way, way up) live because it requires too much fussing to get it right, but in the studio that's probably the best sound.

Here's one live issue not many people believe in, but is real: if you use long or crummy cords, it worsens the sound--you get high frequency and transient loss from long pieces of metal in close proximity--and the best way to compensate is to boost the signal at the source with a preamp. My friend Don Tillman designed an ingenious tiny preamp that's distributed into the housing of the cord plugs, and I swear by those but obviously they're not mass-marketed; they should be!

what do we sensitive songwriters know, we're too busy stopping war

--Scott

October 20, 1997

Scott, I'm the proud new owner of a Loud Family J-shirt. I'm sure this has probably been answered before, but I can't recall the response. Just what does the "J" on the front of the shirt stand for? Joyce? Jesuit? Justification? Joker? Prying, bored minds need to know!

Roger Winston

Scott: It's one of those cases where if you answer the question you probably spoil the fun, but ostensibly it was "J" for "Jimmy" in the song; we did one prototype shirt for the "Jimmy Still Comes Around" video before we decided to make production copies. Zach Smith's son Joaquin played (if that's the word) the Jimmy of the video and wore the shirt. The letter is positioned as it is to look like a tie if you wear it with a jacket. Just like those tuxedo T-shirts we never get tired of.

Of course, I had in mind that people might pick out different "J" associations, "Joyce" being among them, and there's one other that relates to a lyric of mine. And of course Jamiroquois.

Jesuit, Joker, midnight toker

--Scott

Scott, wordy folks' words seem to provide a good deal of inspiration to you. Here's a very select list: Joyce, Eliot, Nabokov, Joyce, Barthes, Joyce.... This little column itself has been rather literary itself thus far, already kicking out a recommendation I plan to track down in Rene Girard. So: What have you been reading since *Interbabe Concern*, and do you see any of it making its impression on future recording projects?

Jon Tveite

Scott: Thanks to my friend Bob Lloyd (who I'm pretty sure is or has been on Loud-Fans) I've been introduced to this guy in Sonoma named Gil Bailie who does Christian-oriented lecture series on literature. I hesitate to say the word "Christian" because it conjures up images of sweaty

televangelists and people dancing with snakes, but this guy is better at stating the truths of the classics in plain language than I thought possible. He bests anything I've experienced academically or, say, on PBS, and I mean that to say a lot. Via Bailie, I've gotten much more interested in classic writing lately. I've been studying Dante's *INFERNO*, a couple of Shakespeare plays--*KING LEAR* and *JULIUS CAESAR*--and the Gospel of John. I've also gotten interested in the philosophical writings of Derrida, Wittgenstein, and Martin Buber, and I've been reading a lot more poetry: Wallace Stevens, Yeats, Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, Allen Ginsberg, W.H. Auden, to name a few.

I can't say it all affects "future recording projects" much, because study is understanding, and what I write and think of as good lines are those that say something I don't understand, but feel is true. What it has done is reveal that much past ground I've covered has been covered earlier and better, and that is a good feeling.

Also: What would you consider your (let's say) 5 favorite books of fiction (Is it allowable if I ask you to exclude Jimmy J.? Is he not a given?)?

Here is a speedy listing of my ten favorite novels. You may pick the Joyce out with a fork if you like and that will still leave five, but I want to stress that Joyce seems to me to be in a league of his own given the novels I've read, though I haven't read many. I don't love the novel form; maybe I'm just thick, but I think novels overextend what one person can have to say to another about the world given a year or two's research. The top half of my list strikes me as refined past this, but whenever novels run out of simple intrigue, they tend to fall into a sort of formulaic display of personal insightfulness, and beyond the scope of about a chapter, one insightful individual carries on in fiction a lot like the next. That said, I have nothing against intrigue, even porn; if I were honest with myself, I'd probably put *INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE* on a list of 20.

1. *FINNEGANS WAKE* - James Joyce
2. *ULYSSES* - James Joyce
3. *A LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU* - Marcel Proust
4. *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* - Jane Austen
5. *HEART OF DARKNESS* - Joseph Conrad
6. *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN* - James Joyce
7. *WISE BLOOD* - Flannery O'Connor
8. *THE SOUND AND THE FURY* - William Faulkner
9. *PALE FIRE* - Vladimir Nabokov
10. *NAKED LUNCH* - William S. Burroughs

Finally, for extra credit: Does the name "Donald Barthelme" ring any charmed bells for you (just curious)?

Not to presume I got any regular credit, but I lose the extra.

"I'm not a literary critic, but I play one on the web"

--Scott

October 27, 1997

Scott, I'm not even going to gush fan-like. It still wouldn't do justice to what your body of work means to me. However, if you feel like answering one of these. . .

Geoffrey Woolf

Scott: Thanks very much.

1. Do you know what Michael Quercio is up to these days? Do you know if there's any chance of another PGL LP happening any time soon. Any chance that you will collaborate with him again?

Last I heard he was in L.A. doing wonderful things with Permanent Green Light. Oddly enough, he called and left a message some time ago, and the return number didn't work. If someone contacts him, please ask him to try again.

2. Do you have any thoughts on the new Oasis LP?

I haven't heard much of it yet. I liked the first and loved the second, but I have trouble imagining a long and full relationship with them.

If I'm remembering right, they gave one of the most Tufnelesque interviews I've ever heard, which went something like this:

Oasis member: "The only important bands have been Oasis and the Beatles. If we were around in those days, we would have been the Beatles."

Interviewer: "Who would the Beatles have been."

Oasis member: "They would have been the Beatles, too. We both would have been the Beatles."

--Scott

November 3, 1997

Scott, it's often been said that the highway to hell is paved with good intentions.

Scott: Yes, for sorting out your finer Faustian points of the afterlife, your 80s metal rocker is your man.

What does that mean, anyway?

Paula Carino

AC/DC slant aside, this question is important as hell (rimshot), and since modern people don't conceive of hell, I may have to, as Dante used to say, get Medieval on your ass (rimshot w/ cymbal).

Einstein showed that time is like a fourth dimension of space; moderns should be uniquely qualified to say "eternal" and not necessarily mean "repeated infinitely into the future" but "true regardless of passing time." It should not be mysterious to say "all moments of our lives are eternal." We (more than most cultures) are hypnotized by the apparent specialness of the present moment, but do past moments disappear into unreality? It seems more likely to me that all moments are always "there" and just as real in geometric spacetime.

Yet when modern people hear "sin leads to hell," we think of God repeatedly punishing someone forever for breaking a taboo. What I think people like Augustine and Dante had in mind was closer to defining sin as thought which by nature deteriorates into inescapable misery. "Sinning" is acting on an incorrect model of reality--what is translated from the Greek as "sin" in the Bible is the same word ("hamartia") as the word meaning "tragic flaw" in Greek drama--and the deadliness of "deadly" sins isn't that they're greater abominations per se, but that in the social order they feed back: envy leads to more envy, wrath leads to more wrath.

Without speaking of reincarnation or afterlife (or upgrade!), hell has a useful meaning: it's getting into so wrong a frame of mind that you die before you get out of it. Your whole life is spent desperately grabbing and not getting, hurting those around you and infecting them with your attitude; and if that is what you have made of your existence in the spacetime cosmos, too bad. You have authored a reality which is always as it is.

Now, what road leads to hell? The first hell-on-earth most of us think of is the Nazi death camps. Let's note that the success of Nazism was by its own proclamation a "triumph of the will." In other words, a triumph of intent, a refusal to be slowed or contaminated by other points of view. And of course every impassioned person thinks his own intentions are "good." Dante and the Buddha would agree that the self before it is purged of worldly desires (what Rene Girard deftly identifies as "mimetic," or imitative desires) is something like a spoilt (Victorian?) child. The self outgrows "selfish" behavior as it learns more about the world, but for a time it only knows that it wants what other people want--shooting a rival to get his jacket or tennis shoes is good because you assimilate something you have observed to be perceived as good in other people's eyes.

In other words, everyone is initially on more or less the same road of bad (selfish) intents from the start, and human culture has the perpetual task of heading off crises of conflict. This, to me is the "Fall of Man," eating from the tree of knowledge in Genesis--not so much that knowledge is bad, but that a little knowledge is dangerous. The individual's will must be brought gradually in line with what has been called the divine will, what you would desire if you knew infinitely much about the cosmos, if you were fully awake.

To get off the road to hell is to go from "life is hell" to "life is hell because of people acting with the same intent as I have had." It is learning not to have your will triumph.

always back, never in the black

--Scott

November 10, 1997

Scott, You and Todd Rundgren would seem to be kindred spirits, with regard to both your musical sensibilities (read: genius)

Scott: What a generous word choice, thank you.

and your technical background. Have you ever considered a collaboration? Would one be possible?

I consider Todd to have made some of the best pop music of my era; I would be delighted to collaborate with him. However, I doubt he's heard of me, and I doubt he'd like my music if he had.

Should we fear that the two of you in close proximity might cause some sort of karmic meltdown?

jbenson

Let's put it this way. If the universe were to bring about sudden atonement for the combined effects of Todd and myself, I wouldn't want to be standing near electrical equipment.

--the ever-affected populist art torturer

Scott, I've recently been rekindling a dormant but once torrid teen affair I had with the music of Steely Dan. Aside from being struck by the odd notion that the Louds would sound wonderful covering "King of the World," I'm curious what feelings, if any, you have or have had for their music, their influence on you, their legacy whether good and evil (pronounce that short "i"), etc.

Jeffrey Norman

Scott: Really love their first three albums. I suspect my musical and lyrical worldviews owe them a large debt. I've had moments of intense nostalgia for that band--as if it's an unmistakable tragedy that college students in the future, who will have their own Ramones or Jonathan Richmans, will not have a Steely Dan, and will miss a certain feeling, maybe when grades are going rotten, of hints at the magnificent gravity of high culture, and of big city culture, by and for those who are just barely outsiders.

COUNTDOWN TO ECSTASY is probably the peak. Its hand is the steadiest. It can be apocalyptic without being brutal, consoling without being naively optimistic. It reminds me of EXILE IN GUYVILLE in that through its conversational flow alone, incisiveness together with the humility not to leave deadly blame lying around, it gives the impression of being in the presence of a young master.

Their mature period struck me as mannered and melodramatic--retelling of the plight of the *player* beyond my willingness to stake him.

there is most definitely a hole in the ground where they used to grow,

--Bodhiscottva

November 17, 1997

Scott, what inspired you to the tune of "Still its own Reward"? I can, or think I can make out the lyrics, but it would be fun to hear about those from the preverbal horses mouth as well...

Tim Pintsch

Scott: It's not so much a single emotional event with me, but more like over time I'll notice that certain emotional events share certain details, and then I'll use those details in referring to a fictional event. Rhyme schemes are funny; by placing this silly restriction on you, they can be good as the first cause of wanting to talk about something: "Survival," "rival"--"turn into your fiercest rival"; wait, I've actually felt that occur in relationships and no one really talks about it! Perfect! That kind of thing (I don't remember actual details of writing this song but you get the idea).

Kudos on your music, I just recently heard your music for the first time.

Thanks very much. Please tell hundreds of thousands of friends.

--the preverbal horse

Scott, I was walking to the UBahn stop in Munich, listening to *Interbabe Concern*, and I realized:

Someone else reads shampoo bottles.

Cool.

Libby Wilson

Scott: Thank you. With my hair, it can't hurt to send out the message that I've probably washed it at least once.

walking to the UBahngi stomp,

--Scott

November 24, 1997

Scott, whatever you do, don't take this as a criticism of your music...

Scott: Yeah, sure, then just when I start trusting you, in goes the knife.

The other day, I pulled out my copy of *Big Shot Chronicles* and popped it into my car radio. Played like a charm, despite my reckless college years a decade ago (eek!) when I abused tapes

horribly. Many an artist's work found a frightening death in the hot July sun. *Real Nighttime*, too, has played flawlessly since I first bought it oh so many years ago.

Contrast that with my experiences with *Lolita Nation* and *Two Steps...* About a dozen times after I played them (or, about a month after first buying them when they were released), they became plagued with this ungodly tinny sound. (No, Scott, it wasn't your voice.) I still have them, but they're pretty useless now.

What gives? Was the tape quality poorer as time went on? Luckily, I have *Two Steps* on cd, but I'm screwed with *Lolita*? What would Joyce or Eliot do?

Raymond Hennessey

LOLITA NATION, of course, was an underground release--not an establishment tool to keep the people from the truth like so-called "high quality" products. Maybe a few cassettes were exposed to tear gas when the man raided our basement, or crushed when we huddled together for warmth under the printing press; that is the tinniness of freedom, brother, and the azimuth error of revolution.

--Abbie Roadman

Scott, what's the best way to make new friends and meet interesting, eligible young babes?

Scott: Joining loud-fans didn't accomplish this? I blame myself.

Okay. Throw a party and invite your six favorite IEYBs, and also the five most attractive single guys you can think of. The guys will be all over the IEYBs, think you're the greatest for facilitating this, and feel good about being your friend. And even if they all pair off successfully there will be one babe left over for you.

How do you keep towels smelling fresh rather than stale and musty, downright funky at times?

John Cafiero

Dry the extremities of the body as usual, then while drying the face and shoulders, hold your breath.*

--King Solomonella

* And remember: a down bay towel to wad and chew on (a down bay towel's a wad you need).

December 1, 1997

Scott, what does the word "Regenisraen" mean and what's the song about?

Eric Davies

Scott: There's no hidden meaning that I can recall. I'll say a few things I think are obvious, and maybe they're not so obvious because I'm not so vivid a lyricist:

The word came to me in a dream, sung roughly as it is on the track. I'm sure it's not any real word. I hear fragments of the words "regeneration," "rain," and at least two more that I can't remember. It puts me in mind of something like a hymn, glorifying and calling up a source of renewal.

In the first verse I'm sleepless, and walking around outside at Christmastime in the snow, looking at the houses with Christmas lights.

In the second verse, I talk about "coastal cities" that "glitter on the black," maybe as they would look at night from an airplane. Then I say "mustard yellow and brick red between" meaning I guess (I just like the words there, I don't ponder what exactly they have to mean) inland, less flashy places, such as the primitive hut-dwelling veldtlands of Sacramento or Denver.

I say I cry to lose a friend, and that would be the dead variety of friend. The last line questions if I'm becoming patient in the face of such things, and whether that's good or bad. Then it's back to the old tabernacle for another rousing chorus.

December 8, 1997

Scott, I would really like to know how you were able to deal with the five year hiatus between *Two Steps* and *Plants and Birds*... You had formerly released an album a year up until 1989, it must have been a difficult period. Why didn't you just self produce a record during that period? I feel like we lost five years out of the career of one of the all time great songwriters.

Steven Matrick

Scott: That's incredibly nice of you to say. Right after TWO STEPS I had a hot writing streak, so about 2/3 of PLANTS could have come out in '89, but it wouldn't have been too good. That was a low-confidence period of my life, and sometimes that causes you to blow a project in subtle ways. There were a lot of hideous lyrics that the following years allowed me to identify and fix up. The early "Aerodeliria," for instance, was a real zero lyrically, it didn't have the "look what we've gotten ourselves in" part--which is maybe the best part--and of course Paul wasn't on the scene yet so it wouldn't have had any piano at all, and it's hard for me to think of that song existing without the piano solo.

I could have plowed ahead and put something out in about '91, but by that time the Loud Family had started, so there was some startup overhead for that lineup to learn songs. We talked about putting something out if we didn't get a deal, but as I say it was a low-confidence period and on some level you're waiting for labels to tell you you're good enough.

December 15, 1997

Scott, have you ever thought of going for broke, swallowing your pride and writing that complete and utter college radio symphony sell-out single that would instantly propel you into the land of Deep Blue Something and Four Non-Blondes?

Scott: Wow, I'm so old I remember when college radio wasn't a *leading indicator*, it was just a backwater. Those were the days.

It's obvious to anyone that really listens to your music that you can certainly write excellent songs, but lurking in the back of your mind (or even strutting at the front) must be the desire to sell (what we call in the UK) an absolute shitload of records. I know you can do it. You know you can do it But do you want to do it?

Ian-Paul Rushbury

Thanks, that's quite a compliment. I suspect my songs would stop seeming excellent to you if I tried to sell a lot, and not because it's somehow less noble to have a less exclusive audience. In the music business there are basically two ways to get popular: to imitate what is popular, or to imitate the preferred manner of distancing yourself from what is popular. Both severely limit the range of what you can get across--you effectively have to dedicate most of your bandwidth to making yourself acceptable by stylistic association--and the latter is insidiously deadly because it works against the musical experience. The problem with hipness is that it usually means you know not to do certain embarrassing things, and if you get a large enough library of things you have to avoid doing, you become hysterically unmusical: music, being entirely temporal, will only ever run on similarity, it will never run on difference. There is no such thing as negative resonance at the level of the ear. To put it in overly poetic terms, music can only be love, it can never be hate. What is purely musical is always love of what the music is, it can never be hatred of what the music is not--such a reaction is only valid in the realm of rhetoric, not music (not to claim my records work independently of a rhetorical dimension).

and the crowd goes mild, *

--Scott

* Footnote: this phrase is as far as I know a coinage of Tim Walters.

Scott, this is not in the form of a question, so I hope I'm not disqualified.

Scott: I don't know. Judges...?

Though your humility is charming, I can assure that Todd Rundgren both knows who you are and admires your work. (Editor's Note: The writer is referring to the 11/10/97 Ask Scott column.)

Okay, the judges will accept this since you used the word "charming."

On a "Guest DJ" feature that aired sometime last year on Philadelphia's WXPN, Rundgren played "Slit My Wrists" as one of his first selections. Though his exact words have long since escaped me, he was very complimentary.

Jim Sundra

Wow, that's very exciting. Thanks for passing it on.

--Scodd

December 22, 1997

Scott, tell us about what goes on in the studio. More specifically, are songs finished when you sit down to record them, or does the band help you mold them into the works of art that they are?

Scott: In the Loud Family the band have with rare exceptions written all their own parts. I've recorded many songs many different ways, but usually once recording starts, the song is mostly written and arranged. The first thing you record is drums and bass, with scratch guitar and vocal (meaning just for cuing, not the performance going on the record). Then you add one thing at a time, playing along to the tape.

I'm sure you've answered that question before, so I'll get right to the point. Did Gui come up with the bass line for "Last Day That We're Young" or did you?

I wrote that particular line but Gui wrote his own parts at least half the time. I think Rob wrote all his except "Aerodeliria"; Kenny writes all his.

Do you ever envision the other instrumental parts (i.e. how the keys should sound, or where a drum fill should be, etc.), or do you leave all of that up to the ensemble that you have assembled?

There's typically back-and-forth discussion of who plays what as you work it up. I'm not capable of composing the strokes of a drum fill, but I'll suggest that there be more or fewer fills in the song in general. Sometimes I'll write a piano part note-for-note (the one in "Inverness," for instance) but almost always the keyboardist writes the keyboard part.

In my mind, I see Elvis Costello dictating every sound that appears on his record - not because he's a fascist, but because he has this incredible musical vision. Do you think that's how he records?

I kind of doubt he does, but I'd be curious. The Attractions records have about the best small-combo arrangements in history, and his non-Attractions sessions can sometimes get downright incoherent; I suspect the Attractions bring a certain amount of creative firepower.

Is it that way for you? This brings up another question (sorry). Let say "Last Day That We're Young" originally was a sensitive ballad. Gui comes up with this propulsive bass line that transforms the whole thing into a giant-rock-rolling-down- this-big-hill-and-there-ain't-no-way-to-stop-it RAWK song. Does he then get songwriting credit? I would imagine, at that point, he would. The question is: where do you draw the line? How much of what we hear is Scott Miller and how much is Game Theory/Loud Family?

Theoretically the line is based on who deserves money if it's covered. When you talk about covering another artist's song, you usually mean you're going to sing the same words and melody over more or less the same chords, but on some songs you're lost if you don't import parts of the recorded arrangement (a cover of "Super Freak" without the bass line would be a pretty abstract concept), so if people contribute significantly enough to the arrangement I'll give them writing credit.

One of many Dougs,

Doug Stanley

our best wishes to your people

--the Scotts

December 29, 1997

Scott, what were your feelings on Princess Diana's death?

Scott: What disturbed me was the way so many people concerned themselves with whether or not others were mourning properly. "The royal family should have grieved more publicly," that kind of thing. What's with people appointing themselves the Sad Police?

Aren't you pretty tall? Are you a demon at the net? What do you prefer to play: singles, doubles or mixed? Two handed or one handed backhand?

I am a towering five foot eleven, a net novice, an enthusiast for both singles and doubles (have never played mixed) with a backhand which if I remember life before I started making this record was two-handed.

How old are you and are you getting grey hairs?

37, no grey hair, medium crows' feet, some crotchitiness, recognizes relatives' faces, mild wandering.

When are you playing Atlanta? (just kidding)

Bettina

Scott: Presumably we'll be there on the June tour. Uh, should I wonder why you're just kidding?

no slice till Brooklyn,

--Scott

Scott, regarding Raymond Hennessey's squealing tape dilemma--I *think* that might be caused by the gear thingies (am I getting too technical here?) inside the cassette scraping the inside walls of the tape. (*Editor's Note: The writer is referring to the 11/24/97 Ask Scott column.*) I think this because one of my tapes that developed this problem eventually just started sticking and not generally not moving any of its moving parts at all when I tried to play it. Anyway, if Ray's tape has not yet reached this final stage, perhaps the problem can be circumvented by making a copy of the original before it's too late (though he'll obviously have to leave the house while it's taping unless he wants to listen to a lot of squealing). I don't know if this experiment will really work, though, since it's too late for *me* to try it.

Sorry I don't have an actual question for you, Scott, but if it makes you feel better, I haven't been able to get "Spot the Setup" out of my head for days.

Francis Heaney

Scott: I think that might be caused by the song scraping the inside walls of your head. If your head has not yet reached the final stage, perhaps the problem can be circumvented by having the head replaced with a copy (people will want to leave the house unless they want to listen to a lot of squealing).

busy turning on the machines that NEATLY PUMP AIR

--Scott

ASK SCOTT

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

1998 (Year 2)

January 5, 1998

Scott, I notice that you haven't really written too many songs about your eating habits, so I'm having a bit of trouble reading between the lines.

When I go to restaurants, I sometimes eat meat. Sometimes I order a veal dish, and other meat eaters at the table get all upset that I like to eat veal. Meanwhile they're eating a steak. Basically, what I'm asking is--if one is going to eat meat anyway, doesn't it seem a bit hypocritical to make some sort of distinction that eating grown-up animals is OK, but eating baby animals is cruel?

Geoff

Scott: I've never worked myself to a Morrisseyan level of sensitivity here. My guess is that in the wild, there's little chance that any given cow won't end up being killed and eaten by something. I doubt they die of old age much, or fling themselves off bridges because they are doomed to be attracted to those who are careless with their feelings.

On the other hand, it disturbs me greatly that to support gross overconsumption we breed races of animals that have shitty lives. I'm convinced that veal calves have so shitty a life that I shouldn't eat them. I eat some red meat, but at such a modest rate that it would take me a long time to mandate the death of one further animal (I figure that chickens and fish don't mind being killed since they don't look up at you with big sad eyes).

Not to judge anybody, but it seems to me the inescapable truth of your effect on cowdom is that whether you in your puny lifetime eat meat or not is probably negligible compared to how many children you have--whether you nudge humanity toward increasing or decreasing voraciousness. My feeling is that ranching just needs to get back to a saner planetary scale of land and animal usage.

--Scott Miller, cowpunk

Scott, your favorites list is so perfectly in synch with mine, it gave me the chills. Really fun reading, nostalgia-o-rama, and great for future shopping lists. But Scott, for 1995 and 96, where is Jack Logan?? Bulk and Mood Elevator are nothing short of amazing. You no like? Me no believe.

Jo Brown

Scott: Jack Logan's BULK is my number 32 of 1994. Never heard Mood Elevator. As we all know, there are several million records released every week nowadays; I'm bound to miss some good ones.

And are your favorites on line somewhere?

nostalgic for nostalgia,

--Scott

January 12, 1998

Scott, this Q&A thing is a wonderful idea! The last time I had the chance to converse with one of my musical heroes was when Elvis Costello sat down in front of me in a bar. Shocked into paralysis, I didn't say a word. I'm feeling less tongue-tied now.

Scott: I have no plans to become a big enough star to cause any apoplexy.

First, thanks for answering these questions. You obviously put a lot of work into this (I was all ready to rebut your defense of Eliot, but upon re-reading your epistle I realized you were right!)

Glad to hear it. And, the sense of his poetry aside, it's hard to believe, if he would refuse all contact with his dear friend Ezra Pound on the sole grounds that Pound wouldn't cease his Jew-baiting, that Eliot the man was unusually hostile or indifferent to Jewish people.

Second, thanks for making such great music. Thanks a lot. I've been listening since '88, and recently came to the realization that *Lolita Nation* is my favorite album ever. Now if I could only convince everyone else...

You're much too kind, but it being the case that these albums are an unbelievable amount of work to make, thanks for reminding me that occasionally someone considers one of them worth the trouble.

Going back to *Real Nighttime*, I've noticed that your albums have created a kind of pattern, alternatingly complex and simple. *Real Nighttime*, *Lolita Nation*, *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things*, and *Interbabe Concern* are all gloriously complex, dense, recursive, and experimental. On the other hand, *The Big Shot Chronicles*, *Two Steps from the Middle Ages*, and *The Tape of Only Linda* hew more to the traditional "song-pause-song-pause-song" structure which we all know so well. So here are my questions:

As a quick aside, I don't see what's so complex about *Real Nighttime*.

Do you agree with my assessment? If so, do you do this on purpose? Will *Days for Days* be more satisfying to Marcia and Etrusca, or Carol and Alison?

It's more or less accidental that the level of experimentation has alternated like that, and the formula probably doesn't apply nowadays as there's not even any particular tide of pressure to behave myself after doing a more self-indulgent one. To me this new one works on a different plane of decidability of such things (I don't want to be so specific that I spoil people's first listen), though there's a nonzero chance that this is the one where even fans of the *Lolita Nation* type records will think I finally just had too much, as Robert Johnson used to say, ramblin' on my mind.

Where I go back to work and get depressed,

David Seldin

p.s. Please come to Boston in the springtime.

okay, but my #1 fan in Tennessee said it ain't my kind of town...

--"Ramblin' Boy" Miller

Scott, I know that "Chicago and Miss Jovan's Land-o-Mat" was recorded last year during the *Interbabe* sessions, but did you actually write the song in 1989...when you were 29?

Jack Lippold

Scott: No, the fictional person being addressed in the song is 29. I wrote most of the song in 1929, when I was 29.

I'm a boy and I'm a man, I'm 29

--Scott

January 19, 1998

Scott, thanks for giving devotees of intelligent, literate pop hours of listening, not to say deconstructing, pleasure.

Scott: You are most welcome, although the idea of scrutiny makes me as nervous as it would make you. I will imagine that if Jacques Derrida were here he'd remind me that being deconstructed is nothing to worry about, that my obliviousness to certain dimensions might in fact be what leads to them being considered.

Your fondness for Joyce and dislike of Pynchon has been fodder for some interesting discussions.

Oh, how small of me to act as if I could effortlessly find fault in one of the best living writers! Much of the writing in GRAVITY'S RAINBOW is nothing short of dazzling. What's going on is

that because I don't see a large structure I find meaningful, I shoot my mouth off and claim there is none.

But to compare anyone with Joyce or Eliot, oh. The reader is at first baffled by Joyce and Eliot, yet there are enough brilliant lines, single sentences that are worth a year of hard-won experience in life, to know something very important is going on. Then on revisitation, more lines are clear. Then on reading critical analyses, more, and at some point you come to the awesome suspicion that the aspects of Joyce and Eliot you didn't understand correspond exactly to the aspects of life you didn't understand. There is of course an element of having to come up to speed with references they make to other material, but I can only say that if Eliot deems it appropriate to in effect say "go read the entire Divine Comedy, then we can come back to this part," I'll jolly well go read the entire Divine Comedy.

I'm curious to know if you've read new-kid-on-the-block David Foster Wallace, and what you think if you have.

He certainly comes well-recommended, but no, I know nothing about him/it. I should probably read it soon, before absorption of "the story on it" alters the experience.

(and in case that doesn't pan out, here's the small emergency back-up question...)

"Don't Entertain Me Twice" has long been one of my favorites of the Game Theory canon.

[...Don't I remember being fired out of that one!...]

I've wondered for years whether lines like "thin film found on co-ed walls" were ripped from the headlines, a la "Day in the Life" or if there are any other insights you'd like to share about the tune.

Doug Mayo-Wells

I don't remember the "film" line referring to any real thing. Because I can't hear "share insights" and not think "convince people to like it," let's admit that the following are only my thoughts today, not a claim any of it is contained in the song. That was my being-a-grown-up album and in some of the songs I was going through and identifying what in the adult world was just a new way of being childish, and in that song it was the repetition of cheap highs from social and sexual maneuverings. Looking up the word "entertain," I see the derivation is "to hold between," as in to hold the attention, and I think if that's all that ever happens--and it never changes your life, it never transforms you--there's an element of being a prisoner of the minor dramas and chance situations of your life, of you being a sort of nonentity in the face of whatever is vying for your attention.

I don't have the words in front of me...wait, thanks to the web, I do! Ah, okay. Uh-huh. Most definitely.

An evil woman done me wrong.

a ass pocket of whimsy,

--Scott

January 26, 1998

Scott, first of all, I must say that I've been a dotting fan of your music for a dozen years or so. Thanks for making it happen.

Scott: Thanks, it's been as much a pleasure as anything so anxiety-ridden can be.

I could ask about your preferences in hair care and underwear, but I am even more curious about the following:

Was the song "Slip" on LN in any way inspired by the Road Runner theme song?

Not consciously, but I think I see what you mean. It has the same beat, and there's that one sound on the Pro-1 synthesizer which more or less screams cartoon. I could well have been unconsciously steering it toward similarity to something like that; it would fit with the motif of juvenile references.

What significant challenges do you face in balancing music and dayjobs?

Mostly just that it all takes so much time. Every time I do an album now I'm convinced it was so exhausting I could never do another one.

These days, a lot of old bands are reforming for reunion tours/albums. Many of them we could surely do without. What artist(s) would you most like to see reformed?

In ten minutes I haven't been able to think of one. Do they ever come back after actually having grown, applied themselves in isolation, honed their craft, pondered what part of their output was just fashion and zeitgeist? The indication is that they don't give the old cow another thought till one day someone says there's more milk in the teat.

Are you a Niners fan?

Joel Maupin

Not except that I find myself rooting for the home team despite having no reason to care. Football is a little like a soap opera, isn't it? They have the same appeal, but mapped to the conventionally conceived male and female psyches respectively. If you asked each why they weren't interested in the other, they'd probably answer that the other is contrived--not a real situation.

--Scott "the Refrigerator Magnet" Miller

February 2, 1998

Scott, are you still compiling, or are you now a full-time musician?

Scott: I work on an object-oriented database. Want to buy one? It's a high-end quasi-infinitely scalable product, used by CERN and other high energy physics labs, big telecom companies, etc. It turns out they're good for organizing your lists of favorite songs and what albums they're on, too.

Did you take a course in "Game Theory" at Davis?

No, it was hard to get enrolled in--offered only fall of even-numbered years or something. Very likely there was no actual course; they just gave you credit for it if you ever managed to devise a class schedule that included it.

From reading the archives, I would have guessed your education was rooted in philosophy or even literature. But EE? What gives?

My intention was to major in art, but I had a vision of myself arrogantly chasing after appreciation for *my artistic talent*, and to counteract that I went into hard science. Where arrogance can hide easily.

Ever been compared to David Lynch? Cryptic is the operative word here.

I'm not aware of ever having been compared to David Lynch (I am flattered it occurs to you, since he is an excellent filmmaker). It's funny that we think of "cryptic" artists as people who create a coded world for us to delight in deciphering. Now that I am someone whose work is thought of as cryptic, I can testify that my effort is just the opposite: that there is *already* a code to the world, to the way things work, and every time I think I see one of the "answers at the back of the book," I just want to give it away to everyone, for free. To say, "the answer is five." The trouble is, you have to first get people to think you set up the right problem--to convince people that you see into their lives without knowing any of the details of their lives. How do you do that?

Favorite bands of the 90s? (Besides Loud Family, of course)

Liz Phair, Guided By Voices, the Posies, Aimee Mann, Veruca Salt, the Loud Family, Elliott Smith, Belle and Sebastian, Nirvana, Teenage Fanclub, My Bloody Valentine, Pavement, did I say the Loud Family? Oh, yeah, you said besides the Loud Family.

Mad Al

--Impotently Peevish Scott

February 16, 1998

My question for Ask Scott...

Scott: Ask Scott is prepared to interface with Tell Steve...

While listening the Beach Boys' PET SOUNDS SESSIONS box set I received as a Christmas gift, I noticed lots of similarities between PET SOUNDS and Game Theory's LOLITA NATION. Both albums deal with the passage of time and the loss of childhood innocence, and other emotions of adulthood. Also, there are a couple of direct quotes from PET SOUNDS lyrics in LOLITA NATION songs, the "God only knows" in "One More For Saint Michael" and the "ugliest trip I've ever been on" (from "Sloop John B") in "The Waist and The Knees"?

The "God Only Knows" one wasn't conscious; the other one was, obviously.

Were the LOLITA NATION album influenced at all by Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys? Or am I way off base?

No, it was certainly influenced *some*. I can narrate precisely the moment PET SOUNDS hit me full force: it was in 1977 and I was watching the movie SHAMPOO for the first time. Warren Beatty plays a hairdresser who has sex with every woman in sight. It opens with "Wouldn't It Be Nice" slightly audible from a radio, and you then learn it's set in 1968. As the film climaxes you get more and more tasty "acid rock" while all Warren Beatty's relationships end up canceling each other out. With the closing credits, "Wouldn't It Be Nice" reprises at full volume, and it's glorious. The director, Hal Ashby, was great with music--he did HAROLD AND MAUDE--and I think his point was that the emotions in "Wouldn't It Be Nice" weathered the storm of things like "Plastic Fantastic Lover." The naivete was more sophisticated than the worldliness that followed.

It wasn't all as straight in my mind as it is now, but by 1986 I had a somewhat clearer sense of wanting to get into the mechanics of that sort of deadly economy of lovelessness, and PET SOUNDS is obviously one of the masterful works along those lines, so I had the little quote of "Sloop John B."

If LOLITA NATION was your PET SOUNDS (creative pinnacle), then what was your SMILE (ambitious concept never fully realized)?

Oh, I don't think there's anything too close to that in my experience. For one thing, the trouble they had making SMILE was probably due to them being a really successful, pressured band. I've never felt more pressure than on LOLITA NATION, and I was often miserable, but as you say, people who bother to consider tend to think that one was better creatively than the others, so I may just have a low Beach Boy correlation.

What surprises could be found on a LOLITA NATION SESSIONS box set in 2017?

Steve Holtebeck

I was thinking if I became a leisurely and powerful star while my singing is no worse than it ever was, I'd like do a kind of director's cut of that record with some different singing and little fixups like recreating some of what we took out for the tighter CD time limit, but I'm guessing that project is not right over the horizon, and of course the few interested people would probably think I ruined it.

Paul McCartney liner notes?

rest in peace Carl,

--Scott

February 23, 1998

Scott, I think we'd all like to see one of your top-whatever lists of fave albums/songs from the annum just past. So how 'bout it?

Scott: This is one of my least conscientious efforts in years but here goes:

- 1 EITHER/OR - Elliott Smith
- 2 IF YOU'RE FEELING SINISTER - Belle and Sebastian
- 3 BRIGHTEN THE CORNERS - Pavement
- 4 O.K. COMPUTER - Radiohead
- 5 MAG EARWHIG - Guided By Voices
- 6 THIS SOUNDS LIKE GOODBYE - Ken Stringfellow
- 7 LADIES AND GENTLEMEN WE ARE FLOATING IN SPACE - Spiritualized
- 8 I HEAR THE HEART BEATING AS ONE - Yo La Tengo
- 9 RETREAT FROM THE SUN - That Dog
- 10 POST MINSTREL SYNDROME - The Negro Problem

EITHER/OR is the big news here. I haven't heard TONE SOUL EVOLUTION or any number of big-buzz pop records yet. I actually liked STANDING STONE by Paul McCartney a lot but I'm not including it here as the real Paul died in a car crash in 1969 and let's not encourage this sort of passing each other off as someone else when we have perfectly good cloning technology.

A longstanding (when not crouching) fan,

William (not Pete) Ham

--Scott (not Ann) Miller

Scott, THANK YOU for the way you quoted and capped the words NEATLY PUMP AIR in the latest round of "Ask Scott" (Editor's Note: The writer is referring to the 12/29/97 Ask Scott column). I saw those words and heard their cadence in my head and then thought, "Hey, wait, what song is that?" and soon had the answer ("Lady Godiva's Operation" by the Velvet Underpants). At that moment I felt that epiphany of "Oh, so THAT'S what he was saying" all these years and years. So thank you.

Scott: You're most SWEETLY welcome.

Also, didja know that at the end of that song, buried in the mix (and I mean buried), you can hear John Cale hissing, "You're a boy...you're not a boy," or something like that. Very

erie. (This has now devolved into "Tell Scott: The Forum for Know-It-All Record Collectors and Rock Nerds.")

Well, as if my input doesn't count toward the know-it-all record collector and rock nerd factor, but anyway...that's an interesting VU anecdote.

FYI, when I came out of brain surgery a few years ago and came to in the recovery ward, I got a phone call from a fellow college radio DJ, asking me if there was anything he could play for me, as if I could hear it; I said, "Yeah, how 'bout 'Lady Godiva's Operation."

Are you serious? Talk about your full-immersion multimedia rides. I think I speak for our entire readership when I say: your brain sounds terrific; I think they did a hell of a job.

Shoulda requested "The Girls Are Ready to Go."

Ha! Well, thank God you didn't. Serious, serious complications.

-- *Scott Tissue*
KCR (killer college radio)
San Diego CA

curly and demurely,

--S

March 2, 1998

Scott, I have two questions for you concerning production on your records. While I know that you worked with Mitch Easter for many years on your albums, I noticed that he didn't produce *Interbabe Concern*. 1) Was this a conscious decision on your part or his part, or just the way that it worked out? Do you plan to work with him (or another producer) in the future, or simply produce yourself (I know that sounds odd)?

Scott: Through no fault of Mitch's whatsoever, TAPE OF ONLY LINDA was a bit of an exercise in how not to spend your studio dollars very wisely, and to top that off I think it was my worst-selling record ever. The label was justifiably eager to see us become a little more cost-effective and when that happens the first thing to go is the hot-shot outside producer, if someone in the band can produce serviceably.

INTERBABE has sold a lot better, but until Alias calls up needing to shelter the millions they're making off us in a high-dollar hit maker, I'll just keep showing up for work, as they say.

2) How would you assess the impact, if any, that his production had on your music?

I suspect for a long time he was the only thing saving me from sounding unlistenable to anybody.

Thanks for taking the time.

Steve Fontana

now, if we could only afford whoever did the Impatients record...

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

Scott, some time ago, I asked if the LF would ever do this (great) song, "The Come On," in concert. You said no, because the the bassline required chops that weren't in Rob's repertoire. Time passes, Kenny's on board, and I'm asking again. This is such a great song ...

Jonathan Ostrowsky

Scott: The problem could not have been that it was too hard for Rob; it was one of our simplest bass lines. I'm sure I just meant that he wouldn't have learned it.

I just saw Michael Quercio for the first time in ages at our Poptopia show! Maybe we can play it with him as a guest vocalist some time.

rocking the Cathay de Grand,

--Scott

March 9, 1998

Scott, I am a relatively new fan of Loudmusic (just the last year or so). The front page of the *Washington Post* yesterday carried an article about "geek rock," i.e. music played by bands with members working in the technical/computer fields. According to this arbiter of conventional wisdom, it's just about the most happening form of music on the D.C. scene nowadays.

Would you consider the Loud Family "geek rock" in that sense (part one of a two part question)?

Scott: I'm not a geek in the sense people mean that to be a compliment, which is to say technologically "high-powered," whatever disturbing thing that might happen to mean. Really I am so NOT happening in any sense a Washington Post article might explore, it would scare you; whatever happeningness we have had better come from the other band members.

Do they mean to assert that there is some stylistic thread which links recording artists who have computer day jobs? If I had to find someone likely to have the exact opposite of my opinion on any given musical subject, I would start my search at Silicon Valley computer companies.

And is this an impending sign of information technology-driven apocalypse? (part two)

Michael J. Zwirn

Since John Lydon's appearance before Judge Judy there has been no doubt in my mind that the end is very near.

110 110 110,

--Scott

Scott, I was listening to "A Child's Christmas Saving the Whales" with a friend, and he asked a question to which I said I'd try and get the answer...

Why is the boy named "Denise"? What was the significance of that particular female-sounding name, as opposed to a more male or even androgynous name? He was intensely curious about this.

Lorrie Smith

Scott: Strange as it may seem to us today, the name, like a lot of that tape, was intended to be humorous. I believe it had something to do with the French for Dennis, "Denis," but to tell you more than that I'd have to go back and listen to it, and I think I'd rather be harpooned.

call me Email,

--Scott

March 16, 1998

Scott, I have many a burning question but I will keep it short so as not to take too much time.

I live in the U.K. and reside in Portsmouth, Hampshire. News of Game Theory and the Loud Family was not always easy to come across before the Internet so I apologise if this is a frequently asked (or slightly outdated) question. Why the change of name from GT to LF?

Scott: My rule so far has been that if all the original band members have quit, it's time to change the name, unless I have a record deal at the time; then it's too much trouble to change the name.

Although a somewhat personal question (sorry) what would you cite as being your main source of motivation behind making music? For instance, is fame and success for the Loud Family important?

That's sort of an Ernest Becker DENIAL OF DEATH question. The proper reason to make music should be--duh--for the sake of the people who hear it. You should be asking the question "if I died soon, to be reincarnated as any of the people surviving me, what would I want to pass on to my new other consciousness in this music?" You want to propagate and clarify a listening aesthetic, and, in the lyrics, encapsulate what you can of hard-won insights which are to some degree peculiar to your life, that are otherwise going to be lost.

This gives you a basis for deciding when imitation is more valid than the urge toward wanting to be considered original. If you sacrifice your chance to resonate with a listener merely for the sake of your reputation as an innovator, you've probably lost the game outright--no one may ever listen to you out of genuine love. On the other hand, if you're accessible to everyone but you haven't articulated anything significant that isn't already out there and available, or won't pass quickly with fashion, it's equally pointless.

So a little fame is a good thing. If you're not famous at all you stand no chance of catching the attention of the surviving listener you care about. If fame is all you care about, though, you're just thinking of it as a way of cheating death, and it won't be.

Ever since I first heard the lead break on "Shark Pretty" I've been hooked, amazed and a devoted follower. Thanks for continuing to make great music!

Well, good ear, but I didn't play that lead. It was Earl Slick, who was probably the top session guitarist in the world at the time; he just happened to be around because he was married to the engineer's sister. He had a record deal (remember Phantom, Rocker and Slick?) so we couldn't use his name. He was called "Ernie Smith."

regards,
Charlie (no I don't play drums) Watts

--Scott (no I can't sing) Miller

Scott, hi. For this assignment in my record-engineering program, I'm supposed to pick two songs by an artist, analyze the structure of a song (which I can do myself), and get detailed information about how it was recorded/engineered (everything from equipment details to "Whoa, how did you get that effect?").

The expectation is that I'll choose a deeply minor local band unused to the attention, and just in case, I did, but I'd much rather write a paper on what you did to record "Screwed Over" and "Top Dollar", and why - will you please help?

Scott: Forgive me for a moment of amusement at the word "why" there. "How--and why--were these delightful recordings made?"

I'm sorry if you're sorry that you no longer work with Mitch Easter, but INTERBABE CONCERN rates right up with the Rheostatics' INTRODUCING HAPPINESS and Julian Cope's JEHOVAHKILL as the best-recorded pop album anyone's ever done; c'mon, share the wealth of ideas. Good day!

Brian Block

I haven't heard those albums, but having heard a fair amount of Julian Cope, I assume that's quite a compliment, so thank you very much.

"Screwed Over" was obviously a very different recording situation from "Top Dollar." The most nonstandard thing about "Top Dollar" is that the guitar and vocals were actually recorded to a click track and then the drums and bass were put on later, and as a consequence of this the vocals have the quality that I'm singing them right after I've written the part, which for some reason caused them to have a really weird personality.

"Screwed Over" was me doing everything except the fuzz bass at the end, which was Kenny. It would take too long to tell the story of every sound on that one, but one result I was pretty happy with was recording a little sequence of notes of sampled piano, then sampling *that* and assigning it to the sampler keyboard instead of the sound of one note being played, so that each key stroke actually fired off the series of notes.

when I was a kid all we had was a Studer 24 track and WE LOVED IT

--S

March 23, 1998

Scott, thanks for all the great music. Fast & furious, now:

Scott: Fast and bulbous!

What are your time-tested heuristics for optimal set list construction?

No science there. Just don't let it get into any sort of a rut. Do things that are somewhat unexpected; don't let the middle drag with a lot of slow-to-mid-tempo numbers.

How much does the set change from show to show on a tour?

Not very much. I like to take requests for the encores but the main value of being on tour is you get really good at doing one particular set. If a lot of people are there and reacting enthusiastically, you'll never be bored with the songs, and you can concentrate on the delivery happening then and there rather than just not making mistakes. On the other hand, when there's a sparse crowd, especially if they're not enjoying it much, you tend to want to change the set around, maybe thinking "I'll give them something to cry about."

What's the perfect set length?

Usually I want to keep it short, unless it's definitely *your* crowd, and a big crowd. I'd say forty to 45 minutes, though the club contract usually says you have to play longer than that. Don't leave 'em wantin' less. If people want more they'll give you an encore.

How do you decide what old songs to resurrect, or what songs from the new album are live-worthy?

For new ones, you want to pick those that have some impact on first hearing, and that lets out a fair number of mine. As for old numbers, who can say? If only there were some statistical record of which ones people liked the most.

And how do you feel about the name Scott, anyway?

Dan Schmidt

I don't know. I guess it's kind of like naming someone Italiann or Swedee.

--road worrier

Scott, my favorite Loud Family track is probably Marcia & Etrusca. This song represents quite a stylistic departure from most Loud Family songs. It's...how do you say...epic ("epic" meaning, of course, that you're only a step away from constructing huge art-rock suites in the vein of Genesis and Yes...or maybe not). Regardless, I love the song - makes for great driving music.

Scott: I love Yes. I never got into Genesis much. I don't mean to give anyone a heart attack, but besides other things Yes did really well, Jon Anderson was an excellent lyricist (I'm considering the early 70s output here). But my favorite full-on art rock band was always Pink Floyd. Everything up through THE WALL was surprisingly consistent for being so adventurous.

I have always wondered what your inspiration for the song was. Who are Marcia & Etrusca? Dino & Elijah?

The names are supposed to conjure up both modern and ancient personalities, sometimes both at once. That song was a democratic effort but for my own part I was thinking of eternal verities flickering in and out of focus with trivial, half-ignored details.

My other major curiosity is the spoken sample in the middle of the song. That's you, I assume? what are you saying?

Sorry, but I don't remember. It was a combination of pieces of singing from takes and me talking between takes but I'd have to listen to it again. If I recall, it's not that hard to make out the words.

**In the hundred-year crusade,
JP Mohan**

in and around Greg Lake, Mountain come out of the sky

--Scott

March 30, 1998

Scott, thanks for communicating with your fans.

Scott: Hi! Thanks for there being fans to communicate with!

I've got a few quickies for you:

Mac or PC?

UNIX. Gnu. Java. Anything that resists being co-opted and locked into sustained mediocrity by one company's iron grip.

Rosewood or maple?

Ginger.

Ford or GM?

Maryann.

Nietzsche or Kierkegaard?

I'm not an expert on either, but they both seem to be first-class minds neither of whom would be the first place I'd send anyone for cultural information today. To paint with broad strokes, I'd say they both shared the conviction that the world marches forward via a process of the weak being defeated by the strong, and Nietzsche was in favor of that whereas Kierkegaard was against it. In short, they both operated squarely in the shadow of Hegel, Kierkegaard working mostly to refute Hegel in favor of an austere, anti-rationalist Christianity, Nietzsche to demolish Christianity so that, unhampered by overdeveloped compassion, *polemos* could make great men.

It's alternately exhilarating and infuriating for me to read either. You could distill either to some truly lovely stuff. Kierkegaard is in many ways the spiritual father of both Rene Girard and Jacques Derrida, who by my guess are the two big thinkers of our time, and Nietzsche is in many ways the spiritual father of...practically everyone else.

And yet, Nietzsche really did hate Jews and Christians, and when he talks about bookish ideologies creating "little dwarf men," you doubt that's any idle metaphor--a man or woman dwarf would be subhuman to him. Kierkegaard was a religious fundamentalist to the point of feverishly opposing women's rights, and arguing in favor of Abraham's intention to kill his son as a sacrifice on the grounds that God's will is a higher authority than reason.

For a modern audience, a book of Flannery O'Connor short stories leaves them both in the dust of their own subjects (not that they didn't help clear her path). Between the two, it seems to be more stylish in the 1990s to name your album with a phrase from Kierkegaard than with a phrase from Nietzsche, so I'll pick Kierkegaard.

Hex Enduction Hour or This Nation's Saving Grace?

I've never heard Hex Enduction Hour. Is that like Entroducing?

Thanks for your time. I look forward to seeing the Loud Family next time you're in Austin.

Kurt Huffman

Thanks, see you in June or July!

--the Anti-Grizelda

Scott, just discovered your stuff this month for the first time. I've purchased all available LF/GT product and I'm swimming through it all with a big smile on my face.

Scott: That's so good to hear. Thank you.

Anyway, I do computer programming for a living in Princeton NJ, and I read on the web site that you program as well. If you don't mind my asking, could you talk a bit about what kinds of work have been involved in, languages, platforms, etc.? It doesn't appear that anyone's asked about it.

Mostly C++ programming on UNIX platforms. I have a Sun Ultrasparc on my desk. I used to work on Lisp and C++ compilers; now I work on an object-oriented database product.

Thanks a lot, hope to see you on tour this spring.

Mick

...my pal foot foot, foot foot, always likes to roam...

do not taunt foot foot

do not play with foot foot when drowsy

do not look directly at foot foot

--Scott

April 6, 1998

Scott, first off, please allow me to gush away by saying that I have been a big fan of your body

Scott: I try to keep in shape

of work ever since a friend loaned me his copy of *Lolita Nation* back in 1988 (yes, I did return it, than I bought the cassette, than I bought the CD...). Having just discovered the LF website, I am giddy at the chance to finally get the opportunity to talk to (at) you after ten years. I especially enjoyed reading your top 20 lists and finding many similar interests (although I did not find one of my guilty pleasures from the 70's -- *The Sweet*).

DESOLATION BOULEVARD is my number 27 of 1976. I guess I only posted them out to 20. Mind you, if the early records with "Little Willy" and what have you are brilliant, I just wouldn't know.

Made special note of the fact that you also recognized GBV's *Bee Thousand* as such an accomplishment. Robert Pollard is one of the few songwriters I have found whose ability approaches your own.

What lavish honor you do me! I feel like I've drunk a case of beer and been hit by a swinging microphone.

One of the things that I have always admired about you is your innate ability to drop obscure references at the drop of a hat. Be it a triple play by the 1906 Chicago Cubs (but what, no "three fingers") or squeezing five Stanley Kubrick film references into one song (?) title. Having taken a class back in my college days which examined the work of Kubrick ("Films as Literature"), I gained an appreciation of his film making technique. I've read your take on some of your favorite books, and was hoping that you might share your feelings on the films of Stanley Kubrick and/or films in general.

Kubrick is the best filmmaker, I think. Not only does he do high art, which is to say revelatory art, but he builds a ladder down from his Olympus that most of us can climb onto; he's not just for critical theorists and filmmaking aficionados. He tells good stories about how culture works and what part violence plays in culture. We see both the reality of violence in all its outrageous brutality, and the romanticizing going on in the mind of the victimizer.

This makes for a bumpy ride--true of anything revelatory. We're used to filmmaking where the brutalizer and the victim see the act as occurring in the same economy: power changes hands unfairly, but the loss for one equals the gain for the other. Kubrick shows the disparity. To the writer and his wife who are brutalized in *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE*, the event reads as sheer sadism; to the gang, it is a powerful generator of glamour and camaraderie.

Hal the computer and Jack in *THE SHINING* are protectors who adopt a sacrality which leads them to recast those being protected as the threat itself. In all these cases, I think a good lesson to take away is that systems of morality are beholden to the dynamics of violence, and not the other way around. People are not "basically good" until something like TV

teaches them to be violent; what must be taught is how not to revert to our natural state of expedient and rationalized hostility.

I was curious as to whether or not you shared my feelings regarding the Star Trek television series? That is that the new series are all pale imitations of the original, lacking their flair, high drama, and social consciousness, and substituting stale, cold technology and regurgitated plot lines (or am I just stuck in the '60's).

Anything would be *pale* compared to the original Star Trek, wouldn't it? It was nothing if not...flushed. I'm a big fan. I thought it often had an almost Shakespearian structural genius to it, and I thought the acting was just right. The "Next Generation" had some excellent, memorable episodes, I thought, but you're right about it not quite having the same flair. None of the other spinoffs have held my interest at all.

While we're on the subject, if, for some unknown reason, William Shatner decided to cover one of your songs, would you be delighted, offended or indifferent, and which song would you want him to cover?

I had a song called "One More For Saint Michael" which actually refers to Captain Kirk directly so I'd have to pick that one. I suppose I'd be completely delighted.

Thanks for your time. I must finish with one shameless plug. Spokane, Washington lies directly on the highway between Seattle and Missoula (or vice versa, depending on which way you are traveling) and we would love to see you here sometime (or maybe I should just get off my ass and travel to one of the two aforementioned cities myself).

Dave Starry

Do you get the feeling that we could draw a number of people in Spokane? Sometimes we'll book a show just on the strength of there being a small number of people who seem enthusiastic about setting up and helping promote a show in their town. If you're serious we could discuss it with our booking agent. In any case, I'm grateful for the interest.

--Captain Quirk

Scott, my wonderful Camaro drove over a cliff near Dover and the waves could give a damn, they all just came back again. What gives?

Scott: As Hoover said hovering over Dover, "waves be dammed."

Please, they told me you would know. Was it the fire drill, or is the sun that bright now?

Ken Simmons

That "bright now" is a would-burning Firestone theoeater, and though the sun's in the driver's eyes, it's the one behind the wheels who gets tired.

--Mag Earwicker

April 13, 1998

Scott, since Simon Reynolds' essay in the *Village Voice* not too long ago, the rubric "post-rock" has been on the lips and tongues of savvy critics. I'm curious if this term means anything to you -- do you surmise a discontinuity in the writing and playing of music sufficiently radical to bid farewell to the rock epoch? (I notice that you have Gastr del Sol on your list of renown for '96 -- so you must have some familiarity and affinity towards this phenomenon, if it is such).

Paul Murphy

Scott: I haven't read the article so I may stray from your exact subject—but we can probably agree there are too many post-designations nowadays. Personally speaking, when I say "post-structuralist" or "post-modernist," I don't have much in mind, I just mean to refer as conveniently as possible to people or works commonly tagged as such.

