The Genealogy of Taste

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The Genealogy of Taste

by

Aaron Tucker

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Through English Language, Literature and Creative Writing
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of Masters of Arts at the
University of Windsor

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ABSTRACT

A young man returns home to Lavington, a rural British Columbian town, freshly graduated with an Bachelors in English and without any direction in his life. In an effort to guide his life forward he undertakes writing an autobiography told through the filter of popular music. The narrator combines discussions of the sociology of popular music and its many facets and genres (i.e. the love song, the canon, the guitar solo etc) with an “aural mapping,” a connecting of songs and albums to various instances, people and experiences in his life. It is through this melding that the protagonist develops a sense of his own identity and is able to create plans for the future and move forward.
I awoke last night to the sound of thunder
How far off I sat and wondered
Started humming a song from 1962
Ain't it funny how the night moves...”

- Bob Seger

I want to dedicate this project to my parents, who have blindly and lovingly supported whatever I wanted to do, even when that meant trusting me.
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one: introducing the band

What is the proper guitar playing position? Is it feet spread and parallel like railroad tracks on a one way ticket to Rocknrollville? Is it sitting, guitar nestled on the lap, mesmerizing the audience, not with ridiculous chops, but instead through snaking lyrics and meticulous attention to injustice? Maybe it’s standing hunched over, slinging the guitar back and forth, while staring broodingly at the floor. If you witnessed a ten year old me and my exhibition of killer air-guitar skills you might have been convinced that the correct position was on your back, rolling around like a dark haired too-skinny beetle doing its best to dodge lumbering feet, legs squiggling in the air. Now, keep in mind I had no artists to imitate for this move, no Kurt Cobain or Stevie Ray Vaughn. We didn’t have cable TV until I was 13 so there were no music videos to show me how to squirm on the carpet; it was like I instinctively understood that guitar was best played on the back. I was most likely kicking and air-guitaring to the solo in “Hotel California” basically the only half way rock song I can remember liking and listening to alone in my room at age ten. Make no mistake though: I was not a musical savant; I couldn’t play a real guitar any better than I could swim (if you ever need to kill me, throw me in the middle of a lake; I swim like a burlap sack full of Black Sabbath songs). Yet I understood, on a very basic level, that the foundation of rock was rolling around playing a loud guitar; to validate his own existence all a guitar player needed was some floor.

But now, alas, I’ve grown up. Sorta. It is the start of the summer of my 22nd year and I’ve freshly gone and graduated University of Victoria with the classic ambling English degree. After said graduation, I did the only reasonable thing I could think of: I
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came back home to live with my parents, in sunny and somewhat tedious Lavington, B.C., and reclaimed my old job at the grocery store, stocking shelves and running the cash register. I sit now in the small sunroom my parents added to the house two years ago, big windows facing the quiet road, pecking away at the keys on my laptop without any real focus. There’s really only one thing in my head, that large million dollar question: what exactly am I supposed to do with my life now?

Here’s a small side question: what exactly is an English degree good for anyways? I mean, I can introduce myself at parties and say “Well, I have a B.A. in English” and correct people’s grammar as they speak; I can go home and intimidate my family by using polysyllabic diction and referencing Milton in relation to every night’s dinner (“Better to eat on the porch than serve in the kitchen”). An English degree sounds like it might be something spectacular but really it’s only slightly above majoring in Pet Rocks.

So what do I do now?

To my credit I’m only working part time; I’ve decided to try the idea of the cliché starving artist, more specifically the writer. In the fine tradition of the wandering, graduated soul I’m trying to find direction and weasel my way into some sort of answer to the large “what now?” hanging over my head; my plan therefore is to write a novel of some sorts, some poems maybe. I really don’t know. But I guess it is only natural that I’ve run to the most consistent and immediate comforts I have: writing and music.

To me the two have always been closely linked. I can’t write without music in my headphones or speakers (the CD on right now is a mix I made a good two years ago that starts with a Ben Folds Five song, “The Battle of Who Could Care Less”). Usually when
I listen to music I feel like writing and gathering words; it really lubricates the creative process for me. And both are activities that I enjoy in a wide, therapeutic and passionate variety. They are the first two places I turn to when I am lost.

And lost I am. Ever since I got home (exactly 2 days 5 hours and 14 minutes ago) I’ve been insanely depressed. I thought I had made a clean break from this place. I wouldn’t have my bedroom packed with early 90’s basketball posters and left over pictures from my 14 year old obsession with Sarah Michelle Gellar. There would be no more borrowing my parents’ car when I wanted to go into town (I sold my ‘90 Honda Civic to pay for my third year of schooling). And there would definitely be no more living with my parents. I’m like a very poor man’s Odysseus, only I don’t like Ithaca, there’s no Penelope and the Circes and Cyclopes were relatively few and far between (almost to the point of non-existence. There were, however, a few Calypsos but I won’t tip my hand too early). In order to escape or, at the very least, block out my return and the consequences (i.e. being back where I started) I delved into my music collection and have remained there, headphones fastened to my head, with breaks only to pee and eat.

But now I’ve emerged from my hole and started writing. My thinking revolves around this: how, when we’re watching TV, do we know what to feel? What cues us in? When the *Jaws* theme comes on you know the shark is going to be eating someone; when that twinkling piano music starts up you know the hero is undergoing conflict that requires a great choice. But what is the sound of in-between, when our hero is caught between some semblance of a bland normal reality of editing fishing magazines or chasing dead money with more money (for example, doing a PHD and hoping that, in five years, our hero has a better idea of what to do with his life)?
This time of limbo needs a theme song to help me along here. It comes to me here that I may be talking to myself but I’ve got so many thoughts and words in my mind that are vaguely connected by small strands of notes and sounds that my hope is to spew them all out and, at the end, they will somehow arrange themselves (interesting enough, I often play pool the same way, the old “hit them as hard you can” idea and hope it all works out). The more I think about this theme music business the stronger the image of that 10 year old me rolling on my back gets; how did I get here and why have I refused to stop rolling around on my back? So this is my best to start to document my soundtrack.

But before we go any further I guess I’ll need to introduce the band.

Like a “traditional” band, my family is comprised of four people: my mother, my father, one younger brother and myself. We are like Beatles only we generally don’t rock (or roll) and no one is British (or dead). So I guess we’re nothing like the Beatles unless you count my mother having had hair like Ringo back when she was 25. Sadly, my family is ridiculously normal. There are no cowbells or nutty keyboard solos here. My family is bass-drums-lead guitar-vocals/rhythm guitar. But who exactly plays what instrument is a tricky thing to suss out. In the interest of full disclosure I suppose it should be pointed out that no one in my family has any musical talent; there wasn’t a piano in my house; my Dad has never played one single shredding guitar solo at any of the weddings we attended; there wasn’t a moment where we sang in four part harmony. Like any teenage boy I tried playing guitar once. I took some books out from the library and borrowed a friend’s acoustic but, in the end, I lacked the commitment and the calluses. My Mom used to play the flute and a little guitar (she owns a beat up Jay Jr. she keeps hidden in the basement) but she used to own a Mustang too. There are many things
from my mother’s youth I’m sure she’s hiding for when she goes senile so that she can forget she’s told me right after she’s done it (perhaps I’ll talk to my mom’s old friends so that I don’t have to make stuff up).

But we are the nuclear family and who heads the nuclear family but the man of the house: my father. He is the frontman. He is the one who works, as the meat manager and butcher at the same grocery store where I work now. He pays the bills; he is the rhythm guitar, the melody keeper and the vocalist. He is the one that ordered for us at restaurants when we couldn’t decide. He was the voice, the foremost distinguishing member of the family. But in the history of frontmen there has never been anyone less flamboyant. His idea of flair is a golf shirt instead of a T-Shirt. My Dad can’t do kick-splits and won’t shave his moustache (and no, he looked nothing like Freddie Mercury, actually more like Burton Cummings, although not like the cover picture for Best of which is just a little past scary.). He doesn’t howl and gyrate, whipping his dark-greyir hair about; he is not around to entertain. My Dad is no Iggy. The best parallel I can come up with is maybe Eddie Vedder: you know that he’s in charge but he doesn’t flaunt it; he just performs impressively and doesn’t screw up.

So who is the show then? Who is there to thrill and shock and amaze? Well, I’ll tell you who it is not: my mother. She’s a mousy woman, soft brown hair, fairly short. My parents are really good for each other in that they are the most low-key and quiet people I’ve ever met. When I do borrow the car and turn the volume up past 6 (50 is the highest it goes) you’d think I had cut their hands off. Nothing causes them worse pain than noise, more specifically 92.7% of my musical taste. Yet, she makes me real nervous because she is a sneaky little wild card. For instance, her favorite musical artist is Reba
McIntire, the red headed self-proclaimed country diva (with her own sitcom)! Whenever I’m driving in the car with her she always puts the volume down to a barely audible level and then hums Christmas carols regardless of date. Yet, YET! she will throw out comments like “That new Queens of the Stone Age single is kinda catchy” or “I like that Snoop Dogg. He’s neat.” Does she purposely pour over various music magazines to keep me on my toes? Is she sneaking out and listening to the radio in the car when I’m not watching? Does she meet with some kids behind the gas station and exchange bootlegged cigarettes and liquor for hip information?

So when it comes time to put every member in their place I guess it’s only natural that my Mom is on the bass. On the surface this is an easy call: she’s the backbone of the family. While my father provided the sustenance, the bridges and vocals, it was my mother, a stay at home mom, who kept the family afloat with that steady pulse, that ever present underbeat. Deeper though, bass players are always the person in the band you should trust least; they are the shiftiest folk. They are hard to predict because they usually sit in the back, near the drummer, biding their time until the lead guitarist chokes on his/her own ego. Just look at their eyes; every bass player has these crazy darting eyes, like they’re planning on clubbing the frontman and wailing out a solo. Because no one ever starts out playing bass; they start out playing guitar, dreaming of ripping riffs and glaring spotlights. But there are too many guitarists and not enough bassists so, in order to be in a band (which is one of the cooler things to be in really), they have to suck it up and sacrifice. Now, I’m not saying my mother wants to kill anyone or that she “settled” as mother within our family. However, there are parallels: my mom is always planning something, running those eyes over everything, taking it in and measuring. She always
wanted a daughter; she was always looking for some excuse to turn me into girl. Like the
time she needed to know if a dress would fit my cousin so she had me try it on. OK, that
probably didn’t happen but that’s the kind of sneakiness she’s known for.

So we ask again: where is the real vibrancy of my family? I’ll tell a joke first:

Q: What do you call the guy who hangs out with the band all the time?
A: The drummer.

Needless to say the drummer does not, unless your name is John Bonham or
Tommy Lee or Neal Peart, add a whole lot of razzle-dazzle to the band. What the
drummer does is sit in the back and pray that one day the band will cover “Moby Dick.”
Now, I would argue that my brother Joel, one and half years younger than me, is the
drummer of the family. There are, however, a few flaws to this analogy. First, he’s just so
damn angry. He has more a Fred Durst vibe with the sort of unfounded manufactured
anger you can only buy in trendy T-shirt shops (and he likes to wear his hat backwards
and type weepy nonsensical things on his blog). He really has nothing to be actually
angry about; my parents, realizing his status as the drummer, overcompensated and
showered him with love and attention. He was the one that got the new shoes before I
did; my parents went and saw every single one of his hockey games yet could only make
it to a handful of my basketball games. And, to be honest, my brother gets along much
better with my parents; he has the same jokes, the same tastes (rare steaks, anti-rap,
hockey). I’m convinced my family would be seamless as a three piece set. However,
every family needs that that shot of pizzazz, a lead guitar.

This goes back to that scrawny white kid rolling around on the carpet. I may not
have been introduced to The Who or Cream until much later in my life but I instinctively
understood the need and role of the lead guitar: to be cool and to entertain. If your frontman is anyone but David Lee Roth, doing jump kick splits and saying things like “I used to jog but the ice cubes kept falling out of my drink,” then you need a lead guitarist to pick up the slack, to raise the entertainment level, to hoist the audience interest with his masturbatory, gloriously loud solos. Moreover, the lead guitarist has to be the cool one, the one that the audience not only respects but envies.

I probably don’t look like the lead guitarist type. I’m thin, maybe five foot ten with long, soft fingers that look suspiciously feminine (my brother inherited the “man hands.” I however have a good future, if nothing else, as a hand model). Up until this point in my life my hair has been bowl shaped or spiky but I’ve decided to grow my hair long like a good university student but it’s not too long (just below the ears). It is going half grey (my dad went grey at 18 too). Oh and I wear glasses with thin black rectangle frames, which isn’t so bad. Girls like guys with glasses. I could be disillusioned on this. At any rate, I’m not your typical body type for lead guitarist; I don’t have any tattoos, my fingers aren’t calloused, my hair isn’t stringy or flowing. In turn though, I’m all about the intangibles.

The lead guitarist may be the most technically sound and fearless musician of the group, but he must also be the posterboy for swagger and “you wanna be me” attitude. I was the one who snuck up to the gravel pit, one of my favorite places growing up, with Darren and jumped off the giant mounds of sand doing front-flips over the edges; I was the one who made up elaborate challenges and bets for everyone. I was the son who cracked the jokes at the dinner table, entertained guests by telling funny stories about my mom, proposed preposterous things and, in general, tried to elicit as many dramatic
moments from my family as possible. I can imagine how conversations at my house
would go if I wasn't around:

Dad: Well, the weather looks warm out.
Joel: Yeah. It looks kinda warm. Maybe I won't need a jacket. I hate the cold!
Dad: Maybe I'll mow the lawn then. If it doesn't rain.
Joel: Are you saying I can't mow the lawn. You don't think I can handle the
tractor? That makes me so angry!
Mom: Well, if you both aren't doing anything, I wouldn't mind moving the couch
under the window.

In short, without me, their communications would become a mono-toned waltz
through Boringville. Sure, every once and while you might turn out a gem, maybe a
conversation about how cool it would be to drive a Porsche off a cliff or something. But
for the most part it's like the cable radio stations that play the same pop drivel on an eight
hour loop, except all they would play is Marcy Playground songs and Keanu Reeves
reading the phone book.

This is how a typical conversation went that I was involved in:

Dad: The weather looks warm today.
Joel: Yeah it looks kinda warm. Maybe I won't need a jacket. I hate the cold!
Me: Please! If you need a jacket out there you may as well grab yourself a purse
and join a chorus line.
Joel: You fucker! I hate you so much! I could just smash everything in sight!
Dad: Calm down Joel. Maybe I'll mow the lawn then.
Me: Why do that when we can take the ride on and tow it behind the truck and we
can take turns seeing how fast we can go?! On the lawnmower!
Mom: You know that new Fat Joe beat is really catchy.
Me: God!
Dad: Well I guess I'll go fill up the gas tank on the lawnmower.
Joel: I hate everything!

Underneath my music and the writing will always be that solid base of my family;
they may not bite the heads off bats but they are like an old sweet and familiar grainy
blues song, and I missed that I guess.
So that’s all of us. I exaggerate the portraits but, really, that is what rock and roll is all about. How many of the great rock rumors are great simply because they are fake? The Rod Stewart “he went to the hospital and had five gallons of sperm pumped from his stomach” rumor is my favorite because he would have had to blow a whole gay bar, bouncers included. It is ridiculous, but on the other hand I suspect that kind of thing might not be so far out of Rod Stewart’s realm (you should have stayed in the Jeff Beck Band, Rod! I’m bitter!) So yes, I am creating an image. Consider the caricatures and fibs the pyrotechnics and smoke machine of the concert.

Now, I sit trying to figure out how exactly this fit of typing is helping me fight my way out of this weird cloud of in-between life. Is this some act of self definition? Maybe. HIPSTER posturing? I suppose. An extreme act of narcissism? Most likely. This chapter, the first chapter, is a start. I’ll just keep pecking away and listening in hopes of somehow putting myself in order.
from what I can remember

pinpointed houses shrunk to
circle porch light or
slowly waning kitchen bulbs

dormant

I can see everything I used to know reduced
glassplant vegetable gardens lumber mill
open green fence mountains gas station
slice of highway two headlights taillights

underneath me this grit between
my palm lines in my pores and
under my tongue in my breath

I've been reading ever since I was a wee little lad. I used to read the Hardy Boys by the dozen (the old hard cover jobs); later on I switched to R.L. Stine (I'm fairly certain I've read 80% of the Fear Street books, no small task indeed). Until I was eight, in place of an allowance I got a Spiderman comic every week. I've devoured nearly every Stephen King book, all of John Grisham up to The Partner (for some reason forgotten to me, I swore off Grisham after that) and too many James Patterson novels to even consider. In addition, I gulped down (and still do) magazines at a very high rate, everything from Cracked to Sports Illustrated to Rolling Stone to Slam. What I am trying to get at here is that I was encouraged to read and I consumed almost anything and everything, most of which, to put it lightly, was not exactly the cream of literature. But my tastes are hardly shocking.

My parents have been generous enough to give me my brother's old bedroom to live in, a room occupied by a hide-a-bed, an alarm clock and my half unpacked suitcase. When I moved out two years ago my brother got my parents' old room and my parents took mine in the basement; they now refuse to switch back to the original arrangement in a completely unreasonable display of tyranny. However, I'm going to put the room business far from my mind: it is my day off from work; no stocking shelves or directing people to the canned hams today. My parents and brother have taken a day trip down to Kelowna, a city about an hour drive from Lavington, so I'm the lone figure here in the house. Instead of working, I'm wandering in my head, sitting in my parents' converted sun room again, at the computer thinking about my reading practices. Well, not my
reading habits exactly, but my neighbors' reading habits. You see, books like *Ulysses* and *Heart of Darkness* were not regular reads in a community of 2000 people (the rough population of Lavington). *Good Housewife* was. Or *Good Fishin'*. Books like *The Great Gatsby* are hardly important (and very time consuming) when one has to mow the lawn, feed the kids, put in a ten hour shift at the glassplant (where they recycle glass, a main place of employment in Lavington) then come home and clean out the gutters. The average person in my community wanted the brain candy he/she could cook through in two weeks and then forget; Tom Clancy, for instance, was, and still is, very popular. I saw nothing wrong with reading the "low culture" texts because that was the norm; this is in direct opposition to an English Lit department where, if a person is not versed in contemporary automaton theory, they're not only hopeless, but a lesser human being. I really have no clue exactly how I managed to get through an entire English degree or even when or how I figured out that's what I wanted to do. I knew I loved books and could read well for comprehension and speed so it seemed like the path of least resistance I guess. Anyway, my point is that I see my passion for the more popular literature and "culture" as part of the reason why my musical taste has developed as it has: a combination of the slums and the Ritz.

The other facet to my taste stems from having always identified myself very closely with my surrounding landscape. On the West coast, in Victoria, I drew almost all my creative energy from the ocean; here in Lavington it is the lakes and mountains that provide me with writing sustenance. Lavington is at the bottom of a valley between two tall mountain walls, littered with sun bleached fields, punctured by large maple trees and cut by a long two lane highway that leads past the two lumber mills. My parents' home is
a green dollhouse with a large red shed in the back, sitting in the middle of one acre of
half field (back yard) and half trees (a concise mini-forest in the back and then a
spattering of maple trees in front of the house). I come back here now, even after being
on the coast and being so close to the ocean every day, and I think how absolutely
gorgeous this setting is.

I’ve always thought that popular Canadian music could do well to utilize its
natural landscape and use that aspect of its national identity to drive songs. However, all
the Canadian acts that I grew up with (the Moffats, Nelly Furtado, Our Lady Peace etc)
just tried to sound like the bands that were popular in the United States (with the
exceptions being, at least in my formative years, The Tragically Hip and Matthew Good)
and did little to establish themselves as “Canadian” (or even small town). As such I went
through my childhood without a truly “me” song. Sure, there were lots of songs I
identified with, a lot of songs that moved me and a lot of songs that I couldn’t/can’t
separate from vivid and poignant memories but, even still, I have yet to hear a song that
screams, “This is you. This song was written for you. Someone has watched your life to
this point and put it to music.”

So what kind of song am I looking for then? What is this “me” song? Well for
starters it has to touch on a specific landscape: small town, lots of trees, mountains, long
dirt roads, highway, water in the distance (lake or ocean). I think that a good steel guitar
riff could achieve this, a messy, picky thing. The song needs to have a sort of innocence
to it as well, an “I got nothing else to do but cause minor mischief and read” vibe. Come
to think of it, that can be the drum line, a good steady pounding beat (as, even at 22 it still
seems to be the vibe most prevalent in my life). I think the pace of it would be loping and
slow, kind of Bob Dylan-esque, none of the dance floor techno business. I’m really fidgety but I’ve never been a frantic kid (plus I don’t own any yellow sun glasses or tight button up shirts; I possibly couldn’t fit The Scene).

(As a small aside there used to be a techno show on MuchMusic (the Canadian music video channel) called *Electric Circus*. The image of guys in tight clothes and goofy sunglasses smiling like idiots will always haunt techno music for me. Even if I wanted to enjoy it I couldn’t stop laughing at myself if I did. Carry on.)

Somewhere there would have to be a guitar solo, not a gratuitous one, but a solid spasm of energy that welds itself into the form of the rest of the song (something like “Geek U.S.A.”). The lyrics would be deceptively simple (think the Beatles’ “Blackbird”) and the title of the song would mostly likely include the words “boy,” “confused” or “ordinary” (but not all three; that would be excessive and silly). It would probably have a female vocal, a real low raspy voice that ramps up as the song progresses in the mold of PJ Harvey or Janis Joplin (I don’t see myself as a woman in a man’s body but I’ve always found that a female voice is much more open to emotional response for me. Maybe it’s that I’ve always wanted a girl who could sing “I Love Rock and Roll” to me. I’ve also always wanted a girl who drove a pick up truck or a girl who looked like Jennifer Aniston circa 1996). All I’m looking for is basically a good solid rock song with the flair and honesty of country.

My musical taste then comes partly from my low brow literary sensibilities and partly from that searching for that perfect definitive song. In my constant search for that “me” song I discovered I like almost everything. No, I take that back; what I mean is, my
musical tastes are really not constricted by genre or at least I try not to be (I like to think I’ll listen to anything once).

In fact I don’t like everything. Of all the music I listen to (and, believe me, I listen to a fair amount) I only actually like about 30 percent of all that I hear. By like, I mean I’ll go out of my way to listen to it, buy the CD, that sort of thing (example: The Pixies or Jackson Browne). Of that 30 percent I’m obsessed with maybe 10 percent, the essentials that I’ll pack around with me everywhere (i.e. I’ll wake up some mornings and crave a certain album, a good example being *A Ghost is Born* by Wilco, which is positively addictive). Of that further 10 percent, I would estimate 1 single percent is transcendent music, not just songs, but queer life anthems (that have often attached themselves closely to incidents in my life) that, when played, can not have any other action accompanying them but my rapt listening (I’m thinking here of songs like “Apparitions” or “Maps” by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs).

Of the other larger remaining 70 percent, 20 percent I would deem merely tolerable; I wouldn’t complain if someone played it at a party unless I was talking to some hot girl and needed to drum up conversation: for instance Frank Zappa or Destiny’s Child fall into this camp. However, the last 50 percent is generally putrid and makes me want to scratch my ears off (examples: Simple Plan, Linkin Park or Chingy). My hatred for Simple Plan and Linkin Park is relatively simple: all of their songs sound the exact same to me, which wouldn’t be such a bad thing if the one song they knew didn’t suck ass. Simple Plan writes whiny “poor me” mall punk meant for thirteen year old girls and Linkin Park writes angry “poor me” music meant for thirteen year old boys. Chingy is just terrible; when your hooks depend solely on mispronouncing words you’re in some
deep, deep kaka (Nelly too. I once heard a critic bring up that Nelly (and Chingy I would contend also) raps in baby-talk gibberish. I wouldn’t disagree with that assessment at all).

Long story short, the only limits I have on music is whether I enjoy it or not. Not genre, not artist (I’ll gladly swallow my pride and listen to a Good Charlotte or Simple Plan CD if they put out a song that didn’t require a frontal lobotomy) and certainly not time era.

I say this because I think it is very important to draw some lines in the sand when it comes to music and taste. It’s a very touchy subject. My two roommates last year, Gabe and Erik, who shared with me a 4 bedroom basement-suite in Victoria, didn’t talk for a week because Erik insisted on playing the new Jewel single four, sometimes five, times a day (a song which I would say lies in that bottom 50 percent in case you’re wondering). I’ve seen people get in shoving matches over Sublime at parties. Perhaps the best illustration of this is as follows: Lavington is smack in the middle between Lumby and Vernon and if you were in the wrong place playing the wrong music you were liable to get heckled and/or beat up. If you were in Lumby, a small logging town, and playing some rap song, people would probably take a baseball bat to your car if you dared brake for a stop sign; the music of choice in Lumby is largely country. In Vernon, a mere 23 minutes down the highway, if you played anything aside from rap or whatever radio single was popular (most likely a rap song anyways) you were liable to be mercilessly harassed; interestingly enough, the music that everybody hates in Vernon is country. And none of this has really changed at all since I left. High tension and drama!

At this exact moment, the sun has just emerged from behind a cloud and is shining into the room, through the windows and trees, at my feet. I have a Gillian Welsh
CD on, *Time (The Relevator)*, and turned up really loud as I type and think about how I interact with other individuals. I admit that I can be fairly harsh when it comes to judging people based on musical taste. I'm the type of person that really doesn't enjoy small talk. I'm kinda shy and if I get into a conversation I want it to actually have some sort of direction and purpose. I tend to attach myself to a lot of acquaintances, the result of which is having to go through awkward chit chat every time I see them, talk that really means nothing and I don’t care about and isn’t relevant to anything until the next time I see them and we have to make awkward chit chat again and so on and so forth. I decided therefore I needed some quick easy way to discern between the “awkward chit chat people” and the “they mean-something people.” So when I meet someone for the first time (particularly girls) I use The Question: “So what do you listen to?” This acts as a weeding out device. Not to be a prick but if a girl thinks that Boston made some really great rock music I’m not going to even make any further effort (similar results if they say they like Finger Eleven or Culture Club). I put a lot of stock into The Question. It is a coolness indicator, a knowledge tester and a lie detector. I know what a minefield The Question is so the trick is to phrase it real casually, segueing off whatever music is going on in the background or a T-Shirt someone is wearing. The Question is really the litmus test of taste so I want the person to feel comfortable enough to be honest.

“So what do you listen to?” is a lot like “So what do you read?” Both questions are more than a simple way to weed out interesting people; they are cultural dividers and, more than that, scary depicters of personal history. For instance, if someone asked me “What do you read” I would answer (the last five things I’ve read): *V for Vendetta* (Alan Moore), *The Great Shark Hunt* (Hunter Thompson), the September *Spin* magazine,
Coming Through Slaughter (Michael Ondaatje) and The Door to December (Dean Koontz). From this, a person could deduce I’m relatively middle class with a mind for contemporary literature (V is a graphic novel and there is not a novel more than 40 years old on the list). I’m a sort of rambling drug addled wannabe hippie, aviator shades hiding my eyes, searching for truth and perversities, yet still oddly obsessed with sensory deprivation tanks (which December revolves around). They could also see that there is little to no romance in any of the texts; I am like Buddy Bolden, drifting, ramming my hands through metaphoric windows, looking for some sort of “pure art,” perhaps leading a person to assume I hate sentimentality (the closest to romance in any of the novels is some of the sex in Coming Through Slaughter) and am therefore essentially heartless. From those assumptions, the thinking could follow that maybe my parents didn’t love me enough and I grew up jaded or I had a girlfriend once but she died in a tragic farming accident and now I refuse to love again. And none of that is really wrong per-se (aside from the girlfriend and hippy thing) and it’s always a fun game to make ridiculous assumptions about people.

The same thing can be drawn from the question “So what do you listen to?” If I answered right now, as I watch my fingers type clumsily, I would say “I’m a rock and country guy mostly. I really like Matt Good and I’m in a big Pink Floyd phase right now” and the person may consider me a hick right from the start (country music). She/he could also figure out I grew up in a small town, probably in a nuclear, relatively happy family being that none of the music I mentioned is overtly and unnecessarily angry (although some would contend Matt Good is unnaturally depressing). Also, I enjoy my sins (i.e. the drugs through association with Pink Floyd) and every other sin (by loving rock music)
but still think myself (perhaps wrongly) sensitive and artsy enough to enjoy the less traveled intellectual path (Matt Good). From my admission of enjoying country music one could assume I am familiar with cattle or farming and, further, in combination with the fact that Pink Floyd or Matt Good have never really released any overtly romantic songs, my heart is cold and dead, due to perhaps, again, a girlfriend and a tragic farming accident (which again circles quite nicely back to country music). Again, none of this is really that far off base.

The thing that I usually have to watch out for when I start into the music conversation, after wheeling out the Question, is the hipster. The hipster is relatively easy to pick out. They are almost always guys (come to think of it don’t think I’ve ever met an honest-to-goodness girl hipster). They will likely be wearing faded jeans and a button up shirt or an ironic T-Shirt saying something like “What Would JT Do?” (JT being, of course, Justin Timberlake); he will have a canvas bag slung over his shoulder which he refuses to take off. The hipster will ooze opinion. Not just any opinion, but the Right Opinion. If you get into a conversation with the hipster you will be wrong on all points you disagree with and, with those wrong choices, you will sink lower and lower into a class of heathens reserved for all people that don’t like The Screaming Trees.

A good hipster will hate 98% of music and the only music he will like is stuff that you haven’t heard of unless you yourself are a hipster (a hint: always mention Bright Eyes. And The Velvet Underground and The Kinks. Those are like secret handshakes that allow (often brief) access to his world). But it is within that 2% that the hipster sees what he claims is the height of musical art. Get used to phrases like “I really think The Black Keys are overplayed, “the irony of course being that almost no one in the general
listening culture has actually heard The Black Keys. Chances are these are the people in your high school that used the phrase “sold out” about as many times as they tried to borrow money off of you. Selling out, which may come in form of moving to a larger record label or making a music video or releasing a single to the radio, is the world’s most grievous and unforgivable hipster sin. He does not want anyone to know the bands, let alone the mass listening public to hear and enjoy the bands.

You see, the hipster’s power rises out of the obscure. He will detest anything played on the radio, based on principles alone. What he does appreciate is bands no one has ever heard of. If that band has only released a Japanese import and an LP with a 500 copy run hidden in the deep jungles of Brazil, that is the ultimate band. Once out of the way and safely on the sidelines, I think it is hilarious to watch two hipsters try and compare music taste:

**Hipster 1:** *(casually drinking a high end beer)* So do you like Band A?

**Hipster 2:** They are OK but I find their sound really derivative of Band B. Do you know band B? They have this great single I pulled off an underground radio station called “Fame is Shame.” *(adjusting his canvas bag)*

**Hipster 1:** Yeah they are ok but I found they sound a little too much like Band C. My god they have the best LP I picked it up at that little record shop on Main and Johnson downtown. I really love that place. They don’t have any Top Forty records which is really refreshing. Pop music is crap.

**Hipster 2:** Totally, but I can’t stand band C. Their last CD sounded like they made it just to sell records. The obo was a nice touch though. I’ll admit that.

I’ve seen conversations go on like this for hours, band-name-dropping sword fights, each hipster trying to out duel the other by showing that he knows more bands that the other doesn’t know. What I find really funny is that most hipsters won’t admit when they haven’t actually heard of a band. They’ll lie and say “They’re OK but...” because by admitting they haven’t heard Band A they has destroyed whatever music authority they
wished to have built; their musical authority being the base for their whole existence they may as well trade all their Warren Zevon records for a noose.

What I like to do when I get into conversations with a hipster is make up bands. I’ll laud the greatness of the Tacos, a little known rock band from Mexico with a wicked maraca player that’d “blow your mind.” Or the Ice Kings, a Norwegian ambient sound act that are really big in Britain (the phrase “really big in Europe/Britain/the UK” is hipster gold) but their only LP, *When the Sun Melts*, is available strictly off their website, www.theworldislonelyandiamcold.com.

How do I know so much about all this business? I have a great picture of myself here beside the computer, brightly illuminated and framed by the moving sun through the window which now refuses to find any clouds, wearing a hemp necklace and Talking Heads shirt in grade ten; I used to be a card carrying hipster myself. I’ve changed I swear (although that’s hard to believe from a guy who’s writing about nothing but his musical opinions). However, there came a point in high school, probably my grade 10 or 11 year, when I really got sick of pop music. I think it was the over-saturation of boy bands (98 degrees, Backstreet Boys, N’Sync, etc.) and rock bands that sounded all the same (Nickelback, Staind, Our Lady Peace, etc.) The legion of crappy pop music, combined with an increased awareness of my own ordinariness, drove me to the hipster lifestyle. Suddenly I only bought CDs that I knew had never been on the radio (and if they were on the radio, or god forbid Much Music, I dismissed the artists as no talent hacks). Half the time I bought CDs based strictly on the recommendations of magazines; if I didn’t like a CD which had received a glowing review in the magazine, I forced myself to like it by
listening to it until my ears bled. Then I would tell everyone who moved how great the album was, insisting it was an "acquired taste."

Yet, this was a public front. I still listened to my 80’s rock with Darren and in my car. I still watched Much Music. I still listened to the radio in the car occasionally. I still listened to my country. Yet, my public music vocabulary was that of the hipster and the excuse I gave when it was pointed out that I knew the lyrics to whatever Top Forty song was on the radio was, "I’ve heard it so fucking much it is burned into my head. It’s sickening" (which is half way true. I didn’t like most of the Top Forty but the odd song that I did enjoy, I dared not admit to).

Then I got out of high school. In my first two years after high school, a little over 4 years ago now, I was still in Lavington, living with my parents, attending Okanagan University College (OUC) in Vernon, my public hipster image grew immensely. In college the game of cool shifts from liking what everyone likes (high school conglomerate thinking) to trying to be as individual as possible. But everybody listens to the same "underground" music; so, because everyone listens to the same "underground" bands in order to survive (read: be cool), in a college setting a hard working hipster has to overcompensate and go super underground. I would stop by the Book Nook, a small bookstore on Main Street in Vernon that sold ancient vinyls in its basement, and find the most random records and buy them, secure in the fact that no one else had heard them. Really, the only thing cooler than a new band no one has heard of is an old band no one has heard of (the worst of these expeditions being a Leo Sayer record that pictures him in a tennis outfit and ridiculous headband).
It was at OUC that I discovered that I could use my love for popular music as an ironic weapon. I could listen to country music or hair metal because it was so uncool it made me cool somehow. Liking uncool things is part of people’s charm/coolness factor apparently, like cheering for the Kansas City Royals or claiming you’ve watched every episode of 21 Jump Street. So the image I put forth was this weird combination of liking songs because they were “artistically superior” (when in reality I had very little clue. I just knew that they got good reviews) and liking songs because nobody else liked them (when secretly I liked them because I thought they were kick ass not because I was being ironic).

But when I actually moved out of Vernon and to Victoria (2 years ago now) to finish my undergrad, something clicked. I didn’t know anyone at UVic. Well, I knew Gabe, but one out of ten thousand is a small fraction. And I lived in a one bedroom apartment to myself the first year until I moved in with Gabe and Erik. I was completely anonymous. With Vernon and small town life I always felt I had to worry about who I was going to run into and what they’d tell the next person about me. I’m not overly shallow but I’m not going to lie and say that I didn’t completely disregard others’ opinions of me. Who doesn’t like to be thought fondly or, at least, tolerably of? But in Victoria there was no pressure of that sort. Suddenly, I stopped trying to justify my taste in music (and books) and started enjoying them. I let the Top Forty back into my life (although when I got a job as a produce clerk at Thriftys, a grocery store, a few months after I moved to Victoria and was subjected to their cable radio station, I grew very sick of the repeated version of Jessica Simpson butchering “Take My Breath Away.” I should say I re-learned how to be selective with my Top Forty). If I enjoyed a tune I didn’t try to
hide it but actually played it regularly in the company of others. Someone would ask me why I liked, say, Justin Timberlake’s first single and I would answer “Because it’s dancey and fast and makes my feet move involuntarily. There are times when I want that. Now is one of those times.”

This was a large step in maturity I guess but I didn’t know it then. I was flush with the exhilaration of actually liking and listening to what I said I enjoyed. Yet, I still had to battle the hipsters on a near daily basis. One of my better friends Tyler, a fellow writer, is a hipster through and through. A heel-dragging hipster. One of his major issues with popular music is that he’s convinced that everyone who gets popular does so because they want money; popular artists are shallow beasts swallowing the consciences of young minds and club-goers whole and spitting out catchy hooks and choruses. Conversations with him would go as such:

Tyler: (wearing a Jethro Tull T-Shirt) I just don’t think there’s anything of value on the radio. It’s all rap and bad pop. Utter. Shit. Where is my Shins album?
Me: Isn’t it possible that good bands get popular because they are good? I mean shouldn’t the cream rise to the top? It’s not worth throwing away the baby with the bathwater.
Tyler: Where is my Pinback album? I can’t find my Decemberists disk. When are you going to burn that Tacos album for me? Ack!

