

# ASK SCOTT

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

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1999 (Year 3)

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**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

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**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

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**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

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**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

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***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

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***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."

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**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

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***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 harrassment); 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 imitativensness 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

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**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

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***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.

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***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

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**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

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***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

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***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

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**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

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**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

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**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

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**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

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**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

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**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

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***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

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***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

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*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

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***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

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*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

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***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

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***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-believably 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

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***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

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***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

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**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

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**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

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***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

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**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

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*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

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***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."

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