It's a little cheap to say those terms are meaningless, but I suspect they call attention to a problem (or unwittingly reveal it, depending on who's slinging the term): we ground ourselves culturally in the very process of smashing foregoing epistemologies. How do we know anything? Well, if we're aware of any old way and new way of looking at something, we *know* to look at it the new way. Better that than the other way around no doubt, but when we start building intellectual world orders on *lack of arbitrarily-determined fault*, look out. Does this airplane fly right? Absolutely. How do you know? Because it's not identical to the previous model, which crashed.

If what was happening was that we were running out of room to say things in rock, I'd think we'd see increasingly many records which are mostly conventional rock except for one or two cuts on which the artist had to depart. In fact, what we see—I should say, what tend to be written about—are records which suddenly and ostentatiously refuse to touch certain rock trappings with a ten foot pole.

To cause us to "bid farewell to the rock epoch," post-rock would need to be not radically different enough, but radically *similar* enough. It would have to do what rock does structurally, but have some veneer of newness, like "psychedelia" or "new wave." And Gastr are I think genuinely different from rock. I'd place them in the academic tradition of Cage and Stockhausen, who I would say sought a music un beholden to mediating culture. As a candidate for the new mainstream itself, it would naturally have the problem of-to paraphrase Andrew McKenna on "deconstruction"—keeping its hands so clean that it couldn't grasp anything.

--il PostEno

Scott, I was wondering if "Not Expecting Both Contempo and Classique" was influenced by the work of designers Charles and Ray Eames. Specifically, the line "There may not seem

like much creative latitude, but that's the challenge of design" reminds me of Charles Eames' statement from *Design Q&A*: "I don't believe in compromise, but I willingly accept constraints" (I paraphrase loosely from memory). Is there any connection here?

Tim Walters

Scott: My God, questions from people who have worked on the albums now. What's next, Bob Ludwig asking me if I've read Deleuze and Guattari? Hey Tim.

No, I can only assume it's my pipe dream of doing office furniture consultation shining through the mundane necessities of turning out indie rock.

a statement from Ray Charles' design Q & A,

--Scott

April 20, 1998

Scott, I'm in a band called In Clover from Richmond, VA (been a fan since I saw Game Theory at William & Mary in 1988 - and I must say - very glad for the rerelease of *Big Shot Chronicles* and *Real Nighttime* since my cassettes are so worn out they just screech now).

Scott: Hey, some of us call it singing.

We've been at it for around 7 years (keep losing drummers) - what's your advice to upcoming bands who are looking for a record deal? We play frats, give away our tapes, just finished a CD - but have no clue how to get people to come to our shows at clubs, and we don't just "know" somebody -- maybe it's just Virginia. I know we don't suck, because people that aren't our friends tell us all the time how great we are -- we just can't get people out on a regular basis. What should we do oh wise-one?

Yes, as you know I've never put my hand to a project that hasn't caught fire in the marketplace, so listen up.

You need to give people a reason to get out there; would *you* honestly call a bunch of your friends and say "you gotta see this band" if you were the band? You need to be a news item on some level, it doesn't matter what level. Really good, sensitive, insightful songwriting isn't going to help that much here, because people just don't say "you gotta see this band, they resonate with the ineffable verities of the human condition." If that's you, I'd say concentrate on mailings to national college radio and fanzines and don't even sweat the local club thing.

If your set is supposed to work on its high energy, take a good honest look at whether that's a slack area. Stop losing drummers, they're crucial! Drums and bass usually determine the energy level all by themselves. Have your drummer and bass player play a typical song from your set and stand outside the room. You are now hearing what the club's walk-up clientele hear when they're deciding if you're going to be worth it. Does it scream "*hot band*, get in

here immediately?" If the energy isn't the thing, ask "what is the thing?" and make sure it's firing on all cylinders. Does the front person knock the audience dead with showpersonship? Or do you dress like toreadors? Or do you nail the hell out of harmonies (a hard one)? Or are you absolutely perfectly timed to ride to prominence on a trend (an extremely hard one that requires rigorous study)?

That's sort of the club scene economy. If you aren't making a proper spectacle of yourself, there's not much reason to place you in front of a mob of drunken onlookers. It doesn't hurt to make yourself a local pest by postering and trying to get articles in local rags, but if you're not fascinating in some drearily obvious way, it's going to be a miracle if you break big from your home base outward. And I hope it's clear from my tone that whatever makes your music essential is worth doing even if it doesn't happen to turn the wheels of success.

Best of luck with Loud Family - Oh - and I've always liked your voice even though you joke about it - it's different and very emotive - it sounds sincere, and I really like that. Hate these vocalists that just pretend to feel what they're singing about.

Tara Lane
In Clover

Thanks, I'm very glad to hear that, because it's proving to be practically impossible to get me to stop.

so worn out I just screech now,

--Scott

Scott, my eighth grade art students are doing a unit on video storyboarding. Any Loud Family or Game Theory songs you'd like them to attempt?

Working on creating a new generation of Loud Family fans,

Gregg Davis

Scott: Gregg, hi! I still love your picture of me schlepping the packages to the post office.

For some reason "Don't Respond, She Can Tell" and "I No Longer Fear the Headless" come to mind. Boy, I don't think of myself as that sinister a writer until I get asked a question like this. I mean, certainly not "Sodium," certainly not "N. San Bruno Dishonor Trip"...

--Scott "Not At All In Favor of Slitting Wrists" Miller

April 27, 1998

Scott, when I listen to your many records (usually only one at a time, though), I always come away impressed by the attention you pay to sound. I don't mean the clarity and definition of the musical instruments, I mean your interest in sound for its own sake--tape loops, found noises, words that seem chosen as much as for their resonance as what they say, noise bursts and low hums pitched at strange and wonderful timbres, you know the drill.

Scott: Thanks, Miles. I've always had a passion for the way sound goes onto tape, ever since Joe Becker and I made recordings in high school. It's almost to the point of my being more of a sound effects buff than a record producer type, because record production is such a morass of fashion-dependent considerations. The sound-texture aesthetic is very *in* nowadays, and in a way that's a noble cause -- to deliver back to people's ears what's been turned into industry semiotics (heard of "the language of flowers"? I give you: "the language of effects on the drum kit").

But beyond a certain point, the happy freedom to explore the possibilities of sound can become the unhappy fear that it will cost you prestige if the dreaded middlebrow ever have an ecstatic reaction to your music. My favorite composers don't key *against* the mainstream; they reject freely, but aren't afraid to swipe from it what's useful.

Do you experiment endlessly to recreate the sounds you hear in your head? Or do you stumble on a great sound when you're messin' around with the amps and effect boxes, and that sound inspires you to come up with a song or a loop built around it?

An idea for a sound in your head can go pretty far wrong, as it can be an arbitrarily hard -- or expensive -- sound to make in the real world. My head had better not hear pricey session singers breaking into "Every Breath You Take," if you know what I mean. So I do a fair amount of trying to make existing equipment work in different ways by using it wrong. For instance, on "Don't Respond, She Can Tell" I got an unusual guitar sound by using the cheapest amp I could find and trying to torture it into producing a hi-fi sound using compression and a ridiculously extreme "loudness-curve" EQ. Synthesizers were put on earth to use in some way the manufacturer didn't intend.

Sometimes you do have no choice but to try to bring off an imagined sound, but an hour of that is typically a lot less productive than an hour of fairly undirected messing around.

A couple of other favorites, Wire and R. Stevie Moore, share with you a very pure interest in (and understanding of) sound that only sometimes encompasses music. However, their experimentation, as documented in the myriad Wire spinoff projects and Stevie's 230+ available cassettes, has been much more public than yours. Are you able to achieve your intended results without committing hours of pings and buzzes to tape, or are you sitting on a vast treasure trove of MILLER MACHINE MUSIC?

Miles Goosens

Nothing I'd want to release. To me, actual experimentation is completely different from what's referred to as "experimental" but which is still intended for an audience. Those

artists' experimentations are "much more public" than mine, but I wonder if, percentagewise, the slew of Wire spinoffs did as much to bring their more difficult material to their audience as the more integrated approach of something like LOLITA NATION did to my audience--profoundly silly of me as it is to draw that comparison, especially considering Wire were a big influence on me.

pushing the pillow, stuffing the envelope

--Scott

Scott, the debut album from the band The Wannadies sports a track three called "Friends". It's the one that I find myself hitting the repeat button for. I believe I'm doing this because the sound (to me) is pleasingly reminiscent of Game Theory. Still, I have not ruled out Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Hang on for a second while I turn the oven off.

I can do a fairly good job of spotting and understanding what accounts for influence and the appearance of influence in literature. But as a non-musician, I lack the language and technical knowledge to verbalize why one band's work should sound similar to another's.

If you've heard this song and can agree in any way that this song echoes your work in G.T., would you mind giving me an explanation (for dummies) of what they're doing to sound like you?

Scott: I haven't heard the song and I may or may not have heard the band. The name is extremely familiar.

For what it's worth, I usually don't hear it when someone says another band, or singer, or songwriter sounds like me.

Well, I've got to go turn off the oven. Thanks,

Geoff Woolf

got to go make some records,

--Scott

May 4, 1998

Scott, fortunately, my job has me in town for the Terrascope concert. Unfortunately, it's sold out.

Scott: It was fun. It turns out KFJC did a live broadcast of it.

Do you have any travel tips? Are there any must see Game Theory/Loud Family historical sights in SF/Davis? Thanks in advance.

Byph Whaley

Oops. The perils of answering these in the order received: I'm always a month behind so nothing current applies. Well, as far as Game Theory or Loud Family theme parks, in-costume historic re-enactments, any of that sort of thing goes, San Francisco has dropped the ball. Capturing any sort of feel is hard--a field trip to any SF Recording studio, for instance, is guaranteed to be as exciting as visiting a closed H & R Block office; most of our experience of external San Francisco involved, oh, looking for parking. One good locale would have been Big Shot Photo Enlarging in Berkeley, where GT practiced. You could have dropped in and taken Photo Robert out to lunch in exchange for humiliating stories about us. But it's closed now.

Despite the utter lack of history involving my bands except that I've had many a tasty meal there, here are my most-frequented SF restaurants: Oritalia, Neecha Thai Cuisine (as I believe Zach Smith said, "that food which does not kill us makes us stronger"), Tanuki, and for breakfast the Curbside Cafe.

I'm going to assume that every standing structure from when I was in Davis will have been turned into a juice bar at least once.

coming soon: "Tow-Away Mountain"

--Scott

Scott, my friends all tell me I'm too other-directed. What do you think?

John Sharples

Scott: Is that a set-up? That is, if your friends can call your "directedness" into question, is the issue decided? Or, the pronouncement may say more about your friends than about you.

I assume that's some psychological term about which I don't know the particulars. Here's my take on the subject in general (probably drawing extensively on Sartre and Martin Buber): no one has an isolatable personality. One's personality is the sum of one's relation to others. If you ask if someone is too other-directed, I say everyone is 100% other-directed 100% of the time. The concept of self-actualization is yet another artifact of our concern to be *regarded* a certain way by others. In short, we all change our stripes according to what we think people are looking for, and when, as will inevitably occur, we find out someone disapproves of us changing our stripes, we change our stripe-changing stripe to accommodate that person, too.

What "too other-directed" probably means is that certain others who constitute one's personality do so in ways that become discordant. If you ever listen to what schizophrenic people on the street are saying, they're--in my experience--going over and over an unresolved conflict with someone. I believe I could quote Gil Bailie here and say that this

gets to the heart of what demon possession meant in classical and biblical texts. The feedback regulating their constituting-otherness is broken.

Then again, maybe each of your friends just wants you to listen to him or her, not those other friends.

too self-produced,

--Scott

May 11, 1998

Scott, because of your joking reference to Guided by Voices in the liner notes to the most recent Loud Family album, and because I remember reading somewhere that you marveled at the contrasts between your approach to recording and Bob Pollard's, I was wondering: what is your critical appraisal of Guided by Voices/Bob Pollard?

Scott: Extremely high. His voice is one of the very best, and their stuff always sounds good to me, which is incredible considering the volume of material they put out. I don't remember what I thought was a big difference, unless maybe it's that--since I only write about six or eight songs a year. And I thought it was about the best thing for music ever that they had a hit mastered on Realistic cassette, but I just couldn't have gone that route myself without it being a contrivance.

I ask because, after my many years as a Game Theory/Loud Family fan, the first time that I was exposed to Guided by Voices, I was struck by the band's similarities to your music. Even a friend of mine who ardently dislikes both the Loud Family and GBV has commented to me that my taste for GBV must arise from my taste for Miller music.

Not to put words in anyone's mouth, but is there any chance they just meant one of us must have used the other as a model for how to be so horrendous?

In particular, I believe that you and Bob share an unalloyed sense of guitar pop and its history, from Prog-Rock, to Folk Rock, to Big Star/Beatles, to Psychedelia, and that you are two of the few pop songwriters working who manage to conspicuously incorporate the entire range of your influences into your songwriting without sounding derivative. Additionally, although your songs tend to vary in length more than Bob's, you both seem to understand that, at times, the most poignant pop songs are less than two minutes long. Also, you both utilize, shall we say, affected yet endearing vocal styles. Finally, although your lyrics simply make more sense (at least to me) than Pollard's Jabberwocky talk, you both manage to come up with truly evocative, albeit warped, song titles, many of which are rather long.

Truth be known, I don't know what Pollard is talking about too much of the time, so I'm not going to presume to guess how much we think alike. It may be that we appear to have long titles by sheer contrast with everyone else. We like to get a lot of info in anything if we can,

and not many artists do, and this was especially true in the early 90s when it was all the rage to have your band be called "Lint" and your songs be called "Rug" and "Blink."

On the other hand, I am aware of the differences, sometimes notable, between the Guided by Voices aesthetic and yours. Aside from the fact that you rarely release anything with such a "tossed-off" feeling as much of GBV's work has, Pollard clearly revels in mid-70's "Rawk," while I just can't see the Loud Family doing stage kicks and twirling the microphones in giant circles, although you are welcome to try. (Incidentally, I suspect that it is only Pollard's "Rawk" pieces that have afforded him more commercial success than the Loud Family and/or Game Theory.) However, in GBV's more "contemplative" works (which is to say that Bob "contemplated" the songs for the hour or so that he spent recording them), including the newly released *Tonics and Twisted Chasers* (which, if you haven't heard, is truly worth ordering from Rockathon Records) and *Under the Bushes, Under the Stars*, I can almost imagine the two of you singing harmony. In fact, there are times when, while listening to GBV, I find it impossible to believe that Pollard, after having spent the 80's singing other people's songs to himself in the bedroom mirror, never listened to and was influenced by *Lolita Nation* (although I have never heard him mention you as an influence).

Thanks. I'd personally rather he listen to *Interbabe* than *Lolita* if that's the first thing he's going to hear. The singing on *Lolita* just really sounds like a drugged 12-year-old or something, and you wonder who's going to find that fascinating and who's just going to be irritated.

How about it? Am I only imagining the similarities between your music and Pollard's? If not, have you ever met the man and/or heard whether he knows and appreciates your music?

Terence D. Friedman

Never met him but I saw them live with the Tobin Sprout lineup and they stomped me concave.

my name is legion for we be thousand,

--Scott

Scott, any chance of doing an enhanced CD? I would think it would be a natural for you given your interest in computing.

Scott: I'd love to, but I'm not all that savvy in the area of expertise that would be relevant to this, and to take on that big a project I'd have to have a lot more and different resources at my disposal than my tiny little career as a recording artist affords me now.

How about making the ultimate fragmented cut and paste CD ... like the finer points on *Lolita Nation* and *Plants* ... something almost like a collage ...

Maybe I could do such a thing as a joint project with a pool of people on the web or something.

Do you practice any religion, would you say you are a religious/spiritual person?

I don't practice Christianity with regularity; I'm still in the process of figuring out what religion is all about. I feel safe in saying religion is profoundly misunderstood by most people.

It's probably true that we all walk around practicing the same amount of religion. Our only choices are to correctly identify our religious behavior as religious or to misidentify it as always reasoned, and the latter is dangerous in exactly the way we think fanatical religions are dangerous.

Great to hear you are a fan of GBV's as they slay me.

I too am dead at their hands.

Thanks for your time.

Ray

guided by guide vocals,

--S

May 18, 1998

Scott, I noticed that you list My Bloody Valentine as a band that you enjoy. I've been addicted to their stuff for a long time, always looking for something like that. *Interbabe Concern* has a similar attention to sound and noise, really great job, and great lyrics.

Scott: Thanks!

What's the new album like? What are your new frontiers musically?

I'd say the new album tries to find some coherence in feelings about music and about life in general that seem to contradict each other. A good example would be the feeling that music is stagnating, that to reach a wide audience you have to rehash the same old cliches in the thinnest of disguises, and a contrary feeling that the whole idea of thinking music has "frontiers" is faulty--that any attempt at radical innovation necessarily leads to music designed to be talked about and not listened to.

And I really do believe those two statements have hard-to-resolve truths to them, and not only as a personal conundrum, but as one showing signs of heading for some sort of spectacular public collision. For one thing, people are more and more hyper-aware of the workings of nostalgia. Everyone jokes about how musical trends are recycled with ever-

shorter lag times, and the new challenge might be dealing with the fact that belief in the notion of lasting musical revolutions is going away, period, and if so, I think there's going to be a crisis of music's claim to being a connection to deeper things.

One great thing about My Bloody Valentine is that while their overwhelming concern is obviously texture, they keep their melodies prominent, too. They're not trying to say "see, we've evolved past melody," the battle-cry of duddiness if there ever was one.

By the way, your last show in Seattle was great. Sadie is sexy! The ultimate live rock lineup, g,b,p,d, with vocals sensuously spread round.

Justin McReynolds

Thanks much. We hope to sensuously spread for the whole country this summer.

evolved past tree shrews,

--Scott

Scott, which is your favorite Spice Girl?

J. Hogard

Scott: The red one with the circular antenna who rides a scooter.

May 25, 1998

Scott, driving around the other day listening to *Lolita Nation*, "What was it we were always wanting...", I burst into tears. Driving around, weeping, on a nice sunny day. I blame you.

Scott: Thanks for writing; that's nice of you to say. And you did the right thing. We nihilists hate sunshine. It makes the pavement too hot to walk our ferrets.

Anyways. I'm curious about something and want to milk your extensive insider knowledge of the music biz. Hypothetical questions follow. Suppose you were you, except really wealthy and really ambitious. Given that you already have talent, would it then be possible to *buy* fame? If so, how would you go about it?

Of course you can buy a certain amount of fame. I guess I'd hire an expensive producer and spend a lot of time recording in an expensive studio, then I'd make an expensive video or two, hire expensive press and radio promotion people, take out a bunch of expensive magazine--even TV--ads and tour with an expensive stage show.

Or, taking it from another angle: say your favorite underappreciated, label-less young rock songwriter just inherited an absurdly large amount of money, and wanted to use that money to expose as many people as possible to their music. Not seeking Michael Jacksonesque fame, just "success". Just "not slipping through the cracks". Could he or she somehow buy the attentions of their favored label?

Big labels are probably used to turning down artists with a lot of money fairly routinely; maybe this artist could pay a regular producer on the label to come up with a demo tape specifically designed to win the heart of a certain A & R person. And this tape should be in a gold cassette shell. A demo tape actually made of gold.

Could they buy a successful tour? Could they buy their favorite producer's services? What advice would you give them, what order would you recommend doing things? Agent, PR firm, producer, studio time....?

love,

Scott

(and that's an order)

I believe one hires a personal manager and they do all that for you.

Oh--if the sky is really the limit I would also hire someone to dance next to me on stage with a big mirror like the Time in *Purple Rain*.

TCB

--"Colonel" Scott

Scott, I recall at one point seeing a copy of *Lolita Nation* that was abridged. I want to say it was a single record, but that could be my imagination. Maybe it was just a shorter CD. Either way, it existed somewhere. Why was it, at one point, abridged, and what was left out of this version?

Chris Perry

Scott: As I remember it, Enigma Records were licensing to Europe rather than exporting, and as it was told to me, the European manufacturer insisted that no one in Europe would ever buy a double album. Yes, this seems a little broad; the original utterance was probably more like "lose half of this crap and we'll talk."

So they made it into a single not too likable vinyl record. The song "Waist and the Knees" and most of the unconventionally structured songs got jettisoned at the horse latitudes.

still furiously pumping my stiff green gallop,

--Scott

June 1, 1998

Scott, quickly, to get it out of the way; thanks for many years of wonderful music.

Scott: Thanks, that's very nice. I had a lot of help.

Songwriting Questions: I have noticed in trying to play some of your songs on guitar that they tend to not follow the "proper" (I ii iii IV V vi vii) pattern, and when I try to force them into that pattern, they don't sound right. When writing music, do you go more by the feel of a good riff, or try to plug it into a certain key? Feel free to discuss music theory at length.

I gravitate toward fairly routine chord progressions with one particular odd thing about them. Anything that involves doing some one thing differently from how I'd ordinarily do it. Just as an example, one of my favorite tricks is to have a progression that involves a major of some chord wander around till it comes back to a minor of that chord--or the other way around. If you know my song "Idiot Son," that's one that does that in one part--it plays a D major against an F and then a D minor against a G.

To me the tastiest changes are always a high wire act. They're always one step away from total cliché or from not making sense at all. But that's only one way to like to listen to music, and clearly it's pretty different from what most people like or I'd be selling a lot more records.

Kurt Cobain once said that once he got the hang of songwriting, it quickly became formulaic for him. Thoughts?

My impression is that he was pretty ill at ease with the fact that the more he stuck to formula, the better the response. That's just how large audience success works, though. However many of them want to share the knottiness of your worldview, the majority just want you for an ornament, like an earring, and for that they want simple elegance; they don't want a big complicated thing hanging off of their earlobe.

As a celebrity (very minor), how do you feel about your public coming up to you and chatting you up before shows?

I feel great about it.

Best shoulda-been-a-band-name you've come up with?

The English Einsturzende Neubauten.

Thanks for your thoughts

Chris Prew

knotty by nature

--Scott

Scott, P & B & R & T is one of my DID's (please excuse the acronyms)

Scott: thank you kindly

and after browsing your music lists, your favorite records share approximately 90% homology (please excuse the molecular biology reference) with mine.

That's pretty amazing, and good correlations like that support my faith that's there's something like a language-correctness layer of musical taste. Languages use arbitrary signs, but they have very knowable systems of consistencies, and I think the musical ear is a lot like that, only the fact that the system is in a certain amount of flux leads to a world of confusion about what those consistencies are.

I also believe there are other ways of getting the same set of tastes that are more suspect, but of course that would apply to other people, not people who agree with *my* tastes!

I did notice, however, the glaring omission of any Marshall Crenshaw records on your list. What gives?

Jeffrey Rose

The thing is, I have no doubt I've left off a lot of great records just because unless a person is actually a professional rock critic his or her access is going to be limited. A quick check of the database shows that I have his debut at #27 for '82, FIELD DAY #24 for '83, LIFE'S TOO SHORT #31 for '91 and MIRACLE OF SCIENCE #36 '96. Which is certainly not bad. I haven't heard his other records.

your favorite waste of type,

--Scott

June 8, 1998

Scott fills out an icebreaker questionnaire, a list of questions designed to help you get to know someone better, sent to him by Andrew Hamlin...

Answer 'yes' if you (the person taking the quiz):

1. Knows pi to seven (or more) significant digits

Scott: I know it to six. You are wrong about the one I don't know. It is not significant at all.

2. Knows e to seven (or more) significant digits

Can they be digits of my own choosing?

3. Knows c to the nearest whole number

Ha. A trick question. C is a letter, not a number.

4. Knows what C8H10N4O2 is

That is what they're saying after certain lines in "Re-Make/Re-Model"

5. Knows at least six programming languages

Not unless you do some fudging at least as bad as counting C++ as a programming language.

6. Has been shot

No.

7. Has been shot at

No. I'm telling you, they're dead before they can reach.

8. Does not have email

Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Aw, this is another trick question!

9. Has a rotary dial telephone

Yeah, right. Try calling phone sex with one of those!

10. Has never downloaded pornography at work

I once downloaded the cover page from these people who will make you a life-size simulated woman for five thousand dollars. Hell, in two years the price will come way down and then everyone who bought one now is going to feel SO STUPID.

11. Has been to Las Vegas or Reno and not gambled

Last time I was in Las Vegas I ate at the Circus Circus buffet.

12. Has been to four or more continents

No, but at ages four or more I have been continent.

13. Has never eaten at McDonald's

No. That is, I have not *never*. It is not the case that never have I.

14. Can speak three or more languages

I have spoken French and Spanish but was shot at.

15. Has been mistaken for someone of the opposite gender

Not after I show them my penis.

16. Has bitten or been bitten by a human to the point of drawing blood

You have been listening to the townsfolk. Such foolish stories they tell.

17. Has won more than \$50 in a lottery

No. Wait, you mean you win money? I thought they were selecting people to die according to obscure small-town customs.

18. Has seen a ghost

No, there's no such thing as a ghost. BOO! Ha ha, only kidding. Ha ha ha ha.

19. Has been arrested for something that shouldn't have been a crime

They go around entrapping people, is what they do.

20. Can name more than nine Muppets

Are you kidding? I watched Sesame Street my whole life. Miss Piggy, Kermit the Frog, Fozzie Bear, Bert, Ernie, Elmo. That's nine.

21. Has never flown in an airplane

I have always remained in my seat while in an airplane.

22. Is packing heat

Packing heat RIGHT HERE.

Well, I have a lot of other icebreaker questionnaires to get to today.

--Scott

June 15, 1998

Scott, we will surely head to Cleveland if the Loud Family plays up there again this spring. Or Pittsburgh, or somewhere. You just do your tour, play great music and try to have fun in between as well. I'm not surprised (disappointed, of course) about the probable lack of a Columbus gig, though you do now have a substantial fan base here among people who find themselves humming "We've Only Just Begun" from time to time and only just begin to question why.

Scott: Janet, because you're you, we're bringing the love to Cleveland on Monday, July 13th at the fabulous (one just knows) Grog Shop.

Today we had a little incident on the loud-fans mailing list. One of our august party wrote, in reference to Nicholson Baker, "...his gadfly activities with regard to the SF Main Library" and another misread it as being in reference to *you* instead. So why not - how do you feel about the SFPL's sweeping embrace of technology at the apparent expense of good old books? Apparently a large, clandestine discarding of books took place last year as the new library *doesn't have space* for 'em. The voters were, I understand, told that they'd be getting more books in return for funding their metropolitan library. That's what I'm told.

My gadfly activities with regard to the SF Main Library haven't including going there, I'm a little ashamed to admit. Having no organizational skills when it comes to reading, it doesn't work for me to borrow books, but only to buy them and strew them around me for years of varying amounts of attention. And for someone like Joyce, I need to mark the margins up silly. When I go to a library, it's for easy access to nonspecific critical material; I don't want to have to check anything out and, heaven forbid, return it, which would mean parking in San Francisco a second time.

Of course, I don't want them throwing books out; it being San Francisco, there's every chance they'd throw out exactly the wrong ones. Allow me to guess that they would throw out five books I consider indispensable to the wellness of culture before they would throw out *The SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanis.

More importantly, a learned guy like you - have you any amusing library stories to share?

I'm ready to declare myself half of the way to being learned--a dramatically pleasing race with senility, I think.

I wouldn't call it "amusing," but it's interesting what you learn when you pursue a subject beyond what makes the newspapers. In college I did a research paper on nuclear weaponry, and I found out that during the Carter presidency there were all sorts of close calls--seven-minute-alert situations and so forth (that is, where the system thinks you have seven minutes to launch a counterstrike or be disabled). I'd probably mangle any actual details I tried to recount now, but I kept finding out about these events and thinking "Jesus, how come we never heard about *this*?"

Also, if the American Library Association successfully solicited you to model for one of their promotional "READ" celebrity posters (and wow, can I see it now!), which book would you brandish for the photo-shoot?

It would probably have to be something not too obscure, so maybe one of the usual things I stump for like *Ulysses*. Although, a pile of books from the LIFE Science Library would be a nice in-joke in a way--*Sound*, and *The Mind*, and so forth. They obsessed me when I was a kid, especially *The Mind*, which has that amazing "symbols inside a skull" painting that I must have spent anywhere from ten to fifty hours staring at and thinking about.

What a difference between something like that and what grade school libraries offered: the same story of a young man's heroism or a young woman's navigation of society, told over and over again, life presented to adolescents as if it were a nursing home for sick and dying systems of validation.

Clearly, I'm trying to decide whether I really do want to go back to being an active librarian someday, or whether being a passive librarian is plenty. Any wisdom you can send my way would surely prove illuminating, as always.

Um, okay here is my wisdom. Being a librarian is good cause they are smart and cause they read a lot.

152.41,

Janet Ingraham Dwyer

and 25 or 6 to 4 to you, too,

--Scott

June 22, 1998

Scott, I've never heard the Loud Family before, but I just picked up *Interbabe Concern* about a month ago, on a fluke (can I say that here?) so regard this as the question of a Loud Family neophyte.

Scott: I'll suspend my curiosity about what sort of fluke causes someone to buy that record; mistook it for a virtual-igloo-building CD-ROM?

First, let me say you guys/gals are on the wings of something truly great. References to L. Ron Hubbard? Drunk on Civil Rights? Velvet melodies backed by gruffly guitars and touchstones to Smile-era Brian Wilson? AAARRRHGHHGGH!!! (and I mean that as high compliment).

ThAAARRRHGHHGGHnk you.

Two quick questions. First, what would it mean if I were to find out that my wife "has sodium laureth sulfate"? Should I call someone? Join a support group?

You will need 20 gallons of tomato juice, a copy of the Bible Code, and an arc welder's apron...

And lastly, having learned that you are a C++ programmer, what is your take on multiple inheritance? Are the payoffs worth the possible pitfalls (i.e., jinxing the name-space)?

Since the payoff is job security for C++ programmers, you bet it's worth it.

Your obt. svvt.,

Trent D.

P.S. You all ever play in Ohio?

We can't do it too often, since as those who've seen us there know there's the constant threat of it turning into a bacchanalian frenzy, but we may be routed through Cleveland on 7-13.

Your obsolete sportvest,

--Scott

Scott, me, Dave and Joe are listening to 'Idiot Son' and we've just been to a series of cosmology lectures. Joe was too shy to ask this to anyone actually lecturing so it's up to you. Given that heavy elements are formed during supernova explosions, and this material is then dispersed into the interstellar medium, what effect does this have on future star formation? Dave says do you still remember the Mark E. Smith version of the R.E.M. song that he inflicted on you, and are you ever going to come and see us in Calne, Wiltshire, UK, again. (The question is serious, by the way)

Lots of love,

Pat Moore, Dave, Joe

P.S. We're coming to SF in August.

Scott: Wow, great to hear from you! How is Paul Ricketts? I should be back from touring August 1 so definitely drop a line and let's get together.

I had the impression that star deaths and star births were more or less independent--that stars formed due to conditions apparently determined by the big bang, not that stars formed and ended, formed and ended, again and again out of the same material. You remind me that to all the accumulated dark and heavy matter is now added Mark E. Smith, which may mean the fate of the universe is to get into a drunken brawl and decide to stop touring.

--Scott M., prof. of Cosmetological Physics

June 29, 1998

Scott, please shed some light on your songwriting processes for the Loud Family. Is it stream of consciousness, jam into a boombox and painstakingly edit later, or stare at a blank page for awhile and then go check the fridge again? Caffeine, booze, pot, other? Morning or evening?

Scott: Sometimes booze or coffee helps when I want to finish something, but I seldom do more than two drinks or two cups of coffee per day for normal health reasons. If I did like pot, I wouldn't feel free to talk about it in the current truly ugly political climate. Persecution of pot clubs for the terminally ill after a popular vote legalizing them? Are the people carrying this out not ashamed?

The songwriting process is no more or less interesting than something like accounting work, by which I mean the process isn't that closely related to the results. Whether an accountant likes to work methodically or furiously probably says more about deadlines than about how inspired the deductions are.

To me the key is a love for getting an inspiration across, and to keep that going far into adulthood requires that I keep a certain amount of background up. If I ever stop feeling like I have a firm handle on what pop music can convey to an audience, and in turn a firm handle on what there is to convey and what has proven in the forums of the world to be worth conveying, I start feeling as if I shouldn't be doing it, I should be using that energy to alert people to what others have done. The most important *process* is tuning my efforts to what I learn has gone before in history, staying one step ahead of learning of my own inadequacy.

Solo acoustic on the edge of the bed or full-on-electric with band on hand? I suspect your answer will come back something like "it depends...," but is there anything tried and true that gets your creative juices flowing? Just wondering. I'd like to write some Loud Family songs too. Thanks!

Rich Burns

What a nice thing to say! Here are some fairly tried and true things to do: (1) Listen to a lot of the music you think your audience listens to, (2) Notate or record musical or lyrical ideas scrupulously, (3) Try out a lot of ideas on a solo acoustic guitar--so many that after awhile it's statistically impossible for them all to be bad.

People were asking me about Bob Pollard. He said one of the best things I've heard on the subject: he considers four random people from something like a high school yearbook and asks himself what kind of a record he'd be excited about them making, then he makes that record.

furiously accounting,

--Scott

Scott, I was wondering if you are much of a cook, and if so, if you have a recipe which is your specialty that you could share with the Ask Scott readers.

Erin Amar

Scott: Take a swordfish steak, some butter, fresh green onions, oregano, chicken stock, salt, white wine, and a medium sized bottle of saffron.

Sell these for twenty dollars and buy yourself a nice grilled swordfish.

--Cuisinartrocker

July 6, 1998

Scott, what action would you take if a close friend were on the downward spiral of self-corrosion? Someone very dear to me is haplessly falling into a dismal pool of alcohol abuse. When he is disappointed in himself, for instance, because of [...] he utilizes alcohol to numb his emotions. In turn, due to the alcohol, he [...], which then leads to further consumption of alcohol--a vicious cycle. I've pointed out his abuse to him, but he fails to recognize the problem.

[editor's note: descriptions deleted to preserve anonymity]

Scott, I am aware that the subject matter of this e-mail is rather personal, but as I do not know anyone else, I am asking you to help me help him. I'm uncertain as to whether or not you realize who I am speaking of, but nevertheless, I want your intellectual advice. Is this an intellectual matter? Not really, but I've used other strategies, and I have made a prominent crease in failure. In an effort to save him, I fear that I will lose him. (I'm fairly insouciant about his turning away from me; it's not that that which I am concerned with, yet the possible loss of his life that worries me.)

By witnessing his gradual--almost subtle--deterioration, I've competed with the anti-altruistic desire to be ignorant and negligent, but I lose. My question remains on the top portion of this letter; please.

Dissuade

Scott: This is certainly disturbing; I wish I could be of more use than I'm going to be. Of the people I've known with substance abuse problems, about a third have turned things completely around for themselves, about a third hover in some grey area, and about a third have died.

By most accounts what turns people around is the realization that drinking is a serious problem, and it's always clear to those around drinkers long before it's clear to drinkers. Drinking seems always to invent a new way of looking at the world in which however much drinking they're doing is okay, and so it's sometimes the case that not until they've hit absolute rock bottom is the logic of drinking even disturbed (let alone broken).

I'd just keep gently suggesting, over time, that they watch it, and that from your point of view it's getting close to time to seek help. There are going to be people who won't go the AA route because they're not Christians and AA is overtly Christian (or I should say has struck me as such; I invite correction), but I think it's well worth noting that the religious dimension is no accident. However they come to that point, Christians feel justified in Christ, and I think that, at a level we're not used to considering, an alcoholic is using alcohol to stave off an encounter with absolute justification. He or she may even have come to be clearer-thinking than the rest of us on this point: justification in the social order--"I'm okay because I'm doing as well as person B, at least in person C's eyes"--is going to fail, and when it does, we're going to know desperation, and the distractions from this inevitability which work to pacify the rest of us don't work for him or her.

hair o' the God that bit ya,

--Scott

July 13, 1998

Scott, have you ever noticed that from time to time a band decides that it would be cute to record a song written by Charles Manson, and then they actually do it?

Discounting the quality of the songs and the suspicion that people sometimes do this just for attention, what do you feel are the ethical ramifications of recording music written by such a person? Are there any? I mean, If "Back of a Car" had been written by Charles Manson, would you still have covered it?

Ethical firmly suspended, tee-hee,

Geoffrey Woolf

Scott: The short answer is I'd probably go ahead with it if the song really were "Back of Car," and you placed me at the moment of having to make the decision to release, ignoring the unlikelihood of the situation ever arising; but no, nothing like this would happen with things being as they are in the real world.

There's no community of listeners that I know of who would, after 25 years to form an opinion, reassess the wrongness of the murders for which Manson was convicted because I did a song of his, were it a brilliant composition with lyrics about being a teenager in love; their reaction would be "how odd that a convicted killer could write so well and so sensitively," which seems to me a worthwhile thing to ponder if it were the case. If the cover of the song were presented as trading in vicarious danger, or we were talking about one of his real songs, such as "Look At Your Game, Girl," I would have serious qualms.

Here is how I see the issues breaking down: on one hand, none of us is fundamentally incapable of doing anything Charles Manson or his "family" did, we simply lucked into unpbriings and circumstances which didn't lead us to involvement in such things, and it would be bad to reinforce a hunch that what maintains the disparity is our becoming in

some sense ceremonially cleansed of any association with certified pariahs. On the other hand, a gratuitous show of solidarity with the particulars of wrongdoing starts down the path of generating social energy at the expense of others--those who could be labeled prudes and sheep for not being so broad-minded as to, as you say, find such a move "cute." That is, it would be a low-grade recapitulation of the victimization machinery that brought the "family" together in the first place.

And then, if this does pose an ethical problem, where should one draw the line? Would it be wrong to cover a Lou Reed song since has been confirmed that he is often not very nice or since it has been alleged that he is sometimes downright abusive?

It's every artist's own call, obviously, but this reminds me of a quote which I believe was from Virginia Woolf. Someone asked her if she thought higher education suppressed the creativity of young writers, and she said something like "it obviously hasn't suppressed the creativity of nearly enough of them." We are in very little danger of excessive ethics stanching the flow of indie rock.

squeaky clean,

--Scott

July 20, 1998

Scott, why "where"?

princess, in this context *i'm* a freak,

ana m.

Scott: Well, Ana, I assume you mean to ask why the last four songs on INTERBABE CONCERN all start with the word "where."

It's very loosely modeled after chapter titling in some piece of classic literature I skimmed long ago--I think it's CANDIDE by Voltaire but I don't have a copy to check that.

I had put on my Jungian psychologist's hat and tried to convey the core idea behind four dreams I'd had--what seemed to me to be my four most enduringly significant dreams. One of them is a flooding river or ocean. Of the dreams I wake up remembering, several of the most vivid and resonant have been about rising waters.

Maybe I had to pee.

where a train goes through a tunnel

--Scott

Scott, do you think that consciousness is a manifestation of the years of intense stimulation that sentient creatures are exposed to in their early years? If a computer were programmed to receive and compare equivalent stimulus, do you feel that it could achieve self-awareness? What type of moral structure would such an artificial life form have? Would you consider it to be a life form?

Velvetmonster

Scott: Since early in this century, we've thought "now that we have calculating devices, it should be fairly straightforward to create consciousness--we just have to make a machine that can store as much binary data as a brain and mimic all the fetching and comparing processes in the brain." Putting aside my hunch that this not far from expecting that if you build an exact replica of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and place any 25 people on the stage, they will spontaneously perform *Hamlet*, I think we've shown disrespect for the issue by thinking of it as a solvable problem.

As one can only speak with authority about one's *own* self, the only test I'd ever believe of whether a machine had self-awareness would be that it had *my* self-awareness. That is, the verifier must be given the experience of being alive in a machine, and even then in order to get it to work you might well have to fool the verifier into thinking he or she was still in a human body, so even with the thing working, we probably have as tricky a problem in ontology as we've ever had to deal with just to yield a verifying community of one.

Here's another conundrum: as we can replay programs exactly, would an event of machine consciousness in the cosmos occur twice if you played it back twice? My answer would be no; because uncertainty of outcome maps to a unique set of world events (in this case the parameterization of the program), though you'd convinced yourself you set things in motion nondeterministically, machine-consciousness time would not be in any sort of synch with natural consciousness time, but with a haphazard calendar of changes to the machine's nature which were for its own purposes significant, and none of which we'd have any basis for thinking is a change to consciousness which still qualifies as consciousness. That is, any moment we know it works, it had better change to something else--which might not work--or it is really just dead silicon after all.

To me, the idea that consciousness didn't need the cosmos to happen, that a freestanding instance of it could be accomplished on a simulator independent of bodies, relationships, desires, and uncertainties, is arguably to presume the cosmos acted less than economically in a way that offends Darwinian logic if nothing else.

we can't wager for anything as trivial as quatloos,

--Scott

August 3, 1998

Scott, I'll keep this brief--don't want to babble on for too long. Just finished looking through your "list of ages" and went "Geesh!"

Scott: Do you mean to say that some part of you exploded?

I could easily pick over 3/4 of my #1 picks since 1965 (which, ironically, has always been the date I've started my year by year list) right from your encyclopaedic effort.

Before then, the best music didn't resolve to albums very well. Often there were multiple encapsulations of jazz pieces, Broadway shows, singles collections, etc., that were hard to pin down to a particular release in a particular year. After 1965 it was much easier to correlate as there was global emulation of the Beatles.

Which, weirdly enough, brings me around to all things Joycean. I've always enjoyed reading your thoughts about literature, especially Joyce (Loud Family isn't going to be performing "Finnegan's Wake" in concert anytime soon, are they? the trad. folk song as opposed to the prog. rave-up). As for a random thought, what do you think of this sentence? "To restore silence is the role of objects." Courtesy of Beckett, first couple pages of *Molloy*.

I haven't read any of Beckett except WAITING FOR GODOT (which was terrific), so this is uninformed freewheeling at its filthiest: I'm thinking by "silence" he means cessation of discourse. A lot of our reality is discourse--haggling over significance, putting spins on things, indoctrination into systems of mediation. When anything is acknowledged by all concerned to be an "object," some aspect of the world reads as a shared reality and will admit no *new* mythological reality to be overlaid; silence on a particular subject is accomplished.

Just a quick question. Oh! Thanks so much for your great songs!

Tony Stanfa

Thanks. We got some kinda little show here, you betcha.

waiting for El Goodot,

--Scott

August 10, 1998

Scott, why do you hate New York? Last time I saw you was at the old Knitting Factory back in Nov '94 when I requested you play "Re-make/Re-model." Thanks, by the way.

Scott: Hate New York? It's probably tied with Chicago for my favorite place to play. They're not as familiar with me as San Francisco is and so don't have as much contempt. There was a 1996 Loud Family show in New York; I can't imagine how the saturation coverage of the event escaped your notice. (Editor's note: There was a show in July 1998 as well.)

Steve Wynn told me you had an even earlier band called Alternate Learning that that y'all did an album together. That sounds like something amazing and impossible to find.

Thanks,

Scott

We didn't do anything like a whole album's worth of split-down-the-middle collaboration. It was more like we helped each other out with resources--he had access to the college radio station and I had a home studio. Plus I just really liked him and his material. I remember having pretty serious plans to produce an album of his at the time he moved back to L.A., but he broke into the industry for real with the Dream Syndicate, which precluded the need for a homemade job.

But, yes, I had a band at that time called Alternate Learning which released an E.P. and an album--none too obviously worth the effort of checking out if you want an opinion on that subject--but with no Steve Wynn, who undoubtedly would have done them a world of good.

"Ain't that some kind of answer? Yeah, but no question was posed"

--Scott

Scott, I used to pride myself on being a fairly knowledgeable fan of music, with tastes ranging from The Turtles to Todd Rundgren to Tommy Keene, but somehow the realm of your musical influence has always escaped me. That is to say, I did not even become aware of the existence of Game Theory (and subsequently, The Loud Family) until I came across a rather concise review that appeared in the innocuously entitled *Rock -- The Essential Album Guide*. For what it's worth, the editors decided that your collective body of work merited ratings ranging from 3 and 1/2 "bones" for *Two Steps*, to 4 and 1/2 bones for virtually everything else in your catalog.

Scott: I'll go against my first couple of romantic intuitions and assume it's better to get more bones.

I began to purchase these items, commencing with *Plants and Birds*, and I was quickly hooked. I subsequently went on to acquire every other item in the catalog, with an exception that leads to my next, rather obvious question. I have desperately sought out used CD copies of *Lolita Nation*, but to no avail. I'm guessing you get this question all the time, but I'm curious. I want to complete my collection, and hence, quench my increasing thirst for your music. My search thus far has only revealed LP versions of the record. Unfortunately, I made the grave mistake of failing to replace my Gerard Turntable years ago. Any thoughts would be appreciated.

S. Berns

Thanks for the kind words!

A person named Dennis Sacks (misprinted as "Stacks" on the recent album) owns an e-mail discussion list called loud-fans, which I'm told has become somewhat more a social

phenomenon than a distribution of band facts, and I've been known to direct people to this as a resource for people who would notice copies of my CDs in used bins.

I have exactly one *Lolita Nation* CD and I can't give it to you, as whenever I'm at home, I listen to nothing but that, over and over and over.

methinks he did call him "Bones"

--Scott

August 17, 1998

Scott, just a few more days before *Days for Days*...the anticipation would be too much to bear if I hadn't bought, like, ten other CDs this week to occupy my time.

Scott: Okay, I'm a little behind in answering these. For all I know you found *Days For Days* to be a big letdown and have hated me for months.

This question has a longish lead-in. I first heard of your band in an interview with the near-perfect songwriter Aimee Mann, who waxed quite enthusiastic about *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things*. I trusted her taste, so I went and bought it soon after. I must admit, I liked it fairly well, but I wasn't overwhelmed. Still, I was intrigued enough to pick up *Interbabe Concern*, and the upshot is that eventually all your albums grew on me in a big way. It's the sort of thing that happens when a CD's on, you're half-listening to it while doing the dishes, say, and suddenly a musical moment goes by, and you stop and think, "What was *that?*", and run over to rewind the CD. Ever had a similar experience with a band you like?

Francis Heaney

These days I make a decision quickly and tend to stick to it--I think because I'm older than most new artists, and have a certain predictive capability about how their minds are going to work. If they in five songs haven't written any true-ringing lyrics, for instance, it's almost a dead certainty they don't have musical subtleties that are going to grab me unawares down the road.

Of albums I've liked a lot in the 90s, *Submarine Bells* by the Chills is the only one I can think of that took a few listens to click; other than that I've tended to know something's coming at me from the first listen.

For what it's worth, I knew I liked both of Aimee Mann's records immediately.

a couple of drinks and he was a fortune teller,

--Scott

P.S. Several people wrote and said AA is not overtly Christian in any way they found off-putting (I invited correction that this aspect might give certain people pause). Nothing at all against Christians, by the way; [see original message](#).

August 24, 1998

Scott, I had a question about what goes on during the rest of your day while on tour. Obviously there is the "showtime" part of the day and the "drivetime" part of the day, but what goes on when you folks have five or six hours to kill? Sightseeing? General mayhem?

Scott: Sometimes there are official duties like radio or record store visits, but yeah, mostly mayhem--we'll get to a town and see what we can do to bring about an outbreak of crazed bloodshed.

There are not that many stretches of five or six hours to kill. Typically travel and meals take up the entire pre-sound-check day. If we do have a day off and we're staying at someone's house it's nice to have an outing and socialize with them because they usually know the good food and fun places in their area. If we're just in a motel, it takes on the feel of a window of sanctuary from unknown factors and obligations, and often you'll just feel like sleeping or generally doing as little as possible besides at some point dragging your ass over to Denny's.

Also...do you ever schedule days off on the tour, or do they just happen when the next coolest place to play is about 26 hours away?

Both. It's a complex formula better explained by booking agents than by me, but my observation is that they often give us Sundays off, and sometimes one more day some time during the week if it coincides with a long drive.

Good luck and congratulations on the new release,

Tom Schettino

Thanks!

No wasted days,

--Fretty Fender

August 31, 1998

Scott, "Gerontion" by T.S. Eliot--what do you think the title means?

Donna Meyers

Scott: It's well established that "Gerontion" is the diminutive of "old man" in Greek. I think Eliot feels the need to treat the collision of the Greek mind with the Hebrew mind in the early Christian era as the big bang of our intellectual cosmos, and I get the sense of a stern caution against allowing the Greek mind to dominate as much as it has.

The old man in Gerontion is spiritually barren in old age, as was J. Alfred Prufrock; he's Nietzschean in that his impulse is to lay the failure of his philosophically-based individualism at the doorstep of Christ, and by extension, the Judaic tradition.

If you want to get at the crux of this matter, you get drawn inexorably to the prologue to the Gospel of John and the "Word," especially because Eliot makes a direct reference. "Word" here describes divine incarnation of course, but the Greek and Hebrew words translated as "Word" are telling (and of course well known). The Greek is *logos*--system of discourse, way of the cosmos in which things are intelligible (interpretation mine). The Hebrew is *dabar*--commandment, divine utterance which creates material reality. The crucifixion transcends discourse, if only in that at the heart of discourse is success through ouster in debate; if you take away the ousted party with his ousted idea, you have nothing, no basis for knowledge--a tautology: "all utterances are true." The crucifixion says analogically, structurally--you can't build what it says syllogistically--that there is always a victim against whom worldly culture, e.g. either dialectic, or protection of the Temple from heretics or the Empire from enemies of the citizenry, convenes to define its own rightness by comparison.

The Hebrew mind can at least conceive of divine reality outside *logos*; the Greek mind figures to be vulnerable to the problem of trying to consider transcendence of discourse using discursive methods.

Eliot's direct reference to John's prologue is: "The word within a word, unable to speak a word,/Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year/Came Christ the tiger" (what a line!). What Christ the tiger attacks is the viability of a primitive or classical hero system in which the Gerontion character feels he might have thrived, hence the bemoaning of his absence from any battle scene ("heaving a cutlass," etc.). Whether it is ouster in combat or ouster in debate, Christ the glorified victim has thrown light on the victimization--the necessity by definition for there to be an ousted party--inherent in any such quest for one's authentication.

and try boosting the lows before the fuzz pedal,

--Scott

September 7, 1998

Scott, as a parenthetical note to the discussion of May 11th which touched upon monosyllabic band names, I feel compelled to mention that there was in fact a Boston supergroup which went by the name of "Lint." They're noteworthy for two reasons: one, they featured several members of the Swirlies (a Boston based group who'd be of interest to anyone who likes My Bloody Valentine) including Seanna Carmody who has gone on to

form Syrup USA. Two, it was the first CD (to my knowledge) which you could also play on your turntable: a small flexidisk was attached to the top of the CD containing a (very short) bonus track.

Scott: What a great packaging idea! I love stuff like that. They could issue a vinyl release that when you take it out of the sleeve is already covered with lint.

Still curious...why sodium laureth sulfate and not sodium lauryl sulfate?

Dana

I think if Marcel Duchamp were here he would back me up on this: sodium *laureth* sulfate can be proven with modern chemical analytical techniques to be the shampoo ingredient conferring a more classic beauty--hence the "eth" chemical suffix, as in, were Shakespeare examining a bottle, "it bestoweth beauty."

--Stratocaster on Avon

Scott, what if you came across a book that was about an openly lesbian rock band that had taken the Loud Family as a major influence (other influences include Aimee Mann), and was part of the first openly gay/lesbian rock scene?

Scott: I'd think it was very thoughtful of this band to cite us as an influence, and I suppose having our name in it might convince me to buy it if I were already interested enough to be checking it out in a book store. Citing a few thousand bands as influences in this book might be a way to move quite a few copies.

And this scene sought to get rid of the more commercial forms of alternative rock and bring more underground artists to bear on the mainstream, like LF, and Aimee, and Ani DiFranco. I have written a book like this and would like to hear your thoughts. Are you bemused, flattered, hate it, etc.?

Feeling guilty, I guess, for being the weak flank in this takeover. Even with our new army of gay and lesbian fans there may never be such thing as a coup where we could emerge triumphant. How would it work? Nirvana didn't sell a hundred times as many records as someone like Teenage Fanclub because they were a hundred times as good, they sold a hundred times more because they were that much better a story in the minds of casual observers. You could divide the world up into the corporate, image-conscious, closed-minded phonies on the one hand, and on the other hand the Kurt Cobains who came off like loser kids but had this spark of incisive sincerity, and say "hey, I belong in that second category; that's me all over."

How you'd ever do that with us or our music I couldn't imagine. Also, we're pretty happy to indulge in guilty pleasures; a deal-breaking cover of "Story In Your Eyes" by the Moody Blues could pop up at any moment.

I know this is a rather wild question but I just thought I'd ask it anyway.

Andrea Weiss

The Loud Family are a wild band full of wild people ready for wild questions.

--son of Sappho

September 14, 1998

Scott, how many copies of ALRN, *Painted Windows* and *Blaze of Glory* were produced? How were they distributed? I have read that all copies of *Blaze of Glory* were used as "promotional" copies, yet members of the loud-fans list have reported that they purchased the record "new" in record stores, thus implying that some copies were made available to the public through normal distribution channels.

Scott: There was no physical distinction between promo and for-sale copies. At the time we could afford only disks, not cardboard jackets, but we decided to put them out even with unsellable packaging to get our personality somewhere on the map--i.e. send them to press and college radio. Thus, Bagism: our drummer Mike Irwin (who was an artist), Photo Robert, and I came up with that white trash bag design. We thought it might be an interesting enough novelty that distributors would actually take a few of the 1000 copies, and in fact they did; we ended up selling about half of them, though, as we feared, a lot of them warped.

We also did a thousand ALRNS and a thousand PAINTED WINDOWS. For all the releases, the procedure was the same--we'd put boxes of them in the trunk of a car, drive to Berkeley and San Francisco from distributor to distributor, Rough Trade, etc., begging them to take some copies. We'd also liberally distribute free copies to record stores. My first receptive audience turned out to be scenester record store proprietors. Though none of those records you mention was reviewed very well (the buzzy synths alone were a hanging offense at the time), record collecting lunatics appreciated the diversity.

Who owns the rights to the Game Theory material, and who has possession of the multi-tracks?

Douglas

Scott Vanderbilt owns everything with the name Game Theory on it forever. When I become a big star in these my golden years, he will get rich and it will all have been worth it for him.

--Scott

September 21, 1998

Scott, I read of your interest in Rene Girard's work. I have a passing interest in his work and often read Prof. Eric Gans' publication "Chronicles of Love and Resentment" online. A

friend tells me that the rejection or downplaying of Freud and other psychiatric/social theories in Girard's work is a major stumbling block. What do you think?

Scott: It's strange to me that a lot of top scholars--Gans, who I guess is at U.C.L.A., is a notable exception--don't really take to Girard. I don't understand a criticism such as "he downplays Freud." Is it true that we all know at a gut level that Freud is so correct in all things, that if a cultural anthropologist downplays him, we lose our link to reality?

For one thing, last I remember it was all the rage to dismiss Freud as a sexist or something but here Girard calls the Oedipal complex into question and he might as well be burning the flag. Do we men think "of course it is true that we desire our mothers sexually in early childhood, but have learned to repress the urge; without this core of our being the universe is chaotic"? I interpret Girard's reaction to be that if some psychiatric patients do have such repressed desires for their mothers, it's not because desire for one's mother is a force of nature, but that the child observed the father desiring the mother, unconsciously acquired the desire himself (Girard's main thesis is that specifically human desires are "mimetic"), and thus in his own mind entered into a rivalry with the father. This, to me, is like a knot loosening, the unintelligible becoming intelligible. If someone were to say "this is too reductive," I could only reply that my personal taste runs toward what reduces complexity rather than what increases it; if they say "this is disrespectful of Freud," I'd say *Totem and Taboo* was appealingly modest about what psychoanalysis could offer anthropology, but that doesn't mean that anthropologists forever owe Freud reciprocal modesty by the rules of sportsmanship. A modest and careful contribution from a great mind can still be wrong. Girard isn't short on general praise of Freud as a thinker and observer.