My parents just returned home and my brother burst in the door telling me he bought a totally awesome set of shocks for his mountain bike. I pretended to ignore him which made him angry (surprise!) and threaten to drive his bike over my sleeping body and then brag about how seamless the ride was over my limp torso. But back to Tyler: it should be said that, although I tend to disagree with the hipster way of thinking, they do have fantastic taste in music. Well, a half formed sort of fantastic. Ignoring popular music
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is like throwing yourself in an underground cell with no windows; how can you relate to people other than those who too are in those cells (i.e. other hipsters)? More than that, some popular music is really, really good and shouldn’t be overlooked. Sometimes music can just be fun and light; more than anything, I think that is the void popular music fills for me (usually that second 20% below the cream as I explained before). If I’m in a dancey happy mood I want the kind of big bass line I can make an ass of myself to. The best example I can think of off the top of my head is Usher’s Confessions, specifically “Yeah.” That may be the most perfect bar song I’ve ever heard; every time I hear it makes me want to drink and get rejected by pretty girls. While the album is not an artistic masterpiece, it is some damn fine musical entertainment. And sometimes I just want to be entertained; I can’t live my whole life in the moody gloom of The Zutons. I’m not saying that Bob Dylan should be compared or held on the same musical level as Christina Aguilera (after all Bob Dylan could never pull off “What a Girl Wants”) but I am saying that Bob Dylan was one of the most popular artists in America for an extended time and now one of the most critically adored; the point of that bizarre comparison is that the 1960’s versions of hipsters probably hated Bob Dylan, based on how publicly accepted and revered he was, despite how overwhelmingly great he was. Sometimes musical artists get popular because they are actually good and the listening public gets it right (the best modern example is probably The White Stripes and Radiohead). With this in mind, I’ve learned to enjoy eating my Cheetos along side my filet mignon.

After that long rambling diatribe I suppose I should answer what I set out to answer here: so what do I listen to? I think it is time for some clarity.
What I Listen To:

Lyrical consciousness: Bob Dylan, Common, Bright Eyes, Matt Good
Big guitars: Hendrix, Van Halen, Led Zeppelin, Guns and Roses
Originality: Yumi Bitsu, Wilco, The Fugees/ Lauryn Hill
Honesty: country music- specifically Garth Brooks, Paul Brandt, Faith Hill
Musicality: defined by me as overwhelming (even brief moments of) perfection, mostly jazz and the blues – B.B. King, Muddy Waters, John Coltrane, Ray Charles, Buddy Rich)
1960’s rock: The Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, The Band
Weird long jammy songs: “She’s so heavy (I want you)” by the Beatles, “Kidsmoke (Spiders)” by Wilco
Catchy and infectious: (usually the realm of popular music, Motown the general Exception – early Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson, Dianna Ross) and odd singles – “Helena” by My Chemical Romance, “Toxic” – Britney Spears
Whatever song fits The Moment: the big kicker that I won’t begin to list here although I’m going to do my best through the rest of this

The music that I adore above most else, that top 10 percent I mentioned earlier, tends to be have a high combination of the different criteria on the list. “Gimmie Shelter,” by the Rolling Stones for example, combines the guitar-infectious-1960’s rock (a little cheat I know)-musicality criteria. I will say now that that further top 1 percent, that transcendent music, tends to be very heavily based in the last component, The Moment, something I will document here as I go.

So, after outlining and answering the question of my musical taste, where does this leave me?

Well I’ve taken my headphones off and have opted instead to put my music through the computer so I can listen while I type. I actually had a conversation with my mother today before she left about the Chicken Palace in Lumby that is rumored to be shutting down. I went outside in the sun and played basketball on the hoop by the shed in the backyard. But I’m still rootless in this slowly autumning landscape, surrounded by
clouds and the odd puff of dirt and dry grass, listening to whatever I can hear and reading anything I can pick up. Only now I'm kinda enjoying it.
nothing felt as good as climbing the Big Hill
pedals dig harsh until dip down other side and
it's been ten years since I rode this bike
too long leg knees high above handlebars
purple red frame hard dented high seat
looking down at house ditches mailboxes
scattered newspapers white fences trees
trees black dog then highway car car truck
I know if I aim straight
down the center
I can close my eyes coast
never forgetting which way is downhill

I've worked hard at the stupid grocery store now for almost a month so I figured I deserved a break from the monotony of a forty hour work week. I drove into Vernon last night, braving the cooling early autumn evening after work (reminded me a lot of Victoria actually, with the air coming off Kalamalka Lake feeling a little like the ocean chill). I ended up at a local drinking hole named Rock Bottom where I ran into some of my old high school friends. Well, not really friends per se but people I knew in high school. So I drank with them and heard them talk about the nice cars they bought with their jobs at the lumber mill and airport. They all commented that I have changed a fair bit; I'm a little thicker now than in high school and have grown my hair shaggier, filled out in the shoulders (I'm still convinced I'm horrendously skinny) and wear smaller shirts and tighter pants that fit me marginally better. Basically, the somewhat new and somewhat improved (read: different) version of myself was a semi-rousing success. It is too bad I can't really say the same for our conversations which, since we had so little in common even when we knew each other 4 years ago, was predictably awkward. Most of our talking revolved around the times and people of our high school lives and, oddly enough, television.

To be honest the night kinda depressed me but I'm trying not to let it get in my way as I sit at the desk here in the sun room. While we talked it got me thinking that every time I catch myself watching Smallville (a guilty pleasure I admit) or any other WB drama, I'm reminded that my high school experience was largely a jumbled bunch of snapshots, events and faces that drifted in and out until it was summer. In certain ways,
the media representations of high school, with their over-dramatics, despicably stereotypical characters and kids taking themselves way too seriously, are more true to fact that I would like to think. Everything did seem as fragmentally episodic and important as it does on TV. Everything was serious, especially the tiniest details; I knew the type of pants I wore day to day would dictate how people reacted to me: on the days I wore cargo pants people seemed to be a lot nicer to me, smiling and talking amiably, whereas when I wore jeans people tended to ignore me. I never did any scientific experiments to support this claim but it seemed that way. Because the things that were taken with absolute straight faced attitude at Kalamalka High School (my alma mater) were: clothes, cars, athletic ability, the opposite sex (I remember one incident where Tommy Jenkins, without a single ounce of humor involved, actually timed how long he held hands with Sandra Tander) and music.

High school is the perfect breeding ground for popular music. Every single person is gaining some foothold in self exploration (often without trying and unbeknownst to them) and, in turn, chooses their music accordingly. One of the easiest ways to figure out what a student thinks of him/herself is to listen to what music they claim to enjoy. The stereotypes existed long before I went to high school but it seems that no one at Kal felt they needed to break any of the preset molds; smokers listened to 80’s metal, the drama kids listened to New Wave, the popular kids listened to Hanson and Bush X, and so on. Nobody really questioned or challenged these “rules”; I think everyone figured that that’s what was supposed to happen and was content with it.

But that really isn’t really new or interesting. What is intriguing though is a conversation I had once with Ryan, one of the kids I grew up with in Lavington. Ryan
told me (and I am blatantly paraphrasing) that he often listened to music like his life was a TV show (a fantasy I'm positive every modern kid has when they are young) and he often played music that he thought would get him into similar situations as the characters on TV. In short, he was trying to dictate his own soundtrack with TV as a model. On a base level it makes sense; I mean, if a slow song comes on every time Lana and Clark are about to share a teasingly intimate moment, it translates to a young impressionable mind (like myself at 14) that, if a person plays enough slow mushy love songs, the chances that they will share a kiss by a moonlit barn-loft window rises exponentially. There is a certain logic in this. If a lonely girl in her room plays “Beautiful” by Christina Aguilera maybe her peers will begin to accept her. If a boy blares “Hot for Teacher” perhaps this confession will finally drive his high school gym teacher to realize her love for him (a particularly appropriate comment considering I am playing 1984 at full volume into my headphones right now).

But actors don't pick the score behind their scenes, so why should people think that they can? This leads to the inevitable question: how much of our own background music is scripted? I suppose this discussion could spiral into all sorts of philosophical debate about Fate and Destiny but that is much too large for me to attack directly here (and really the only authority I hold in that area is a lecture course I took in metaphysics in second year which lead me mostly to the conclusion that second year philosophy students are looking for any and every situation to use the term “phenomenology” to impress people. And people say us English grads are pretentious). What I am interested in is whether people can stuff music into a setting and make it meaningful or is it all serendipity.
What I do know is that teenagers, most assuredly guys, put a lot of stock into popular music and its powers; certain songs, whether chosen or not, come to define very important and pivotal moments in life. I myself have three songs that came to define my high school myth: the warm up song for our basketball team, the song I lost my virginity to, and my graduation song.

My old high school, Kalamalka, is down the bowl of the valley and a fifteen minute drive from my home in Lavington; it is one of five in the surrounding area, housing roughly between 500 kids (when I entered in grade eight) to over 700 (when I left in grade 12). The school was relatively close to Kal Lake, so I suppose it was only natural that the school team name was the Lakers. I spent five whole winters bearing a navy blue and white/yellow basketball jersey with the bold capital letters LAKERS pressed across my chest. The only problem was that, despite my undying passion for the game, I had a few major factors riding against me: 1) I was pretty short (I didn’t grow to my current height of 5’11 until grade twelve. I was actually under five feet in grade 8); 2) I was white (sickeningly pale, which means I could really only do two things in a basketball sense: shoot deep jumpshots and ride the pine. My Caucasian nature wasn’t such an obvious hindrance however, because my school had a grand total of two black people, neither of whom actually played basketball); and 3) I wasn’t that good. Don’t get me wrong, I mean, I was better than the average person but I had a tendency to lose focus in the middle of games and become a victim of repeated brain farts that usually resulted in me having the ball bounce off my hands or forgetting that we had a full court press on. Such events, in quick succession, usually had me relegated to the bench where me and Brad, another fellow bench warmer, checked out girls in the stands and had water bottle
quick draw contests. To be truthful, I played basketball to be with my friends, to get on the bus and go to the away tournaments, to sneak out and gallivant around whatever small town they holed us up in: Clearwater, Kamloops, Revelstoke, the basic gambit of B.C. highway towns. My favorite was a town Golden because that had a sign that read: “Golden: Town of Opportunity.” The only opportunity I saw in the town, which exists solely because the TransCanada runs right through it, was the chance to work at a gas station and brag about how Golden is better than New Denver.

Anyway, for the home games, most of the school would show up and we would always enter and warm up to a melody of songs, led by Montel Jordan’s “This is How We Do It,” a bombastic suburb-rap anthem that encouraged us to reach for our 40s and turn it up (yeah!). For five years our opening lay-up drills always started with that song. What may be more bizarre is that no one wanted to change it except me. My teammates argued that that was how it always was and to switch the song would be sacrilegious. It’s not to say that the song is particularly terrible; I enjoyed it once upon a time, around grade seven. But by grade twelve, the song was utterly laughable. Other teams would stop doing their weaving passing drills and stare at the speakers, flabbergasted. When we went to other schools, schools like Fulton (the cross town rivals) they never had the same warm up music game to game; they had THE up-to-date mixtapes that played the hottest singles. It should also be stated that Fulton, a freshly constructed school, continually throttled us year in and year out (and not just us really, but nearly every local team); they made the provincial finals in basketball nearly every year I was in high school. We, the proud Lakers, on the other hand were not exactly piss-poor but dangerously close. Did
the warm up music correlate to greatness? Was the secret to great basketball an ever changing warm up tape? Given all the evidence involved I'm inclined to state yes.

(While we're on the topic of achieving greatness, would it be hard to see people doing better if their everyday lives included warm up songs/entrance themes? Like, when you get to work or school and your entrance theme plays, maybe the chugging bass-driven “Achilles’ Last Stand” or the uber-rap-hardcore “Gangsta Paradise” (if that’s your fancy though I would laugh at you), wouldn’t you want to work harder? Wouldn’t greatness be the only acceptable outcome if your entry into every room was preceded by the opening to “War Pigs”?)

So by grade twelve “This is How We Do It” had taken on a very shifty and tricky meaning within my mind. On one hand, it represented the good times I had with my friends, creating in-jokes and just being stupid and blissfully naive. I mean it was hard to be overly serious when your only real responsibility in a strange city was to play basketball (which wasn’t even a responsibility to me since I wore a healthy groove into the bench). Also, the song reaffirmed I was an athlete and with that came the sort of high school capital that was trumped at Kal only by being a hockey player; people vaguely recognized me in the halls and cheered in the rare instance I checked into a game. I was not an unpopular kid by any stretch of the mind, but I didn’t hang out with the “cool kids”; basketball leaned me a little more towards the cool side or at least gave me a foothold with the popular kids.

On the other hand, the song brings back the memories of getting our asses handed to us on a near weekly basis for 3 months of the year. For my entire high school life. In front of people I knew. It gave the other team a chance to laugh at us before we even
tipped off. The song is demoralizing like that. I’m certain if I was being interviewed for a job and the nicely dressed woman uncrossed her legs and started humming “This Is How We Do It” I would break down, sobbing, and explain, that “Yes I understand, I’m just no good for the job” and walk out. She wouldn’t even have to say anything.

(While we’re on the topic wouldn’t it be easier in some social interactions if you could just play songs. Like “Hit the Road Jack” when someone needs to be fired or “Song for the Dumped” when you need to tell that special someone you are no longer so fond of his/her company. Wouldn’t this make the world a lot easier?)

“This is How We Do It,” through the filter of my basketball “career,” has been transformed into this weird mix of blissful remembrance, pride, and utter soul crushing inadequacy. But Paula Cole’s “I Don’t Wanna Wait” bears no such feelings. In fact, I enjoy the song, despite it being one of the whiniest theme songs ever. I suppose that statement needs a fair bit of prefacing given that, taken at face value, the only people that might agree still believe Dawson’s Creek was the height of existential art and Pacey was a dreamboat.

We talked about Dawson’s Creek last night at the bar coincidently because it was one of those shows everyone watched or claimed to watch. I personally never caught more than five minutes of the show before running away from the TV. Not my cup of tea. In fact, the mere thought of it now, makes the sunroom here chill and gives cold goosebumps to my skin as I type.

Continuing, living in a small valley with an abundance of mountain lakes, myself and my friends were large fans of camping. Camping had nothing but upside for us. We could drink and pass out where we pleased; we could have a campfire, which, anyone
that isn’t a robot would agree, is one of the best things in the world. And, because there were so many lakes, we were usually able to find one that was empty of other campers so that we could carry out our shenanigans, loud and stupid, without outside interference.

The year was 1999, my grade eleven year, and it was the wind-down period of high school, the last two weeks where nobody did much of anything except make absurd summer plans (I believe this was the summer that Brian, Chris, Stefan and I decided that we would make a trip to Mexico. Driving. In Brian’s beat up station wagon. Nobody seemed overly surprised when the trip didn’t work out). I had yet to turn 17 and I was ready for some life changing experiences.

I had been reflecting, as I listened to *Girls Girls Girls* on the regular, I just wasn’t doing anything I thought was of note. I wasn’t hooked on drugs (I had smoked pot once and ended up wearing my lungs on my shirt I coughed so hard). I hadn’t gone on a 7 day bender (at this point in my drinking career my limit was around 3 beers). And, the most glaring problem, I still had not had sex, let alone sex on a car hood or pool table.

Not that this was a huge problem because none of my other friends, with the exception of Brian, had (but he was a hockey player and they were known for having the whole team share one girl. So he only half counts). We were just approaching that age where we stopped thinking hitting each other in the crotch was funny and starting to really focus our energies on other crotches. For me, it was Susan’s.

Now, I had had girlfriends before, brief interludes of dating, so I was reasonably confident in the logic of baby steps. Being a somewhat shy fellow I really only got the courage to date about one girl a year on average. With Janice, my first girlfriend, I managed to get to second base, feeling her breasts underneath her shirt. Gina, the next
girl, allowed me into her pants, groping amateurly. As the summer of '99 approached I convinced myself I was locked into a progression of sorts; my next girlfriend would be The One. Not the First Love; no, no, no, high school was not the place for that silliness. The First Time.

So in the twilight of the school year my friends and I decided it would be a good idea to travel the dirt roads to our favorite campground: Sugar Lake. We packed into two cars: my beat up Honda Civic newly acquired from my parents, and Chris’s mom’s white Bonneville. Also along for the trip were: Stefan, the immortal Kim Miller, Susan, the other Chris (who we referred to as Jack), Becky/Trevor (friends who were dating), three bootlegged 2L bottles of Vex, two dozen Budweiser and enough hotdogs and marshmallows to last us two days.

Susan and I weren’t dating but we were doing that game of asking each other’s friends if the other was interested, dancing around our attraction for each other. Naturally, it was Jack who invited her camping for me (she was a friend of Kim and Becky’s so it wasn’t completely random). She was a short girl, slightly chubby waisted, with a cute round face and wonderfully deep, dark brown eyes. She had this habit of biting her hair when she talked which I thought was adorable. She also listened and claimed to “really understand” the Misfits and Dead Kennedys which seemed pretty hardcore to me.

As we set up the campsite, we turned on the car stereo for some music. The first song: DMX’s “Ruff Ryder’s Anthem.” The tents were scattered around the fire, crackling against the quickly falling night (it seemed an unspoken agreement that the tents should be far enough apart that there was some privacy) and we all began to relax and chatter. In the background, because one of the girls (Becky I think) begged for it, Shania Twain sang
some poppy country song. Then, Puff Daddy’s “Missing You.” Looking back I should have known there was some sort of mischief afoot, given this selection of songs without any coherence, but when you’re watching the sunset orange and purple between the trees in the company of friends and campfire, it is hard to notice such details.

Then the booze and someone found my Whitesnake tape in my car and it was “Here We Go Again.” We were all relatively new to the drinking game so, really, it was no surprise when we all proceeded to get drunk and stumble around, dangerously close to the lake at times, casting spidery shadows on the trees. Then, Destiny’s Child and “No, No, No.” A truly bizarre soundtrack.

I think at this point Kim (I know it had to be a girl because none of us guys would have been man enough to do it) slipped in a mixtape that began with Savage Garden. For those of you not in the know, yes, I bought their CD, and no, they were not any good. At any rate, we all paired off, Becky and Trevor, Kim and Chris (with Jack and Stefan floating about anxiously) and Susan and I. It started with us talking on the picnic table, then she asked if I would dance (“Don’t Let Go” by En Vogue, still one of my favorite sappy songs). We kept talking, me saying things like “I wouldn’t mind playing college basketball at UCLA” and her just patronizing me by nuzzling my neck. Then kissing my neck.

We decided to take a walk (“Mo Money, Mo Problems” in the background). The path was stupidly dark; I mean I could barely see my feet, which was not helped in the least by the vision-doubling effect of three and a half Buds. Staggering along for a few minutes we found another picnic table down by the lake and sat down.

Me: So what do you have planned for the summer? I think we’re going to Mexico.
Susan: *(looking unconvinced, though cute)* That sounds cool. I don’t know. I don’t have much of a summer here.

Me: Why’s that?

Susan: I just found out yesterday we are moving. My dad got transferred.

Me: That is shitty. Wow, that really sucks. *(While my heart is dropping into my stomach “You Make Me Wanna” starts to play unironically in the background)*

Hey, do you like this song?

Susan: Not really.

Me: *(lying)* Yeah. Me too.

So we sat like this for a fair amount of time, chatting aimlessly, cold wood slowing numbing our asses, until I leaned in and kissed her.

By a relative stroke of luck my tent was relatively isolated at the corner of our campsite directly by where we emerged from the path and a good distance back from the campfire. I unzipped the tent and stepped inside, arranging the sleeping bag as Susan went over to her tent and grabbed a small box. She stood for a split second outside, silhouetted by the flickering fire and, in that moment, “I Don’t Wanna Miss a Thing” wailing in the background, I realized that, perhaps alcohol encouraged, if I played my cards correctly, I would no longer be a virgin by sun up.

So it got to the point where we’d gotten all of each other’s clothes off and she reached behind her.

“My mom gave these to me. She said just in case.” She half giggled and begun tearing at the condom box. The stereo, by some miracle of car battery, was still going. “Semi Charmed Life” started.

(As a small aside, I have no clue what the perfect song to have your first sexual encounter to would be. I’m leery of picking a long song like “Freebird” or “Patience” simply because they are roughly 23 minutes long and if you finish before the song is done you look terrible and that seems like a lot of unneeded pressure. However, there are no
real short slow sexy songs except for maybe “Do You Realize” by the Flaming Lips and, even still, that was in a car commercial. Of the same mind, I don’t think “Bohemian Rhapsody” would be good either because of all the tempo changes. With such drastic musical shifts one might be tempted to try some acrobatic moves, which, being the first time in such a situation, I can’t envision going well. Someone would probably get poked in the eye. A true conundrum.)

I had taken Sex Ed courses since grade seven and, like any teenage boy, had seen my fair share of porn, so I didn’t consider myself completely uneducated in the basic matters of sex. What I hadn’t banked on was the tricky condom business. It took me through “I Swear,” “Creep” and two condoms, all the while Susan watching anxiously, to actually work the rubber on (within her head I’m sure she was thinking it was a sign to escape. Why she didn’t is as big a mystery to me as it is to you).

Then Paula Cole started. The first thrust ended on the lyric “in the war of ’44/ every telephone ring” (this is where the high school TV show would fade out and then fade back in, next morning, focused on a coffee shop) and we continued, beginning to hit our rhythm by the time the chorus repeated itself near the end. By the time “Only Wanna Be With You” played through and the climax of “Water Runs Dry” peaked, we were finished.

So an otherwise revolting song became lionized by me losing my virginity to it in a tent. If Susan was upset about it she didn’t show it and, after our morning awkwardness, we became amazingly comfortable with each other. She’d already seen me naked and at my worst; I could only go up from there. We dated until she moved, repeatedly falling into fits of giggles about the condoms. But when she moved it became different, a
distance too far, her meeting new friends and me with my old ones. We called each other a few times but then, as things tend to happen, nothing more happened. I’ve most likely become the embarrassing sex story she tells people (which is probably fair).

Now that I look at it, I think I have romanticized the whole thing and it’s partly the song’s fault; I’m not sure I could look back so fondly on such a disaster if I didn’t have such a laughable sensory cue to balance things out. But that was high school I guess, a weird balance of terror and humor with brief interludes of stumbling perfection. That damn song, in some bizarre way, is proof that Susan and I were young and perfect, if only for two and three-quarter songs.

I’m kinda restless today; I keep getting up and wandering out past the living room to the kitchen and filling up glass after glass of ice water then sitting back down and pecking out one sentence then getting up for something else. I’m trying, with limited success, to translate one of the main topics of conversation from last night at Rock Bottom, a topic four years in the past now: the grad song (Van Halen is still in the headphones, only now I’ve switched to I).

In direct contrast to the Susan story, my grad song is something I actually got to vote on. I had the choice of what song would be played at the crowning moment of my high school life. Theoretically anyways. Grad songs are slippery, tricky beasts. On the one hand, I think they should be grand, overstated songs that trumpet greatness and sadness simultaneously, while maintaining the joy of the sort of freedom that comes with the rite of passage from high school to some other sort of loose reality (in my case University). By this logic, every high school should have to choose between “American Pie” by Don McLean and “Baba O’Reily” until the end of time. Yet, when I was
seventeen, graduating, strutting about the school and shoving younger kids into lockers (well, only the ones smaller than me), I don’t think I realized that such an event called for such an obviously epic song. I was more concerned with my life then, in that moment, as I was. My thoughts didn’t include my twenty five year reunion when I might desperately want to link my high school years with some sort of powerful, transcendent meaning. When I was seventeen I wanted to rock and be young and listen to whatever my favorite song of the week was; there was no need to bookmark graduation because all I could think about was camping one week after grad, then, after that, working at the grocery store until the summer finished (you can see when, after a eight hour shift today, I feel I’ve come depressingly full circle). This kind of thinking holds a lot of validity when it comes to selecting the perfect grad song; why not pick a song that exemplifies the Now Moment of a grad year, a superficial, frivolous song. Really, that’s the only kind that has its roots puncturing the deep earth of high school antics and carelessness.

So I suppose it only follows then that “Shook Me All Night Long,” “Karma Chameleon” or even “Nothing Compares 2 U” became the anthems for grad years past. Two years before I graduated every senior class in the Western world had Greenday’s “Time of Your Life” as their song (it was also played at our own grad banquet for good measure). And you know what? That’s fine. I respect those songs; the songs are valuable in that they speak for a particular moment and set of people. What I don’t agree with are songs that are constructed for situations, in this case, the graduation experience. Like that damn babbling spoken word sunscreen “song” or, now and forever a bitter enemy of my stereo, Vitamin C and her completely idiotically titled “Graduation (Friends Forever).”
If you’re unfamiliar with the song, its lyrics consist of “we’ll always be together” as the chorus, intersected by uplifting quotes from ACTUAL high schoolers who spout gems like, “I’ll always remember my high school years,” “I couldn’t have graduated without my friends” and “I had a miserable time, but I really wanted to be immortalized in a crappy song.” Oh, and if you missed what exactly the song was about because you were jabbing pens in your ears, it’s there in title! Would it really have been so hard to drum up a different title with some damn style? Perhaps, they spent their budget on the damn sound bites. Perhaps, the writer wanted to wash his/her hands of the song as quickly as possible and thrust the title forward and ran all the way to the bank.

Has pop music degraded so far that this cruel practical joke, down to the bracketed friendship bracelet motto, is released upon the public? When did popular music become Hallmark cards?

Rant finished. At my high school, the graduation committee was made up of the popular kids: the Sarahs and Kristies and Mandys. Now, I really didn’t have any strong feelings either way about the popular hockey player/rich crowd. I was on talking, reasonably friendly terms with most which was fine by me. But when it came time to nominate songs for graduation they began to promote very heavily this Vitamin C song. Their logic went something like this (somewhat) exact quote: “It is just so perfect, you know. It says everything about high school, you know what I mean, and it’s so sad at the end I almost cried but then I didn’t.” The Vitamin C crusaders blazed through our grad class, preaching in low cut V-neck sweaters in an effort to swing the lonely guy vote. Girls that would normally be given a weak, patronizing smile by the Kristies and Sarahs, were cornered by the vending machines and complimented on their hair before subtly
being handed the message: Vitamin C. The popular guys strangely stayed away from such canvassing; they seemed embarrassed to be associated with such a movement. I suppose selecting the perfect casual jeans was problem enough.

Without the popular guys, the Vitamin C coalition had to overcome some serious roadblocks. The other songs nominated were Edwin’s “Trip Around The Sun,” (good pick; decent balance of subtle rock sentimentality and tolerable music) Guttermouth’s “Lipstick,” (a complete joke of a song which manages to include the words “whore” and “cunt” in direct reference to the narrator’s mother. I guess someone thought it would be hilarious to have that much swearing in an auditorium of parents) “The River” by Garth Brooks (I adore Garth Brooks but this is one of those songs that seemed too slow and country and God oriented to really gather legs with the slacker/stoner vote) and, lastly, “Freefalling” (a grand song that had the kids with cars’ vote with the definite possibility to sway the smoke pit). My listening tastes all through high school basically went in phases, similar to lunar patterns; one month I would listen the hell out of “punk,” then the next motown, the next alternative, etc. I always had my bedrock of hair metal and country and other artists (by grade twelve, that list would include Matt Good, Smashing Pumpkins, Beck’s Odelay and so forth); however, I always tried to find certain songs the popular kids liked that I could agree with, so at least we would have something in common. “Trip around the Sun” was one such song.

My vote, therefore, went to Edwin.

(Retrospectively, I should have written in for the extended instrumental “Little Wing.” The Hendrix or Vaughn versions would have been fine but I hadn’t heard either yet and would not for another two years. The song translates well across time periods
because of its instrumental nature; the emotional tone mirrors the sort of restless, semi-exuberant leaving experience. Plus it is a unique enough choice that it could represent our specific grad class, without being watered down by twenty other classes choosing it, like what happened with Vitamin C. And, really, does anything say young and careless like a six minute and forty three second guitar solo?)

So those were the options. The grad committee passed out little cards to vote on and “Freefalling” won. But wait. By a slim margin. Over Vitamin C. To this day I’m convinced someone was stuffing not only their bras but ballot boxes. Naturally there was a recount. When that failed to nominate “Graduation,” somehow the class was cajoled into holding a re-vote. The logic I suppose was that, since it was now a two horse race, the kids who didn’t vote for either “Freefalling” or “Graduation” could now have more of a say in what the grad song was. More persuasion followed: lectures on Vitamin C’s lyrical quality and ever lasting ability to remind us exactly who the Kalamalka Grad Class of 2000 really was. “Freefalling,” in contrast, was a degenerate song, a song about nothing but drugs and rebellion and escaping with style. So we had a re-vote. There was no grey by this point; you either hated “Graduation” or you adored it. You were popular or you had the ability to resist the temptation to be associated with mindless garbage. The results came back and Tom Petty took it again. Victory!

So the plan was, after we’d received our diplomas, sweltering the whole while in our gowns in the too small auditorium packed with eager eyed parents, we would stroll out two by two to the lyrics: “She’s a good girl/ Loves her mama/Loves Jesus and America too/ She’s a good girl, crazy ’bout Elvis/ Loves horses and her boyfriend too.” Fantastic!
Yet, as we walked, the first lyrics were instead: “And we talked all night about the rest of our lives/ where we’re gonna be when we’re 25/ I keep thinking time will never change.” Suddenly our graduation class had been changed from a group of young kids ready to challenge the world into a bunch of naive yuppies constantly looking back for the best of times. I stared venomously at the speakers the whole walk to the back room, and, when out of sight, kicked the nearest garbage can, muttering and searching for Chris or Jack or someone that I knew would share my feelings about this betrayal.

For the rest of my life I will have to hear that infernal song as the background music of my mind every time conversations about graduation come up. I ask myself, why/how did such a switch occur? Why was Vitamin C THE song for our grad class when at least half of us absolutely detested the song, many on general principles alone brought about by the campaigning? Who thought they had the authority to decide this? Who had the bloody gall to actually think they were important enough to speak for 120 different minded individuals?

This was a topic of conversation we speculated on well into the night at Rock Bottom. Our collective guess was that the Sarahs, notorious suck-ups, managed to wrangle a few teachers onto their side and they blindsided the principal with bitchy pseudo logic. Teachers at our school were generally soft hearted towards the causes of the cool kids so it’s not completely out of the question. Either that or someone donned a balaclava, clubbed the music guy at the ceremony and switched tapes. I guess the easy answer is because that is how high school often goes. This should not come as some great insight, but the popular kids generally get their way through high school, based almost solely on mystique and sleight of hand, an unflappable confidence that the general public
will always cave to popular opinion, whether it be grades, music, cheerleaders/football players or a graduation song.

And this is the reason that there will always be more shitty mainstream music that good mainstream music I suppose. The high school crowd are really the only steady record consumers (adults have too many other problems and college kids are just too poor); once you corner the "cool kid" market, it slowly spreads to the "kids who want to be cool" market. Although there wouldn't be a problem if that sad truth wasn't that every popular high school kid I knew (and I'm sure this translates generally across the board both geographically and temporally) had real shitty taste.

But to return to the grad song again, which still angers me four years later, the harder answer is that that is often how life goes. One thing I know (and I suppose you do too now) it is that the moments I anticipate as being "good" often have less than desirable results. Do I blame TV? A little; I've seen countless graduation ceremonies on TV and not one had some cheap switch trick as the climax. I know I often expect too much out of moments that I think are important (or should be important) and when things fall somewhat short of that perfection it magnifies in my head into utter chaos. But that doesn't make the instances any less shiny or wonderful; it mainly makes them real and human.

So I'm stuck with Paula Cole. Bittersweet fucking Paula Cole.
when sharp tools fail or when a too young boy falls

embarrassing things you find on scrap paper while cleaning drawers:

I know a lot of poems start with a sunset but
this one is different because this sunset is creasing

I find myself punching holes in the hull of my heart
trying to sink myself to your sea bottom because
I’m convinced you’ll be lying there
among the rainbow coral and flipping tales of long-hair mermaids

I’ll happily drown in those light eyes of yours
pierce myself on your lashes,
slice my hands trying to put your
smile in the cage of my fingers
steal a rib so I could listen to your
heartbeat like the ocean trapped
inside a seashell

And you are that morning in a ten-year-old’s life
where he’s throwing rocks into the lake by his house
because he has nothing else to do

And there’s nothing more I want to do
than buy some cheap beer sit on the hood of my car
and talk until the sun rises, creasing

I’ve taken up running in these last few days of September. I used to run when I still lived here with my parents in Lavington two years back before I went to Victoria, when I was still going to OUC (the community college) down the highway. I would get up in the morning and put on whatever was closest to the bed and run up the gigantic hill that guards my road and then back down again; I did it then to stay in shape. I felt I was falling apart physically, especially since I wasn’t playing basketball anymore and wanted to at least remain kinda sorta fit. My parents, who are both working today, don’t seem to understand but they like that I’m getting out of the house and doing something. Joel, who is watching TV absently downstairs, mostly makes snide comments about me needing to “keep my girlish figure” or something equally witty. I think he’s just jealous of my fantastic birthing hips.

Anyway, now that I’ve moved back I’m running because I like to run. Before, I was focused on the road, going up the hill, finishing so I could go home. Now I go in the middle of the day on my days off (or in the evenings after work), and watch the fences and the fields to either side of me; I don’t run as hard or as fast now, but that hardly bothers me.

The reason I mention this is because I was putting together a sort of mental map of my childhood neighborhood as I was running this afternoon. As my feet thudded (when I run I fall very easily into a rhythm-pattern of step-step-breath) I unconsciously started compiling a list of places with events: where Darren was riding no hands over the crest of the hill and a car scared him so bad that he crashed, hooking his clothes into the
barbed wire; the spot where my brother and I made a fort beside the railroad tracks and threw rocks at the speed limit sign just outside our hideout; the bus stop directly across the street from my gravel driveway where I waited every morning (I won a bet once with a neighbor, Jolene, when I ran from my bus stop, down the street, past the Turf Farm and another half dozen houses to Darren’s bus stop in a full sprint). Around that corner is Kim’s old house; at the end of the Learmouth Rd is the gravel pit. A list. A map.

I suppose nearly everyone does the same thing but mine have all been attached to music, almost always unconsciously. These are my places and my musics.

1: Various Artists, *The Hitlist, Volume 1*:

As Chuck Klosterman once wrote (and I now paraphrase), “I know enough about music to fool most people.” I too, given the proper pressures, could make a reasonable music history for myself: it would begin at age eight when I was going through my dad’s old records and came across some old Zeppelin on vinyl (*II*), which led me into Black Sabbath, and somehow to Crosby Stills and Nash then back into the rock groups of the late 60’s (Buffalo Springfield as a start I guess). And, at fifteen, I would front a small garage band called “Everything but the Nipple” or “Tempted to Kick Your Ass” or something, and we would rock out and, after, pass around a joint and argue Lou Reed’s solo career versus his time in The Velvet Underground (which really isn’t an argument at all). I might even throw in some reference to The Kinks or The Animals mixed with a sly allusion to Keith Moon driving a car into his hotel pool.

But the truth is the first CDs I bought (starting in late grade eight-ish) in chronological order were: Shaquille O’Neal *Shaq Diesel*, Sheryl Crow *Tuesday Night Music Club* and Brandy’s self titled first disc. Hardly a murder’s row of musical
greatness. The only cassettes I owned when I started grade 6 were: Much Dance ’93 and ‘94, Garth Brook’s *No Fences* (next to *In Pieces*, my favorite Garth album), Snow, Kriss Kross (both tapes really bad urban pop pseudo rap), *Appetite for Destruction*, taped versions of *Back in Black* and *Girls Girls Girls* (for my rock-metal loud guitar fixes) and, finally, the *Hitlist Volume 1*, hosted by the immortal Tarzan Dan. I was mostly a Top Forty kid. It didn’t help that the two radio stations in Vernon played exactly the same flavor-of-the-minute songs. It’s fucking frustrating. Once, no joke, I heard “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” by Deep Blue Something within an hour on both of the radio stations. I’m guessing I briefly fell into some parallel universe where blatant references to Hepburn movies were the height of art. I’m not quite sure what exactly to think of that.