That Eric Gans title is great, but I haven't read him yet. My fear is that he gets into a certain area of discipline I'm not so good at, identifiable by sly, urbane uses of the word "signifier."

2) Paul Virilio (*Dromologies* etc.) has a book out called *Open Skies* which I think is interesting in its diagnosis of our current information-age dilemmas.

I'll keep an ear open for this.

My third question is, are we doomed to relive every musical period at least twice? There's that expression, "history...first time as tragedy and then as farce", what happens if it was farce to begin with? Do we then have glam as tragedy?

Colin Freebury

More and more the truth of nostalgia is right in front of everyone's nose. It's too much yarn to spin here, but I think the best outcome would be that we lose faith in the tragic aspect the first time around, but, failing that, we could set rigid moral limits: any weak and impure nostalgia from the era of nostalgia itself, for instance, the early 70s, is considered hopelessly gauche; strong and pure nostalgia is felt only for jerky silent film footage, Charlie Chaplin impersonators, Art Deco lettering, Scott Joplin music.

O O O O that Shakespeherian rag,

--Scott

September 28, 1998

Scott, I saw a reference to record ratings. Me, my brother and best friend create tapes every year that feature our top 20 songs and albums in countdown style. How do you go about rating and ranking records? How long have you been doing it? Do you have lists of your top albums and or songs? Thanks for being a Ron's top 20 mainstay!

Ron Schorr

Scott: I keep swearing I'm going to make road tapes of my top songs, and I also keep swearing I'm going to compile a list of the best music for each year of the century, not just the rock album era. Can you believe there's no money in either of these worthy endeavors?

Yes, I do the songs, too, and I consider that list more important than the album list, except that it's less interesting to other people; the critical world focuses on the unit appropriate to a buyer's guide.

I rely on suggestions and free records from friends at labels, and I would say that Sue Trowbridge and Greg Dwinell usually influence me due to their informedness and similarity of tastes to my own. There's no system I adhere to; I just write down the names of albums that excite me so much I want to share the news. At the end of the year there's usually a publication or two wanting to publish the opinions of music biz nobodies like myself, so I pull the whole thing into a top ten commitment which I then start painfully regretting in about a month.

--Franz List

Scott, how come *Lolita Nation*, *Two Steps* and *Tinker* were never re-issued by Alias?

Scott: The voice of temptation, the siren song of millions to be made from those titles, cried to Alias, but they stood firm, a rock. "To an ugly enough public tendency, we will not pander," they were heard to say.

You were also labelmates with the Smithereens back then. Did you ever tour with or do anything with them?

Game Theory opened two shows for them: one in SF and one in Santa Clara. I was pretty much a fan, and I remember them being very good and very loud, and old school rock as the day is long: their road crew had Bill Graham level contempt for the idea of any of the Smithereens' equipment being touched or scooted to make room for the other bands-- which seemed kind of a lost dispositional art in the fussy Camper Van world of 1987. (For the record, I remember the band themselves being congenial.)

Just wondering, hope everything is well,

Ant

Thank you. I think I can report that nothing is *that* bad.

guns 'n' blood 'n' roses 'n' butter 'n' bread 'n' chocolate,

--Scott

October 12, 1998

Scott, I love the new album (though I confess I usually just program out the odd-numbered tracks--is that wrong?). Already have the wife singing "Why we all moved to Ca-li-for-ni-a" around the house.

Scott: Thanks. You mean you routinely arrange for her to walk around singing that? Kinda weird, but--great!

I had a question about "Cortex the Killer," in which you name-check your hometown for the first time (as far as I can tell) since the Game Theory days: "Sacramento...I have let your people down." This is so ineffably *sad* that there must be a story behind it. Is it a reference to something specific? I mean, I personally don't feel let down. Does it have anything to do with your 20-year Rio Americano reunion? (this year? next?) Do you plan to attend? What will you wear?

If there is one, it's this year, but nobody's contacted me--and my parents haven't moved; maybe there's some preference that I not show up. I would have to wear one of my foxy nylon disco shirts by Nik Nik. I was actually a Roxy/Bowie boy in those days but leopard jackets and oversize kabuki space suits weren't widely available.

There's a combination of straightforwardness and sarcasm in that line, I'd say. If, for instance, I think now about not letting Sacramento down, that might have meant something like becoming a famous musician playing music Sacramento perennially likes--which I couldn't do if I tried at any rate, but is even a tricky concept in that what a modern community (and I use the terms loosely) might think it will always like it of course doesn't continue to like ten years running. Kansas? Tears For Fears? Bush?

Obligatory favorite-album-list question: You place the first three Steely Dan records high, but the next four don't make your top 20 at all. Surely *Katy Lied* is better than *Red Octopus*!

"If only you'd believe in miracles, so would I" seems a good deal more pithy and sophisticated than anything I can think of on *Katy Lied*. "Who's coming on, is it you or me?/Coming on, while it's still soft and warm" is fairly grabby stuff, and the Jeffersons' music did a lot more movin'-on-up than Steely Dan's at that point, say these ears. Though neither one of these records is exactly Mr. Toad's wild ride from start to finish.

Maybe if I played them all the way through, which I haven't done in years (what can I say? I'm underfunded), I'd see this your way, but at the time of release I thought they were starting to sound a little, as they say, paid for.

Not that this is subjective or anything. I won't ask about Joni Mitchell until next time.

I wouldn't call Joni neglected on my lists by any means. But, you know, last I checked (1976?) there were people better than Joni Mitchell. She struck me as stuck forever in the psychological that gropes for the spiritual, but a spirituality that's always too self-conscious--as if the right way could be known by its glorious and subtle objectification of everyone who'd ever made her feel bad. This is unfair of course because I don't know her mature work at all.

Looking forward to seeing you in New York, where they jazz the rock.

Matthew Budman

glad you got to see me blow, cat!

--Scott

October 19, 1998

Scott, when I was a teacher trainee I used the very amusing Game Theory Christmas Tape as a listening comprehension in a class. They were delighted. The sound effects were met with lots of laughter. Anyway, as one bright young thing remarked, the story is not fully consistent. It ends like this:

"And so Denis did attend Unhand the Whales that Christmas Day, having learnt an important question. He vowed on that day, that before voicing disapproval of any cause, he should always take the time to verify that the cause did not in any way benefit him."

The problem is that the cause did not really benefit him. Or do you mean that if he had run away immediately he wouldn't have got his Christmas presents?

Daniel the Swede

Scott: How a release of 300 copies can haunt one.

Not wanting to keep the youth of Sweden in ethical limbo, the point was that dreaming he was a whale and that the people on a boat with Sting saved him from being harpooned should have inclined him to appreciate charitable natures, but--are you ready to bust your sides laughing?--he ended up being just as uncharitable but with new resolve to scan the world for charities which could help him, and from now on hate only the others.

Gotta stop, I'm out of breath. I should really be doing stand-up.

P.S. Rumour has it that The Posies are coming to Europe. Don't you know them?! Perhaps you could join them on "the Loud Posies tour" or possibly "the Posie Family tour." Think about it. It's about time that you conquer our part of the world!

Of course--everyone should know the Posies, occasionally the best band in America! 'Cept now they've broken up. But with solo albums there'll just be more to love.

--Rupert Popkin

Scott, I'm currently listening to the new album. I'm really enjoying it. The odd number tracks are quite bizarre and original. Thanks for letting us in on your not so standard musical excursions. I notice thanks to Chris Xefos. King Missile is one of my favorites ever!! Why the thanks, and what is Chris up to?? Thanks for all the great tunes!!

Ron Schorr

Scott: Chris is a huge talent. He's currently playing in various SF bands, writing songs, and producing records. I would suggest a web search under Xefos to turn up juicier rumors than I can fabricate off the top of my head.

Glad you're enjoying our album which ain't so incomprehensible once you figure out that dogs, pigs and sheep really symbolize people.

--rock and roll Animal

October 26, 1998

Scott, I had to write to tell you how much I enjoy your music. I have *Interbabe Concern* and just got *Days for Days*. I'll soon be getting your other stuff.

Scott: I love you.

A friend turned me on to you, and I'm turning others on to you. I'm probably not your usual demographic--age 40, but still listening to new music. My similarly aged friends--the few who still listen to new music--also really, really like you.

Thanks. A lot of over-40 people (well, five or six) like my material, and I can only conclude that to appreciate my music it helps to be at least as senile as I am.

In searching through your "Ask Scott" archives I was happy to find your discussion about "the one odd thing" you put in regular chord progressions. Your songs seem to have an interesting quirk, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was--thought it had something to do with major/minor relations. Would you care to expound a bit more on this quality?

It's hard to expound analytically on music; nobody likes music because of sensible thinking, they like it because of cultural black magic--yet it just so happens you're talking to Mr.

Expound On Anything, so here goes. Most unsuccessful songwriters probably love to suppose there's some terrible pathology at work keeping people from liking them, and here's a little bit of mine.

I believe music uses the language part of the brain, only music is different from language in that there is no clear distinction between what is being said and what language is being used to say it. Really successful pop music often arrives at some sort of gaudy alignment of the two: surf music which talks about how good surfing is, for instance. It sounds like a simple case of accessibility, but it's not. When, on PET SOUNDS, the Beach Boys shifted from beach-bum/hot-rodder shop talk--something 1% of their audience probably involved themselves in for real--to subjects universally felt and cared about (and did it brilliantly), there was widespread confusion and sales plummeted.

At another extreme is someone like John Cage, who I think profoundly distrusts the basis of appreciation of a piece of music being nothing more nor less than the sum total of other music the listener has heard in his or her life. It seems shaky: arbitrary and co-optable. But I don't go to his extremes to counteract it, I go to what I consider a mild extreme. What I'm "saying" has no de facto congruity with the style I'm using, but I want the style to stay enough in the background for the statement--"the one odd thing"--to be in sharp relief, not vice versa. People who expend energy deciding what is trip-hop, what is noise-pop, ambient-this or retro-that will wonder why I waste my time. Well, almost everyone wonders why I'm wasting my time, but, hey, I'm making a point here.

Why do you think it is that your little quirky things *work* rather than just sounding quirky??

Trial and error, I guess. I try a lot of phrases before I get one that works for me. I can only ponder after the fact why it was good; there's no strategy for actually generating them, that I know of.

And why no Pittsburgh concerts? PLEASE come here. Or let me have a tape of a show or something.

Jeremiah McAuliffe

I am all for arranging a Pittsburgh show. If I send a demo tape to the Pittsburgh chamber of commerce, can they be counted on to do the rest?

4:33, good buddy,

--Scott

November 2, 1998

Scott, since I saw Game Theory open for the Cucumbers in Athens, GA in 1985, I've been a constant listener to your records ("fan" sounds so pathetic). It is with huge disappointment that I found out that neither Tower, Virgin nor HMV in London is carrying

Days for Days. I'll order it of course and wait six weeks. I realise that this may be as pointless as complaining to Robert Rauschenberg about the wrong placement of the stuffed goat, but I'm annoyed that I'm denied access to perfect pop in such a large city. **Because this page is not called "Tell Scott" I'll cut to the question: Could you perhaps have a word with Alias or their distributors, or should I kick some ass locally?**

Johnny Mundane (London, England)

Scott: T.S. Eliot did write "The Waste Land" specifically about London so if you felt like doing some bemoaning in that area you might have classier grounds than most. And, yes, then and now the problem has been that there aren't many Loud Family records there.

All I personally can feel when I'm in London is that it's exciting and different, but undoubtedly I have that luxury for one reason only--I already have Loud Family records.

But I digress from the subject, ass kicking. Don't kick Alias's ass; they're more or less our only friends in the music industry. So, I guess HMV, Tower, and Virgin. Just take every man woman and child connected with those stores out back and kick their ass, then say "and let that be a lesson to you for not carrying the Loud Family." Their fear of further violence will lead to us being promoted enthusiastically.

yours in fog,

--Scott

November 9, 1998

Scott, you've been a big influence on me. I think it's great that you have this forum for interaction with your fans. It's hard to imagine, for instance, Michael Jackson doing the same thing. Of course, considering his audience, the caliber of questions here would surely be superior. At the risk of contradicting myself, here's some for you.

Scott: Thanks for being influenced by me! As far as I know it's not a terrible mistake, but I'll let you know immediately if I find out otherwise.

We know you're not really a Spring. Are you an Autumn?

I don't know, I don't know. April is the cruelest month...September girls do so much...Tuesday's gone with the wind...what does it all mean?

Do you often use names from "real life" in your songs?

Kristine, my fiancée's name, is in a song from the last album. That's about the most daring level of verisimilitude I've resorted to. Hopefully the issue is behind me now, but I've observed over many years that having women you've been involved with think you're referring to them in retrospect is a strangely lose-lose proposition. Either they think you shouldn't have pined over some past attachment or if they think *they're* the past

attachment, you shouldn't have been making them the object of a grievance. Let me state right now that all conjecture was wrong; everything I wrote before 1996 was the result of being spurned by my one true love, Maureen McCormick.

Have you ever upset friends or acquaintances by writing, um, pointed accounts of them?

No, but good idea. Apparently the guy who draws Dilbert had his company superiors terrified that he would poke some sort of grisly fun at them. How I could put that into effect given the diffuseness of the audience for my music is a tougher problem. I guess if the need ever arose I could make real trouble for, oh, Anton Barbeau. You reading this! I could be at work roasting you with satiric balladry as we speak!

Did you do anything special for Bloomsday this year?

Nothing I can remember specifically. Shaved, worked at my job, walked home, went to the toilet, took a bath, rode in a car, read a newspaper, ate lunch. Just that sort of thing.

Cheery today,

James Hogard

U.P.:Up and away,

--Scott

November 16, 1998

Scott, which generally comes first: the lyrics or the music?

Roger Winston

Scott: It boggles my mind that writers like Elton John can get handed sets of lyrics, some of them real disasters, and make reasonable songs out of them; it feels so against nature. (To our younger readers: Elton John had about one and a half good albums before you were born). I mean, sometimes I'll really get in the mood to craft some fine art and write out a few lines, but I can't use that as-is in a pop song, I have to do surgery on it so it sounds less like it's enjoying the sound of itself.

So, hardly ever lyrics first by themselves; usually a short melody line with some words appear together. It's tempting to invent stories about the process that make it sound more like architecture than it really is--one moment a melody idea isn't there, and the next it is, and you didn't really do anything to make it be there. You know? Anything that feels like the thing people will like about a song feels like it just fell down from God. You didn't make it, and you feel completely unqualified to finish it. Like: shit, now I have to write some lines *on my own* that people will think are as good as that one God wrote.

But a song with a rhyme scheme is incredibly restrictive, and that helps keep things going in the right direction. In normal speech, we tend to cloud the subject with implications that we have good personalities. We don't want to transmit our precise level of informedness and humility, for instance, we want to transmit a gross exaggeration whenever possible. But in a song there isn't room to do that. You can write an arrogant song, but you can't really disguise it as anything else, whereas you can disguise, say, an arrogant speech as a nationalistic speech. I would say it feels like there's only room to say one true thing in a song, and you have to let it find its own direction. Making the scansion work is such a full time job in itself that if you try unconsciously to introduce self-serving commentary, you just run out of room to still embody the subject: the subject goes away, and you're commenting stylishly on nothing, which might be great, but in a completely different way from what you intended. Your words and the way you sing them simply have to make their own case.

November 30, 1998

Scott, I was glad to hear the name Priapus in a song (he's quite a character, that bawdy little imp),

Scott: A song from the wood as it were.

and overall I think that *Days for Days* is a great album.

Thank you! I find it's great driving music, both away from it and at it.

My question(s) tho, goes back a ways: Was "He Do the Police in Different Voices" a tip of the cap to T.S. Eliot (or, consequently Dickens?) or were you using that phrase in its more general sense?

I am willing to believe I have a funny way of talking but I would not go so far as to say I know of a general sense in which to say "he do the police in different voices." My answer is therefore that, yes, my cap was off to Mr. Eliot, as it always is--off my head, on the ground, ready to catch any change he might fling. I haven't read OUR MUTUAL FRIEND, which is apparently where he got it, and although I've read THE WASTE LAND many, many times, that phrase was actually cut (it might have only ever been the working title) so I can't say I know a damn thing about what Eliot thought about it.

There's a literal sense in which it's meaningful to me--the siren sound is there, you know--but I was thinking a lot at that time about what it means to "do a voice," to adopt a mode of expression, so I pinched the phrase. This was all years ago, but let's say it amuses me now to say that one thing I was trying to express in this and in "Sword Swallower" was that you can't succeed in speaking the truth by putting on what you expect your audience to take to be the voice of honesty. You end up not saying the truth, but saying the thing which you expect people are looking for in an honest statement. The job of acquiring credibility saps energy from the job of deserving credibility. So to get myself at least within range of the truth, the first thing I was going to do was remind listeners that I am an aspiring entertainer and stealer of lines.

Also, the "Here Comes Everybody" on "Ballad of How You Can All Shut Up" sounded like a sly Finnegans Wake reference.

One might as well claim to be sly in one's Finnegans Wake references because crass or sublime, virtually no one is going to give a rat's ass.

Maybe I just suffer from an acute case of self-reference: any act of interpretation says more about the interpreter, I suppose.

I don't know if it says *more* about the interpreter. I'm of the somewhat out-of-fashion school that says meaning is in at least one sense more or less absolute and unambiguous given enough information about a subject and a mind broad enough for it. But it's good to remember that we don't often operate under very ideal conditions.

Then, if we cannot transcend our subjectivity, and all Love is Narcissism, is there any hope for selflessness or humility?

Jerry Ascierto

I have to take baby steps toward that one. Transcending subjectivity is, I think, only possible in the following sense: if you figure out how your subjectivity was wrong in the past, you can potentially correct for it that much but no more.

Love which is called Narcissistic is a difficult concept for me, because loving yourself, enthusiastically encountering yourself as you are, seems to lead to happiness and good behavior. It's self-loathing which leads to disastrous compensation, though the self-loather is paradoxically the one most compelled to appear at ease. Rene Girard points out (or so I take it) that our perception of others as self-satisfied--and this is often a social front the person puts on, as in an act of coquettishness--leads to our own inappropriate behaviour in reaction, though we'd prefer to think it was the original fault of someone else's apparent smugness.

So I think the hope for humility and selflessness is that a certain aspect of transcending subjectivity involves overturning notions of how self-love is perceived in one's self and others, and how it is earned. To think it can be earned as if at a job is to perpetually suspect you haven't done enough lately to earn it--it has to be a matter of grace, a matter outside causality; this is why the great religions talk about faith and forgiveness. You can't earn personal forgiveness except by the grace of the person you've offended, and you can't earn cosmic, ontological forgiveness--a feeling of self-love--but by the grace of whatever you call God. I think the movie UNFORGIVEN addresses this stuff really well.

we *all* got it comin', kid

--S

December 7, 1998

Scott, how seriously should I be taking this year 2000 computer problem?

I'm a nerd for a living and I keep hearing about how many computers systems that we take for granted, or don't even know we depend on, might be affected by their inability to count past 99 in a predictable manner.

Airlines aren't taking reservations for anything after New Years, the chair of the senate's Y2K special committee follows the president's non-statements with suggestions of printing out all your important financial info and stocking up on food and water and mentions the possibility of power brown-outs.

I'm beginning wonder whether, after January 1, banging rocks together will be the new state of the art.

So, what about you? Where are you on the scale between trustful ignorance equaling bliss and going all out Branch Davidian? A couple of extra cans of beans-n-weenies on the shelf just in case? A lease on camouflaged bunker in Utah with it's own well and solar power? Any newly acquired personal armaments? Or is this all just a Chicken Little EMAIL VIRUS WARNING!!! with a numerological twist?

Scott: I haven't heard a convincing description of how all such doom is going to come about. I can envision monetary transactions getting messed up because suddenly programs can't figure out what event happened before or after what other event, but it's not intuitively obvious to me why computers would say "oh no, it's the year 1900, we'd better shut down water and power to the city." I'll probably take the minimal precautions of getting my finances in writing shortly before Y2K.

"What if neighbors come to steal my food?" you wonder. Ha! The food on my shelves is *poisoned*. The real food is hidden.

Also, what are your thoughts on the morality of programmers heading for the hills to protect their selves and families from feared economic collapse vs. sticking to their cubicles and working fixes for it?

Andy Ingraham Dwyer

Programmers choosing to survive in the wilderness is a funny thought.

It wasn't programmers working today who caused the Y2K problem, so their obligation on moral grounds alone to fix it could be questioned, but you may well ask what would happen if we found ourselves dependent on programmers' morality. I think programmers typically believe by mid-adolescence that since without half trying they have themselves steered clear of committing any monstrous crimes, while the morality of others proves a drab nuisance at best, it follows that they themselves must possess a truly sterling morality, one in need of no further work of any kind.

tonight I'm gonna party like it's 1899,

--Scott

December 21, 1998

Scott, imagine you didn't have the gumption to start your own band, the talent to write truly original songs and the ability to hold down a day job and still manage the other rigors of an original act. Do you think it would be fulfilling enough to, say, play covers in a wedding band once a month, or would you simply be a music fan at that point, spending more time listening and abandon playing altogether?

Tony Shepps

Scott: The cover band. As little aptitude as I have for singing, I've always known that I love to sing and the quest has been to make that tolerable to those nearby. And I just plain get excited when I have a guitar in my hand pounding chords. It feels like I'm taking control of my little world in some way, and it can really cheer me up.

Hour for hour, playing covers is far more enjoyable than playing my own songs. Strumming a new song for the band is always excruciating; it's unfinished and everyone in the room gets this look like "wow, Scott sure isn't coming up with much this time." Then when a song is done yet still new and exciting for the band, audiences don't know it and sit there wishing you'd play something from the days before you lost it. By the time the first human actually wants to hear it, you've probably played it a hundred times and are plenty ready to move on. With covers, everyone on and off stage is more or less happy.

I've wanted since junior high school to be in a cover band that actually did good songs. When I was 16 in 1976 we used to do Roxy, Bowie, Iggy, Syd Barrett--all to zero takers, naturally, but the world's dialectic has advanced since then. (Now the flavor of stupidity is that no one could possibly listen to anything like Yes or Cat Stevens, but I'll take that over 1976 any day.)

--Scott

ASK SCOTT

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

1999 (Year 3)

January 4, 1999

Scott, I'm quite grateful that I was turned on to your music. I really, really like it. You make me smile. My friend tells me I'd also like the Game Theory stuff...so, when you see that extra dime in your royalty checks, it's from me.

Scott: Thanks for sending such wonderful thoughts. What do you mean by "extra" dime?

Have you ever thought of doing a long continuous piece of music a la Jethro Tull's *Thick as a Brick*? With your abilities I bet something like that would be really cool and really good...

Jeremiah McAuliffe

As you may know I'm at least a medium-sized fan of prog rock from the early seventies. I think of some of the songs I write as loosely describable as extended compositions in that sense--"Sister Sleep" from the last album, for instance. What usually happens is that I start out conceiving of a song as being bound to end up twenty minutes long, but by the time we've worked it up and I've thought about what people are going to get bored with if it's overextended, it ends up being only a little longer than a regular pop song.

I've heard that the way some of those early seventies groups worked was to actually go into the studio with only so much written, and just keep writing new parts and tacking them onto the end, all while the clock was running, until you had twenty-five minutes of material. It sounds like an interesting thing to try one day when we have about ten times as much money in the recording budget as we do now.

don't push me 'cause I'm Fragile,

--Scott

Scott, I had to listen to *Days For Days* several times before I decided I liked it. Good work as always, but what is this morbid and unprofitable fear of catchiness you've developed?

Erich Vogel

Scott: When I was a kid, neighborhood bullies used to beat me up while listening to ordinary hit songs on the radio. Naturally, a morbid fear of catchiness developed. Thankfully, a handful of radical bohemians, perhaps such as yourself, embrace my tortured anti-music.

malaise forever,

--Scott

January 11, 1999

Scott, thanks for many, many years of pure listening satisfaction. Around a year ago, I read an essay about the Velvet Underground written by Lance Loud. This led me to wonder if you've had any contact with members of the actual Loud family.

Scott: Not directly. We've been trying to get Lance to come to a show for years but despite a couple of alleged close calls he hasn't shown up to one yet.

If so, what were their reactions to your use of the name?

Someone at the label talked to him when we first signed to make sure he didn't think anyone in the real Loud family was displeased by our using the name. What their actual *reactions* were I couldn't say. I heard an elaborate story about Lance playing our first album for various family members and recording their reactions for a Details magazine piece, which appears not to have been true as far as I can tell.

More questions: Both on your instrument(s) and in the studio, are you schooled or self taught?

I took some classical and "rock" guitar lessons from age 9 to 12, and I had a few music theory and choral singing classes in 7th to 12th grade. My college degree is in electrical engineering, which maybe makes buttons and meters less scary, but most of my producerly skills I picked up from Mitch Easter or various studio engineers. You aren't often called upon to build a new signal processor using NAND gates.

What do you think are the relative benefits of each approach?

Pop-rock is kind of too monkey-see monkey-do for a *whole* lot of schooling to be worthwhile. Producing seems well suited to an apprenticeship system because being exhaustively informed about technology is less important than being used to managing recording situations. You need a good feel for how records get done well and done as interestingly as possible while staying on schedule.

Which do you prefer: making records or playing live? Why?

Probably playing live if it's a really good night. It's hard to *enjoy* making a record in a way. There's always a fair amount of anxiety about it not sounding good enough.

Finally, what is the best selling album in your catalog? How many copies did it sell? How many albums have you sold all together? Thanks so much for your patience with my cheezy questions. By the way, you guys ROCKED in Portland.

Jeff

Thanks! I actually don't know how many my albums have sold. SoundScan isn't very informative for indie records because not that many of them are sold in SoundScan reporting stores. I think my records sell between five and fifteen thousand each depending on which way the wind is blowing.

why don't we sell this song all together

--Scott

January 18, 1999

Scott, regarding "Second Grade Applauds": If I've had that hook playing in my head for 5 years, the least you could do is give *some* explanation to what the lyrics are "about," so I can judge whether or not I've been completely brainwashed. This isn't really phrased as a question, but there you go.

Thanking you all at once,

Matthew Sutton

Scott: Thanks for thinking well of one of my songs; I'm always afraid that when I start holding forth on the subject of what it was "about," that will all change.

First, Little Joe was Little Joe Cartwright, the youngest of a cattle ranching family on the Bonanza TV show. Or so I remember it from my early childhood; maybe they were actually crime fighters or space explorers. At any rate, in the first verse of my song, he gets tired of roping steers.

See, that falls right into place once you know he was in a *cattle ranching* family. The song should make perfect sense now.

I answered another question about one of the songs on that album recently, or maybe I just started spontaneously talking about myself--how embarrassing--but I think I started noticing that there was a how-to-please-the-crowd theme on the album PLANTS AND BIRDS (which didn't). The second grade in the "Second Grade Applauds" are there because I'm thinking about the difference between what a crowd really wants and what it only thinks it wants, or can be convinced that it wants. The second grade are the crowd in that song, maybe taken back to a somewhat less complicated frame of mind; though how it all shakes out is a little complicated, not because my design was all that grand, but because without a good sixties TV metaphor the whole English language just breaks down.

--Captain Lovey Dovey

Scott, why is it "We Love You Carol and Alison" and not "We Love You Shelley and Robert"?

Robert Toren

Scott: It was originally "We Love You Shelley Winters and Robert Preston."

--Scott

January 25, 1999

Scott, first of all, thanks for a wonderful tour this summer. It was great for me to be able to catch the LF live twice within a month. Pure (post-)Nirvana. The whole band did a job that was way beyond the call of duty, especially considering some of the venues you all had to work with...

Scott: Thank you very much. It was Nearvana, is what it was.

Secondly, being both a software engineer and a musician yourself, do you think there is some correlation between software engineer types and music? Seems to me like most computer people are way more into music than your average American, even to the point of being into the same style of music. And I don't mean just listening to it either--a lot of people in "do it yourself" local bands and such tend to be computing folk. Is there something in the brain that links these disciplines?

Writing a song and writing a computer program are the same kind of general activity; that probably has a little to do with it. They're both acts of programming. According to my dictionary, "program" comes from the Greek pro (before) + graphein (to write), used to mean a public posting of a schedule of events. In both a song and a program, the end product is scheduled events, sound or computer events, intended to have a certain effect when you fire them off.

Some common cause? Is it that appreciating music takes some of the same understanding that appreciating math does?

I've thought about that one before, since people talk about music being about frequency ratios and rhythm patterns and all, but I don't think so. Too many people who are great at one don't have a clue about the other. I remember reading *Goedel, Escher, Bach* and liking it a lot but being unconvinced that Bach's music was great precisely insofar as it solved complex problems in counterpoint--as if the cultural component of Bach's music were negligible, and it would sound just as good to an Indian sarod master as to a Western classical musician because it's just that mathematically airtight.

Is computer programming actually an artistic endeavor that's not too far off from creating music?

Both involve the pleasure of creating some little thing to delight ourselves and others, maybe to get praise for it if we did a good job. But an "artistic endeavor" is a cultural endeavor, and a computer program isn't, it's a technical endeavor. The success of song creation involves other people *inherently*, whereas the success of program creation involves a functional goal from which human opinion has been subtracted out. When a program works, the hope is that this job done well will be appreciated, will make for good social

interaction. But good social interaction *is* the job that, properly speaking, has to be done well by a song. This is a subtle point--subtle because I'm not articulating it very well--but creating *to* people is different from creating *at* them.

Or I am just noticing correlations that aren't really there?

Probably more like I'm making distinctions that really aren't interesting or important except to me.

Lastly, there's this really cute girl in my 8th period biology class. I'm very interested in her, but she doesn't know I exist. Any ideas? Please don't suggest counseling. Been there, done that. Thanks.

Desperate in Denver,

Roger Winston

Proving that one exists is never easy. You might start by giving her the arguments used by Descartes and Bishop Berkeley.

ceci n'est pas un ordinateur

--Scott

February 8, 1999

Scott, have you ever used Eno's Oblique Strategies as a guide while recording?

Scott: I have never actually used the Oblique Strategies but they look like you could get a lot done with them. Maybe I'll try writing a set of lyrics using one card before writing every line. Or making what the card says the line. Are they copyrighted?

You have to wonder if they actually work or if they just have the property of seeming like they would work. I just can't imagine Eno ever being stuck at something.

Bryan Ferry, in the old days: Brian, any ideas for this mix?

Eno (scenario 1): Well, for starters, we could make a tape loop out of the guitar solo, play it back at different speeds on two decks during the verses, and have 100 untrained vocalists try to sing along with them after only one practice, then...

Eno (scenario 2): Damn, Bryan, I can't think of anything it needs. I've gotten so used to the demo.

And what what action would the direction "Decorate, decorate" have prompted during the making of, say, "Crypto Sicko"?

These responses would have been possibilities:

1. Retitle the song "Decorate, Decorate."
2. Spruce up the studio.
3. Liberally add glockenspiel and vibra-slap to the mix.
4. Pursue a new line of work.
5. Add "Crypto Sicko" as a bonus cut to every master tape in the vault.

The Guy From Esposito,

London

Tall and tanned and young and lovely,

--Scott

February 15, 1999

Scott, I was fascinated to hear that you used to be a computer programmer.

Scott: I am still a computer programmer but, as Danny Plotnick would say, I'm not fascinating.

Looking back, there are lots of Loud Family references, from the packaging of *The Tape of Only Linda and Interbabe Concern* to the name of your old band Game Theory. I have two questions: First, was the song "It Just Wouldn't be Christmas" inspired by your experiences working in a software company?

I've had very positive experiences at the two companies I've worked for since 1986, and that's a rather venomous lyric, so I think the answer is no. The line about the convention hall doesn't come from real life, for instance. At the time I wrote the lyrics for that song I didn't understand them, and I didn't like them; they just came out. Strangely, years later I now understand my reasons for writing them better, though I'd probably embarrass myself badly if I tried to explain it essay-style.

Maybe I can capture the spirit by quoting T.S. Eliot, who can improve on anything I say with one hand tied behind his back, and being dead:

When the Stranger says, "What is the meaning of this city?
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?"
What will you answer? "We all dwell together
To make money from each other?"
(Choruses from "The Rock")

Second, have you ever tried to write a song about computers and computer logic, something programmers the world over could adopt as their own? If anyone can do it, it would be you.

Computers are already smug enough without us writing odes to them.

I also wanted to say that the new album is incredibly great, the best so far. Keep up the good work.

Thanks, that's very kind. If I accidentally catch a listen to my own stuff at times when I'm not in the mood for it, I sometimes think: it's true, I really am the single least capable producer and vocalist on the planet. Thanks for helping to keep me going, at least while I have contractual obligations!

Daniel Saunders

Reality is that which when you stop believing in it, it doesn't go away.

--Philip K. Dick

That's a great quote. An ironic thought, though, is that if the statement were *entirely* true, this would undermine the context in which he'd say it. As long as we go around with the faith that another mind, such as Mr. Dick's, might at any time open up a reality that transcends the verifiable as we knew it before the encounter, there's room for the statement to be witty and wonderful. If not, we could entertain no notion of this "reality" he talks about--reality would have to already be completely specified in a closed, objectified system according what "goes away" and what doesn't by our existing definition. A statement like that could then only strike us as some sort of charmless, fanciful tautology, maybe the way we'd react to "you know a girl isn't pretty when you stop finding her attractive."

February 22, 1999

Scott, I thought I saw you at the Posies final show at Bottom Of The Hill in San Francisco. I'm wondering about your impressions of the show, and of the Posies as artists now that it seems their time has passed.

Scott: I loved the show. I'll miss the Posies very much, though I recently went to a Saltine show--Ken Stringfellow's new group--and thought it was incredible. I hope I'm getting the name right. I remember another KS show once being billed as the "Sol-Teens."

The Posies probably shape my ongoing impression of '90s music more than any other group. I loved Nirvana, but to me most grunge bands seemed kind of purposefully backward-looking--a cross between early seventies Black Sabbath and mid-eighties abrasive hardcore stuff like Big Black. And nothing like "low-fi" or "electronica" or any of the hip-hop variations has struck my ears as being new and innovative.

FROSTING ON THE BEATER is to my thinking a state-of-the-art record. It's the benchmark for that ultra-compressed '90s sound, which not everyone loves, but for better or worse nobody ever used to make records that sounded like that because the technology and the know-how just weren't there yet. Which is not to say it's just the production and mixing. They're extremely innovative with their guitar tunings, and the vocal harmonies are very sweet while at the same time having a sort of cinematic pathos to them. All their albums are terrific but that's the one that places them in my perception of history.

Further, when so many worthwhile acts reach some measure of acclaim with varying levels of success, what factors lend the most influence to whether or not they survive or disappear?

Some bands keep going for a long time on a cult following and fairly good press. Pere Ubu comes to mind. Certainly the higher the level of success, the more likely someone can make a career out of it.

Fortunately we're blessed with your career's relative longevity...

Bill Silvers

Thanks, that's nice of you to say. I know we're going to do one more album this fall, but after that I think our Alias contract is up, so the end may be looming as far as my album releasing career goes; I have no idea whether another deal will come along or not. At any rate, it was great to be able to put out well in excess of my share of records over the years.

--the next Jandek

March 1, 1999

Scott, I just want to tell you how much your music has meant to me over the years. I have been a fan since 1987, when I bought *The Big Shot Chronicles*, a few months before the release of *Lolita Nation*. I recently bought a "Friend of the Family" sticker and put it on the back of my car. I became an obsessed fan back in '87 and tracked down all the vinyl EP releases from Game Theory. I'm thinking of getting the *Distortion* album cover transferred to a t-shirt. Your juvenilia is better than most other musicians' mature works, believe me.

Scott: It boggles my mind when people say such nice things; thank you. Not to stanch the flow of credibility, but I was pretty old (23) when we did *Distortion*.

I am a drummer, and was so happy to find that Gil Ray has returned! He is one of my favorite drummers, right up there with Moe Tucker, Gina Schock from the Go-Go's, Keith Strickland in the early B-52's line-up and Bobby Gillespie on the first J and M Chain album. Gil definitely has a '60s feel in his style. I used to play *Big Shot* and *Lolita* at home while I had my sticks out to learn all the cool drum parts. I especially like his groove on "The Waist and the Knees." I still can't do it the way he does. Anyway, Scott, your music has been a regular part of my life almost daily for 11 and a half years. You keep making it, and I'll keep buying it and enjoying it.

I love Gil, too, and I'll pass along the compliment. Thanks again for writing such an encouraging message.

Oh, by the way, who are your favorite writers? Do you like Douglas Coupland? Jeff Gomez?

Never read either of them. I'm actually not all that well read when it comes to fiction, especially recent fiction.

Who do you like that is/are considered classic?

Mark Staples

On another occasion I answered the question "what are my favorite novels?," which is different from my favorite writers, and maybe I'll play up the difference even more by saying these need not be fiction writers, but any writer for whom I would probably be part of the intended audience. I will excuse myself from evaluating important writers writing to radically different cultures from my own, such as early Buddhist haikuists, or Martin Heidegger.

In laying out this list, my sketch strikes me as pretentious--as if I were qualified to judge weightier matters than I am. But to be one of the ten greatest writers of all time seems to me to mean you're beating a lot stiffer competition than F. Scott Fitzgerald. You would be claiming not just that you could compel and entertain modern readers more skillfully than others aiming at that same goal, but that you could create a text that ranks with the great Western texts, and would continue to do so after centuries, which means you encapsulate a truth which withstands the overturning of the goals of language your century aims at. Therefore I'm thinking less of writerly skills in a particular idiom--on which subject I'm certainly no expert--than simply how indelible an impression certain texts have made on me.

drama: William Shakespeare

Probably the easiest selection for anyone who is afraid smart people will be watching. I've read or seen about 15 of the plays--more than enough to realize that their continuing relevance to the entire spectrum of social situations is beyond question.

One moment that often seems apropos is Lear's outrage at Cordelia's answer of "nothing" when he asks his daughters what they have to say to flatter him to earn their inheritance. His insistence that "nothing will come of nothing" underscores our perpetual, insidious recourse to tit-for-tat--how true love is robbed of reality when it must be in the context of this, and relative to that.

poetry: T.S. Eliot, Dante

Eliot would probably think me an idiot for declaring him the equal of Dante, but from where I sit Eliot is our times' greatest literary resource. Future generations will consider Eliot and Joyce unnecessarily difficult, but for me they were the only avenue to certain truths. To me,

"The Waste Land" is astounding in its anthropological precision. One day, after enough sixth graders have shot their classmates, maybe we'll become more attentive to Eliot in 1922 saying (effectively) marriage, community, and culture are for all of us deathly ill, and here's why...

As for Dante, the Divine Comedy, besides being gorgeous poetry and invention, is probably the most enduring and applicable moral system in the Western world. If someone asked me whom I disapproved of more, Kenneth Starr or Bill Clinton, I would say: Ken Starr (assuming our chief executive isn't actually guilty of rape or harrasment); the sowers of discord and scandal, especially against a popular head of state, are much farther down in hell than the lustful.

book-length fiction: James Joyce

The masterpieces are backbreaking intellectual exercises, and I feel funny recommending them because I had to have so much outside help to interpret them for me, but how they do tell it like it is. Bloom in ULYSSES is an antihero not in the trivial sense of not being admirable, but in the sense of refusing, in subtle ways but at every turn, to buy into a system where validation comes from besting others.

FINNEGANS WAKE is virtually non-English--a long novel written in approximation of a dream, in which there is never more than a hint of sense being made. It's not so much the author deciding to tell a story in a playfully obscure way, as it is Joyce rudely collapsing history, with its incidental and linguistic disparities intact, into a few hundred pages as a way of getting at the answer to the question: what story does this tell?

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN is also brilliant, and, for fans of such spectacle, a brutal ravaging of the Catholic Church.

short fiction: Flannery O'Connor

She writes about people near the limits of psychological crisis and interpersonal dysfunction, and in most authors such a distanced look at losers and wackos from the American South would feel abusive and voyeuristic. In O'Connor, though, we're invited to note what milder form each of us has of every sociopathy we read about with amused scorn. Typically we catch someone in an act of harsh treatment, and note the comically flimsy mental justification behind it, only to be sobered by the similarity to our own justifications that never seemed flimsy before.

I wish I had the text in front of me, but in one story a man goes to bed relishing the thought that his little boy "would finally find out he wasn't as smart as he thought he was [(mis)quoted from memory]." Usually all we need to feel righteous is solid proof that someone in close proximity is wronger than we are.

modern philosophy: Martin Buber, Rene Girard

Buber is a somewhat mystical Jewish scholar from the early 20th century. I have no particular use for lofty spirituality, since as a typical suburban Californian grown up agnostic,

if anyone is not going to get it, I'm not going to get it. I've nevertheless found his thoughts on relationships in I AND THOU to be, somehow, more powerful than anything from other philosophers. In short, he asserts that we lose the knowledge of what relationships truly are because they are inevitably objectified. We tend to hear this as cliché and/or say "so what?," but a strange loop becomes apparent: when a relationship becomes objectified, we mean that it becomes a mere commodity in another system. But what the "other system" must be constituted by is relationships with other people. Yet, if all relationships are objectified, all social currency everywhere is ultimately devalued.

Rene Girard is living; until recently he taught here in the bay area at Stanford. I've mentioned him in a couple of other contexts, and I'll advertise again that he's my pick to be remembered as the important humanities theorist of our age. His theories of human imitateness and the role of sacrifice in primitive cultures are unprecedentedly profound and far-reaching in their implications. After reading Girard, I thought of Harrison Ford in THE FUGITIVE, saying that if it was all a puzzle "...then I just found a big piece."

classical philosophy: Plato

No one agrees with everything Plato says, or ought to, but he thought more accurately about more important issues than most well-educated people today with all their (can I say "our"?) modern sophistication.

As an example, it occurred to him to be leery of fictional media on the grounds that society will be disrupted by people ascribing more authority to it than is deserved. We today can think only of this threatening free speech, and so it does, but what percentage of the population have their sentiments roused by a well-made movie and think "this has told me an important truth," as opposed to "this has told me what the filmmakers know will make money if they tell me?"

religious texts: [writer of John's Gospel], [writer(s)/editor(s) of Genesis]

Whether you believe every miracle story or think it's an elaborate scheme to underfund the NEA, the story of the passion of Christ is, it seems to me, the most often told and least forgettable story in Western culture. No one you know doesn't know that a man supposedly preached love and brotherhood 2000 years ago and was cruelly executed for his trouble, and very few people don't think important issues hang in the balance of what it all means (granted, many believe it's responsible for great evil on the part of the Church).

Similarly, Genesis, containing so many stories of lasting cultural weight, and such multilayered observations as "God created man in his own image" are simply too important to leave off a list of the greatest writings.

...tragically, leaving no room for Anne Rice once again

--Scott

March 8, 1999

Scott, my girlfriend continues to have an itchy scalp after using her shampoo which of course contains sodium laureth sulfate. I thought it could be the water pressure, but this problem continued even after our most recent move. The pressure is so high now that it blows you all over the tub.

Scott: You mean the water pressure problem continued after a move? Is there any possibility that you have inadvertently been living not in houses or apartments but hydroelectric plants?

Could it be the sodium laureth sulfate?

A number of people have written to tell me that other people have told them that sodium laureth sulfate is really bad news--that it's used to clean grease off driveways or something and someone thinks it causes cancer. I wasn't overwhelmingly convinced myself, but you might want to first shampoo some lab rats and see if whatever condition they develop is worse than having dingy fur. My only interest in biochemical compounds is their obvious usefulness in lyric poetry.

P.S. I lost touch with Game Theory after college, I also seem to have lost my copy of *Lolita Nation* (but we won't get into that).

Actually, Game Theory lost touch with existence very soon after that.

Our radio stations in Minneapolis are either tiny college stations that you need to be in their studio to pick up, or owned by Disney (is "No Doubt" even music?). I couldn't be happier finding out about Loud Family. You continue to amaze me.

Much appreciated! I am withheld by annoying vocalist professional courtesy from addressing your comment on No Doubt.

Ira Mitchell

Of all the major religions, Buddhism has the best outfits...

hey hey we're the monks,

--Scott

March 15, 1999

Scott, a couple of years ago a fellow fan and I, having just met via e-mail, were gushing fannishly about your music--he, in particular, about your lyrics. He found your religious imagery compelling but quite mysterious, but I (raised in Boston) found one thing leaping out at me--a burning question. Were you raised Catholic? (I surmise, but this may be going too far out on a limb, that if so, it might have been in a community where this was less common than it is in my home town.)

Charity Stafford

Scott: I am actually Baptist and Christian Scientist by heritage, but I am not baptized and my parents never forced a word of religion on me. I haven't heard about anyone in the X-Sci half of the family keeping the kids home to die of intestinal blockage, but maybe those just aren't the favorite Thanksgiving dinner stories.

I have taken communion in an Episcopalian ceremony. I hope that was okay; my understanding is they don't consider it sinful for the unbaptized to do so. I believe a number of religions tell the truth if you really listen, humbly but not looking for the excuse you need to renounce your entire life. By taking communion I say I live insofar as I partake in the body and blood of Christ--the Incarnation of the divine and the self-sacrificing. And insofar as I do not, I perish with my corporeal death.

But nothing makes me believe in the Pope's infallibility interpreting the Word of God, so I cannot be a Catholic, and nothing makes me feel qualified to give testimony to the physical resurrection because so far as I know I was not there (don't let's start with reincarnation!), so I doubt I can be a Protestant.

I may be able to become a JoEpiscopalian; I'm not sure. I'm into Buddhism as an observer but in a way it's evasive to go with a culturally remote religion.

Scott, as a ravenous Nabokov fan, I've always been drawn to LOLITA NATION's flirtatious relationship with the book. Is there (or are there) a specific facet or sensibility in the book that inspired or influenced the album? Or is it a more general reference to the state of being young or naive?

Adam

Scott: Less general than that, though it would have to be somewhat general, since I've never read LOLITA. I've seen the movie, and I've read PALE FIRE. I know, no legal loophole there, I must still be hung in the square, but the fact is I knew all I needed to know for my appropriation of the concept to work for me. The old-man/young-girl situation shows in sharp relief how isolated people in relationships can be. There they are, filling a need for each other, but they're on different planets entirely, and the balance of need is unstable.

What you mention is the most important echo, though. In my mid-twenties I felt powerless and persecuted. What did the world want me for? The title made me think of an entire generation of Lolitas: someone--our parents? God?--needed us to be there, but the need felt neurotic and uncompassionate. In "We Love You Carol and Alison" (my favorite Game Theory song) I'm trying to express that teen alienation thing that the kids go for, but I'm also fishing around for a basis of proper adulthood.

March 22, 1999

Scott, I noticed that DAYS FOR DAYS is a much warmer sounding record than INTERBABE CONCERN. (I liked that you took pride in its "cold and lifeless" digitalness, you big rebel).

Scott: You know the man can't touch me.

What did you do different (recording-wise) between the 2 records?

The recording circumstances were almost completely different. About the only similarities were that both were digital (ADAT) and a lot of the overdubs for both were done in my living room. INTERBABE CONCERN was a lot more unstructured. I did guitar and vocals to click tracks, and then afterward we put drums and bass on, which is really backward. Also, Joe Becker was in the process of leaving the group and didn't play on all the tracks, so that added to the chaos. DAYS FOR DAYS was played all together in a sound studio, and not to click, and we were pretty far from being overrehearsed, and all that just leads to a more organic feel.

Which new pieces of equipment assisted this change? (or is it more common for you to rent commercial studio time?)

We have to do drums and mixing in a studio at the very least. I wouldn't have enough mikes to do drums and I wouldn't want to find out if I've got enough good will with the neighbors.

I'm assuming that you have your own computer based recording facility.

Actually, no, the computers have belonged to other people. Paul Wieneke did a little digital software editing during the final stages of working on INTERBABE CONCERN, and a person I know named Tim Walters did a lot of digital treatments on the odd-numbered songs from DAYS FOR DAYS. All the computers we used were free-range computers.

What microphones got the most use on the two records?

For all the singing I used an AKG 414 going live into a plain old dbx transistor compressor/gate/limiter. All the guitar amp miking was with a Shure SM 57. Those are pretty uninteresting choices. The one somewhat weird thing I do is lay everything down with a fairly heavy gating and compression on it. It's annoying in a way because you have to be careful not to make little breathing noises that are too loud, or you can hear the gate opening up, but I eventually need gating because otherwise you can hear cars going by, and I've really come to believe in letting the singer hear the processing that's going to be on it later. I think he or she then naturally gravitates toward singing in a way that makes that sound good, which is different in subtle ways from singing to make an uncompressed, flattering-reverb signal sound good.

The bracing thought is how much craft and science go into getting my voice to sound even as good as it does.

mark27

and of course I always use a mark27 on the floor tom...

--Scott

April 5, 1999

Scott, (and Alison, Gil, Kenny), thanks so much for playing the Cactus Club in Milwaukee. I loved it, and my fellows in my office completely understood for the next week when I would remove any offending CD and put on one of the LF (or GT). Well, OK, they didn't understand, but they tolerated it. But I know that for the next few weeks or so, all of us were kinder to our housemates, more respectful of our elders, better lovers, and used less aerosol spray. However, I digress.

Scott: Thank you very much, and I'm glad to hear that it's perhaps possible to establish glorious social harmony with nothing more than the implied threat that at the first sign of trouble, it will be back to you taking off everyone's CD and putting on the Loud Family.

Here's my query: Sometimes, after especially intense periods of listening to your output, I find I need a break from music that has so much DENSITY. And I need to put on the Ramones, or maybe just some old *Nuggets* compilations. I have found the same problem with Mr. Costello (Elvis). Do you ever find yourself needing to just rock, without thinking? Maybe just forty two verses of "Louie, Louie," or "Wild Thing," without having to worry about how it's interpreted? If so, could you do it in our town? I would love to hear/see it.

I do like to "just rock," but at the risk of overanalyzing the overanalysis, it was easier to just rock in the days of Elvis and the Beatles than it is now. You'll have noticed that since about 1968, rock has been associated with revolution, and most rock critics have cast suspicious eyes on acts like Elvis and the Beatles who meant not to do much harm. You can make a good argument for excluding John Lennon from the category of the harmless, but let's assume you can take my general meaning.

If you *immersed* yourself in "Louie, Louie" or "Wild Thing," you were in danger of no worse consequence than teen romance. If you immerse yourself in Public Enemy or Nirvana, who delight rock critics with the authenticity of their dangerousness, you had better not be too vulnerable a person, or you might go off and do something very...dangerous.

That's not to criticize, or to promote censorship. I personally like Nirvana more than I like Elvis, and even more I like someone like Patti Smith, who brings with her a knowledge of the momentum of her poetic tradition. It's inherently dangerous to take on the big issues, and I admire people who do it well. But I can't be very happy immersing myself in something I feel I need my sharpest philosophical eye to assess. I want what I immerse myself in to be pretty harmless, or pretty unambiguously right-headed. Since punk, audiences always have their professor's robes on. We see Johnny Rotten wearing a swastika, but we're not *really* supposed to like Nazism, we're supposed to know that's incidental to the meta-statement, which is that we should unite against whoever would compromise our freedom of expression. Very nice; very scholarly. But I am so provincial as not to go immersing myself, to say "take me I'm yours," and "look everyone--Johnny with the swastika over there is the way and the light."

"Wild Thing" I do rock out to.

BTW, I love the web site, although the level with which you and the rest of your fans discuss your music and literature is a bit intimidating to me. However, let's talk about buildings, and I'll try to blow your socks off.

Okay, here goes. "How about that Frank Lloyd Wright? If you want a big, wide, flat place, you better call old Frank Lloyd Wright."

With no cute or pithy sign off,

Brian Miller

the kids are losing their minds,

--Glitzkrieg Scott

April 12, 1999

Scott, me and my chum James are big fans of the one album that is available in Britain (*Days for Days*).

Scott: Is that really the only one available there? I get a skewed impression because I'm only really familiar with one record store in all of Britain and that's Minus Zero Records, and I think they go way out of their way to stock records like ours.

Any chance of the band ever coming to do some gigs in the UK? You'll have an audience of at least two, especially if you play Guildford Civic Hall (Surrey). The BBC's London radio station, GLR, would be delighted to have a live session from you I'm sure, cause your music is right up their street.

Go on, whaddaya say?

Tim Wrench

I'd love to play over there, and I'd love to touch base with Paul Ricketts, the Ptolemaic Terrascope folks, and various people I met when I was there in '91 and with the band in '93. There's been some talk for a while about doing a long week in Scotland and England before the U.S. tour this fall, but club owners are funny; they're always wanting that "audience of at least two" figure set in stone or something.

hope we can get together for .53 litre of Guinness,

--Scott

April 19, 1999

Scott, I was concerned about something. When I listen to *Tinker* "Nine Lives to Rigel Five" sounds fine. On *Distortion of Glory*, I hear the tape drop out for a split second on the cool backwards cymbal opening (Michael Quercio's psychedelic idea?)

Scott: It might have been. I forget. It's just one of the stock sounds those Simmons cymbals make, I think.

I am concerned about the Game Theory masters. Are they all in good shape? Are they all still in existence?

Good question. I know the *Blaze of Glory* multitracks had to be "baked" before we did those remixes to keep the oxide from flaking, but I think the others were okay. Though that was nine years ago.

What about the ones that haven't been re-released? I remember an interview with the Go-Go's a few years back, and Belinda Carlisle said the original master of "Cool Jerk" from *Vacation* (my favorite album from '82) was somehow lost, and therefore wasn't included on the *Return to the Valley of the Go-Go's* compilation. This may sound silly, but it saddened me. On the run-out groove of *Vacation* my old vinyl copy says "Is this record a pencil or a beer can?" To me it was/is a pencil. And so is your early work. Please reassure me that all the masters are okay.

Hold on now. Do I feel good about being a pencil rather than a beer can? That's one for the ages. Nobody tells me anything, but I think the masters are okay. What's gone missing is the market incentive to do anything with them.

Always a True Gamester and Loudfan,

Mark Staples

Thanks! I appreciate the positive words very much.

Wait--with the pencil, you could write "please get me a beer,"

--Scott

Scott, please settle two bets:

What are Dangling Participants, if they said:

**"I wonder if they will aloe us to leaf,
or is this a cacti affair?"**

Deserters, all?

Scott: No Joshua treason here, but the duress code of the old waste says a corporal can't go seein' the general wearin' only his genes.

**As Francis Scott Wilson said,
"Keep an Eye on Sumner"...**

**If you're talking about about Dunesbury,
can it be Zen if you've ever heard the word?**

Only if you're aliturgic to be stings.

Thanks.

Ken

then we're all finnished,

--Scott

May 3, 1999

Scott, according to an article in *USA Today* on November 4th,

Scott: (Yes, Mr. Ask Scott is running a little behind real time...)

the Recording Industry Association of America is suing to keep Diamond Multimedia from selling a palm-sized device that plays MP3-format audio files.

Is the RIAA's lawsuit a legitimate defense of the interests of hard-working musicians? Or is it part of a derriere-garde battle against the fundamental nature of technology, to protect the shrinking turf of a few large media companies?

My topical assessment of the lawsuit is obviously worthless, but I usually consider the social illness of the music business to outweigh these technical debates that crop up. No doubt this one is a little less laughable than those of the "home taping is killing music" era (as usual, expensive studio taping is what's really killing music), but I'm naive enough to, without knowing the specifics, dislike lawsuits as answers.

The claim is that such a device is basically a vehicle for music piracy, and no doubt you can find lots of unauthorized MP3 files on the net. But the net and sound files and digital compression algorithms could also be a way for musicians to make their music available to a wider audience, possibly end-running the areas of publishing and distribution, which seem to be pretty much locked up by five or six huge international companies.

What might save it from becoming a rampant problem at least in the short run are the expensiveness of keeping songs around on hard drives and the lack of a collectable physical artifact. In the extreme case, though, the prospect of only one person in the world having to buy a piece of music and then distributing infinitely many free, high-fidelity copies makes selling your music for a living problematic.

At least earlier this decade, smaller labels made a comfortable living. It was due in a way to the "alternative becomes the mainstream" phenomenon, and like all waves of excitement it led to some good material being produced but also did some permanent damage. In the

wake of alt-is-the-mainstream, the mainstream rejects the mainstream. If you look at albums in the Billboard top twenty (or albums in the college top ten, it makes no difference), the common element would be that they'd all purport to be militantly non-mainstream, saying to their audience: picture in your minds the lost souls who buy generic commercial music, and we're not that! We're more down-home, edgier, more deeply emotional, what have you. Things are very divisive and segregated.

There are some exceptions, like maybe Beck, and also the state of affairs existed in much milder form thirty years ago, but it's now so pathological as to be killing the host organism. There's no longer a viable enough self-acknowledged, pan-ethnic *mainstream*, of listening equals, but rather a nation of mutual superiors.

To a degree the mere fact of more people being able to make records, while good for democracy, erodes the canon in some actually pernicious ways. Filmmaking seems to be much healthier, and for reasons that have nothing to do with the inability to send a pirated movie around on the net. The sheer expense and human investment in a big film is going to give filmmakers a gut fear of excluding an audience sector, so a broad-market movie is less a strange and distrusted thing than a broad-market record. There are a few but not many top-budget film analogies to a *country* movie or a *hip-hop* movie, but if they were cheap and studios put out a hundred a year, you can bet that's almost all there would be. Artists like the Beatles and Stevie Wonder used to think like big studios in a good way, or in their earlier days more precisely like small studios hoping to have big crossover hits. They made records with the faith that pretty much anyone might love them.

But that sort of machinery doesn't run anymore. While I'd stop short of saying web distribution enters into it yet, popular music *as music* has become so demythologized and democratized that the mentality of mob rule has taken over the minds of both music makers and music listeners in an insidious way. Mobs are never harmonious in the long run. They follow the logic of factions and insurrections. Now more than ever, makers of fashionable music are more than a little embarrassed to sound simply musical, especially musically whimsical, as if that were weakness in battle. To play to either real universality or real subtlety is almost always an offense to the culture, its crime being the weakening of the *us* in a cultural game of us-against-them.

I think of you as someone who's managed to entertain and enlighten a large audience for many years from outside the whole Sony/BMG/Warner/etc. arena. You also seem to understand technology as well as anyone, and I'm wondering what your thoughts are on this. Do you see technology like this as a threat to your livelihood, or as something that might help you to reach more listeners with your music?

Probably at this point it would help me, but I need *a lot* of help if you're going to throw around words like "large audience."

Best wishes, and thanks for all the great songs!

Heartfelt thanks.

Tim Victor

ebony and Merchant/Ivory,

--Scott

May 10, 1999

Scott, can you shed any light on the killings in Colorado last week? I want to know what we can do to keep it from happening again and again.

Scott: At Sue's suggestion, I'm answering this question out of order because it's such an important recent topic.

I think the light I can shed is the observation that children aren't ordinarily raised as if there were a need to prevent them from committing violent acts. The assumption is that a lot of corruption would have to come in from outside for our children to turn violent.

This is true in some senses, but there's an important sense in which it isn't true. Any person will take the shortest route to feeling good about himself or herself, and disturbingly little in our era stands in the way of feeling good by dint of simply getting the better of someone else. In its crudest form, this means savoring any situation in which someone else is suffering more than you, which means there's incentive to bring such situations about.

We're strangely unlikely to think in those terms, obvious as they seem to me. We all consider ourselves above succumbing to that kind of feeling good, though none of us is. I relish watching someone getting pulled over for being in the carpool lane not because the crusade against pollution is being advanced, but because I am prone to wickedness, and wherever possible, hypocritically self-righteous wickedness.

Our heritage is one of thinking in rational, evolutionary and psychological terms, and when behavior occurs which doesn't maximize rewards or procreate the species, we get confused and look for brain pathology. I suspect the brains of the adolescents who murdered in Colorado were working just fine. The act they committed was a religious act. How else to categorize it? They needed to do what they did more urgently than they needed food, sex, or to live another day. In their minds they were bringing righteous fury down upon guilty or at best worthless beings in the name of the gods--the highest cosmic arbiters and observers, whose wills guide the movies with the very coolest endings.

We know to warn kids about peer pressure, but I think we need a more accurate model of peer pressure than that kids experienced in wrongdoing have an interest in tempting and corrupting others, and threaten with ostracism when resisted. This again has the defect of flattering ourselves that bad behavior comes from *out there* somewhere, never from anyone in our family, least of all from children who when they were smaller were sweet creatures and had their complete being in what we said was good and bad. But it is natural enough for members of any group to be willing to up the ante of tolerance of hostility directed outside the group, so far as group solidarity is *the thing*. A boy will routinely suggest that guns or

explosives are needed for the group's great goal, for no other reason than to aggrandize himself in the group's eyes, to show he is not afraid of such conflict escalation, when of course it only occurred to him to make the statement precisely because this *was* a fear. In the absence of any better school of thought, he will naturally see such a fear as something to overcome to achieve group acceptance. So peer pressure has a strange, self-engendering mutuality. I assume the Colorado shooters were kept well enough isolated from gangs, but were perfectly capable of escalating their mythos in this way to delirious heights of barbarousness.

That this sort of cult-like activity happens or threatens everywhere, and constantly, shouldn't be ignored. It must always be transcended by something else for its power to be mitigated, and parents can't *be* the transcending morality forever. For those who have no traditional religion which transcends our de facto religion of localized righteous vengeance, and have no potential to attain Christian conversion or Buddhist enlightenment (surely beyond the reach of adolescents, I would think), the best answer may be periodical inoculating talks about how antisocial behavior sometimes does get out of control, coupled with the unfortunately weak panacea of *other interests*. Parents should make sure kids know that the world is full of wonderful and interesting possibilities for them both nearby and in other places and times in the lives. (Of course I would not hesitate to intervene forcefully at the first sign of actual violence).

I have almost no experience with children so forgive any naiveté in dispensing this advice, but I would like children to have some version of this message, however it might be told to them:

"People, and you along with everyone else, are liable to get into trouble because we like it when other people have a hard time. We think: well, I'm not having as hard a time as they are, so things must be going my way. We'll even think up elaborate and secret excuses to keep things going that way, like arguing that checkers is the best game to play when the secret reason is that we always win at checkers. But the satisfaction we get from behaving that way never lasts; we always need to do it again and again. And this almost never occurs to us; we almost never wake up from this deluded state and see that the satisfaction never takes hold however obsessively we indulge. And the world just gets worse because people are all out looking for secret ways to make everyone more miserable than they. But there's a chance that you *can* wake up for periods of time. It's not easy, but if you can, there's a chance others will see you and do it too, and you'll have at least a small community of people who aren't secretly making each other miserable. You have to always ask where the victim is, who is getting hurt that we give ourselves permission not to care about. We won't always be strong enough not to go along with the hurting, because there will always be the delusion that if we join with the hurters, then we'll be with the winners, things will be going our way. But those doing the hurting are under the delusion, too, and you must not contribute to it being hard for *them* to wake up by rewarding them with your subservience."

There, I'm sure no six-year-old will have any trouble sitting through that.

Note: The only truly insightful discussion of this I've seen yet was on another music-related website (coincidence?), an online column called "The War Against Silence". I strongly recommend it, especially this past issue, [#221](#) (ostensibly about ABBA).

Steve Grossberg

I read that also and I agree it was quite penetrating. More than anything I valued his ability to say something like "I could have been one of those killers," and from that go on to make the strangely rare deduction that our culture is unhealthy. That is positively essential thinking.

Thanks for writing.

Sincerely,

--Scott

May 17, 1999

Scott, I noticed that "Cortex the Killer" was on your most recent set list. During your show in Atlanta I believe someone shouted a request for "Cortex," Alison got it started, the rest of y'all came in then aborted a few moments later. You apologized and explained that the song hadn't been rehearsed for the tour.

I was surprised that "Cortex the Killer" wasn't ready for show because it's the first song on the album. The (il)logic being that if you (concert attendee) have had only minimum exposure to *Days for Days* before you go to the show, chances are you've heard the first track the most, it's the one in your head, and you wanna hear it live. So why not oblige?

Scott: We were trying to simulate those gated vocals at the beginning of the song by going "ha ha ha ha ha" and I guess it was just the right flavor of being hilariously futile that the idea of doing that song became slightly ridiculous, in my mind at least. Then after a while it occurred to us that it could sound okay without those, so we did it at a couple of shows when we got back home.

My question is how do you decide which songs, particularly from the new album, to work up for the tour?

Bettina

If one is the single, or as they say in the small label world, "radio emphasis track," we play that, since that one is invariably such a monstrous hit lives would literally be in danger if we didn't play it.

I guess it has a lot to do with which new ones we think will go over okay on the first listen. If they have good dynamics like "Lions In the Street," there's a reasonable chance that even if

none of the melodic content is clicking for anybody, there's enough drama to the sonics that people will at least have some abstract awareness of being professionally entertained.

As for old songs, it's a bit of an unpopularity contest. You toss a few names of songs around and usually someone will be so sick of playing any given one that it gets rejected. You're sometimes left with the somewhat mangy ones nobody cared much about in the first place, but sometimes those are the most interesting to do.

Do you have any we *must* do?

thanks for writing,

--the mangement

May 31, 1999

Scott, first off, thanks for the many years of smart pop music. *Days for Days* has found permanent air play inside my head.

Scott: Or so you thought last December...

My question is a simple one of guitar techniques. I've been striving for years to record a truly crisp acoustic guitar tone--the tone that Big Star got on *#1 Record* classics like "Ballad of El Goodo," etc. Upon hearing "Businessmen are Okay," I was struck by what a nice job you did with the acoustic track(s). It seems that you have 2 acoustic tracks, each panned to a different channel. Any advice on gear, effects, compression, etc.?

I have two mikes, an SM57 and an AKG 414, so in a burst of insight I decided to use those two. I get the best results with the 57 in front of the sound hole and the 414 off to the right side a couple of feet. Some engineers have fits when you use two live mikes on an acoustic like that because there's some phase cancellation, but a Leo Kottke record this isn't, so I figure let's live a little. They're compressed using my little dbx 166A and as you note panned left and right.

Not trying to steal any secrets, just learn from one of the best.

Thanks,

Scott Gagner

Damn you are nice. You're right about those Big Star guitar sounds being stunning. The electrics on *Radio City* are uncanny, too, and there's got to be some secret reason that those guitars sound *so* good. *Big Star Third* is a magnificent record and all but the guitar doesn't have that same otherworldly amount of bite. Of course people preferred "Philadelphia Freedom" 1000-to-one in either case so it's hard to have perspective.

strum und twang,

--Scott

June 7, 1999

Scott, this one's a bit personal, but in case you don't mind the question...do your musical efforts pay for themselves?

Scott: Well, they don't earn me a posh living but they certainly pay for themselves.

To what extent do you subsidize your musical activities with the income from your "day job"?

Most years I make money from the band but sometimes there's a little loss depending on where in the releasing and touring cycle things are falling.

And another question: What's your day job? As a software engineer, I'm curious about what you're up to. I remember hearing that you were involved in writing LISP interpreters years ago.

Yes. Well, a LISP compiler actually. I work at an object database company now.

Thanks for all of the excellent music that you've made and are making. I've been enjoying your older releases recently...and I think that you're really onto something with *Days For Days* with its lush sound, with its integration of Alison's contributions into the songs, and with the rather perfect production.

Scott McFarland

Thanks, I'm very glad that if I *had* been dumping huge amounts of my own cash into those records it would not have been entirely my own vanity.

not that my vanity is under control or anything,

--Scott

June 14, 1999

**scott, here's a question which has been lingering
in the puny grey matter of my brain
since the *Interbabe* days.....
i can't believe i've never asked you.....**

**one of my favorite songs from that album
(and such a great one live.....
weren't there strobe lights,**

**at least in austin,
on the '96 tour?)**

Scott: Correct. You know, the psychedelic era and all.

is "asleep and awake on the man's freeway"

**is this connected in any way,
or perhaps a reflection upon,
this passage from book ii
of aristotle's *de anima*?**

"for both being asleep and being awake require the presence of the soul; being awake corresponds to attending and being asleep to the state of inactive knowing."

Actually, no. I read Aristotle for the first time in 1998--something called "The Pocket Aristotle"--and let me tell you one need not be surprised that Jackie Kennedy fell for this man.

Though I've now had a chance to forget a lot of what I read, I think I do remember that passage, though not the exact context, and context would be important if we were asking the question "is what I was thinking about in the song at all like what Aristotle was thinking about?".

As with a lot of the great old thinkers, even when Aristotle is pondering an issue which has been fairly well sorted out in the intervening centuries, his framing of the problem is still revelatory. He has the idea of "entelechy," or the potential of living things to become themselves, e.g., what a seed has that makes it become a plant.

He believes this has something to do with soul, consciousness and intelligence, and he's wondering why a plant soul is going to differ from a human soul, and so forth. In a way this seems pretty quaint in light of genetics and biology, but he drops in a few oddly compelling observations such as that the *entelechy* of plants has to do with physical growth--plants get bigger, or they're dead--and that's not true with animals. It's hard to explain why, but that grabs me. It's a reminder that if organic life and sentience have anything like a goal of hoarding matter to their own use, there's a strange amount of patience and forbearance to evolution, since, e.g., dolphins probably don't add significantly to the mass taken up by something like kelp.

**and speaking of sleep,
do you ever have lucid dreams?
(not asking for details, mind you....
but lucid dreaming seems to take
the aristotelian concept one step beyond....)**

not yr sister's sleep

ana luisa morales

It could be that in "Asleep and Awake" I'm thinking about the soul Aristotle says exists when we sleep and the soul he says exists when we're awake, and looking at what would happen if they one day accidentally bumped into each other. That said, I'm not that I know of capable of asserting my waking consciousness while I'm having a dream, so I may be especially poorly qualified to be taking up the issue.

thanks for being a part of Greek week,

--Scott

June 21, 1999

Scott, baseball fans, since the earliest expansions, have complained that as new teams get added to either league, pitching talent is being diluted. Basically, they say that there is always a small number of decent pitchers, so the more teams in MLB, the more sub-standard talent has to be used. The theory is somewhat borne out by the fact that many of the truly outstanding hitting records have been set during expansion years.

Hell of a set-up, no?

Do you think that the compact disc has done the same thing to popular music? I mean, before the CD, the record buyer was fairly easily satisfied with the 35-45 minute record. Heck, most pre-CD double albums fit nicely on a single disc when reissued. The CD, though, will hold what? Close to 80 minutes of music? Nowadays the 35-minute CD seems dwarfed by the empty space theoretically left on the platter. I hear people say that they feel ripped off by such a short offering at LP price.

I guess what I'm wondering is, do you think that record companies and artists feel pressured to release longer records and, in the process of releasing 50-70 minute albums, accept a lower class of album filler?

Scott: Hell yeah. It's a more complicated equation than that to be sure, but I think one aspect of the personality of late 90s music is that generally people's requirement for drama in the realm of 30-to-60-second durations has gotten *really* easy to fulfill. People don't mind electronica, ambient, Stereolab, Spiritualized, one bit. That's good--I think--but weird. It's not quite like we're now all jazz listeners, either, because that had to do with being in the presence of heroic personalities, and that's not a necessity at all anymore.

Part of what I mean by "complicated equation" is the following psychological factor: people want to assess 3 to 5 seconds of the music and either bond with it or not bond with it, and if they do, be able to defocus from it for some period of time. When they come back to it, they don't want it to have betrayed their attachment by having mutated into something they're no longer on board for.

Certainly this involves social considerations heavily, and in a way it's deducible from the cachet of amassing knowledge about many non-mainstream releases coupled with the superabundance of CD releases. You appreciate artists who play ball with this by not

inundating you with information--if you spend ten minutes intelligently skimming around the average Stereolab record, you can boast complete conversational familiarity with it. I'm a pretty good sized Stereolab fan, so that "you" includes me, I guess.

I mean, look at the suffusion of double CD hip hop releases, and then look at all of the reviews saying that "probably it should have been trimmed to one good disc": scarier still, look how many of the reviewers are right.

Have you noticed that in the past ten years or so that it has become a bit more difficult to locate the "perfect album" (or are you getting jaded?--a self edit)? Is there a correlation? Have you noticed that tracks 5-7 have more than ever become the place where tunes go to die? I have a specialer place in my heart for the perfect 32 minute album than the pretty good 60 minute one. Do you? Do you like soup?

Geoff Woolf

Soup? The food? Yes. And yes, no doubt about it, the "perfect album" idea is not too healthy, since that involves a critical tradition listeners don't buy into very much these days. I do!

thanks for writing

--old ball-gamester

June 28, 1999

Scott, what are your 10 favorite rock/pop albums *of all time*? Is it even possible for you to make such a list?

Scott: There's probably no such thing as a subject on which I'm so uninformed that making my top ten would be impossible, and pop album lists is an outright weakness. So here goes; I'll give you not 10 but 20 because the top 10 might be boring what with all the Beatles.

- 1 BRAIN SALAD SURGERY - Emerson, Lake, and Palmer
- 2 THE BEATLES (WHITE ALBUM) - The Beatles
- 3 REVOLVER - The Beatles
- 4 RADIO CITY - Big Star
- 5 THIS YEAR'S MODEL - Elvis Costello and the Attractions
- 6 WHO'S NEXT - The Who
- 7 THIRD (SISTER LOVERS) - Big Star
- 8 HELP! - The Beatles
- 9 EXILE ON MAIN STREET - The Rolling Stones
- 10 ABBEY ROAD - The Beatles
- 11 THE RISE AND FALL OF ZIGGY STARDUST AND THE SPIDERS FROM MARS - David Bowie
- 12 ZOSO @ % \$ - Led Zeppelin
- 13 EXILE IN GUYVILLE - Liz Phair
- 14 ARE YOU EXPERIENCED? - Jimi Hendrix Experience

- 15 MURMUR - REM
- 16 RUBBER SOUL - The Beatles
- 17 THE VELVET UNDERGROUND - The Velvet Underground
- 18 LUST FOR LIFE - Iggy Pop
- 19 PET SOUNDS - The Beach Boys
- 20 STANDS FOR DECIBELS - The dB's

Yes, I am kidding about the number 1. My favorite album is actually SGT. PEPPER. What a coward, eh? Some people probably had a little hope for me for a second there. I do think SGT. PEPPER is easily the best record I've heard--as incredible a flowering of the Western tradition as one could ask for. Allen Ginsberg made the radiant observation that it deconstructs (my stupid trendy word, not Ginsberg's) the expulsive element of cultural unity. Personae the "youth movement" would have no thought of but to collectively oppose--the 64-year-old, the parents in "She's Leaving Home," the uniformed "Sergeant," the man who "used to be cruel to his woman," all find inclusion in the worldview, are human, have feelings worth considering and answering. The way that critical opposition to SGT. PEPPER comes into being is revealing; people resent the Beatles' abandonment of rock in favor of eclectic, out-of-fashion forms, as if they perceive kowtowing. Mostly it reduces to "how dare they give aid and comfort to our enemies?"

Do you like Thomas Pynchon? Seems like he'd be your cup of tea. Maybe.

It's been exactly ten years since I read GRAVITY'S RAINBOW, the only one of his I've read, and I still have to admit it's a fine piece of prose wizardry. It does seem to portend a lot of anthropological significance I've never found too coherent (granted that may mean it should be *exactly* my cup of tea :-)).

Here's how I'd put my reservation. It's only too easy to read that book and conclude this: that the happy life is one of little accountability. Moral rectitude is exactly synonymous with being low in a social hierarchy. Slothrop is the low guy in civilization's hierarchy, the animal man, I'm guessing his name is meant to suggest sloth and slop as in what you give a pig, and his virtually libertine comportment is positioned as likably frank (in that schema wherein a Freudian won't abide a repressor). His erections are his metaphysical leapfrogging of social unreality which leads to war/bombing, the difference between him and the uptight troublemakers. With status--such as that of officers and top rocket scientists--comes more reason to efface one's naughtiness, engendering a culture whose business it is to keep the animalistic (violence and sex) hidden and depersonalized. That's what comes across to me as how it all works according to the book.

Certainly the depersonalization of violence is a key issue in life, but I think the lumping of violence and sex together under the "dark urges" category is unproductive. Human interpersonal violence is a product of selfhood, and I believe it's unrelated to instinct; animals don't have vengeance, that I can tell. Or maybe I really mean that I don't have the smarts to read the book in a way that squares the heaviness of the sexual stuff with the heaviness of the sociopolitical stuff.

Amazed to hear of your childhood preoccupation with the Time/Life volume on The Mind, since I was obsessed with it too & haven't met anyone else who was. I remember the compartments-inside-a-skull painting very clearly. Part of it appears on the cover of some Van Halen album or other!

Right, and I wish it were just a hair more obvious that Mssrs. Halen were using the close-up of the beating scene because they *disapproved*. Running with the devil and all, you wonder if they meant to answer the electric joy on the onlookers' faces with "now, now." Maybe the title means "we're giving you 'fair warning' that this kind of behavior could lead to suspension."

The book also had a section on LSD research, with photos of zonked research subjects staring at candles, etc. Noting this at age seven or eight (circa 1970-71), I asked my father, "Daddy, what's LSD?" His answer: "It's NOT FOR LITTLE GIRLS!" Hee hee. Anyway, he was right.

I like that answer! I believe THE MIND predates the era of America's campaign to spread enticing misinformation about drugs: "drugs are nothing but an attempt to be fashionably rebellious and 'expand your mind'; YOU DON'T WANT THAT, DO YOU?" The flavor of THE MIND was a lot more "these seem to be useful in studying psychosis."

Did you see Velvet Goldmine? If so, what did you think?

Nope.

Any notion when the Loud Family might play here again? I remember a very terrific show about six years ago where y'all played "Editions of You" as an encore. I also remember witnessing a drunk woman approaching you post-show with a distinctly predatory/carnal agenda, and your tactful and gentlemanly conduct in the face of that. (I think she might have been me, but amnesia has mercifully drawn the curtain of charity over that scene.)

Thanks, that's kind of an ego stroke! I can live with the fact that it took a fair amount of alcohol to awaken the interest.

Thanks for being you.

I remain,

Very truly yours,

The Minnesota Einsturzende Neubaten

S. Van Pelt

And thank you and everyone else for not being me.

unlawful Karn Evil knowledge,

--Scott

July 12, 1999

Scott, quite a few of us were dead chuffed (sorry, that's some British slang that's wormed its way into my vocabulary) that the Family finally played in Arizona some months ago (turned out to be one of the few highlights of '98 for me), and I'm sure this gets old after a while, but thank you for creating some brilliant and sometimes quite moving tunes...and your replies in this very column have provided several buffet-table-sized portions of food for thought, as well as some larfs when needed. Anyway, I'll just toss out some questions/comments and if any of them are worth a reply (frankly, I'd be floored if you thought any of them were, but I'll try anyway), then please do so.

Scott: Thanks for writing! I don't get that much feedback from people about "Ask Scott" and this beats "please don't run them as often."

1) Not that this is a terribly likely scenario, but just suppose some soul who didn't quite "get" a song like "Slit My Wrists" wound up doing themselves in after hearing it (you may not be a master of mind control like Ozzy Osbourne or Rob Halford, but just go along with me on this one), and you were told about it. Would you feel that you should be held the least bit accountable, morally if not legally? How much responsibility is involved on behalf of the artist to be certain that people do not grab the wrong end of the stick and proceed to beat around the bush with it? (I've debated this topic with others before and I'm avoiding telling you where I stand to ensure an honest response.)

Obviously I'd be devastated. I do think the song is pretty far from anything with potential to incite, like "think how dramatic it will be, and how many people who you don't like it will make feel bad," but who knows how intentions might backfire? Do we want to say the concerns of suicidal people shouldn't ever be addressed for fear of doing more harm than good? However bad I might be at it, I think narrating feelings like that might make someone feel a *tiny* bit less disconnected from humanity.

While I'm aware people will consider this nonsense, the real answer to your question is that I was just as "responsible" and "accountable" for any suicide in the world before I wrote the song as after. A suicide is a real event. The cosmos will not be assuaged because the survivors divvy up the blame in a way they find satisfactory, or even because some of them knew the person and some didn't. The suicide is now a fact of spacetime.

2) Since you probably talk to Joe Becker more often than I do, how do think he would respond to a letter from me claiming to be a 9-year old boy dying of a "mysterious illness" and that my one last wish would be to have Thin White Rope play a one-off reunion show in my mom's backyard? Apparently this ploy was quite effective in TV sitcoms throughout the decades...do you think it would work now?

Unfortunately for you I am now able to steal the idea and get them to play in my backyard.

3) What's a record you dig that's currently unavailable that you'd recommend someone to buy on sight (I mean besides *Lolita Nation* and *2 Steps...*, we all know that already)? It's hard to find many Wipers or Laughing Clowns albums around these days.

Stands For Decibels by the dB's leaps to mind. *Beyond the Java Sea* by Metal Flake Mother.

4) Was "Mammoth Gardens" actually commissioned for a John Hughes movie or does it just sound that way to me? (just kidding)

That must be what gave *Lolita Nation* its vast market appeal.

5) Any plans to round up all the Loud Family's cover tunes onto one disc (you know, like Metallica did, man)? For some reason, I can imagine you doing a swell take on Wire's "The 15th" (from *154*). I've got other questions, but this is probably more than you can put up with already.

Thank you,

one of the many Mikes of the world

There's contractual disincentive to do covers because the record company has to pay more to use other artists' songs than for ours. I personally love doing covers. It's ironic that when I was in high school, covers were the way to make money and doing a song of my own was a vain indulgence, and now doing covers is the expensive luxury. Those tribute records--even when in your heart of hearts you're thinking there are way too many of those tribute records, it's always tempting to be on one when asked.

thanks for writing,

a singer into many of the mikes of the world

July 19, 1999

Scott, the song by Everlast in current rotation on radio stations and MTV constantly rekindled my childhood dream of becoming a pop star. When I first heard this composition, I realized it was possible for me to get massive exposure on a national stage despite having a singing voice that sends hysterical mobs marauding and maiming weaker dotards in quest of a lavatory to heave their wrenching bowels. If I inscribe a Aesop refrain and engulf it with 20 odd caricatures of Jerry Springer guests, will this product attract the attention of a known producer who can attract recording executives with the distribution channels to get my record playing every 15 minutes on some media outlet in every major market. How much do you earn in royalties when your song is played on the radio and MTV? When my autistic refrain germinates itself as an immutable loop in the heads of radio listeners, will I have to play live? I realize even though I play the tambourine better than most, few people will pay to listen to a solo tambourine artist. On a few occasions I have connected with the audience in an intense moment of universal harmony slamming my 'bals so hypnotically that the audience becomes 'bal junkies

freakishly craving their next fix of 'bal banging. These special performances have decreased substantially since my doctor changed my medication for Grand Mal seizures. If I have to play live, how much will this cost me? How much does an average musician require per performance? Can I get by with an acoustic guitar and a congo player? Do they have Big Brother programs where I can request a kid in the band? Are there temp agencies for musicians in metropolitan areas like there are for manual laborers in case I have to tour? Do concert promoters pay for all my sound equipment? Is it now acceptable to do a Milli Vanilli type show? I perform as a one-man band playing a drum, cymbals, harp, and guitar. I realize I will be marketed as the latest innovator in music destined to define a new sound in music history. This is how I think my marketing campaign should be structured to qualify instantly as a one-hit wonder. This is all I want to achieve in this occupation. I don't want to hire an entourage that just drains the money I make off my record. If you have any suggestions on how I might best pursue this dream, I would be eternally indebted as Faust. Do you know any budget producers, promoters, or managers? Do you think this project could be successful for a European tour?

Thanks,

Harold Blair

Scott: No.

Thanks for writing,

--Scott

July 26, 1999

Scott, it's time to ask another burning question which hopefully will go towards correcting all the wrongs in the universe.

Basically, I'm a film editor and the thing that scares me most is getting too close to a film project and not knowing if it is any good or not. As you can well imagine I see the work-in-progress again and again (about 40-50 times), and, it gets to a point where you just don't know anymore. My question is, do you find this to be a problem you have encountered when writing or recording music? And if so do you try and counteract it somehow?

Scott: In my experience it can be a matter of overcoming laziness. There's the kind of laziness where you just can't make yourself work, but there's a more insidious kind of laziness where you make yourself believe that the key to success is in obsessive rituals--eradicating every bit of hiss on a track, redoing a track again and again until there are *absolutely* no mistakes, etc. These can cross the line from basic professionalism to avoiding looking at the bigger picture that maybe the song as a whole really needs some redecorating. One valuable service I think of myself providing as a producer is being the grouch who says "okay, let's move on; people aren't going to care so much about this backing vocal that we can throw five percent of the budget at it."

I know it can be numbing and isolating to live with a project, and while I'm tempted to say "get lots of outside opinions," realistically the odds that you're even going to be able to present your situation and your range of options so as to get back exactly the right insight from someone are low. If it's practically a finished product and you just want to hear "great" or not, than okay, but thinking "I'll just collect opinions until it's finished" is going to be a way of collecting panic. I think it's a better policy to just remind yourself to spread your efforts around equitably to everything that needs to get done; minding what all has to wrap--and when--just to finish on time has a way of healthily circulating your perspective.

Another question which I suppose could be seen as being loosely related to my first: Music of the Loud Family is sometimes referred to as music that will "grow" on you. I'm interested to hear your opinion on why some music is thought to "grow" on you, and other music is perhaps more instant to the listener. Is it anything to do with the song structure you are using? For example, have you purposely toyed with the chorus, middle 8, etc. Would that prove temporarily baffling to a listener? Are you aware at the time that a track you are recording might prove to be something that grows on your listeners? Is it a lyric thing? Sorry if this seems a silly question but it is one that has bothered me for years.

It probably goes a lot like this: after several listens, the shock of my godawful singing voice wears off enough that the effort the band and I have put into the music and the lyrics has a reasonable payoff.

Thank for your time in considering these questions, and I thought *Days For Days* was stunning! Thanks!

Charlie "I still can't play drums" Watts

You're very kind--thanks much for writing.

--Scott "not the one who plays in the V-Roys or the one who writes video games or..." Miller

August 9, 1999

Scott, when we had talked on the two occasions I saw The Loud Family, I never got around to asking you about Michael Quercio. I believe I found a Three O'Clock website that said he was in another band. Maybe this year some kind of tour could be arranged between the two of you. Wishful thinking, huh?

It's definitely a Big Star, Elvis Costello world.

Brian

Scott: Thanks for writing.

Michael Quercio is in the wonderful Jupiter Affect now. Unlike huge bands we don't get to just say "we'll do a tour with the Jupiter Affect" and it comes to be--if it's a package tour, it's generally a package put together by other people. Not that I've been stuck in packages I've

hated or anything but my level of fame is that of being grateful enough if we can get dates in the right clubs on the nights we need to get them. Our booking agency is Red Ryder and they do a pretty amazing job.

keep saying "it's definitely a Big Star, Elvis Costello world. it's definitely a Big Star, Elvis Costello world. It's..."

--a citizen of the Ricky Martin, Limp Bizkit world

Scott, it is a pity that your new album is difficult to get in Holland. After months of desperate telephone calls I gave up and ordered the damned thing via Internet. Even with the lyrics downloaded from your homepage it will take me days (for days) to understand them. Don't worry! It keeps me from listening to anything else, including my wife and children.

Scott: :-) I know, like, what do they want, food *again*?

There is really one question on my mind: when do you and the band plan to visit Europe, specially Holland? If you want to know how to get here ask Jonathan Segel. He was here some years ago in the Patronaat in Haarlem with Camper van Beethoven. I would appreciate it if you could give me a non-cryptic answer.

Ha! Am I notorious for being unclear or something? I go around fancying myself a direct person, you know. If I'm cryptic in a song lyric it's usually because I have a subject that I not only have saying something to say about, but the burden of getting people even slightly interested. Sometimes the best way to do that is to make a statement that's challengingly nonsensical, but then there's another way to look at it in which it makes perfect sense. Not to say *I've* ever had any success at it, but that sort of thing is done fairly masterfully in, for instance, the film *Eyes Wide Shut*. Kubrick is saying a lot, but he risks losing a lot of perfectly intelligent people at the level of "this is preposterous and uninteresting."

Unfortunately what it falls on my shoulders to be clear about is that eager as I might be for such a visit, the Kingdom of the Netherlands has so far expressed *no* interest in hosting us in an international teen combo context, though I will ask Jonathan Segel if he knows of a way to smuggle us in. Perhaps we could disguise ourselves as a large shipment of pot.

Thanx for the music!

Gert Jan Dekker

Thank you, and I really would like to get over there and play.

--Skaat van der Mueljer

October 4, 1999

Scott, this is usually the space reserved for all of us devoted fans to gush about how much your music means to us and how incredibly perceptive, clever, perplexing, blah blah blah... your music is. Since I've had the chance on two occasions to tell you all that in person, I'll keep it brief: thanks for always challenging our tastes as we're enjoying your CDs.

Scott: Well, thank you very much. I try to crew my records with the talents of people I work with and once in a while the old boat floats for someone.

On this very web site, Sue reports that this upcoming CD, being your last for Alias, may also very well spell certain demise for the Loud Family. If you listen closely, you can hear scattered voices across the hinterlands wailing, "Say it ain't so, Scott!" I guess my question is, what would it take for you to keep the juggernaut a-rollin'? If this is indeed the end of Scott Miller Chapter Two (all Manfred Mann references aside), what do you hope for next? The all-covers wedding band? Hopefully, that point of desperation won't be crossed in the near future.

I honestly don't know, but doing these records is un-flipping-believable hard work and it doesn't make money, and that makes it complicated to keep doing them. I'm starting to get conscious of not wanting my career output to be cluttered with so many releases that no one knows what to start with. I mean, will any of Frank Zappa's quadrillion records I grab out of the rack speak as if his soul then cared about my soul now, or am I more liable to get an earful of nineteen-somethingty-whatever cultural *positioning* (as if the issue were *my* caring about *him*)?

Zappa was brilliant; don't get me wrong. However, the fact that Frank Zappa is brilliant and is going to go down in musical history, and I'm not, is neither here nor there. We will have an unvarying amount of music history whether I live or I die; but whether I or anyone ever speaks to you is constantly at stake. I want the way to be clear for you to hear what of mine is the most worth hearing if you're listening. I don't want to simply *keep trying to make it*. It's certainly wiser for me to put out one good record in the future than ten bad ones. It could be wisest of all for me to just let what's there stand.

But there are people I still thrill to work with on musical projects; my current band, and Joe Becker for instance. I can't imagine just stopping cold either.

With a tear in my near-beer,

Thomas Durkin

Thanks much for even caring!

what is this "cookie" someone might be in it for?

--Scott

October 18, 1999

Scott, I heard third-hand (in the bush) that you admired Stanley Kubrick's controversial film *Eyes Wide Shut* because it illustrates the principles put forth by philosopher Rene Girard.

Scott: Yes and no. I can typically drone on and on relating anything that I take to be great art or literature to anything else I take to be great art or literature. I don't have any reason to believe Girard and Kubrick ever thought about each other or a common "philosophy," and the word "philosophy" sells the shared reality short, I think. I would much more gladly say that a Dali painting is "surrealist," because whether Dali was in or out with the surrealists at the time of whatever painting we're talking about--that is, whether the assertion is technically right or wrong--it would at least be on the table that we're really talking about intellectual cachet and prestige, and both Girard and Kubrick are masters of taking those off the table.

I really like this question (I'm skipping some earlier ones--bad boy!), so forgive me for walking on the same eggs I remember walking on twenty years ago when someone asked me "do you like the Cars, since they're 'new wave'?"

For the benefit of us more up on Kubrick than Girard, could you elaborate on that subject to your heart's content?

My heart might never be content; where do I even start? My friend Bob Lloyd made the stunning observation that "eyes wide shut" echoes the idea of the masks worn at the men's club--the eyes on the masks have wide open eye holes, but the idea is not to be able to see anybody because faces are covered. Kubrick is obviously suggesting someone is symbolically shutting his or her eyes to something. What?

One reason Kubrick tends to be "controversial" is that he cuts off the route to a too-easy resolution of the problems he brings up. Tom Cruise isn't giving in to plain old lust when his eyes start wandering. Kubrick is at pains to show that women are so preternaturally available to him that it's a palpable inconvenience. Yet his world lights up when his friend in the band says "...and the women..." Kubrick is also at pains not to make a sex-is-of-the-flesh-and-therefore-bad statement; note the last line of the film. The levels of understanding he is after are deeper and darker.

The next darker level of understanding is this: he hungers not for sex but for privilege. But this, too, is already his. He goes to swank parties; he flashes his doctor ID all over the place, as if *it* were a secret society password. What dazzles him in the men's club is being in the sheer community of the men who are able to command such subservience in women. The sexual goings-on are fascinating to him insofar as they serve the atmosphere, but are mere formalities in and of themselves. His nod to the big, prominent masked figure, now his fellow of the elite, is obviously the golden moment for him. This level is darker not only in its being more sinister, but in its being unexamined. He would not, at least at the start of the film, be ready to face his need to have more prestige than someone else just to be happy.

The next darker level of understanding is that to hunger for prestige is to make it necessary for there to be victims. The game of social advantage--which we all play--doesn't work

without losers, and it comes to light that the women are hardly happy participants in all of this. As Girard has articulated brilliantly, we always need expendable victims and we need a way not to see the victims being victimized. Slavery is not really victimization because Negroes' uncivilized lives in Africa weren't worth anything. Or, the military draft is not really victimization because it's expedient and at some level impartial. Or, *laissez-faire* capitalism isn't really victimization because it lays out beautiful rules to justify why those who are suffering in poverty are doing so. Or, it's okay to have this men's club because the women are well paid and are otherwise just gutter trash anyway.

The darkest level of understanding is that the necessity for victims is not just a byproduct but is itself a hunger in human beings. This is the sacrificial appetite, and is closely related to why--as Girard explains--every culture in the world develops a steady diet of ceremonial blood sacrifice. This is touched on in the mysterious equation by which if Tom Cruise isn't to be punished for his crime against the collective, the appetite for vengeance can be satisfied by punishing another. We tell ourselves "this is unbelievable, this is schlock moviemaking," but consider how we feel when we hear a murder has been committed somewhere: we feel a lot better if we read that they "caught the guy," and if we hear he can't be prosecuted, our gut reaction is outrage, before we know a single detail of the crime or the evidence. What is the root of that if we strip off the genteel rationalization? Kubrick is showing us to what steady state a certain gravity of desire always tries to return culture. Nicole Kidman's dream of relishing Cruise's public humiliation points to the same thing: they both hunger to be able to ecstatically redeem transgressions against themselves in demimondes of magic and revenge.

I've rarely been more riveted in a theater than in Nicole Kidman's early monologue (where she's smoking pot). It seems strangely abusive, and you get the idea she wouldn't be laying it all out if it weren't for the pot, but it rang so true: you have no idea how close the barbarians are to the gate, and neither of us knows quite what keeps them out.

Hoping the new Loud Family album will be entitled *Manos, The Hands of Fate*,

Andy Hamlin

thanks a lot for writing,

--Kubrick's Rube

October 25, 1999

Scott, I was just wondering what the current status is of your record deal with Alias. I noticed that their building is up for sale in Burbank and was just curious if they were still viable. If in the future, the one surviving record label doesn't mistake you for a four member teenage vocal harmony group and sign you up again, do you think you will continue to put out records on your own?

Scott: If I had to do it all myself, I'd probably say no; it's too much work and at some level it gets to be a case of crowding out young kids who are getting that first-time thrill of having

something out so that I can be this sorry old vampire putting out his 90th record. If there were a kindly small label who wanted to release an occasional just-for-people-who-already-know-about-me vinyl 45 or something, that sounds rather appealing at the moment I'm writing this.

I know most of us would kill to have a few thousand loyal fans anxiously waiting for the next spread sheet we analyze or tax return that we process, but is that enough for you anymore?

Oh, I love it and I probably depend on it too much. But after thinking "I'm great because a few thousand people like me" again and again, and also saying "but so-and-so isn't necessarily great at all, even though a few *million* people like him or her," that's eventually going to ring a little bell.

Do you feel that your fan base is expanding, or do you feel that you are just entertaining the same people twice with every new release?

I wouldn't say the fan base is exactly "expanding," as if it's just a matter of time before people start preferring my group's stuff to other artists', but I put a lot of effort into making records that stand a chance of being engaging listening for both new and old audiences.

I can understand why you would continue to write and record songs on your own, but don't you think you could achieve the same effect by just handing out the tapes to a few of your close friends? It's not that I'm trying to discourage you in any way--I love the new album more than anything I've come across in a while--I'm just wondering after all of these years what's still in it for you?

To tell the truth, making a tape that three people heard in 1976 wasn't too fundamentally different an experience from doing a real release which in times of my peak trendiness I would expect to get reviewed in big music magazines.

Are you still hoping to score your very own "Seasons In The Sun" or do you just get off on the fact that somebody you don't even know (actually I met you at The Rat in Boston once) drives around in his beat-up truck and listens to your stuff all of the time?

I'm always hoping to score, baby.

Deee-pressingly yours,

Robbie D.

Seasons not dead, Terry Jacks rules OK

--Scott

Scott, I love the Loud Family and Game Theory. Is there any possible way to get Game Theory on CD? If not, who should I address a letter writing campaign to? Thanks for all the beautiful melodies.

Hotpocket8

Scott: Thank you, wonderful very flattering person. Game Theory CDs: two words: (1) used (2) bins. Alias re-released some of the material in about 1994, but I think that was a computer error that's been corrected. Maybe in two years all music will be sold as computer data and we'll take a pill instead of eating dinner.

Wars? Ho ho, we eliminated warlike people in 2139

--Scott

November 1, 1999

Scott, if you could choose, would you prefer to write something so startling and so profoundly true that it becomes a part of the vernacular and society loses track of the actual originator (you); or would you write a tract that is so obscure that the best minds of the few next generations spend immense amounts of time trying to figure out what you meant, and your book makes you famous?

Scott: Hey, that's a good question. To answer it, I'll want to look at a couple of assumptions: one is that something can be sufficiently startling and profoundly true that it gets assimilated, and the other is that sheer obscurity preserves the credit you'll get for being original.

As for the first, what is humanity's track record for accepting outlandish *falsehoods* vs. accepting outlandish truths? My impression is that the falsehoods win by a landslide. On the truth side, I can think of, maybe, in the history of mankind, relativity (this is probably hasty; just go with my point here). And it's probably only accepted today because it's in an area where scientific verification is possible in spades. How about the falsehood side? I don't know, how many people bought *The Bible Code*? You think that many people were lined up ready to accept that time wasn't constant across reference frames? Ideas don't spread according to verifiability; that would be way too inefficient. They spread according to what's flattering and advantageous.

Let's have an exercise in contrition here. You and I are, I'm sure, fond of deconstructing "creationism." We don't literally believe in Genesis, and we look at these poor saps who do, and we wax reflective about how they can't accept science because it upsets their little system of where people fit in the world, etc., etc. Now. When and why did I decide to believe in natural selection? Did I compare enough carbon dating data of primate skulls to decide the evidence was just too compelling to ignore? I submit to you that I *knew* natural selection was *positively* true at exactly the moment it computed to me that it would bring shame on me to believe otherwise. Printed books and teachers essentially had powerful magic on them--the way the Bible and ministers have powerful magic for creationists. I'm

not saying let's throw out science here. I'm saying let's not pretend we walk around living scientifically. We walk around living religiously.

Here's what that was leading up to: revelatory truth is usually by nature an uphill battle because it isn't flattering or advantageous. It doesn't have *that kind* of magic on it. The worry isn't that if you lay that stuff at people's doorstep they'll take it in and not leave a tip, the worry is that they won't be happy to have it there. With varying consequences.

To the second point: in a way, obscurity *does* preserve one's credit for originality. That was the James Joyce paradigm, and I love Joyce. To an extent it was the *Waste Land* paradigm. But I think those works have truth that is being *slowly* verified, and that's why people stay with them. The rub is that for both Joyce and Eliot it became (speaking slightly poetically) a profitable endeavor right about the time they dropped dead.

Now here's the actual answer to your question: I'd rather speak the truth and have it be appropriated, but I don't think that's possible; I think you can *only* reveal surprising and profound truth obscurely (and not altogether consciously).

Still trying to figure you out,

Cookie

Thanks! I'll take being worth the most occasional head scratch, believe me,

--musical head louse

November 8, 1999

Scott, an English singer/songwriter named Momus desperately needed to raise a bit of quick cash to pay some legal bills, so he made an offer to his fans: Pay me \$1,000, and I'll write a song about you. Along with the money, the buyers had to submit a short biographical sketch of themselves. The result was his current album, *Stars Forever*.

What do you think of this approach? Would you ever consider doing it? I'm sure that there are several well-heeled Loud Family fans who might consider shelling out the bucks in order to be immortalized in song by Scott Miller.

Hello Kitty

Scott: I've heard about this, and my friend Tris McCall is more of an expert, so I'll insert his (always insightful) commentary:

...but new classicist ideologue and patriot nick currie, the man behind the MOMUS mask (or should that be the other way around?), doesn't trade in anthems; instead he favors theoretical ruminations, meta-storytelling, curating and displaying the best of our collective pop-detritus, and socio-cultural commentary--lots of socio-cultural commentary. he's also committed to working out, on record, the best representational strategies for writing

characters, scenes, and situations. if that sounds dry and bloodless to you, you probably haven't heard *stars forever* (*****, le grand magistery/analog baroque), a dizzying double cd set of character sketches of unknown and nearly-unknown individuals generous enough to pay currie a cool thousand in exchange for a song portrait. enough has now been written about the ethical implications of "patronage pop" that i won't sit here and play into currie's hands by either denouncing *stars forever* as the ultimate sell-out or championing him as a post-capitalist savior of the record industry, but i will say this: anybody who thinks that it's somehow less tainted to record for warner brothers than it is to grab funding from random japanese women needs to hit the adorno a little harder.

You know Tris *really* respects Momus not because he gives the record five out of five stars (he's relatively generous with his five-star reviews), but because he deigns to uppercase several letters, which I don't think I've ever seen him do before.

I haven't heard the record myself, but if it's true there's a Jeff Koons song on there, chances are we won't be 100% disappointed, at least if we're happy enough just to have something to, effectively, gawk at.

Momus's is a fairly brilliant idea. I'm far from sure I like it, and even farther from sure I'd ever do it, and infinitely far from doing it before a respectable enough period of time has elapsed for Momus to receive all due credit (if that's the word) for the gesture.

Fortunately I have only the modest legal bills of someone whose records don't make anyone very much money, and can thus afford to choose my subject matter, but maybe I can get creative in other ways. How about if I do an album about the exact set of people on Momus's album?

still waiting for my \$1000 from John Delorean,

--Scott

November 15, 1999

Scott, you probably hate to answer questions about songs this old, and you have probably answered this question many times before, but what is the story behind "Andy in Ten Years"? The song has continued to haunt me; it is beautiful, sweet, and sad.

Scott: The advantage to asking me about old songs is that if I did explain them before, I won't remember what fibs I might have told and may now have to resort to the truth. I thank you for your kind comments, by the way.

There's no particular "Andy" in real life, but I might have been imagining Andy Warhol as a contentious young man--I really don't remember. I suppose I'm talking to the part of myself that wants to be an iconoclast, and asking: when I've created all my great cultural havoc, what will I have to show for it but a wake of needless disillusionment? If the world learns to believe in the Sex Pistols and not Pink Floyd, has a great liberation really taken place, or is it a lateral move--or worse? I think I'm beginning there to wonder if in the end it isn't really

less about how you end up fitting into what seems at the time like the big picture than it is about whose feelings get hurt along the way.

Also, I am completely unfamiliar with The Loud Family. I am planning to buy as many records as I can find, but how would you compare this band to Game Theory?

The 1993 album was a little like the one with "Andy in Ten Years," only slicker. The 1994 album was a shorter, somewhat brash and grating variation. The 1996 and 1998 albums were done on more of a shoestring budget, the first having an experiments-in-home-recording feel, the latter having a live feel and a thought-out theme. The new one is something of an average of all of the above.

Finally, what do you think of the open source movement?

Michael Manske

You mean the market trend of having to give the source code to software away? Something about it scares me--probably because I have some wannabe artist bones in my body, and open source is a little like saying "you can't sell an artistic service, art should be free to anyone." That's pretty irrational, given that I've never been able to make a living by artistic means to begin with, and I don't connect the fear at all to my programming job. Maybe I should change my model for doing music to some analog of selling customer support!

RTFM,

--Scott in 12 years

December 1, 1999

Scott, I had an interesting experience as a member of the audience at your excellent live show a while back. While I had expected to feel a bit out of place, it astonished me how different being among the audience felt compared to being among the players.

Scott: I'll bet my nose doesn't look as big, since it's not in profile.

As a performer, routinely exposed to various crowds, have you noticed any characteristics that groups of people might display that single individuals do not? If so, how deeply does this influence reach? Do you think that group membership influences consciousness itself; i.e. that the consciousness of a crowd is an entirely different entity from that of its individual members?

My personal crowd issues are no deeper than "I'd better not screw the songs up or people won't clap for me," but as you obviously know there's been serious study of crowds in our time.

A lot of the modern attitude on the subject is a reaction to the fact that Hitler could mesmerize crowds. We inherit from Nietzsche a general contempt for people's tendency to

be sheeplike, and we're more careful now to teach our children to think for themselves. That's a useful concept to a point, but when you teach individuality as a goal in itself, what you really nurture is willingness to oppose someone without qualm. And if you don't understand how "group membership influences consciousness," your attempts to teach the willingness to oppose Hitler will result in the willingness to persecute the Jews. If I'm in Berlin in 1935, I can pat myself on the back just as heartily for standing up to the Jews as for standing up to Hitler, and the invisible gravity determining what I'll stand up to is the set of eyes on me waiting to pass judgment--the eyes of the crowd. A crowd is like a laser; it can feed back on itself into intense coherence.

What's the weirdest thing you've ever seen a crowd do?

Watch Pat Robertson.

Congratulations on your continuing success.

Thanks and likewise.

Donnette Thayer

remember to beat the crowds this shopping season,

--Scott

Scott, I was just reading an Ask Scott letter referencing Michael Quercio, and it brought to mind a sort of trivia question that I've wondered about for a long time. Many years ago I owned a CD called Rainy Day (I think it was mainly a compilation project of David Roback's) on which Michael Quercio played. It was a really nice CD, and I could kick myself for selling it when I was in college. Anyway, my question is this: does that little bit of history have anything to do with the line from "Bad Year at UCLA:"

"And you wind up working in someone else's rainy day"

Just something I wonder about everytime I hear that song.

Joe Slagle

Scott: It's just a coincidence. Thanks for listening to their and my records!

songs for 'Brella,

--Scott

December 20, 1999

Scott, have you ever tried to write a totally cliched sappy pop tune? I mean the full on "moon/june" "ohh girl I just wanna be with you tonight" kinda ditty? But totally

straightfaced? I have been threatening to do this for a few years now but strangely enough I lack the courage. It seems to me almost like shooting heroin or watching a sitcom all the way through, i.e. I'm scared it might be so fun and easy that I'll just wake up one morning and be Dianne Warren or whatever her name is (and I have heard that hard drugs WILL turn one into Dianne Warren).

Actually this is just a lame excuse to say hi. I'm really excited about your site. Its my first visit and I shall return.

And whenever you wanna play LA please let us know.

-Stew

Scott: This has to be Stew from [The Negro Problem](#), and I couldn't feel more honored than by a message from a member of one of my favorite bands--maybe my very favorite at this time.

What you modestly call "lack of courage" I'd call knowing too much. I like romantic songs from people who are that naively passionate, but it would be fairly dishonest for me to write in a romantic way. I try to put true love into my songs, and true love is different from romanticism, and doesn't really suffer it gladly; as you know that's by no means an original thought, but there's a lot of opinion to the contrary so I'll elaborate a little.

First of all, I'd only expend the effort of writing an entire lyric when the subject required that much work, which in this case would mean the listener needed to be seduced. Now, without intending any sort of anti-sex sentiment, I'm neither in the market for the actual conquest (being married), nor convinced that displaying my technique increases love in the world. I wouldn't likewise mistake my writing a song to a chef to try to convince him or her to cook me a great meal for a lessening of world hunger.

Second, I've grown more private about the topic. It would be humiliating to me to advertise the way I would seduce, or, by extension, to tip off on the way in which I could be seduced. And though I realize lyrics are fiction, for some reason I hesitate to disturb my relationship with the listener with the suggestion that there's coercion going on between us.

Romanticism ought to one day strike a person as chilly. I think the movie SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE did the trick for some people, but I'll approach the task a little more abstractly. Let's take the classic romantic story of the knight slaying the dragon to get the princess. Remove the dragon and you do not have a romantic story, you have--I don't know--a society notice. Romanticism is a trick; it seems to hinge on sexual devotion, but really hinges on the presence of an obstacle to the union that needs to be destroyed. When there's no obstacle, things turn unromantic and we don't know why. In real life, there's no such thing as a dragon, but the logic of romanticism needs something to be slain. In SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE, it was the man with the allergies who got dumped. Remove him, and you have no movie. The catharsis is in heaping the sins of banality, frailty, and "settling" onto his head, then running the lance through his boring little heart. Now, this is not the open intention of the filmmakers, it's simply what the rules of romanticism entail. In fact, lesser filmmakers would

have simply had the dumped guy be an asshole who was holding the woman by some obligation.

"Oh girl, I *just* want to be with you tonight." Because tonight you're the princess and tomorrow I'll probably need you to be the dragon.

but tonight I need to be Darryl Dragon,

--Scott

P.S. Please forgive my sloppy use of the words "romance" and "romanticism." To me the latter is more or less a literary glorification of the former, which is a little closer to what I'm criticizing than anything people casually refer to as "romantic."

ASK SCOTT

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

2000 (Year 4)

January 3, 2000

Scott, hope all is well on your end of the continent. Haven't resorted to the Ask Scott venue in awhile, but I'm eagerly anticipating your work for the Rykodisc benefit and have a few questions on that front.

Scott: That benefit release seems not to have gone forward, though I'll be up for participating if the idea gets resurrected.

First, to the best of my knowledge this song will be the first song you've ever recorded and released as a "solo artiste," per se. How is the process of recording as "Scott Miller" differ from the process of a bandleader writing and then recording with others, as you did in *Game Theory* and the Louds?

The most obvious difference in the process is that I play the drums and piano myself, usually in the form of tapping the keys on a sampler keyboard, with terrible results.