Well, I played my *Hitlist* cassette so much I wore the writing off the sides. I enjoyed it then for its musical purity and bubble gum catchiness. Sad? Yeah. Now, I cherish this cassette mostly for the comedic elements. Even the title of this tape is hilarious. Hits? Where? Shabba Ranks? TBTBT? The smooth stylings of Zhane? Somehow, The Urban Cookie Collective, whose track “The Key The Secret” anchored side one, parlayed their success with the Keebler Elves into a single. While this tape is not a particularly proud moment for me it has birthed many great things. To start with, the opening track “I Would do Anything for Love” by Meatloaf, spawned more grade seven fantasies than I care to remember. Every dance I went to at Lavington elementary school played Meatloaf as the last song and every boy would desperately hunt down the girl he really wanted to dance with (“dancing” consisted of being across from each other, hands outstretched, roughly a meter in between stomachs, swaying slowly and scared). I would always try and make for the hottest girl on this song because it is roughly 17
minutes long. That’s an especially long time in a 12 year old’s life. Oddly enough Meatloaf never got played at any of my high school dances. Maybe he wasn’t hip enough.

Continuing, the sheer unintentional comedy of *The Hitlist* is ridiculous. On the second side is a song by Joey “Whoa! Blossom!” Lawrence called “Nothing my Love Can’t Fix.” At one point he even starts rapping and, I think, if you listen carefully, you can actually hear his career withering in the background.

(Stepping aside quickly “Nothing My Love Can’t Fix” is the central track and catalyst for *The Worst CD Ever* that my roommate Gabe and I created in fourth year while I was in Victoria. The *WCDE* is a train wreck of pure garbage that is unparalleled anywhere. We would go to parties and stick the CD in the player and wait to see how long it took before someone realized it for what it was and shut it down; the record time was at a house party where the disc made it all the way to track six, past Vanilla Ice’s “Having a Roni” (he tries to beat box!), past “Scatman” (one of the most bizarre “hit” songs ever. I guess it was that pulsing ‘90s dancey beat and the repeated self identification/proclamation that won people’s hearts) and directly in the middle of “No Means No” by Ricky J. Yes, we spent a good night drinking over the creation of *WCDE*.)

Don’t get me wrong: *The Hitlist* is almost reason enough to doubt the existence of a God. Almost. However, in the end it’s just laughable, harmless and, eventually, sentimental. It reminds me of when I was so naive that I didn’t understand the content of 80% of the music I listened to. Darren had to explain what stripper anthem “Girls Girls Girls” was all about and it took me roughly three years after buying the *Hitlist* to really wrap my head around “Humping Around” (I had a vague idea what humping was. Well, I
knew it was dirty anyways and that I wanted to do it to girls). The album is a reminder of a time before my head was polluted by the knowledge of other, more seasoned, boys.

Sadly, I immediately equate my childhood with most of these songs, whether they were on my headphones on car trips to visit my grandparents or just background music to doing my laundry. In fact I've been writing for the last hour with Hitlist on the one stereo that still has a tape deck in the house (my parent's record/8-track/cassette player) and I still know nearly all the words. I can't think of anything more pathetic than a semi grown man singing along in his best falsetto to “What About Your Friends” by TLC (back when they wore bandanas). The album is a time capsule from when musical taste was optional and all I cared about was whether I could sing “Poison” without pause, through “never trust a big butt and a smile,” without any musical accompaniment.

2: Matthew Good Band, Underdogs:

I got this CD for my birthday from my friend Angie (along with a duct tape wallet). The reason I remember wanting this CD was two-fold: firstly, I really liked the “Apparitions” song and video (the video that has Matt Good whipping around as a janitor while a hooker shoots some guy and another business man (played by guitarist Dave Genn) does a line of coke in the bathroom). Second, no one else really seemed to like the album.

The big thing in terms of music at Kalamalka High School during the release of Underdogs with the popular kids, the Sarahs and the Geoffs, was a sort of alternative-rock/mall punk. Clumsy by Our Lady Peace was the perfect must-have album right about the time Underdogs came out. Our Lady Peace fit the mold of alt-rock perfectly: a sort of angry and loud yet strangely introspective music, with the perfect lyrics for boys and girls
to write on school binders and sing along with when angry at their parents for not buying them a Sony Shockwave Discman.

(Naturally I bought *Clumsy*, an album of which I am now hard-pressed to find an ounce of goodness outside of “4AM” (a lulling, actually kinda moving song I still keep around mostly because I danced to it with Gillian Clarke and she grabbed my ass the whole way through). I have a firm belief that everyone who bought *Clumsy* will someday feel the same way and we’ll all throw our copies into a large pit and light them on fire).

Anyway, Matt Good was not overly popular, which I found kind of strange because he fit the mold of alt-rock pretty well. I think now that he might have had a few too many slower songs and that he may have been, in fact, too depressing (and by depressing I mean serious, which often mean the same thing I guess when you’re in high school). There was a damning rumor going around that “Matt Good was an asshole” which somehow soured his catchier more radio friendly hits. And, to be honest, the first single off the album, “Everything is Automatic,” did nothing me for me when it came out; I saw it on Much Music and just as easily dismissed it. Really, without the “Apparitions” video the Matthew Good Band would have had to wait until *Beautiful Midnight* for some semblance of larger success.

While everyone was discussing how dreamy Gavin Rossdale was, *Underdogs* forced me to have an opinion. It was really the first album that I didn’t feel obligated to like; I came to liking it by myself on my own terms. It was a sort of secret that I could play while I wrote crappy rhyming poetry (sample from a poem I found in a drawer: “time stretches out beyond me/ I can’t wait to run and flee”) or shot at the leaning basketball hoop in the backyard. Was the album in the right place at the right time?
Maybe. But it’s still a very good album. It holds two of my favorite non-single Matt Good songs, “My Out of Style is Coming Back” and “Middle Class Gangsters.” Both are slowish heavy songs (at least heavy to me), full of bile and barely under-surface violence against some unseen too-cool opponent; when Good sings “didn’t touch your Mustang when I was in the parking lot” and he says Mustang with such viciousness it almost rips my blood from my veins. It was also the disc that was my first baby step away from a commercial norm and into a sort of pretentious indie-elitism where I would shun anything remotely mainstream, regardless of consequences. I like to think that now I’m mature and have become more tolerant, but I doubt it.

And now that I think about it, every girl I have ever cared about has hated *Underdogs* and I say “hate” with complete confidence. Portia, who I met in a karaoke bar (a story for a later time) absolutely detested Matt Good. An exact quote from her: “He makes me want to kill myself, he’s so depressing. Not only that but he thinks he’s hot shit when his voice is terrible. Horrendously terrible.” She even babbled some music theory about constant minor keys and a boatload of dissonance like that would impress me. Kim, the girl every guy wanted in elementary and one of my best friends at the time, hated his haircut and that somehow translated into dismissing his music as putrid. Susan refused to make out with me to any of his songs (there was one incident where we actually had out clothes off and were rolling around on her bed and the fresh mixtape I had made her ran into a Matt Good song (“Strange Days” I believe) and she stopped, gave me a very serious look and put her bra back on. Heart breaking). Even Marissa (another story for later) turned the station every time he came on the radio and actively avoided him in conversation. What does this female dislike of Matt Good mean? Most people (I’m guilty


myself) use music often as an aphrodisiac but Matt Good appears to be the un-ironic anti-sexy anthem maker. If I’m ever trapped in a situation where some less than desirable girl has me cornered in an alleyway I am comforted that I can whip out Underdogs as a sort of repulsing shield.

But this lack of female adoration won’t stop me when I’m home alone and upset or happy or feeling anything really. Girls be damned; this album taught me to move outside my comfort zone and I thank it for that.

3: Guns N’ Roses, *Appetite For Destruction*:

I have a theory that everyone over and around the age of seven in the late 80’s knows at least 3 of the choruses on this CD, if not three whole songs, no matter how much they espouse to hate the band and everything they stand for. The general opinion of Guns and Roses at my high school was that it music to listen to while you sat on your T-top and smoked cigarettes in the smoke pit (read: loser music). G and R was the externalization of every person’s clichés about how a “band gone bad” looked and acted: long, scraggly hair, addicted to various narcotics, obscenely loud and forever in search of some hotel room to trash. Only skids and people who wanted to go to jail listened to G and R.

That was the allure of Guns N’ Roses. Darren was much more of a metal fan than I was and he was the one who turned me onto Axl and the crew. He actually listened to Ratt and Telsa; I only listened to the top of the metal gang without going much further, mostly just the odd single (namely Whitesnake and some Def Leppard), Motely Crue and G and R. I was by no means a metal head but goddam I loved *Appetite for Destruction*. Darren and I would jump around smashing the couch arms for drums and screeching...
about it being so easy. We thought Slash was on the top five “badass people of all time” list. Maybe even top three. The band was living caricatures of cool, people we couldn’t believe actually existed. They epitomized everything a rock and roll band should have been: a woman gathering, gluttonous, machine of devastation that played damn fine music. (I had of course not seen them play live, a treat I would not get until I was in grade 12 and borrowed a video of their Toyko tour. To say that I was shocked at Axl’s love of hot pants is an understatement of massive proportions). They were fun and loud and obnoxious and our parents hated them.

And for the above reasons *Appetite* is the perfect drinking CD; truthfully that’s where my love really stems from. Putting on this CD throws opens the world of the rock and roll lifestyle. Granted you’ll need a fair bit of liquor and an ability to sleep late into the afternoon, but this record is a vicarious experience. The first time I really drank was a camping trip (and somehow Paula Cole is now tragically linked to G and R because of the camping business) where we piled everyone we could on short notice, got my buddy Darren’s sister to bootleg some beer for us and headed to a backwood lake in late September (a day strikingly similar to today’s come to think of it). Being the novice that I was I don’t remember a whole lot. I’m pretty sure I went in the lake chasing someone’s volleyball. I’m certain another person threw a mini propane tank in the fire. However, what I can remember is the constant wail of Axl in the background, “Paradise City” blasting out of the truck speakers so deafeningly loud I think trees were wishing they could fall over dead. We were hick rock stars, trashing the campsite like it was the Ritz Carlton. This translates to any landscape: if this record comes on in a pub or a bar
somewhere you are expected to act like an idiot. It is the soundtrack of unapologetic alcoholic shenanigans.

(A funny story that I just remembered: I brought a copy of the CD to my Grandma’s house once, my Dad’s mother, and was playing it a little too loudly through my headphones. She walked up, this wobbly woman, sweet as pie, and took the discman away from me, right out my hands. Then she kicked my ass at crib. I’m still unsure what she disliked more: the music or the idea that her grandson was listening to that type of loud obnoxious music.)

If, in a thousand years, archeologists dig up the 1980’s I pray to god they don’t find “Home Sweet Home” (one of my least favorite songs ever. Don’t try to convince me otherwise) or any Bon Jovi (a band which only sounds good never. Ever. Don’t ask me to explain it rationally. If Susan can turn off Matt Good then I’m allowed to turn off Bon Jovi without explanation). I hope they find this album: Appetite for Destruction, which I argue is The Seminal Record of the Eighties (if you are thinking of bringing up Genesis or any sort of Phil Collins as a counter argument you probably need a kick in the face). It does an excellent job capturing the ‘don’t worry, just consume’ feeling that surrounded Reagan and 80’s American pop culture. It is a better record than Thriller, rawer and more compelling. While not having the same lyrical or traditional musical consciousness, it is better than anything put out by U2 that decade; Joshua Tree is a record I can envision being released in 1995 and still having the same cultural effect as it did in the 80’s. I realize U2 was horribly popular and that Joshua Tree and Achtung Baby are very good records and I sound like I’m talking out of my ass but those records mean absolutely nothing to me; by the time I was exposed to U2 they were touring with a giant lemon and
sucking horribly; I can’t get over that. By the way, who gave U2 the moniker of best band in the world anyways? Now they are the new age version of Boston (who were a poor man’s Eagles), making cookie cutter pedantic corporate rock to sell to baby boomers. I suspect people will say the exact same thing about Coldplay in fifteen years but I’ve never really like them much either.

At any rate Appetite is my CD of glorious excess. And don’t we all need to enjoy ourselves sometimes?

My mom just came in and asked me what exactly I was writing. I told her I it was a sort of autobiography and that I was spilling all her secrets (including the one about her hair when she was pregnant with me and the coded messages I found in her graduation yearbook). She ran from the room and is now downstairs busy looking for evidence to burn and shred. She’s a sweet lady.

4: Me First and The Gimmie Gimmies, Have A Ball:

This disc is a bunch of guys from other punk groups (Lagwagon, No Use For a Name, Swingin’ Utters and NOFX respectively) pulled together as a glorious cover band. While some might think this one trick pony might get old, I thrived on it back in the day.

It all stems back to when punk was cool in high school. The kind of punk that was cool was not Sex Pistols punk but more like NOFX punk. I used to think it was so awesome how every punk CD I owned had at least five tracks with straight out yelling and the other five were based on either dildos or lesbians or getting angry at Mom/Dad because the narrator couldn’t say dildo or lesbian. This type of punk music was more pop than punk; it had no social agenda, it had no real substance, just a lot of potty humor and
fun, sloppy three chord songs. Life was good, life was fast, life was simple. It was a time of invincible vibrancy and Have A Ball rose to the occasion.

Mostly, it just reminds me of driving the fifteen minutes of corn-fenced highway between Vernon and Lavington. The CD really only sounds good if your windows are down and you are doing at least eighty kilometers an hour while each of your three friends, squished in the back seat, sing along in their most out-of-tune voices. The best part about that fifteen minute drive would be the fearless singing. Up loud tempo versions of “Mandy,” “Nobody Does it Better” and “Uptown Girl” are the real centers of the disc; they demand that you sing along.

There are two other factors that made me enjoy this album, the first being that my parents practically squealed in disgust when they heard the cover of “Rocket Man,” a completely sacred song in our house. If nothing else, punk covers illustrate that wonderful gap between generations; somehow it’s doubly offensive that someone of the younger generation butchers, not only a song (which apparently never happened before 1980 if you believe my parents), but a song their generation created. It’s like spitting on your parents. I believe the exact quote from my dad was, “They bastardized the hell out of that song. Why is he screaming? Where is the piano? I’m going to throw this crap away if I ever hear it again.” My mother, although her scrunched up face gave her away, tried to pass it off like she liked the song in another attempt to out hip me. I saw through that façade when I played “Uptown Girl” and she actually scratched her ears off.

The second factor in my adoration of Have a Ball stems from the fact that this album also marks one of only two artists (the other being Eminem) I supported once I found a thing called the Internet. At the release of adoration of Have A Ball in grade nine
it was a sugar pop free-for-all mixed with the pseudo angsty alt-rock I discussed earlier: Backstreet Boys were hitting their stride, Christina wasn’t Xtina yet, Creed was somewhere waiting in the wings and people still thought Lance Bass was somewhat important without him needing the publicity of an ill conceived trip to outer space. Being how I shunned anything even remotely popular I just stopped buying CDs in an attempt to stop feeding the massive conspiracy that was putting absolute shit on the radio and infecting generations of youngsters with crap like Britney’s Spears’s “crazy, but it feels alright/ baby thinking of you keeps me up all night.”

(Rant: the thing that really bothers me about current pop music as a whole is that no one can even conceive of a slant rhyme. Rhymes are painfully exact in ridiculously tight couplets. Every song contains the “dead-head” or “night-right” rhyme somewhere and when they can’t conceive of anything at all to rhyme exactly, they simply repeat the word: case in point Avril Lavigne’s “He was a sk8r boi/she said see you later boy.” Who writes this shit? Give me something sloppy and raw, a song like a Burger King hamburger. I mean it’s one thing to make T-shirts for mass production that say “Rebel” on them but it’s a completely different more disgusting thing to do it in poorly rhyming couplets.)

Anyways, I supported Me First and the Gimmie Gimmies because they seemed like they loved music (why else would anyone cover songs?) and I was positive they couldn’t be making money. Plus I was banking on them coming out with a crazy cover of New Kids on the Block. Not only would the band be bastardizing “Step by Step” but it would probably piss off that ever-smug Donnie character. Fuck him!
When someone listens to as much music as I claim to, you develop a fine taste for picking out whether a radio single (and subsequently the artist) will be a flop, a smash or some middling cloud of forgettableness in between. By the chorus of the first listen of any song I can usually tell how big a song will be. I had developed this borderline psychic ability by roughly grade 8 and honed it all through high school. For instance, when I first saw Christina Aguilera’s video for “Genie in a Bottle” I told my brother (slack mouthed beside me as she writhed on the sand) that she was going to be insanely popular. I’m not bragging here but it is just a skill I’ve acquired that is half instinct, one quarter listening carefully, one quarter being burned by buying crappy artists’ albums.

I, however, maybe have been known to be wrong; I’ll be the first to admit that. I told Darren that the Backstreet Boys would be done in 5 weeks (it turns out I was off by roughly a couple of years) and I’m sure Kim has my gem of a quote, “Natalie Imbruglia is going to be around for a while, mark my words,” hidden somewhere to blackmail me when I actually make some money someday. What happens in these situations of utter wrongness is that I generally get blinded by some outside circumstance beyond my comprehension: in the case of the Backstreet Boys, I was blinded by the fact that I was not a teenage girl starved for love; for Natalie Imbruglia, I overlooked that I was a teenage boy horny as ever. Wow. She was really cute.

And somewhere in the deep drawers of my history is a footnote that states on such and such a day in and around August 1995 I, as a brash eighth grader, made a statement to the effect that Tony Rich was amazing and that he would rise to astronomical proportions. So what happened? Well his first single, “Nobody Knows” (a definite love
Tucker 64

mixtape mainstay), was released to my (and a few of my friends. Mostly girls now that I think about it) excitement, peaked at number 2 on the MuchMusic Video Countdown (where it stayed for two weeks) then disappeared forever. The second single? Never came. The second album? It probably exists somewhere but I’ve yet to actually see it (upon further inspection Tony Rich released two other CDs. Who knew?) In fact I might be convinced that I imagined Tony Rich if the CD wasn’t playing in my computer right now (barely drowning out the noise of my mother dumping boxes into the backyard and lighting her own yearbooks ablaze).

How was I misguided? Soft, easy, easy listening grooves and simple, catchy song writing. R & B crooning. The album is ridiculously soothing, the perfect afternoon nap CD when you want to crawl beside someone and fall asleep in the nook of their shoulder. (I’ve never actually had the chance to actually use the CD for that specific purpose given that the first girl I asked (Beth Morrison, 1st year at OUC) laughed so hard she almost fell over. Turns out one of her earlier boyfriends always tried to put the album on as make out music and then sing the words to her. I would never do anything quite that shameless.) There is no narrative line to tie it through but there is a certain vibe that runs through each song, a hooky, grabbing sometimes desperate smoothness, like a man who has nothing else but the abilities to talk well and spend money.

Now I can’t let go of the CD for the life of me. I’ve tried. I left it at home when I moved to Victoria but I ended up wanting it as reading music and falling asleep music and background talking music. Eventually I had Mom hunt through my boxes in the basement and mail me the CD. Much to the chagrin of my roommate Erik’s girlfriend Darlene (who stayed at our house frequently) I played the album for two days straight in
what passed as our common room (read: where the TV/DVD player was). If girls loved
the Tony Rich project in 1995, I’m absolutely certain 98 percent of them hate him now.
There’s little logic to this aside from Darlene’s explanation: “this reminds me of the
creepy kid who sang me the lyrics to “Nobody Knows” at a school dance. Except he sang
a little like Toni Braxton with a voice cracking problem.” Apparently this album induces
a lot of kinda bizarre bad singing from people who didn’t know better and Tony Rich
could the rap for it.

I’m imagining now as I type that I’ll be thinking about the album tomorrow when
I go for my run. Hell maybe I’ll eve hum a few songs and drift away back into my own
head of wishes and dreams. I guess, more than anything, the album represents the things
that “should have been” side of me, like a fantasy alternate universe centered around me
where I learned to play guitar, I ended up with a girl, Kim or Sara or Marissa, and played
NBA basketball. In such a world Hanson and the Backstreet Boys fought each other to
the death and nobody cared about the results and Tony Rich is still turning out the hits.
a backwards view

We had taken to drinking beer on the back porch, looking out onto the summer sky and seeing a 34.59 clear blue and white between us. This usually happened about Tucker's production department, sitting there in the hall, laughing at the political jokes opened. We talked about school time graduated and having no idea what to do, him debating going back to town, his brother leaving, the world without much about us, his novels (mainly him asking me what I'm reading, then listening to me read should have made various books), about movies (stupid comedies we both liked--Buffy, Matron, Super Troopers) but mostly we talked about music. Tucker usually opened the cig with a Players Light and tapping the ash onto a Tiffany's ring."Black (Live Version)," Pearl Jam. June 23: 20.

it is only when I'm at this edge of earth western point of this island and ocean beyond me that

"home" translates in three languages to "water" (small creek stilled lake wood dock)

long concrete line pockmarked with the breakwater ocean waves broken against it

a line which extends to water which extends to water which extends to horizon

five: it takes a band to raise a village

We had taken to drinking beer on the back porch, looking out onto the summer sky and passing a $4.59 cigar back and forth between us. This usually happened after Danton and I finished work at the Victoria Thrifty’s produce department, sitting out in some camping chairs, ties loosened and collared shirts opened. We talked about school (me graduated and having no fucking clue what to do, him debating going back to University), about work (and our heinous boss who cared way too much about persimmons and baby bok-choy), about novels (mainly him asking me what I’m reading, then listening to me bitch about/laude various books), about movies (stupid comedies we both liked i.e. *Billy Madison, Super Troopers*) but mostly we talked about music. Nic joined us frequently, alternating the cigar with a Player’s Light and tapping the ash onto a stray magazine.

This routine took place almost nightly starting about six months prior to this very point in time where I sit typing on my laptop here in an autumn Lavington. Back then I was firmly entrenched in the summer: working forty hours, spending the nights and days off trying to cram as much mindless behavior in as possible. School was done; I had graduated and was enjoying the fruits of my four years of literature labor: working a crappy job for 10 bucks an hour (little did I know, shortly I would suddenly panic and move back home and begin writing this while working an equally shitty job for 9.50 an hour). I hung out with Danton and Nic because a) they are funny kids that I judged as relatively good folk; if I were dying I’m sure they give me a kidney if it would help, then
make a joke about that kidney giving me hepatitis. We’re reasonably like-minded. And reason b) they are in a band. A good band named Machina.

I tell everyone I know about the band, most recently my dad. My dad and I went out and played golf yesterday. Understand I don’t play golf often, maybe once a year and my dad barely plays either, only when we go together really, so the round was a mish-mash of lost balls and hooks. But we did talk a fair bit, about Machina and old friends in Vernon and school in Victoria and he asked me about what I’m writing here. I think he’s nervous too about it being an autobiography. I told him not to worry and that he can read it when it’s done. He then proceeded to shank a ball badly out of bounds, followed by me nearly drilling an old couple two fairways over with my tee shot.

I’ve been thinking about their band a lot lately. I’ll be at work in Lumby, stacking cans of ravioli and hoping no one bugs me to ask where we keep the ice, and suddenly catch myself humming one of their songs. Then my head drifts back to the many nights on the porch, a huge beast of a porch, roughly twenty feet from end to end. A far cry from where I sit now, hair still damp with sweat from my daily run, *Siamese Dream* around my ears, the Lavington sun still stinging my forearms.

Nic is the kinetic front man, singer and rhythm guitar; he has a chin strap goatee and a build like a half-back, wide shouldered and solid. He wears the requisite double spiked wrist bands and black shirt and jeans, completing the outfit with a skull belt buckle he absently plays with whenever he drinks. He doesn’t talk so much as yell and laugh loudly.

Danton, Ben and I, more often than not, laugh along; his obnoxiousness comes off as charming. Ben is the drummer in the band while Danton plays lead guitar (as a
fellow (metaphorical) lead guitarist I feel a natural affinity with him); the three rent the house together. Liz, the bassist, would sometimes join us for our late night porch sessions but not nearly as often as we had them; she worked at a hotel buffet breakfast downtown and had to get up early most mornings for 5:30.

(I think it should be mentioned here that Liz is drop dead gorgeous. She usually wore tight dark jeans with her dyed blonde hair falling around her shoulders. She would exaggerate her quiet eyes with dark make-up, cigarette smoldering as she quietly smoked. Oh and she’s damn good with the bass)

Nic and Danton and I got to be close and I thought, somewhere in a drunken haze I imagine, that it would be a good idea to write about them. Kinda like a band bio of sorts. So I asked if I could interview them and they all seemed reasonably excited about it. I sat at the kitchen table with my notebook and pen and the band members rotated in from outside on the porch. Did I do it because I liked their music? Yes. Did I do it so they’d maybe take me on tour with them as their “writer”? (a job I’m sure would entail drinking, smoking and general shenanigans. Only, I would have the responsibility of recording such things.) Yes, obviously.

So I did, individually, me nervous and completely rec-league, having no clue how to conduct an interview at all, first talking individually to each one and then we sat on the porch together and I tried to get answers from them as a group, as a cohesive whole, as a band.

The four have been together for a little under two years. When Danton told me he played lead guitar in a band, casually one day while we were chopping romaine lettuce or some asinine activity of the sort, I demanded to see them play. Since I have no musical
talent I thought this would be the closest way to associate myself with a band. My brain generally equates bands/music to coolness and who doesn’t like being cool? Am I shallow? I guess. Mostly I’m a sucker for live music. It always blows me away to actually see and hear people making music (again, this probably stems from my ability to barely hold a tune and/or a pick). When I go to a show, I catch myself staring at the speakers, then back at the band on stage, lining up the movements with the music pouring out. Am I simple? Perhaps. I consider it part of my allure.

The first time I saw them play it was on a Thursday night, one of the busier nights in Victoria for downtown bar activity, at Lucky Bar. It was a loud, dark, perfect environment for rock music. The opening band, element 7, played a semi-spirited set that ran too long. This threw the next band, Violent Shade of Green, off kilter so that they also ended late. It was well past midnight before Machina took the stage.

By this point I was drunk. I've always been a firm believer in drinking in bars; I've never been cool enough to just lean on the wall. I’m also not the best looking fella around (again, skinny, pale, glasses, womanly hands and chapped lips) so I rely on mostly my brains and scraps of wit to win people over; since bars, noisy and flashy, are generally not the best place to display such attributes, I resort to drinking in order to encourage myself that talking to people, more specifically girls, would be completely within my realm of doing, and that, if need be, I can start a conversation by segueing off whatever song is playing (sample: “So did you know that Usher’s does 300 sit ups a day?” or “Did you hear J-Lo insured her ass for 3 million dollars.” Sometimes these work, honest). However, the only people that were still around Lucky Bar were a group of three girls, cashiers from work that Danton invited, Will (one of the most sincere guys
I know when it comes to loving, enjoying and living music, Andy (a tall, goofy, bushy-headed kid that has the most bizarrely wonderful sense of humor. His idea of a good joke involves surrealists, a stingray and a nine iron), Savannah (another girl from work, friendly and sweet), myself and a scattering of random people I can’t remember. At the point when Nic asked the sparse crowd, “Wanna hear some fucking music?” there were roughly a dozen people left in the bar.

They opened with a wall of sound, a quick sharp guitar rift from Danton, undercut by the steady pound from Liz’s bass. Danton tried to pout his pretty boyish face while he bled his solos into the crowd. He put a lot of effort into looking tough, to getting that rock and roll face, but his white sequined belt really undermined his efforts (and yes, I did yell “nice belt” at least twice). But the kid can play guitar, which is good because nearly every song contained a solo of some length.

To be blunt, I was distracted by Liz. She stood off to the side of the stage, long legs and tight t-shirt, swaying, watching the stage theatrics of Danton and Nic. She seemed indifferent mostly, until she stepped to the mic, handing her bass to Nic to play, and sang. Her voice is raspy and slow, lulling. I was embarrassing myself, puddling pathetically near the front of the stage as Will yelled at me to close my mouth and stop drooling. "Well that was our one slow song for the night. Let’s go!” Nic shouted as Liz finished and pulled her bass back from him.

Despite the late hour, Machina put on a show. The real strength of their music is the insanely catchy melodies married to hard guitar and drum lines; the group launched into "Shadows of Heaven" and those of us left started bouncing and yelling. They have a very strong sense of variety and pace but for the last twenty minutes it was loud
unapologetic narcissistic guitar solos, hard drum rolls, passionately loud vocals and, most of all, a commitment to entertainment.

A band, particularly a live show, should balance two things: entertainment and humanness. I know this is tricky but I don’t think it’s too much to expect. When I see a live show I want to see things I can’t listening to a CD, like fancy varied instrumentals or the lead singer weaving passionately about stage and leaning into the crowd; I want to hear an alternate lyric, a messy slide of fingers over guitar strings, banter between the band and audience.

And Machina is committed to entertaining. Danton and I have spent more than a few weeknights poring over DVDs of guitarists, me ogling with awe, Danton studying and then later, emulating. One of his favorites is Stevie Ray Vaughn. I’m guessing he picked up his behind-the-head solo thing from him (although I’ve yet to see him lean his guitar on the amp and simply bend the thing to get as much distortion as possible, like Vaughn did, by far the best part of *Live at El Mocambo*). Nic told me once that they get together as a group and rehearse their “spontaneous” stage actions, as a way to keep the crowd involved. It doesn’t hurt that their songs are structured for flashiness and Nic is willing to do almost anything to get attention on stage.

Going slightly aside, when I watch a live show I don’t want just pure spectacle because that turns the band into a product, a strict image; I have a problem with people unable to separate the actual band and its individual members from their image, the people who have a very hard time grasping that there are real people singing and playing. On the other hand, there is a ridiculously strong intimacy within live music because you can see the mistakes and rough edges (hence the humanness I want from a show). I want
to hear the singer go flat, maybe mumble a lyric, a sloppy chord change or missed rhythm. Is this too strict a set of expectations? I'm hard because I care. Tough love.

Of course not all these thoughts ran through my head that first night at Lucky as I nodded my head along to the steady pulse and wail but I think the kernel was planted. The final song contained three separate guitar solos; on the second one Danton slipped his guitar behind his back without stopping playing while Nic bit his nipple. An impressive show indeed. Danton hardly noticed; he just picked at the strings feverishly while Ben smashed on his drums. At the end of the night we went back to their house and drank and smoked on the porch and talked.

The other night, I went on a long rambling story about Danton and Nic to my family at the dinner table, a convoluted clutter of type about pushing shopping carts around into each other and then them trying to teach me to play guitar. I miss them all now, all four members, me here in Lavington, typing, stringing together poems and stories and trying to self medicate myself with words and music. I've even taken to jotting down quick song lyrics, interesting images that jump into my head, in hopes that we can write a song together. Wishful thinking maybe.

When I interviewed Machina I asked the band, "What is it that you guys want to do with this band?" I placed the cigar on the plastic table and was still very nervous about this whole idea of an interview. My beer was nestled beside my chair and I looked around for an answer. Each member looked at each other. Nic answered. I scribbled it down, then rested my pen. I remembered then when Nic told me, as the frontman, the first face of the band, he feels a responsibility to be the voice for Machina. But he takes this very seriously, not in a dictator fashion; he makes sure he talks to every member constantly, so
he can speak for them as a whole confidently, knowing each person’s stance. It was
natural then that he answered almost all of the questions, but I noticed that each member
nodded along, approving.

An hour before I was inside at the table with Ben. Ben Walker is the quiet one
of the group. Unlike Danton and Nic he doesn’t crave the spotlight, content to provide the
backbone of rhythm. (My brother, as the metaphorical drummer of my family, is roughly
1/20 the drummer Ben is. Not to be rude, I’m just being honest. Joel, if anything, tries to
disrupt the rhythm of the family, insisting I’ve fathered children across Canada and steal
Girl Guide cookies.)

As I was interviewing him Ben pushed a long string of curly hair from the front
of his face. He has a neatly trimmed goatee he pulled at as he nervously answered my
questions. His girlfriend walked by and grabbed beer from the fridge, putting one in front
of each of us. Ben had just got home from his 9 to 5 job repairing and installing air
conditioning units and he wanted a shower. I asked him for one more question which he
answered slowly.

"The thing about drummers," he told me, "is that they make or break a band. A
shitty drummer will destroy you. The really sad thing is that 90% of people that listen to
music can’t tell whether the drummer is garbage or not. We are the foundation of the band
and we just kinda blend into the back." I nodded and wrote it down. I picked up the habit
when I was young, probably listening to Right Said Fred or something equally terrible, of
separating the instruments in my head, trying to pick out the guitar, the bass, the drums,
each on their own. The drums always fascinated me, probably because I just couldn’t
envision anyone but Animal from the Muppets playing them. Yet, when segregated, they
were a throb, a constancy unmatched. And the sheer energy and stamina required to play, body in constant motion. Amazing.

Ben left and Lizzie entered. The foundation for the band musically is the two quietest members of the band, a fortunate set of circumstances, I think. If I’ve learned anything from bands is that they require balance; it is not healthy to have four members that act like those Battle Top games, just spinning and spinning, bumping into each other occasionally, only to knock the others over. To continue this analogy, Motley Crue are obviously Battle Tops. I would count U2 as Monopoly (“classic,” pretty blatantly capitalistic and vastly overrated. Also, goes on for much too long). Guns and Roses are Snakes and Ladders, deceptively simple, a long series of ups and downs controlled by demony snake things (heroin?). Jessica Simpson would be Memory (image is central, both are rudimentary, with no intelligent thought to get in the way). And Rubben Stoddart would be Hungry Hungry Hippos. Machina is most like, though nowhere near an exact metaphor for, the game of Life, a throwback, where the goal is to construct a sort of fantasy life (i.e. the rock image); Life is a game with a balance of real life practicality and zaniness.

Liz sat across from me, smiling politely while I did all I could to remain collected. I was not quite bumbling but dangerously close; if I didn’t have the crutch of interviewing her I’m sure the discussion would have degenerated into me complimenting her on her pants, asking what her favorite color was, then five minutes of awkward silence.

We actually talked a little about what influenced her musically and how being the only girl in the band was a problem/benefit. Then we talked about books, a subject
well within my wheel-house. I ended up giving her my copy of *Ulysses* at the end of summer before I left, but not before calling her from my going away party and drunkenly explaining to her, while in the parking lot of some high school with Will, Nic and Andy, why she was so gorgeous and perfect. You’d think times after that would have been awkward. Actually they were, but luckily only for that week until I left.

Turned out Liz grew up in an extremely musical family: her father plays guitar in a blues group while her mother promotes various bands and events around B.C. Liz left Prince George, her home for 17 years, to travel Europe, carrying her guitar and near nothing else, settling in France to work at a Starbucks.

"The guitar is the first thing I reach for still," she said haltingly, "I still write all the time, I still play. It's my home."

I nodded, agreeing. After I left Victoria and Machina at the end of summer to come back to what I thought was home, this place where I sit at this moment asking "now what?" I found myself returning to my writing and the recess of my music collection, like Liz’s guitar perhaps, CDs long past their listening prime (Bush, Tonic, even The Presidents of the United States). They are old comforts even if they, as a general rule, musically suck ass.

It was 8 AM, about two months before the night I did those interviews, and I was on my first break from the produce department with Danton. We were getting some coffee and Danton spotted Nic.

"Hey. Hey!" Danton yelled. The girl from Tim Hortons he was flirting with craned her head to see what he was shouting at. "Nic. NIIIIIIIC."

Nic didn’t look up and got in line at Starbucks.
"Fucker," Danton muttered, then smiled, looking back over his shoulder as we walked away. "Tim Hortons girl is cute."

Danton had a piece of pepper hanging from the arm of his shirt that he plucked off and threw in the garbage; we had both been up since 4, starting work at 5, and just finished unloading the produce stock, 16 skids, for the day; I rested my head on the table while Danton unwrapped a greasy breakfast muffin and took a bite of a hashbrown.

Nic brought his coffee over and sat with us. Nic works in the receiving at Sears in the same mall as the grocery store. He stole a drink from my orange juice and wondered out loud how Liz was doing. She was across town, working too.

"How come you didn't respond, fucker?" Danton asked.

"The Starbucks girl is hot. You were embarrassing me."

I laughed, thinking about a story Danton told me. We were at their house. The ceiling light hung down, bobbing and shifting our shadows on the floor and walls. It was Friday night and we had been drinking for a couple hours; people milled in and out of the living room, drifting out to the porch to smoke pot and cigarettes. "We're kinda the David Bowie of bands," Danton starts, "Pretty straight, but just gay enough to make you nervous." He proceeded to tell me a story from the previous night: he and Nic were at The Red Jacket, a dance club downtown, both stupidly drunk and pleading with two girls to come down off the speakers and dance.

"We'll come down if you two kiss," Danton said imitating one of the girls in a high pitched tone. "And Nic turns to me and kisses me. The two girls look at each other then slowly step down and start dancing with us. They only made it through half a song before they left though."
"And he didn’t even have the courtesy to return the tongue,” Nic adds, passing by with Katie, a cute brunette from his work. "Left me out in the cold."