Second, when another of my favorite songwriters, Neil Finn, broke up Crowded House and released a solo album after two decades of band work (*Split Enz* and *Crowded House*), there was a lot of unhappy muttering among his fans that the new material was missing the intangible nuances of his band work with established collaborators. Do you worry that some of your fans may find fault somehow with your solo work outside the Loud Family?

I don't know Neil Finn at all, and I can't critique myself like that, let alone keep a straight face while discussing *My Solo Process*, so instead let's talk about what we'd all be more interested in: Pink Floyd. If I never have another forum after "Ask Scott," I'd hate to have squandered the opportunity to publicly complain about Roger Waters.

First, why does Roger hire Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck to play all over his records? Because that's how you Replace David Gilmour. As if anyone wanting to make an album has to Replace David Gilmour. It's easy to imagine most of Roger's recent artistic decisions being made with that kind of reactive, obstacle-surmounting logic. It's sort of like watching a person ride into the ocean on a tricycle out of sheer spite for people who don't think he'll make it across. His records paradoxically end up sounding like junior versions of the post-Roger Floyd records, with the female choir vocals, the sound effects, the arena-style blues guitar, but as if it's the work of an impresario who wouldn't budget to hire the original band. Moreover, the real desperation shouldn't be over the loss of Gilmour's guitar, but of that *glorious* voice. His singing was for one thing *sine qua non* for the hits to have happened, and for a lyricist, if you've got someone who can sing "run, rabbit, run/Dig that hole, forget the sun" and not sound like William Shatner, hold on to that resource!

Almost as valuable to Roger as Dave's voice was the presence of a crack team working tirelessly against him.

I was a teenage (well, college-age) Nietzsche head until the day that I woke up and realized the problem with Nietzsche: everybody who was reading it was doing so from the perspective that they were the Ubermensch. Now I keep Nietzsche at a safe, petting distance.

--Tris McCall

I think the chronic random feeling of being thwarted used to give Roger just enough oneness with the non-Ubermensch to keep the big problems, like imagined blood fueds with Andrew Lloyd Webber, under control. Roger knows the world is dehumanized, but while part of him knows to pursue the science of love and forgiveness, he--like most of us--lunges toward the opposite: that we should figure out whose fault it all really is (the warmongers, the televangelists, the middlebrow composers) and never, ever let them off the hook. It's sound enough logic at the level of consumer protection, but when he's giving peace sermons while dragging Gilmour, Wright and Mason out to the killing fields, we can see that *Wall*-management is tricky business. And kids emulate all of this in minor ways; they strive to be able to spot rotten guilty mediocre teachers, associates, mothers.

I wouldn't presume to recommend attempting more Floyd-with-Roger albums this late in life or not; frankly, as a maker of music I'm not worthy to tune their instruments, let alone counsel them. But as any idiot, I can spot Roger's need to apologize to, and forgive, the other members unreservedly. Failing that, maybe he should just ask himself if he's really doing the world a favor by withholding his expertise from these Floyd-without-Roger records.

Third, I understand that your contract with Alias may be winding down...any prospect of finding a new home amidst the green-tinted artist haven of Rykodisc?

I don't know; let's ask them. Ryko, are you *playa* enough for the Loud Family? Please reply to scott@loudfamily.com!

Hoping my move to Boston is timed well for another tour,

Michael Zwirn

You'll want to have the platforms and hot pants out of storage by mid-March.

hey, bassist, leave them billionaire light-musical composers alone

--Scott

January 10, 2000

Scott, in response to Geoff Woolf's question about long CDs and filler (which, by the time this question comes up, will probably be half a year old)

Scott: Missed it by that much!

--it is true that most long CDs contain a bunch of crap, but finding two people who precisely agree about which songs are the crappy ones and should have been cut is nearly impossible. Although filler bugs me on a certain level, I also sort of appreciate it when a band essentially says: "Here it all is. We decided to let you make your own album out of it." (Although I appreciate it even more when a long album *has* no filler, like *London Calling*, say.)

It doesn't have filler *exactly*, but some of the musical material is a little on the public domain side.

So as to make this an "Ask Scott" instead of an "Opine to Scott": what with CD-R technology getting cheaper and cheaper, have you given any thought to starting your own little home record label, and bypassing the irritating music industry entirely, if no renewal contract is forthcoming from Alias? Jeff Davis, formerly of the swell Balancing Act, has started something along those lines. Seems to be going not too badly for him.

Francis Heaney

I'm really glad to hear that. For myself, though, I don't know. I've put a lot of work into a lot of records and it's a little beaten out of me at this point. I still enjoy my band, and the contact I have with lots of great people who are listeners (like yourself), but if you ask me today, I feel like minimizing any future bureaucracy for myself. I like the idea of doing little odds-and-ends types of releases in the future but I'm not in much of a mood to flog the "recording artist career" horse any more.

I don't know if *Attractive Nuisance* will be my last record, but it was made as if that were the case. I realized there's a difference between making a record and making your last record. It's hard to explain; for some reason I'm tempted to say I no longer feel we're trying to build an audience so I feel less ingratiating, but in a way that's almost the opposite of the truth. It's more that whatever ingratiating I'm going to do, it had better not be that kind of ingratiating that says "here's the exciting direction I propose that you and I pick music to go in"--"direction" points to future projects--but rather: whatever our boring old direction was, this is where it led; let's make it add up to what it can add up to. Settle the account rather than take out another loan.

lowest interest rates in town,

--Scott

February 1, 2000

Scott, I can't remember if I asked this already, or only dreamed I asked it already. Please feel free to ignore and/or have me killed.

Scott: Nonsense! The number of questioners I've actually had to have killed is extremely small. People exaggerate.

But: Anything to say about the version of "Nine Lives to Rigel Five" popping up on the new (Rose Melberg side-project) Gaze record? Does this mean that you are the Scott Miller who's been thanked in the liner notes of some of Rose Melberg's records previously?

Fine print reader,

Doug Mayo-Wells

If it's the one I think I heard, it's a very nice version. I don't know myself to have been thanked on their other records, though.

--Rigel Tufnel

Scott, I've been a huge fan (not the oscillating type) ever since I bought a record of yours called *Dead Center* on a French label called Lolita back in '84. It seems to be a compilation of the first two Rational EP releases, but some of the versions of the songs, including the title track, are different than the ones on the CD re-releases. Just wondering what the story is behind this. I assume by now that this is a pretty rare item.

Scott: I believe we recorded two versions of the song "Dead Center"--the one on the OP (pre-"Option") magazine flexi, which has those really silly speech fragments, and the one on the French album you're talking about. The one in the '90s repackaging is the flexi version. I think the best version of that was one we were doing in the late '80s that had the verse about Carole Lombard and Vince Lombardi. There may not be a recording of that one.

I don't know if the French record is particularly collector-priced or not. It's not one of the ones I hear anecdotes about.

Great new record, by the way.

Rob Disner

Thanks! Wait, what's this behind your ear? It's another new Loud Family record!

any day now, any day now, I shall be re-released

--Scott

Scott, how much time and money does it take to make a Loud Family disc? Are there any technical and business differences between how you make records now as opposed to how you made 'em as Game Theory? Finally, what's your status with Alias and what future do you see for Scott Miller (TM) brand music?

Waltzing the Halls since 1985,

Chatty Charles

Scott: Charles! Great to hear from someone I used to hear from when I didn't hear from many people!

In the Game Theory days, everything was done in a big studio with a big producer (Mitch Easter). Nowadays a lot of it is done in my living room on ADATs and only the drums and mixing really have to be done in the studio. I'm the only producer. It's hard to give exact money figures but, you know, somewhat less than a Barbra Streisand record. *Interbabe Concern* and *Attractive Nuisance* were really slow records to make, like six months or thereabouts. A lot of that time is spent doing little arrangement touches at home, so it's not running up studio time.

The future? In the future people will listen to music in a kind of virtual reality where the musicians and singers aren't even in the room with you, yet you hear them,

--Scott

Scott, I was shifting through my old vinyl yesterday and, as I was admiring the covers of my Game Theory collection, I suddenly realised that there was a question that I have always wanted to ask.

What was the deal with the ever increasing size of the "G"? Did it signify anything? (apart from a "G" that was increasing in size.)

Scott: Ah, yes. "G" was short for "Game Theory."

Ba-dum bum.

I thought of the G increasing in size as suggestive of it being descended into, as in objects getting bigger in your field of view when you move toward them. Sort of parallel to feeling I was going deeper into psychology with my lyrics, I think I'd say in hindsight, and for the 1988 record, the "G" didn't get bigger, and that had to do with a shift in my thinking away from the idea that getting deeper into psychology all the time was precisely the way to go.

Regards and thanks for *Days for Days*. How does it feel to having never released a "weak" album?

Like if that's the case, people have sure acquired a taste for weak albums in my lifetime. Thanks for writing!

Health & Happiness

Charlie Watts

Rolf & Florianness,

--Scott

Scott, since you once had a Zachary Smith in the Loud Family I feel I must ask this question: Did you grow up watching "Lost In Space" and if so did you prefer the (earlier) fairly serious sci-fi adventure episodes or the (later) ridiculously campy ones?

Scott: Having been born in 1960, I did grow up watching it, and I believe I can summarize the reaction I had to this and most any other shows which had a TV family: Wow, the daughter is really cute.

Love your music.

Sincerely,

Beppo Jones

Thanks much,

--pusillanimous pipsqueak

February 14, 2000

Scott, I'm going to be annoying because I already asked you this. Have you ever watched the t.v. show "Dr. Who"? It's an old British sci-fi series. Has anyone told you (besides me) that you look like Tom Baker? He played Dr. Who during the 70's. Oh yeah, and how old are most of your fans at your concerts? I think I am the only 16 year old who knows who the Loud Family are. Well, at least in Pittsburgh. *Days for Days* rules and I'm looking forward to the new album!

Elissa

Scott: Thanks much! You're right; I saw your question and didn't answer yet because I try to answer earlier mail before later, but now, out of guilt for disillusioning young people in my audience, I'm answering yours out of turn. Of course, you could in actuality be one of those 50-year-old internet perverts who *claim* to be teenage girls (albeit one with a genius for stalking sites that won't arouse suspicion).

Yes, people have told me I look like Dr. Who. I personally thought he looked like Roger Daltrey, singer for the Who--a far more metaphysical connection. I've only watched Dr. Who a couple of times, but my wife Kristine has gotten me into a sci-fi (though more comedic) Brit series called "Red Dwarf"; highly recommended.

Though you're not the *only* 16-year-old who knows about us, our shows are typically in 21-and-over rock clubs. I sympathize because when I was 16 and liked the Velvet Underground and Roxy Music, it was unthinkable that bands like that would ever play a big venue where I could have seen them, largely because they didn't sell to the under-21 demographic. Needless to say, it's gratifying if our songs occasionally connect the way those others' did with me.

not a doctor, but resemble someone who plays one on T.V.

--Scott

Scott, you seem to have reached Maslow's "self-actualized" state. Do you feel like you have?

Scott: Thanks to the web, I can inform myself that the person in such a state is "autonomous, easily motivated, able to solve problems, and accepts and assists others. [Such people] are mature in all dimensions and can realistically deal with failings and doubts."

So thanks very much; the question alone implies an all-too-generous appraisal of me. Unfortunately I really am kind of a non-stop embarrassment, especially when it comes to "assisting" others with my attempts at being deep. The only hope is that I get habitually shamed into consulting valuable sources, causing me to sometimes accidentally parrot something useful. This is pretty far from being "autonomous."

Was there any one moment in time that you realized you were "awake"? Details?

Actually, yes, in a way that has personal significance to me, but which I'd only cheesily misrepresent if I try to express it in my typical embarrassing way--I didn't instantly decide I was poised and masterly or anything. Two of my recent readings have been Dostoevsky's THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV and the BHAGAVAD-GITA (a sacred Hindu text), and I take them both to be *straining* to get that kind of wakefulness you're talking about across, and they're both vastly more brilliant at it than I'll ever be, yet you have go in prepared--unconsciously craving to hear what there is to hear--otherwise the din of social context will drown it out. But it's not like no one's prepared; I'm not Mr. special reader of those books.

Have you read anything from Vernon Howard? Comments?

Sorry, only what I could pick up right now from scanning his Amazon book blurbs. Sounds like he could be interesting. My comment--knowing nothing--would be that the easiest way to decide for yourself if an author's take on "wakefulness" is for you is to catalog what he or she thinks is keeping people asleep and seeing if that rings true.

Do you consciously change "mental states" while writing or playing a show? or are you always on this "higher plane"?

Thanks,

Jeff Brown

Your question reminds me I could stand to improve in that area. By "higher plane" I assume you mean really aware of how the performance is affecting everyone in the room, the audience, the promoter, the other band members, as opposed to being in an egotistic, mechanical frame of mind. I tend to be in the latter just because it's sometimes all I can do to get the notes and chords right.

--shame of the waking universe

February 21, 2000

Scott, I'm sure you get tired of the "I'm a big fan of yours" letter so I'll begin by saying you're a big fan of mine--or so you told me once about a million years ago when my band opened for Game Theory. I just figured you were being polite in a disinterested way--we opened for a lot of assholes who told us they were big fans but didn't have a clue who in the world we were--but you went and proved me wrong by picking up a guitar and asking me to show you where you were going wrong in the chorus of our current 7" single (you were playing an E flat minor where I played some weird-ass chord I stumbled across by accident that I'm not even sure *is* a proper chord). I didn't tell you then, but being treated like a peer by someone with a major label contract was one of the nicest moments I'd had in music. So thanks. And I am a big fan of yours.

I don't have a question so much as a suggestion. Or maybe it's a tip. Or hell, it might be just a funny story. I just hope Mitch Easter hasn't told you this one already. I don't know if you ever made it over to Sam Moss Guitars in Winston-Salem when you recorded at the Drive-In, but if you did you know that it is *the* place (in North Carolina, anyway) to pick up some vintage cheese--and Sam is cool as hell to boot. So anyway, I'm in there one day many years ago and Sam is trying to sell me a tweed Fender Bassman which I really want but can't afford and Mitch is trying to talk me into it so he can buy back the Orange he sold to me when the doorbell jingles and who walks in but Poison lead guitarist C.C. DeVille. And we knew it was C.C. DeVille because he announces himself thusly: "Hello, I'm C.C. DeVille, lead guitarist for Capitol Records recording artist Poison, appearing tonight at the Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum here in Winston-Salem" (an exact quote).

"Big fucking deal," is Sam's exact response, which upsets Mr. DeVille somewhat. He makes a rude comment, Sam makes a ruder one, and the situation escalates until such time as Sam offers to, "with the help of my friends Mitch and Drew here" forcibly eject Mr. DeVille's big-haired ass from the establishment. Being that neither Mitch nor I are especially imposing physical specimens, we blanched somewhat at the prospect of violence but Mr. DeVille's response was astonishing.

"Mitch?" he replies. "Mitch Easter? The record producer Mitch Easter? Man, I *wore out Two Steps From the Middle Ages*. I love Game Theory!" Whereupon he picked up a handy Taylor acoustic to perform a credible version of "Wish I Could Stand Or Have." It was a hell of a moment.

So the suggestion/tip is this: I haven't heard Poison's name for a while, so if you find yourself in the market for a guitarist any time soon I'd wager "The Pussyman" (as the headstocks of his guitars read--his mother must be so proud) would be glad to get the gig. Been meaning to share that with you for about ten years now.

Scott: I only wish we'd had more opportunities to bump into each other in the hallways at Enigma Records and get into exchanges of "you the pussyman," "no, *you* the pussyman."

Ain't looking for nothing but a good time,

Drew Weiss

P.S. If, as this week's Ask Scott suggests, our days of readily available new Scott Miller tunes is drawing near their end, that's a shame. But I know exactly what you mean, and understand completely. The day I said music will always be a passion but it's time to call it quits was one of the toughest of my life. I hope it's not so, but if it is thanks for all the tunes.

Thank you! In my case, after a contract where the band didn't make the label money, the "decision" not to do another record in the near future is not best described as agonizing, but I appreciate the sympathy anyway.

--Capitol Records recording artist poison

March 6, 2000

Scott, if you were to host a dinner party or similar social event where a few of your guests were unfamiliar with your music, which one of your songs would you play for them on your living room stereo if you *actually* chose to honor their enthusiastic requests: "Oh, please play us one of your songs!"?

Scott: I'd first try to divert their attention by trying to get them interested in seeing my wife dance a scene from *Swan Lake*, but if that didn't permanently shift focus off me, I'd probably start asking myself: which of my songs is not *that* embarrassing, and is pretty short?

Here are some candidates in that category:

"Just Gone" from *Interbabe Concern*

"Save Your Money" from the new one

"Crypto-Sicko" from *Days For Days*

"Aerodeliria" from *Plants & Birds*

"Still Its Own Reward" from *Tape Of Only Linda*

If some of you are saying "hey, that one's a *little* embarrassing," welcome to being me at a dinner party and why I'm not running my catalog over to the CD player while you're eating.

I would never tell you to be quiet. ;)

You might if you thought anyone could pull it off.

Kristine Chambers Miller

lots of love,

--Scott

Scott, is that the flaming baby head sun thing from Teletubbies in the upper left corner of the *Days For Days* cover? If so, why has he (she?) been turned into a white bean?

Scott: That baby, for some reason, always reminded me of Kurt Cobain. I just see a strong facial resemblance. And of course, now there's Frances *Bean* Cobain. It all adds up.

Thanks for answering this Burning Question,

Roger (Po) Winston

--Scott "Tubby Custard" Miller

March 13, 2000

Scott, I have enjoyed your album lists and they have led me to some bands I now enjoy. I still think you *must* check out *Joy 1967-1990* by Ultra Vivid Scene. I discussed this with you at one of your shows. Hugh Jones produced it and it is his masterpiece.

Scott: I'll watch out for that one. I think Joe Becker played me some of it and it sounded good. There was a period where I was getting told that the singer sounded like me, which ought to frighten anyone.

Anyway...in one of your interviews you mentioned classical lit. as a contributing influence in *Days For Days*. I realize how pretentious it would look if you released "Scott Miller's Reading List"; however, I am curious to know what sort of stuff you enjoy.

Christopher M. Hall

I see what you mean about the posting of reading lists being pretentious. I've done some approximation of that on this site, and in retrospect it seems pretentious. Not in the sense of biting off more intellectual material than I can chew -- I guarantee that I'm pretentious in that sense 100% of the time -- but in the sense that a reading list stands to mismanage how people absorb our culture. I realize teachers have skills I don't have in advising what to read in what order, and no one in particular has ever scanned the set of books I've read for important holes.

I usually read literature which has a reputation for being heavy and influential, because I want a big payoff for investing my time. Even if I hate a book, I still want the reward of understanding what sort of effect it has had on the thinking of the world. For instance, I disagree with Nietzsche on practically any issue of morality, but he has an amazing genius for bringing the right issues to the surface. He's J. Alfred Prufrock's nightmare; he makes it impossible to avoid everything the timid, rationalist mind wants to pretend is a solved problem.

Often enough, I'll go back and read some favorite thing of mine even though I've read it many times before. I'm always going back to "the Waste Land," for instance. I think everyone should try to read "the Waste Land," if only for the experience of humbling oneself before what by academic consensus is the poem of the century and not knowing what the hell it means, letting clues to the meaning come to over time. One comforting thought is that if you read it and you don't get *a word* of it, you're not much worse off than the most literate minds that first read it in 1922. In my opinion, it wasn't understood that well until the 1990s.

I don't remember the context for my saying "classical literature" was an influence on *Days For Days*, but if you caught me today I'd put it slightly differently and say I've gotten more conscious of what cultural history produced me, so I have an appetite for the classics which parallels my appetite to write songs. For me the term "classic" implies a revelatory power which should apply to anyone's life, and where it occurs to me "oh, what this certain writer is saying is what it feels like for me to be in this certain situation," that might turn into a lyric under the right circumstances.

Right now I'm reading Machiavelli and I'm writing a song about how I regret my inability to govern the band through the use of fear. Kidding!

--Machiavelli Vanilli

Scott, I recently began using digital audio editing (ProTools specifically) and can't believe how much better the recording and production process is. I'm wondering when you made the transition to digital.

Scott: *Interbabe Concern* was the first one done on ADATs as opposed to Studer 24-tracks, but it was still tape deck recording -- none of these albums has been recorded and edited on hard disk. We actually did the most computer stuff on *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things*, the first record. Paul Wieneke had SoundTools and Rob Poor did some crazy programming tricks on, of all things, a Next box. That was how we got the opening Doppler and chop-edit effects, for instance. An example of a SoundTools track is "Self Righteous Boy Reduced to Tears."

***Days for Days* sounds much more digitally produced, but less creative (at least from my perspective) than *Interbabe Concern* (which in all fairness is one of my favorites)...**

Digital audio is a tool that requires mastering like anything else. While I was able to remove all the *warmth* and *life* the first try, it wasn't till *Days for Days* that I was also able to get rid of the creativity.

Finally, thanks for your work. In my collection you rank with Abdullah Ibrahim, MBV, and that Chilton fellow.

Justin McReynolds

Well, that's a very nice thing to say; that's some good company.

thanks and good luck with recording,

--bit player

March 20, 2000

Scott, I was wondering what your opinion is of The Magnetic Fields' *69 Love Songs*, since I know you've been a fan of Stephin Merritt's work for a long time.

Scott: Hey, Jeffrey, thanks for a good question. I finally got a copy of that and I love it. Two musician friends of mine whose end-of-year lists I always consult, Ken Stringfellow and Steve Wynn, had this as their #1 pick, so I knew to take it pretty seriously. I was nevertheless prepared for it to be good but not great, since Stephin Merritt's romantic leanings go in a somewhat different direction from what I think of my own stuff doing, and this seemed a little like asking Robert Plant to stretch out and explore some Hobbit themes in depth.

But I guess this was the case of a just plain great record being a just plain great record, because he's more of a hopeless romantic than ever before, and the results are unbelievably inspired. Best record of '99 I have to say. A lyric like "If I was the grand canyon/ I'd echo everything you say/ But I'm just me/ I'm only me/ And you used to love me that way" is typical of the sort of effortless success *69 Love Songs* sustains over the marathon running time. "Grand canyon" suggests a wide emotional gulf, but it's the gulf of adult tragedy rather than adolescent longing, because we know this love was once requited. The fact that a canyon echoes, and thereby becomes a fortuitous metaphor for a lover being forced to "echo" sentiments rather than being allowed his individuality makes me wonder why the hell such happy accidents never happen to me when *I'm* writing.

Actually, when I talked to Stephin and Claudia a couple of weeks ago they mentioned that they recently read *Ulysses* out loud to each other, indicating they're at least somewhat societally crippled along my own lines, although Claudia was, I believe, convinced that Molly Bloom was damaging to feminism, and again I think: would that a thought with that potential to be loved ever cross my mind.

Me, I'm quite impressed by the album's range of approaches, both musical and lyrical, and also by what an effective singer Merritt's turned into.

Couldn't agree more.

My question, though, is whether you'd ever consider doing such a large-scale, thematically unified work. One could extract some sort of unity from, say, *Lolita Nation* or *Interbabe Concern*, but one virtue of *69* is that Merritt is so direct in naming his topic. My first doubt was whether it would be financially feasible for you to mount such a huge production...but then, I hear *69 Love Songs* has outsold the rest of Merritt's catalog combined: something to be said for doing something big and buzzworthy, I guess.

That's very true. The short answer is I've never been on a label that would have put something like that out, so I didn't waste time making impossible plans. The closest I've

come was when *Lolita Nation* required two vinyl disks -- and even so, Enigma wouldn't go two CDs, so we had to cut it by seven minutes or thereabouts. Alias pulled the vinyl release of *Interbabe Concern* because it was going to require two records.

(Obligatory gush time) You're one of the few currently working artists who I think might be capable of doing justice to such a large-scale project -- along with, of course, Kid Rock.

Jeff Norman

I'm speechless, and I'm sure Kid Rock is, too. As you probably know I'm in something of an am-I-still-currently-working? mood these days, so the last things on my mind are magnum opera (always wanted to use that plural in a sentence; I don't know if it's even technically correct), but I couldn't be more tickled that someone thinks I might do a good job of it, so consider the idea to now be lodged somewhere at the back of my mind. If Stephin and Claudia will do all the singing.

'69 Love songs,

--the other SM

March 27, 2000

Scott, my name's Matt. I met you back in '85 when you stayed with friends in a band called Other Bright Colors.

Scott: Wow, hi! They were a terrific band.

I remember we had an interesting conversation about Joyce and Nabokov. I just read your interesting, entertaining Schopenhauer-esque defense of *Eyes Wide Shut* but still don't understand your adulation for Kubrick the Will-Moralist. Every time I see his films I feel like I'm going to Sunday School. My advice: check out Max Ophuls, Kubrick's mentor...

First, thank you for prompting me to read *The World As Will and Idea (or Will and Representation)* by Arthur Schopenhauer. It was slow until "book 4" about morality, at which point I started eating it up.

Second, congratulations on identifying Kubrick as a moralist; I'd be surprised if many people confuse *A Clockwork Orange* with Sunday School, but I agree there's probably more than a little similarity.

"Will-Moralist" sounds like it might be academic jargon I don't know about, but let me say that I'm all for artists moralizing. There's a pretty fascinating debate raging at the Amazon *Eyes Wide Shut* customer review page -- you've never seen so many one-star and five-star reviews -- and one of the more articulate complaints is that Kubrick dares to lecture us on sex at home being okay whereas sex in cult rituals is bad, with such sermonizing corrupting the dream reality that was captured in *Traumnovelle*. I think Kubrick's point is that we *are* in a dream reality, and he's going to be so unsporting as to corrupt it for us. The masked ball is

a magnification of what people strive for in the absence of spiritual authentication: a vague notion of participation in power and advantage, behind which (preferably out of our view) there must be those at whose expense the power and advantage are defined.

I believe Schopenhauer was the first Western philosopher to have digested Hinduism's *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, and I think this more than anything earned him the tag of "pessimist." Thinkers of the European Enlightenment had become so happy to think of man as initially good but methodically corrupted that when Schopenhauer came along talking about man being inherently deluded by *Maya*, they must have thought he was Kubrick's variety of spoilsport.

Ironically, the word "enlightenment" nowadays has a more Buddhist flavor, and we multiculturalists don't want to be too unfamiliar with the related topic of *Maya*, or we could be accused of not knowing what we're supposed to be enlightened *out of*. So in a way Schopenhauer had a somewhat fashionable attitude. He doesn't divide the world into the righteous and the unrighteous according to strength of "will." For Schopenhauer, the will is always the same -- for everyone -- all that varies is what knowledge the will has at its disposal. He's at his most inspiring (I think) when he talks about the "good" person. He says the good person looks at another person and doesn't see an impassable gulf of time, space, and identity, he or she recognizes himself or herself but for a detail of manifestation. Where the similarity is not recognized, the Hindus would say the "veil of *Maya*" is making reality look like the false world of appearances. In our culture, reincarnation is an absurd violation of causality. To others it's a useful way of thinking outside *Maya*. If I say "don't victimize that person, you could literally come back as that person," I would expect to be treated as an idiot, but I think such treatment is the result of a culture that has forgotten how to be awed by the mystery of consciousness without having answered any of the tough questions.

Kubrick faces tough questions, and he's willing to say "you don't really want what you think you want" in *Eyes Wide Shut*, which is not what Hollywood is supposed to say. It's supposed to say "what you want is a precious dream that bad people are trying to take away." If not for this sort of very gentle moralizing, can we have morals imparted to us at all? Are all morals terrible encroachments on our freedom? Considering historical evidence of the alternative, I think we should be open to a few morals! I think we need to seek human guidelines outside of our own impulses, which impulses always prove to be terribly faulty. I think the little interlude with the costume store owner deciding to pander is Kubrick making the point that something can be immoral even though everyone in the room seems to be happy about it. I think Kubrick knows we try to put distance between our business and anyone who is going to get hurt by that business (our eyes are "wide shut" to those who get hurt), and he's a skilled enough artist to do something about it.

Do you like Robbe-Grillet?

I don't think I know him, unless he sang "Strangers In the Night."

Have you ever read his later, more baroque novels *Project For A Revolution In New York* and my favorite, *Topology of a Phantom City*? If you haven't, I think you would enjoy

them. Also: do you like Pavement? I thought *Terror Twilight* was a beaut, and *Brighten The Corners* is also excellent.

Oh, but of course. Pavement are unfailingly terrific.

Matt Morris

I've enjoyed talkin' Schop

--Scott

Scott! Scott! Scott!

Scott: Hey, Jeremiah (Jeremiah Jeremiah); how are you?

A new album, but no appearance in Pittsburgh? And after I sat in an Amtrak all the way to Chicago and back to see you? And I've NEVER EVER done that for anyone before. I feel so hurt. Can't make it this year. (big heavy sigh) Maybe you'll put out a live recording for the rest of us poor losers?

As far as I knew, no one ever cared about the Loud Family in Pittsburgh, and already this year I've heard from two people. Had I known of this groundswell I could have alerted our booking agent.

New album is on order... can't wait! You are easily my favorite songwriter along with Ian Anderson, who's new album "The Secret Language of Birds" is, btw, quite good (but I've never traveled to see him).

I'm not worthy! Try as I might, if I'd put "snot is running down his nose" in a song, it would have sounded awkward.

I do hope you have a safe and successful tour, and the new recording does real well for you.

Jeremiah McAuliffe

Thanks!

all the best,

--Scott

April 3, 2000

Scott, I was chatting with a friend the other day and we both agreed that the '90s have been a virtual musical wasteland compared to the '80s (particularly 1980-85). We both

could come up with at least 300 great and essential releases from that period, but were hard pressed to come up with 200 from the nineties.

Scott: Really? I think of '80-'85 as a time where there was some music I loved intensely but in a somewhat unshared way; '91, '93 and '94 were more broadly respectable (Nirvana, Pavement, Teenage Fanclub, Liz Phair, Aimee Mann, Posies, Guided By Voices). Still, for sheer spirit-of-the-age, I wouldn't put either in the same league as 1965-69, or probably even 1977-78.

I wouldn't want to have to describe the cathartic power of psychedelic music in the sixties to someone who only knows it through a veil of (perfectly justifiable) ironic detachment, but maybe I'd start by having you picture your future adulthood as a time when you will very likely go to Vietnam, and die. This occasionally flares up to trouble you, but the world is strangely unconcerned, as if remote warfare were the plot of a movie everyone likes, and you don't follow it but you realize you are supposed to like it, too. The music of the sixties was there to say "no, you are not crazy; something is wrong with the system. The system is lacking in love, and you must wake up out of this system where when the system requires it, blacks and women are expendable, and you are expendable." Now, that quoted sentiment is a romantic myth, but one with a large intersecting region with truth. A romantic myth contains a false promise of freedom, but here real loss of freedom could be pointed to in the counterexample, and that has real force for music to play around with.

What's your take on this, and do you feel that there is hope for the future? I know that there are still many great bands to found out there, but unlike the '80s it's much more difficult to hear about them unless you're able to read massive quantities of fanzines.

Jack Fraser

I think music is in a certain amount of trouble. If someone loves music, he or she will find music to love, but someone looking for music to have cultural directedness is probably frustrated. What is happening in culture is that the myths are losing their power, and I don't feel we yet know how to relate well to the music of myths losing their power. Although in that category, there are some blazing successes which people *can* relate to -- the song "Rose Parade" by Elliott Smith comes to mind.

a ridiculous marching band started playing and got me singing along with some half-hearted victory song

--Scott

May 8, 2000

Scott, I'm a longtime fan and always wondered where you went to school (college). Some of your Game Theory lyrics mention UCLA, but you are SF based.

Scott: I wrote "Bad Year At UCLA" in 1981, when I was going to school at UC Davis, which is part of the same system as UCLA but located in the Sacramento valley. "UCLA" happened to

be better for the scansion of the line, so I used that -- it's also a big sports campus, hence widely recognized (compare "UCD").

Where do you work for a day job? Do you have a day job? It says you're a programmer.

As we would expect, IT is correct. I work as a programmer in C++ and now Java.

What do you think of Linux (and any related platforms; TurboLinux etc...)?

I like Linux for not being Microsoft, and anything TurboNotMicrosoft is even better.

How many more silly questions can I get away with asking?

Three.

What is your favorite guitar?

My current hollow-body Telecaster is probably the all-around best electric I've ever played. It stays in tune, and as with most Teles you get the right kind of payoff when you play hard. But I've frankly never picked up a guitar and thought "this one is far better than other guitars." A great guitar sound is more the result of fussing a lot with what the amp and the effects are capable of. You can sometimes use a terrible guitar to get a really ear-catching sound.

Do you (or have ever heard of) Roy Harper?

Anglophile that I am, I like him quite a bit; he is after all an intimate of both Zeppelin and Floyd! He writes sturdy melodies and he's an uncommonly intense lyricist. Like Julian Cope, he's developed that English eccentric's grudge against Christianity -- it's Stonehenge-where-the-demons-dwell loopy in the head, but it's inspired; none of your typical bourgeois irreligiosity-Lite of the sort Nietzsche lets loose on in entry 58 of *Beyond Good and Evil*. He has plenty of good less-heavy material, too. There's a song called "Home" which reminds me of (and rivals) Big Star.

Make more LOUD music,

Tracy Norton

A mildly disjointed and harmless fan.

thanks for writing!

--TurboHarmless

May 15, 2000

Scott, I've got a truly obscure question for you, but first let me say that I am wasting no time in getting prematurely alarmed by all this talk about the end of the Loud Family. Your music has been an endless source of enjoyment and inspiration for me, and the interview I had the pleasure to do with you (back in Santa Cruz!) a few years ago, along with the couple of times we've spoken at LF shows, have convinced me you know way too much about what you're doing and about making truly meaningful music to give it up anytime soon. But that said, I remember that I was pretty unnerved back when I first heard Game Theory was going to be morphing into this odd new thing called the Loud Family -- after all, I truly felt Game Theory got me through high school back in the '80s! But despite all my hand-wringing, it certainly worked out well, at least in the good music department. My only point: if you do decide to stay in the game, there are quite a few people who are willing to follow you into a new project or wherever you feel like going musically. Well, except maybe for tone poems...

Scott: Hi Steve. Good to hear from you! Thanks for writing.

I appreciate the encouragement. I actually have only limited experience asking people to follow me somewhere musically, and it's a nauseating, icy job. What most people would really thank me for, despite what they probably think, are the times when I've restrained myself and played the game like a good fellow. Ordinarily the entire process of making music, from top to bottom, is directed at getting the audience to like you, suiting its criteria for quality, and not being a brute with significance. It's mostly an illusion that there's any such mechanism as liking something because it's original. If I say "this is good," that means it's good *compared* to something, yet if I say "this is original," I ought to mean its value is in *not being comparable*. The two don't go together. In reality "this is original" probably means "I have some *model* for 'originality' (which is nonsensical) and this fits it" -- if a piece of music successfully imitates what people have associated with the avant-garde, or with what they have decided is exotic or off-putting, they'll often incorrectly call that "originality."

Now, I'm saying neither "let's all try harder to be original" nor "let's give up on ever being original." It's complicated. But to illustrate, I thought George Harrison was fairly genuinely original when he tried to include "Krishna consciousness" in songs -- there was no hidden shared context; it wasn't merely a sneaky imitation of something with the *cachet* of originality, it was something he truly felt deeply and his audience truly did not. Now, he probably got a *few* people interested in something related at the level of exoticism (maybe transcendental meditation), but if you want to see the reaction of a mind which is keen in the way you and I feel ours are keen, read Robert Christgau's lacerating reviews of Harrison's mid-seventies albums. You will see what we really feel about what I've called originality: we shriek that didacticism has been aimed at us; we openly loathe its audacity.

Okay, finally, here's my question, guaranteed to refresh with its pop culture-y goodness and child-proof obscurity seal: Is *Two Steps From The Middle Ages* some kind of tribute to "The Twilight Zone"? I always got a kick out of the "Room For One More, Honey" reference, and I think most people remember that episode.

You are correct, sir. It is a reference to that fine episode.

But isn't there an episode called "You Drive" as well? Like a guy hits a kid with his car, and his car sort of becomes his conscience and ends up driving him to the police station? Were both of these conscious references to Rod Serling's little masterpieces, and if so, are there more I missed?

The phrase "You Drive" didn't come from there, at least consciously. But if that's true, I like that coincidence very much. I think the writer (and/or you) was thinking along the same lines as I was.

These are the kind of freaky questions that should assure you -- if that's the right word -- that people will be poring over your work well into the year 3000 (when life as we know it will be animated by Matt Groening).

If mankind spends a thousand years pondering the meaning of "Room For One More, Honey," and someone discovers that the meaning is that it was a line from a TV show, I am afraid of things turning ugly.

That and the fact that CD copies of *Lolita Nation* seem to be going for over \$100 on eBay. I'm thinking of buying a security system for mine. If you've got a bunch of extras lying around, I swear you could finance your whole music career with them.

Thanks for your time,

Steve Palopoli

I thought for a long time I only had one copy of that, but I found a second in a shed when I moved. I'm trying to look at the high collector prices for that thing and find the good news for me as a recording artist, but it's hard to translate into any sort of strategy.

two security systems shy of peace of mind,

--Scott

May 22, 2000

Scott, from the liner notes (as well as the sound), it seemed like *Days For Days*' songwriting was more collective than on previous Loud Family albums. Is this regime likely to continue on the next album? Or will you retake the reigns of compositional power? Remember: "Strength alone knows conflict, weakness is born vanquished!"; some Russian said that, but I can't remember which.

Erich Vogel

Scott: This question is from 1999, so we'll skip forward and note that the collective songwriting continued more or less unvanquished.

I've never heard that quote and I'm a little slow assigning aspects of songwriting to their metaphorical counterparts in St. Petersburg under siege, except that I can sure picture Kenny in one of those hats.

Brothers Karamazov gonna work it out,

--Scott

Scott, shall I be honest? When I was in my 20s in the mid-'80s, Game Theory was a big deal to me. *Big Shot Chronicles*, in particular, was very special. In 1989 I went away to college, life changed, priorities shifted, contexts evolved. In short, I haven't listened to Game Theory since 1989.

On a lark, I just bought the latest Loud Family CD, and instantly remembered what I loved, and why I loved, Game Theory. I was excited by how vital your music still sounds. And obviously, I went searching the Net for Loud Family "stuff", and here I am. I read your music lists and was caught up in some nostalgia for the heady days of my early 20s. A time when the Berkeley Square was filled with Husker Du, Camper van Beethoven, Robyn Hitchcock, Dumptruck, Let's Active, Meat Puppets, Replacements, and the Minutemen. The Smiths and REM played the Greek Theatre. Those were fun and innocent days.

Like most of the folks I know, I am more jaded these days (for better or worse), but these are good days, too. I am happy to be looking forward to spending some of them with Loud Family music!

And by the bye...what's happening with Game Theory re-issues? Shouldn't some company like RYKO reissue them just as they have with the Meat Puppets?

Scott: Some of them were re-issued in 1993. I feel terrible breaking the news, but Game Theory is a much, much harder sell than the Meat Puppets, and this was the case even before Nirvana did two of their songs on an incredibly high profile live album. We're not such a chunk of alternative music history, and my singing is funnier. In a way a potential Game Theory audience has to be more open to something mainstream like Rush -- only when they listen to Rush, they're thinking "if only this sounded a little more like the Left Banke."

And lastly, I just saw Pavement this weekend (for about the 10th time since 1992 at the Kennel Club), and I just couldn't make up my mind whether or not I was still engaged with it. Most of the crowd seemed to have been born in the '80s, and I wondered if it was time to pass the torch on to the next generation. I couldn't help wondering if the band was wondering the same thing. Did you go? What do you think of the new album?

I haven't seen them but have always wanted to. They've always been sold out by the time I hear about the show. I'm pretty happy people born in the '80s are listening to Pavement. I think they're near the top of the scale of bands that have something musically valid to offer. It's kind of like Led Zeppelin. Led Zeppelin used to have a critical reputation for being thuddy, but their music was actually more varied and nuanced than almost anyone in the '70s. Pavement have the reputation for being tossed-off, which is a good point of mass

recognizability, but where there's a languid vocal delivery, or any end effect where the sound is casual rather than forced, serious listeners shouldn't confuse that with any actual laziness on the band's part at the time of writing the songs or making the record.

Okay...this note has gone from latent sentimentality to idle chatter. I think I'll hang up...

Dale Chapman

sweet Calcutta (crooked) rain,

--Scott

May 29, 2000

Scott, I've followed your music for 5 years now, and although like all fans of your music are a wee bit saddened at the thought of your recording contract ending and all that that implies, realise that sometimes for doors to open, other doors must shut (though preferably left ajar in the case of your songs!). May I venture that perhaps priorities are changing, and that makes the writing, rehearsing, recording, touring cycle more difficult to pedal (ha, excuse that terrible pun!). My priorities are changing, in that at 38 I am about to buy my first acoustic and start to write, play and sing.

Scott: That's great.

First, I just wondered what your past and current (if different) ideas were regarding age, dilettante-ism (is that a word?) and the songwriting process...

I used to think songwriters peaked at about 28, and I had no idea why, and now I guess I think it's partly natural to lose focus at a certain age, and partly natural for it to *seem* -- to a person who was my age when I thought it -- that writers lose more focus than they actually do.

It's very hard to just repeat the old successes, because pop music, being a young person's medium, is always impatient to get to a new style which will displace the old style, and after a while the audience may simply lose its ear for what you do. It also gets harder to put mature attitudes across to a young audience. You get some distance outside of the fashions of the young, the romantic and narcissistic notions that are *clearly* going to send them crashing into a wall, and you realize you can't do much about it. You don't want to just mount a campaign to spoil their fun. So you find yourself needing to do trickier surgery.

Dilettantism is an important asset to the world. Dilettantes don't worry as much about what I just talked about, and they don't worry about things like "a song is supposed to be for getting something across, but it's burdened with being a machine for generating fame and income" -- they just do the job. Without dilettantism, pop music would not have much life in it.

...and secondly, how such ideas might relate to the music "industry," particularly in terms of the industry's influence being diluted by the ever increasing value for money of home recording and the possibilities of MP3 and internet distribution channels. Tips for the young(-ish potential) player, if there must be a question mark?

At some level it spells better exposure for new artists, obviously, but it also may be that making pop music is stripped of its ability to glorify successful artists, which you have to figure would cause a lot of people not to try as hard. In fact, I'm starting to think more seriously that the shock of the future could be that all the systems for accruing prestige go haywire. Oscars, Nobel Prizes, New York Times book reviews, big record deals, mentions in the local paper, and a million other validating institutions may dissolve in a vat of web sites and email discussion groups, and people whose *religion* involves such things could reach a point of terrible disillusionment.

Thank you for your answer, and on behalf of all your New Zealand and Australian fans may I wish you and your family and friends the best of luck in all your future adventures...

Wayne Patrick
provisionally aka seedcake
Fremantle,
Western Australia.

Thanks very much for writing!

--Scott (provisionally a capella)

June 5, 2000

Scott, I have recently got into your second record. I think you should come to Scotland and play some gigs, so I guess I'd like to ask: any chance of a British tour (or you could just make it Scottish.

NANDRALADES

Scott: I'd love to play in Scotland, but ye cannae believe the shite I have to go through to get an overseas tour organized. It will probably happen one day, but I can't presently envision what is going to make the parties involved get serious enough to actually pick up phones and book dates. I thank you for the interest, though.

--Scot(t)

Scott, I'm a recent convert to all things Loud and Gamey. I rank The Loud Family/Game Theory as one of my top two musical discoveries of 1999 (the other is Badfinger).

Scott: Thank you very much! -- if we pop artists like anything, it's being discovered, and if it happens before we hang ourselves, that's the icing on the cake.

Out of all your songs that I've heard, I'd have to say "Baby-Hard-To-Be-Around" is my favorite (followed closely by "Even You"). I was wondering if you could shed some light as to what this song is about. Is it a literal tale of a girl obsessed with her new dolly, a dolly that turns out to be very different from what it initially appears to be? Is it a tale about a man who thinks he's in control of his girlfriend, only to find out she's in control of him? Is it a cautionary tale of teenage pregnancy? For the love of God, Scott, you've got to help me!!! This song has consumed every waking moment of my day.

The "tale about a man who thinks he's in control" etc. seems like a first class interpretation to me. In a way, though, I'm not much more qualified to say what's the "right" interpretation of my lyrics than I am to interpret other people's lyrics or poetry (not that there's any stopping me from doing that, by the way).

Also, I noticed two band I really enjoy didn't make any of your lists: Redd Kross and Enuff Z'Nuff. Do you have any opinions on their music? I noticed a similarity between "Jimmy Still Comes Around" and the Redd Kross song "Lady In The Front Row." Since *Plants...* and Redd Kross' *Phaseshifter* both came out in 1993, I assume there was just a "vibe" in the air and no one was nicking riffs.

Phaseshifter -- great record. I have it as #26 for '93, but my lists on the web page only go out to 20, I believe. Good year, '93; very tough competition. That record would have been top ten in some other years. I'll have to re-listen to "Lady In the Front Row" (FYI "Jimmy" was written in 1990, and I'm sure both our and Redd Kross's records were wrapped before the other came out).

I've never heard Enuff Z'Nuff.

Thanks for your time,

Tom (a man with ammonium laureth sulfate hair and an avid fan of seriousnesshouse guitar playing)

Ammonium laureth sulfate: the *other* white degreaser.

take up thy KROSS

--cautionary dolly

June 26, 2000

Scott: I'm excited to see that I have an Ask Scott from the Great One--her whose powers exceed my own even on this, the very Loud Family web site. It is a question from the Webmistress Herself. Strike, dear mistress, and cure his heart!

Scott, do you have any thoughts on the Napster controversy? Metallica recently filed suit against Napster on the grounds of copyright infringement by users of the company's software, and your pal Aimee Mann has also gone on record voicing her negative opinion

of the popular program. Not even you are immune -- a recent check showed that someone had posted *2 Steps from the Middle Ages* in its entirety, as well as a handful of tracks from *Lolita Nation*, and a couple of rarities that originated right here at loudfamily.com!

Do you feel that Napster and similar programs such as Gnutella help or hurt artists? On the one hand, it's possible that someone could decide not to buy *Attractive Nuisance* if they can grab the whole thing for free on Napster, but then again, Game Theory's CDs aren't for sale anywhere these days unless you're willing to pay \$50+ per disc on eBay, so perhaps the person who posted those tracks was doing your fans a favor.

Sue T.

Napster and I have two significant things in common. (1) major labels don't like us, and (2) we make our homes in San Mateo, CA. I go by the Napster building fairly regularly and am eerily drawn to it, a bit like the monkeys and the black monolith in *2001* (there is in fact a slight physical resemblance).

The Napster issue is knotty, and it touches on some important issues -- issues where I feel I'm used to seeing things get botched up through dismissiveness and oversimplification, so I'm afraid I'm going to have to give a long, heavy, boring, circumspect answer involving Kierkegaard.

I suppose the most important thing to say is that I don't want to see Napster *users* hauled into court. I'm in favor of finding ways to limit use of Napster, and I'm perfectly fine with people getting their Napster licenses yanked for infringing copyrights, but I'd want to talk the industry side out of spilling blood if I could. I'm not too happy with the amount of money Metallica wants from Napster -- it seems to me like they're doing too much of a war dance over this -- though it's possible I have faulty perspective when I see so many zeros in dollar figures.

Now, that said, I'd like to talk to the users about *their* duty not to spill blood. The pro-Napster argument goes something like "it's inevitable that copyright enforcement as we now know it will become impossible with Gnutella, so everyone should just get used to Napster." This is precisely the logic of the mob. "The police can't stop us from looting these Jewish shops now that fascism is insurgent, so everyone should just get used to fascism." The mob supersedes truth and falsehood (that is why Kierkegaard said "the crowd *is* untruth"). Consider: what would it have mattered if fascism *succeeded*? What if it was unanimously told that the rioters at *Kristallnacht* were heroes? Would that make it right, or at best morally undecidable? What if it's perfectly true that Gnutella will make copyright protection a thing of the past, and that if in fact the sooner it dies, so much the better for the vast majority of mankind?

Kierkegaard knew that from such success -- and it alone -- you can deduce its moral *wrong*. For the self to align with insurgency is to accept its truth as *the* truth -- to be absorbed into this machine for displacing truth, recasting it as an obsolete way of thinking. How could a Nazi tell the truth to his rioting compatriots? "We must renounce our common cause and grant these shopkeepers the dignity to price their wares." What, those smug, chiseling

shopkeepers? What a relic you are! "To preserve our humanity, we must let major label artists charge what they want and respect their copyrights." These price-gouging majors and their rich, out-of-touch artist lackeys? Your thinking is obsolete!

For what it's worth, I think the era of intellectual property, which I reckon for cultural purposes to be a few hundred years old, is probably starting to wind down. But we don't know what it means to live without it, and living without it will be a very big deal, so we should proceed with caution and humility, not giddiness, if we know what's good for us.

--Napinducer

July 3, 2000

Scott, this is kind of an Ask Scott and kind a plea to come down South. I love Loud Family and Game Theory, and people are always surprised to find out about such good music that they previously were totally unaware of. There is a community space/venue in Sarasota, FL that I would give my right arm to have you play at, if you can ever make it all the way out here.

Scott: I'd love to come play there some time.

My "Ask Scott" portion of this is: what do you think about the newer manifestations of indie/alternative music?

I don't know; do the Magnetic Fields and the Flaming Lips count as "newer?" Things at the college radio level feel a little low on inspiration to me. Electronica was sort of a cultural non-event for my money, though maybe the "rave" concept has real power if you're young enough.

Nothing could possibly be more depressing than MTV programming in 2000. I can say to myself "if I flip to the premier current music channel in America, I will see a white rap/metal guy doing hand-jive at a fisheye lens at ground-level" and usually be right. Aimee Mann is right that the average adult listener is strangely neglected by the music industry. If you're not a teenager and it just doesn't interest you to fantasize about being a messed-up tough guy, it will probably be deduced by the industry that what you want is to watch Human League videos.

Where did the name Loud Family come from?

Danny Wood

In 1974 (I believe that was the year), there was a PBS show called "An American Family," which made somewhat reluctant cultural icons of a Santa Barbara family whose surname was Loud. A film crew documented their daily lives over nine months, and when anything occurred that families in 1974 normally didn't publicize more than they had to (divorce, homosexuality), it became a scandal. I remember the press being decidedly unkind, tending to accuse PBS of deliberately selecting a troubled family, as if it were important to

stigmatize the Louds lest it be accepted that any family selected at random can be made the subject of scandal. No doubt if the press wishes to scandalize a family, it wants credit for a special and valuable discovery.

see also the Mumps' CD

--Scott

July 10, 2000

Scott, I feel a little embarrassed that my only question to you ever on this page is so prosaic, but : I have heard that you are thinking of not continuing with Loud Family after *Attractive Nuisance*, but that you will be doing a tour in support of it. We would so much like you to play in England again (missed you in 93) -- is there even the remotest chance?

Suzanne Beard

Scott: I definitely appreciate your being interested. It hasn't been officially pronounced, but my gout is flaring up in a way that tells me we probably won't be continuing the Loud Family. I hope I get a chance to play in England some time again under some circumstances; maybe if I'm ever on vacation there someone could set up a show ("right, we'll just ask the bands that draw to wait outside, so this fucking tosser who no one gives a fuck about can play his nice little songs"). If nothing else I *must* shop at least once more at Minus Zero. There has to be a copy of "Oh No, Won't Do" by Cud with my name on it out there somewhere.

mind the gap,

--S

Scott, I'm a Joyce enthusiast also. You are the only person I've met (several times at the Hotel Utah, and at a DuNord gig Alison did) who has also read the *Wake*. In your 1998 interview with ana m., you said, "I recently put *Finnegans Wake* at the top of my favorite novels' list and then thought dear God, what if people go out and buy it?" Why, exactly, do you think that would be a problem? It has to be among the funniest novels ever written.

Scott: Yes, but if someone picks up *Finnegans Wake* and just starts laughing hysterically, I'll be wanting to leave them to enjoy it *by themselves*. Let's say that if you thought *John Lennon In His Own Write* and *Ulysses* were both drop dead knee slappers, there's at least some chance *Finnegans Wake* is for you. For sheer (dark) humor that's as intellectually advanced and a whole lot easier, I'd probably go to Flannery O'Connor's short stories first.

To me the big *Finnegans Wake* payoff is in linguistics and the anthropology of consciousness. There's a critical work called *Joyce's Book of the Dark* which I thought made that case very well.

Having read Joyce, have you ever read the work of William Gaddis? I think he's everything literary critics claim Pynchon is supposed to be, but funnier and more interesting. I highly recommend *The Recognitions* and *JR*. As with Joyce, the books appreciate with multiple readings.

Tris McCall likes him, too, so I'll probably check him out. I'm still of a mind to give priority the classics (currently in Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*).

OK, here's the big question. I have a book of poetry coming out. Some of the poems have references to your lyrics. Will you bring in a big law firm or a small one to have it quashed?

Well, you know, poetry law is such a high-stakes arena, I can't make any promises. Congratulations on having a book of poetry coming out.

BTW, Alison & I used to work together at Green Apple Books, so you can find out from her what a tough litigant I am. Maybe we could duke it out at your Feb. 18 gig (just to generate publicity). I'll miss with my punches if you miss with yours. Deal? I think I'm coordinated enough to consistently miss. After all, I used to be a bass player.

As I remember I held up my end of that bargain.

Finally, I hope *Attractive Nuisance* makes Alias tons of money, and they re-sign you or someone nice out-bids them. I need new music from you in my life on a regular basis.

David Fox(x)

Thank you very much! I believe that album made over a hundred dollars.

mind, the gap

--Scott

July 17, 2000

Scott, it's an unavoidable frustration, I suppose, that as my interest in music continues to both deepen and broaden, I have less time/attention to devote to any particular album or artist. I've been thinking a lot about my listening habits lately, and since you are an important member of my sonic pantheon (and the only one likely to answer my e-mail), I thought I would ask you about yours (if it's not too personal).

When, where, how, and how often do you typically listen to music? Do you tend to spend a lot of time listening closely? Do you like to have it on in the background when you're paying attention to something else?

Scott: I should start by saying that music is necessarily a background concern, necessarily glorifying and contextualizing other aspects of life. That's why many religions fussily regulate music, and something to do with why Plato wanted to curb the lyric arts in the Republic.

It used to irk me that music by my native people the Californians was too often *about* something else, like surfing, skateboarding, dancing, dressing up, or whatever. Now I consider that a naive complaint.

Why do you listen to music? That may seem like a silly question, but I think people have a number of reasons: relaxation, stimulation, nostalgia, the desire to make a fashion statement, sociability, inspiration, mood alteration, etc. I'm sure you have multiple motivations, and different ones at different times, but I would be interested to hear your thoughts.

When I was young I was consumed by music, and when I wasn't making it I was listening to it, always interested in what made good music good. My favorite way to listen to music was while playing solitaire. I learned the habit from Nancy Becker. For me it ideally occupies the aspects of the mind that might otherwise rebel against focusing passively on sound.

These days I don't have that kind of spare time, and I'm not compelled by the possibility of music being my livelihood, so I listen more casually, usually while driving, paying bills, etc. I no longer listen responsibly enough to make lists of favorite music in the 2000s, for instance. Strangely, I don't listen to music any less passionately for any of that; sometimes I'll want to stand in front of the stereo and marvel at a great track. Maybe I can say that the spells I fell under are no less wonderful on reflection, but I don't fall under the same spells anew as if nothing of youth were special.

Do you tend to listen to an album repeatedly, or are you more of a variety/spice/life kind of guy? Do you listen mostly to new music, or frequently go back to past favorites? Do you listen to much music outside the pop/rock genre?

I'm one of those people who can listen to a song I like a hundred times and not get tired of it; old music is hardly ever less okay with me because it's old. Current pop/rock is also not as right for me as sixties-based pop/rock, though. I feel a boring speech coming on, but I'll limit it to saying pop/rock's charter used to be something like allowing the young and excluded to feel okay and have fun, and now it's far more focused on the retribution due the excluders, where the "fun" is at best ironic and at worst vengeful. The error is that no exclusion goes on consciously, or at least the exclusion getting a reaction is less brazenly self-serving than the reaction itself. An overused but clear illustration is the rioting at Woodstock III.

I listen to a little classical and jazz, but as nothing but a novice, and jazz is in some ways deliberately unhelpful to novices.

Finally, I'm interested in the way that listening interacts with the creative process. Since I got my first 4-track, I've been spending more time listening to and working on my own songs, at the expense of time devoted to others'. Since much of the process takes place in my head, I have gotten away from the habit of playing my stereo every waking minute I'm

at home. Does songwriting have a similar effect on your listening habits? Do you ever listen to particular music with the conscious intent of allowing it to influence a particular project? Do you ever listen to your own CDs after they've come out?

Before making every album I've forced myself to buy a batch of currently popular college radio CDs just to avoid getting too isolated. I listen to my finished CDs now with less anguish than in the old days. It's liberating not to think they stand a chance of competing successfully against other CDs for national attention.

I hope this barrage isn't too overwhelming. Feel free to pick and choose. And thanks for making the noise you make. The new album is much more "attractive" than "nuisance" in my book. I only wish there were some way the band could play closer to the center of the country. It's a doughnut of a tour and I'm stuck in the hole.

Only about 699 times happier than the unjust man,

Jon Tveite

Thanks very much for writing, and I hope I've been able to turn the untidy mystery and wonder of music into useful, clinical analysis.

writing about music is like dancing about music

--Scott

August 7, 2000

Scott, I've admired your music since 1985 when I bought *The Big Shot Chronicles* simply because the song titles sounded so intriguing. A grad student ca. '87-'89, I saw you twice in Iowa City and to this day make my wife's eyes glaze over every time I fail to convey your ferocious solo performance of "Erica's Word." I recently snagged a CD of *Lolita Nation* which, absent any foresight, I bought on LP in the '80's, and think your Loud Family work, including *Attractive Nuisance*, among the very best rock of the past ten years.

Scott: Thanks very much. Sometimes I wonder what it could be that someone likes about my music, when most labels would never think it's something they'd like to put out. I don't often guess right about what listeners whom I care about will consider a stylistic error, yet sometimes along comes someone like you thinking I didn't mess things up at all. Musical tastes are mysterious, and I respect recording artists who are masters of that business!

I infer from last week's "Ask Scott" that your Alias Records contact is almost up; can you be more specific about your plans? In response to the writer's P.S., I printed up the lyrics to *Attractive Nuisance* and thought that, among others, "One Will Be the Highway" and "Motion of Ariel" directly address your lack of career success. (Both beautiful songs, by the way). Have you framed *Attractive Nuisance* as your last album, or last Loud Family project?

Yes, then and now I think of it as my last album. Doing additional work damages the ability of future listeners to hear what I've already done. For example, almost all reviews of my albums now talk about how I've been slugging it out so long with little success, and the only way to cure that misunderstanding is to stop doing anything that has the structure of slugging it out.

I wasn't thinking about lack of career success when writing "One Will Be the Highway" or "Motion of Ariel" -- which is not to say it's beside the point. Lack of success makes for a clear understanding that I can't speak with authority to my listeners -- but that's progress, not cause for redoubling efforts. In the system of fame, if I earn authority, those giving it to me think "he is a great one, and by listening to him, we will learn what is good." But I am thinking "without their granting me authority, I am nothing, so I must carefully learn what they want me to say is good, and say that." On the surface (and for the young), this is not a problem. "Of course! That's called wanting you not to suck!" But there is unseen machinery working out what sucks and what doesn't, to which one is liable to object if one studies it carefully.

I hope not. A few years back, I was delighted when, waxing nostalgic over Game Theory to an ex-student, she told me about the Loud Family and I could once again look forward to your music. Whatever the form of future projects or any possible sabbatical, will you continue to write and record?

At the moment I don't think so. It would just be disappointing a few people around me rather than a lot of people, or later rather than sooner. But maybe I will one day come up with a new and better tactic for being both communicative and entertaining. You never know.

Good luck with the new CD and congratulations on your marriage. Will you play in New York or Baltimore this year?

Ned Balbo

Thank you! (NY si, Baltimore, no)

--ferocious Erica

Note: Ned Balbo is the author of a really terrific (Towson University 1998 prize for literature!) book of poetry entitled *Galileo's Banquet*.

August 21, 2000

Scott, this goes without saying, but I'm eternally grateful for the robust Loud Family/Game Theory catalog you've give us over the past two decades. Also, I love the new album and I've really enjoyed reading your Ask Scott responses and your ruminations on everything from Nietzsche to Girard to Roger Waters.

Scott: Thanks very much. I'm glad you like *Attractive Nuisance*, and emboldened by this I'll share with you what a weird job it is trying to make a record that people will think is good. I remember when just coming up with a melody I liked and words that I liked was this satisfying and successful act, and lately that just seems more and more beside the point of what anyone's interested in. Maybe I just used to be good at it and now I'm not, but I feel like I work the ol' magic like always, and listeners are standing there blinking and saying "why are you writing these depressing things?" "Why aren't there more experiments?" "Why do you still sound like the '80s?" Jesus, I don't know -- I was standing there ready to make one of my *good* albums like *Lolita Nation* or *Plants and Birds*, when I just impetuously decided to be tedious and out of date.

A couple quick questions: one thing I've never had the privilege to experience is a live LF show. Are there any plans in the works to release a live retrospective? I'm equally interested in hearing shows from the original '93 lineup as well as the great current ensemble.

I'm not sure any recording exists of that lineup. I think there a couple of decent 8-track recordings from 1995 and 1996, but I'm probably forgetting some. I'm a little afraid of live recording because my voice is so terrible sometimes, but you could probably selectively string a few tracks into something not totally devoid of merit. I know some people out there have some Game Theory tapes they're fond of, but generally I don't hear much I can listen to vocalwise.

Also, now that it's more or less a sure thing that the Loud Family chapter of your musical career will soon be coming to an end, what direction do you see yourself going in next? More specifically, I've always wondered if you've considered experimenting with more left-of-center forms like ambient and electronic music. Pop geniuses such as Peter Gabriel and Brian Eno have proven themselves quite adept at creating less commercial and more adventurous music. Ever considered it?

I sure can't think of much that Peter Gabriel has done that tempts me to use the word "genius." Maybe the song "D.I.Y."

As far as pop songcraft goes, I definitely consider you in their league, and more sonically adventurous tunes on the new release like "Controlled Burn" indicate you're capable of such departures...

Well, the "ambient" direction is practically an Eno trademark, for one thing. And thanks for the compliment, but the concept of my taking a less commercial direction is rather metaphysical even as a topic of conversation.

I'm sure I'd like to do another record one day, assuming I have reasonable support in that task, but I want to be careful not to do it just to be doing it, which is part of that sort of "addressing possibilities" attitude which I consider something of the down side of some of the music by people like Eno. I want to have more of a game plan for pleasing people than that, as unfashionable as that sounds.

Whatever the case, thanks for the many years/albums of excellent music. I hope I can catch the band on the upcoming tour.

JP Mohan

Thank you very much for writing.

--the paw paw caucasian blowtorch

September 11, 2000

Scott, I found this at a [Jeff Buckley web site](#), and I was wondering what your take on it was, in lieu of the recent dissolve of the Loud Family (sorry that it is so long).

Scott: ...I'd better cut a lot of this out so we don't infringe anyone's copyright...

"You're constantly trying to make sure that your sense of self-worth doesn't depend on the writings or opinions of other people. You have to wean yourself off acclaim as the object of your work, by learning to depend on your own judgment and knowing what it is that you enjoy. You have to realize what the difference is between being adored and being loved and understood. Big difference."

I know exactly what he means. Fame is probably the strongest de facto experience of the sacred that most people will ever get. What constitutes *the sacred* is a hairy topic, but if you've had close contact with a very famous person, and were left groping for a way to express how he or she was simply more *radiant* than an ordinary person, *that* is the sacred. Not a *developed* experience of the sacred, but the real thing.

The same general mechanism compels people to want to accrue fame. I'm a sufferer of this disease, and I know Jeff Buckley's need to separate the work from the acclaim. There are times and places when working ambitiously toward fame works cleanly, but it's usually it's a pretty polluting burn. Having to *fascinate* people is usually a bad business for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that if you're in the process of soliciting fame, you're by definition unqualified to relate to anyone as an artist. An artist's job is to relate the truth of experience, and if in fact what you're doing is selecting for which simulated experiential truth will *fly*, you will acquire the habit of replacing truth with schlock when schlock flies. It's not an absolute rule, but it is a real and insidious tendency.

One of my favorite social commentators, Gil Bailie, said that people will look back on our time and think it very odd that people *desired* fame. The unalloyed reaction to fame is not very close to good will. There's a strong element of currying favor, maybe. If a famous person walks into the room, we often suddenly want him or her to *like* us, and are ready to credit ourselves with being unusually friendly people, but if you break it down, we don't really worry much about the famous person's happiness. We think famous people already have what we want, and if we behave right, we'll get some of that. If a famous person makes some sort of public misstep, there's a feeding frenzy. Any cold and unimaginative put-down will be *gold* for comedians for a year; that is just life. The magic we take for good

will toward the famous turns into the magic of shared contempt in a way that should make anyone wonder what happened to our inflexible dedication, our *certainty* that the famous person *radiated* something of which we were compelled to partake.

I quote all this partly because it might have some bearing on the state of your music career right now, and also to ask you a question (or rather a series of questions). The questions are this: did you stop enjoying making music? Did it become too much work with not enough reward?

It stopped making sense as a business that takes a lot of time and money and doesn't earn money back. I may have to look to something like feudal patronage if I ever hope to do another serious project.

Or do you just feel creatively depleted at the moment, and feel like calling it off for now?

I have a project in mind which I *think* I'm going to get excited about, but there's just not the slightest doubt that people need a rest from me. I feel like I'm putting stuff down that should be knocking people out, and it's not. Like a lot of middle-aged rock people, I probably need to get smarter about what current music I try to resonate with, and what current music I refuse to do business with, because that's a huge part of how people relate to music whether I like it or not.

From some of your responses to this question, it sounds like you might be ready to hang your guitar up forever, with maybe occasionally playing for fun. Not that my opinion matters in this situation (or should matter as it is your decision to make), but I will definitely be sad to not hear any more Scott Miller recordings in the future, and I feel that I speak for many out there by saying this. I am just hoping that these words of Jeff Buckley (a talent who died before he could even peak musically) might help convince you (a talent whose career has been a series of musical high points with no signs of the inevitable descent) to reconsider. After all, you still have breath in your body, so please let us keep hearing it.

Michael Miller

Michael, thanks for writing. Believe me that I take this as encouraging and inspiring. I'm grateful for all the messages I've received lately, and I can assure everyone that I'm not bitterly rejecting music or anything. If my life goes such a way that there's a respectable opportunity to do a serious project, my heart will be in it! But I'm honestly not talking nonsense when I lay out reasons for not doing records under the present circumstances. I have to be conscientious about how a release will be received. I can't expend a thousand hours on something that doesn't have a pretty good deployment system -- meaning not that it's going to sell in malls, but just that it gets a reasonable number of people excited.

fifteen minutes of flame,

--Scott

November 13, 2000

Scott, Any chance you'll ever play in the UK again ?

F. Kowalczuk

Scott: Thanks for asking! I just don't know. Believe me, I'd love to. If I were on vacation there one day I could always pick up an acoustic, except that being label-less, I no longer have business ties to people who could set up a club date. "Hello, operator, this is Scott Miller. I need the number for playing my guitar somewhere in the country."

Reminds me of a Derek and Clive skit where Peter Cook is talking about addressing a letter to the BBC: "I just wrote 'C***s, London'; I knew it would get to them."

keeping that American boogie steamin' hot for ya

--Scott

Scott, I never heard of you before but it seems like Aimee Mann likes you so I'm gonna check out your stuff.

Plus I thought you seemed pretty cool by your high estimations of early Kinks and Who albums but I knew for sure when I noticed you dug the dB's.

Brad

Scott: Glad to hear it! I hope for new listeners' sake that history keeps scrupulous track of the dB's; I just consider their stuff rewarding as anything.

Hope you either liked our material or were able to avoid it without monetary loss.

--seemingly liked by Aimee Mann

November 23, 2000

Scott, it's not so much an Ask Scott as a Tell Scott, but man, I've been searching high and low throughout New York City, supposedly teeming with decent record stores, in search of LF's latest. And I'm having a rotten time of it. I don't know what's worse, not finding it, or the stares of record-store employees, blank and pitiless as the sun.

Scott: I am sorry you couldn't find that CD. The Loud Family message was always anti-blank-pitilessness.

I know I can buy it online, but it is goddamned distressing to not be able to get my very real hands on your very real latest release without involving ones and zeroes. This is New York! It's not like I'm in Hale Eddy (that's upstate, and i'm sure if you were an East Coaster, you'd have used it in a song by now).

Hale Eddy
You got the love I need
Maybe more than enough
Oh darlin' darlin' darlin'...

Something is just wrong with this picture.

Thanks for listening,

David Klein

Thank you for writing. So many things didn't quite click in my music career that no particular one irritates me anymore. What I do is somewhat inherently uncommercial (both my content and my not overly obvious vocal merit), and when I look back I'm a little astounded that so many people supported me. It's weird to reflect that there was a time when I would walk into a record store in London and actually be recognized -- a memory that seems oddly parallel to going into the same store as a teenager and being in awe of anyone who had a record on sale there.

So I'm thinking of everyone who bothers to read this on Thanksgiving.

come on pilgrim,

--S

December 18, 2000

Scott, "opera" is the plural of "opus," but I think the adjective has to match, which would make it "magna opera". (Editor's Note: Aaron is referring to the March 20, 2000 Ask Scott.)

Scott: Hi, Aaron! That is outstanding. When one sees "Harvard" in the email address, the mood is set for Latin adjective agreement, and here is no disappointment.

That's not my question, though. What I want to know is, where were the side breaks going to be in the vinyl *Interbabe Concern*? It always seemed to me like the feedback squall at the end of "Top Dollar Survivalist Hardware" belonged at the beginning of a song (or perhaps a side) rather than at the end, but, well, you tell me.

Aaron Mandel

You are right. Side two was supposed to start with the same synthesizer sound (not feedback, actually) as side one. Side? Sequencing seems to have less meaning all the time, doesn't it? Soon we will press a button that causes us to instantly know a piece of music in its entirety, and we'll be able to just hold the button down until we want to stop thinking about it. After that, music knowledge cancellation software! A market for which is not farfetched even now.

I do wish *I. Con.* had come out on vinyl -- the packaging was nice, and the LP had that cool groove-cramming just like *Get Happy*. Then again, I've had two of my records mastered by Bob Ludwig in one lifetime, which is definitely more media karma than one little person deserves.

medium karmus,

--S

ASK SCOTT

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

2001 (Year 5)

January 15, 2001

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

Waxing narcoleptic and waning insomnic,

Jack L.

Scott: Hi, Jack! Thanks for writing.

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

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

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

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

--Scott

January 22, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eric Vogel

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

--Essinem

February 5, 2001

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

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

John G. Norman

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

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

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

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

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

keep thinking too hard,

--Scott

February 12, 2001

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

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

Anyway, two questions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

best wishes in whatever you're doing now,

[Pixie](#)

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

--thwarted lobster

March 5, 2001

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

Scott: Thanks very much.

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

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

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

This brings me to my questions:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thanks again for a great record!

Hailey

thank you again, care of cell 44,

--Scott

March 26, 2001

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

Scott: A dodgy old thank you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Can't say I have. Will watch for.

The Prune

Some base their claims

on tang alone

but i prefer a fruit that does a job

(Robert Shure)

Joanna Jackson

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

--Prune-Tang Clan

April 2, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

Slouching toward Tempe,

Jeff Owens

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

--power pop's answer to Sebastian Cabot

April 9, 2001

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

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

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

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

Or were there some early eighties vices involved?

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

A long time fan,

Mike Fuller

Great to hear from you, Mike!

--the wild pitcher

May 7, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now there is a disturbing thought.

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

Cagliostro

the overwritten

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

--Rod Surly

May 14, 2001

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

Mike

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

daddy isn't here, Mrs. Torrance

--Scott

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

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

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

Brianna

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

Erin go Bolshevist,

--Scott

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

Todd Sherman

Scott: Ytray ookinglay on ebay.

--piglatino

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you for your time.

Ira Rosen

Thanks a lot for thinking of me/us.

--Poe

May 28, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dennis Sacks

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

--Marquis de Clade

June 4, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John

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

--hermeneut munster

June 11, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

I'm blushing!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thanks for the music,

Chris Perry

weird = normal,

--Scott

June 18, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Johnny Turner

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

thanks much for writing

--Einstein-on-the-Beach Boy

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

Cryptically yours,

Rob Disner

Scott: Hey, Rob, thanks for writing.

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

oh, baby, I got ketchup on Chris Stamey,

--Scott

June 25, 2001

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

James Hopkins

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

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

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

Anyway, start your own site and make it good!

--PoMo swill

July 2, 2001

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

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

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

A fan for 13 years that never knew your name,

C. Rohman

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

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

--nonMasi star

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

shalom uvracha,

Bar Sela

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

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

manov lamancha

--Scott

July 9, 2001

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

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

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

Tina Roberts Cannon

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

fond regards,

--'Mentos

July 16, 2001

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

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

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

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

Tom Galczynski

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

--Scott

July 23, 2001

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

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

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

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

Ken Jasch

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

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

--Scott

July 30, 2001

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

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

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

What gives?

Richard Cusick

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

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

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

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

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

--Scott

August 20, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sword Swallower"

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

"Idiot Son" (I love the lyrics.)

"Inverness" (A great song)

"Isaac's Law"

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

Carl Brannen

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

we are the Mink Hollow men,

--Scott

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

Chris Perry

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

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

September 3, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's Millertime,

Alex Knox

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

please, Carter, don't hurt 'em

--Scott

September 10, 2001

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

Scott: I'm much obliged to you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sincerely,

Mark Portier

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

randy for antique,

--Scott

September 17, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mike Hogan

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

thanks for a nice email,

--Screedchbox

October 8, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

Teresa M. & Megan W.

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

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

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

sounding extremely redundant (intentionally!)

--Scott

October 15, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

David Werking

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

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

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

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

thanks for writing,

--Scott

October 22, 2001

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

Sean MacMillan

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

here come old laptop

--Scott

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

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

Andrew Hamlin

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

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

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

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

--odd Job

October 29, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bruce Scanlon

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

Bonzo doesn't *even* go to Hollywood,

--Scott

November 5, 2001

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

Thanks,

Philip Welsh

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

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

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

Still in time for carolers to start arranging!

--sister sludge

November 12, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A big fan in the cold, wet North,

Corey Smith

thank you very much for writing

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

November 19, 2001

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

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

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

Bill Carmichael

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

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

hypothetical freshman consolation,

--Scott

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

Bil Orland

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

--hasbean

November 26, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Best regards,

Tom Galczynski

Thanks for a very thoughtful message.

--Aimless Man

December 3, 2001

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

Scott: That line is the perimeter of the stall.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Can't say as I know the lady.

Frank from Jersey

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

--young fresh fellow (ret'd)

December 10, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Best wishes from Berlin

Your "Pen-Friend," *Bendrik Muhs*

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

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

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

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

ich bin Irving Berlin,

--Scott

December 17, 2001

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

1. What are you most thankful for?

Scott: My wife Kristine. Awww!

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

Medium Christmas, pretty big plastic tree.

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

I believe it is Douglas plastic.

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

I would call everyone religious.

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

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

Target marketing gets me HOT.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anyhoo, back to algebra.

All the best during the holidays,

David Werking

thanks for writing and writing, David,

--Screaming Lord Algebra

December 31, 2001

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

Scott: Sorry for the surreal delay in replying.

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

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

Thanks; I'll watch for Larry McMurtry.

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

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

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

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

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

Have you ever failed to write a song?

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

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

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

Thanks,

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

thank you, pain webber

--Scott

ASK SCOTT

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

2002 (Year 6)

January 14, 2002

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

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

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

Bill McKinley

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

from the protocol harem

--Scott

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wishing I were cleverer,

Ken

wishing I were kissing to be cleverer,

--Boy Georgeless

January 28, 2002

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

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

Scott: Thank you!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Looking forward to whatever comes down the Miller pike,

Grahame Davies

thanks, I do value the encouragement,

--Goo Goo Dali

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

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

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

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

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

Sincerely,

Tom Pierno

I am in your debt for such a flattering message.

thanks much for writing,

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

February 4, 2002

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

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

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

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

Anything new to recommend?

eRacerX

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

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

February 11, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

***Mick Kinsey*
Wolverhampton, England**

Don't worry. America will never make such unstrategical use of our nuclear arsenality.

my coat is shining after switching to YUMMY SNIPPETS,

--Scott

February 25, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dana Claycomb

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

--Angstrum

March 4, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gregg Conover

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

just plain sticks in my head,

--Scott

March 18, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mark Portier

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

waiting for Goodo,

--Scott

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

Lisa Letostak

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

Thank you for writing.

WHAT IS IT NOW, MOTHER?!

--Scott

April 1, 2002

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

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

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

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

Rick Ness

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

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

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

--Scott

April 8, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So punny it Hz,

Frequency Kenneth

Thanks for writing, Ken!

--Super Freq

April 15, 2002

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

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

Scott: Bill, thank you very much.

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

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

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

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

Bill Belt

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

Oh...

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

--Scott

April 22, 2002

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

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

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

Best,

P-Bob (Photo Robert)

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

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

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

1. Jonathan Segel played about three times as much violin and guitar on "Why We Don't Live In Mauritania" and "Sister Sleep" as actually made it into the final mix. He essentially laid a bunch of tracks down and said "use whatever you want," and it would have taken an extra day or so that I didn't have to work out a more liberal selection of combined tracks such that the arrangement still hung together. But his tracks were all great. "Sister Sleep" in general was too hard a mix to do in a half day, or whatever it was we had. It's really about four songs in one.

2. On the first three tracks, we tried to get more coherence than we attained with the false-start versions of the same song. The third one is the most perfect (the mix Tim Walters did), but the problem became how to start with the same energy, then build up from there. I didn't really nail that mixing task.

3. The guitar sounds were not as first-rate as they were on *ICon*. Again, it was just a matter of having an extra hour here and there just fiddling with the pedal settings vs. the amp settings vs. the pre-amp and mixer EQ settings. You can get a good enough sound by just throwing a mike in front of the amp and playing like you do live (some sessions I've done, e.g. *Kickball* by the Impatients, seem like there's no such thing as getting a bad guitar sound), but there's usually a golden combination of tweaks in there somewhere where you get a really satisfying range of life in the transients and whatever distortion overtones are going on. Some of the *DFD* guitar parts got in that pocket, and others I think just aren't really pulling their weight in the mix.

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

Days Ex Machina,

--Scott

April 29, 2002

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

John Steele
Palo Alto, CA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you very much for writing.

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

--Scott

May 6, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

G.L.

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

--the displaced person

May 20, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thanks for staying in touch thru the website.

**Best,
Brian Neumann**

Thanks a lot for writing.

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

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

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

2000

BACHELOR NO. 2 - Aimee Mann
TONIGHT AND THE REST OF MY LIFE - Nina Gordon
MP4: DAYS SINCE A TIME LOST ACCIDENT - Michael Penn
17th CENTURY FUZZBOX BLUES - Anton Barbeau
GUEST HOST - Stew
MASS ROMANTIC - The New Pornographers
DE STIJL - The White Stripes
HOWDY! - Teenage Fanclub
FOLD YOUR HANDS, CHILD, YOU WALK LIKE A PEASANT - Belle and Sebastian
THIRTEEN TALES FROM URBAN BOHEMIA - The Dandy Warhols
RED LINE - Trans Am

2001

TOUCHED - Ken Stringfellow
NICE CHEEKBONES AND A PhD - The Posies
GARDEN ABSTRACT - Belle da Gama
TVI - Yuji Oniki
REVEAL - REM
OH, INVERTED WORLD - The Shins
THE TYRANNY OF DISTANCE - Ted Leo/Pharmacists
IS THIS IT - The Strokes
THE WORLD WON'T END - Pernice Brothers
WE ARE ALL BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE - For Stars
WEEZER - Weezer
I'M WAKING UP TO US e.p. - Belle and Sebastian

talk of tomorrow has spoiled the gathering,

--Scott

May 27, 2002

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

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

Scott: Hi, David; thanks for writing.

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

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

David Werking

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

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

free Winona,

--Scott

June 3, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

Robert B. Disner

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

thank you for writing in,

--John Lemming

June 17, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

behind you with a tape recorder,

Steve Holtebeck

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

does anybody remember laughter?

--Scott

June 24, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

Dave-O (David Werking)

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

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

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

Thanks for writing, Dave-O.

turning once more to Sunday's clone,

--Scott

July 1, 2002

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

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

Sue Trowbridge

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

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

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

regretfully,

--debassed

July 8, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I tend to agree with that.

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

Please consider the request, and thanks.

Jack Gorski

Thanks for writing, Jack.

--Baba Aurelius

July 22, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Robert Rossney

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

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

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

I AM IRONY MAN,

--Scott

July 29, 2002

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

G.L.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

use new EMITEX record cleaner,

--Scott

August 5, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

Tom Galczynski

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

--Scotto e mezzo

August 12, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Diana Foss

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

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

August 19, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ain't Too Proud To Beg,

Mark Portier

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

baby tongues look just how they felt,

--Scott

August 26, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Phil E. Young

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

unpopular, overground, dependent,

--Scott

September 9, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anyway, hope all is well,

Nick Kelly

Thanks much for writing,

--Whiny the Elder

September 23, 2002

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

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

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

I said reading Gans and others makes you wonder "whether you are so much meant to share in *any* knowledge, as to understand that in the past, sharing of knowledge has been flawed, and before we can share knowledge properly, hard technical repair work must be done to the machinery." I like Derrida, but part of my unlearnedness causes me to think of Derrida's great influence as a kind of bridge troll for academic writing: you have to pay the troll by qualifying your text against "logocentrism" and "totalization" and a host of other totemic buzzwords I don't find meaningful enough for their proliferation, and I credit what I call this "repair work" on the "sharing of knowledge" with obfuscation -- contributing, e.g., to Gans being quite a bit harder to read than Plato or Nietzsche.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

all kindsa sincere,

L (in NZ as it happens!)

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

we put the GANS in *FINNEGANS WAKE*,

--Scott

October 7, 2002

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

Scott: Gigathanks!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Janet Ingraham Dwyer

Thank you so much, Janet.

--Julius Seizure

October 14, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ken Binner

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

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

--Scott

October 28, 2002

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

DaveO

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

thanks for visiting www.westernreligion.org

--Scott

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Your loyal fan in the sticks,

Marcus Verhaegh

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

thanks for writing and best wishes,

--Surfer Rosa Parks

November 18, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Patty Cottrell

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

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

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

--Middleage Fanclub

November 25, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

--Scott

December 2, 2002

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

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

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

Thanks,

Judi Winn

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

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

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

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

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

--Scott

December 16, 2002

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

Don Adler

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hairy krimble,

Steve G.

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

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

fast and silly, the Mascara Snake!

--Scott

ASK SCOTT

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

2003 (Year 7)

January 6, 2003

Scott, I came across your site while looking for Uriah Heep mentions. What's with the reference to Mick Box of Uriah Heep?

Kevin J. Julie

Scott: Some sort of mistake. I've never heard any Uriah Heep and couldn't name any members -- although I enthusiastically support the name Mick Box.

Scott, I had only ever bought & heard *The Tape of Only Linda*, *Interbabe Concern* and *Days for Days*. I had heard somewhere (in this forum maybe?) that every other release by the Loud Family was hands down brilliant, but not the reverse.

Oddly, very very oddly, I find this to be true. If you don't mind a bit of critical wankery, *The Tape of Only Linda* seemed a bit too Roxy Music-drenched for me and somewhat scattershot (though "Soul Drain" is on heavy rotation in my car stereo & is on the short list of best Loud Family songs I can quickly name).

Scott: There is such a thing as being too Roxy Music-drenched?

In contrast: *Interbabe Concern* is an album that people will still be writing about decades from now. And *Days for Days* seemed ambitious as anything, but a little weak in places. I give it high marks but, frankly, I don't return to it much.

Last month I just found *Plants and Birds* at a Local Large Retail Chain Conglomerate (only 11 beans!). I bought it (because I've learned to buy anything you do, basically) and took the shrinkwrap off and played it....

It is one incredible disc. It is a disc for all ages.

Thank you very much.

What do I like about it? It is hard to pin down, but I think in some ways it shows very clearly how you are rock's answer to -- forgive this comparison -- Orson Welles. You deftly juggle any mood or style around by merely flexing your fingertips, and your flair for orchestration, multi-layering, is untouchable. You are a perfectionist at the service of real emotion. Hats off.

I have not bought *Attractive Nuisance* yet, but clearly (based on the formula) it should be good.

Not a bet I would make, although it's hard for me to predict the ongoing likability of those Loud Family albums if only because I think of them all as so utterly synonymous with audience disappointment. To speak only of college radio, once my strong area, I think *Plants and Birds* and *Interbabe Concern* peaked at numbers 60 and 95 on CMJ respectively, compared to even a not-very-well-loved Game Theory album like *Two Steps* which was still top ten. And it's not that Alias Records couldn't do college radio, either -- I think Archers of Loaf were number two when *Interbabe* was number 95. So maybe my honest impression is that *Plants and Birds* was just the right album for about a hundred people in the universe including you, *Interbabe* for about fifty people, and *Attractive Nuisance* for about seven people. So while I don't think you will actually like *AN*, I will say for the record that despite a mixing/mastering regret or two, it's still what I want the lyrics to be saying and how I want the music to be sounding (probably ditto for what you consider the weak aspects of *Days For Days*, unless you're thinking things like "he should have sung that word without a rasp" or "the EQ and reverb in the middle section of 'Sister Sleep' aren't very good").

Having said all that, my question is: do you like any Lilys albums? For some reason I tend to put you and Kurt Heasley on the same velvet-draped pedestal (i.e., perfectionists at the service of real emotion).

trent d. (creates diversion, then lobs in real question)

I've only heard *The 3-Way*, and I think it's a terrific album. The song "Socs Hip" is a classic.

now in Lee Abrams's service,

--Scott

January 13, 2003

Scott, this isn't really a question -- just a couple of comments:

1. In your July 8, 2002 "Ask Scott" you state, "What is most fragile about it is that when our intellectual mainstream puts its rational, philosophical hat on, it comes to the conclusion that our moral bases are arbitrary. If I were to write a book, it would be on something like the proper basis for a viable modern Western morality." A book has already been written on this, namely *After Virtue* by Alastair McIntyre. I'd send it to you if I had your address, but I haven't and I suspect there should be bookstores in your neck of the woods which could get it. If not, send me your address by return e-mail, and I'll send you my copy.

Scott: Thanks for the tip -- but do I take it you mean you think McIntyre did a good job? I'm aware that there have been attempts, but none that I have read or been told about that seem to focus enough of the scholarly resources I know to be available in taking a systematic crack at the task.

2. In your most recent "Ask Scott" you refer to yourself as "Whiny the Elder," in what you think is a reference to Pliny the Elder (I think); but Pliny rhymes with "whinny". With "Whiny"? Neigh... enough for the horselaugh here.

Actually, I knew that. Not that I've read Pliny, or that ever since prep school I've naturally anglicized my classical references in perfect Oxford manner. Like all pseudointellectuals, it's my fate to get laughed at more than I get laughed with, but because of the frequent opportunities for embarrassment, if there's anything my sorry ilk do right, it's accrue preferred pronunciations. If your short-lived forte were erring primers on Pepys and Dvorak, you would weep at the beauty of my saying this out loud. Maybe it's just me, but it won't detract from a Van Gogh pun (in the unlikely event that there's something to distract from) that I know half the room is ready to slap the offending hand and say "f'n *gucch!*"

I've enjoyed your bands over the years, and have kept my CDs and cassettes. As soon as I can, I'm going to make archival copies of the cassettes -- until then, they aren't getting played. Oh well.

Enough for now.

Hudson Luce

Thanks very much for writing.

It stands for "urban haute bourgeoisie"...

--Scott

February 3, 2003

Scott, first of all, thanks for putting out *From Ritual to Romance*. Having seen you guys live just once as Loud Family (and a few times as Game Theory), it's awesome to have a CD to keep those great evenings fresh. Must say, to this day I think your work is the most overlooked, underappreciated collection of ground-breaking music ever. When asked to list my all-time favorite bands I respond with 1) Husker Du, 2) The Pixies, 3) Game Theory/Loud Family. To which I invariably get a "What theory?" It used to piss me off, but now I immediately use the open door to lend the uninformed cohort a tape or CD and in a matter of days they're off scouring for CDs for their own collection.

Scott: How generous of you, all around! I certainly appreciate it, and I'm glad to hear the material gets a positive reaction. I have moods where I feel pretty good about what we've put out and think my bands deserved more success, and other moods where I think I'm one of the most inept people ever to get fairly widespread attention doing music.

Again, thanks for writing such amazing music. Just wondering, are there any Game Theory live recordings, and are you currently working on any projects I might be able to find?

Norb

There are some live recordings of Game Theory floating around out there. My friend Dan Vallor did a pretty good mix of what I believe is the second to last Game Theory show in Vancouver, B.C. There seem to always be nebulous plans to release or re-release certain things, but it's rare that they pan out. Alias were going to do a Game Theory box set and I know they had some live recording or other that they were going to add to it, but they ended up only releasing three of the albums. I'm still amazed that *From Ritual to Romance* actually made it out.

One project I'm fervently hoping gets finished is an album of quasi-acoustic versions of my songs with Aimee Mann and her guitarist/ producer Michael Lockwood (who's an incredible talent in his own right). It's about half recorded, but of course she's a pretty big star these days and we need to find some time to finish it that works within her touring and recording schedule.

Oh, another one of these things that *may* come out is a DVD of footage shot by indie film whiz Danny Plotnick of the last Loud Family tour in 2000.

thanks for writing!

--Frumpton comes alive

February 17, 2003

Scott, with artists like Joan Jett and Joe Jackson making their material available by selling albums in MP3 format on their websites, perhaps the out-of-print Game Theory recordings could generate more profit for you (or someone you know) by being sold in this manner too. Would you consider this an option that could be achieved in the not-as-of-yet-but-maybe-next-Thursday future?

Scott: I don't own the Game Theory masters, so, no. There might be a higher than usual probability of some out-of-print Game Theory stuff getting another run in the near future, but there's still thicker uncertainty than I can see through at the moment.

(And now for the free psychological counseling portion...) Secondly, is it unhealthy for me to be so fixated on these matters in the first place? Does the research suggest that albums which held enormous importance for me in 1987 or 88 still having personal relevance today indicate I've failed to grow as a person and get beyond the experiences I underwent at that time to become a more fully developed human being?

I like to think not, and I appreciate someone being concerned about it; it's the kind of important question people don't generally seem to feel the need to expend much work answering.

Being a "fully developed human being" too often just takes the form of getting older, and gravitating toward sympathies and philosophies which are advantageous to older people. Developing as a human being should always mean being less anxious to achieve personal success and happiness relative to what others achieve. That can go against the grain of

human nature, but it's amazing how much less absurd the universe becomes as such an outlook becomes internalized; true development beyond youth can't (slightly paradoxically) involve disowning youth.

Let's say I used to like "Anarchy In the U.K." by the Sex Pistols, but now I'm old and, with any luck, more unhappy with spiteful lyrics like "I want to destroy passersby." I don't think it's effort well spent to mentally distance myself from my previous enthusiasm for the song. I think it's good to preserve the ability to enjoy the visceral power of the song (with maybe a bit of social prudence when it comes to handling such power with care), and to appreciate that art can be good because it expresses how people feel as well as for higher achievements like adding perspective which will change how we feel. Denying youthful, embarrassing tastes too much in a misguided attempt to falsify to ourselves what we were in the past has unfortunate consequences: we exaggerate our current immunity to bad impulses; we distort the standards of taste and behavior to which we expect young people to adhere naturally, without anyone's help.

So while I wouldn't recommend cultivating the attitude that how you fit into the past is worth dwelling on yet how you fit into the present is not, I applaud continued openness to the reality of past passions -- the willingness to be that passionate person plus some perspective, not that person minus the passion. It leads to civility. We can see passions in others which we might consider misguided, and more reflexively realize they have a place in the world, and might be treated with gentleness rather than suppression.

Finally, could you record a version of "Walk Away, Renee," place it in an airtight bottle, and set it adrift in the Pacific Ocean in the hope that it may travel around the world to be discovered purely by coincidence on a beach on the east coast of Canada where I just happen to be walking along?

I will try to play a version of "Walk Away, Renee" in San Francisco on the 29th of March, and if it's recorded and bottled, let Canada beware.

Peace,

Kevin Wakelin

Thanks much for writing, Kevin.

this is your war, this is your war on drugs; any questions?

--Scott

February 24, 2003

Scott, here's what I've been wondering: Until very recently, you wrote songs on a pretty regular basis for all of your adult life and then some. I get the impression that you write the way Randy Newman does -- namely, that you sit down and will yourself to come up with songs whenever there's an album to be made or a deadline to be met (instead of

being like, say, Robert Pollard and writing entire albums while stuck in traffic). Still, I'm guessing that it's also become somewhat second nature -- that whenever something moves you either emotionally or intellectually, you'd naturally channel that into a lyric or a melody. So now that you're (temporarily, we all hope) retired, what do you do with the energy that used to go to songwriting?

Scott: Brett -- it is always a great pleasure to hear from you.

And: good question. I used to be somewhat infatuated with the idea that I was skilled as a songwriter, and felt writing was part of the holy process of increasing my fame. These days I'm sufficiently disabused of the impression that I owe it to us all to battle for a place in the music business that I don't just reflexively dump a bunch of energy into a song idea anymore. The ideas still come regularly enough, but now the reflex is to just count to ten and go do something useful, like my laundry. If it's a particularly stupendous idea, I'll record a little piece and jot down a lyric.

Let's say for the moment that despite popular consensus I'm a worthwhile artist, and despite even minority consensus my later material is exciting and worth following. I sort of have to hope that enough people miraculously arrive at that conclusion to even pretend that the pop music deployment mechanism is worth my cranking it up again on what will be *even later material*. W.H. Auden can write later poetry that people think is disappointing until 25 years after he's dead when they start to get it, but the kind of arty pop music I do just isn't going to have an audience of any kind unless it's part of some kind of ephemeral, fad-thinking at some level -- let's not kid ourselves.

But to answer your question, I find that the songwriting energy is in fact resulting in laundry that is better folded, and less frequently overdried.

If some great hook should pop into your head, do you store it away anywhere or let it go back into the ether? A lot of us former college DJs have developed that conditioned response where you start back-announcing the records you play in your own living room, and I was wondering if there's an equivalent of that for songwriters.

I guess I have a good laugh, like: a hook! Oh my goodness, how quaint. My, but the music world has walked with a purpose away from anything remotely resembling the world of pop hooks as I imagined it.

This is also an excuse to say hello and send an overdue thanks for all the music (especially that last LF show at TT's, which for all the frustrations of that tour, was probably the best I ever saw you play).

Cheers,

Brett Milano

I had a great time at that show, too. Thanks for coming, Brett, and thanks for writing.

Romance? Not in this weather. [--Auden, "Plains"]

--Scott

March 3, 2003

Scott, don't write any more songs if you don't want to, but I submit that it's time for you to stop insulting those of us who know you're a great musician, especially since we're the only ones reading your Ask Scott answers to begin with. Do you seriously think anybody believes you wrote songs hoping to be Bryan Adams or Vangelis? You better not. And this crap about your music's only justification being membership in some fad? Did you have your self-esteem accidentally amputated?

Scott: Thanks much for the message. I am a big fan of your writing.

I seem to have achieved an apparent crescendo of self-pity last week that truly grated on some nerves.

I've still got it!

I'll reassure everyone reading this that I think awfully highly of my bands' recordings, and I'm also convinced that some of my results are good in a way that is tied up with most people not knowing what to make of them. And certainly I'm very grateful to the people who have shown me enduring support, and I know that includes many people reading this!

I didn't make my meaning clear about the "fad" business. I don't think the only justification for my music is membership in a fad. I think the justification is the communication of my feelings, the exploration of human nature as I see it, and the shaking of groove things, and those are fine justifications. What I'm saying is that if I'd happened to decide one day years ago that my medium of expression was to be doo-wop music, doo-wop's going out of fashion as a fad forever would have probably spelled a fatal squandering of my efforts. Unfortunately, getting pop music across depends a lot on being in the right place at the right time for the tender ears of the mob, and my efforts to isolate and win an audience which would somehow spell viability have been -- statistically -- disappointing.

As for Bryan Adams and Vangelis, it is my sad duty to inform you that I had every intention of reaching that level of popularity, cannily inducing millions of people to listen to music more like the way I listen to it.

Listen: you are great. Really, really great, and it's not your prerogative to disagree with me or the rest of us. There's no reason that should bear on your music making or lack of it in one way or another, but it should bear on how you answer these emails. Your self-deprecation has crossed over into a bizarre inverse egotism.

Stubbornly yours,

glenn mcdonald

Thank you so much -- consider me encouraged. It would be easier to express myself in these matters if everyone had the experience of putting out nine or ten albums over a twenty-year period. Eventually there is a note you didn't used to hear, or at least you didn't know you'd ever dislike, in the reception of the releases, along the lines of "here is his latest attempt to please us; how has he done?" And you think, no, that's not it anymore. You want people to ask -- and you begin to understand it's not going to happen -- "what is he bringing to us that we don't *expect*, in advance, to want to hear?" You discover that the only way to produce something that will be taken as innovative is to stealthily imitate another work which has recently been taken as innovative, and never, but never, to actually innovate. God bless punk rock, but ever notice how a hundred alarmingly similar 1977 punk albums can be taken as simultaneous out-of-nowhere bolts of original expression?

maudlin lang,

--Scott

March 24, 2003

Scott, I was looking over my old True Gamesters newsletters from about 1990 and found the one where you listed your 120 favourite records. It's an interesting document that inspired me to get a lot of the albums you ranked. What would a list of your 120 favourites look like today? I'd particularly like to see how many Nineties and Naughties releases would make the list and what old favourites would be shunted to the hinterlands. If you don't want to take up valuable Ask Scott space, maybe you could put the list with your year-by-year ones.

Scott: I don't quite have the resources to generate that much detailed critical commitment right now, but just off the top of my head, some of the big news albums of the '90s for me were *Exile in Guyville* by Liz Phair, the Aimee Mann albums, *Frosting On the Beater* by the Posies, *Either/Or* by Elliott Smith, *69 Love Songs* by the Magnetic Fields.

Also, I'd like to goad you into some "trash talk" about the WORST or most disappointing records you've ever heard. Your comments on Roger Waters a while back were very perceptive (but you can't criticize music until you've heard "Eleanor Rigby" by Vanilla Fudge).

There are many levels of bad, disappointing, okay-but-vastly-overrated, and so forth. Here's a random sampling:

Never Let Me Down by David Bowie was almost superhumanly disappointing. *Born to Run* and *What's Going On* are two plenty okay albums, but my reaction to the ubiquity of their presence on rock critics' best-of-all-time polls is: huh? Pretty much any post-Syd Pink Floyd splinter project except the first David Gilmour record, which has the mighty "There's No Way Out of Here." The soundtrack for L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth* with Chick Corea stands a decent chance of being the worst record ever made. The live jam from *All Things Must Pass* and the live jam from John and Yoko's *Some Time in New York City* both raised an

already high bar for ex-Beatles releasing crap. Everyone loves the group Portishead except me. Everyone loves that last album by Beck except me.

How's that?

My last question is about a subject that recurs in your lyrics, interviews and in Ask Scott: the desire for fame and success as an artist. Over the last few years I get the feeling that you have worked hard to understand this desire and deal with the source of it, but what do you think would have happened if your deepest, most extravagant desires for fame had been realized? How would this have affected you and the music? Would it have been different if it had happened in, say, 1985 or 1993? Would you have tried to maintain your success by giving the people what they want or would you have been more bold than you were? Could there have been a happy medium of success for your groups?

There are always a few ways that can go -- the worst is you get just enough fame to get a major label deal, but don't quite have enough clout to get to make the albums you want to make. Fortunately, except for a limited budget here and some compromises for the sake of democracy there, I've gotten a lot of my artistic intentions down, and they've been as marginalized as God intended. I'm glad I didn't release albums that sold fifty thousand instead of five thousand but were subjected to a lot of market pressure.

I've rambled on but I'm dying to know what you think about these things. I wish you could know how much your records and the things that you've inspired me to check out (like Joyce and Girard) have meant to me.

Thanks,

David Thomas Lynch

It means a lot that you'd say so; thank you!

Zapple forever,

--Scott

Scott, I just wanted to take this opportunity to thank you for a *stunning* live album. *From Ritual To Romance* is a classic.

Also, an extra special thanks because it contains my favorite Loud Family song: Baby-Hard-To-Be-Around. What a blistering version!

You f-in' ROCK!!

Tom Enroth

Scott: Much appreciated! It was a real treat to have so many talented people contribute to both the audio and visuals of that release.

--I, Finrock

March 31, 2003

Scott, I just saw you play at Highland Grounds here in LA and enjoyed it immensely. (Scott Miller playing for free, how can that suck?) This was the first time I'd seen you since a Game Theory concert in San Luis Obispo that I promoted (at a tiny little Caribbean style bar/restaurant called DK's which I'm sure you don't remember) back in the late 80s sometime. Thanks for the version of "Erica's Word" at the end of the show; it was really great to hear it again.

Scott: Well, thank you for coming, and for promoting that show!

My question is this: You mentioned on stage that *Lolita Nation* is in the early stages of being remastered for re-release. Can you give any information about this? What label, when, etc., and will Mitch Easter be involved at all? (You also professed to having forgotten about "Chardonnay" and what a good song it is, which nobody would ever believe!!)

Thanks and take care!

Dave

To be honest, it's too early to talk about it in any detail. Nothing concrete has really happened yet except that I listened to the album to figure out which songs I might like to remix if that were an option (and it would only be an option if Mitch were involved). For a while I was saying I wanted to re-record a bunch of the vocals, but I guess I've been mostly talked out of that because, you know, the exhibit in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame would have to be updated and all. But I'd like it to be reasonably spiffed up at any rate, with today's mastering technology, some at least minimally interesting packaging, and, if at all possible, the uncut version of "Chardonnay."

But the rub there is this: I hadn't listened to that song in years and years, and I'd become more and more convinced it was a really stupid song, but I finally listened to it and I thought it was okay. Yet, I'm now thinking, it could be that the particularly stupid parts were in the cut verses! I just don't remember a damn thing about them. One embarrassing detail is that I was listening to *Moss Elixir* by Robyn Hitchcock, and I think Mr. Cambridge pronounces "Di Chirico" right and I don't.

thanks for writing, Dave,

--a tiny little Caribbean style bar band singer

April 14, 2003

Scott, let's get physical.

Working with the notion that light is composed of wave particles called photons, a theory (fame theory or shame theory) occurred to me while going for a jog (wonderful things, those endorphins!).

Scott: Thanks very much for writing, Jack.

It's been a long time (23 years) since my modern physics education, so expect some high impedance in my brain. My feedback won't be scholarship, but maybe the exercise is useful for purposes of (1) publicizing of your idea, and (2) talking an amateur through it.

These photons, of course, have a velocity component of 'c' in one dimension, but there just may be much slower velocity components created by the wave oscillations themselves in the other 2 (known) dimensions. Unlink the forward 'c' which is independent of frequency and amplitude, these other 2 dimensions have velocities that are dependent on frequency and amplitude.

Are photons thought to have a velocity component in directions other than their direction of travel? What I thought was that light has wave and particle natures, the photon concept describing the particle nature, and so you couldn't really talk about the y and z velocities of a photon -- y and z components are electrical and magnetic amplitudes, not physical oscillation of the photon.

Even if I take a classical wave example like sending a wave down a jumprope by wiggling it, I wouldn't think I'd talk about a velocity component of the wave going down the jumprope in the x direction and another velocity component of the rope molecules at any point going up and down in the y direction. There *isn't* any actual movement of matter in the x direction -- it's the nature of a wave system to propagate energy in some direction without accounting the local displacement as a velocity component of that propagation.

Going back a very long time ago to The Big Bang (memories are a bit foggy, because I was just a teenager then), the theory states that an incredible burst of energy occurred at a rate of 10^{-43} seconds. If one were to plot this on a Laplace/Fourier frequency vs. amplitude plot, one would get almost incomprehensibly high frequency components.

Personally, the Big Bang theory has always sounded a lot like creationism to me, only updated to what we know about constituents of matter. In biblical times you could say something like "one day there were just continents and animals and humans," and now you have to say "one day there were just photons and electrons." Maybe it's just me, but it seems at some important level like a bit of a lateral move.

A little quibble is that 10^{-43} seconds is not a rate, it's a time, and it's hard for me to even think about what you (or anyone) must really mean: in that much time, all the energy of the current universe is flowing out of a sphere of some definite size, for no reason, and limited by nothing. Some part of my mind wants to know something like: how do you know if you have high amplitudes at high frequencies, since at one end of the measurements you're taking, there's no time or space?

Sorry, that's all pretty much digressing.

Perhaps the aforementioned other 2 dimensions have a velocity limit of 'c' as well. So here's the gist (finally): when the oscillations approach 'c' this is the point at which energy changes back into matter.

Something about this seems like an interesting thought, but it's mostly beyond me. For one thing, I think I only know about high energies changing more matter into more energy, not high energies causing a net change back to matter -- except, I'm imagining, in black holes or something beyond my comprehension. Maybe something like what you're talking about is why there's matter in the universe, not just energy, but as noted before, my building blocks of knowledge don't go that high -- I'm stuck at that problem I was describing earlier of conceiving photon oscillations.

I shared this theory with a fellow citizen of Planet Mensa, who seemed open to the concept. What are your thoughts?

Light travels at 186,000 mi/sec... here comes some now,

Jack Lippold

P.S.: you should hear me on "York or Sargent: which Dick was the superior Darrin?"

Sargent was never quite silly enough -- he was just sort of miffed all the time. York was addled, and I think there was something kind of funny in being able to imagine him having a somewhat indistinguishable amount of anxiety over meeting a big client if he'd lost his briefcase, or he'd been turned into a golden retriever.

social Durwoodism,

--Scott

May 5, 2003

Scott, did you ever play in the UK at all in any of your incarnations?

I've been a fan of The Loud Family since they started and even managed to track down some Game Theory CDs a while back. Feel as though I missed out a bit not seeing the Louds live as I've seen most other singers I rate like Tori Amos, Aimee Mann, Suzanne Vega and All About Eve. Also, have you heard of a singer called Nerina Pallot? Her album *Dear Frustrated Superstar* from last year was superb. I think you'd really like it.

Scott: No, I don't know her. Nice title!

I've played in and around London a couple of times. The first time was a solo show in 1991, set up by a friend, at a place called the Mean Fiddler. Then the first Loud Family line-up played a few shows in 1993. We did a Greater London Radio spot, played a place I think was called the Powerhaus, played a place I think was called the South Cross Venue, played some place in Leicester, and played some place in Aldershot. The main thing I remember about

the Aldershot show is that Elastica were on the bill. I remember talking to someone in Elastica (who I am now deducing from their web site was "Donna Matthews, vocals and guitar") and being flabbergasted to learn that they were getting cover stories in national magazines and all they'd done is release *one single*. What -- you don't have to have three college radio hits and tour for years over there? I like England!

I'd love to play England again, but I no longer really have the kind of connections and career momentum where some promoter in his right mind would fly me over.

Any truth in the rumour that you'll be working with Aimee soon? If not, then I guess we'll just have to respect your retirement and know that another musical genius has been lost.

Franko Kowalczyk

I'm blushing! But actually, I'm thinking pretty positively about the Aimee project (which I won't describe in detail now, having described it in other messages). It's about half recorded, and as part of finishing it up, we're writing a song together, which I think is coming out great. It's fantastically thrilling to work with Aimee.

thanks for writing; don't forget to shop at Minus Zero!

--Young Blighty

May 19, 2003

Scott, I am not writing you for the first time after having been a fan for many years. Actually, um, who are you again? Oh, that's right.

Scott: Thanks much for writing, d. -- IF THAT IS YOUR REAL NAME.

I had a dream in which people, including you and including me, were travelling across the country in a van. Actually, I had to sort of stand on the back bumper and hang on to the door and the molding, while someone on the other side of the bumper poked me with a carrot to try to knock me off.

I have to jump in and say how sad it is that classic psychoanalysis would be at such a total loss for words at this point.

We stopped at some cramped hovel, where dwelt an old man and a scruffy-looking black dog. The old man apologized for his dog's apparent lack of socialization (due to unfortunate circumstances in the dog's early upbringing) but defended the canine's essential worth thusly:

"That dog smells better than any calamari around! You want to talk about loving your enemy... that dog loves calamari."

What does this mean?

d. (doug mayo-wells)

Why we dream is a good juicy mystery. In a way, it's farfetched to think dreams are constructed complete with meaning somewhere in the unconscious, and then they're exposed like a movie to consciousness, which then might or might not figure out that meaning. It would be an odd evolutionary inefficiency for the brain, once it *had* the meaning in hand to begin with, to go through this risky, cinematic process to get the meaning to some other aspect of the brain. Though maybe not inconceivable.

But I'm more inclined to think there's not so much an inherent *meaning* in dreams as there is the possibility of some class of encounter which the brain feels like playing out to test its own reaction and interpretation. Which sort of goes along with my theory that it's not all that mindless to watch what is typically thought of as mindless TV. By watching something like a soap opera, I'm thinking that to an extent you're doing brain work that's valuable in the same way that dreams are valuable -- you're doing on-the-cheap refinement of your reactions to provocative situations to be better mentally prepared for similar real life situations. The down side is the untrustworthiness of it all: you're probably also receiving recommended resolutions from people who are poorly qualified to do anything besides get your attention; but that's another subject, and I'd better start circling back to yours.

In a way the "meaning" of the dream is exclusively the way it made you feel; I'd have to ask *you* what it means. But you're a pretty good writer. I'm going to suppose you may have captured the essence of that dream enough that I could imagine the reasonable generic human reaction to it, which may be pretty close to my attempting to say what the dream means.

In your dream, you go traveling, which I presume has the feeling of venturing beyond your cultural boundaries. What you find there -- here the dream is very realistic and significant -- is a representative of culture's non-included. In a way the sickness of culture is that it assigns worthiness in a big invisible pyramid scheme, which by its very nature requires a bottom layer of those who are utterly abject. But the old man in the dream is giving you testimony that even those abject according to the paradigm of "socialization" have, in your words, essential worth. And maybe as added significance, the old man isn't testifying to his own self worth, but another's: the dog's. So your dream has the potential to enlighten you to the absolute worth of another despite cultural interpretation.