God forbid we embarrass him in a Foodcourt at 8 in the morning.

Nie and I both graduated from University at the same time, me with my faithful Bachelors in English, Nie with an English Major, Economics Minor. I asked him once “Why economics?” He said, "It’s hard to make money playing in a band. I want to, but you know, I gotta be prepared?"

It is hard to make money playing small clubs in Victoria; the band is constantly borrowing Danton’s mom’s minivan to ship equipment back and forth, while all four have to keep steady jobs. All the money they do make playing goes into a band fund which pays for transportation and helping to finance the making of their first album.

"I just wanna get out and tour," Danton told me one night drinking beer on the porch. "I don’t even really care about money. I just want enough to support myself. I think I could be perfectly happy just touring and playing music all the time."

I asked Ben and Liz about this and they agreed with Danton. Nie, however, disagrees.

"I wanna be something. I wanna be huge and mean something to someone. I wanna to be what the Smashing Pumpkins were to me, what Soundgarden was to me, you know? And I think we can do it. We’re young enough. We’ve got a lot of talent. It’s just a matter of drive and keeping it together."

Later, I was in the kitchen talking to Liz. "Why do I think we’ll work?" She restated the question back at me. "Because we really get along. I think we love each other."
She stares at the kitchen table, relaxed, and I wonder if she really detests this idea of an interview. Eventually I saw Liz is a very shy girl but once you get her talking she gives freely of herself, speaking honestly and baring. She watched her finger trace along a crack on the table.

She brought her eyes up and did her lopsided half-smile.

"I mean each of their parents think I'm dating their sons. We're just together a lot and just really honest. And respect," She adds, "We all know what each of us can do. We all know we're talented and we work well together. If something was to ever start going wrong I think that we'd just have the sort of strength to talk it out and stay together."

It is this comraderery that has sucked me in and what I miss now the most now, quietly playing an Air CD, *Moon Safari* (an ambient noodling, soothingly repetitive album), here in Lavington. All four are convinced that they are doing something important and worthwhile and they sucked me into that, blissfully unaware.

It was a month and a half after the Lucky show where I first saw them and an hour before Fully Loaded was to go on at Steamers, a downtown bar. Steamers is a definite step up from Lucky Bar: the chairs are plush, the bar is bigger, the bathrooms cleaner. The opening band, Moneyshot, was in the home stretch of their show as opening act and Fully Loaded was getting eager, bounding with energy, nervously picking at their instruments.

Actually, Ben was calm. He watched the other three and grinned. "You asked me once," he says, "why I play and I told you some line about expressing myself and
simply making music. I lied. I do it because when you're up there, you feel like a God." Then he added, "Don't write that down."

The bar was near full. With the first few echoing practice notes people stopped playing pool, came in from the patio, picking up their drinks, and tried to work their way to the front.

Nic opened, howling into the mic, slamming around the stage. The band played, inspired by the larger crowd, frenetic and frantic. Danton pulled at his strings with hyper abandon, plucking, picking with speed as the crowd cheered louder and louder. The crowning moment came in the second-to-last song; Ben stood up, punching the kick drum creating a thundering echo with his foot. All the other members drifted to the side of the stage as Ben launched into a long drum solo, punctuated by him tossing his drumsticks into the crowd. The bar peaked, standing, bouncing.

When someone at the end of the set yelled for an encore, starting a chain reaction of chanting, the band looked surprised. They slowly glanced at their instruments, stunned, then gathered at the back of the small hot stage, off guard.

I've never felt better for anyone. I was proud. Even now, thinking about it, it makes me dance around a little inside. I can't remember if I ever told anyone about that. I'll have to go back to Victoria and tell this all again.

Nic came to the mic, the chanting quieting momentarily. "We'll just play something from the beginning of the show. You won't remember. You're all drunk anyways." He pauses. "No. Just kidding. We'll play a song we never play."

The crowd rose and cheered and the band played.
that number means something to some people

rain: smells like blood tastes
closing fast in the dark

I turn the soft corner crunching gravel
headlights: three deer caught

sinewy long limber strong
ears perked pushed forward like sails

I'll never tell anyone about this
tuck it away beneath my palms
secret and lonely

It is getting colder, which shouldn’t be overly surprising considering it is October and the leaves have made a decided break for the ground. As Kerouac wrote in *On the Road*, "everybody comes home in October"; I couldn’t agree more. At the very least, if they don’t come home in October, it is certainly the time when everyone realizes where home is. Such feelings generally lend themselves towards poetry and I’ve been writing a fair bit lately, as companions to this semi-memoirs thing I’m writing here.

On an unrelated note, it’s going to start snowing soon and I really have no clue what I’m going to do without my running; it’s my time to think and extend my body, just be a thing moving forward and completely absorbed into the fence lined and whitening landscape. I suppose I could run on the snow/ice but that seems like a disaster waiting to happen. Maybe I’ll take up ice skating, although the last time I did that I fell and whacked my head good. The lesson: because of my inability to swim, all forms of water, whether half or completely frozen, are completely deadly/unfriendly to me.

The chapter I wrote earlier on my own Canon of music got me thinking about the actual Canon of popular music. There is a large stack of magazines beside the computer here in my Lavington castle right now, a giant dangerously-close-to-toppling pile. My parents (who are working outside presently, raking leaves), in an attempt to raise a well adjusted child, used to read to me constantly, particularly magazines and comic books. Then, like any young man concerned with acquiring the entire cool that is rock and roll, I latched onto music magazines. What do these seemingly unrelated asides have to do with each other? Like any music obsessed permanently ironic, semi-resigned hipster I am
always up for a good list; any male that feels even an ounce of solidarity with *High Fidelity* knows that music lends itself to lists upon lists. Well, the first magazine subscription I had was to *Rolling Stone*; *Rolling Stone* recently ran its list of the top 500 albums of all time.

These types of lists hold two purposes really. I’ve done a great deal of thinking on this in the last few days while at work (when asked where the toothpicks were I think I blurted out “I’m Waiting for the Man,” a track off the number 9 album on the *RS* 500, then scampered away to hum the song to myself all day. These types of things, sadly, are recurring). First, the lists allow people just beginning to explore music to get a good background; these lists are education. Secondly, they give hipsters something to bitch and moan and write angry letters about: “How dare you leave The Tacos off your list? You bunch of Bolsheviks!” Hipsters love to go all 80s style and accuse people of being communists.

Anyway, as evidenced by my early cassette tape collection of Kriss Kross, Snow and *The Mask* soundtrack, I was not, in youth, interested in The Greatest Records of All Time. I was interested in what sounded cool (which was, apparently, kids who wore all their clothes backwards). I started my exploration of music with a great handicap and it wasn’t until I moved out from my parents’ home that I actually started caring about where my favorite CDs drew influences from. I’ve always said it’s important to know where your roots are; I think it’s safe to say Snow didn’t write “Informer” with the lyrical barrenness of Bob Dylan in mind, but I think the notion is worth exploring in some twisted sense. So, without further ado: The Canon of Popular Music!
I: *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, The Beatles

My parents actually own a copy of this on vinyl, proof that, despite the sweatpants and bad puns, my parents may have been cool at some point in the past. That said, their record collection also includes Trooper and a tribute 45 to The Archies. I’ll leave you to draw your own conclusions.

When I was thirteen and slowly evolving into someone who cared about music I begged to use the record player. A typical conversation would go as such:

**Me:** Can I play some of your old records? I promise I’ll be careful.
**Dad:** You’ll scratch everything. I don’t trust you, you’re clumsy.
**Me:** But you don’t even listen to the records anymore. I could steal them all and sell them at a pawn shop and it’d be five years before you even knew they were gone.
**Mom:** I think I want to move the furniture again.

Meanwhile, I was allowed to use the ride-on lawnmower, basically a small car with whirling, razor-sharp blades before I was allowed to touch the record player. To be fair though, I did ruin my dad’s copy of Deep Purple’s Self Titled 8 Track by unwinding the tape and using it as part of an intricate set of booby traps in the small grove of trees in my backyard.

When I finally got to use the turntable, I went through the LPs one by one, listening to the ones with the coolest covers first: Pink Floyd’s *Wish you were Here* then *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. To be honest I really disliked *Sgt Pepper* the first time I heard it around age 14; I was more into the 60’s style bubblegum pop and the one Supertramp record, weirdly enough, in the collection. I didn’t listen to *Sgt. Pepper* again until my first year, in college, roughly five years after that first listen, when a girl, a cute girl with deep emerald eyes and an affection for *What You Will* that seemed obscenely
classy, lent me the CD. Originally, I probably intended to listen to the CD in order to
spark some ridiculously engaging conversation before I tried to get in her pants or
something; the plan was ruined by my immediate and, dare I say, more mature
appreciation of the record. That’s not to say I didn’t flirt shamelessly with this girl after,
but alas it was a lost cause, as apparently her boyfriend did not take kindly to blissfully
ignorant scrawny boys hitting on his girlfriend.

My personal litmus test for how Great an album is as follows: 1) How many
covers of songs by other artists arise from said artist’s music (counting, of course, the
quality of said covers); 2) The number of songs you know all the words to but didn’t
know that it was that particular artist that wrote/sang the song; and 3) The quality of the
band and their ability to represent large groups of disparate people and times with their
music.

My logic behind the first criterion is that good music is really hard to screw up
because all the building blocks are there (i.e. melody, lyrics, instruments); all one needs
to do is really change the vocals and the tempo. Sgt Pepper houses “With a Little Help
From My Friends,” a song brilliantly covered by Joe Cocker (later to be used by the
Wonder Years as its theme), possibly one of my favorite covers ever. Jimi Hendrix later
covered “Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club Band,” with his own electric style. The sheer
number of quality Beatles covers is endless and therefore, the band (and the CD in
question) safely satisfies criteria 1. Not only that, I failed to even recognize that “Lovely
Rita” or “Getting Better” were Beatles songs until I heard the record again. Probably I’m
ignorant, but that at least satisfies criteria 2. Add in the “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds”
reference as Raul Duke and his attorney, Dr. Gonzo, migrate through Las Vegas in *Fear and Loathing* and the album resonates in too many places for me personally to ignore.

Further, as a larger cultural whole, the album was released in the summer of '67, probably the most romanticized period of modern America. The music, blaring from Volkswagen vans and over acid tests everywhere, provided the backdrop to the protests, the rebellion, the experimentation and awakening. The Beatles' experimentation with drugs and production techniques, the pushing of musical-pop boundaries, is really groundbreaking and, deservedly so, vastly appreciated.

Musically, the album couldn’t be played live at the time of its production; *Sgt Pepper* was a breakthrough in music recording technology, incorporating multiple layering of tracks. No longer did a band play in a studio and have itself recorded as a group; instruments could be played separately and combined later. The Beatles began famously to experiment with such layers, adding vocals, horns and background noise that eventually culminated in *Sgt Pepper*. The album is gorgeous and important just in the sense of musical evolution. Did it hurt that the record was released smack dab in the middle of the most respected and influential era in music? No, no it did not.

I’m left then to look back in admiration: the greatest feat of the Beatles, in my mind, was their ability to be the most popular band of the Sixties at the same time as being the best band of the Sixties (and, arguably, ever). My buddy Tyler and I talk a lot about this sort of thing. I asked him once whether he thought there would ever be a band as famous or influential as The Beatles. They played beyond sold out concerts, started riots, made droves of girls swoon at their very mention, popularized two of the more interesting movements in pop music (the boy band and psychedelic rock) AND
influenced 3 (and counting) generations of music makers. All this without internet or
MTV; they generated their fame by radio and selling records (oh, and I guess Ed
Sullivan). Nowadays, if a band grew to such large proportions of fame, the audience
would be saturated so quickly with cheap facsimiles that, no matter how great the band
was, people would become alienated from them. It’s sad but a band like the Beatles
would not survive today’s media barraged culture.

But when I fought through my parents’ record collection yesterday (my dad
anxiously hovering near by) and found the LP, hilariously complete with Sgt Pepper
cardboard moustache and lapel decoration thing, I couldn’t stop marveling that something
so fresh, so perfect sounding, could have been made 30 plus years ago.

2: *Pet Sounds*, The Beach Boys

I’m going to come right out and say it: I hate Dave Matthews.

By all accounts he should be an artist I love; he’s a good musician that writes
pretty decent music and composes pretty alright lyrics. Normally, Dave Matthews would
be ranked in the upper pantheon of artists I adore. This, sadly, is not the case.

It started with my friend Darren and me. My dad built Joel and me a playhouse. It
was a simply constructed shelter: two windows at different levels and two doors. I
begged that we could have the house in the far corner of the yard so that it could be
somewhat private. Darren and I, being 14 years old and having a 15 minute drive to
anything fun, usually hung out there, behind the grove of trees strung with 8 track
ribbons. We talked sophisticatedly about girls (“Mandy gives me such a boner”),
superheroes (“I am so Spiderman”) or ghosts/aliens/serial killers/Unsolved Mysteries (“I
woke up last night and I felt a body sitting at the end of the bed. I’m not shitting you. I heard it say ‘go back to bed.’ Yeah! No shit that’s scary!”

But occasionally the talks would turn to more serious things, like what we thought the perfect life was (mine was playing college basketball at UCLA and marrying Corrine Miller). More often however we turned to things we hated. It was in the rust-colored playhouse that Darren and I both decided it was OK to irrationally hate things. There were things we had no real reason to really hate, things like the JLA, Toni Braxton or turtlenecks; we just did. This is a philosophy I’ve carried the rest of my life. To this day, my list of things I hate with no logical explanation includes: flip up headlights on cars, umbrellas, guys who wear scarves inside with no jacket, Everyone Loves Raymond, Dave Matthews and Pet Sounds by the Beach Boys.

I should like the CD. It’s smart music, pure uninhibited and unapologetic pop music. The opening track, “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” is possibly one of the catchiest and immediately likeable little ditties I know. “Sloop John B.” is a classic. “God Only Knows” has been covered a number of times with high quality results. Yet, I won’t listen to this CD without someone threatening to stick a knife in my thigh.

The real reason, in my mind, that Pet Sounds is rated on the RS 500 list so highly is two part: firstly, the production of this record, with the layering of tracks and unique sounds (dogs barking! Get it? Pet sounds!), basically challenged the Beatles to create the most productionally advanced record, Sgt. Pepper. Secondly, Brian Wilson came completely unhinged after undertaking the majority of the record’s production. I think then that Pet Sounds’ critical acclaim is an attempt to keep Brian Wilson from descending into further craziness, a purely humanistic tactic that has little to do with music.
So maybe it’s the patronization of an insane “genius” that drives me to hate the record. Maybe it’s that people lump it in with *Sgt Pepper* as one of the great musical achievements where *Pet Sounds* lacks the character or culturally defining features that *Sgt. Pepper* has in spades. I’m convinced this is one of those records where some rock journalist decided semi-arbitrarily that it was a Great Record and somehow people through the years have managed to talk themselves into its alleged wonderfulness.

And the funny thing is that if I had heard this record when I was 14, talking with Darren in the playhouse, I would have adored it; I probably had the Beatles on my “things I irrationally hate” list. Believe me, the irony is not lost.

My parents just came inside for lunch and asked me to rake leaves, a task I begged off until tomorrow because I have to work a four hour shift tonight at the grocery store. Instead, they sent Joel outside to bag leaves. Fantastic!

Back at it: the number 3 album on the list is the Beatles’ *Revolver*; the band also occupies the 5, 10 and 14 spots. This should not be entirely shocking to you; this is a band that defined most of the decade of music that is hailed as the most influential of rock music. I like *Revolver*, especially “Tomorrow Never Knows” and “Eleanor Rigby,” but not enough to waste both our time. Therefore I will skip to the number 4 album. No further discussion.

4: *Highway 61 Revisited*, Bob Dylan

The easy thing to do here is to tell you about my drunken killer Bob Dylan impersonations (I’ve mastered “Tangled Up in Blue”) and babble about his vocal prowess, or lack thereof. I really don’t mind his voice; I know a lot of people that may balk at such a claim, insisting that I must be deaf or possess no taste. I would argue
vehemently that however terrible his vocals may be, his most redeeming quality is that Bob Dylan actually cared.

If I had heard Bob Dylan when I was ten and could get past the fact that Dylan did not use sappy backup vocals or exaggerated phat hooks for choruses, I would most likely be singing in bars, writing some solid lyrics and wailing or slurring through songs, convinced that my lack of any singing talent was no obstacle to fame and critical adoration. The inflection in his songs, his whine, is just so damn honest. There's no digital retouching, no fancy production, just a guy a songbook and a harmonica. When he says "home" for the first time on "Ballad of a Thin Man" there is something so infectious about it I can't help but smile. If anything his vocals made him more respected because people then focused more on his lyrics which were, and still are, unrivaled.

Sadly, the only interaction I had with Bob Dylan before I left for college was when that guy with "soy bomb" on his chest jumped on the stage with him at the Grammys. I can confidently say my dad hated Bob Dylan and I'm fairly sure, retrospectively, he would have destroyed any stereo that played Bob Dylan in his house. My dad is hilarious. He's an easy going guy; he likes his country music, his Clive Cussler and Tom Clancy but when he hates something he really puts his heart into despising it. And I believe Bob Dylan is on his irrational hatred list, along with "I Will Always Looooove You," which is entirely fair; I'm no hypocrite. I really wish I could hunt down a cover of Bob Dylan singing "I Will Always Love You" so I could see if my dad's head would explode. The point of this rambling is that it wasn't until I moved out that I began to listen to, and appreciate, Bob Dylan.
What makes *Highway 61* so great is the same reason why *Sgt Pepper* is so great (well, partly anyways). Bob Dylan and the Beatles were the height of the 60’s music scene for a reason: they spoke in such a way that the generation of kids needed and embraced. Again, Bob Dylan cared about the world; he wrote searing protest songs like “Masters of War” and “With God on Our Side” or the classic “Like a Rolling Stone,” the first track on *Highway 61*. Bob Dylan cared about the evolution of music; one of the largest musical events of the 60’s was his “selling of his folk soul” to play an electric set. But that has simply endeared me to him even more; Bob Dylan just wanted to be cool and play a loud guitar. Is that so wrong? I mean the guy released a seven minute song as his lead single for *Highway*. And people listened to and adored it! That’s fucking gangsta.

His lyrics are cutting while they simultaneously grind into the guts of his listeners. As for criteria one and two I mentioned before, I think they are a tad bit unfair to impose with much gusto upon this album. There are some very solid covers from this album (the best I can think of is Hendrix doing “Like a Rolling Stone” at the Monterey Pop Festival and forgetting half a verse or so). However, I think the songs are so long and intricately unique it would be foolish to try and have someone else sing them. As opposed to songs like “Along the Watchtower” or “Blowing in the Wind” or “Mr. Tambourine Man,” successful interpretations of Dylan, the tracks on Highway 61, are simply too long and without any real catchy hook to be successful as covers (with the obvious exception of “Like a Rolling Stone”); I just couldn’t picture them being done any other way anywhere near as effective as here. Similarly, criteria two is futile to apply here because I would argue all the songs here are distinctly Bob Dylan songs.
What really makes *Highway 61* such a great album is how tight it is; there is not a wasted track on the record (which, I would argue, “When I’m 64” off *Sgt. Pepper* sorta is and everything past track 1 on *Pet Sounds* definitely is). I’m hard pressed to find any excess fat here, not a note, not a word, not a beat.

And you know what kills me? The fact that Bob Dylan was changing the world when he was at the same 22 years on earth crossroads I’m currently sitting at. The guy was writing music that was insanely popular while having the balls to protest the many injustices he saw. He sold his soul when he played electric guitar, forsaking the folk world. He screwed Joan Baez. He crashed a motorbike and came back better than ever.

The guy shook things up and I admire him greatly for it.

A final word of advice though: as great as Bob Dylan may be, if you ever run into my dad avoid him at all costs and concentrate on the Eagles or Gary Allen.
photoed familiar

twelve thirty-seven am:
caught staring outside
white soft rain bounces off
orange berried mountain ash tree
thunder shaking valley

I never go out in the rain anymore

I miss the good storms
where I'd wake up to find
front lawn littered with evergreen branches
weathervane tossed on the neighbor's porch

“Night Moves” Bob Seger April 30th 2002: 19
I’ve decided to let my dark moppy hair grow even moppier; in other related news I’ve taken to sporting a sparse goatee. I am in the trial period of said facial hair and feel no affinity either way, only that it should be mentioned. I’m of the mind that it makes me looks older since, freshly shorn, I look about 18. My glasses I think are part of the age thing too. Oh and my still skinny, pre-“filling-out” frame. The goatee probably just makes me look homeless.

It is late at night here in Lavington. The lights are off at the neighbors and my parents have just said goodnight. It looks still and quiet outside, not a cloud or puff of wind. It’s going to frost something terrible tonight. I usually like to write in the AM when I can play my music without my headphones but since I worked this morning I couldn’t. And I needed to write all this down.

I ran into Geoff Karnagee yesterday morning at the grocery store. He wore a flannel long sleeve shirt with tight jeans and a NASCAR hat. In other words he fit right in with the general public of Lumby. I don’t mention this is be a snide asshole or to segue into my hatred of NASCAR (although I could); I mention it because Geoff Karnagee was not always “normal” but was, at one point, undoubtedly one of the coolest fucking kids I knew (I remember him and Brodie Man getting high on mushrooms one night and trying to climb trees. That was generally what passed for cool in Lavington).

Think of the coolest kids that you knew growing up. Were they super-mutants with great hair, beings above and beyond everyone else, deities that demanded your respect and adoration? What exactly made them so damn cool?
Tucker 95

I'll start: the archetypical cool kid from my grade seven class, my scary limbo year before I would move down the valley to Kalamalka high school, was constructed as so: if it was a guy he had a steady rotation of Mossimo or No Fear T-Shirts with slightly faded Levis (perfectly baggy). He would most likely say things like "____ rocks!" where the blank was usually filled with Friends or scrambled cable porn. The coolest girl wore tank tops that barely contained her almost budding breasts and showed off peaking bra straps; the outfit was completed by tight jeans that flared largely at the ankles, Airwalk shoes a must. She too watched Friends only she insisted that it was "sweet" or, if they were feeling especially naughty, "the shit."

And what music did the cool kids listen to you might be asking?

The easy answer was Greenday's Dookie.

The hard answer is as follows: being cool was a full time business that demanded commitment on all fronts. A kid at my school could own the proper clothes and watch the proper shows, but if he/she didn't know the lyrics to whatever song was hot at the moment, he/she may as well wear their own feces for a hat.

My elementary school ran from kindergarten to grade seven. My grade seven grad class consisted of approximately 35 kids, a mixed bag of lawyers' sons, farmers' daughters, mill workers' kids and gas station owners' children. You might get away with slight slips in cool. If you wore sweat pants that was generally made fun of but it wasn't enough to ostracize you (however, once you get to University, at least three pairs of sweat pants are necessary to slip into early classes when it is obvious that you need to portray the "it's too early to care" vibe). If you wore knock-off No Fear shirts, such as No Surrender, that was not lauded but definitely not shun-worthy. But music! One
needed music in order to complete the whole package. For example, it was ok to listen to country music so long as it wasn’t your whole personality (i.e. you didn’t wear Wranglers, boots and a hat everyday) and you had no plans for joining the cool crowd.

The problem was that the cool kids were also the rich kids, the Geoffs, the lawyer’s sons, the ones who could afford the nice clothes and the big cable package. Kids such as myself, a meat cutter’s son, were not so fortunate. My brother and I were given twenty dollars a month out of the Family Allowance check to buy clothes. Any money I had outside that came from my five dollar a week allowance, not a bad sum, but nowhere near enough to buy the cool necessities.

But I could afford to buy smaller hunks of cool and so I focused on music. Once every three weeks, if I bought little else, I could buy myself a cassette tape. But this raised another dilemma: Lavington Elementary was a “feeder school” meaning that it was in between two of the high schools. My classmates and I were in the rare position to have a choice in our young lives: Charles Bloom or Kalamalka Secondary.

Charles Bloom is in Lumby, a logging town with a seasonal existence that freezes up in the winter. It doesn’t help that the town is still slowly being strangled by the mills being shut down. Kalamalka on the other hand is in Coldstream, an affluent outskirt of Vernon. The cool kids wanted to go to Kal; they wouldn’t be caught going to school with the hicks of Lumby. Being that I wasn’t particularly cool or particularly un-cool, I felt no real pressure to choose either way. Well, I guess that’s a lie.

My dad worked in Lumby at the grocery store I now work at. My best friend Darren was going to go to Bloom. And I genuinely liked the area of Lumby. I didn’t think they were hicks; I found a lot of the kids who wanted to go there fairly like-minded
to myself: they liked trucks, climbing shit, swearing and, lastly, country music. My initial
gut reaction, channeling perhaps my inner Holden Caulfield, was to make my way to
Charles Bloom.

Country music and I have a very healthy relationship that started at a young age.
I’ve grown up with it, like a mentoring older brother who has offered me such final
wisdom as “It’s ok to cry so long as it’s into a beer bottle” and “Women will break your
heart, but there’s always another one.” My parents used to play *Hot Country Hits* in the
car tapedeck, rotating through Brooks and Dunn, Alabama and Reba McIntire. Darren
had two older sisters, both of whom went to Charles Bloom, and they had indoctrinated
him with their musical taste, which in turn rubbed off on me. All this said, none of the
cool kids at the elementary school listened to country music (or at least admitted to it).

This brings me back to the question of Lavington Elementary and being cool and
music. I was struggling with the quandary of what music exactly should I buy? Should I
buy what the cool kids were listening in grade seven? Or should I start purchasing for the
cool of the future and place my money in Garth Brooks and Vince Gill stocks? (I don’t
even know if Brooks or Gill themselves could even conceive of a situation in which they
are cool. Strange times.)

So I spent the final weeks before Orientation Day (each high school had a tour in
which to woo us) walking a fine line. I had Darren copy me a tape of Garth Brooks’s *In
Pieces*, a task I could have accomplished myself if I had a stereo with dual cassettes (All I
had at the time was a see-through radio my aunt had bought me, a tiny thing, roughly a
foot long, with tinny speakers and a sub-par tape deck. But you could see through it! The
novelty ranks up there with fake reggae accents). I also went out and bought Montel
Jordan’s first CD and brought myself into negotiations to get a copy of *Dookie* (an album I was forbidden to buy because of the dreaded Parental Advisory Sticker. That vicious black square was my parents’ only criteria for filtering my musical choices). I see-sawed in between the two modes of music, unable to give either side a foothold over the other.

However, I didn’t even end up going to the orientation for Charles Bloom. After visiting Kal, with its wide hallways, individual lockers, tall laughing older girls and location so close to the beach, I was sold. In retrospect this was likely the luck of the draw; if I had gone to Bloom first I would have been by their large wide hallways, tall laughing older girls and convenience store/pizza place close to the school. I was just a young kid easily impressed/overwhelmed. I was amazed at how big everything was: the gym, the library, the people, the classrooms. But what I didn’t even consider was what the cool kids at Kalamalka High listened to?

Let me tell you what they didn’t listen to: country music.

I had fucked myself into a corner of sorts.

High school was a completely different ecosystem of cool. It demanded conformity into one group; once an individual had been lumped into a clique it was then appropriate to make judgments on that entire group. For instance, if you listened to country music, you were stuck immediately into the Hick section, an unforgiving stereotype, which destined an individual to either transfer to Charles Bloom or buy a really large truck and run over the numerous Honda hatchbacks in the parking lot. There was very little room for grey.
I therefore did the only thing I could do to survive: I hid my country music. I only played John Micheal Montgomery, Dwight Yokum, or, later, Paul Brandt and Faith Hill, in my quiet bedroom.

The stigma against country music is so frustrating. In Victoria, my last year of University, my roommates Gabe and Erik and I were taking advantage of the free cable we scammed off the girls upstairs when I happened to stop on the American Country Music Awards, which was quickly booed by the two of them. I asked them what was so bad about country music. “It’s so whiney.” I countered with their mutual adoration of Dashboard Confessional, who, as a general rule, whine like a kicked dog. Pointing at the TV I asked, “Well what’s so bad about this song?” (I think it was Brad Paisley’s “Celebrity”).

“Well this is a bad example, because I actually like this song. But every other one is crap.”

The only country that they would concede was acceptable was Johnny Cash, which was due, not to his music (they couldn’t name one song outside “Boy Named Sue”) but more to his image of being a hardline asskicker. Our discussion eventually escalated to the point of ungodly yelling and challenging each other to “go outside.” What our exchange of intelligence convinced me of was that people hate the idea of liking country music. The logic is that if a person enjoys country music, she/he will be transformed into an incestuous, gun toting hillbilly; liking country music is some disease that makes those who take pleasure in it lose teeth and develop Southern accents.

I break slightly here to say I might go for a walk once I’m done this. It is absolutely picturesque outside, dark with the only shadows unmoving and quiet, and I
can envision myself walking past the Turf Farm and down towards the railroad tracks with my breath coming out in cold clumps. I’ll finish typing and leave I think.

But first, what is the big deal about country music? Well for one, I don’t think it is so shunned, but only shunned by the cool, a completely different minority crowd. The types of people who listen to country music are housewives (my mother), butchers (my father), the logger (Lumby), the regular Walmart shoppers (a large conglomerate of middle to low class folk that covers nearly everyone else). As Chuck Klosterman wrote in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, Walmart and other such large department stores of the sort stock country music in complete disproportions to what record stores stock of country music because that is what sells to the more general buying public. In short, the majority of “normal” people listen to country music.

Continuing, the top 20 of the All Time Best Selling CD list is populated by 4 distinctively country albums: Garth Brooks with three, Shania Twain with 1. Both of those artists have had roughly ten years to sell that number of records as opposed to Fleetwood Mac or The Beatles, who have had several decades. Moreover, a good chunk of the remaining best selling CDs, the Eagles for instances, are really only a short jump away from country music. In fact, of the top money making acts of 2004, Shania Twain sits 7th and Kenny Chesney and Toby Keith at 12 and 13th. So it is not as if country music isn’t popular, it is just popular with the wrong people in the wrong places: grown ups at the very, very fringes of youth and cool culture.

As I recall, conversations centering around country music usually went like this:

*Sarah:* I really like that new Our Lady Peace song. It’s the shit.
*Me:* Yeah it’s ok.
Sarah: Well, my mom heard me playing it the other day and she made me turn it on. Then she put on her Pam Tillis CD! (she shudders and the group of Mandys and Kristys recoil in unadulterated terror)

Mandy: My dad is always switching the radio to the country station. Ewww. (mimes puking)

Geoff: I know! Why can’t I just listen to Hootie you know? They rock!

Sarah: What is country music good for? It’s for hicks.

Me: Yeah me too (panic stricken and slowly backing away)

So I was forced to hide my passion for country music through grade eight, through grade nine, through grade ten. I smuggled tapes into my walkman, singing along to the sad stories in my head, biting my tongue every time someone asked me what my favorite song was. No, it wasn’t that I didn’t like the pop and rock music that was rotating through Kal week by week; I did (somewhat). I just couldn’t drop my country music. I found (and still do) the songs more honest, more compelling. Every song was a story, usually sad, and as a budding writer constructing short stories and atrocious poems, I liked music that was both coherent and meaningful. Country music seemed much more authentic when boy bands and Mariah Carey did not. My favorite Garth Brooks song is his cover of “Shameless.” If you ever want actual proof of what I’m saying here, get a copy of Billy Joel’s “Shameless,” then play it next to Garth’s version. I like Billy Joel well enough, but fuck is his version wishy-washy; it’s like he’s singing about some sock he lost in the dryer. Garth, on the other hand, belts, howls and wails, unapologetic about the emotion pouring into the song. In short, I believe Garth Brooks. Country, because it didn’t have to dress up, and play to the cool crowd, could afford to be sentimental and overt, honest and I appreciate that.

And so I played country music on the sly. Darren, brown-red hair and blue eyes, and I were still close friends and he would make me cassettes and we would play basketball to the country music blaring from the porch (for my grade eight Christmas, my
parents bought me a ghetto-blaster, a sleek black number with one tape deck and one CD player. I was listening to country on a regular basis, alternating it with Matt Good and No Doubt, relishing every ringing steel guitar. Yet, I was unable to really shout my true feelings.

So instead they leaked out. I made a lot of mixtapes for people. Given that my allowance doubled in grade ten, allowing me the freedom to acquire music at double the rate, I had one of the larger CD collections in the school. When I made these tapes I would slip in the odd country song, especially if the tape was for a girl. Country music is a goldmine for love songs, songs that will melt hearts with their superficial simplicity and romantic yearnings. To this day, “The Red Strokes,” another Garth Brooks song, goes on almost every mixtape that carries with it even the slightest hint of romantic potential. I’m also guilty of gratuitous use of Tim McGraw’s “Take the Girl” an overly sappy story about a couple resisting, then embracing their love, only to get married and have the wife (possibly) die giving birth.

If I was making an up-tempo mixtape for someone, I would put on “Sold” or “Friends in Low Places” (the extended version of which is possibly the greatest drunken singing jukebox song ever). Country music, when it’s played fast, stripped down, is damn infectious. I still can’t help tapping my feet and smiling whenever I hear “Chatahootchie,” even though Alan Jackson falls dangerously close to being on my Irrational Hatred List. There is a certain sort of kinetic, unabashed energy about country; it is the type of music that demands the listener stomp around and sing along. While being somewhat simplistic, it uses that strength to belt out solid phrases, anthems, of life and vibrancy.
Fortunately, my slow self-exposure lined up remarkably with Shania Twain’s emergence on the music scene. She was not new to country music listeners; she had released a self-titled album a couple years earlier (which I didn’t like much), then another called *The Woman in Me* that housed mostly rowdy woman-empowering country choruses combined with slow love-y ballads. But what Shania did on her third album was push a sort of pop-sounding country music. She was still singing the same sassy open songs about men and love, but now they sounded like radio sunny, friendly hits with sexy electric guitar and spicy horns. The first country song I remember the cool kids talking positively about was “Man, I feel Like a Woman,” an utterly fantastic lyric. Soon after, I would catch the Sarahs humming “That Don’t Impress Me Much” and the Kristies singing “Honey I’m Home.”

(As a small aside, female country music in the late 90’s, for a period of five years, degraded quite predictably into mindless pop, losing completely its country flair for authenticity and instead jumping directly into pure sentimental schlock. I’m sure there wasn’t a song released from 1997-2001 by a female country artist that didn’t include “Angel,” “God,” “Love” or “Heart” in the title. I’m still amazed “I Love God’s Angels in My Heart” didn’t turn out to be a smash country hit.)

This Shania explosion gave me courage and I was almost ready to come out. I would have too if the male artists hadn’t fared so shitty in the translation to cool. The men tended to rely too much still on the steel guitar and twangy voices, which seemed much too much country to be really accepted. So I still had to be very cautious about what I revealed about my country knowledge. Typical conversations regarding country music changed to this:
Sarah: That new Shania Twain song is the shit.
Me: Yeah I like it too. You should try listening to the Judds.
Kristy: Huh?
Me: Yeah me too (panic stricken, backing away) I just heard my mom listening to them. Really lame and crappy. Yeah. Well, see you later.

Then I graduated. Once I left that summer I got a job in Lumby at the grocery store at nights and picking cucumbers in the morning, and I was free to listen to whatever I wanted. In fact, country music was encouraged and when I went back to school at the local college I didn’t think anything of playing and loving it. It seemed natural.

I think it’s hilarious now that once I openly flaunted my love for country, windows down, stereo cranked, it became a sort of attractive conversational piece, one of those things that made me unique and somehow sexy. I would go to class and a girl would come up to me, flirty smile, and say “I heard you driving into school playing country. That’s really, ummm, cool.” Finally goddam it!

And what do you think Geoff listens to now? He actually directed me towards the new Big and Rich album, a band committed to the kind of side show antics of 80’s metal, who Geoff insisted “rocked hard.” I smiled largely and told him I had already heard it about a half dozen times through and that it was indeed the shit.
keys to the castle

still morning sunrise

car keys in my hot palms

engine sits ticks in tune

with myblinks and breathe

I pulled over because maybe

a stray dog will approach me

lolling its dingy tongue

hot breath like garden dug holes or

maybe some car might pull

around the corner she'll

know me like everyone else

saw me at the gas station pool hall

grocery store backyard wants to

say hello like everyone else or

maybe I'll just pluck an apple from the

orchard across the dirt road drive off

eight: the narrator as Jim or how I lost my mind to Johnny Greenwood

I'm alone in front of an audience of hundreds dressed ridiculously in a straw hat, rolled up jeans, a four sizes too large plaid shirt, makeup that is intended to make me look like a black slave and I'm waiting patiently for my part. Around me people are singing and dancing and I'm doing my best to sing with them like I'm happy instead of withering slowly inside due to a combination of nervousness and a disgusting assurance that I'm going to puke in my classmate Iris's hair. Finally I speak.

I am not so fortunate as to have the prior scene be a recurring nightmare; it actually happened. It was the annual Lavington elementary school drama, many moons before the English Major semi-debacle I'm in now, and I was smack in the middle of a musical version of *Tom Sawyer*. Playing the role of Jim, the black slave: me. On the irony scale: 17.5 extremely white kids out of 10. Total number of lines: 3, including a brief snippet in the singing open number. Number of those lines remembered currently due to complete memory wipe out: 0.

This lack of memory it is not because I screwed up the play; I think I did OK because everyone laughed. I just re-read *Tom Sawyer* (Mark Twain is one of my more favorite authors) and I never understood Jim as comic relief because when I read the book he seemed the most honest, least funny character in the whole book. (Looking back I'm also surprised the high school girls brought in to do my make-up knew what a black man looked like being that they probably hadn't ever actually seen one in person in Lavington or Vernon. Maybe they were basing it off a Boyz II Men CD cover.)
I've blocked most of the Jim memories because I really disliked speaking in front of people. Even now, I'll do it but I'll never be thrilled about it. In high school I would dread any time I had to give a presentation in front of a class, always scared a classmate would telekinetically masturbate me or I would collapse and be known as "the guy who passed out and lost a pint of blood out of the back of his head." I hated being the centre of attention for a bunch of strangers (or in the case of high school, in front of the Judge and Jury of Peers).

So is this why I seek out the guitar solo? Is this why nothing gets me quite as excited as a good hard riff or solo blaring through a stereo that I can hop around and air guitar to? Is it because I'm jealous from the bottom of my nervous little heart of anyone who has the balls to get up in front of a crowd and destroy speakers and ear drums with a soul capturing, meandering guitar trip? Yes, yes it is. Guitar solos are visceral and powerful and immensely emotionally involving and all this is heightened by the fact that I personally can't even play two chords together properly. And for some reason, every solo echoes the big mountains that make up my valley, large majestic things that lie slightly beyond my comprehension. It was a girl of course who helped me to this realization, Marissa, but she comes in later.

I write about this now because I woke up this morning with the solo from "Jessica" by the Allman Brothers in my head. The solo isn't really one of my favorite (but it does sound a lot like the Grateful Dead so that's a plus) and this is the first time I've given it more than five seconds of my time, but for some reason it was lodged in my head. I tried to get it out by playing a bunch of Jefferson Airplane but finally I just caved in and so I'm listening to the song on repeat now, and will continue doing so until it
makes me want to puke; it's the only remedy I could think of. Thank god no one is at home here; I would drive them bloody nuts. Joel is at school or angrily driving or something and my parents are both at work. Even the leaves have left, all bagged and stacked in the back of Dad's truck. Winter is getting here and I can see the white tips on the tree limbs on the hillside forming.

And I think about Tom Sawyer because it's only a few days before Halloween. That means Christmas will be here shortly in all its shining glory which in turn reminds me that every time our elementary school would do a Christmas concert, which was EVERY fucking year, someone would always try to get me to sing or act or speak and I would decline and blend into the background as a shepherd or a telemarketer or a tree. And I was content with that until my teacher, Mrs. Osborne, asked me to try out for Tom Sawyer. I momentarily forgot my limits: I'm white, I have very little actual musical talent and I know I don't do well in front of strangers; I blame Don Felder and Joe Walsh.

I had heard solos from Motley Crue and Guns and Roses and, with a few exceptions, they struck me as badass and fucking awesome but not overly artistic. The first one I remember thinking was a definite departure from the play-as-loud-and-fast-mode of solo was from the Eagles "Hotel California." My dad had their second Greatest Hits on tape and he used to play it in his pick-up truck all the time. As I recall, I heard the song fairly close to the time I got it into my naive head that it would in fact be a good idea to audition for the Tom Sawyer fiasco.

What I didn't realize was that I didn't really want to be in front of people. My young mind, encouraged by the image of me using whatever acting/singing skills I magically acquired in twelve years, wanted to wow and overwhelm the audience with a
show. The guitar is an obvious phallic symbol but a young boy like me didn’t have the vocabulary for that business; what I saw was were some guys playing real loudly, being famous and getting girls. When I was young I assumed that nothing could be sexier to a woman than a guy wailing on a guitar (and nothing I have experienced thus far has really proven that too far off base). But since I couldn’t actually play guitar I thought the next best thing was to be The Star of Tom Sawyer. Fuck, I was not just a quiet smart kid, but a goddam dominating actor with a hell of a singing voice and a real sense of the stage. I mean, if someone could get up and write and perform a piece of music so simultaneously badass and gorgeous, why couldn’t I get up and paint some white fences? Solos have this twisted sort of logic that insists fortune favours the bold. “Hotel California” convinced me I could be a star (I’m also a firm believer that if Joe Walsh had simply played that solo over and over during his presidential campaign we might all be getting free gas by now).

A guitar solo can do that: it can trick people into believing some pretty crazy things. After smoking hash with my roommates one night, the solo in “Paranoid Android” convinced me that there were spiders on the roof. They were, however, friendly spiders and only needed guidance towards the fridge where they would find sustenance and happiness in BBQ sauce and half cooked cold spaghetti.

And the solo in “Hotel California” told me that I would make a pretty damn fine performer. When I went for auditions I got a rude awakening:

Mrs Osbourne: Ok. Let’s hear you sing.
Me: ...
Mrs Osbourne: (turning to the dozen or so other kids trying out) Why don’t we start you out?
Group all together (except me): Oh Ca-na-da. Our home and na-tive land (motioning for me to join in)
Me: Boy, you guys sing good.
Mrs. Osbourne: You won’t sing? It’s a musical you realize.
Me: ...

See, the solo by nature is glamorous and it struck me at that point that I neither required or enjoyed the glamour or an extended spotlit moment. I was terrified of it.

As I get older the virtuosity of a lead guitar player has begun to blend into something different. The glamour is still there; there’s really nothing more terrifyingly awesome than a loud, long guitar solo. But now it has become a crystallized expression of both the song and the individual playing. I can hear people screaming now: “What about the singer? Isn’t he/she soloing the whole time?” No. Vocals are the lynch pin of the melody yes, a solo no. The vocals are damn important, but I would argue that the voice is another instrumental element in a song, just as bass or guitar riff or drum line is. The guitar solo, on the other hand, is still part of the song but from a far greater distance; it is outside the immediate lyrics and vocals. In fact the only two songs I would argue have a “vocal solo” would be “One” with Bono and “Love Reign O’er Me” with Roger Daltrey. The guitar solo is like a soliloquy in a play: it is part of the song but is self consciously contributing from slightly outside the immediate world of that song. I am trying to convince you that David Gilmore is Hamlet with a guitar. Make sense? Maybe?

The more I listened to music the more I became convinced of the transcendent value of the solo. The guitar solo raises the emotional stakes of a song. Take the classic Zeppelin tune “Stairway to Heaven.” I always get complaints when I talk about this solo because people have heard it so much it seems cliché to discuss it. However, everyone has heard it: because it’s bloody good. So we’ll continue as we were.
The song is winding and whimsical for six minutes and then launches into a blistering Jimmy Page guitar that drives the song into such a fever pitch the listener falls over in a big convulsing pile of wonderment.

But the solo itself is not simply a pace changer but instead a magnifier of theme; it is the last few steps upward out of the over-capitalistic vision that someone can buy their way into God’s grace. The song progresses from the third person description of the woman (the example), to the first person (narrator), to, finally, the second (the audience); the solo invites the listener back in, showing that the stairway is the organic noise of the “whispering wind” guitar. The last verse then is communal and the listener, in tandem with the narrator, is an observer of the woman, driven up by the solo and looking down. The solo morally raises the listener above the woman! Jimmy Page becomes a sort of moral guide to eternal heaven and redemption. The recording off the BBC sessions heightens this by having a longer instrumental in between verse and solo than the studio version. Most listeners will have heard the studio version first and will anticipate the solo, like a sinner at confession waiting for blessing and redemption, but the extended wait adds an extra sort of ramping up to the actual solo, an extra step on the stairway (if you will). As a slight side note, I like the BBC version more because it starts quieter and slower than the studio version, encapsulating on a micro and macro level the slow build of the song (i.e. the musical stairway).

Most people might have a hard time swallowing that interpretation of “Stairway,” especially when the song in question comes from a band that may or may not have banged a groupie with a large piece of shark. But this alleged shark banging only feeds into the thinking that ties into the under-appreciation of the guitar solo as a musical
component: the myth of Rock and Roll. For most bands the late 60's and beyond was a stretch of "alleged" hooliganism: drugs, sex and cash with the occasional making of a record about cash, sex and drugs. Each song off of said record had a five minute guitar solo reflecting the absolute decadence and selfishness of the artists.

Therefore, guitar solos were "awesome" but they were never "cool." Who do I blame? Some people might point toward grunge and Kurt Cobain because of their dismantling of the rock star image but Pearl Jam, as members of the grunge movement, used the solo often (especially in live performances). No, if I had to blame anyone I would blame a combination of eighties metal and the people who took eighties metal 100 percent seriously.

Don't get me wrong: I grew up with metal as an alternative soundtrack between country and pop but the over-saturation of the hair band absolutely killed the guitar solo. I believe the eighties were the high water point where the wave of the solo broke and rolled back. It went from being associated with Hendrix and Sabbath and Van Halen, to being the mode of method for Whitesnake, the Scorpions and Poison. At Kalamalka High School kids thought that if you liked any song with a guitar solo in it you belonged in the smoke pit sitting on the hood of your Firebird with the rest of the guitar loving skids. Kids were just as scared of being associated with enjoying the music of men with high soprano voices and long flowing locks, the notorious flaunters of solos, as being lumped in with the music of straight leg jeans, cowboy boots and belt buckles. Really, as we all listened to our NoFx and No Use For a Name, the real punks were the kids on the Trans Ams and horses.
And finally “Jessica” is gone from my head and I’ve replaced it with Cat Power; her soft bluesy vocals and acoustic guitar, serves as a very obvious counter point to this whole discussion. It makes a nice rhythm with my type tapping fingers and the odd car zipping down my road here in sleepy Lavington. I feel Cat Power will help me stand objectively (as I can) outside the solo so I can analyze and explain it properly.

To continue then, the image of the guitar solo has carried over from the eighties and has been turned into a sort of albatross. I can hear the hipsters today roasting the guitar solo as masturbatory. My friend Tyler refuses to even listen to Guns and Roses because “they don’t make music, they make an excuse to snort coke, get on stage and wail on a guitar for three and a half minutes at a time.” However, Tyler owns *Appetite for Destruction* because that is what hipsters do: they buy records that every one else (read: critics) say are good, then bash them and refuse to listen to them to make their piccolo playing indie-rock-folk bands seem more important. I would argue, like Nic Hornsby in *Songbook*, it is ignorant to ignore a song simply because it has a solo and that there is a definite difference between a good solo and a bad one.

A good solo is one that gives to the song and fits within it seamlessly, as a coherent piece of the whole, like the one in “Stairway.” A bad solo is one that is nothing more than an excuse to play a lot of loud distorted noise in quick succession in complete divorce from the song (example: “Talk Dirty to Me.” Also I’m tempted to include the guitar instrumental from Bryan Adams “Everything I do (I Do it For You)” because, like the parentheses in the title, the solo is completely unnecessary. Unless Bryan got paid by the amount of pointless noodling in his song, in which case he managed to tag on an extra 2 minutes and 14 seconds of pay. Good on him). The guitar solo is, by its very nature, a
beast of narcissism; the lead guitarist must want that moment to him/herself. But the good guitarists are able to use that moment and place it within the song while still displaying their expertise. In brief, the bad solo screams “look at me” while the good solo is one that says “listen to me.” If you are still unsure about what the difference between a good and a bad solo is I recommend using Joe Perry’s in “Crazy” as the dividing line. It has to be the most average one I can think of off the top of my head; if the solo in question is better than “Crazy” than it is good and vise versa.

(I will ask now what happened to the slow guitar solo. Anybody can bang away some power chords and call it a solo but what about those winding slow things that really grab the listener into the song and pull him/her down the rabbit hole. To be fair, “Fall to Pieces” did it really well but there’s a solid gap of ten years before Velvet Revolver where no sorts of semi-half-decent slow guitar solos emerged. I’m really at a loss for an explanation. I’m certain Billy Gibbons can’t be doing anything except playing on shitty Nickelback records, why don’t we get him to act as detective on this one.)

To return to the family portrait at the beginning of these writings, I wasn’t always the lead guitar; back in high school/elementary school I was more the bass player: my presence was there to round out the family and not offend the Real Show (i.e. the parents). As things progressed in my life, my role within the family had to change. I was no longer the little boy; I had to grow up at some point. I guess there comes a time when a son or daughter becomes equal with his or her parents and starts to contribute to the family.

The catalyst for such a shift: college and later, university. If I had to single out one person it would probably have to be Marissa.
She was the type of girl that would drive every guy nuts because she was nice and gorgeous and let them all think they had a shot at her. She was sneakily stunning, like I’d be looking at her and notice her hair, curly and long, then the next time I looked I’d notice the hair and her emerald eyes and the next time her hair, her eyes and her lips and so on, until I had been snowballed into adoring her.

OUC, where I spent my first two years of my college/university adventure, is a twenty minute drive from my home. As a result I usually stayed at the school all day, content to eat bad cafeteria food and listen to my walkman rather than make the drive back and forth between classes. It was winter of first year and I had “borrowed” Neil Young’s Everyone Knows this is Nowhere CD from my Dad (he had forgotten he had it so I hardly think it was stealing). I was drawn to the title before anything else; it was perfect in congruence with my life at that time, living in sleepy Vernon with restless feet. When I listen to music for the first time, as I was doing with Everyone, I like to simply play the thing and see what kind of bizarre connections can be made between the musical world of the album and the real world of myself (Nie, from Machina, and I used to do the same thing actually). The cafeteria faced the parking lot with a large bank of windows. The first time I saw Marissa I was alternating between watching the snow flakes drift aimlessly down, Neil Young for the first time, and a copy of Slaughterhouse 5 recently recommended to me by my creative writing professor.

Marisa walked in, looked around, and then settled at a table across from me. When she turned around and smiled at me, a cursory polite smile, I had just started the tape (track 1: “Cinnamon Girl”). I always get nervous when a song like that matches up with a seemingly meaningless action. What if it’s not barren of sense? What if she is my
cinnamon girl? While I frantically asked myself these questions she returned to her work. Meanwhile, my racing mind was trying to calculate how many words I could say to her before she would return me to my seat in embarrassment. So I sat.

But guitar solos, as discussed earlier, can cause a meek boy to do some brash things. My thinking was if someone can get on stage or into a studio and have the confidence and skill to weave their way through a mind-bending guitar trip then surely it takes far less effort to simply talk to a girl. Neil Young’s guitar, through the jammy tune “Down By the River” was talking to me, convincing me I should talk to this girl, as I pretended to read. The solo said, “You must make the effort to at least see if she’s your cinnamon girl.”

But, as I stood to get up, she gathered her stuff and walked off. I, acting as natural as possible, went to get a drink from the water fountain. It was still snowing outside and the next song started, naturally titled “The Losing End.” Sample lyric: “It’s so hard to make love pay/ When you’re on the losing end,/And I feel that way again.” If this strikes you as particularly cute or forced, like I’m somehow making this up, think how badly I felt when it happened, like I was some punch line in a large cosmic jukebox joke. I don’t think I have hated the world more at any point than I did in that moment.

To insert myself here again, “Southern Man” playing nostalgically as I write this, I saw the first few flecks of early snow drift down and settle in the grass. Shortly there will be a skin over our lawn, unmarked by footprints. My mom will be happy; first snowfall is one of her favorite times of year. The flakes probably won’t stay but they are nice as they are right now.
To get back to the story at hand, at the start of the next semester, one month after the cafeteria, there Marissa was again, in the front row of my Intro to Political Science course. Something in the back of my mind registered that Neil Young solo again, deep and primal and bold. The class went by and after, I bumped into her in the hall. She was putting her headphones over her ears.

**Me:** What do you have in there? *(gesturing towards CD player coolly)*

**Marissa:** Just a mixtape. Half Van Halen half Alan Jackson.

**Me:** *(nonsense syllables and then a garbled assertion that girls like her didn’t actually exist and that I was dreaming)*

So we went to go get lunch and then got some Slurpees from the 7-11. The next day it was more of the same. And then the next day was more of the same. I sort of fell backwards into dating her, like most everything good I’ve ever done in my life.

She loved guitar solos, in fact they were her favorite part of popular music. She could and would talk at length about them, even picking up a guitar every once and while and playing me the starting licks; she loved to play the opening part of the solo in “Tangerine.” Her favorites were, in no real order: Hendrix’s “Along the Watchtower,” Clapton’s “While My Guitar Gently Weeps,” anything Stevie Ray Vaughn did and, oddly enough, the solo in Jethro Tull’s “Aqualung.” She also loved “Cortez the Killer,” so when I told her about the whole Neil Young-cafeteria incident she almost laughed as hard as when I told her about my acting role as Jim. As for me, I would add to her list, though not contain it to: Ace Frehley’s “Shock me,” “Hot For Teacher,” any Keith Richards’s and the solo in Matt Good’s “Blue Skies over Badlands.”

Marissa became the girl who convinced me that I wasn’t completely crazy for making the statement that Slash’s solo at the end of “November Rain” makes no sense unless it’s placed within the context of the video (if you listen to the thing on the stereo it
doesn’t fit the song at all. The large shift in tone is completely unexpected. But in the video it’s damn powerful, mirroring the dramatic shift between life and death. Although, I have yet to figure out the larger social significance of the guy randomly jumping into the wedding cake).

She said that the guitar solo was not only good, but often necessary. Her logic was that any song can be a “good” song but a truly Great one has a stamp of originality and honest emotion that a listener is never going to doubt. For Marissa, a solo, because of its lack of words, was universal and, in that universality, was pure translation of emotion, unmuddled by language. I’m paraphrasing her here because as I heard her I was frantically stumbling through my head for the necessary devices to remember such important information. Instead, I got caught in how she bit her knuckle while she was explaining this to me. If she wasn’t so damn cute I would definitely be able to quote her word for word.

I also gave her my stories to read, which was something I rarely did for anyone. I wanted her to know exactly what I doing in my head; I thought she might understand. I wanted her to hear my voice, me as an entity acting and being independent and willing to share. She also begged me to share my writing with my parents, insisting that they deserved to read what I was writing because they were giving me so much support and were generally interested. I always had a problem giving my writing to them; I guess I was self conscious of it and I enjoyed the privacy of keeping it for myself. In high school, they knew I wrote a lot. I had two drawers full of foolscap papers and they bought me a broke up typewriter to bang on. They themselves were constantly harassing me with “Let
us read some stuff” and “If you wanna be a writer you gotta let people read it.” So, at Marissa’s insistence, I did.

It was when they read a story titled “Pinpoint” about a girl struggling to get out of her everyday boredom in a city too small, that I think they realized what I was going through. My parents had grown up in the Okanagan (moving from Kelowna to Vernon before settling in Lavington) their whole lives and were content; they never threatened to move, barely ever took any vacations. I remember giving the story to my mom and she passed it to Dad; once she finished and she got up and gave me a hug, looking sad.

“You’re a restless boy, aren’t you?” she asked, knowing the answer, and then she told me she was proud of me. Suddenly, I had been shifted to lead guitar.

“You know,” Marissa started one night, streetlamp filtering in through her window and onto the bed where we lay (stereo: R.E.M “Find The River”), “you go on and on about music, about how you could never play anything, like you don’t have a single ounce of musical talent in you, then I read some of your poems and I want to slap you in the face.”

“Oh?”

“I mean, your fiction too, it’s not that different than an album. These poems aren’t that different than those solos you adore so much. No. You don’t know. Maybe that’s what I find so sweet about you.”

I’m looking out my window now, watching the mountain ash tree quiver outside with tiny birds dodging snowflakes and stripping it of its berries; beyond that is the highway, beyond that the mountain walls like guitar solos, and beyond that Marissa. She disliked Vernon as much as I did, mainly because there was no scene that she felt
comfortable in here and she could only stand waiting in so many lines while senior citizens counted out change and complained. She moved east to Ontario to study painting at the University of Waterloo and this time we did keep in touch for a long time, agreeing to see other people but really only half heartedly. I think we loved each other. I’m sure I loved her in moments. But she met someone else out there, another painter, and she said she fell in love with him instantly, and so I moved to Victoria.

Instantly? Was it that simple? I’m positive I should have moved out there with her when she first left but I couldn’t; I didn’t have any money, my courses wouldn’t transfer, the usual business. Was I scared? Yes. For all my bravado and restlessness I was scared to move halfway across Canada on the assurance of selected moments of what I thought was love and some half ass excuse to continue a degree. But she’s happy now and I’m happy for her even though I very much doubt she and that painter are still together. At least that’s what I tell myself in hopes that she’ll come back to Vernon or maybe I’ll go East and she’ll call and we’ll go out for coffee.

But for all this business I did learn some important things from her: 1) As good as Frank Zappa may allegedly be, anything other than “My Guitar Wants to Kill Your Mama” and “Son of Mr. Green Genes” is largely unlistenable. 2) Tom Sawyer as a musical was a shitty idea on par with Jimmy Page allowing Puff Daddy to sample “Kasmir” (but “Tom Sawyer” as a Rush song is not terrible) and 3) Neil Young will always break my heart.
visible homes and fog

I can add growing old to the list of things that scare the shit out of me

having to watch the whole spectacle
a slow deterioration of flaking
spotted limping bursting dry body

a brittle shell for whatever mind
I would have left unremembering
tire swing mortgage soft sheets
lingering past noon where did I put my glasses? My car keys?

if I have my way I'll get hit by a car
on my thirty second birthday die on a sidewalk

nine: the man who sold the world

I’ve never broken a bone. I can’t remember even coming close to failing anything, whether it was my driving test (passed with 25 demerits when 45 were allowed) or in school (honor’s student etc). I’ve never been arrested. I’ve never had to go to the hospital to be treated. I’ve only had one cavity (and it was a small one). I’ve never been in a fist fight or crashed a vehicle (Well once I did but now I look before I lane change. To be fair I was probably looking for something to smash my radio with as they replayed Prozac for the third time that day). I’ve only had my heart broken twice (three times). Neither of my parents have died, divorced or become seriously ill. None of my close friends have ever been in a car accident or overdosed on any sort of drugs (other than more than a few friends passing out drunk). I don’t have relatives in jail. No one I know has committed suicide.

The problem is that I tell everyone I have had one of the most ordinary, unremarkable lives ever. My life experience is virtually nil. I’m just a backwoods small town boy who managed to have everything go contentedly right. Bad Things don’t happen to me.

Which is utter shit. I don’t know what has led to me to that reassurance. It’s true: there has been no dramatic phone call or box in the storage room filled with birth certificates I didn’t recognize, but bad things do happen to me. What happens is that I simply ball the incidences up and make them as small as possible, crumpled and minute, then pretend they will never return to their full size, forever scrunched. Then I’ll put on an old favorite CD, something like Beautiful Midnight and write a poem or a story.
I got a mid-November phone call from Kim today. We don’t talk regularly now despite both of us being here in Vernon. We kinda grew apart and anytime we are together there is this cloud of awkwardness that engulfs us. But she called me today because she figured I needed to know that Brodie Mann, a guy we both graduated with and Kim dated briefly, has cancer. He was a nice guy, a good enough guy, but we were never close. That’s really weird because I hadn’t thought of Brodie for four years and then Geoff showed up at work and I remembered him briefly. And now he’s at the forefront of my head. The last time I saw him was a graduation party and he jumped in Becky’s pool with all his clothes on. I can’t even remember the reason for doing it but I remember his usually spiky hair flattened to his head as he struggled against the weight of his own jeans and shirt, all the while dodging the pool toys Becky and Kim were throwing at him.

It had been snowing fairly regularly since Halloween but for the last week the snow has been melting slowly in Lavington. By the time Christmas hits in a month there might not be any of it left, just alternating patches of slush and brown half-dead grass. The sun is outside. Brodie has cancer.

And anytime someone says “cancer” my mind jumps to the most natural place it should: my dad’s mother. My dad’s father was an alcoholic who died before I could start remembering him. His mother, however, lived for a good time after that. She was a chubby woman, cheery and caustic at once, who played bingo with every ounce of love she didn’t reserve for her family. She also chain smoked, going through roughly two packs a day.
She lived in Kelowna, only an hour drive from our house, so we visited with her often. I would always bring a book and CDs when I went there and sprawl on her beige almost corduroy couch, enjoying the uninterrupted peace while she fussed over my parents. Ever so often we’d play crazy 8’s or crib. She was a mean crib player with absolutely no mercy.

I guess it was about nine years ago now. I had just bought a new CD at the Kelowna mall, The Presidents of the United States of America self titled album, enticed by their smash hit “Peaches.” I was listening to it at a low volume, flipping through a Reader’s Digest Grandma had hidden under her couch. I didn’t really mean to hear the conversation but I did.

My Grandma had found a lump and she was going in for a mammogram. I could sense there was a lot of tension at the table; my mom was looking at her with controlled tightness and my dad was as scared as I’ve ever seen him, eyes wide and his tongue licking his lips quickly. I remember the most ridiculous song played quietly in my headphones, “Boll Weevil” I think, with me thinking how stupid the fucking song was and my grandma’s hand gripping her coffee cup, shaking slightly. Yet, my parents didn’t mention it to either Joel or me. And I couldn’t ask my parents; I was scared. In the next few weeks I started listening to more and more of The President’s CD, alternating it with a stupid dance CD (with the famous every man dis-track “Short Short Man”), Deborah Cox, among other mindless distracting music.

When my parents sat Joel and me down at the table it was two months later; my dad was watching the cracks in his hand and my mother was wiping her eyes. The two strongest people I knew were crumbling in front of me and then they told us that
Grandma had breast cancer. Mom tried to explain everything as best she could while the small flowered wallpaper swirled behind her, my head, my fingers light and hollow with air. I didn’t cry. I went down to the basement into my room and picked up a book, half heartedly trying to read but instead I threw it across the room in frustration, deciding timidly on my headphones and The Bends. I didn’t hear when my parents knocked at the door, instead falling asleep with the headphone cord wrapped around my wrist, waking up at 2 AM completely lost. I wandered upstairs stopping at the big window looking out into the back yard.

A thin slice of moon lit the small garden my mom had planted and tended all spring, blending the flowers into the corn stalks. Everything was like the negative of a picture, and I stood like that for a long time, just watching my backyard and never seeing any change. I wish I could say there was a song I was humming but I was silent.

I got used to the idea that she had cancer; I had to. But my dad was wearing down, going back and forth from Vernon to Kelowna constantly, trying to support her and all of us and still work at the grocery store. My mom tried to prop my brother and me up with good spirit, baking more than usual, renting us movies. I put away the Presidents album and switched to Nirvana’s Unplugged (an album that probably ties with Jeff Buckley’s Grace as being the most obviously sad albums of the nineties, I guess).

Then Grandma died. We drove down as a family one weekend and spent half the day at the hospital. The flowers surrounded the bed, weaving along the desks, tubes and pipes extending from her like vines, Grandma wheezing, squeezing hands and falling asleep. My brother and I spent most of the time in the waiting room while my mom and Dad along with my two aunts stayed by the bed as long as they could.
After lunch my parents dropped us off at Grandma’s condo where my brother and I played cards for a while until I settled into the couch reading. I left my discman at home so instead I listened to the sound of furniture settling and people padding down the hallway outside and my brother digging cookies out of the cupboard in the kitchen. My parents came up the stairs; my mother was crying and my dad had sunken inward, shoulders tilting into his stomach. No one said anything. Each one of us sat at that same small kitchen table wedged in the corner between two windows, sunlight glinting off the hard clean surface, in silence relying on each other’s presence for some sort of reassurance.

And so I sit here, lost and sad again, and writing. Brodie is the same age as me. Christ. When Kim called me and it reminded me of my Grandmother I went and played through the other album I always like to hear when I get bad news, which is The Verve’s *Urban Hymns* (almost specifically for the song “The Drugs Don’t Work”). The CD was a gift actually from my other set of grandparents, the Henderson, my mother’s parents.

My mother’s parents were always my favorite when I was young. They had a farm that we stayed at constantly, with a pony, cows, a turkey, chickens everything. They were the grandparents that spoiled my brother and me with gifts at Christmas, getting me the Ninja Turtle figures I asked for and the CDs I liked. They were the ones who got me my first bike, an RMX (My parents, probably headed by my underhanded mother, told me that it was like a BMX, the popular brand of bike at the time, only it imported from Italy. Of course I believed them). In grade 2 Mrs. Miller made us write a common place book that collected stories and drawing and objects into a hardcover; I dedicated the book to my Grandpa and Grandma Henderson.
One night my dad came to me while I was playing basketball on the hoop outside and said that we weren’t going to go to their house as planned for that weekend. I didn’t see Grandma and Grandpa Henderson again for another six years. It is still devastating even now at 22 years old, but it was particularly bad when I was 16; I can’t even imagine what it was like for Joel, two years younger than me. They didn’t call once; they didn’t send one birthday or Christmas card; they didn’t visit at all.

I thought it was my fault. I knew the problem had to do with Joel and me so I thought maybe I had said something to upset them, or accidentally killed a chicken or something, and now they didn’t want to talk to Joel or me. In that way, kids don’t think there’s a world beyond themselves so whenever anything ever goes wrong they immediately turn upon themselves with lashes of blame.

It turns out, of course, that the problem had very little to do with my brother and me. My mother wouldn’t come to talk to me about it until I was 18. I was downstairs on my bed, reading a Raymond Carver collection of short stories called *Where I’m Calling From* and listening to the first Wallflowers’ album (*Bringing Down the Horse*). The best song on the album, “Invisible City,” was playing and my mom bent down to turn the volume low and asked softly to talk to me. It was two weeks before Christmas; we had just gotten off of school and my mom had been busying around the house, hanging garlands and ornaments, trekking through the few feet of snow to sprinkle bird food for the birds still left, keeping busy. My dad was at the grocery store, trying his best to deal with the holiday rush for turkeys and hams, coming home ragged and happy. We had gotten used to having our small contained Christmases, with no grandparents or aunts or uncles, just us, maybe going ice skating or sledding Christmas afternoon. However, every
year I still looked out the window for my grandparent’s truck rumbling up the driveway or a surprise gift under the tree from them, even a card, hell a phone call. But I never asked.

My mom looked about as solemn as I can ever remember her, her light grey eyes fixed on mine and her mouth firm and strong.

“I know you think it’s your fault your grandparents never call you. It’s not.” She started.

“Oh.” I sat silently trying to gauge where exactly my mother was going. Her small hand bunched at my comforter, then released it, smoothing it as she talked.

“There were a lot of things that went on that you don’t know about. Things started well before your dad and I got married.”

I sat and watched this tiny woman search for the correct language to tell me her parents used to beat her.

“They were never very kind to me. They treated me and your uncles and aunt like crap. Like filth. They used to call me names all the time. Your grandmother…” she adjusted painfully the bedspread then continued, grasping my eyes with a look as strong as bridge cable. “She used to hit me and call me names. I was the oldest and she thought that I should… I don’t know what she thought.”

I slipped beside her. Her feet hung off the bed and she watched them tap on the floor. “She broke my guitar. Smashed it against the wall. She didn’t want your dad and me to get married. She said we were too young and tried to take my car away. My Mustang that I bought with my own money working at the pizza place. She cursed and threw things, god, when she found out I was going to have you…”
Her voice was clear but her eyes were dripping dark stains onto her jeans. I hugged her. She rocked me back and forth, not whimpering or sobbing but crying silently onto my shoulder.

“They wanted to have you kids if anything ever happened to your father and me. We wouldn’t. That’s what this is all about.” And still she didn’t break into fragility, instead growing roots into my bed and wrapping her limbs around me stronger. She had stopped crying. She used the same voice she had used after she read my stories: even, proud, equal. It was that small slight hinge between being her boy and being her son.

She told me she loved me and left, leaving her soft indentation on bed. I sat on the bed for a few minutes, before I got up, put on *Urban Hymns* and started wrapping Christmas presents (a Canucks T-shirt and Clive Cussler book for my dad, a Limp Bizkit CD, roller puck and sponge puck for Joel, a yoga book/tape and garden magazine for my mom) and cried, finally collapsing in the wrapping paper and tape and half slept staring at the ceiling.

I have two devices when faced with emotional problems: music and writing. I realized with my grandmother’s death to cancer (and now Brodie) that I can’t escape completely into either world; a poem doesn’t stop a funeral and a song doesn’t change an old woman. What people fall into is expecting music to save their lives; Elvis Costello is not Spiderman, Whitney Houston is not WonderWoman. Music is a parlor trick. Music is mortal. Music can not beat a stopped heart.

But the music I adore and worship is important because I can recognize the humanity in it. The problems and foibles and loves of my favorite songs are the same
essential building blocks that I put back into listening and tying and tethering that music to the incidents and accidents of my life. Music is a human process.

I feel I should apologize here for the somber mood. No jokes today I guess. But the one positive is that Brodie and cancer and missing grandparents has got me thinking about what I want to do. I can’t work at a grocery store the rest of my life. I won’t.

So what then? What a disgusting large question. I feel like I should be in a mall-punk-emo band. Maybe that’s what I’ll do. And we’ll call ourselves The Boo Hoos and play appropriately sad rock.

For now I suppose I’ll take a walk. The motion will do me well and I could really use some landscape to think within.
the last is the saddest

it started in the silence between balcony and glass door watching city blink itself into darkness

my seven year old heroes:
do they still put pucks in the net
or search badlands for dinosaurs
or save people and fight supervillians?

all of these are terrifying ghost stories now

early autumn city settles self
coughing yelling one floor down
sirens crawl across the street below

fangs claws slobbering eyed monsters
under the bed a different shade and shape

I gave the first chapter to my parents today. I figure after the emotion of the previous chapter (and the news of Brodie) I needed to share a bit of the burden. Plus both have been suspicious that I'm creating some sort of bomb manual or, even worse, dumping the family skeletons on the lawn for all to see. I've also deftly managed to dodge an extra shift at the grocery store by refusing to answer the phone; my reward was to take a giant walk today around the block, which has invigorated me. Since my family (aside from Joel who is at the College) all have the day off today, I decided to let them read it while I write something new. So they are both quietly digesting the first chapter at the kitchen table right now; the occasional chuckle, a dry cough sounding thing, from my dad, tells me things will probably be ok. There are so engrossed in the reading that haven't complained about me playing my Tragically Hip mixtape at a volume I know is one step beyond their comfort. And it is such a nice day out, the sun glinting brightly off the crunch snow, that my mom mentioned taking the family on a drive today to Sicamous, a small highway town some three hours away, to get some ice cream in the dead of winter. Strangely enough that sounds appetizing.

But first this business of the Canon again. Like I said when I first tried to tackle the Top Records of All Time, I've been beaten to death as an English Major with the idea that The Canon is God. However, upon further assessment I realized that at least half of the records in the Top 20 of the Rolling Stone Top 500 (which I referred to earlier) don't mean a damn thing to me. Sure I respect all those albums; I recognize what makes them Great but I really don't care about them beyond that. In this way, the Rolling Stone's
Exile on Main Street (number 7 on The List) is a lot like The Canterbury Tales: admittedly Great, but way too far away from my personal experience to ever have me pay the album more than a cursory glance (there are also roughly six hundred million “the Stones are as old as The Canterbury Tales” jokes to make here. I shall allow you to choose one. And Let it Bleed is a much better album for my money. “Gimmie Shelter” is spectacular. There is one part a little over half way through the song where the woman is wailing away, just singing her throat out, and her voice peaks and cracks she’s singing so hard, and in the background, barely audible, is an impressed “whoo.” A perfect detail).

The point I’m trying to get at here is that art, more specifically music, has to have some sort of personal connection or engagement with its audience or it is just pretty words on a page or pretty lines on a canvas or pretty notes in a song. It’s like the big maple tree in my front yard. Sure there are lots of trees in the world but that’s the tree I swung on until my arms nearly fell off. In that way, sure there are lots of CDs but that’s the one I had my first kiss to/swung on the maple tree to/ tried to put a condom on in a dark tent to. So I’m adjusting the second half of this canon business to include only the canonical records that I care about, that have touched me in some way like the bare trees rising into my far horizon sight.