Calamari for the dog? That's what *those people* do with their food stamps??

re-elect Gore,

--Scott

Scott, in your opinion, could a vampire *force* him/her/itself to eat actual food instead of blood?

David Werking

Scott: Commonly observed approximations may be: (1) a cat, and (2) a goth person. Both would prefer to drink blood but *will* survive on non-bloody food for long periods. So I will say that a normal, newish vampire will be able to force him or herself to eat food at least for a while, although perhaps some sort of science diet involving blood byproducts is necessary for immortality and a shiny coat.

mwahaha,

--Scott

June 2, 2003

Scott, I wrote once approximately four years ago, and now am writing again with an admixture of intellectual inquiry and sad avarice. (Speaking of "admixtures," are you a fan of Donald Barthelme's short stories?)

Scott: All I've read is his novel *Snow White*, which I enjoyed very much, although I'm not sure I'm quite on top of why so many people I know seem to single him out as *the* author to recommend. I mean, I'm sure I've had ten times the number of Donald Barthelme recommendations as Anne Sexton, Kingsley Amis, V.S. Naipaul, and J.G. Ballard recommendations combined -- what could that mean?

First, as far as Husker Du, I have always been among those who fall on the Hart side of the coin, like those who fall on the Lennon side of the Beatles coin. Even in my punkiest days circa 1983-84, I loved Hart's compositions, sad, melodramatic, sometimes whimsical hippy stuff though they were (i.e., "Diane," "Pink Turns to Blue," "Turn on the News," "Flexible Flyer"), more than Bob Mould's angry stomping.

I'm not really a Husker Du adept; I've managed to form opinions about most of their albums, but I don't actually own any, nor would I probably ever play them if I did.

That said, I'm with you -- I like Grant's Husker Du stuff better than Bob's. The critical overrating of Bob Mould's Husker Du material was truly a thing of machinelike beauty that I don't think has been equaled since -- and that's saying something, since his songs certainly weren't bad at all. There was just sort of no such thing as not thinking that sound was an out-of-the-park home run every single time (which it just plain wasn't). Bob's stuff starting with the *Sugar* record has been much, much stronger, and gets *nothing* like that level of critical attention. "Deep Karma Canyons"; "Classifieds" -- amazing songs!

That said, are you familiar with Hart's oeuvre post-Huskers? If so, waddaya think? I for one believe that the first Hart solo album was practically impeccable, even the sappy Billy-Joel-on-Dope coda of "The Main." Likewise, I love the first Nova Mob album and all of its goofy historical images (*Last Days of Pompeii*? To my knowledge, although you delve into esoteric literary references, you've never sunk into advanced high school history as far as lyrics go). The second Nova Mob album was horrible, and I wonder whether he hadn't relapsed as far as the drug use goes. Finally, the most recent solo Hart album showed signs of promise, though only about half the songs had the melodic strength to sustain

the poppy production. Are you familiar with these releases? Can you become so and give me your thoughts? Did you ever at all consider yourself (while in Game Theory) a contemporary of the poppier side of Husker Du in anything more than a purely temporal sense?

Only in the sense that people used "college rock" as a catch-all term; we were a hated harmony-mongering, keyboard-using band to any Husker fan, I'm sure. "Diane" was probably my single favorite song by them, which my friend Dan Vallor played for me when it came out. F*** me! I'd kind of considered *Land Speed Record* the sort of thing people still did if they were still stuck in a teenage frame of mind, which I considered myself well beyond at the time (rather embarrassingly, now that I look back), but with "Diane" I came to respect the emotional impact they were capable of deploying.

I probably ought to get *Intolerance*; I'm not sure if I'm up for studying Grant's whole catalog, but I've heard a few post-Husker songs that are pretty damn engaging.

Next, here comes the blatant avarice. I really, really want a copy of *Lolita Nation* and the first and fourth Game Theory albums on CD. I have them on LP but don't currently have the technology to transfer them, and anyway my LPs are long since scratched. If anybody out there in Millerland is willing to trade with me, I have a fair deal of 80s stuff, as well as decent 90s stuff on LP and CD, particularly a pretty complete backlog of Guided by Voices rarities / live versions, etc., on CD. If anybody is willing to trade (and if you, Scott, have any thoughts on the latest GBV offering, *Universal Truths and Cycles*), please feel free to post here or write me at tfriedman@nc.rr.com. Thanks.

Terrence Friedman

Let the swindling begin.

P.S. My vastly younger 19-year-old sister (14 years younger than me, arghh) is just now getting into intelligent pop, starting with Aimee Mann. I'm waiting about another year to spring you on her.

Here's hoping that move doesn't grind the whole program to a halt.

everything's in boxes at 2541,

--Scott

June 9, 2003

Scott, this "Ask Scott" thing is getting to be a habit. This is going to be a bit dicey, so if you don't answer it, I'll understand; although none of the loud-fans know where I live.

This is my twisted little take on deity. It just might ruffle the feathers of believers, agnostics and atheists alike. I expressed this thought to a regular at an establishment I go to often and I must have scared the be-jesus out of her, because I haven't seen her since.

Okay, here goes: "I believe there is a God. But in light of the power, scope and secrets of the universe that we can't begin to understand, I just don't believe we humans are a significant part of God's plan. An odd paradox exists in many -- if not most -- believers. These believers display the ultimate in humility and fear in God, yet they often have the arrogance to believe that we humans have the power to offend or protect God."

Scott: You're right -- people who value humility and believe in God ought to be open to the possibility that God might, in the vast possibilities of all universes, have more significant creations than humanity. I guess anyone who's read Milton has a flavor for that Puritan theology where God is a sort of cabinet-maker whose newest project in *Paradise Lost* is humankind -- but that's probably not quite what you're getting at.

There, I said it. Although I haven't come across anyone who has expressed a similar outlook, I imagine they're out there. I'm curious if you have come across any.

A grayer shade of pale,

Jack Lippold

I may never have heard that before, or looked at it that way myself before -- I congratulate you for a rather original thought! But my personal impression is that human consciousness is enough more remarkable than anything else in my realm that I wouldn't know how to begin to imagine something more significant. When I say I believe in God, the core of what I mean is that I can't talk about the specialness of my own consciousness -- the *subject* world -- without bringing in the concept of God, and were I to say I don't believe in God (which I don't, because people would take it as a cheap rejection of Western spirituality), the core of what I would mean is that I don't have a coherent way of talking or thinking about a privileged aspect of the *object* world which manipulates the rest of the object world as a result of motivations we would have some chance of understanding.

Short sentences, Scott. Hemingway. Short sentences.

thanks for writing Jack, and best wishes

--the God-doesn't-play-dice man

June 23, 2003

Scott, I was a fan of yours in high school and even saw you play at Northwestern in Chicago in the mid eighties. I would love to be able to find *Real Nighttime* and ALRN's *Painted Windows* on CD. Are they available?

Stephanie Grove

Scott: ALRN -- no. *Real Nighttime*, on eBay quite a bit, sometimes Amazon.

Scott, I've recently undertaken the arduous task of converting a centuries-old coal bin in my basement into a writing/recording space.

Scott: Wonderful. I have heard of writers trying to go it without a coal bin, or with a contemporary or unconverted coal bin, and I wonder what they are thinking.

I've always regarded the Loud Family albums as sterling examples of skillful self-recording, so I wanted to ask you a technical question. Recording vocals has always been my weakest point as an engineer. Assuming that most of the tape hiss and ambient noise isn't coming from my own throat, what microphone(s) do you use for such a purpose?

Most of my vocals have been done with an AKG 414, but don't let stop you from using them -- I think they're the best mics you can get for about a thousand bucks. For acoustic guitar right in front of the sound hole or miking an amp, a Shure SM 57 -- around a hundred bucks -- has always sounded as good to my ears as anything else.

If you have a lot of money, it's really done these days to throw in a fancy pre-amp, but I'm not completely confident the money for those things always ends up on the screen, whereas time put in learning to compress is essential -- including learning to use the side-chain feature to control hissy-ess frequencies (a skill I think I finally got good at around the song "One Will Be the Highway").

Do you scrub down the raw tracks with any outboard compression / noise reduction gear, or is it all about post-production in ProTools?

I'm actually waiting for ProTools to port to Mac OS X, then I'll buy it. All my stuff has been on ADAT (or in the old days, 24-track 2", or in the very old days, Teac 4- and 8-track).

I have dbx 166A compressor/gate/limiter that has just been the workhorse of my home recording life. I always record with lots of compression and some limiting -- the hotter, the better -- and unless it really bugs the singer, noise gating.

Incidentally, I've discovered that *The Tape of Only Linda* is the best possible album for scrubbing down concrete floors in abandoned coal bins. It happily beat out strong competition such as Wire's 1985-1990 *The A List* (too murky), Ultra Vivid Scene's *Joy 1967-1990* (too robotic) and Maria Kalaniemi's *Iho* (too NPR).

Myke Weiskopf

It will take the paint off most anything. Thanks for writing, and happy recording!

--Alfred E. Neumann

June 30, 2003

Scott, I just read this on "Ask Scott":

One project I'm fervently hoping gets finished is an album of quasi-acoustic versions of my songs with Aimee Mann and her guitarist/ producer Michael Lockwood (who's an incredible talent in his own right). It's about half recorded, but of course she's a pretty big star these days and we need to find some time to finish it that works within her touring and recording schedule.

I've never written to you before, but reading what you wrote above compels me to do so.

I'm not the flattering type, really, but I think your recordings remain to this day among the most interesting and literate that I have ever heard, or probably am ever likely to hear in my lifetime. When you discuss Auden or Joyce (I'll throw Wilde in as a comparable favorite), you refer to them naturally as masters or geniuses within their particular area of artistic expression.

Scott, through your work in Game Theory and the Loud Family, you occupy this same hallowed ground within power pop, or post-Beatles rock -- I don't know what to call it exactly. I can only tell you that I've listened to hundreds of records of this nature and no one ever equaled your ability to create interesting, tuneful, soaring music that never failed to be a reflection of a keenly intelligent, musically gifted mind: writing from the heart when you wanted to, being enigmatic when you wanted to, challenging everyone that listened to simply pay attention and reap the incomparably unique benefits of your musical and literary viewpoints, or kindly step out and soak up the new Ratt album instead.

Scott: Well, I'm blushing, of course; thanks very much for saying all that. I honestly don't think I know what Ratt sound like. Less Auden influence, you say?

Personally I've never been more than half satisfied with my attempts to tie in with what I consider great literature. I have the vague goal of presenting certain interpretations I came by with difficulty in a way I imagine I would have found more approachable; but even if I'm successful at this reeling in of a putatively lofty idea from literature down to the reality of my own life, I've likely made it uninteresting to everyone except someone like you who has unusual patience with a project that's laborious in this way.

So I appreciate hearing when it works out for someone. As an example of what I take to be the more typical reaction, [this Attractive Nuisance review is handy](#). Besides the just praise of Alison's contributions, I like as a closing put-down the writer's declaring that my efforts made him "painfully aware of [his] own mortality while putting [him] to sleep" -- oddly close to something I might have offered as a stated goal (I might have said "invite consideration of ultimate concerns without using shock tactics").

To people that love the idiom of music that you contributed to and brought true artistic growth to, you are a genius and immortalized in our eyes. Anyone who does not believe this either never heard your music in the first place, or for whatever reason could not listen carefully enough. Your contributions to popular music are much greater than I think you, or the world at large, quite realizes yet.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart that you have dedicated yourself to your art for as long as you have; had you not, my life and those of many, many others would have been far poorer without your voice somewhere in the mix.

I thank you again. I don't predict any sort of snowballing interest in my recordings, but to provide a pleasant experience to an always limited but fairly steady number of listeners is very gratifying.

Now that I've gotten that off my chest....

I hope this project with Aimee comes to fruition. She is a very intelligent and concise musician who makes impeccable music with an absolutely unique and original approach, just as you have done in your own career. Her keen observations of human relationships contain unusual insight; her talent is a gift to all of us, just as yours is.

I hope that it does not appear too lofty to say that the fact that she regards you as a musician as highly as you regard her is a undeniable testament to the strength of the human spirit; your mutual collaboration reflects one element of the highest aspirations that people working together could ever hope to achieve in their lifetime.

It's a dream experience. I still have to pinch myself. Michael Lockwood is now working steadily with Lisa Marie Presley, though, so that may mean our producer is not too available for a while.

I anxiously await the fruits of your work together. Save the realization of true love or the birth of a healthy child, I'm hard pressed to think of anything that would lift the emotional fabric of the admirers of your craft to a higher level.

Lawrence Sweet

Highly encouraging words. I am very grateful.

born to be Wilde

--Scott

July 13, 2003

Scott, since I know what a huge Beatles fan you are through interviews I've read and detecting the influence in your music, I was wondering when your father bought you *Sgt. Pepper*; I think you were born in 1960 (10 years before my post-womb existence), therefore, if you did possibly get it in 1967, did you buy each subsequent Beatles LP when they came out?

Scott: Close. After *Sgt. Pepper*, it was my friend Joe Becker and his parents through whom I heard Beatles material as it came out. Being 7 to 9 in the last Beatles years, I didn't actually have albums' worth of buying power.

If so, what was that like?

Like they were gods walking the earth, and a new Beatles album was the most radiant event in life. But always in a complicated way. The white album was certainly a strange experience -- I remember initially being just short of totally confused by it, but it was still incredibly compelling to imitate them even as they were pushing the boundaries of it being too weird to get away with doing that -- e.g. by having *really* long hair like John in that strangely captivating white album photo (and since that wasn't an option given my parents, I remember hunting down a flea-market pair of those round National Health spectacles, just to have and keep in a drawer).

Although, the great yet confusing white album was almost concurrent with "Hey Jude," which on the other hand spoke as directly to my soul as anything ever. That they came up with such a familial, encouraging take on love relationships is just one of hundreds of aspects of the Beatles I look back on and wonder: where did they ever find the mental poise to do something like that? To say nothing of the surreal filter of childhood that all of this was coming at me through -- metaphysical connections between, say, the green of the Apple logo and the lime green of lime green Hot Wheels cars. I'm sure anyone who was at least that old in 1966-69 understands the pop culture nirvana unique to that period, which probably sounds like incoherent nonsense to anyone else.

Where any Beatles release was too bizarre to be instantly lovable it was equally valuable as an aesthetic challenge, and this was even true when the breakup was occurring and they started releasing a whole bunch of disturbingly experimental records like "Zapple" releases. It seemed like whatever value was lost by them being unlistenable was compensated for by it all just being that formidable a mystery.

The Beatles' explosive breakup with all the bizarre solo records makes more sense when you consider that at the time, their music wasn't necessarily considered as bankable and timeless as pure musical craft as we all take it for granted to be nowadays. There was much more of a feeling of it all as super-fad -- essentially a souped-up dance craze which if it was of any lasting importance, was important as an exponent of a youth movement whose manifesto was something like: more freedom is always better. That category of idealism did most of its unraveling concurrently with the Beatles. When the Beatles had done classic work, it was all a very disciplined operation, and the problem of emancipation-as-freedom degenerating into anarchy-as-freedom is maybe nowhere clearer than in contemplating John Lennon being *constrained* to produce "Come Together" rather than being *freed* to produce "Unfinished Music #2: Life With the Lions."

But for a long time their instincts were all but infallible. It turns out to have been amazing and rare that the Beatles occupied a niche as top-rank cultural heroes for being creative and intellectually eclectic, yet adhering closely to real life for their subject matter. They were really these wild geniuses who succeeded *as* geniuses -- not as either a cult or as escapist entertainment.

I know you would have been pretty young, however, I was pretty precocious, getting *Piper At The Gates of Dawn* in grade 2 and the banana album in grade 5. Please elaborate with your memories! That would be way cool.

Keep making records or "Don't Doubt Yourself Babe" cuz yer a genius.

P.S. I'm well aware of your love of Alex Chilton so I'd thought I'd tell you that I once played in a short-lived band with guitar player and friend George Reinecke called The Golden Triangle, just after he left Tav Falco's Panther Burns, though we just did a few gigs but often talk about working.

Bret Judges

Fun! Memphis musicians tend to seem kind of crazy to me. But then I guess so do San Francisco musicians.

spo-dee-o-dee,

--Scott

July 21, 2003

Scott, have you heard the new Spoon record? I'm only asking because they've certainly heard yours! Their song "You Gotta Feel It" came up on my iPod right after "Erica's Word" tonight and I'll be damned if they aren't carbon copies of one another!

I pulled out the trusty Telecaster from under the bed and played along with both just to be sure. Besides moving the progression down a half-step, they are pretty near the same.

Can you sue them for ripping off your chord progression? If so, I want 25 percent! Of course, they don't sell any more records than you ever did, but with the present condition of our economy, I'm not ruling anything out.

Rob "half-diminished" Disner
Silver Lake, CA

Scott: Hi, Rob -- thanks for writing.

I appreciate your thinking of my music business interests -- God knows that's rare -- but it would hard for me to work up an aggrieved feeling short of their copying "Erica's Word" exactly and calling it "Erica's Word, Not By Scott Miller." Here's a little theorem of mine about music, which I'll now lay out in the following poor-man's Wittgensteinian manner:

1. All good music sounds like something you've heard before. If you hear good (to you) music, you will either:

a. Consciously recognize (what for your purposes is) the source and attribute the good of the music to that source, or

b. You won't consciously recognize the source, and you'll attribute the good of the music to the music you're hearing itself.

2. All music which you identify as good, to the the extent that you correctly identify it as something you've never heard before

a. Is in fact still actually good (to you), but

b. It is good as something other than music.

Music is a machine that requires the sound at hand, and also *requires* the set of subconscious echoes and reference points that make it act as music. So in my book, being a good writer of melodies is a matter of magic and blarney, stealing without getting caught. I still think it's a valuable pursuit, and I'm never intentionally underhanded when I write a song; it all only turns ugly if I start looking around for ways *my* material has been lifted.

All I've heard from the latest Spoon is a song called "Jonathan Fisk," which I thought was one of the best tracks of 2002.

everything fight about that spoonful,

--Scott

August 11, 2003

Scott, I just saw Richard Linklater's at-times fascinating movie *Waking Life*, and was reminded of something that I was able to ask you about in 1998. One of the points that the movie made was that dreams allowed the main character to come up with fascinating ideas and concepts that he wouldn't have believed that his conscious mind could have conjured up. When I asked you about a particular line in "Idiot Son" ("And I saw real estate that I would not call land"), you told me in so many words that it was a dream image about ecology and land that had been spent of all of its resources barring its inherent financial value. You also have mentioned that a lot of your images have sprung from dreams. Could you characterize what qualities that you feel your dream images could possess vs. those images/lyrics/etc. that you came up while fully conscious?

Scott: Good question, Thomas. Thanks for writing. The short answer is that a satisfying album of lyrics typically has a few striking concrete images, and a dream can be good raw material for that. You may have no idea how an idea or feeling is getting communicated; you just trust the value of representing something that seemed strangely significant to you.

Taking that to an even deeper level, the art that you've come up with, are you of the mind that it comes from you, or simply through you? I realize that before you release a song, an album, you've tweaked the crap out of it to get it ready for prime time, and in that sense

you are definitely the art's midwife. But ultimately (and this isn't meant to trivialize your role in the amazing music you have made), do you feel that the art originates from Scott Miller per se, or that you are the conduit, and that it springs from a vague, undefined "other" realm? And trust me, there isn't meant to be any judgment attached to that; an answer of "I made it" is not a selfish answer, it might be the true one.

In a way, it's hard to know exactly what distinction to make there. I remember reading a book called "Consciousness Explained" by Daniel Dennett, and I took his theme to be something like that we think of the self as a monolithic agent when really it's more a collection of processes acting as preferences, filters, motivations, etc., and when these processes get together, consciousness just magically happens (not incredibly well-fleshed-out as deep thinking goes, I didn't think, though what do I know?). But in a way songwriting is a similar question. I've picked up a lot of motivations for writing songs, axes to grind, reasons things sounds good to me, etc., and a lot of forces, social and otherwise, you could describe as acting *through* me. In a way Todd Rundgren writes songs through me because he influenced me to want to perpetuate certain aspects of music.

Dreams may in some sense be the source aspect that's the closest to being uniquely *me*. Dreams are egotistical, for good and bad. People have to work to build a moral and spiritual sensibility, and dreams may work within that, or may rebel against it in favor of desire and sentiment. The best art is probably both morally sophisticated and decisive while being quite sensitive to human desire (Dostoevsky springs to mind); dreams usually help with the latter, and require a disciplined mind to be helpful with the former.

Once again, thanks for your amazing music. *P&B&R&T* is still my favorite album of all time. Congratulations on your new family.

Copacetically dazed in a daisy glaze,

Thomas Durkin

Thanks much for such a positive assessment.

Neon meate dream of a Oxfordprof,

--Scott

Scott, ta-tan,ta,ta,tam

ta-tan,ta,ta,tam

ta-tan,ta,ta,tam

ta-tan,ta,ta,tam

....

eeeriiccaaaa'sss goooneee shyyyyy

mmmmm mmmm mmmmm

ok,ok, i'll never see/ear it live uhhhhh

Right now at Madrid (Spain) but too at Zaragoza (Spain too) I'll wait for 10 years more, meanwhile I'll grow up some ginkgo biloba seeds against sadness and try to get the rest of loud fam. cd's

And wait for a Good Year At Madrid and for Christmas hollydays.

Javier Martin Garcia Lopez

Scott: Buenos dias, Javier! Hey, if Ken Stringfellow can get to Spain to play live, then so can I. Wait a minute, I have that backward; it's that if I can do something, then Ken Stringfellow can do it. So close. I've wanted to go to Madrid ever since I saw "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown." I think it was the mod phone booths.

Erica esta en casa
Donde es la biblioteca?

--Scott

September 29, 2003

Scott, that two of the most talented, smartest, and flat-out nicest people I've ever met have decided to bring a new life into the world is great and welcome news for all of humanity. Here's hoping Valerie gets your chops, Kristine's moves, a Fisher Price keyboard for Christmas and an open 125 Records contract on her first birthday (watch out Britney, Christina, Mandy...)

Scott: Well, Valerie just turned one, and we didn't hear from 125, so she may keep a dialog open with Death Row.

I've been wanting to write to you to make an observation about your last album, which has been in heavy rotation on my CD player of late. As my previous borderline-psychotically enthusiastic letters to you about your music might have suggested, I've been a big fan of your music for years, but I'm remiss to admit that I didn't much appreciate *Attractive Nuisance* when it first came out for a reason that's now become clear to me: I hated the idea of you singing your own rock obituary so much that I didn't want to even countenance the idea. Seeing you lay down your guitar on your last tour seemed to confirm what some of the songs on *Attractive Nuisance* suggested, and this was terrible news for all of us who are passionate about your music.

In the years (years!?) since that time, I've somehow gotten used to stumbling through adult life without the joy and edification of a brand new Scott Miller album to help make the unfiner points of living tenable if not completely worthwhile. Ironically, finding no other suitably soul-bracing alternate consolation to your music in art or literature (*The Corrections* came pretty close), I found myself turning back to your last album which, now that I can listen to the songs with acceptance and a little detachment, I now regard as some of the best work you've ever done. To anyone reading "Ask Scott" who is un- or under-acquainted with your music, I'd like to recommend in particular to them the trifecta

of songs that comprise the heart of your last album. These three songs -- "Nice When I Want Something," "Years of Wrong Impressions," and "Blackness, Blackness" -- showcase and encapsulate your musical and lyrical abilities like nothing before.

I'm glad to hear about more people liking that album than did when it came out. It wasn't exactly designed to be a hit, but it was really met with an exciting new level of indifference and misunderstanding.

"Nice When I Want Something" reads like an Edward Albee play or Mary Gaitskill short story. The lyrics are brutal, implosive, hilarious, mordant. Like the comic genius of our time, Larry David (our Charles Chaplin), you've made the apparent subject of your venom yourself, with an eye so sharp I'm wondering if you're a masochist or just play one on CD. The Mike Keneally guitar solo and Gil Ray drum fills make this crunchy, jarring Nirvana homage one of the best hard rock songs in your catalog, right up there with "Curse of the Frontier Land" and "The Softest Tip of Her Baby Tongue."... "This is home. This is where we spend weekends." Yeah, you and the Prince of Denmark.

Mike Keneally is really a talent. Besides being the god of prog he's most commonly known as, he's written these amazing unknown pop-rock classics. "Rosemary Girl" is every bit as good as, say, "Venus" by the Shocking Blue for that kind of song.

And from there you somehow segue to the bubblegummy pop that is "Years Of Wrong Impressions," a song that is Archies-Monkees catchy as it is heartbreaking. To me, the second stanza of "Years" might well be the lovers' pact our generation made with itself in some fifth-floor walk-up twenty years ago, and it's not so easy to look back at that day and what we've thus far become. Alison Faith Levy sings this song passionately in duet with Kenny Kessel, recalling all the beautiful vocal parts you've written for your female collaborators over the years, going back to Nancy Becker and her soaring "aws" and "ahs" on "She'll Be A Verb." When Alison sings the bridge of this song, the album's emotional highpoint, I'm also reminded that your happiest sounding songs -- "Hyde Street Virgins" comes to mind -- are sometimes your most despairing, but without any cloying irony. The carnival organ tones, the "la-la" third stanza lyric and the idea that being misunderstood and lonely might be inevitable, are reconciled to the point where it feels like your trademark to be able to reconcile unreconcilable things. How do you do that?

Like the liner notes say, I flattered myself that I was feeling a thematic connection with T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which in fact openly addresses the subject of reconciliation of what seems unreconcilable. I never would have guessed that was explicit at all in my lyrics, but that's the nice mystery of lyrics sometimes. One thing to say is: despair often happens to someone whose goal not achieved is, when you get right down to it, nothing so much as an intense wish for personal advantage; if you can watch that come and go with a little perspective, the despair can be seen to have a sweet and instructive quality.

The next audible sound on this album is perhaps my favorite sonic moment in all of your recorded music, next to the walls-crumbling breakdown on "The Waist and The Knees" with your "I hope I can wake up" lyric and Zach Smith's whinnying-horse guitar solo. I'm talking about those warbling in-and-out-of key piano notes, leading into what I believe is

the best song you've ever written and one of the greatest modern poems I've ever read. Listening to "Blackness, Blackness," makes me wish you didn't have happen to you some of the things that have, so that you wouldn't know what you do to be able to write such a song, but since they have happened to you, I stand astounded that you could distill something as elegant and shattering as this from your experience.

That's certainly very nice of you to say.

With these songs and this album, your legacy is clear: you're among the first to have taken pop music to high art; to have given it the depth, complexity and personality of literature (while still rocking out like a madman -- an "Asleep and Awake"-like whoo to you!). On a more personal level, this is now the album I laugh and cry along to while I wash the dishes, drive to the post office, think about departed friends... It's the music that carries me along.

Best to you and your family,

Mark Portier

Thanks so much for writing and for giving me the feeling I'm not writing this stuff from Mars.

who's afraid of Virginia Plain,

--Scott

Scott, what kind of guitar did you use on "Regenisraen" on Game Theory's *The Big Shot Chronicles* LP? Do you still use this guitar today?

Mark Staples

Scott: Hi Mark!

I think it was my Guild 12-string acoustic, which I still own, and Gil Ray's Fender 6-string acoustic.

Scott, I can remember a time when I would take my walkman and roam the outer reaches of the Lake Michigan shoreline and evaporate into Game Theory's ethereal sound. I would literally walk forever inside the music -- I felt like I wasn't there any more -- just these walls of sound. I suppose I miss those days -- or maybe not -- but your music -- ahhhhhhh... Thank you.

Jim Braun

Scott: What a nice message! Thanks a lot for writing.

Scott, it was awhile ago -- I believe it was the tour promoting *The Tape of Only Linda* -- when The Loud Family came to Toronto, playing at Lee's Palace. I can remember when my friend and fellow band member, also named Scott, casually told me, "That band you like is playing at Lee's." Since I had been a Game Theory fanatic, not to mention a True

Gamester, I freaked! I wasn't going to miss the gig for anything; indeed, I'd been waiting for a chance to see you live for a long time -- I don't believe Game Theory ever made it to Canada... did they, and for that matter did The Loud Family ever return to Toronto?

Scott: No, but we played Vancouver several times. Kind of a drive from Toronto.

Anyway, after the show, I spotted you going to the bar so I decided to try and go talk to you. You were incredibly friendly and refreshingly unpretentious. In fact, you gave me the feeling that I could have talked to you for as long as I wanted, but, since you were such a big influence on me (I'm also a singer/songwriter) I was a little lost for words and wanted to treat you like a star so I pretty much let you know that you were a genius. Do you remember me?

I think so. The name definitely sounds familiar, anyway.

Finally, I wanted you to know I turned a lot of people on to your music and since I've detected a lot of frustration in your lyrics to the tune of "I failed, I didn't make it," many of these people think of you as a star, e.g.: I remember my ex-girlfriend stating after I permed my hair once, "you look like Scott Miller!" Lastly, are you at all into Van Der Graaf Generator or any krautrock?

I'm pretty ignorant of the genre. Maybe my favorite is Neu! I've never heard a note of Van Der Graaf Generator as far as I know.

Thanks for turning people on to my music. I think you just have to do music as a business for twenty years to appreciate how humiliating and discouraging the whole self-promotion process can get to be, even for someone who looks like a star from certain angles. I think I've said something like it before, but I can't tell you what a relief it is to turn to the ubiquitous potential "I'm just not sure there's enough interest in a new Scott Miller project" and say "well, God has shed his grace on thee, because there isn't one!"

P.S. I see I've typed you a fair amount so if you don't edit the responses you get for "Ask Scott" before putting them on the web site and I've sent you too much, maybe you can just email me a reply.

Bret Judges

You obviously have no idea how excessively people are capable of typing at me, or I at them. It's our little ritual.

--Van Der Graaf Perm (ret'd)

October 20, 2003

Scott, I liked reading your list of favorite albums, esp. the nods to underappreciated records of different eras, i.e. Spirit or Royal Trux. However, no mention of Harry Nilsson anywhere. What gives? Aerial Ballet? :)

Scott: Thanks a lot for writing, Paul. I like the label you work for a lot.

Harry Nilsson is one of those artists I'm undereducated about. I own only one of his albums - the Lennon collaboration *Pussycats*, which unfortunately I found quite mediocre the one time I listened to it. Taking inventory of what else I know about him: I like his "Daddy's Song" from *Head* a lot. "Coconut" was a cute novelty song -- maybe like the two hundredth best song of 1972. I liked "the Point" quite a bit as a child, but I haven't revisited it; using memory alone, I rather suspect the hit wouldn't grab me ("Me and My Arrow") but there was something that goes "this is the town and these are the people" that might (grab me). "Jump Into the Fire" is a fine rocker, but probably not as interesting to me as rockers on other records that wouldn't quite make my top 20, like, say, Moody Blues albums. "Daylight" was a more respectable novelty song in my book -- maybe the *one* hundredth best song of 1974, or whenever it was.

So I haven't had the experience it takes to get him into the category of my *very* favorites, but probably within striking distance. Any suggestions what albums I have to listen to?

Keep up the great work, I am a big fan of your records, recently re-discovered *Days for Days* (my favorite) and it hasn't left my CD player for days and days....

Paul Finn
[MERGE Records](#)

Thank you. I very much enjoy hearing that you liked it.

--Harry Nihilism

October 27, 2003

Scott, I've been a fan since high school, blah blah blah. Here's my question: why do your songs have so damn many chords? I'm dumb and I suck at guitar but I want to learn your songs so either make me smart or stop using so many chords.

Scott: I tend to like a lot of chord changes, and I've never quite answered the question of whether it's really the best way to write, or I'm just obsessively adding chords for some spurious notion of improvement. It may be a mix of the two. I think Quincy Jones once said that a song is poorly written unless you can get the gist of it by humming it, or something, and I sometimes wish I could apply that ideal a little better. But part of it is I just have a busy ear. Songs that sound busy to some people sound just right to me. I think when I've done the best job is when you're not really aware that there are a lot of chords until you actually try to learn it. Not to presume it's true for my stuff, but for me, those can be the fun ones to learn because you learn the little secrets of why they sound satisfying.

Sorry if it's been asked before; I've never read Ask Scott before today, though I've been on the mailing list for what seems like forever.

Evan Gregg

Thanks for writing, Evan. I think there are some web sites that have chord charts for my songs. Just search on some lyrics.

chordially,

--Scott

November 3, 2003

Scott, it's me, the guy who got you into *Harper's*, for what it's worth. This is brief and doesn't involve philosophy or literature or anything as dignified as that (just as, as I expected, my frivolous *Harper's* letter followed a more dignified missive involving the tragic plight of some peoples somewhere). But I had to write when, in answer to a fan's question as to why not soldier on alone, you replied:

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

Ever since the tragic plight of the Scott Miller Appreciation People has come to pass, I have been wondering, "what the hell is wrong with your acoustic guitar?" Not that you owe anyone anything, of course (except to me for the *Harper's* thing, but you know that already), but if you regret the circumstances of your situation, it seems like a great idea to put out an acoustically conceived record. I say conceived because I do not simply mean "unplugged" (sheesh -- did that make you cringe, too?). But I have wondered lately just how cool it would be if you were to work up some material to be recorded in a more off-the cuff and intimate way... something sort of Howe Gelb-like, I guess. Where the time between conception and recording is too short for much cranial interference. Of course, you are you and he is him, and that's why your records sound different, but I guess I somehow have the instinct that just such a recording is waiting untapped within you, and this is the ideal time to give that a shot. I know you've played acoustically at shows... so... whad'ya think?

Andy Davis

(ok, it wasn't that brief)

Scott: Thank you for writing!

I think that's a fine idea -- if my project with Aimee Mann ever gets finished and released, it will be a lot like what you describe. It should have one new song Aimee and I are co-writing. I might release some more originals one of these days if there's a good opportunity, but it I'm not sure if it's likely to be more acoustic than other music I've recorded.

unplugging away,

--Scott

Scott, how are you enjoying fatherhood?

Jerry Murphy

Scott: I love it. Like people say, there's a lot of work involved, but I love my little girl supremely.

--Scott

November 10, 2003

Scott, I recently got interested in Game Theory and The Loud Family. I only own *The Big Shot Chronicles* on LP, and *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things* on CD. However, I have visited the Loud Family website, and love your best albums list.

Scott: Thanks on both counts.

I am also a fan of Radiohead and Weezer, and I noticed that you rated *Weezer* (The Blue Album) 4th in 1994 and *O.K. Computer* 4th in 1997. I checked 1996 for *Pinkerton* and 1995 for *The Bends*, and was surprised that neither was listed. I was especially shocked because you mentioned the Green Album as one of your favorite albums of 2001. In my opinion, *The Bends* and *Pinkerton* rival *O.K. Computer* and The Blue Album. Anyway, I'm wondering if those two albums slipped through the cracks, or if you just don't like them very much.

Matthew Sussman

I like *The Bends* more today than I did in 1995. It would certainly be in my top 20 of that year today. The best cut is the opener, "Planet Telex." I've never been as crazy about "High and Dry" and "Fake Plastic Trees" as the rest of the world. *Pinkerton* I've never heard at all.

I don't like that Weezer green album all that much. I doubt it would make a formal top 20 of mine for 2000 if I did one. But 2000 wasn't that strong a year -- not nearly as strong as 2001 -- so I'm not certain. There are countless recent releases I haven't heard. I used to get sent free albums by labels and fans who'd keep me pretty well informed, but I'm off their radar now, so if I did favorite album lists it would almost be an accident of who I happened to run across.

--former enumeration junkie

November 17, 2003

Scott, I have to admit that I had never heard of the Loud Family until quite recently. Jeez, where have I been?!

Scott: Where everyone else has been, it sounds like.

I came across an old Aimee Mann interview from the time of *I'm With Stupid* and she waxed lyrical about *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things*. I was intrigued enough to track down a copy and, to borrow a Peter Tork song title, it's blown the top right off of my head! I must find more stuff. Soon!

Thank you very much. And, wow, a Peter Tork song I don't know.

I'm fascinated by [your list of favorite albums](#) from each year going back into the 1960s and I find myself agreeing with many of your choices. However, I've noticed that in the 1980s section you list albums by Black Flag and Husker Du but nothing by the Minutemen. Not even the magnificent *Double Nickels on the Dime*. How come?

Okay, it's not much of a question but I'd like to hear your views on this great band.

Ian Marshall

I've been asked that very question before. I only bought that album about two years ago, obviously long after I made that list, because people kept insisting it was a grievous oversight in my lists. Before that I'd only heard parts, which I'd mostly liked, but nothing that seemed like it was going to threaten to displace the Tall Dwarves at number 20.

Eighties music is a little tough to rank according to any sort of aesthetic theme, because it divides so obviously between ostensibly big-production, emotions-for-the-big-screen music (Prince, U2) and self-consciously indie music. I still feel there was a strange coldness to the decade despite all the various attempts to generate heat.

I think most people would admit *Double Nickels* is magnificent in a difficult way, and you can be a right-thinking person without being in quite the right mood for it. The Minutemen definitely don't schmooze up the community of melodic preciousness the way, say, Elvis Costello or the Smiths do. The tradition here is more beat poetry, art-jazz-funk stuff that for the most part traces easily to styles that were anti-traditional recently enough in history. This isn't bad, it just means the artist will be end-running my ear rather than coming right at it, so it's going to be reasonable for it to be quite good but still miss my top 20 if I'm not right in the sweet spot of the intended fringe audience.

Except that the Minutemen's lyrics have an honest ring, and don't use the words "dawn" and "man," *Double Nickels* reminds me in a couple of bizarre but striking ways of the ELP album *Tarkus*. The playing is very impressive in a jazzy way and the lyrics have the ring of something important and iconoclastic being said, but if you subtract off any "blown away" factor and you hold a gun to my head and ask "what does it actually mean? Are you positive you would embrace this if there was absolutely no cultural pressure to consider it significant?" my truthful answer would have to be it's not obviously stuff I'd hum in the shower, and where I'm actually able to pin down the cultural slant in the lyrics, I confess I'm apt to have the mental reaction that I know more about life than this person.

But that's just to explain negatives. The album is really a triumph of personality and intangibles, which of course *Tarkus* is not, so let's end by saying it would stand a chance of

making my top 20 of 1984 if I scrupulously re-evaluated everything today. Unquestionably, there's something unique and compelling about D. Boon's delivery and lyric style.

bitches crystal knows how I twist all the lines

--Scott

December 1, 2003

Scott, I feel a bit hesitant to ask a question, seeing how I have never heard a full song that you have written (my computer has made it about halfway through downloading "Erica's Word" once) or even seen an actual copy of one of your albums. I'm currently a college student at University of MD, songwriter/ guitarist/ bookstore manager. I actually was born after you released the early EP's with Game Theory (I was probably about 5 when Game Theory stopped releasing music) but positive reviews and obscure song titles have helped me find my way to your website. After looking at some of the Ask Scott archives, I've become even more intrigued with the band as a whole and especially the obvious devotion of your fans. My first question is whether you frequently receive feedback from people such as myself who wouldn't have any medium to hear anything by your band, and who are too young to have experienced it firsthand.

Scott: It would make sense that a fair number of "Ask Scott" submissions are from people in your category.

I'm assuming that comparisons to Big Star (who is practically unknown at my music-illiterate campus, which is actually one of my favorite -- Tommy Keene's -- old stomping grounds) have helped others discover the band. I also was intrigued by your top 20 lists; not only do I love reading lists of any kind (it could have been your top 20 shampoo brands and I probably would have read it) but I also wanted to see what bands besides Big Star shaped your musical direction.

Actually I wasn't well-informed enough to have known about Big Star in my formative years, that is, from 1972 to 1974 when those records came out. I first published those lists in 1982 in a piece in my college newspaper and kept doing them for fanzine publication, etc., until 1999. I think it was 1981 that I heard Big Star for the first time, in a "you sound like this guy" situation.

Now, again, as I am only vaguely familiar with the greater concept of Scott Miller rather than the distillation of the concept into 3 minute packages (quite different than the usual circumstance), I don't know exactly how you funnel these influences into songs. I was pleasantly surprised to see albums by T. Rex, the Knack, and Black Sabbath on your lists. I think that artists such as the Beatles and Led Zeppelin achieve greatness because their songs cover the expansive range of human emotions and aural dynamics symbolizing these emotions. I was a little disappointed that there was a lack of albums that would have made me go "Wow, what an all-encompassing list..." Now, clearly, picking an album for pure kitsch value is probably not the best way to introduce fans to new music, but I was seemed to notice a trend of "critical acceptance" among the artists you picked.

Maybe I'm overstepping my bounds and will get laughed back to Baltimore for this one, but I was wondering what your take on some commonly laughed at, but really quite good bands are (no, not "guilty pleasures" -- remember my whole expanse of human emotions theory). Didn't you ever just want to crank up a Def Leppard CD in your car and sing along (really great melodies and production), or read David Lee Roth's book (one of the funniest people in pop music, and early Van Halen has proven impossible to duplicate), or steal a riff from Guns N' Roses?

Here are some positive statements about those artists: "Sweet Child O' Mine" is one of the twenty or so best songs of that year. "Jamie's Crying" is one of the thirty or so best songs of that year (1978 -- very tough competition year!), and I have laughed more than once at David Lee Roth's witticisms in interviews. "Bringing On the Heartache" is one of the thirty or so best songs of that year -- '81, wasn't it?

But speaking truthfully of my overall personal involvement with them, most of those bands' material is really boring to me, and would have been at any point in my life. I'm old enough that to me hard rock is Hendrix and *Beggars Banquet*; I like my hard rock fairly bluesy and arty. The White Stripes are much more my speed as hard rock goes.

I will also add that if you don't think it's dicier to admit to thinking *Get the Knack* is a great album than *Appetite For Destruction*, you know a different set of critics and rock fans than I do.

(Maybe you did these things and just don't really talk about them...) I mean, I love Pavement records and Big Star's *3rd/Sister Lovers* is a classic, but I can't really listen to them very often...

Maybe it's just me -- I've always found *Big Star Third* to be one of the most pleasant listens ever. Although I'm very wedded to the "Stroke It Noel" PVC sequence. "Kizza Me" is an okay -- if brash -- opener, but put "Thanks You Friends" second instead of last, and I almost think "well of course you won't like it."

Pavement have plenty of songs I've always considered highly listenable: "Summer Babe," "Debris Slide," "Grounded," "Stereo," "Texas Never Whispers," "Ann Don't Cry." They're one of those bands that a lot of people like for, well, I won't say wrong reasons, but maybe the same reason they'd like a lot of other bands I think are terrible. You'd think from the press that they existed just to challenge the faint of heart with grating, half-assed recordings, but most of their material is quite thoughtful and entertaining. I find "Cut Your Hair" off-the-scale enjoyable and accessible and have some difficulty imagining anyone preferring to hear "Running With the Devil."

Maybe I just like a little too much red meat and sugar with my usually healthy musical diet, but I wonder if any of Mitch Easter's Mick Box fandom ever rubbed off on you.

Other people have asked me about Uriah Heep. Never heard a note.

Final question -- any chances for a rerelease of the Game Theory CDs, or a Game Theory box (I'm sure that Not Lame Records would take one look at eBay prices and jump at the

chance, I hear the Posies and Jellyfish sets were excellent too). Thanks for listening -- if you want any recommendations for cheesy fist-in-the-air anthem CDs, I'll fill you in.

Perry

About half the material had one round of reissuing in the nineties, but nowadays I hear about reissue plans coming and going and I'm just kind of numb to it all. I was all set to be involved in a sort of *Lolita Nation* director's cut project (that's one of the Game Theory records, if you don't know), but that seems to not be going anywhere. Apparently one problem is that the masters to all that stuff are in the Capitol Records vaults and it's not clear who will be able to gain physical access to them.

thanks a lot for writing,

--Ramblin' T.S. Eliot

December 8, 2003

Scott, a recent review of *From Ritual to Romance* in *Uncut* magazine referred to the Loud Family as "[t]he Chicago brood." As a native Chicagoan, allow me to be the first to welcome you to the Windy City. It was very clever of you to pretend to be from somewhere else every time you played here.

Scott: Well, thanks; I do love Chicago. And I love brooding. Our booking agent is in Chicago. I wonder if that's the confusion.

I was recently making a "Best of the Loud Family" tape (er, sorry) for a friend of mine who, despite her many positive qualities, has somehow managed to spend 36 years on this planet without becoming familiar with your work. As I was re-listening to all the Loud Family CDs, writing down song lengths, and considering the proper track order to ensure maximum listener impact, it occurred to me that I was spending way too much time and effort making something that I really ought to be able to purchase.

You know, you need Mac iTunes. It takes care of the song length computations and lets you audition the transitions.

So I need to ask: Is there any possibility that we will see a *Tinker to Evers to Chance*-type Loud Family compilation someday? The merits of such a CD seem so obvious that I don't feel the need to go into them here, but I will offer my suggested track listing if it will help ease the pain of trying to condense the Loud Family's history into 75 minutes.

Sure, I'd like to see it -- I value an opinion that's had some thought put into it.

Alias own the Loud Family master recordings, and I don't think they're putting new things out, so I'm not able to imagine how the release of such a thing would go.

Finally, thanks for signing my CD of *Lolita Nation* a few years back, and I'm sorry I joked at the time that I hoped to sell it on eBay someday to finance the educational needs of my as yet unborn children. I feel kind of bad about that whenever I think of it.

Andrew McDonald

Better than selling your unborn children on eBay to buy CDs, though.

trying to condense the Loud Family's history into 10 years,

--Scott

December 15, 2003

Scott, I was wondering what your opinions were on the bootleg trend -- you know, the thing where you take the vocal track to one song and attach it to the instrumental track of another song and hopefully end up with something interesting when you're done. (It could use a better name, though, frankly -- I mean, "bootleg" already has a music-related meaning, and the alternate word "mash-ups" just sounds too juvenile to me.)

Scott: Your mail is the first I've heard of it.

Such songs, of course, dwell in that area of intellectual property rights where things start to get nebulous. One could come up with a defense of the practice claiming that bootlegs are critical speech (the implied criticism being, for instance, "This Christina Aguilera vocal sure does sound better with music by the Strokes instead of the crap on the original song"), but I find it a little depressing to have to get so legalistic. Thoughts?

It's nice to think of people having the right to create whatever they want for themselves, with whatever raw materials they want, and play it for as many friends as they can -- as a noncommercial, social experience, in physical space -- without having to pay anyone royalties.

And, if it turns out you also enjoy the genre, or at least intellectually approve of it, what do you think about making an a cappella version or two of your songs available on the site for people like me (yes, it's true, I have made a number of bootlegs myself, as you perhaps had guessed by now) to play around with?

I'm flattered, but I love mankind far too much to ever let it hear me singing a capella.

Just how unexpectedly great does this stuff sound? It's a little hard to imagine anything like radically serendipitous combinations. Have you tried playing "The Wizard of Oz," only instead of the soundtrack, you play *Dark Side of the Moon*, and instead of the *Dark Side of the Moon* vocal tracks, it's Christina Aguilera?

This isn't meant to imply your songs need improving! It's just that, as someone who acquired the technology to create bootlegs based on the fact that not enough other

people working within the genre were really catering to my esoteric musical tastes, it gets hard to dig up interesting vocal tracks to work with.

Francis Heaney

If it makes you feel any better, I don't own any of my masters, so I wouldn't have the option of playing with my own vocal tracks even if I wanted to.

having a mash-up with the YardAikens,

--Scott

ASK SCOTT

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

2004 (Year 8: from May 2004 Scott had a lay-off until June 2006)

January 5, 2004

Scott, I saw your show in NYC a couple years ago... it was great.

What do you think about the cute ex-Beatle having another kid at 63?

William Pollock

Scott: Thanks -- I enjoyed that show a lot (the Knitting Factory, right?).

I think Paul probably knows more than most men about being a good dad and husband, and I assume he'll do a great job. I haven't heard of any of Paul's children playing instruments, so maybe he's worried about being the only Beatle yet to contribute a next-generation supergroup member.

happy new year!

--Scott

January 12, 2004

Scott, you don't by chance be the same Scott Miller that happened to be in the Marine Corps, early seventies? I had a friend named such that was really smart and from California; just a thought.

Scott: Different Scott Miller. I was about five years too young to be in the Marine Corps then. And thank you for calling me smart; it must be obvious I fish for that compliment!

On another thought, congrats on keeping me guessing as to what the hell you're gonna record next. Come back to St. Louis if you get the time and the money's right.

Steve Graham

The money's right for me, I'm just sometimes not right for the money.

thanks for writing

--the increasingly other Scott Miller

Scott, You are Loved.

Scott: Smooches back!

I want you to know that there is someone who loves you very much. That's important to know in the "dog eat dog world" in which we live. We spend our lives trying to earn love and respect and somehow we never seem to "measure up." It's wonderful to be loved without reservation, without having to earn it. We are loved, not because we are good, not because we have lived up to expectations, and not because we've tried to live a good life, but we are loved just like we are... faults and all. God has put a high value on our lives in that He gave His Son to die on a cross to pay the penalty for all our sins. He has a very high purpose for your life!

Woah, slow down, person or spam engine Emory Ausley. I think we need to be a little more reflective about the *good news* of people dying on crosses.

After 42 years of struggling with the meaning of life and what the purpose of my life should be, I met a man named Jesus and He changed my life. It has been wonderful to be loved unconditionally and to finally realize the meaning of life itself. I'm writing you to share this love and to let you know that you are a very special person in the sight of God. He only wants good for you and wants to help you in all of your trials.

I sincerely think that's wonderful. It would be interesting, special person that I am, to be told some of the details of this meaning being given to life. It's inspiring that anyone would give his life for another, but I feel decidedly uneasy thinking that someone would have to die for me, Scott Miller, to bring meaning to my life. The Jesus who stopped the stoning of a woman caught in adultery seems to be trying to teach the world not to locate the meaning of life in people dying on crosses, and in similar situations. So let's please approach the subject with a bit more respect for the complexity of Jesus' issues.

The Holy Bible tells us in the book of Romans, chapter 3 verse 23, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Romans 6:23 reads "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Romans 10: 9-10 goes on to read, "Because if you confess the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth one confesses unto salvation."

Who is your audience? Unbelievers who will nevertheless accept proofs based on the New Testament? You do see the problem there, right?

If you haven't already experienced His love, you can by praying this simple prayer and by believing in your heart that He has answered it to the fullest. "Father, I come to you as a sinner. I repent and ask you to forgive my sin and to come into my heart and take control of my life. Fill me with your Holy Spirit and enable me to be the person that you want me to be. Please use me to help others and help me to realize and fulfill the purpose for my life. Thank you Jesus for dying to pay the penalty for my sin. I accept your sacrifice for my salvation. Enable me by the power of your Holy Spirit to live a life that will be pleasing to you. Amen."

Thank you, that is lovely -- right up until "thank you Jesus for *dying*," which, again, has a troubling ring to it. Dare I say, a pagan ring: "thank you, human sacrifice, for appeasing the angry god in our stead." My personal study of Christianity leads me to agree with those who think it's subtly but significantly wrong that God ransomed his son to himself. It lets humanity off the hook. If we cannot understand ourselves to be potential crucifiers, we are not saved.

If you prayed this prayer KNOW that you are now in the family of God and accepted into His Kingdom. It's that simple. This is the beginning point of a new relationship with Him. I encourage you to get a hold of a Bible and explore the person and characteristics of God that's revealed there. You can easily find one online simply by going to any search engine and typing in "the bible online."

Does such a sudden and simple conversion really work for people? How wonderful for them! But on behalf of most people I know, I must warn you that there are those of us who hear this sort of ancient-sacred-text-based supernatural death threat, and take it for strong evidence that Christians are coercive wackos.

I would like to encourage you to forward this email to anyone you know. Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:15-16)

God Bless You.

Emory Ausley

And you. Consider your email forwarded to some more of *the condemned*.

--St. Scott the Underpromoted

January 19, 2004

Scott, ya'know, it's been awhile since we (as in faithful followers, aka "fans") have heard from you. What gives? but don't use that line as Young Fresh Fellows beatcha to it. Get your ass back in the studio along with Zak and put out (sexual innuendoes included) something *we* can absorb and become influenced by! Go to work!

Steve Graham

Scott: You know you're getting old when you can't spot sexual innuendo even after someone points it out.

Thanks a lot for writing and offering encouragement! To review, I did continue putting out full studio albums for as long as it was a viable business venture for fifty people or however many were involved, but buyers do vote with their feet in such matters and it turned out

not to sustain farther than it did. I'm looking into participating in a few projects where the stakes are lower.

hope Zak Starkey starts returning my calls,

--Scott

Scott, I stumbled across a Loud Family web site that had your email address on it, and I thought... what the fuck. I'm sitting at my kitchen table (which, this being NYC, is also my desk, the living room center, etc.), listening to *Tinkers To Evers to Chance* because I couldn't decide whether to listen to *Big Shot Chronicles* or *Lolita Nation*. I know you've moved on to other things, but I must say this: you created some of the best and most lasting pop music in the history of pop music. These words must be of little sustenance, given that, well, they are just words and do not reflect the taste of a nation at large.

Scott: Thanks. I do appreciate it. I'm enjoying the situation where I'm no longer on the radar of the kind of people who don't want to hear what my music does, so when I hear from someone, it's almost always to say something nice.

My discovery of Game Theory is thanks to Byron Coley and his fanzine, and his recommendation, over and over again, or all of your records.

Now, who the fuck am I to be writing to you? No one, really. A fan. A former writer. Our paths crossed twice: Once in Chicago when I interviewed you for *Jet Lag Magazine*, and once again via telephone when I was co-editor and co-publisher of the late *Catharsis Magazine* out of Norfolk, VA (check it out on the internet ... there's some stuff about you posted).

You know, I think I remember you.

After *Tinkers*, which is a commendable compilation, I lost touch with your work. I heard the Loud Family shortly after you released the first CD, but didn't love it, so, given where I was going at the time, it was only natural for me to let my interest wane. For that I apologize. I have no idea to this day what the Loud Family sounds like, except that I remember vaguely not liking it when it was coming from a tinny car stereo in a Toyota driving back from a Faithhealers show in Provincetown, RI. I did manage to astonish everyone in the car, though, when I said that it sounded like Game Theory. Good ear, they all said.

Whatever.

I thought of the Loud Family as targeting people who were a little out of sync with the times, musical taste wise, but I think we overachieved in that area.

So, 15 years after the first time I saw you play live, I sit here, in my living room/kitchen/rec room/multi-media chamber, listening to the velvet sound of your voice and the fluid hook-laden flow of the music that engulfs it, and, well, I'm as fucking impressed today as I was when I first heard "Erica's Word" way back when. Again, of little

consequence, is this hope I have that in a few years, Game Theory will be rediscovered, and, just as the Replacements wrote about Alex Chilton, some degenerate rock band (I say that with love, mind you) will memorialize your records in their songs, and kids will flock to the old CDs and maybe even vinyl to figure out what it was about. Sure, don't plan your retirement on that, but still... it could happen, couldn't it?

All of this is to say two things: (1) Hello, had to reach out to you; and (2) Thanks for the great music that has kept me in good company for all these years.

George Paaswell

That's a really nice message. Thanks so much!

--Wane County

January 26, 2004

Scott, there's something I want to ask you that just popped into my head today.