6: What’s Going On, Marvin Gaye

My first exposure to Marvin Gaye had nothing to do with this album but has everything to do with me actually buying it. My dad got Wednesdays and Sundays off and on almost every Sunday my family packed into the car or the truck and went out for the day (like my mom’s Sicamous plan). Usually we would go fishing, or have a picnic; sometimes my mom would con us all into driving around looking at the big houses on
Okanagan Lake so she could dream. I would usually sit in the back seat reading a book (I have an absolutely astounding immunity to car sickness). I suppose if I had owned a walkman or a discman (neither of which I owned until I was in grade 3) I would have been able to listen to the music of my choice. This was not the case however.

In the pantheon of my mother’s favorite tapes is the *Greatest Love Songs of the Seventies*, a blistering compilation that included the immortal “Let’s Get it On.” The tape would play almost every mini road trip we went on and so the song was beat into my head. Even when I was young I recognized the song as sexy and smooth despite lacking the words to describe it as such. In that same vein, very few things in my life have ever been as disconcerting as my parents looking into each other’s eyes and singing the lyrics to each other, my dad doing his best baritone and my mom collapsing into giggles in the passenger seat while my brother and I look at each other confused, then mime vomiting.

Naturally, one bright summer day, when I was cruising the pawn shops looking for CDs much later in my years and came upon a $7.50 copy of *What’s Going On?* I snatched it up. The album turned me into a large Marvin Gaye fan. From Gaye I went backwards: I went out and found his greatest Motown hits, a CD I loved to death (especially “Stubborn Kind of Fellow”), which then directed me to other Motown greats like Stevie Wonder and The Temptations; from there I eventually drifted further backwards into Chuck Berry, Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. People say that marijuana is the gateway drug; I would argue that Marvin Gaye is the gateway artist.

So what exactly is it I love about the album? Well, for starters, it tries very hard to deliver a message. Gaye is conscious of environmentalism, the war in Vietnam and American poverty (to name a few concerns); he attempts to raise awareness and action on
all these issues which I think was really ballsy as Motown as a genre rarely strayed from the content of breakups, the opposite sex, and love. With the unrest of the late '70's and the Nixon presidency and the Vietnam debacle I think it is important that Gaye tried to blend his voice into the obviously proactive emerging voice of rock and try to raise awareness. This is especially hard since taking such a departure would be taking a large risk in alienating his fan base (read: less record sales). I respect the courage of the album.

Secondly, the sound of the album is phenomenal. What's Going On has to be one of the smoothest sounding records ever (rivaling Ray Charles Modern Sounds in Country and Western and in contemporary music, Yumi Bitsu’s Team Yumi) There is no other way to describe the CD but silky. The flutes and the saxophones do not jump out but instead pool together to create a seamless painting effect. And Gaye’s vocals are phenomenal, not overpowering but packed with emotional range; his voice works fantastically within the songs, allowing the instrumentals to feed off of his voice and vice versa. Really a gorgeous album.

Going slightly off track now, Marvin Gaye has the reputation as creating nothing but ultimate make out CDs, great backdrops to unhooking bras and sliding off pants. I met Mike when I started going to OUC because we had friends in common and, of course, we started talking about music. When I mentioned What’s Going On? his eyes lit up and he said “Marvin Gaye. Ya! He’ll get you some tail. Great sex CD.” (Mike, a barbershop singer, then went on to recommend Boston and ELO as further “sure fire sex bands.” I laughed and asked him if he trolls for girls at the Foreigner fan club meetings.)

I, however, couldn’t see myself trying to get my swerve on to the album. What’s Going On? seems too serious; trying to screw around without giving it my full attention
would be somehow blasphemous. Would I start feeling guilty in the middle of getting
with some girl and would that then be misinterpreted as disinterest? Would my attention
drift with the melodies? Even worse, would I start singing along? My point is this:
despite its smooth exterior, I would predict any romantic encounter in direct combination
with this album would turn out to be a pure horrific disaster.

(While we are on the subject, I think the same can be said for “Let’s Get It On.”
First, there are the obviously awkward associations between that song and my parents.
Second, it suffers from the exact opposite affliction that undermines What’s Going On?:
it is impossible to take “Let’s Get It On” seriously at all. It has been used in every bad
comedic sex scene and has now taken on the characteristic of a cultural cliché. Want to
show you have no clue about human mating habits? Put on “Let’s Get it On.” You might
be able to get three articles of clothing off before your partner starts rolling around with
giggles and ask you to please please please change the CD to some Van Morrison or
Jackson Browne or something.)

I guess my real soft spot for this CD rises from my first few days in Victoria. I
knew exactly one person in the whole city, Gabe, who hadn’t even moved there yet from
Vernon. I was holed up in a one bedroom apartment with no phone, no internet hooked
up yet. My parents had come down to help me move but when they left, the only thing I
had left to keep me sane were my books and my music. To make matters more difficult, I
was used to Lavington which is very sleepy and quiet and dark and comfy; unfortunately
my new apartment was located three blocks from the fire department, whose sirens went
crazy all hours. More, right across the street was some new cheap housing, the residents
of which tended to get real loud real late. What’s Going On? was the CD in my
headphones I put on at night, wrapped in a sheet, until I was on the edge of sleep. The CD is an ocean for me, lulling, soothing, deadly serious and immensely gorgeous.

I just had the following conversation with my mother:

**Mom:** I just read your chapter. You think you’re pretty funny don’t you.
**Me:** I’m deadly serious. No jokes.
**Mom:** Well when you’re done there I got some furniture for you to move. Jackass.

I’m going to order the biggest bloody ice cream cone Sicamous can muster and put it on her tab. I going to return here to Lavington happily gorged.

Numbers 7 through 11 aren’t really important to me so I’m going to be real brief. At number 7, as mentioned before, is the Rolling Stones *Exile on Main Street*, a record I don’t really even remember although I’ve tried to listen to it a half dozen times. I would also argue that *Sticky Fingers* is also better when it gets right down to it so really I have nothing more to say about *Exile*.

Number 8 is the Clash’s *London Calling*, a really good album, but one I don’t really have any connection with. I listen to the CD probably once every 3 months because I do like it a fair bit, but I always get the feeling that I would always have to go out of my way to put it on in a meaningful context. *Blonde on Blonde* by Bob Dylan is number 9, another great album but I would have put *Freewheeling Bob Dylan* and *The Times They are a Changin’* and ahead of it. Dylan is a great lyricist, writes elegant and powerful songs, but I heard *Blonde on Blonde* after I had heard four other Bob Dylan albums and, as such, my opinion of it is high but I can’t muster enough thoughts or memories on it to warrant four pages of babble.

The Beatles are up again at number 10: *The White Album*. Undeniably a great double disc but again I have a hard time with this album at this spot when I like Abbey
Road (number 14) more; “I want you (she’s so heavy)” off of Abbey Road might be my favorite Beatles song. I will say for the White Album however, “come and keep your comrade warm” is one of the best lyrics ever.

Elvis has the 11 spot with the Sun Sessions, another seminal record but more for reasons similar to Pet Sounds and we don’t need to ask how I really feel about that record. The Sun Sessions, while pretty spectacular in parts, is included so highly more because of its place in Rock and Roll history than anything else I believe. For me, although I appreciate and like the majority of Elvis’s songs and recognize the importance of Sun Records, the songs always seemed like they belonged to a time too far distanced from me. I don’t think I’ve ever heard an Elvis song, aside from at Christmas, in anything constituting a casual listening environment; never has Elvis ever come on spontaneously and therefore I just can’t get real close to him. I will say this though: Elvis was untouchably badass. I watched film of young Elvis performing and god, he had bloody appeal. Wow. He just twitched and snarled all over the place; someone would sit a guitar around his neck even though he’d never touch it, and he’d just groove and sing. I think I have a man crush on Elvis circa 1959. But enough. Moving forward.

12: Kind of Blue, Miles Davis

I’ve come to jazz very late in my listening life. As I grew up I had lots of rock and lots of pop and lots of country but very little of anything else (read: musical genres by people that weren’t white). I have no real explanation for this other than people I knew just didn’t listen to rap or jazz or blues; the only way black artists got played was if they sang pop songs. But I do know my hipster phase at the tail end of high school drove me in the exact opposite end of virtuosity and jazz: punk and barely tolerable indie-rock; it
took me a long time to get back to genres with overt musicality. I never realized how white bread my musical upbringing was until I started writing this here.

Anyway, I sort of fell backwards into jazz when I was trying to decide which college to go to. I knew that I wanted to study English and write so I was looking at all the different programs in all the different schools in Western Canada. I had no clue where exactly I wanted to go but I knew in my heart of hearts I had to leave Vernon. Gabe, on the strength of roughly three million in scholarships was going to UVic, and invited me to stay with him for a couple days on my reading break from OUC to check the school out. The plan was for Gabe and me to drive together to Vancouver, leave the car at the parking lot, and ferry over to Vancouver Island.

I drove my parents’ car actually; neither they nor I trusted my own Honda, which had climbed spectacularly in kilometers and rust content. As I pulled onto Highway 5, gaining speed, I realized that I had never been as far as I was going to go without guidance from parents or adults. I had been all up and down the valley, but never out on a highway, an open road, honest-to-God four lane highway through the mountains. The scenery seemed more vibrant, the small rivers more rushed and powerful, the colors more fetching and acute. A high speed run that was less Hunter Thompson and more Dylan Thomas brought us into Chilliwak, then Abbotsford, Langley, Surrey. My parent had given us good directions, me driving and Gabe navigating, so I figured we would have no problem getting to the ferry dock.

Except of course there was a huge problem: neither of us had ever driven in a city before. I was immediately overwhelmed; I was used to lazy traffic and open streets, an ambling sort of transportation, not the fit of chaos that greeted us as soon as we got off
the main highway. In short, we hit the panic button. And it started raining as it began
growing very dark. Eventually, we pulled over and found a gas station that pointed us in
the right direction; we made a fruitless battle to try and catch the next ferry and missed it
by less than fifteen minutes. When we finally got to the University I flopped my bag and
pillow on Gabe’s floor, who was living in Residence, and we went out to eat.

We ended up at the dorm cafeteria, the only thing still open, eating rubber pizza
and laughing at ourselves. For two days I had no school, no parents, no job, nothing. I
was completely free; nobody knew who I was and I was away from home. Then some
guys that Gabe knew came up and invited us over to their house for some beers.

Well, one thing led to another. We all had a bit more than a few beer, all the while
listening to a soundtrack of very loud Ja Rule alternating with Creed. Based on that initial
impression (those are probably two of my least favorite “artists”) I almost turned around
and swam back across to the mainland. That probably would have been ill advised.
However, I also realized that not leaving Vernon for two years after high school was a
sort of blessing in disguise because I probably could have drank beer on porches and
dicked away the first two years of undergrad with no problems or academic results at all.

At some point I got up to go to the bathroom and when I came back I passed
possibly the only semi-quiet room in the whole house. There were two girls and a guy
sitting listening to *Kind of Blue*, passing a pipe between each other. One of the girls
motioned me in, visions of the Sirens beckoning running through my giant nerd head, and
I sat down on a bean bag chair and took a pull off the pipe. The music wrapped around
me, spontaneous and tight. And roughly 6 months later I was alternating the album with
Gaye as I moved into my own place in Victoria.
To this day, the CD is one of the first I recommend to anyone and always one of the first I put on in casual gatherings. It is decidedly upbeat, packed with skill and deft touch. I guess that’s what impresses me so much every time I listen to it: how good the musicians were before mass culture and over saturation decided to bury virtuosity (the guitar solo being the obvious example). The album is just so versatile: I’ve sat and played cards to it, I’ve done countless hours worth of reading with it in the background, I’ve sat down and listened to it all by itself. There’s a wonderful sort of magical flexibility to it that is stunning.

What strikes me about the disc now is how barely contained it is, as a tiny ball of happy bedlam pushing at its borders. In that way it reminds me of that drive to the ferry and Vancouver city buzzing obliviously around the small country kids. And like the image of the city, the album seems better discussed as whole and not on a track by track basis because for the most part I can not separate its parts. Cities are large romantic creatures and *Kind of Blue* is much the same.

That’s how the album boils down to me: meeting a world that’s almost too big and greeting it with an innocent joy. When Gabe and I made that trip to Victoria I was terrified to leave Vernon, absolutely horrified to leave. When Gabe asked me to go I thought, “If you go, you’re not going to want to come back and that’ll make it very hard on you. Is that what you really want?” I act all tough and say I always wanted to leave but some of that is me talking out of my ass; it was so much easier in Lavington and Vernon where I knew 50 percent of the people I passed, had a job and a place to live with a family I loved. But when I sat down in that room in Victoria with *Kind of Blue* playing it
Tucker 142

was like someone placed a hand reassuringly on my shoulder and said, “This is what you want.”

13: The Velvet Underground & Nico, The Velvet Underground

I went through my entire two years at UVic hearing people talk about this album but couldn’t find a single person who actually owned it. The Velvet Underground is the exact doppelganger of the Spice Girls: everybody loves the band but nobody owns their albums. Example:

Random person at a party (more than likely a girl): Yeah I love the Velvet Underground. Especially the album with the banana on the front. That’s a great album. I mean fantastic. It changed my life. I had dropped out of high school and was addicted to cocaine, living on the streets as a hooker, the whole nine yards and that album turned it all around for me. I actually lost my left arm in a machete fight and that CD regrew it for me.

Me: Yeah, my favorite track is probably “European Son.” It’s just long and loud and borderline obnoxious. It’s fantastic.

Random: Oh me too, me too. (starts humming the BTO hit “Taking Care of Business”) That’s the song right? Yeah I love “European Son.”

Me: Ummm. Well, we could actually go listen to it. You got a copy?

Random: Oh I don’t actually own it. But it is sooo great.

The Velvet Underground & Nico is one of those records that more people have heard of than actually heard. The brass tacks is this: everybody likes the idea of the CD, the thinking, the legend behind it; the album is lauded as one of the first “underground” records, a big middle finger to established record making and promotion. However, and I believe this ties directly into why so few people actually own the record, I’ve met very few people that actually enjoy the music on Velvet.

And I can’t say I blame the general public for steering away from the album. It is horribly inaccessible in parts. There are quirky little pop songs here (like “I’m Waiting for The Man,” a mixtape staple) but then you have some of the solos and the last song, “European Son,” that is largely feedback and twangy noise. It is not an album made for
mass consumption and everybody who has ever uttered the two magic words “sold out,” (hipsters especially) knows that an album created not to sell is the highest form of musical art (that said, anyone who actually plays music that I’ve met, adores the music on the album. Nic and Danton use to swear on it like a Bible and I could probably draw some easy comparisons between Nico and Liz).

What I find really entertaining about that is that Andy Warhol who helped produce this “underground masterpiece” is the same man who helped popularize pop art. Isn’t the CD then a sort of contradiction in terms? Doesn’t Warhol involved in an iconic Beatles record make more sense? (I guess he did help design Sticky Fingers’s artwork.) I do miss the idea of the album as an artifact and artists actually constructing music as a complete package and product. More and more the contemporary product of the actual album seems rushed, like some record execs decided to put as many headshots or bizarre photos as possible in the libretto without any real reason. I guess what I’m really asking for is for further pull and peel album covers that look more than vaguely phallic.

For me, the CD has no real magical powers of healing or transformation. Lou Reed is not my Jesus and Nico is not my Mary. In fact, I came to this CD ashamedly late, as a brash twenty year old two years ago, and my relationship with it has been brief and intense. At the start of last summer my parents flew me back from Victoria to Vernon for a brief visit before I had to buckle down and start a long summer working and saving money at the grocery store in Victoria so I could blow it on my last year of tuition. (Incidentally, that was also the same summer I sold my car to help pay for school. The lesson: high education is for suckers who like to spend money foolishly.) A brief vacation, my parents told me (and for which they would buy my flight back to
Tucker Lavington), would be just the ticket to refresh me from a long school year. Plus my mother missed me fiercely and I’ll admit I missed both of them a good deal.

When I got to Vernon my parents, along with all my friends that still lived here, had to work, which left me with whole days to entertain myself. The first day back I drove the car into Vernon to explore the old stomping grounds and assess the changes that had been done by a whole year’s absence. What greeted me was predictably depressing. Nothing had changed, no one had moved on, everything remained largely in a static vacuum of time complete with the same pimped out cars with mile high spoilers, and hoochie haircuts. I remember walking through the mall and seeing the same shirts in Bootlegger and the same girl running the accessories kiosk by the Coles bookstore. God, I was depressed and angry; I wanted to shake every person and try and wake them up. The Vernon radio station didn’t help either, playing the hits they played when I was in high school (for some reason OMC’s “How Bizarre” is an everlasting smash in the rotation of Vernon radio. How shitty).

So I did the only thing I could think of to cheer me up: I bought CDs, namely The Velvet Underground’s. I had the VU album playing in the car thinking about my disastrous trip around Vernon when my brain actually started working, slowly turning and shifting gears. Who was I to say that leaving was the only good thing about Vernon? How bloody egocentric could I be? It was in the middle of “All Tomorrow’s Parties” that I came to the realization (and consequent acceptance) that some people will be happy doing things and being places that I don’t like and that’s because they are different people and only if I want to be a selfish asshole can I think less of them for it.
Let me say that that realization has made my trips home so much easier and happier; I can hang out in coffee shops and go to the mall without wanting to scream. And maybe somewhere in that midst I realized that I had romanticized my own image of what I was doing. I thought I was running away to some city away, when really I wasn’t nearly as alone or independent as I liked to think. I need this place, these patches of dirt road and field. This landscape is home and maybe now that I’ve realized that I can leave it and still carry it with me. I can pack these highway gas stations and leaning fences with me within the liner notes of the Velvet Underground album and take me with them where I need them.
at the finest hour of the happiest day

please don’t slow down

she says from somewhere in the passenger seat
highway curls around curves her eyes
aware of my physical act and pull of driving
(arms steering wheel legs pedals eyes road)

she’s impressed by me and this metal hunk of motion
and it makes me think of the first time she left:
elevator and I stared at the door her physical act of leaving
(small snick dress hair groan of gears lowering hands pockets)

can’t remember who came back first
but I know no one asked

eleven: where have you gone, all the power ballads?

My parents danced their first wedding dance to Lionel Ritchie’s “Hello.” As a marriage song I’ve always questioned its effectiveness. My mother is hovering around my shoulder while I type here at the computer desk. Since it’s my day off and Christmas is coming she’s been harassing me all morning to get my shopping done before it gets too crazy. She said her ears were burning and that she had to see what I was writing. However, after reading that first sentence she turned red and walked out of the room. It seems now that she’s sort of embarrassed about Lionel. But she’ll be leaving soon and my dad is at work and Joel is snowboarding at Silverstar Mountain and I would really like the house to myself today to crank my music and write. Right now OK Computer is playing in my headphones but I want to be able to put it on the stereo and turn it up.

Also, because it’s my day off I’ve been watching TV, more specifically MuchMusic. As I was studying the moving-picture-box some atrocious slow ballad single flashed on; the boys, who couldn’t be more than sixteen, sang emotively about true love into the camera while the wind machine whipped their shirts around their perfectly choreographed dancing. (I felt a little like Yossarian at that moment, watching the perfectly normal and accepted craziness explode around me.) From the TV, I looked at my parents’ wedding picture above the phone and it got me thinking about “Hello.” On the surface the song is an adequate tune to remind a couple of their loving relationship, past and present. “Hello” is weepy and romantic enough for the ladies, smooth and suave enough for the fellas (the smooth and suave may have originated from Ritchie’s moustache which, oddly enough, looked a little like my dad’s). I like to think my parents
considered the song an encapsulation of their relationship, the wanting and the desolation, the searching and finally the finding. The reason my parents gave me for choosing the song depended on who you asked.

My mom said that it always piped through the speakers at the cherry orchard where the two met and that when she first saw my dad, the song was playing and something clicked in her head. Her standout comment on the subject, a comment I might add resides in the upper echelon of All Time Cheesiest Comments, was that "Hello" taught her to love.

My dad says that it was the song on the radio when I was conceived. He may have been joking because he mentioned in the next breath that he also really liked jeri-curls. You see, my parents fell in love, then made me, then decided to get married. I like to think my parents didn’t just get married because they were going to have a kid; I like to hold out for my mother’s more romantic thinking that ties into her choosing the song. By all accounts the marriage business worked out remarkably well: I’ve never seen them fight; they still hold hands like teenagers in the mall, still kiss and act more mushy that I can stomach.

But I’ve got to wonder if it was each other that they were looking for? Is “Hello” an anthem of their young love gone too far too fast or does it represent for them a musical bond and special moment? Since neither have answered those questions straight when I’ve asked I’ve got to believe it is a bit of both: young and bold-headed, well meaning, loving stupidity.

I got to thinking about this because of that terrible single on the TV earlier and a tree and a song that always reminds me of how young and stupid I could be. Let’s get one
thing straight and in the open: I can’t climb anything for shit. Fences: barely. Social ladders: no. Mountains: haha. No. Trees: definitely not. But I’ve tried; there is a specific pine tree in the front of Kim’s old yard, a tree I drove by yesterday on my way to work. I’ve driven by it everyday I’ve had to work this summer so it shouldn’t have shook me up like it did. I had to pull the car over and sit and watch the traffic zip by me. When the radio came back from commercial and started playing an Avril Lavigne song I started to move again.

My roadside stop has been bothering me all bloody day and that fucking tree has been haunting the back of my mind. It’s not even that nice of a pine tree; it is not particularly solid or tall or bushy or anything. It is just a damn pine tree. Yet, I couldn’t even drive any further when I saw it and I had to stare at the snowy mountains, completely still within the echoing song, long forgotten, repeating itself in my head. I have a real bad habit of being hopelessly romantic and I blame it completely on that tree and my parents, who have one of the most loving relationships I can even imagine, and The Verve Pipe, more specifically their song “The Freshman.” The song itself is not really romantic, more sad and regretful, but I didn’t climb every tree in front of the girl I adored to The Verve Pipe.

The really bizarre thing about popular music is the role it plays in educating young kids. Despite having the positive relationship role models of my parents in front of me everyday I declined to accept their authority on relationships; I believed and trusted in music to give me the vocabulary and proper guidance to woo and adore.
And this is very defensible. Why would I believe the ordinary everyday things I see when the vocabulary and experiences dramatically being taught through music were soooo much cooler and interesting.

I should add here that I had the luxury of a wealth of sappy love songs because of my parent’s record collection (which I of course abandoned for the more “badass” loud metal I heard later). By Grade 2 I had undergone the learning of “Lollipop Lollipop” and “Candy Girl”’s subtle rhetoric. Rudimentarily, by age 9 or so, I grasped thinly the innocence of love, but at the same time I was exposed to the hard realities through rock: Billy Joel’s “Only the Good Die Young” showed me that love doesn’t always flower up nicely.

One of my most trusted authorities on love was the 80’s and early 90’s metal bands. The thing about 80’s metal’s notions of love is that they are almost completely contradictory within themselves. If you listen to one of the faster songs, there really isn’t much in the way of romantic love. I guess the logic was that every guy was “too fast for love” or just wanted someone for at the drive-in in the old man’s Ford; bands like Poison would have you believe that the world was a whole lot of rarely unrequited lust.

On the flip side, the power ballad was a whole different ballgame. In the power ballad, love was like the Harlequin novels: sappy, overtly sentimental, trashy and horribly influential. To me, hearing, Extreme meant that love was simply inexpressible; love was something so special that even a song as classy as “More Than Words” was tremendously inadequate. What version of the love song was I supposed to believe in?

Well, somewhere in grade 5 it became crystal clear. My mom rented The Bodyguard and I heard Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You.” Later I heard
SWV’s “Weak.” Then I heard All-4-One’s “I Swear.” These songs killed the lust song of the hair metal and convinced me that the slow sensitive song held the real keys to love. More than this, girls loved the slow sappy songs and my conniving little head did some simple sort of math and came up with the idea that to get girls I should not only like the songs but act and say things in the same vein as these love songs. I felt I had cracked some sort of code to unlimited girls. What exactly I would do with this cornucopia of girls I had no clue. My brain was not quite advanced enough to link the sexual desire of faster hair metal to the power ballad, a move that surely would have shaved five years off my Loss of Virginity date.

So I was armed from a young age with a gigantic vocabulary of sensitivity. Funny story, true story: there was Marika, a girl that I along with most of the other grade six boys, were chasing. She was the twin sister of one of my best friends, Jesse, so I got to see her a fair bit and convinced myself that I had a halfway decent shot of her “liking me” (a bigger abstract notion than “love” for a 10 year old) based mostly on quantity of presence. I was kinda shy, especially around her, but I was a fast runner (which went a long way at Lavington Elementary) and my bushy dark hair didn’t look completely idiotic. People told me I was funny. These were all qualities I figured were a good base, but I was still looking for that little extra push.

So what was my clinching move to win Marika’s undying love? I copied out the lyrics to “Your Song” and gave it to her one day after school; the faultless logic behind this being that she wouldn’t fall for the “kid’s stuff” of the Archies, but needed something sophisticated. Since my parents owned both Peter Frampton and Elton John’s Greatest Hits, and they were, by default, the most sophisticated people I knew, I had to trust their
taste. Somehow I settled on “Your Song” above “Baby, I Love Your Way” (I considered “Baby” too obvious because it had “love” in the title). The results of such bold plagiarism: she didn’t talk to me for three weeks. Neither did Jesse. Then, that summer she and her family moved and I didn’t see her again until I accidentally ran into her up at the college by which point I had forgotten all about the Elton incident until...

**Marika:** Yeah Jesse is doing well. He’s up north working on the oil rigs.

**Me:** That’s cool. Beats working at a grocery store. I really don’t like it much but hey.

**Marika:** *(kinda laughing)* Yeah I guess so. *(laughing a little harder)* Hey do you remember giving me that poem in grade 6?

**Me:** *(eyes widening in recognition)* No. Can’t say that I do.

**Marika:** You copied out some poem from somewhere. I think it was a song. I was so scared of you after.

**Me:** *(looking towards the door)* Really? I did that?

**Marika:** I shouldn’t say scared but I was kinda creeped out. I guess it was sweet though.

**Me:** Yeah me too. Well gotta go.

I agree that perhaps I went a little overboard. After all, I only play that song now around a girl if I like her a fair bit. But I also think she overreacted badly. The incident made me realize that perhaps my grade 5 moves (or lack thereof) could use some subtle polishing. I went back to listening to love songs again for some sort of answer, studying the proclamations, singing the songs in my room. I had all the words, all I needed was a target.

It seems my brother has developed a sense of irony because he just got back down from the mountain and came into the computer room where I’m writing. His pant cuffs were soaked with snow and he grinned stupidly while he tried to read over my shoulder. When he caught the Marika story he went and found the very record I stole the lyrics from and, as I type, is singing along at the top of his lungs. An odd mix, my Radiohead
and his Elton John, like Billy Joel got drunk and fell on a set of turntables. Also, my brother can’t sing for shit.

So, the tree in the front of Kim’s yard (stay with me; I’ll get there I promise). I met Kim in kindergarten at Lavington and we had this weird sort of young connection; we rigged the three legged race so that we could be together; we invited each other to our birthdays before anyone else (we were born, oddly enough, only a day apart); we sent each other the extra special valentines, the super big ones. Given that I didn’t listen to a lot of music then I imagine I wrote the straight forward, “Be Mine Sugarpants, From Aaron” or something equally exciting. The crowning jewel of that kindergarten year was a four foot triceratops we made out of paint and construction paper which I kept on the ceiling of my closet for the next six years.

But after that kindergarten year we downgraded (at least in my mind) to “really good friends.” I’m not sure why; I guess the world opened up into many other desirable first graders. Through elementary and high school I pined. Not to the point of sending the lyrics from gay balladeers to her, but I did pine. When we hit high school everyone was amazed at how close we were without actually dating. Apparently she had no attraction to me; I cursed my skinny frame and awkwardly long arms. Yet, I was around her constantly. I was over at her house, she was over at my house. We’d go up to the gravel pit together. We’d make the 25 minutes bus ride home after school together. It was wonderful. It was torturous. I imagined her to be the girl of my dreams; she was always tantalizingly close but completely unobtainable. The role of The Friend is never a good one unless you are extremely sly and sneaky. I am not one of those people.
I kept plugging away, thinking one day she would realize that taking a chance on me wouldn’t be the worst thing ever (trapped in a room and forced to listen to “Invisible” endlessly, incidentally, would be The Worst Thing Ever).

Then Kim told me she was moving at the end of the summer in between grades 9 and 10. Two things went through my head: first, I had one summer to really make an all out romantic assault. Once she got to Vernon I would no longer have the leverage of simply being the closest, most available guy. Second, such an assault required an absolutely mind-bendingly precise and personal mixtape as its spearhead.

Back in the present now, my mother has just left for town and I’ve put on the Verve Pipe CD as loud as it’ll go, for authenticity’s sake. “The Freshman” is a sad slow song, not over powering with its vocals but kinda lazy with its beat and pulse. Right now I’m searching my giant file folder of a brain for the exact track listing of that mixtape but I’m coming up painfully short. I remember I put “The Red Strokes” by Garth Brooks because she said once, in grade six, while waiting for the bus home, that she liked the video. I also included Toni Braxton; her favorite song at that time was “Un-Break my Heart.” I think I even snuck that theme off of ConAir on (“How Do I Live”). I do remember that no one that should have been on that tape was. There was no Edwin McCain or “Truly Madly Deeply,” hell, not even that terrible Righteous Brothers song off of Ghost.

I gave her the tape right after Grade 9 ended. We were watching TV at her house downstairs because it was too hot upstairs and I gave her the tape, passing it off as the sort of casual gesture reserved for shaking hands or picking up the mail. I made tapes for
her a lot so she really wasn’t shocked by the move, and she tucked the cassette into her pocket.

We decided to brave the sweltering heat and go play Frisbee in her front yard, to the left of which, directly visible from the highway, is this pine tree with arms like clutching vacuum fingers. What happened with that Frisbee should not be a large surprise; I’ll kill the drama by saying it obviously got caught up in the tree. But what transpired out of that is what forced me to the gravel shoulder on my drive by yesterday.

I waited out on the lawn, admiring the K-car her dad was constructing in the garage. I thought Kim was inside getting the Frisbee (which she was) but it didn’t even cross my mind was that she was finding some music to put on. Her second floor bedroom had one window facing the yard and she frequently pointed her ghetto-blaster out that window so we could listen to tunes. The first few notes of The Tony Rich Project’s “Nobody Knows” from *Words* jumped out of the window, startling me. I thought “Is this the first song of my tape? She does have the song on other tapes, I know she does.” I couldn’t be sure if it was my tape.

She came out of the door, emerging like Bo Derek in *10*, hair flipping and her breasts bouncing towards the seams of her tank top, smiling in her too short shorts. I probably stared and I remember her shooting me a quizzical look, but I think I was more panicked by the prospect of her family and everyone walking by hearing my soul pouring out of her stereo (I believe the apt cliche would be: a deer in the headlights). I could feel my brain going in separate directions: 1) god, she looks hot and 2) god, she’s going to hate me. It was a tape meant for a late night listen, perhaps while she read some magazine article on how to find the perfect guy or combed her hair in the moonlight; the tape was
not a set of sunny afternoon anthems. My solution, in a split second burst of decision-making brilliance, was to ignore the situation until I was sure it was the tape. In the meantime I motioned for her to throw the Frisbee, leaping as it nearly sailed over my head.

We continued like this all the way through Tony Rich and then the 3 agonizing split seconds between that song and "One Sweet Day." Then I knew I had to do something about the tape. I don't know if anyone knows the torture of hearing your own attempts at expression of love broadcast back at you while the object of your affection casually flips you a plastic disk; I kept waiting for her to recognize the meaning of the tape. Surely after two songs she would catch onto the message of the tape and then what? Well the prospects were too frightening. I acted quickly:

**Me:** Hey can you turn that off. I want something a little more upbeat.
**Kim:** What? Is the rest of the tape like this?
**Me:** Uh *(cursing self and the existence of Mariah Carey)* no. Just, I really don't like this song.
**Kim:** Um. Sure. Ok. I'll fast forward through it then *(starting towards the door).*

She turned and threw an absolutely appalling throw, well above my head, that curved directly into the tree. I could see the thing poking out well above my reach and I began looking for a hockey stick or something to prod the thing down. But this new predicament distracted Kim from fast forwarding through the tape (and finding the next sappy slow song) and now she stood beside me, tiny hands balled on her hips. There was no hockey stick. I glanced at the tree and offered to climb it.

My thinking was that maybe I could divert her from the music pouring from her window by showing my tree climbing prowess and then somehow divert her, maybe say I had to go to the bathroom and then switch the tape or something. I put one foot on one
low branch of the tree and hoisted myself up, aiming for where I thought the Frisbee was. "Higher" she told me; I climbed a little higher and shook a branch. "Higher" again. Up again and I shook, extending my hand down the tree limb and firmly gripping its hard bark, finally dislodging the damn thing. The problem was that such shaking threw off my own equilibrium and I could feel myself tipping slightly forward, my grip lessening and then I fell, crashing through the tree limbs and landing awkwardly upright on the ground on my right ankle, rolling over on it, howling in pain. Kim rushed over, clutching the Frisbee to her chest, leaning over me (did I try and look down her shirt? Probably. I figured I had earned it). "The Freshman" started. Why exactly I decided to include the song is beyond me because it mostly definitely isn’t a love song. It’s really depressing actually. For a long time I simply confused sad song with slow songs which would definitely explain the lack of ladies. She looked concerned:

**Kim:** Are you OK? Oh my God are you OK?
**Me:** My ankle hurts. Fucking goddam. Why is that tape still on?
**Kim:** Your ankle. Did you break it?
**Me:** No. I just rolled it I’ll be fine. *(leaning very closely, inspecting my face with a very soft look on her face)*

Somewhere in between the pain of my ankle and the stupid song I think I knew it was my chance. I inched forward towards her lips, hoping to simply connect, and then go from there; if I learned anything from music and television it’s that a perfect kiss is as good as gold. And she leaned in, and I swear she closed her eyes in anticipation.

It wasn’t a long kiss, maybe 30 seconds or so, with tongue action towards the end of it once I got bold enough. But when it broke, it broke harshly. I had rolled the dice and came up empty.

"We are such good friends. This will ruin it."
And I nodded even though I couldn’t agree less. “The Freshman” indeed; a young kid who didn’t know any better, beginning my education.

I eventually hobbled home and didn’t call her for the next week, nursing my wounded pride for the majority of the summer by throwing a tennis ball against the side of our shed and reading a lot of Stephen King. Also, I refused to listen to any Bush (her favorite band) or even turn on the radio for fear I would run into some song I couldn’t control, going so far as to put myself on a strict diet of The Philosopher Kings and Gin Blossoms.

I don’t listen to that song anymore. “The Freshman” I mean. In fact I haven’t even thought about it for such a long time. Maybe it was seeing that tree that shocked it back into me. I swear when I looked at that tree I could hear those sluggish gloomy lyrics and the snap and thud of me landing. (I might be able to garner more sympathy here by telling you that I broke my ankle in twelve places and still walk with a limp, carrying my foot with an appropriate love scar, but, sadly, the ankle was merely rolled and has healed perfectly.)

That tree and that song have become inseparable now. I realize now the thing about music that resounds with the listener is that is inseparable from the scene it is attached to; it has the transcendent quality of being both the focus and the background of a scene.

God forbid if my brother reads that last story too. He’d have a field day with “The Freshman.” At least he’s finally turned off Elton John and now I can hear the stray guttural yells from his stereo downstairs as he attempts to disrupt my quiet balance of solitude as I write. So needlessly hardcore!
Continuing though, pop music is fucking everywhere. You can’t watch TV, or walk through a department store without being washed in it. What does that do to the love song? It kills it. Love is a lot less sincere when you can hear it any hour of the day in Zellers or 7-11 (or in my specific case, three times a day at the grocery store).

When a half way decent love song is actually released it is effectively killed by over distribution. “The Reason” by Hoobastank, admittedly a pretty bad song is made a hundred time worse every half dozen times a person runs into it. And if someone hears “The Reason” everywhere, because again, music is piped in everywhere, the odds are very high that something bad or unlikable will happen in conjunction with the playing that song.

I guess the problem with popular music is that it rarely “happens” anymore; the spontaneity of falling out a tree to some sad song has been lost. There are simply too many moments, none of which are particularly important, that end up drowning any sort of emotional connection with the listener. So is it the lack of control and over-saturation that has killed the love song? Should a love song even be controlled by forcing it into a “romantic” situation (would that cheapen the moment and song)? Are there people like me, who are so burned by a single tune that they take it out on every other slow song they hear in a bitter ignore-fest, driving records sales and profitability down, encouraging the slow destruction of such pieces?

So what then is the modern equivalent of the love song since metal died? Rap. Both rap and metal (despite being enjoyed stereotypically by opposite ends of the race spectrum) aim for the same demographic i.e. the young white suburban male; popular rap
music embodies the same sort of “get every girl around you and have a 13 girl, 5 hour orgy on top of large piles of money” energy that cock rock did.

Exhibit A: 50 Cent “Magic Stick”/“Candy Shop.” I put a slash between them because there are fucking identical; both are duets with large breasted women that rely largely on sexual imagery; they both use EXACTLY the same baseline; sadly, both were number one hits. Please compare: Magic Stick chorus: “I got the magic stick/ know if I can hit once, I can hit twice/I hit the baddest chicks/ Shorty don't believe me, then come with me tonight”; “Candy Shop” chorus: “I take you to the candy shop/I'll let you lick the lollypop/Go 'head girl, don't you stop/Keep going 'til you hit the spot.” Accordingly, love and relationships are redundant, overbearing and more than slightly creepy when veiled by bad metaphors.

Rap now (at least most commercially popular rap but, again, there are exceptions like Kanye West and to an extent Jay Z to name the most obvious) aims towards the young men just taking their fist dip in the pool of sexual thought, just like hair metal did. The main difference though is that rarely does the rapper do any “power ballad” type songs to try and even it out. I guess someone could make the argument that R and B fills the role of the power ballad but I really consider rap and R and B separate animals. Convince me otherwise. All that kids are given nowadays are the overly sexual songs, which are fun to dance to, don’t get me wrong, and sometimes entertaining, but are about as useful (and influential) as “Drop Dead Legs.” Has love grown too heavy a subject to the point that the alternative of dancing and making out to some fat beats is just easier?
The irony of discussing the love song as Joel plays some weird combination of cats dying and people firing large guns at drum kits as I try to type (and it pushes snowflakes down outside) is not lost on me here. I can barely even concentrate really.

God, I sound like an old man. I’m not complaining honest, just trying to make a point. The results then: the love song has died. No band (which ties directly into the death of the mid nineties boy band) releases love songs anymore because people just don’t believe them. Maybe it is the peak of scientific thought and the rational world taking over but suddenly the realm of lovey emotion has shrunk tremendously. There’s a certain distrust in sentimentality which perhaps comes out of that terrible peak of the Backstreet Boys/ N’Sync, “bands” that, while the most contrived musical groups I’ve been witness to, relied very, very heavily on romance and hugely mushy, abstract notions of love.

(There is an alternate theory on the death of the love song I’ve read on the internet that Fred Durst has employed all the songwriters in North America and is now hoarding love songs to be released in a double disc effort next year titled “Soft Bizkit: Songs To Make Internet Sex Tapes To.” All efforts to find evidence for this have sadly failed).

The only place that the love song still exists: on the fringes of music in the realm of country. Generally the people who listen to country music (in my experience anyway) tend to appreciate and listen to hair metal which has that tricky balance between macho lust and sensitive mushiness. On the whole they are the normal average folk, the ones who hang their laundry on the lines while their husbands work down at the mill or auto parts plant, the rural sprawl dwellers. They are the ones doing the middle wage jobs, coming home and dreaming of winning the lottery and living happily ever after. More than that, they are exact in their desires and wishes: to be loved and to be content. Also,
people who listen to country music don’t listen to rap. Kids growing up with country
listening parents tend to be fairly isolated in their musical tastes and therefore don’t pay
any attention to the messages of rap. So then the country music listener still grows up
believing the in the love and sentimentality they were brought up with by their parents.

I do have faith in a popular love song comeback however. All the old players are
back in place in this fine year of 2005: Mariah Carey has a new single on the charts. Newlyweds seems to be popular somehow. The Backstreet Boys have a new album. Jon
Cusak has a new romantic comedy coming out. I believe we are one Boyz II Men record
away from a renaissance.

To be fair, I don’t hate every love song; I just hate the way the love song is
handled, mangled and mistreated when it is so powerful and influential. Maybe I’ve read
too much Donne or listened to too much Al Green. I’m too idealistic and expect the love
song to be about and encourage/remind listeners of situations of love (or, at the very
least, situations where a teenager can be tricked into thinking a situation is love).

I don’t even really hate “The Freshman.” It is just the shock of knowing that a
song and a tree, define a tiny space in my head where “love” resides and no amount of
shaking will dislodge that.
there are people I can’t imagine getting old

standing on breath puffed porch watching
snow fall winter and I thought she was perfect

small freckle on her nose (slightly oversized
she hated that part of herself the most) hair
(light brown sandy blonde cut layered like water
falling always smelled like papaya although
I still don’t know what that smells like) eyes (dark
pools of shade she’d pout like that with those and
I’d do this babbling) palms (so many tiny lines
a map to her fingers delicate bird bones) mole
(on her right breast kissed soft eagerly lingered
and her hand squeezed the back of my neck)
laugh (like stepping off a cliff and waking up
relieved although I did enjoy the feeling of falling)

10 AM Boxing Day: Christmas is done again for another year. My family and I had a quiet little dinner with each other. Our family tradition for nearly all 22 of my years is that my mother makes lasagna for Christmas Eve and then ham for Christmas day. Needless to say I have gained roughly as many pounds as days that gravelly "rapper" Mystikal was relevant (a generous estimate of 10).

The grocery store closes for both Christmas and Boxing Day which is nice; we all have the day off and we can have our family together. We’re going to go ice skating up at SilverStar Mountain later today. As I type, my dad is in the kitchen constructing some concoction for breakfast out of the leftovers from the last few days that I can’t even begin to fathom while Joel sits at the table and waits patiently. That kid will eat pretty well anything. I think mom is trying to put up the wind chime I got her for Christmas. We’re all busy in our own little places right now and that’s wonderful.

I’d be lying to say that Brodie Mann is far from my head though. Even during the holidays here, this brief respite, the whole cloud is hanging somewhere over the back of my mind. Right now the large question I began with, “What now?”, and my initial reaction to Brodie, “It could happen to me,” go very hand in hand. I’m trying to work through it.

I’ve decided to type down a bunch of words for a while. I, of course, got a bunch of CDs for Christmas so I’m slowly working my way through them as I write. Every Christmas I tend to come up with a theme when I make my wish list (which people tend to stick to for some reason. Thankfully). Two years ago it was obscure indie-rock. Last
year I asked for a bunch of soundtracks I thought were interesting. This year I asked for live albums and music DVDs. I was rewarded with the live Radiohead album (from Joel), the double *Live Era* by Guns and Roses (an album I owned actually on cassette and never quite got around to getting on CD), the Wilco DVD, and the CD playing right now, a double disc of David Bowie live (all from my parents).

I’ve thought and written about live music earlier and I’m not going to rehash a lot aside from the fact that Machina puts on a fucking good show and that’s what live music should be. Again, it is the intimate atmosphere of the listening that is going to make the experience memorable and that can most easily be found in live music.

But I do think there are other ways for studio albums to achieve that intimacy but the factors involved don’t really hinge on the music itself. The personal connection is a process of connecting that music with places and times, like the aural map I made while running earlier. And no two people will have the exact same memorable records, the same exact Canon of music.

These, again, are the CDs that aren’t going to make any Rolling Stone top 500 albums and don’t demand the large recognition of Greatness but instead are content to lavish in the turning loose, through scene or person, of a skinny kid’s head and heart.

1: *Music To Have Sex To*, Various Artists

Trying to look for this album in record stores won’t do you any good. Much like *The Worst CD Ever*, this album was the brainchild and construction of myself, some good friends, a skewed view of reality and mass boredom.

For most of my childhood my mother stayed at home and looked after the house while my dad worked in the meat department at the local grocery store as the manager
and meat cutter. Our family never really had any excess money and I’ve always had to work to put myself through post secondary. For the two years of undergrad that I did in Vernon I worked with my dad at the grocery store; for the next two in Victoria I worked at Thrifty’s, a local grocery chain on the island. There I was a produce monkey: I would cut celery and throw green peppers around, lift heavy things and basically be a bitch for all the people who wanted to make a career out of being a produce monkey. Such a menial job left plenty of time for chit chat with co-workers.

*MTHST* arose out of the question of how many kids had their first sexual experience to Aerosmith’s “I Don’t Wanna Miss a Thing” in comparison to STYX’s “Sail Away.” For the record, I championed Aerosmith of the two, although, overall, I have to think Air Supply or Foreigner would take the gold medal. The conversation then turned to other possible virginity stealing songs. Soon this ballooned into a whole CD and a bet: I would construct a CD for my friend Jordan and the next time he was going to get down by the fire he would put it on. He couldn’t listen to it before hand and it needed to be played all the way through to win. And he was to make me a CD under the same rules.

The actual construction of *MTHST* is an art form. It starts like a normal sex CD might, with two or three nice though cliché romantic songs, like “Amazed” by Lonestar, then “Freebird,” a song slow at the start that picks up steam when you’re (hopefully) moving into the territory of clothes removal. The trick is to make it seem like any other sexy mix album so that suspicions are not aroused immediately until, in theory, things have gone too far to stop. If I started off with “My Heart Will Go” the whole illusion and fun would be ruined.
From those first few tracks the album starts slowly ramping up into terrible. Any CD of the sort must include Meatloaf and, to be safe, REO Speedwagon. For variety I usually include a random obnoxious song as a sort of pace changer from the overly weepy slow ballads. In Jordan’s case I inserted “The Grease Mega Mix,” a giant mash up songs from the movie, at track ten, which receives bonus points because I knew he absolutely detested that song. The album climaxes with my most personally hated song “Total Eclipse of the Heart” by Bonni Tyler. Basically the CD is a mish-mash of over sentimentality and unadulterated buffoonery.

To no one’s real surprise Jordan played the CD. To add to the business it was his first time with this particular girl and she was a roommate no less. At the point when the track “MMM Bop” came on, as the second part of the one-two “Grease Mega Mix” combo Jordan said he had to bury his face in the pillow to keep from laughing. The best part about the scenario is that the girl actually thought this was the type of music Jordan used for making moves; if someone was to take the CD literally and extrapolate some sort of Taste from it they might assume he was the last remaining member on the Hanson bandwagon. Frankly I’m surprised she didn’t jump out of bed. Fortunately Jordan explained things after and she thought the album was funny. And now the two are dating. Really, the CD is an arrow in my quiver of matchmaking.

I sadly have not had the guts to actually use the CD Jordan made for me. I put much too much stock in lining up events with music to try and screw around. Plus it’s not like I’m getting laid every day or anything. What if the girl heard the CD and stormed out in a fit of disgusted confusion? That would be beyond tragic. I took my lose and walked away.
Why do I mention this album? Not to prove that all men are assholes, although it just might. I mention it because somewhere, everywhere there are kids who needs CDs like this. I mean look at Jordan. The CD inspired such confidence and wonderful experiences that the girl couldn’t resist him to the point of actually having sex with him regularly. Imagine what it could do for you. So for all of you out there that think ELO is the way to woman’s vagina think twice. John Travolta would probably work better.

2: *Beats, Rhymes and Life, A Tribe Called Quest*

When I was first introduced to rap I felt very awkward. My friends would drive around in their cars bumping to Master P or “Thug Life” (part of the baseline for that song is two shot gun shots), rattling the speakers out of their homemade boxes and I would cower in the back seat trying not to be seen. I felt fake listening to the music. As much as I love Biggie Smalls, my life was nothing like his so I had to learn how to appreciate and respect rap and hip hop in my own setting and come to some sort of understanding where I didn’t feel as uncomfortable as a twelve year old boy slow dancing with a girl and trying to will an erection down. It was the whole black consciousness meeting the white and I had no idea how to listen to the music at all. The first CD that I really felt I could connect with was, as you can probably guess by now, was *Beats Rhymes and Life*.

If I was born ten years later and wanted to write this book when I turned 22 then every chapter would be sprinkled with rap or hip hop references instead of rock music. Rap has emerged as the dominant form of popular music which gives me mixed feelings.

To get this out of the way, yes hip hop and rap are different although I’m not exactly sure how. I’m not an expert on this so if there is disagreement here chalk it up to
extreme amateurism (actually you can carry that excuse with you all the way through this
book thing if you like). Anyway, when I was growing up and rap was in its transitional
years from underground to full fledge popular movement it was harsh, big and mean
(think N.W.A or Notorious B.I.G. or Nas or any number of artists); in contrast, the
contemporary version of rap is much more commercial and light in comparison (gross
overgeneralization perhaps but let’s continue). Hip hop is different; in my eyes it is a
more conscious of itself, a little less verse-snappy hook formula and definitely more
playful and lyrical advanced (Buck 65 being almost purely hip hop). I don’t really hold
one genre higher than the other, each have their own time and place, but I do enjoy hip
hop in more situations. My favorite artists are the ones who blend both worlds, like
Common or The Roots.

Like anything when it gets popular, rap is horribly bloated right now and emcees
are being turned out more for looks and image than actual skills, just like boy bands
before them and hair bands before them and so on and so forth. Countless people much
smarter than me have written on the phenomenon of the white middle class teenagers as
the main demographic for rap music made almost solely by black artists, so I’m not going
to try and add anything new. Like metal sold a fantasy life to suburban white kids, hip
hop does the same sort of thing; instead of women, drugs and loud guitars, rap sells
women, drugs and loud bass lines.

While I do think rap started as a legitimate and honest expression of the hardships
and triumphs of inner city black life, now it seems like that has been taken to excess,
distended, and the message has become diluted and ineffective. This is a real shame
because rap and hip hop are the only genres of music that still consistently surprise me.
It's easy to crack the code of rock songs and equally as easy to figure out most of the lyrics before they are even sung. But where rock is lacking, hip hop and rap is charging ahead.

Hip hop and rap artists are much more willing to extend their genre, to write funny, poignant politically and socially recent lyrics. Also the bass lines and production for rap and hip hop artists are much more overt and important (for all the nay-sayers saying sampling old songs isn’t creating anything new, it is. Sampling is not covering, it is re-envisioning the song in a new context). I believe strongly in this; there’s no use in fighting me. It seems that every time I get a recommendation from someone who listens to hip hop/rap regularly and I buy a CD there are at least two or three instances where my head will pop up and out of whatever stupor I’m in and say “hot damn!” Other hip hop/rap related surprises of note: the whole Water For Chocolate album, “Who Knew” by Eminem, “Moment of Clarity” by Jay-Z, the first listening of “Jesus Walks,” the Wu Tang Clan as a whole, “Concrete Schoolyard” by Jurassic 5 and Beats Rhymes and Life.

Like I said, I had trouble relating to the general lyrics of rap (particularly gangsta) in any real way; I felt like I was disrespecting a way of life I could never know by pretending I empathized or understood. I was being purposely alienated (and rightly so I think). But, I respected the delivery of words and message, the art of it. And I learned through the lyrics. No one insisted I should; I came to it through a slow realization and many listens. The lyrics for Ready to Die were an education in lifestyle, the mechanics a lesson in poetry. Beats acts in much the same manner.

I read magazines religiously and one of my favorites is SLAM, a more hip hop influenced basketball magazine. SLAM uses hip hop and rap as its base and made many
references to A Tribe Called Quest lyrics and albums. My friend Stefan kept pushing the album at me and on a whim one day I picked up *Beats*, not knowing what to expect. What I did get was some jokes about OJ Simpson ("gonna get off like OJ" is my favorite. I guess it was only natural considering his trial was on at the time of the making of the record) mixed with solid, thoughtful lyrics, Q-Tip at his smoothest delivery, jazz-influenced instrumentals and squiggly bass lines. "The Pressure" is probably my favorite track if only because I have a real soft spot in my heart for scratching and turntables.

(I have to say mixing and turntables have almost becomes the new guitar in that it is impossible to not appear cooler by playing and using a turntable well. If I could I would learn how to mix and put together a fantastic remix of the theme from *Saved By the Bell* and "Red Light Special." Trust me; it would be beyond comprehension.)

So *Beats* got me past the awkwardness by allowing me to enter into the rap in my own way, through the cleverness of the lyrical content and the impressive (often incredible) flow of the rappers. This playfulness taught me not to take the message of rap so literally and instead see the places through which I could insert my own experiences without taking anything away from the artist's.

Well, my mother has finally hung the wind chime. She decided to hang it inside, where, oddly enough, there is no wind, defeating the thing of its only purpose really. But it's hers and I'll let her do what she likes. It looks really nice by the window anyways, forever wanting to play in the wind so close. Poor wind chime. I decided to save breakfast for later because I feel like I'm rolling here so we'll continue as we were.
3: *Dude Ranch*, Blink 182

My family is sometimes bizarrely protective, my mother particularly. When I was young I never owned a single GI Joe or toy gun. My parents wouldn’t let me watch the Simpsons until I was 15 for fear it would corrupt me (little did they know I actually bootlegged a few VHS tapes which I hid, where else, under my bed. Next to the Penthouse).

I say bizarrely protective because at the same time I was allowed to read virtually any book I could get my hands on. I read nearly all the Christopher Pike books, not overly gory but not exactly rainbows and puppies either. I also read a good chunk of the Stephen King novels; nothing of this bothered my parents in the least. But one thing my mom and dad didn’t stand for was swearing; they hated movies or music with swearing in it, hated it when any of us swore, just hated it, my mother especially. Despite her best efforts my brother was a habitual swearer, very colorful in his language, particularly in my direction for things I was largely innocent of.

(I would try and goad my brother into swearing so I could get him in trouble. I know. I’m a horrible brother. I remember one time I went so far as to hide a tape recorder under the table our Commodore 64 sat on. True to form, once he started losing at the surfing portion of *California Games*, he went off, all recorded. I got him to do a week’s worth of my chores in exchange for that tape).

My mother has since softened in her stance and has even been known to utter the occasional “asshole” to someone who cuts her off on the highway or in a parking lot. Logically too, in her attempts to constantly throw me off base with her new music knowledge she must have to put up with a little swearing.
But it wasn’t always that way. When I was young the result of this anti-swearing campaign resulted in some serious music hiding. I can remember not playing my Guns and Roses tapes (along with the most of my other metal albums) except in my headphones or car. Other notables on the self censored list that I can remember off the top of my head were: Dookie, Jagged Little Pill (for the lyric “Are you thinking of me when you fuck her?” Scandalous!) and eventually Dude Ranch.

This CD showed up in my grade ten year when everyone who was anyone was doing a slow shift out of the mainstream, or at least making the appearance of shifting out of the mainstream. And what better way to shift away from popular culture than to embrace obnoxious music? Suddenly our school was ablaze with punk music. Don’t get me wrong: the cool kids, they still loved their Top Forty which was the base of their musical taste, but everyone seemed to have a need, nay a burning desire, to show how individual and rebel they were by listening to punk as a collective group. I, of course got sucked in, buying the first three Punk-o-rama CDs, as well as trading for Punk in Drublic by NoFx (an album I traded straight up for Much Dance 95).

So I bought Dude Ranch after hearing it in Wayne Webber’s truck constantly. Wayne was the resident rich kid who owned a pool, billiards table, laser tag, a truck of his own, a ‘55 Mercury and basically anything you could even think of that was awesome. Also we were in the truck one time with Naomi Peters, a girl that combined obscene cuteness with the rumors of being “rough on the couch,” and I heard her say that the CD was “sooooo fucking sweet.” That really clinched the deal.

I shudder to think what my Grandma would have thought of this album if she reacted the way she did to Guns and Roses (she probably would have cut off my hands or
something). Most of the album can only be described as sophomoric, particularly the
skits that litter the CD, but goddam it I was sophomoric and the CD fit perfectly within
the brief moment of listening. I even remember relating very strongly to a lot of the
lyrics, especially the ones about being a sort of misfit with the ladies (after all, it starts
with "I know I'm pathetic/ I knew when she said it/ a loser a bum what she called me")
 Mostly the album was a solid mix of potty humor, loneliness and catchy relatively simple
music.

But I couldn’t play it on my stereo. Ever. I would have to hide the thing next to
the Colt cigars I occasionally smoked (the height of gangsta). Dude Ranch was kept far
away from the prying eyes of my parents. And I never got caught, although I did come
close once. My parents were supposed to be out at my brother’s hockey practice but
ended up coming home early. I, thinking I had the house to myself for a couple hours,
blasted Dude Ranch up loud, so deafening in fact that I didn’t hear the car pull into the
driveway. It was only by pure luck that I looked out the kitchen window in time to see
my parents closing the door and my brother reaching for his hockey equipment. I dove
across the kitchen into the living room (the lyric playing: “shit dad/ please don’t kick my
ass/ I know I’ve seen you trashed at least one time”), rolling in a tight ninja ball to the
 stereo where, in one motion, I popped the CD player open (the old Sanyo top loading
single disc player) and tossed the CD out. My parents opened the door at that instant, my
mom rushing upstairs.

Mom: Did I hear music? I thought I heard swearing? Was it the new Foxy Brown
single? Why do you look so guilty?
Me: No. Actually, I was just listening to DC Talk. They are a Christian rock band.
Mom: Why? No don’t answer. Don’t lie. What’s that behind your back?
Me: Oh this? My friend gave it to me. I haven’t listened to it yet. It’s Blink 182.
Mom: (eyeing my suspiciously) I heard that CD. I know what’s on it. You better not let me hear that. Give it back to your friend. Don’t think I don’t know what’s going on.

Dad: (To Mom) Did you pay the phone bill?

Me: (slipping away) Well, see you later!

Joel: Why was hockey practice canceled? That makes me so angry!

And then I slowly grew out of the CD along with the whole faux punk scene. I tend to enjoy music in cycles where I’ll be really into a genre of music (i.e. punk) and I’ll swallow everything that has to do with it, then get tired and move to the next genre and so on, until a year or so later I’ll return again and start the whole situation again. Sophomore punk has been like that but Dude Ranch has always been constant; no matter where I’ve been in my life I always enjoyed this CD, an album I always return to when I’m in a silly mood, an album that follows me wherever I move.

Garth Brooks, The Hits:

Like Dude Ranch, this is one of the first albums that come with me wherever I end up. The Hits was a necessity on our Sunday car trips and has come with me each and every time I’ve moved. When I talked about this album previously I forgot to mention how much I like to shy away from greatest hits collections. Like any canon of a work/artist, the songs chosen for greatest hits tend to be driven not by emotional involvement from the singer or the audience but instead by commercial impact (i.e. a collection of singles). Therefore I try not to buy greatest hits albums unless I own at least three of the artist’s non-collected CDs so that I can understand their music away from the marketing machine. However, sometimes greatest hits provide a ready-made mixtape that allows the best songs to be accessible in one place (examples being Bob Dylan’s first greatest hits or even the Stones’s greatest). I will say though that I’m more a fan of self-created greatest hits albums; for example, my friend Lindsay made me a greatest hits of
Depeche Mode, one of her favorite artists, that is infinitely better than any prepackaged compilation. CDs constructed like that always have a soft spot in my heart because they are connected not by mass recognizability but by personal contact; the songs chosen are what an individual recognizes as the most important tracks of an artist. That level of importance usually doesn’t correlate to rehashing singles.

Naturally, then I have some minor quibbles with *The Hits*. I wouldn’t have “If Tomorrow Never Comes” or “What She’s Doing Now” on the album and would replace them with “The Red Strokes” (which makes a lot of sense actually considering it was a pretty popular single) and “The Cowboy Song” both of which are off of *No Pieces*, an album that could just as easily be the topic of this conversation as far as my personal canon goes.

As it is, *The Hits* spans the complete spectrum of emotion. There is a song for every type of mood I’ve ever been in: there are upbeat sing-along type songs to keep the CD going: “Ain’t Going Down (till the Sun Comes up)” and “American Honky-Tonk Bar Association” for instance. Still the CD does a good job of balancing those with the ballad-esque, more sensitive slower tunes, such as “Unanswered Prayers” and “The Dance” (severely underrated song in my mind). Pacing: that’s what the record is all about; at no point does it lag or jet ahead. It is wonderfully sturdy.

As discussed before the album also houses “Shameless,” a Billy Joel cover, that has become my favorite Garth Brooks song (mainly because of how desperate it sounds. Not desperate in a needy sort of way but frantic in a romantic sort of yearning way. I think that song pretty much sums me up).
I am listening to *The Hits* as I write here (Joel in the background trying on his new snowboard boots and my mom trying to goad my dad into dancing to some Christmas carols with her) and I'm convinced that every writer should give country music the chance it deserves. There is such a unique storytelling quality that comes out of country music. A lot of songs ("That Summer" and "Friends in Low Places" are like tightly wound short stories, accentuated by the aural. The most obvious example of this on the album is "The Thunder Rolls." The song begins with a slow picking of an acoustic guitar and the spattering of storm noises (thunder and raindrops) that continue through the song. Garth's quiet voice weaves the narrative of a man returning home from his mistress and his wife waiting for him to arrive, the impatience and worry accented by long bending guitar chords. The song captures the desperation of the wife waiting, apprehension about an accident. It is in the climax where she smells the mistress's perfume that the betrayal strikes and the humanity of the character strikes (in the extended version, the last verse has the wife talking a gun and shooting the cheating man which is doubly as dramatic). The story being told is heightened and controlled even tighter than any writer can hope to do on paper alone; the aural element of the song lends it a dimension beyond the mere story, an almost interactive element, and why wouldn't a writer be interested in that? Plus, country music is generally stories that the majority of people can relate to; as a writer or an artist of any point, there is great value in stories that are translated and understood by a lot of people.

The other part of the album that draws me to it is the recognizable landscape. When Brooks sings "every time I pass a wheat field/ and watch it dancing with the wind," I think of the corn fields that sit on either side of the highway drive into Vernon.
When he talks about the small town scandal (the hotel, the truck, the kids) in “Papa Loves Momma” I think of all the gossip that has filtered through Lumby and Vernon. The football game in “Unanswered Prayers,” the highway and truck stop in “Callin’ Baton Rouge,” the bar of “Friends in Low Places,” all of these elements are the physical essentials of my home. The real reason I haul this CD whenever I go, back and forth and finally with me on my return to here in Lavington, writing away at my laptop, is because it is a sure fire homesickness cure; I can put the album on and feel like I’m back nestled in a sleepy little valley, rocking myself to sleep on a hammock.
weight of (return)

a semi familiar rush of my stomach into
my throat as the plane touches down
skidding wheels my fingers deep into

my landscape has it been so long that
I forgot that it smelled like small scenes
long lake water brown edges wood chips
vaguely but mostly rain clouds in the distance

walking down the runway my knapsack
pulling on my shoulders heavy solid

thirteen: how Bon Jovi saved the world from an interstellar invasion: a true story

Probably the largest reason that I became an English major was because my parents put a book in my hands every chance they got. In my young childhood I spent a lot of time on the front lawn on an afghan my mom claimed she had knit when she was twenty with my walkman, devouring novels from the local library. When I wasn’t reading I was playing baseball or road hockey with my brother or shooting basketball with Darren on my rickety hoop. I grew up largely without movies and television. Before I turned 12 I can remember seeing a grand total of three movies in the theatre (Jurassic Park, Ace Ventura 2 and Home Alone 2) and renting about a half dozen others: The Bodyguard and Turtles in Time probably five times I have no real clue why we loved it so much; it is largely atrocious but I really loved Ninja Turtles when I was young. They were semi-witty and fought bad guys and hung out with the hottest chick to ever wear a yellow jump suit. My brother and I couldn’t get enough of that movie. Seriously.

Anyway, I can’t remember exactly when we got cable. I don’t remember watching much TV aside from hockey games or Ghostbusters and Batman cartoons. Maybe this can be attributed to the fact that we only had one TV and my mom was always watching Oprah or her soaps while she buzzed around doing housework, but I was much more content to be outside and away from those crazy moving pictures.

This has lead to a lot of semi-awkward conversations in college and university. When people don’t know people they often go to the common denominator for normal kids growing up: mass media, more specifically, TV shows or movies. So I would be in a large group sitting around, or worse yet, talking one-on-one with someone, and we would
be discussing movie after movie I of course hadn’t seen (to this day I’ve never seen *Scarface*. I still haven’t seen the third *Godfather*. I have, however, watched *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* for every time I’ve read the book which numbers around a half dozen times). I would sit silently, staring into my drink, waiting until a movie came up that I had read the book adaptation of so I could join in the conversation. The worst was when someone would actually direct a question at me like “Yeah, wasn’t that part funny?” and I would have to answer I had never seen the movie, only to suffer for a good ten seconds of utter open-mouthed silence, then five minutes or so of “Oh you should see it, it is the [funniest/saddest/awesomest] thing you’ll ever see.” Actually, what was even worse was when someone would quote a line from a movie and everybody would laugh and I would sit there like a perfect twit smiling like I knew what was going on.

(I want to go back to something I said earlier when I talked about the Graduation song and how pop music becomes sort of like Hallmark cards to the point where my generation can simply quote a lyric instead of making our own sentimentality. Well, the institution of humor suffers from much the same problems. I’ve noticed that almost every person my age relies on TV shows and movies to create laughter; very rarely is a snappy comment anything but an exact quote from a movie or sitcom. Is my generation incapable of creating our own humor? Is manufactured wit that much better? Or is it just easier? Next time someone tries using a movie quote as a punchline don’t laugh. Let’s curb this problem together.)

It’s almost noon and I’m actually in the kitchen at our large wooden kitchen table typing on my laptop today, not in the converted computer room (a place I’m becoming partial to because of the view of the garden and shed in the backyard). I have to work in a
couple of hours and while my mom watches Regis and Kelly and my brother sleeps late, I prefer to sit here and listen to music (right now it’s Broken Social Scene’s *You Forgot it in People*) and peck away at the keys. My mom, who loves to watch TV, especially bad reality shows, made a New Year’s Resolution to actually watch less TV (I would say she averages at least three or four hours a day); so far she’s not really sticking to it.

Which sort of links into my New Year’s celebrations: I ended up at a party of a guy I knew in elementary school but I hadn’t talked to until three weeks ago when I ran into him in the mall. The party was large for Vernon standards, maybe 70 people, and a good chunk of the people I went to high school with were there. I ambled through the same aimless chatter that I always do when I see the same people I only see once a year, the “Whatcha doing now?”s and the “What are you going to do now?”s and the what not. There was also a lot of talk about Brodie, who couldn’t make it to the party because he had to go down to Vancouver for treatment.

However, there was a girl off to the side with a group of people I didn’t recognize and she was laughing and carrying on, entertaining. And she was gorgeous. I timed my next trip into the kitchen to match hers and we struck up a conversation. She was a short girl, wide hipped and brown eyed with shortish dark hair, streaked maroon. Her name is Brooklyn. The most striking feature of hers is probably her teeth, which sounds kinda weird. I don’t have a tooth fetish or anything but her teeth are perfectly straight and her smile showed them off all over. So we talked and not once did she ask about TV shows or movies or anything of the sort. We talked about Vernon a little and books and skiing then later about families and so on and so on. It turned out that she has largely the same (non) experiences with TV and movies that I had; when I mentioned I really only watch
TV for music videos she squealed excitedly and grabbed my arm. I had to explain some things to her though: I did not seek out the music video; the music video sought me. The first video I saw was by complete accident. The cartoon I wanted to watch was interrupted by some sort of news bulletin so I was aimlessly flicking channels while I decided what to do when I came across music. But this was not just music but music being sung by a face right in front of me. A female face, shot in black and white (or was it brown and white?), just her and a chair in a room wailing her desperately pained heart out. Who was this goddess you’re asking? Sheryl Crow. And the song was “Strong Enough” and the video started me on a long path of addiction. If fact it was that video that lead me to buy the second CD I ever owned: Crow’s *Tuesday Night Music Club*.

In elementary school no one paid much attention to music videos and that was probably why I had missed out on the medium for so long; I’m sure if people were discussing the new Nirvana video I would have hunted down MuchMusic much earlier. (Interestingly enough, the popularity of Nirvana at our school was very limited; pop like the aforementioned Boyz II Men was what everyone listened to. The only reason I knew of Nirvana was because Mike McMillian had their tape and left it at my house one day. But even with that kind of Fate involved I really didn’t appreciate Nirvana, despite the badassedness I intuited, until I hit high school. Of course by then the grunge scene had run its course and was replaced by Hanson and The Moffats and *Nevermind* and *In Utero* seemed times too far back).

YTV, the Canadian kids/young adult channel, showed the HitList every week with Tarzan Dan (of *Hitlist* Fame in the first installment of my personal Canon), and every once and a while I would run into it by accident and they would be playing a Take
That song or something I would wrinkle my nose in disgust and briskly change the channel. Even when I got the infamous *HitList* tap for Christmas one year, a tape I absolutely adored, I never watched the weekly countdown. I was an active kid and I didn’t really like to it in front of the TV; I was more (unconsciously I guess) concerned with playing music in my own environment, say my backyard or bedroom playing on my mini basketball hoop.

What determined what was popular in Vernon and the surrounding area was almost always the two radio stations in Vernon: 94 CJIB and 105 CICF. They ran a weekly countdown show that showcased “The Top Forty songs in the valley!” and all the popular kids would listen intently to the top 5 and buy the corresponding cassette tapes. I myself was never a big radio listener. In fact the only time I really ever listened to it was when I was in the car. I got my music from other people: basically I would raid my Dad’s cassette and records first, then bug Darren for music in combination with chatting up the cool kids to see what exactly they were listening to so I could buy one of the cassettes every once and a while. I could never afford to buy cassettes when they were popular and lacked the general foresight to predict future hits so I always ended up buying bands like Chumbawumba and Joe about a month after they’ve peaked popularity wise. I eventually got smart and just bought compilation tapes like *The Hit List* and *Much Dance*. If I was going to own unpopular music I wanted a bundle of unpopular singles rather than two unpopular singles and a selection of side B filler.

I distinctly remember in grade 3 Kim and Jen Black in the corner of Mr. Goodliff’s class on recess with Trevor, Braden and assorted other cool kids listening to Marky Mark’s “Good Vibrations” repeatedly on the ghetto blaster. At this point in time
Marky Mark was at the top of the CJIB Top Forty Charts. I don’t know what is funnier: a) the only time the group stopped listening to “Good Vibrations” was to listen to “Lollipop Lollipop” b) his band/posse was called The Funky Bunch. Was The Groovy Group taken? Or c) the kids that listened to Marky Mark’s “Good Vibrations” treated him like he was such a badass because he didn’t wear a shirt on his cassette tape libretto and said “hell” and wore gigantic gold chains. They sang along like it was some gangsta Kumbaya. But would a badass allow “drug free so put the crack up/no need for speed/I’m the anti D-R-U-G-G-I-E” to be “rapped”/sung anywhere on his/her song? I bet Axl Rose bought a thousand Marky Mark tapes and threw them into a big pit and lit them on fire while he shot up some heroin just on principle alone. As a side note if you have to tell people you’re not a sell out (which Marky Mark does in verse 3) then there is a 99% chance you are. The group continued like this until “I’m Too Sexy” burst on the scene and took the place of The Funky Bunch.

I told Brooklyn all this, New Year’s Party swirling about us, stranger’s bodies stumbling over each other and bumping into walls and door frames, laughter and chatter, and she alternated between with her own stories. We started to build some sort of momentum towards the door, perhaps drink fueled for some sort of walk. We continued talking as such as we stumbled down the street. The song that I was humming was “Mr Tambourine Man” and for continuity’s sake I’m playing that very song right now (off Dylan’s live album). And I continued telling her my stories.

When I found that Sheryl Crow video in grade 7 something switched in my head. I stopped listening to the little radio and started watching MuchMusic on a borderline obsessive level. Pop music up to that point had been strictly aural to me; it was something
I only listened to, albeit with great passion, but only using one of my senses. “Strong Enough” awakened me to the power of the image. Suddenly I could see the music manifested in front of me in a completely different set of language: pictures. I think what made that click in my head that a music video was something to behold was that the music (theoretically) was the focus instead of the image; the visuals were simply a vehicle for the music. The video then was another clue to what the song really meant. A naive and idealistic notion, I know; as most music videos are made mainly as promotional devices, not as artistic explorations of the music that attempt to meld physical detail and meaning, but I was young and impressionable. There are worse things to be, like person who has to lie to Ace of Base everyday and say they made some tip top songs once upon a time.

I also began realizing that certain music made you uncool and overcompensated and in turn made my listening more private. Instead of playing my music loudly out of the playhouse in my backyard, I watched and listened to music on the more private and contrived environment of TV. At least then I could blame the TV for playing something crappy, I mean it wasn’t my choice to see Seal it was just on TV and there was nothing I could do about it. Gone were the days when I could ignore the HitList and just listen to music in my own world; I had been sucked into the (overtly) contrived world of the music video.

And so the Top Forty Radio hits changed to the Top Thirty Videos. Every Friday at 6 o clock I would tune it to watch the MuchMusic countdown to see the hottest new videos and songs coming out (sometimes I would even watch at 9 o clock on Saturday morning if there was a particular video I really liked; TLC’s Waterfalls is the example I
I think of off the top of my head. I had a huge crush on Left Eye Lopez. I guess my early obsession with music videos wasn’t as pure as I’d like to think it was; I was trying to see what was popular (or what I could bet was going to be popular).