I've done my own projects, musical and otherwise of course, and when I get finished, they tend to acquire a compressed glitter and shine, a completion, to where I don't like anyone messing with it when I'm finished. For that matter, I'm not always so crazy about hearing their critiques either. I get the feeling "That's what it's supposed to be, so don't screw with it", and when I'm feeling saucy, there's the addendum "Okay then, do your own and see how we all like it, smartass."

When I listen to your music, ever since 1985 when I got *Real Nighttime*, I have that same feeling of compressed completion, as if someone had toiled over every nuance to the extent that any change would diminish the whole. Knowing how many people are usually involved in a recording project (or any project for money), I find it fascinating that this feel could have been preserved.

Was I supposed to feel that way? Did you?

Say it's so,

Ken S.

Scott: Hi, Ken -- many thanks for listening since 1985. You have earned the name of "survivor."

You're right, I fuss over every aspect of an album. I never just do my job and let other people do theirs; I interfere and think I know better when I probably don't, and I act like the world is paying terribly close attention to what I do. I've never really been in the position where someone from the label tried to change an album I thought was finished, but I have to think my ensuing unrelenting snittiness would have worn them down.

For some reason, I don't often feel like negative comments from critics are inappropriate. Even when I think a reviewer is frankly underqualified to assess music, I tend to think I failed fair and square to get something across.

It could be that the core of what you're talking about when thinking "that's what it's supposed to be, so don't screw with it" is something that gets clearer to me the older I get, and that's that audiences tend to conceive of the function of entertainment as being simpler than it really is. The naive model is that to the extent that the artist expresses the human experience lucidly, charmingly, and professionally, all is well and the listener enthusiastically accepts the results. But in some respects, what is swallowed that easily is actually ineffective. It's only what comes across as arch, wimpy, off-putting, disappointing, inappropriate, out-of-it, etc., that offers the opportunity of actually imparting something -- of actually teasing someone into growing a little. Some albums are easy illustrations. No doubt there was a lot of desire to "screw with" *Pet Sounds* and turn it into something that made a lot more 1966 listeners happy, at the cost of gutting its personal integrity and power to critique culture.

Still, I can hardly be so bold as to presume that my albums are worthwhile in that way, short as I am of a like community of heavy-hitting critics testifying to their worthiness.

powerless to vote myself back on the island,

--Scott

February 2, 2004

Scott, I'm a big fan, so forth and so on.

It is my understanding that you've made it clear that you aren't interested in re-releasing any of the GT catalog. True dat?

Scott: No, I've been pretty consistently open to re-releasing the GT catalog, and have offered my cooperation when people have approached me about doing it. Most of it did have one round of re-release in the the 90s. The way I understand it, the only thing standing in the way is that the masters are physically inaccessible -- in the Capitol Records vault -- and the individual who owns the masters, Scott Vanderbilt, has not been able to coordinate obtaining them. Or maybe there's more to it than that; one tends to get news of when and why things heat up, but when and why they fizzle out stays relatively quiet.

We'd love to know what you think of the idea. We just never got the balls up to write and ask until now. We've been kinda scared.

I'm told I'm pretty approachable when I'm not behind the wheel of a car.

But the absence of new LF music prompted me to write...

Scott Born

thanks for being interested,

--Road Worrier

Scott, my name is Josh. I've been a fan of you and your music for years. I just happened to be mindlessly surfing the internet and came across the Loud Family's website. I'm really not the type of person to email musicians/artists, but what the hell??

Scott: I email musicians/artists. Is there a stigma I should know about?

I really don't expect a response as I'm sure you have better things to do, but I very much want to say that I truly admire your music. While my musical tastes have changed radically over the last 20 years, I have never been able to stray from the music you produced. Game Theory and The Loud Family are in many ways the music I grew up with. Okay, enough, I'm sure you hear this all the time and it's boring. However, I do want to thank you.

Let's at least prove I don't have better things to do.

Also, I enjoyed looking at your list of top albums from 1966 - 1999. We do share similar musical tastes. I was intrigued by the fact that you listed Guadalcanal Diary (another great band) from 1985 (*Walking in the Shadow of the Big Man*) and 1986 (*Jamboree*), but did not have what I believe to be their best album, 1987's *2X4*.

It must be a good sign that certain people generally agree with my selections but are flabbergasted at a particular omission. It means we must be remarkably close in most respects, which seems like a miracle, since my tastes must be out of the ordinary. At least, I look at something like the Village Voice polls and think they've been about two thirds incomprehensible since 1980.

I would be most interested in any commentary you have on this matter... again I'm sure you have better things to do than email some guy in Cincinnati about old Guadalcanal Diary albums.

The stimulating commentary to be had on this subject is: I've never heard *2X4*!

I thought I saw somewhere on the LF website that you are no longer musically active. I hope I misunderstood. There are so few really talented musicians/songwriters out there. I always saw Game Theory and the Loud Family as a welcomed oasis in a vast desert of really bad music.

How nice of you -- but that's just not true. There's been quite a bit of great music all along; you just have to do a little digging.

Okay, enough from me. Thanks again for the music. I would love to hear something new!

Joshua Wolk

Thanks for that, too. I have one eye open for little musical contributions I might be able to make here and there.

listomania,

--Scott

February 23, 2004

Scott, I had the pleasure of seeing Loud Family a couple of years ago at the 40 Watt in Athens on the last tour. I got the chance to talk with you after the show. One thing has bothered me since then and I can't seem to get it out of my head. Magnetic Fields were the headlining group and I remember commenting to you that your set was way too short. You seemed to be insulted in some way. I just wanted to say I was sorry if you were.

Scott: Ohhhh. You thought my *set* was way too short!

Keep on Rockin'

Joe Graves

P.S. Thanks for *Lolita Nation*. It is my number one record.

Thanks much. I'm still rockin' -- maybe not so hard that people shouldn't bother knockin', but that is as it should be.

--Scagmetal Fiend

Scott, if you remember, I'm your big Pittsburgh fan (you responded to me once). You and Ian Anderson are my favorite songwriters -- and I went all the way to Chicago to see and hear you play live. (I'm working poor... it was a big deal.)

Scott: I'm indeed honored!

So, looking through our local "alternative" paper tonight I see a "Scott Miller" coming here. Oh my gawd am I psyched! A bit more research and I have to guess that it is not *you* who is going to be here March 4, 2004. (There is a Scott Miller and the Commonwealth who I guess are the ones coming here. They sing about trains, or something. Unless you correct me... and thus give me something to look forward to...)

You are right, I am the non-train Scott Miller, and fortunately for train song fans it is not I who will be there March 4th.

Oh well. It did cause me to look for you again (I knew you were dumping the music after *Attractive Nuisance*) and at least I found your DVD and live CD, which I just ordered. I'm glad about those. And I'm very glad to see the Loud Family web site is still kind of active... hope springs eternal.

Kind of active? My friend, the party never stops here. We cannot get Paris Hilton to go home.

I've not read the more recent posts yet... just found it, ordered the new stuff, and wrote this e-mail. It's been a while since I looked at your site. I mean, I can respect your decisions regarding the music. But... you *have* to know by now that a lot of people really, really like your music! Please, think about giving us more, or at least some more live recordings...

Thank you. I keep an open mind. It takes a fair amount of time, work, and cooperation to put out good songs and I have no incentive at this point to put out half-baked ones.

I also found that software co. bio with you in a toy car and without curly hair. Well, I'm glad you drive a Lexus... but I'm really kind of bummed.

Uh, Jeremiah, I drive a used minivan. You must be talking about [the site I just found](#) by searching on +"Scott Miller" +Lexus +software. I'm now computing that a couple of people have asked about this site in the past, and I am not that Scott Miller; his reference to Game Theory is apparently a joke -- possibly a downright hoot for fans of "Joe Satriani and Rush (pre-1983)."

I listen to your music regularly. I'm sorry you didn't "make it" in the music biz, but look who does! You aren't like them! It seems like you are financially comfortable... please, give us more.... I don't mean to sound or be obnoxious, but... well... you *are* one of my favorite songwriters. How am I supposed to respond?

Y'know Scott, my little hamster friend died yesterday, after living with me for two years. Thinking you were touring again really made my day. Thinking I was going to hear you play live, right here in Pittsburgh, really got me going. I *am* happy about the DVD and live CD, but really man... your music is great. Can't we please have some more???

Come to Pittsburgh and play for me! :-)

With nothing but love, respect and full acceptance of whatever you want to do,

Your big fan,

Jeremiah McAuliffe

You're too kind, and I am now inspired.

For Ian! For the little hamster! For pre-1983!

--Scott

Scott, a quickie: The backwards track on "Self Righteous Boy" sounds like a snippet of "Don't All Thank Me." Is it?

Jack Lippold

Scott: You know, I honestly don't remember. I get curious myself about what that backward vocal is saying. Statistically speaking, it's probably something about Satan or Paul McCartney.

snosamehtybdellortnocsitforchsanhoj,

--Scott

March 7, 2004

Scott, everyone writing to you wants to talk about other people's music... and I'm no different. You once wrote:

I've discovered how easy it is to cheapen your past work by trying to sound good to people. People have good noses for pandering and very bad noses for true artistic worth [...]

which is a very thoughtful statement on its own; but do you think this has any relevance to the fuss that has been made around the Liz Phair album?

David Thomas Lynch

Scott: Hi, David. Thanks for writing. I don't have the latest Liz Phair, so no comment I could make would be too valuable. Interestingly, when I was in L.A. doing the sessions with Aimee Mann, our working day would consist of Aimee and me going into the studio with Michael Lockwood to work on our thing, while Aimee's husband, Michael Penn, went into another studio to produce the Liz Phair album. (To answer an obvious question, I have no idea if my session with Aimee will ever surface).

I guess some of the Michael-produced material is on Liz's album, but then I guess she hired Avril Lavigne's producer to score hits, and has in fact had a hit with the record.

I've liked all her other albums a whole lot, and that hit that goes "why can't I breathe whenever I think(?) about you?" is pretty good, so I'm at a bit of a loss to explain why I haven't gotten the album yet. It really has nothing to do with thinking she might cheapen her past work if she has a hit. In my quote above, I'm not concerned that a hit -- or crummy newer work -- *actually* cheapens past work, just that it makes a lot of people *feel* the past work has been diminished, so they avoid it, and I don't want to give thoughtful people a reason to avoid my work if I don't have to. I'm one of the people for whom the past work won't really be cheapened.

I guess it breaks down like this: for me to buy an album, I either have to know of at least one song that musically knocks me out, or I have to have faith that the album is by a first-rate artist who generally speaks to me. The hit is good but it falls pretty far short of being a knockout, and I've developed the impression that all Liz would care to communicate to me is

some adjustment or other to my idea of what she, Liz Phair, is all about. This is pretty different from feeling she wants to share her experience of life with me. She's at times a very insightful individual, but I've somehow accrued the feeling that she's been given over to the idea that the task of life is to take the variety of people in front of one, and arrange them so that they provide gratification. She doesn't long for them to know what she knows or feel what she feels.

thanks again for writing,

--Scott (self-titled)

March 15, 2004

Scott, I listened to *Days For Days* all day today.

therefore

must spew

LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE

Where when how what why are (aren't) you guys playing again?

Sandy Zwart

Scott: Hi, Sandy. Thank you so much for spewing, of all things, love.

As it happens, Alison and I are playing a show together in San Francisco on April 12th at a place called the Rite Spot. It'll be mostly two different sets of solo stuff, but don't be too surprised if we get together and drop some "Islands In the Stream" science on a few numbers!

I have no idea whether you're a (SF) Bay Area person or not, but I'll try to do a *Days For Days* song in your honor just in case. As for recording, I don't know. Alison and I talk about doing something. There seems to be hope that I have a project coming up with some original material from me, Anton Barbeau, and Jeff MacGregor of the Solipsistics, but I can't make any claims about what commercial form, if any, it might take. There's an Aimee Mann collaboration thing in cryogenic suspension. I'm hoping to do something with Bradley Skaught, with whom I've done a little cowriting from time to time.

just don't ask what cowriting has to do with the Rite Spot,

--Scott

April 12, 2004

Scott, I'm very excited to discover (just in time) that you'll be playing here in San Francisco on the 12th. I was listening to *Lolita Nation* this evening and preparing to send you an "Ask Scott" letter. I sat one table behind you at Gabe's Oasis in Iowa City back in the late '80s but wasn't able to muster the courage to talk to you. I think Full Fathom Five or the Dangtrippers opened for GT that night. I sort of had a crush on Ms. Thayer at the time (I was already a Game Theory fan).

Scott: I'm sorry we didn't get the chance to talk, although it's just as well that we didn't get the chance to talk about the crush on Ms. Thayer.

You performed a searing solo version of "You Can't Have Me" as an encore. Years later I caught up through the website and was pleased to see you connecting with fans. I'm leaving San Francisco soon (heading back to Iowa) and am really happy that you are playing at the Rite Spot this Monday.

Along with sets by Alison Faith Levy and Victor Krummenacher!

You probably have the set list ready, but would you consider playing "Where You Going Northern", "Chardonnay" or "Together Now, Very Minor"?

Let's see. "Where You Going Northern" -- probably too much to learn. "Chardonnay" -- sadly or luckily, I think I've lost all record of the original so-called long version lyrics, and that's really the way it should be played. But in any case, too much to learn. "Together Now" I could conceivably blunder through. Maybe if I get an encore.

Also, for years I thought you were singing "Hey Jude" on "We Love You Carol and Alison" when it was actually "They Need You"!

You are correct. I cannot always be stopped from singing "Hey Jude" but was that time.

I was 24 years old listening to *Real Nighttime* and found myself wondering if the reason my life hadn't taken off was because I wasn't yet 25. I found out later that age didn't play that big a role in how life unfolds, but that took years to discover. Thank you so much for music that still resonates, Scott. I'm looking forward to seeing you and Alison on Monday night.

Warm regards,

Russell Scheil

Thanks a lot for such a nice email. I hope you say hello at the show tomorrow. You can expect some fine entertainment tomorrow, and I'll be greatly disappointed with Alison and Victor if they don't provide it!

we want you in SF but I suppose Hey Jude back in Iowa,

--Scott

April 26, 2004

Scott, I too am deeply indebted to Rene Girard for stimulating my cortex and, more importantly, sharing a wisdom which has very positive and practical effects on my daily life, rather than simply remaining locked up in an ivory tower. I also got a lot out of the Girardian Gil Bailie's [Violence Unveiled](#), and notice that you have a lot of good things to say about Bailie both in your columns and in interviews.

So, without intending to stir up too much turbulence, I have to ask you: are you aware of Bailie's recent missives to members of the [Cornerstone Forum](#) coming down on abortion rights and gay marriage?

Scott: Yes, I subscribe to the forum and always greatly appreciate Gil's insights even when I don't agree with his positions.

Mind you, I certainly don't expect all you "progressive artistic types" to be straitjacketed into thinking the same way about everything; e.g., I respect Bob Dylan and surmise that a tremendous amount of reflection has gone into his spiritual journey, his non-PC views on some issues notwithstanding. Also, I am aware of Girardians who are pro-gay (James Alison) and others who support abortion rights (Eric Gans, who, unlike Bailie, does not equate abortion with human sacrifice).

Well, that's kind of a loaded way of putting it, even though I think you're right, that Gil and Girard do both talk about abortion having a "sacrificial" dimension. I think the gist of Gil's position is that it's irresponsible to consider pregnancy -- which one would terminate if it occurred -- a calculated risk in the more or less unexamined quest for sex, always more sex. Which is perfectly reasonable to me, and cause for reflection on how responsible I may have been at every point in my life. But their positions do seem more extreme than my own, and I'm not confident I understand them well enough to interpret them correctly.

Gil's opposition to gay marriage is closer to a clear-cut case of something with which I'd disagree. To reason that the family is the rock of civilization, and that the redefinition of marriage so as to defocus from family-building is an anthropological disaster may well be true -- what do I know? -- but if you asked me how that is a Christian rather than a pagan concern, I don't think I could tell you.

Here is an excerpt from Gil's March 31st message to subscribers:

Until the mid-20th century, it was quite obvious to everyone that marriage was about having, loving, and raising children. With the disconnection of heterosexual sex from child-bearing and the attendant familial responsibilities, marriage, it seemed, was mostly about sex, and sex, it seemed, was mostly about -- well -- sex, that is to say, about physical pleasure. If marriage is about sex and sex is about pleasure, then there is absolutely no reason to limit marriage to one man and one woman, nor to limit it to two people rather than three or five; nor, for that matter, to rule out, say, adult incest. To sever sexuality from natality and to assume that marriage is about sex and that sex is about pleasure, is to render heterosexuality morally and anthropologically indistinguishable from homosexuality, and

homosexuals can hardly be faulted for pointing this out. Thus does the spirit of this age operate: encouraging anthropological pipedreams of the most absurd and irresponsible sort, and bringing us to ruin for snapping at the bait.

You could probably pin me down to the attitude that marriage is mostly about sex. Without beginning to deny that other considerations are extremely important, I would say that if you pick two people entirely at random, the best gauge of their unsuitability for marriage would be the absurdity of their having sex with each other. So I ought to consider this something of a direct rebuke from someone I consider to be very much my intellectual superior on the general subject. The problem is that I just don't understand it very well. For one thing, wouldn't the concern about "sever[ing] sexuality from natlity" apply as well to any childless marriage as it would to homosexuals? The fact of society recognizing the validity of a childless couple's marriage commitment does not in my mind pose any sort of threat to familial responsibility just because it disconnects heterosexual sex from child-bearing. Now, a royal house of ancient Greece or Persia would *certainly* tell you about the anthropological ruin of inattention to matters of bloodline, but would Jesus? The Jesus of "Who are my mother and my brothers?/Any who do God's will"? So I think I need to hear the case specifically against homosexual marriage where there's a one-to-one commitment.

I interpret the Christian grounds Gil seems to be giving as "be not conformed to the spirit of the age," which in this case is a little broad for me to know what to do with it. If the spirit of the age is racial equality, should I oppose racial equality? The bottom line here could be kind of a Catholic thing: faith in papal edict should be the end of the discussion; but that would *really* be putting words in his mouth that he didn't say, so I'm just left a bit unsure of what to make of it all. I should at least add that out of context this makes Gil appear a good deal more homophobic than I otherwise take him to be (great fan of W.H. Auden that he is).

So, I guess what I'm asking is, how do the implications of Girardian theory effect *your* politics, and, without meddling too much, your ethical decisions in general?

I'd had an inchoate sense of the supreme importance of both Christianity (mostly from reading T.S. Eliot) and societal scapegoating structures (mostly, I guess you'd say, from writing "poetry" seriously for a long time), and Girard put a lot of the mysterious elements together into a breathtakingly lucid cultural theory. I have Gil to thank for both a far better reading of Eliot than I could have ever managed myself, and I guess shared credit for my discovery of Girard (with my friend Bob Lloyd who was then at Stanford University Press).

Just understanding the radicality of the change Christianity has made to Western (and world) consciousness -- whether you love Christianity or you hate it -- makes world events a lot more intelligible. I've also tried to study other major religions as much as I can, to understand where people's ultimate concerns lie.

One Girardian concept I find applicable in the real world once in a while is "structural innocence," which Kierkegaard touched on when he said "the crowd *is* untruth." Pontius Pilate's famous utterance "What is truth?" epitomizes the attitude that there's no real right and wrong in life, it's always in effect ultimately a matter of deciding whose interests coincide with your own. But the revelation -- and it's really Judeo-Christian revelation -- is

that it's possible to decide innocence according to the cultural benefit accruing to those deciding the guilt. It's a hard concept to articulate and I wouldn't nominate myself for the job, but here's a very freewheeling paraphrasing of Kierkegaard: "we may not know what truth is, but I sure as hell saw them making the lie that opposes it with my own two eyes."

Hoping all this contributes more to gathering than scattering of thoughts on the the subject! ([Lk 11:23](#), a passage well elucidated to me in a Bailie essay, I have to say.)

La paz sea contigo,

Don David de Vigo (Spain)

Thanks very much for writing. You mentioned Bob Dylan, and I'm reminded of an interview from about 1983 where he was asked a kind of smartass question that went something like "how can you believe in the Bible when it told people to condemn homosexuals, and that would mean condemning your friend Allen Ginsberg?" I think he said something very close to "It didn't tell *me* to condemn homosexuals, it told *them*." Amazing damn answer, I thought.

more blathering than scattering,

--Scott

May 10, 2004

Scott, one of my favourite writers is Marcel Proust. Have you read his work?

Xavier

Scott: Yes, I've read the first volume, *Swann's Way*. I thought it was wonderful, and I've gotten even more out of it in retrospect since reading Rene Girard's commentaries. I thought it was a fairly difficult read, though; I have doubts that I'll be able to find the time to get through all of *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*. I've only read it in translation, but Proust (or so it appears) used very long sentences to render very long descriptions. This was a man who could talk for several pages about how the light hits a steeple. In my twenties, I struggled not to be bored by some of it; I think now I'd have a better sense of how he was knitting the described events into the larger cloth. Failing reading it all, I currently have the more modest goal of reading the first volume in French; I've read one novel in French now (the 1950 sci-fi classic *Ravage* by Rene Barjavel) and I'm gathering the impression that while Proust for a native speaker is difficult, and Proust translated to English is difficult, Proust in French for a non-native speaker isn't *doubly* difficult. French doesn't seem to be at its most challenging during a careful, ornate description; it's at its most challenging when someone tosses off a quick idiom and you're supposed to know all the implications, but you don't.

Where it moves along is where Proust captures personalities and human nature, starting with the salient feature of childhood -- the initial-condition for adulthood -- being an insatiable neediness for attention and validation. The book certainly leaves many indelible impressions. I'm thinking of the way he describes the woman with the manufactured way of

laughing at the dinner table, where she always throws her head back with her mouth open for a couple of silent seconds before emitting the laugh.

As for writing about unrequited love, he's up there with Todd Rundgren.

--Marcel Voyager

May 24, 2004

Scott, I only just now discovered your site, even though I'm a longtime listener of Game Theory and Loud Family. (Not an aggressive web-surfer, I guess.) My comment: I'm so blown away by reviewing [the list of "favorite albums."](#) It's like you've been listening through secret headphones into my life. Wild. I realize it is partly explained by the fact that we're nearly the same age, but still uncanny seeming on first reflection. On second reflection, maybe there are legions more of us around... In any event, thanks for all yr terrific music over the decades, and best of luck.

Chet Hertz

Scott: Thanks; it's fun hearing from like-minded people. I sometimes imagine what fun it would be to have the means to operate a radio station which each day picks a fairly random date from the past, and plays what radio actually *should* have been playing in that era. I think it would be great to observe how accessible people would consider a lot of it today; there's no reason the average "Free Bird"-yelling middle American shouldn't have been going nuts for "Try Try Try" by Julian Cope in 1995 or "Red Morning Light" by the Kings of Leon in 2003.

--secret head

Ask Scott took a break from here until mid-2006.

ASK SCOTT

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

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

June 23, 2006

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

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

I really want to see the Al Gore movie.

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

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

Roger Winston

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

Nice to hear from you, Roger!

Impeachment & Cream,
--Scott

July 10, 2006

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

Andy (almost) Twenty Years Later

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

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

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

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

July 17, 2006

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

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

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

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

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

Contrivially yours,
Jack L.

Thanks for writing, Jack!

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

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

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

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

Back to Quad,
--Scott

August 14, 2006

Hey Scott!

Scott: Hey, Derek, thanks for writing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thanks for your time,
Derrick

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

2. Have you read *The Brothers Karamazov*?

guided by guides,
--Scott

September 4, 2006

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

Credo quia absurdum,
Kenneth Nixie

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

spiritualized,
--Scott

October 23, 2006

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

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

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

Thanks,
Lance

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

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

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

1986: Fall: almost positive we played The Cat Club

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

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

I'm probably forgetting at least one show.

Thanks for writing, Lance!

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

--Scott

November 13, 2006

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

November 27, 2006

Hey Scott—I live in Iowa City, and was there for your in-store at the Record Collector and show at Gabe's on the *Plants & Birds...* tour. Feels like it was yesterday but it must have been 13 years ago...

At the time I was told that you work as some sort of software engineer—is that still the case?

Scott: Still is. My degree was in electrical engineering, being at the time the closest thing to studio recording that passed as a respectable enough university avenue for my parents to pay for. But then doing software became a lot more obvious a way to make a comfortable living than anything right in my area of study, which I began becoming convinced would have to be something like 3-D terrain signal processing for cruise missiles. The only viable thing I'd probably rather do than what I do now for similar financial reward is produce

records, but the reality in my circumstances would involve too much traveling away from my family.

I make music and write software as a day job, and I'm kind of conflicted about whether I'd really be happier making music full time—there's something liberating about not having to worry about making money or appealing to an audience. My friend Josh 'Kit' Clayton works at Cycling 74 and has a recording/performing career, and he made the decision to never depend on music to make money because he didn't like the choices he had to make to make money at it.

I hear that loud and clear. But I can honestly say I found the '80s and '90s such an incoherent period of musical history that I wouldn't have been capable of making an audience-pleasing decision if I'd dedicated my life to it. Today seems a lot more normal. It seems to me someone like, say, Sufjan Stevens would have sounded great to most culture-savvy listeners up until about 1979, then sounded incomprehensible until about 1997, then ramped back up to sounding completely acceptable again. Is that just me?

Which could either be a completely valid artistic choice, or abdicating from actually building an audience, and grasping at more artistic cred than you deserve as an amateur. In Josh's case I think it's the former and in mine perhaps the latter ;-) On the other hand I have friends hitting their mid-thirties living in crappy apartments and sleeping in the van when they tour, trying to make a living as working musicians. They seem pretty happy about it, but you can see the fatigue in their eyes.

Yeah. The key to happiness in this life is to find enough of what, for lack of a better word, I'll call a spiritual path that you're able to conceive of and work toward personal validation outside the social order. And in no situation is that more challenging than when your living depends directly on pleasing audiences day to day.

What it came down to for me is the times when doing music seemed like it was a job, it wasn't fun any more. I'd rather try and make money to live doing something I didn't have an emotional attachment to avoid that feeling—that showing up to play in Oskaloosa was a chore...

Anyway, thanks for continuing your own particular crooked row...

Kent Williams

Thank you! It seems like making music always involves at least as much time spent not having fun as any bad job. There's almost no way for me to enjoy changing strings, working up to being able to sing or play hard parts without mistakes, spending hours a day in some continuum between isolation and social awkwardness, frequently with no clear plan for being able to eat, sleep, or use a bathroom, or going through contentious legal negotiations as a matter of routine. You just have to have an intense enough love for music that you're willing to let some portion of your life get pretty stupid to cause a few drops of good music to drip into the bucket.

Verse, Chores, Verse, Chores, Chores,
--Scott

December 18, 2006

The singer/songwriter Stew recently said, "It's not the job of the artist to GIVE A FUCK, only to GIVE." As an artiste yourself, I was curious what you thought of that sentiment.

Sue

Scott: Okay, so first I'll say Stew is a brilliant guy and I take his advice to artists to heart! But the question to me boils down to whether I'd be inclined to feel the same way if I didn't know who said it, right? I think I pretty much agree. An artist is different from an entertainer in that the entertainer is more interested in finding out what the audience wants and providing that, and the artist is more interested in informing the audience what it *ought* to want. I love this R. G. Collingwood statement: "The artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts."

Not that, speaking for myself, I'm 100% artist and 0% entertainer when I do music; I've always set out to be a mix of both. Or maybe I'd say that I've set out to be a mix insofar as we're talking about doing music as a "job," if we take that to be an important word in Stew's quote. A "job" is performed to someone's satisfaction; if you literally don't care who finds your results satisfactory, it's somewhere between a "hobby" and a "calling."

10% Fun!,
--Scott

ASK SCOTT

Downloaded from the *Loud Family / Music: What Happened?* website and re-ordered into Jan-Dec

2007 (Year 10)

February 12, 2007

First off, congratulations on the birth of your 2nd daughter. I'm a father of a girl who is 9 now. Best thing I've ever done!

Scott: Thanks very much!

I've been a fan since I heard "I've Tried Subtlety" as a college DJ in 1986 in Richmond. Thank you for all the great music. Your songs are intricate and totally unique, but always accessible too. This is rare.

You're too kind.

As a fan of the indie / punk scene from way back, I didn't listen to much classic rock, but I loved the band Rush for the same reason. Too many bands trade melody for complexity or business today... (A well known band down the street in Charlottesville, VA who shall remain nameless is probably the worst offender of this.)

I don't know that much Rush, I'm sorry to say. My band in high school did a song called "The Best I Can," but it was one the other singer sang, and of course Kenny Kessel's epochal deployment of "By-Tor and the Snow Dog" in the Loud Family 2000 DVD.

Now for my question(s):

Do the names of girls in your songs relate to actual gals you've known? (Erica, Linda, Joanie, Carol, Allison, Penny, etc...)

No, that just always struck me as a common lyrical style that had an almost magical incantation aspect, for which I was rather forlorn about the world losing the knack. It's hard to explain, and it's funny that you mentioned finding my songs totally unique, but I'm always conscious of trying to sound like something else, mostly something pretty old. The time when I started having record deals was unfortunately the time I thought the whole music business was finally going right down the eye of the toilet. I was really naive enough to think that groups like the dBs were going to rise triumphantly and define the 1980s, whereas of course it was, you know, Madonna. I remember feeling it was essential to hold on to this mid-sixties way of talking about a particular girl with a particular mysterious complexity the way Bob Dylan would, or something.

I like the fact that your lyrics contain no cliches. Who is your primary literary influence?

Oh, my lyrics have their share of cliches, but I appreciate the thought. My primary literary influence is T.S. Eliot, surpassing James Joyce about ten years ago. Now there were a couple of fellows who could avoid cliches if they wanted.

Can you tell me what the song "Crash into June" is all about? Thanks again for all the great music—I'm ordering *WIIW* now.

**Be good,
Clay Asbury**

"Crash Into June" was one of those songs that I was so convinced was a failed piece of writing as we were working it up that I've always had a strange grudge against it, but nowadays it doesn't seem worse than anything else I wrote around then. The lyrics are about coming to terms with impulses toward nostalgia, and how that involves a feeling that the good times, such as they are, are necessarily hurtling past and can't be latched onto.

remembering the fabulous 19Hades,
--Scott

March 5, 2007

I've been listening to *SMiLE* tonight, again. As you no doubt know, after all these years Brian, strained through a generous helping of Darian, finally squeezed it out in between hallucinations. In a rather perverse way (I suppose), I somehow miss the days when the closest thing I had to the real article was the French import of *Smiley Smile*, clipped and psych as it was (or was that me?); I always worry when the salesmen return from the tent where virgin art once lightly dozed, self-satisfied smirks painted on their greasy faces like cheap red lipstick—nay, shun Lolita: I hate being supposed to like something.

Scott: Wow, can anyone's hat not be off to you for that characterization?

Personally, I consider *SMiLE* the "real" *Pet Sounds*. Okay, so Brian is now worn out enough to be propped up on stage by his handlers without seeming too crazy, except sometimes... and of course angelic genius still lurks in that murky, chaotic, spinning, fragged olive-drab and mustard-yellow twister called the Mind of Brian; but is it still art, seeing as it's now in a million tiny angelic pieces?

You know, far be it from me to suggest that Brian's mind might have some company...

I've been wondering, since I got the DVD and went to the legendary gig at Montalvo Winery down the 85 (ticket stub in scrapbook): what did you think of the finished *SMiLE* product, released 35 years late?

I thought it was fantastic—considerably better than I expected. Some of the material positively came alive; I'd never quite flipped over "Wonderful" or "Wind Chimes" before, but the new *SMiLE* versions are gorgeous. I always thought "Heroes and Villains" was a little on the rinky-dink side, and "Surf's Up" was more art-damaged than brilliant, but you put them

together in the same project, especially with the recurring musical themes, and they really start to add up to something. Outside of any rational critique I could offer, it gives me an eerie feeling of someone having salvaged discarded pieces of American life as I've known it and stitched these into a sort of tapestry, that says, "you thought you had disowned all of this, but whether it's good news or bad, it is not really gone."

Were you inspired by the work?

I was definitely inspired. It's not clear to me what exactly I should be doing with that kind of inspiration at this point in my life, but I was.

Do you see any of your records as being on the same level, either statement-, cohesion-, or composition-wise?

I've certainly labored to achieve those categories of effectiveness, but I have to think if I were having anywhere near that level of success, there would be some obvious body of evidence, like steady healthy sales or constant critical attention.

Hint on last question: I do, but I'd rather you go first.

**Your pal and Brian's,
Ken S. Nixie**

Thanks, that's very kind of you. Actually, supporters occasionally remind me that some of my albums go for collector prices, so maybe based on that I'd be willing to claim that they have at least as much literary merit as a Nolan Ryan rookie card.

He gives speeches but they put him back in bed,
--Scott

April 2, 2007

Across all your records I have a very strong sense of the "album as artifact", each one a carefully sequenced set of songs that rewards playing in full.

Scott: That's very true; when record labels have changed my sequence, it's seemed insane to me. In Europe, they would only release one disk of the *Lolita Nation* material, and it sounded like a pathetic album to me.

There are lots of lovely architectural features, like the linking tracks on *Days For Days* or that same skronk that starts *Lolita Nation* and *Plants and Birds*, the little descriptions of songs, the things that always make it fun to get a new Scott Miller record, to see what you've done! Was this something that you agonised over or a process you undertook for pure pleasure alone?

There's no question that I agonized over the earliest one of those, *Lolita Nation*. That was in late 1986 to '87. It was a fairly low period of my personal life, and I thought that not only

had the music business as a whole descended into a godawfully stupid state, but I wasn't sure my contribution made any practical sense—I was feeling that the more I got things right, the fewer people liked it. *Lolita Nation* was a really stubborn attempt to do everything as an exaggeration of my own idiosyncrasies, and I was feeling depressed that this would just drag the band's career down for no particular higher purpose. I deliberately sang more in that high, airy way than ever because I thought that was the only way to capture the feeling of being in a kind of dream state that social reality couldn't commandeer. It seems a little misguided now that I try to explain myself, but I pretty much succeeded at the task I set myself.

If I had to describe a theme behind the "architectural features" of my albums, it's that I often feel a compulsion to go off the page and come up with a sort of meta-narrative commentary. Songs have a tendency to just say the things songs always say; different art forms suffer from different variations of that pathology. I want to get across that besides playing the making-albums-to-please-listeners game by the usual rules, there's this other thing to be expressed. For instance, on *Days For Days*, I wanted to create a venue where the same listener is expected to enjoy both relatively conventional pop music and relatively unconventional compositions. It's strangely not done. There's a weird social fiction that you're supposed to position yourself as a listener of one or a listener of the other, but the reality is that even not very sophisticated listeners are more than capable of appreciating both forms of expression. In fact, maybe "sophistication" is the problem; it conditions someone not to be sympathetic with some so-called "unsophisticated" point of view, sometimes arbitrarily.

And now that you aren't making a record every couple of years, do you miss making these artful packages for your songs?

I miss the couple of weeks right after a release when it's possible to imagine that people are going to enthusiastically embrace it.

Thank you for everything!

John Allison

thank you for suggesting there is an everything to thank me for,
--Walter Skronkite

Is it possible to get the new cd autographed; are there plans to tour europe one day (and esp. belgium)?

filip dejongh

Scott: Buy the album directly from [125](#), and we will get it pimped out for you. (The editor adds: put a note in the comments section of your PayPal order and we'll see what we can do.)

I'd love to tour Europe; I've only ever toured in the U.S., Canada, and England. Not to suggest that every man, woman, and child in Belgium wouldn't want a ticket were I to show up, but are there certain cities where, uh, perhaps semi-obscure 1980s college radio bands

do better than others? I've been even more out of the swing of the music biz than I ever was since I've had small children, but I got to Paris to produce Swan Plastic Swan last year so maybe anything is impossible. Or maybe not very possible things are really not very possible. Anyway, thanks for the note!

--Belgian waffler

June 11, 2007

Every year at about this time I go back to the early period of the Game Theory catalog. I could probably ask you hundreds of questions at once, but instead I'd like to inquire about one of my favorite songs (that also seems to be one of your most chaotic/psychotic from that era), "Friend of the Family". I have enjoyed trying to untangle as to what this song is about for only 17 years now. The only rationalization that I have made was in the title/lyric "...friend of the family..." It seems to remind me of a news report wherein some sort of tragedy occurs and the report would end with a comment from "a friend of the family." Was that a good guess?

Scott: I like that way of putting it. It's a relationship song and these people are going around with an attitude of having to shake off the mundane in favor of something more vivid and worthwhile, but in an undisciplined way that just becomes desperate. I think I was trying to get at what sort of thing is on the mind of people who are on the verge of becoming dangerous troublemakers for no obvious reason. There is such a thing as assuming for yourself a borderline-outsider status like friends-of-the-family for some tragic event, just as a symptom of tending to gravitate toward something certifiably emotionally intense and focused.

As I have probably mentioned to you before, this is why yourself and Steely Dan can continually hold my attention for decades.

**Your friend,
Lance**

Steely Dan certainly hold my attention, but I always found their lyrics relatively direct, at least the general gist; is it just me?

no school like an old school,
--Scott

October 1, 2007

I'm a huge Game Theory / Loud Family fan from Norway (probably more or less the only one? At least the only one with a collection of your stuff also including ALRN album) Through being an REM fanatic since 1985 and my interest for power pop, I looked for related stuff like Mitch's Let's Active etc. and through this interest bought the first few GT albums.

Scott: Joe Becker, who played drums on a lot of the music I've recorded, is half Norwegian. I believe he has relatives accounting for at least one more fan in Norway.

REM wrote "What's the frequency, Kenneth?" for *Monster* album in 1995 on the Dan Rather, CBS News anchor, incident. It was sort of a hit for REM and a lot of fuzz around this story, even making Dan Rather sing the song on Telly. Your track "Kenneth, What's the frequency" included on *Lolita Nation* is not as well know, but I guess taken from the same incident. Tell me about it and your feelings on REM making their song 8 years later.

It was definitely referring to the same incident, although now I don't remember many details of that incident. The piece we titled "Kenneth, What's the Frequency?" wasn't a song, it was just a sound collage. That news item really struck me at the time as sounding like one of the more disorienting experiences a person could have. I thought that was the right mood to try to set at the opening of that album.

When R.E.M. came out with their song I don't remember being particularly dumbfounded at the coincidence or anything. I think I wondered whether anyone besides me would still remember the reference. The R.E.M. song was one of my favorite songs of that year (1994).

Lately I was introduced to Anton Barbeau's music through my friend Bill Forsyth at Minus Zero Records in London (a great shop for REM obscurities and power pop records) and really look forward to the new LF/AB album which I have now ordered.

I hope you like the album with Anton. I don't know for a fact that Joe's relatives like it, but I have a good feeling.

**Take care,
Skeeter
REM Collector & Fanatic**

No kidding, Bill Forsyth? I really like Bill Forsyth and have been lucky enough to cross paths with him a couple of times. I hope I can get back to London at least once more while there is still such a thing as record stores.

watch for my next recording, "I Feel Fine, and It's the End of the World"
--Scott

Recently, compelled by a move to a smaller space, and by my wife's insistence that "these HAVE to GO," I sold the majority of my LP collection. I had perhaps 2000, and kept something in the neighborhood of 300. 3 of the 300 were my original copies of *Two Steps...*, *Lolita Nation*, and *The Big Shot Chronicles*. They are precious to me, although I have CD copies of all three. I would not, could not part with them. Artistically (on your end) and personally (on my end), those LPs are precious artifacts of a time in my life that I treasure, and a time in the music industry when it occasionally seemed like anything was possible and the future was bright. I guess what I'm fumbling at here is that your music "looms large in my legend," as an old friend of mine puts it.

So thanks.

I got to thinking about how I'd found out about Game Theory in the first place, and seem to recall that my dopesmoking, guitar-playing, music-listening buddies and I had read that Mitch Easter was producing you, and since we knew and admired his work with REM and a buncha others, we decided that we should check you guys out. I, for one, was amply rewarded, and have been a fan of yours ever since, and would rank *Lolita Nation*, at least, in my top ten or fifteen of all time. I'm sure it's irksome to keep hearing praises for something you did 20-odd years ago, but it's goshdarn GOOD. So there.

It feels good to hear you say that, thanks. It's nice for that album to have its little footnote status or whatever you'd call it, but trust me that there's not such a steady flow of praise that I just can't take any more.

I have come to realize that I've found MOST of the good music that I know through this method, a sort of "lateral" investigation. This method works best, of course, for the music fan willing to do a bit of work, a bit of research. I guess I'm trying to say that I'm a "music nerd" for lack of a better term ("aficionado" seems too gradiose and Hemingwayesque, although it might be more accurate), and that from what I've read in previous "Ask Scott" columns as well as gleaned from listening to your music over the years, that you might also fall into this category (although I'd never call you a "nerd").

I think I am a nerd. I definitely sound like a nerd when I read my own writing.

So, my question is this: How would you characterize yourself as a "listener," or as a "fan," or, if you wish, as a "music nerd?"

I'd say I've grown a somewhat sophisticated ear over these many years, but it's also true that pretty much any embarrassing fan-like characteristic you could name, I suffer from it. If you let me talk to Bob Dylan, I'm positive I'll be the guy who says "You know where you go, 'how does it feel to be on your own?' That is so awesome." I've also got mild techie geek tendencies. My wife ridicules me for having conversations about things like what vocal mike it sounds like people were using on some recording.

Tragically, much of my own teens and twenties bore an uncomfortable resemblance to Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*. I will admit to pestering the owner of the only decent local record shop for Game Theory posters. He could not produce one, so I ended up hanging the LP cover of *Lolita Nation* on the wall, since for a few months there, it never left the turntable long enough to need the sleeve. That's pretty nerdy, I guess. I rolled joints on that record cover, played it to every girlfriend I had, and used to liberally sprinkle mix tapes with "One More For Saint Michael" and "Together Now, Very Minor" and "We Love You, Carol and Alison." Yep, nerd. But that's OK. Anyhow, thanks for your time and thanks for reading this blather.

Yours in nerddom,
Chris Tanis

Thanks again. You know, I have to confess something here. When I hear that someone put *three songs* from a certain album on some mix tapes, honestly, nothing in my cultural

experience causes me to think, "Yep, nerd." Throw in that the album was something of an indie affair, *and* that while the tapes were being made, the packaging was serving as drug paraphernalia, and you could well be on the way to the kind of edgy hipster profile that would have bona fide nerds nervous that your next move could be to bust out some Chet Baker and go shoot up in their basement.

--pronounced "le NERD"

December 17, 2007

We've crossed paths a few times—you were kind enough to put up with my interview questions before a Knitting Factory show in 1994, for instance. I've never stopped listening to and enjoying your music, and I'm glad you were able to give us some new music last year.

Scott: Mike—it's great to hear from you. I have very much appreciated your openness to getting something out of my music, and then even passing that along.

My question regards *Real Nighttime*. It is probably my favorite Game Theory album, and I'm on record in Kim Cooper's *Lost In The Grooves* book as saying so.

Thank you for that piece. *Lost In The Grooves* was a great project.

In that review, I suggested the theory that *Real Nighttime* was, in large part, about graduating college and getting on with life in the world at large. "24" sets the age of the protagonist, and from there the lyrics are a long string of allusions to leaving the nest, growing apart from family and younger friends, and attempting to embrace adulthood with all its responsibilities and, paradoxically, its freedoms as well. (I felt much freer, for instance, when I got my first full-time job and all of a sudden had more than \$20 a week to my name.) "Coffee or beer?" "A year ago we called this a good time." "Give me all the gin I need, for I may not be this strong when I call my parents and tell they've been wrong."

And so forth. I wouldn't call it a "concept," but it's definitely a recurring thread throughout the LP. It's obvious that *Real Nighttime* has unusual personal resonance. So I'm wondering if you wrote the album with the above perspective in mind.

Exactly right. Oddly enough, I wasn't too aware of that being a lyric theme at the time, but I can look back now and see all the things you're talking about. Also I had this intuition that freedom had a strong aspect of being bad news. What I've since learned from people like Dante is that at a pretty high level of spiritual discipline, we can attain a state where indulging free will is fruitful because our strivings are coherent and giving, but short of that, excessive freedom is typically a formula for trivial and unfaithful pursuit of what passes for personal advantage. "Curse of the Frontier Land" and "Friend of the Family" have the really poisonous descriptions of that, but even the jaunty or romantic moments have kind of a feeling of things being so okay only because you have yet to be discarded by someone for being no longer of use (in the case of the last song, discovering myself to be one of the discarders).

I'm also wondering if, during the writing process, you were conscious that this would be your first communication with a larger audience. There may have been a couple of college radio cuts off *Distortion*, but this was Game Theory's first proper studio LP, complete with the very in-vogue Mitch Easter behind the boards. Everything about it seems a step up from both *Alternate Learning* and the *Distortion of Glory*-era Game Theory records.

I recall that as being the first time I wasn't struggling against immense difficulties just to get the opportunity to do an album, and I actually found myself with the means to make one more or less to my own specifications. I didn't in fact have any sense of it being something special to communicate with a larger audience. I was pretty convinced since about age seventeen that the significant communication of musical feeling that occurs in the music business happens inside about the first five thousand sales, and if you go on to sell five million, it's to many more people with a much shallower interest. I still would have been interested in a big time music career, but I believed in mere stupid catchiness for achieving that, not a bankable ability to share thoughts. It felt like a long shot that many people were going hear those sorts of lines like "everything is in terms of next time" and take it as anything but a sort of twee wordplay, not something their life has felt like. And probably 2/3 of my fans just happened to like twee wordplay.

Lastly (and unrelated), are there any unreleased tracks from the last version of GT with Michael Quercio participating? The three *Tinkers to Evers...* recordings suggest a promising lineup.

We recorded one song Michael wrote called "[Free Ride](#)" which is really good. There's the version of "Dead Center" with the "every man had seven wives" lyric set. There are the two fan club Christmas recordings. There were covers of the Nazz's "Forget All About It," Eno's "Needles In the Camel's Eye," and some others I can't remember. The most compelling song project I had from that period was a reworking of the Beatles' "Yesterday" with a completely different melody and the lyrics shuffled around. That never got off the ground but I'm still curious what people would think of it if they heard it.

I hope all is well with you.

Mike Appelstein

Thanks and I you.

I guess like terrorists, I just hate our freedom,
--Scott

Have you ever been at a loss for words?

todd, in salt lake

Upon review.

--Scott, in lite syrup

December 31, 2007

I've been reading through all the "Ask Scott" questions on your site and they're incredibly "in depth" and detailed.

Scott: Thanks—I've kind of slacked off from it now that everyone has a "blog." It was a fun exercise to try to make an honest attempt at an answer to any question whether I had expertise in the subject or not.

I just wanted to say hello and ask if there is any chance of you touring to the UK again!!

I'm starting to think about doing an album again, but I'm pretty prepared for it to be one of those situations where when it actually comes out, a lot of people who thought they were going to care really don't because the community that used to be available to share the interest has moved on. Of course, there's the internet now, so you never know. If there's a shadow of an opportunity to come play in the U.K., I definitely will.

I got into GT and LF fairly recently (also through friend and London record shop owner Bill Forsythe, who I saw mentioned in another post) but now have all your albums and think they're superb. Especially like the later Loud Family stuff and just gutted that I never saw you live. Anyway great to get a new album recently and looking forward to many more.

Best wishes for the holiday!

James Boxall (London, UK)

Doing the album with Anton was relatively encouraging, mostly because in 2000 I figured I'd never again have the time or the business model to do an actual release, but with the advent of ProTools and 125 Records, I've been corrected to at least that extent. To my surprise, I've come to think I can really produce the hell out of a record on a computer.

It's funny, I've never been in regular contact with Bill Forsythe, but he and Minus Zero probably cross my mind at least once a week. It occurs to me for the first time as I type this that Minus Zero probably represents the last physical manifestation on the planet of the record buying experience as I knew it when I started making records, where I would walk into a store and immediately start enjoying like-mindedness with the proprietor.

Thanks for encouraging me by liking the later Loud Family material. It seems like for anything I write now, I think, "well, I like this, but experience indicates that no one else will." But I think I'm building an army of twenty or twenty-five people who will really get it.

Love Minus Zero,
--Scott

ASK SCOTT

Downloaded from the *Loud Family / Music: What Happened?* website and re-ordered into Jan-Dec

2008 & 2010 (Years 11 & 12)

May 19, 2008

Reading the recent posts, I'm excited to hear you're considering jumping back into the fray with another album, maybe produced on a DAW. I can do things with Ableton Live and a Korg Wavestation virtual instrument plugin that I really haven't earned the right to be able to do.

Scott: Thanks for writing! I'll consider myself emboldened. Home digital music isn't evil, it just threatens awfulness from a new and confusing angle. There's no longer a sea of obviously mediocre demos in the world, there's a sea of final products whose mediocrity is subtle—the result of tepid passions and unearned technical merits. As Bradley Skaught said, the good news is that anyone can make an album now; the bad news is that everyone has.

If a duffer like me can fake and spin his way to people thinking I had a coherent vision, then I'm convinced you'll be a master once you decide to do it... and this brings to mind to a question I've always wanted to Ask Scott.

Having been a True Gamester since way back when there was such a thing, I've been around for just about the whole ALRN/GT/LF ride. Over the years I've frequently gotten the feeling that your work contains within it the idea that "Businessmen Are Okay." You've always seemed to be able not to take your music too seriously—even though the artistic quality of your work has been so skilled and feeling that it's entirely possible for your fans to take it all too seriously.

I'm utterly serious about music, I just respect the buying public's judgment that it's not what I should do for a living. I listen to and think about music all the time. But I also do think businessmen are okay—or at least I think an impulse such as disliking "suits" is suspect.

The counterpoint to the experiential effect of your music is when you reply to questions; often referring to the mundane aspects of making a record (and all the stuff that goes with it) as being borderline "not quite worth it." Furthermore, popularity appears to be a strong operator in your view of your musical career.

Really not so. For example, I'm completely capable of loving producing records under conditions of extreme anonymity. But unavoidably "a career" means "a level of marketability," and I've reached the limits of what I'll sacrifice to achieve that.

It seems like a well-honed balancing act between idealism and realism. It would be great to hear how you achieved the balance between *ars artis gratia* and *redde Caesari quae sunt Caesaris*.

Question: How did you learn to love the bomb? Are you like enlightened or something?

**Doing the Fake and Spin,
Ken S.**

Enlightenment makes you love the bomb?

Most of what I know about enlightenment I've absorbed from Western literary figures, who tend to be Christian if they are religious themselves; the following quote from W.H. Auden comes as close to having koan-like power as I (being a Westerner) have come across: "I believe because [Jesus] fulfils none of my dreams, because he is in every respect the opposite of what he would be if I could have made him in my own image. None of the others [Buddha, Muhammad, etc.] arouse all sides of my being to cry 'Crucify him.'"

Bomb Factory Not Bombs!
--Scott

December 22, 2008

First, thanks for all the fantastic music over the years—I have long loved Game Theory and The Loud Family, and pretty much any GT album and *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things* are on my list for "if you were stranded on a desert island and could only pick 10 albums"—all are favorites. Also, thanks for a very special memory from when GT came to Baltimore and I bought you a beer to welcome you, and you made a valiant effort to sign my cd book from *Two Steps*... I can still make out the impressions, even though the pen wouldn't work on the glossy surface—you really tried though. My questions are fairly bland, but I've been listening to your music for two decades now, and it never gets old—the songs are just too interesting musically and lyrically, with a very personal feel. A friend of mine says she hears classical training in your music, so I'm wondering about your training in that area ("w/ all our well-trained ears") and its influence on you.

Scott: As a kid I had some classical guitar training and some general music theory. That may have caused me to grow the tendency to value melody by itself more than most people. That is, I like melody more than people like melody, not I like melody more than I like people. Although come to think of it, some songs are definitely better than some people.

But to give some perspective, I've probably expended a hundred times as much effort acquiring studio recording skills as I have at anything like mastering counterpoint techniques, or studying scales to improvise in.

Also, "Regenisraen" and "Inverness" both sound like they involve personal experiences with actual places—can you describe what they hold for you (and if "Regenesraen" isn't a place, where does the title come from)?

That first one was on an album called *Big Shot Chronicles*, and most of the lyrics on that album came from dreams I'd had, and I was also reading the 1939 James Joyce novel (if that's the right word) *Finnegans Wake*, which is 700 pages of a sort of Jabberwocky speech meant to communicate a dreaming state, and that technique rubbed off on me for that title. I suppose my intention was to conjure up the feeling of finding yourself in need of spiritual renewal, but when I go into detail about lyrics I wrote when I was pretty young, it's usually an exercise in trying to sell them as respectable to my current self, so I'll save everyone that embarrassing spectacle.

"Inverness" is a real place in Scotland and there's also a city of that name not too far from where I live, which is the San Francisco Bay Area. The song is supposed to convey a longing connection to a place where a soured relationship occurred, but it's a complete fabrication—I don't know anything about those places. I can't tell you why it seemed to mysteriously capture something for me. Songwriting at its core is completely unconscious; it's not like I crafted the idea for that chorus, it was just one minute not there in my head, then the next minute it was.

Not to say this would be true of you, but for some reason it's generally a mild shock to people that songs aren't autobiographical, when something like a film or a novel, which goes into much greater detail, is just assumed to be a complete invention.

Also, I loved looking at your top 20 lists and am especially glad to see bands like The Feelies and Prefab Sprout in there—Did you ever get into the Go Betweens or the Chameleons? Thanks again for such phenomenal music.

Scott Soud

You know, I'll check those artists out further when I get the chance.

Thanks again for the beer.

--Postfab Sprout

March 29, 2010

Since you are one of the few people who without question is a significantly bigger Alex Chilton fan than myself, I (a) wanted to pass along condolences from one fan to another on the loss of a major musical inspiration, and (b) wondered if you were planning on writing some sort of memorial piece. I have no idea if you knew Chilton or ever even met him, but I know his work clearly meant a lot to you, and I'd be curious to know if you had any final words on the man behind Big Star.

Mark D.

Scott: I spoke to Alex only a few times, mostly in a single backstage encounter in Memphis in 1984, and the first thing I feel obliged to report is how entirely good-natured he was. I didn't know better than to do a fair amount of geeking out about Big Star Third, to the point of having him help me get lyrics right, and he participated in this discussion with no hint of annoyance or attempt to change the subject.

I realize there was such a thing as him behaving antisocially, but if I'd never actually met him, I'd assume from what I read that he was antisocial day in and day out. There's a big difference. Alex had a precise and literary mind, and the closest facsimile of a literary life available to him in his formative years was Memphis's community of the musicologically hypereducated, a seductively rich atmosphere in the midst of which there was far too much positive reinforcement of colorful excess. He had a black sense of humor that, in the patterns I've seen it deployed, I think perversely indicated that he liked you, or was considering liking you. If you were overly sensitive to crossing the line, it was an unfortunate fact of life that he was going to have to put some distance between you and him, because crossing the line was what he did.

We can learn from the personality traits of great originals like Alex that originality, in the first instance, is contentiousness: an arbitrary rejection of some habit of mind. But just as Alex spent occasional defining moments in opposition both musically and personally, he spent the whole rest of his day being pleasant and loving life, both musically and personally. It's no accident that his later musical career is difficult for most people; he directed his affections to neglected corners of the musical landscape, where affection was needed most. My heart goes out in gratitude to Jody, Ken, Jon, John Fry, Laura who seems entirely wonderful, and everyone who gave Alex a good life, and I'll testify again to what a supremely successful artist he was—I would guess one of the ten best American composers in history.

very best,
--Scott

This was the last Ask Scott entry.