But I will say this about music videos: they gave me a good chunk of my taste between grade 9 and grade 10. In fact I would say in that two years I based my musical judgment almost strictly on what was popular on the top Thirty. But this time I had a job in the summer picking cucumbers which gave me a little cash flow throughout the year, augmented by an allowance of ten dollars a week. With this semi-abundance of money I bought the first Usher CD, along with the first Ben Folds album, Monica, Deborah Cox to name a few others, based solely on their performance on the MuchMusic charts. I can remember Stefan actually predicting two weeks in advance what CDs I would own just by looking at the countdown.

In my mind there are really 6 types of music videos; keep in mind too that a video rarely uses just one of these types, but often combines two or three of the genres. There is the standard band playing somewhere video: always classy, always a hit, but you need a front man with great energy to pull it off (“Walk Idiot Walk” by the Hives being a great example). There’s the fantasy video: lost of stupendous looking girls/guys, money, cars, drinking, dancing all sexy like. Most pop-rap videos fall into this category. The bad: “Tipsy” by J-Kwon; the good: Usher’s “Yeah.” There’s the artsy-makes-no-sense video, where the director or the band has been given WAY too much lead way and turn out a wholly ambiguous video full of images of breaking TVs and gypsies running 10K marathons. Fourth is the shock value video, where everything is really grotesque and ultra vivid. Marilyn Manson does this video really well but most bands that use this type
of video use it more for publicity's sake (read: their music sucks and they need to alarm people to get them to pay attention).

The fifth type: the overtly manufactured/commercial for the egos video, a cousin of the shock value, in that the artist isn’t very good so the director makes them as pretty as possible (both guys and girls) in hopes that the good looks of and the image manufactured for the artist will mask the crappy music. Also included in this category is the video from a soundtrack that splices movie clips. Basically the overtly manufactured video tries to do anything and everything possible to distract the viewer from the actual music. These videos all tend to look vaguely similar no matter who the artist is: guys in white suits/girls in tank tops and low jeans at a carnival/beach/pool flirting with some person of the opposite sex (see Jessica Simpson’s whole catalogue of videos).

Lastly, and my favorite, is the plot-driven music video.

I guess it is my love for all things storytelling that really makes me love the narrative video. Basically, the music tries to intertwine with some sort of visual story, and generally cuts in ever so often with shots of the band doing band things (i.e. playing music). The height of this genre might be the Guns and Roses experiment with the video trilogy, i.e. one story across three videos. Chuck Klosterman does an excellent exploration of the G and R video trilogy in *Fargo Rock City* and so I don’t want to go any further. The thing about this genre of video that interests me so much is that the lyrics often substitute for dialogue or description of the visual scene; music videos offer a unique simultaneity of story telling. The best example of this is Eminem’s video for “Stan.” The song itself is a story, through the writing of letters, of an obsessed fan’s unraveling into a psychotic episode that ends up with him driving his car and his pregnant
wife off a bridge. The video basically takes the same narrative arc of the single and adds a visual character (Devon Sawa) for Stan, who accentuates the character from the song by adding scenes in the video where he dyes his hair like Eminem, hangs countless pictures of him, literalizes all his lyrics. The video fills in the gaps of the song’s story (i.e. why the letters weren’t delivered until after Stan’s death and what happened at the event where Eminem supposedly ignores Stan and his brother). The video becomes a sort of visual aid to the song, meshing seamlessly into one unit.

And I really really love the music videos with stories, especially when the video collapses into some bizarre and unrelated storylines, like Bon Jovi’s “This Ain’t a Love Song” for instance.

I really didn’t like Bon Jovi when the single was released nor do I now, although I guess they might have their time and place, like with a gathering of close drunk friends or a “bands everybody loves to hate” party. For the record I think it is hilarious that they titled their Greatest Hits box set “100,000,000 Bon Jovi Fans Can’t Be Wrong.” because 1) I can’t even find half a dozen people who admit to being a Bon Jovi fan and 2) it is the same logic of Marky Mark telling people he’s a badass: if you gotta let people know you’re popular, you’re not popular. However, I ended up watching the music video for “This Ain’t a Love Song” a fair bit because my brother of all people liked the song.

As I’ve said before my brother liked his angry loud music. But he always had the video’s protagonist. Like he’s twenty and she’s 10) and a teenage girl involved in at these bizarre exceptions, tapes he would buy without any obvious (at least to me) rhyme or reason. Through the years he bought Rage against the Machine, Limp Bizkit, Godsmack and Korn albums but he balanced these out by buying the Aqua album with...
“Barbie girl” on it. Aqua is unequivocally the easiest punchline/funniest verb in music history. Sample:

Person A: Billy broke his leg today, doesn’t that suck?
Person B: Yeah that’s really Aqua. A really shitty deal.

Perhaps I should cut Joel some slack for being almost two years younger than me and not having enough time to properly cultivate my fine tastes in music but he owned The Lion King’s soundtrack and the first Jewel album. It seemed every once and a while my brother would break out of his rage and randomly point his finger at the first artist/song he saw. “This Ain’t a Love Song” was one of those songs. He went so far as to time the MuchMusic Countdown (a trick I taught him) so that he could watch it at least twice a week.

(I really hope Joel wakes up soon so I can remind him of the song. This peaceful Lavington morning will ring with my piercing vocals miming Bon Jovi.)

From what I remember it stayed on the MuchMusic charts over 20 weeks, an unheard of shelf life for a music video (usually videos peaked in 8 and were gone in 12). I’ve downloaded the video to make sure it makes as little sense now as it did then and I was correct. It was just an old guy running around in a foreign country (I assume Vietnam) spliced with shots of presumably the same guy only much younger in the battlefield as a photographer. Somehow there’s a young girl (considerably younger than the video’s protagonist. Like he’s twenty and she’s 10) and a teenage girl involved at the end (maybe she’s grown up at the end, but she’s still really young but then there’s an older woman who seems more the guy’s age) and then he gets beat up as an old man again. I surmised from this that the young girl was a time traveling alien and Bon Jovi was trying to make a subtle comment on the dangers of interstellar relationships and
pedophilia. I didn’t really like the song but I did like to watch my brother watching it, especially when I could put my thoughts in.

**Me:** *(watching carefully for thrown objects)* This video doesn’t make sense. Who is this guy? Why is he hitting on a ten year old?

**Joel:** Quiet I’m trying to listen.

**Me:** But the song has nothing to do with a war, let alone the Vietnam war. I wouldn’t have a problem if the story had a love story. That would match the song at least. But this one is so convoluted I want to arrest the guy. Bloody pervert.

**Joel:** Fucking be quiet!

**Me:** And I mean when they cut to shots of the band only the singer and the guitarist are doing anything. The bass and drummer are sitting there with their thumbs up their asses. And what the fuck are they doing in a bunch of ancient ruins? This makes no sense.

**Joel:** Then why do you watch it every fucking week? You just say the same fucking thing over and over. Fuck! *(Rage spills over and I run from the room)*.

Looking back, perhaps it wasn’t that Joel was angry all the time, but that he was just angry at me for being kind of a dick. Anyway, it’s not like my taste in music videos is completely infallible. I tell everybody my favorite video of all time is probably the Smashing Pumpkins “1979” *(a distorted wobbly camera youthful trashing of a convenience store by frontman Billy Corgan. The video reminds me of doing dumb things for no reason other than we could. I also really like Guns and Roses “November Rain,” a classic right down to the massive Slash solo behind the church. Another one of the story videos that don’t quite make sense.)*

In actuality my favorite video is Lionel Ritchie’s “Hello.” The video has everything: an awesome storyline, a Peja Stokavic look-alike *(the guy playing Billy Bob at the beginning),* a blind girl, step aerobics/ballet class, an overemphatic Ritchie singing “Hello” like he’s having an aneurism and enough unintentional comedy to fill a dozen high school gyms. The basic storyline: Ritchie, a teacher at a school of some sort, is romantically pursuing a blind girl *(a student no less).* My favorite moment is where
Ritchie calls the girl on the phone, says “Hello” in neck popping fashion, then proceeds to sing directly to the camera, forgetting completely the girl on the other end. And of course, nothing can top the end, where a student tells Ritchie to rush to the art class where the blind girl has made a clay bust of Ritchie that looks nothing like him. Also, added humor points because “Hello” was my parents’ wedding song.

Joel finally woke up and groggily stumbled into the kitchen to get some food, dodging me typing at the table in our small kitchen (quite a conundrum considering his body must be telling him it’s breakfast but in actuality it’s almost 1 PM. Is it lunch? Is it breakfast?). I started humming the chorus from “This Ain’t A Love Song” and he gave me the finger and walked into the bathroom. I guess I deserved that.

When I admitted my love for the “Hello” video Brooklyn almost fell into the ditch laughing; the only thing that saved her was that her arm was linked through mine. The night carried on and then we walked back to the house where the party was. She was staying the night and I was walking home so we went our separate ways but not before she offered me her phone number. I know for a fact that the number works because I called her yesterday and we have a date to eat at the Italian Kitchen downtown. Perhaps I can clear up some of the things I said to her (perhaps “justify” is a better word. Some shameful confessions from my end).

What has the music video given me then? I would answer: a bonding experience with my brother, a fine grounding in popular music and a healthy appreciation for my headphones. The music video (a term I use to include the song and the images) is entertainment; it is an art form that demands to be swallowed by the millions. They are designed to mean the same thing to everyone in that they can only be appreciated in one
place in one environment: watching TV. The contrived environment that the video means
does not give much leeway for subjective meaning making. For the music video to be
effective it must dominate the landscape around it so that the viewer/listener is within the
world of the video and his/her own reality fades away. Why music on its own is such a
large part of experiences (well, mine anyways) is because it doesn’t necessarily dominate
but accentuates and intrudes upon the listener’s landscape, working in tandem with
everything around it instead of overpowering it.

Even now, as I type this, looking out over my backyard littered with crunchy
snow and birdseed, headphones attached to my laptop, listening to The Times They Are A
Changin’ this moment will always be tethered to this song; the music has morphed into
specific memories: me, looking at the cow fields behind my house and the garden, lumpy
under the snow. No TV or book can induce that.

And I know tonight I’ll take my walkman and climb the gravel pit, sit at the top of
one of the mounds and listen to the same CD and, looking at the fields divided by roads
and fences, houselights blinking on as the night pushes in, and think I love this place, this
right now, this here. But Mr. Zimmerman is a smart man: the times they are a changin’.
This landscape can only contain me so long, with its tree-lined valley mountains and
narrow creeks. This is home, it always will be but I don’t think I need home right now. I
mean I always have my CDs if I get homesick. I feel that restless step and I feel like
finally I know where to put my first foot.
swallowing and then

I’ve watched enough movies to
know a cliché when I’m in one
warm warm small mouth closing
over my surprised my tongue lips
eyes still open raindrops funneling down
the back of my neck spattering the
road around us not a single headlight
to worry us wiping soaked hair
from your forehead waiting

Travis Tritt “Best of Intentions” August 9 2003: 21.
I never really wanted to be in a band. I told Danton and Nic that right when I met them so they weren’t confused. Truthfully, I did, on occasion, want to play guitar and sing, like a young Bob Dylan, and set my poetry to music (lately I’ve even been writing some song lyrics). However, there was a time when I thought maybe a duo act would be a decent idea. I have persuasive friends. Like Darren for instance.

Strange journeys typing here in Lavington on a sunny winter day; I never quite know where I’m going once I start. Despite telling random stories about him here, I haven’t talked to Darren in years. Actually it was my mom who mentioned him to me yesterday and I guess that’s why he’s in my head. Last I heard he was in Castlegar doing his millworker apprenticeship. I only think about him now because he was a constant topic of conversation with Brooklyn last night on our date (a date my mother demanded to know everything about. Thank god she’s in Vernon shopping or I’d be forced to give her an Alabama album to subdue and distract her).

For some reason I felt the need to tell Brooklyn almost all my childhood stories, most of which involve Darren. Our date actually went fairly well, with us exchanging stories and ideas on such wonderful topics as: Franz Ferdinand (both the band and the archduke), silent movies, siblings and cross-dressing (a surprisingly plentiful area of conversation), gravel pits and the merits of comic books. She really is wonderful and I enjoy her a lot. She has this way of watching her hands as she speaks then catching your eyes when you’re least expecting it. It’s fantastic. And apparently she doesn’t mind guys with toothpick-like arms or undecided fashion senses.
Unfortunately I won’t be seeing her for a few days being that we both have to work the next few nights, her at the coffee shop downtown and me at the grocery store (I will say this though: the late shift allows a lot of time to play a game I call “What can I juggle?” It’s fairly self explanatory. Amazingly enough, a can of tomatoes, a chocolate bar and a box cutter are not an easy combination to juggle. Moving on). But the evening and the date got me thinking about where Darren actually went, and then for some reason another girl who in no way is really related to Brooklyn or Darren.

Darren and I used to collaborate on a lot of different things when we were younger. We worked well together; I was the semi-anal retentive one who liked to plan and over-think and he was a little more reckless and adaptive, apt to running his hands crazily through his brown-red hair and flashing his blue eyes on everything. But we were both wildly imaginative. We would play basketball and make up twisting fancy dribbles and lay-ups and name them supremely crappy/cool anthropomorphic names like “The Monkey” (a back to the basket flip shot over the shoulder punctuated by a pseudo summersault after you’ve released the shot) or “The Panther” (a sort of spinning between the legs dribble that would theoretically leave the defender flailing and whimpering on the ground). We would do large scale drawings of cities and buildings, often with various traps and safety precautions to keep our super castle thing from being invaded by evil ninjas. We even wrote stories together, usually with each of us writing a page then switching to the other, a technique that culminated in a ghost story about a grandfather clock, which every night at the strike of twelve would release a very destructive and psychotic ghost that preyed on small children and household pets.
In the midst of our mutual adoration for ACDC and Guns and Roses we decided to start a band. Except it wasn’t a band really but two guys playing guitars. Neither of us had any clue how to play but I had my mother’s battered and beaten acoustic guitar (which a large chip in the corner my mother refused to discuss until that Christmas holiday) and Darren found his dad’s in the garage, nestled beside the winter tires. So we brought the guitars together, laid them beside us, and decided what our band name was. Sadly my personal favorite, Everything But the Nipple, was rejected (as was Rocket to Rock). But we did settle wisely on Tempted to Kick Your Ass. So we laid our guitars to the side and decided what songs to play. Naturally we would be a cover band because we didn’t know how to write music. We would play “Long Way to the Top” and “Shout at the Devil,” probably “Paradise City.” Darren even agreed to play a Garth Brooks song, though we never decided on which, as a way of throwing the audience off.

Sadly, we never picked up the guitars and actually learned how to play. Though, I did learn one valuable thing from the whole experience: covering songs is essential to being a musician. By covering a song a band is showing its tastes and paying homage to an artist they respect and enjoy. And, obviously, very few people can simply pick up an instrument and write music of their own to play; every person who plays an instrument played other’s people’s music first. That’s how you learn. Covering songs is part of the musical artistic process, like a writer imitating his/her favorite author’s voice or sense of humor.

Most of my hipster friends hate the cover song based on principle alone. Their argument against covering songs is that the bands are only doing it for commercial reasons and are too unoriginal or lack the necessary musical talent to actually write a
song of their own. And in some cases I would agree. There have been a number of very unnecessary covers of songs. Unless it is one of those bitingly sarcastic covers of a pop song, then, and only then, it is ironic enough to enjoy.

(While we’re on the topic, my top three unneeded cover songs are (in no real order of hatred): Hilary Duff and her coattail-riding sister’s, “Our Lips are Sealed.” A sugary car wreck that no one should ever care about. Ever. Ignore it. In fact, I just wiped it from my memory. Secondly, “The Boys Of Summer” by the Ataris. The only way someone should be allowed to cover a Don Henley song is if they are making an album titled Artists Who Were Way Better in Their Band Before Going Solo (and if that’s the case they may want to consider playing Bobby Brown and Phil Collins songs as well). Lastly, Jessica Simpson’s completely inexcusable and intolerable cover of “Take My Breath Away,” mainly because I once made out to the original song on my bed in the basement with a girl named Shelly and that is a fond memory that doesn’t need to be soured. For the life of me I can’t remember how exactly the song actually got to playing given that it’s not something I would put on under my own uncorrupted power. Shelly probably switched it while I was struggling to unhook her bra or something. Anyway, the Berlin version is nice and soft and even loving, whereas Jessica Simpson uses her version to show how powerfully she can belt, completely zapping the song of any intimacy and turning it into a “look at me” song. Honorable mentions also include: any cover of “Big Yellow Taxi” (being that there are roughly two thousand different covers of the song already), Limp Bizkit’s “Behind Blue Eyes” and any attempt to cover “Imagine” (with the exception of Neil Young) or “Knocking on Heaven’s Door,” counting the G and R version, sadly, and especially including Avril Lavigne’s.)
Yet, there is something really quite special about a good cover of a song. Now, I can hear music purists shrieking that no cover will ever equal the original; the original versions of songs are sacred and should not be touched and that I should be drawn and quartered appropriately. There was a time when I would find myself making the same argument with books that are made into movies but I’ve softened in my old age now I guess. I won’t see a movie that was made from a book without making a good faith effort to read the book in conjunction with it. The same thinking applies to cover songs; I’ll listen to the original song next to the cover. I’m a firm believer of respecting the roots of artistic projects.

This opinion comes from the reasons I see for covering songs: first, as I said earlier, is to show respect for influential artists. Secondly, covering a song allows for a re-envisioning and updating. I despise covers that do the exact same thing with the song as the original, played with exactly the same instruments and timing and phrasing. The world does not need Xeroxes of songs. A good cover for me tries to take the original, keep enough of it to show it the respect it deserves, then put the new artist’s spin upon it. Most obviously, and I’m going to state this so there’s no confusion, covers should only happen if the initial version is actually enjoyable. This rules out all covers of “Are You Jimmy Ray” or any Venga Boys song.

When I was young and listening to music I couldn’t have cared less who wrote the song or where it came from; I was concerned with how much I liked the song and how uncool/cool it made me by liking said song. But as I grew older I began to get more and more interested in the history of pop music. I began to search out the originals to at least make some comparisons, mostly at the prodding of my father.
My dad and I were driving home from the grocery store one night (about a seven minute drive from our house to Lumby) and the Fugee’s version of “Killing Me Softly” came on the radio. My dad, who was in the middle of telling me about a new golf course in Enderby, stopped and stared at the radio, not touching the dial, driving while looking past his windshield beyond the highway.

Instead he started telling me a story about when he was 14:

“So I was walking down to the gas station to get myself a chocolate bar. Your grandmother, rest her soul, had given me the money and I loved chocolate. I was a fat little kid. Mainly because I’m the youngest son. Well, the only son. Anyway, so I’m in the store and this song comes on the radio. The original, of course. Roberta Flack. Little slower and a lot more piano. In walks this girl, Serena Frost, tall thing, big long legs, long blonde hair, right off of a poster. She was one of your aunt’s friends, so she was older than me, but only by a couple of years. She comes in and we start talking, just being friendly and she starts kinda flirting, or so I think, so I’m flirting back. I used my money to buy her a soda instead. She asked me what I thought of the song,” he pointed at the radio playing “Killing Me Softly” and continued “I thought it was kinda wussy but I told her I liked it because she seemed like she liked it. You remember grandma’s house?

Before she moved to the condo.”

I nodded yes. “There was that big field behind the house, couple acres and at the back was that tiny tree house. Well, that was my tree house. I used to go back there and the field would be mostly corn so I could sneak out there because the corn would hide me and I would sit and read or throw a football against the wall or whatever. Randy Zahara used to come over a lot. He lived down the street. Yeah. Well, me and Serena we snuck
back to the tree house thing, nothing major, just to talk. We figured we better sneak so that your aunt wouldn’t see us and come hang out. She was pretty clear she wanted to be just her and me, touching my arm and smiling that big smile she had. Nice lips, you should have seen. So we made out the whole day. Don’t make that funny face, your old man used to make out with lots of girls, and we made out you know I think she was the first girl I got to second base with. We’d do that pretty systematically, you know maybe once or twice a week, making out in this little tree-fort house thing after I bought her a soda. And everyday she’d be humming this song when she left, slow and sweet.”

His voice trailed off and he went back to looking beyond the highway again but when he got home he rushed to set the groceries in the kitchen, letting my mom know he would put them away in a second, then went to the large fake oak TV center where he kept his records and pulled out the Roberta Flack record, gently placed it in the player and guided the needle down.

The Fugees cover is probably one of my favorite cover of any song, mostly because of my father’s slightly misplaced love for it. It is the only cover of a song I’ve actually heard him say he enjoys (saying it reminds him of the old one). I enjoy it because it is quirky and unique the way it’s redone, faster, with a solid big bass line as its core instead of the piano. I guess it also reminds me where exactly I get my genes from.

And that’s something actually that Brooklyn explained to me last night which I hadn’t even considered until then: a cover song bridges the generations, brings the new listeners back to the music of the past, allowing exposure to artists that may have been forgotten or unappreciated by a modern audience, to be rediscovered and enjoyed. That’s why I think cover songs are particularly effective in live shows, because the energy is
there and the audience, more than anything, wants to hear songs they know the words to; if the casual fan hasn’t heard or isn’t overly familiar with the band, why not pick an old stalwart that everyone will know. The best shows I’ve ever seen always play at least one cover of something into the set, to get the audience involved.

So in honor of this chapter I found an old tape of my dad’s. It’s a great live performance of Otis Redding and the whole thing is cover songs. He does rapid tempo versions of “Satisfaction” and “Day Tripper.” He infuses the songs with a brand new energy and musicality. They are wonderful.

And I so I push forward without much of a segue in a roundabout way to karaoke and Portia. I know people who love it and swear it is most fun anyone can have ever. In fact some of those people are my friends. I, however, am not one of those in agreement. I came to the conclusion I couldn’t sing when I was about 6 in the car and I was trying to sing along to one of my dad’s tapes which means I was butchering the Ghostbusters theme or “Last Kiss.” My mother literally shrieked at me to stop. So I don’t do karaoke myself but I do go to karaoke bars because I like how much fun everyone seems to be having. Think about it: have you ever seen anyone miserable at karaoke? If you can’t enjoy some bearded stranger in a tight T shirt sing “Every Rose Has Its Thorn” you’re probably a robot.

Sometimes I do think about singing at karaoke (usually after five beer or so) and try and think about what song I would sing. It would have to be something I know all the words to and doesn’t require a lot of vocal range. It would also have to easily recognizable with the other patrons of the bar so that if need be they could sing along in order to drown out my voice if necessary. Therefore the only logical choice is (narrowly
narrowing out “Changes” by Bowie the OC Theme): “Strangers in the Night” by the immortal Frank Sinatra. Amazingly enough, although I really can’t sing (although I’ve been told I can hold a tune so I’m not tone deaf) I do an impressive lounge act. I’ve even perfected my lounge banter: “Don’t forget to tip your waitress,” “Drink specials on Friday,” “You can’t stay here people do find a lucky fella or gal” etc.

I almost did do karaoke once. It was my friend Julie’s birthday and she demanded that we go to the one karaoke bar in Victoria, Sopranos. Naturally we started at her house as a small crowd that snowballed as the night grew, gathering people and velocity as the hours grew later until we all caught the bus downtown and poured ourselves into the club with the benefit of three hours of pre-drinking. I shunned the song list and instead headed for the bar, securing a beer and a table with the crowd, who were all but slobbering. In a stunning turn of events even I would never have predicted, Julie kept enough of her wits about her to complete a rousing rendition of “You Were Meant for Me” by Jewel, an otherwise unredeemable song.

When we had settled I was shocked by a syrupy voice dripping from the speakers as a redhead cradled the microphone, swaying slightly with a drink in one hand, singing “Kissing You,” a meandering dragging song I had never heard of but later, in a mad rush of obsession, learned it was from the Romeo and Juliet soundtrack. Let it be said that I’ve always ALWAYS had a thing for girls with unique hair like braids and small pigtails and stuff like that, and red hair fits directly into that category, so Portia had that going for her right from the beginning. And she could fucking sing. By one quarter of the way through the song she had the whole bar captivated to the point where everyone forgot their drinks and conversations and simply listened.
Fueled by liquid confidence I approached her after the safe distance of a few songs so as not to seem like an overly creepy fan. She was surrounded by another large party which turned out to be her friend Melanie's birthday, who, in similar fashion to our own birthday girl, churned out a truly memorable performance of “Desperado.” She even tried to change the lyrics that made the speaker into a female. For example, she changed “don’t you draw the queen of diamonds” into “king of diamonds,” and so forth. Outstanding really.

As I walked over I saw a middle age man, sweating through his collared shirt and gesturing wildly with his hands, talking to Portia while she twirled her hair awkwardly around her finger, waiting for one of her friends to notice and rescue her. I got closer and heard the guy say, “That was the best thing I’ve ever seen. I’m an agent. Or I’m trying to be and I’m always looking for young women with talent to represent.”

He passed a business card across the table and I caught her eye and she smiled, relieved. She stood up suddenly and said, in her sweetest voice, “I already have representation. There he is.” She pointed to me, a drunk, young and artfully disheveled lad. I was wearing one of my favorite shirts, a Lavington Mini-Hoops shirt (which I got when I went to a basketball camp in grade 7 and finally does actually fit me) with faded jeans rolled up at the cuffs. She quickly slipped beside me and kissed me on the cheek and introduced me to the guy, who was looking skeptically at me. In the background a roundish blond woman sang “Blackbird” slightly off key.

“This is Mr. Janetston. He’s a local agent. He books events really well and knows the street and what everybody is buzzing about. I’ve been with him for a little under a year now.” She explained handing the card back to him.
"Howdy," I said to him, then bravely, "She's mine. Don't bother. I own this city."

Then I took a long drink and he left. She inspected my face curiously. I introduced myself and explained why I was there. I insisted she sung "real good," before I told her in some blatheringly charming way she was pretty and asked whether I could buy her a drink. She laughed, told me her name was Portia, asked for a Baileys while still eyeing me with a bemused look. When I returned triumphantly she invited me over to sit with her, introducing her whole group of friends. Directly in my eyesight and on stage were two girls that I had come with and they were singing a duet to each other in overly dramatic fashion, hugging and falling over themselves. I believe the song was "I Got You Babe." I think one of the girls had somehow fashioned a really bad moustache out of paper towel to fully immerse herself in the role of Sonny.

It turns out Portia and most of her friends were voice majors at the University. She really enjoyed Broadway shows and some opera and barely any pop or rock music. She painted sometimes, didn't have time to work, had a sister and two sets of parents (one set in Victoria who she lived with and another in Saskatchewan). She liked the color green and disliked onions.

We talked for a while but the bar was too loud so I asked her if she wanted to go for a walk down by the harbor. I had cut myself off at the bar so I was feeling slightly better, confident in my ability to create conversation in a semi-romantic setting. When she agreed I hurried over to my table and told them the story, introducing her, and said, with much hope in my voice, that I'd be back at home later.

Well, I was home later the next morning. We ended up walking around the L shaped harbor in between the streetlight shadows of docked boats. We mostly talked at
the start. As a voice major she had a very high standard when it came to vocal performance. Somehow I managed to get over the fact that she detested both Matt Good and Bob Dylan (in her words Matt Good has “a voice more rancid and vile than kittens caught in a blender”) but only because she said that she prized their songwriting ability. I, in turn, said I respected Broadway for their use of jazz hands. There was high tension for a brief moment until I revealed my love for Ken Kesey which led us safely away from disaster. It turned out her favorite book was *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. And who said being an English major was useless?

Most of the night we took turns asking each other questions while we ran the gambit of late night ghetto-slice pizza and park benches. The questions started out simple enough, mostly about family or school, likes and dislikes the sort of general banter that goes on between people trying to decide how much they like each other. Incidentally I learned that her favorite cover was “Susie Q” by CCR (which I didn’t even know was a cover to be honest). I was fairly confident I was rounding the corner on “more than a friend” and heading down the relatively straight stretch to “romantic interest” based solely on my answer to “Where do you want to be in ten years?” I told Portia a story about how my English teacher in grade 12 used to make us write every day on an assigned topic. She asked us to write an account of where we’ll be in ten years and then share some of it with the class. I wrote mine as a story/fantasy that had me waking up at 10 AM, rolling off the bed, slowly so as not to wake my gorgeous wife, writing some novel or something for three hours, then dicking around for the rest of the time. The best part was that I wrote my crew of friends in as my butler, gardener and chauffer. Portia
laughed and touched my arm when I told her, lingering, and just when I thought I was maybe imagining some sort of interest she bit her lip and gives me a real playful look.

“So I gotta be getting home,” she told me as she pointed down the street then looked at her watch. “It’s morning. Walk me home?”

I walked her home and we made out for a bit on her porch.

“Don’t take this personally but I never invite guys in on the first date. Maybe later if you play your cards right.”

“This was a date?”

“Sure. I had a good time, didn’t you?”

Before she went inside, she gave me her phone number and said goodbye, yawning as she closed the door. I went home, running through tracklists in my head.

When I got to see her again I anchored the meeting with a mixtape which I remember began with Prince’s funky and varied “I could Never Take the Place of Your Man” and ended with Wilco’s winding and majestic “At Least That What She Said.” I realize that I often make mixtapes of music that I like and then force them on people when I first meet them. She probably hated Prince. I should have started with something off Rent or something. But it did all work out reasonably well. The next month was a burst of intensity, a fast forwarded days-nights-days-nights cycle of kissing and laughing and touching and bus rides and walks downtown.

For some bizarre reason I think she and I both realized that it was starting to fade and instead of dragging it on we simply ended it as quick as we had begun it. Maybe if both of us had the patience or the will to be together for a couple of years we would give each other the chance to fall in love. I knew she wanted to go to New York the next year
for school and I knew I wasn’t staying in Victoria or going to New York so instead of
dragging out the two or three months...fuck I don’t know, I really don’t. She was the
only girl that made me wish someone would cover “Apparitions” by Matt Good or “Girl
from The North Country” so that we could actually listen to those songs together, like
maybe we could sit down on my bed and talk things through while it played in the
background, maybe even agree on giving the long distance thing a try. We still stayed
friends, really close, never messed around with each other but we didn’t date other people
either. In fact she was the last person I saw in Victoria, the girl who drove me to the
airport and gave me a kiss and wished me luck. She’s gone now too, to New York, like
she said, trying her best to hack it there at NYU backed by a boatload of money from
scholarships and her parents. I think she’ll make it; she told me she thinks I’ll make it
too, whatever that means. Make what where?

But I have a real good feeling about Brooklyn. She likes Matt Good just as he is,
which I guess isn’t grounds for marriage or anything but at least she wouldn’t send him
disparaging mail that would lead to a restraining order. I like the girl; I like her a lot. I’d
like to learn how to play guitar and surprise her with a song someday.

But for now all I can do is pluck a few strings off my mom’s acoustic I have
laying besides my bed downstairs, miles and miles from the kitchen where I’m typing
now. But I guess that’s a start.
Crazy Together (lyrics)

There’s a thing in my head
Drifting dead and loose
Painting pictures of skytops
Playing long strips of blues

I’m feeling faint in the head
Like a lead set of dolls
Playing house in my fingers
Putting holes in my walls

You got me so close
You got me so tight
You bring me some night sky
I can trade for sunlight

My white hot sun
Come on baby let’s get crazy together
Don’t run baby we’ll be crazy together

There’s a thing in your mind
A kind of slow burning
A smoldering heat
A fight slowly turning

There’s a thing in your mind
A dream in slow motion
Dull notes ’bout trips home
An urge like an ocean

I’ll get you so high
I’ll get you so quick
I’ll bring you some cheap love
You can trade for lipstick

My white hot sun
Come on baby let’s get crazy together
Don’t run baby we’ll be crazy together

My white hot sun
Come on baby let’s get crazy together
Don’t run baby we’ll be crazy together
I just returned for a long walk down to the railroad tracks and the first thing I did when I got home was grab a few CDs and sit down at the computer. The computer is right beside the big bay window at the front of my parents’ house and gives me an excellent view of my front yard: cat footprints, hedge, semi-used road and so on. What I see today is the snow dribbling away like January and the bare patches of ground threatening to break through. My mom is outside in the backyard sprinkling bird food on the ground while my brother shoots a hockey puck against the shed. I think my dad is asleep on the couch. In other words the front yard, Lavington, my home, is at rest and perfect and for now, I have it all to myself.

For the first 7 or eight years of school my mom would take Joel and me to the mall and she would pick out mountains of school supplies: pens and binders and paper. We’d get a new pair of pants or T-shirt but never shoes: “Shoes are too expensive, boys. Besides I just bought you shoes.” Although my mom can name Snoop Dogg’s last three singles and is willing to believe that that Judds will get back together she refused to remember she hadn’t bought me shoes in two years nor believe that I wore out shoes faster than Ashlee Simpson fans let boys get to second base. The last eight years she’s simply given us the money and turned us loose, insisting only that we show her what we bought so she can inspect and ooh and ahh over it. I know it’s only the first week of February but this year I’m looking forward to the flyers that come in the mail proclaiming “Back to School Madness” and telling my head over and over “You’re not
going back. You’re done. Finished.” For the first time in a long time I’m actually happy I’m not in school. Relieved even.

And then that relief is kinda balanced with a queer uneasiness, mostly still stemming from Brodie Man. I saw him the other day at Checkers (a sports pub) and he’s pale and bald and no eyebrows. I had a conversation with him, all the while steering away from the obvious topic of cancer, and he was in good spirits the whole time. But the more I talked to him the more restless I felt. So there’s this relief and this restlessness.

I’m listening to God Speed You Black Emperor right now, a band from Montréal whose sound is an instrumental sort of mini-orchestral composition. It is very lulling and productive. When I write I always try and have familiar music on to lubricate my head. Now it has gotten to the point where I won’t write without it (oddly enough I can’t read with music that I love playing. I simply lose my head away from the book). The God Speed album reminds me of the ocean, endless sort of waves of music, stretching out, washing back. I’ll sit for pauses of ten seconds or so, listen, then type a sentence, slow and pecking, then listen again, stare out the window, watch a car go by (rust building slightly over the back wheel well), then listen again to the violin, then let my fingers hit the keys. Brooklyn actually recommended the band to me and they are pretty damn fantastic. Speaking of the girl, things are going as well as anything. We had a little bit of a tussle at the video store when she wanted to rent the Notebook and I wanted to see Garden State. She won although I, to my credit, valiantly fell asleep half way through. Things are ducky in paradise.

I think I’ve formulated some sort of plan too, to counteract this limbo I seem stuck within. I had a vision today: I finally heard Shawn Desmond one too many times on
the cable radio station at the grocery store and snapped, handing in my resignation only after smashing each and every speaker in the store in a screeching blaze of anti-Desmond glory. In reality it would probably happen nothing like that. I would probably walk up to my boss Dale and say I was quitting and he would wish me luck while “We Belong together” by Mariah Carey played for roughly the 200th time that day. But the vision itself was really really satisfying.

(The record for most plays in a work day was a close race between two heavy weights, Sixpence None the Richer’s “Kiss Me” and Ricky Martin’s “Living La Vida Loca,” each clocking in at a whopping 6 plays each in one 9 hour shift.)

I think I might switch the CD. I’m in the mood for something a little more upbeat, a sort of celebration disc that I can sit down and be happy to. I feel good. I really do. Free and unattached. When you go to school for 17 odd straight years it sort of zaps the youth out of you. You can really only be silly in your off time, which is precious little and much too fast, only during bursts of smoldering summers or while catching time between bus rides, always aware of an ever quickening sun shrinking behind the mountains, a sort of fast forward time with large holes in continuity.

It’s weird, and maybe its just because I’ve written this conglomerate of words and music and love, but I feel like I’m listening to music again with the same zeal and passion that I did back when I was falling “in like” with a new girl every week and playing kick-the-can until I was tired enough to pass out in the grass. The sort of analytical attacking of music that came with being inundated with uber-reflexive thinking all through University has kinda fallen away. So has the high school mode, where I was obsessed with being cool; not even the university obsession has returned, where I turned music into
learning and knowing music on a factual pseudo-hipster level in order to be able to snap out random facts like where and what exactly Pete Townsend ate for breakfast on the third day of recording *Tommy*. Don’t misinterpret me: I really, really enjoyed music during those periods and music was still tethered insanely and obsessively close to nearly everything I did (or was done around me). Before, listening was more intellectual or posturing: now I’m finding my dad’s tapes and my mom’s records and pouring over them, opening up the libretto and pulling out the album covers and discovering and, more than anything, enjoying with a simple wide eyed animalistic and savage purity.

Here I am now, listening to *Elephant* by the White Stripes. I believe Jack White has some of the absolute dirtiest guitar rifts I’ll ever hear. They are just so mean and vicious and powerful and sweet Jesus. I mean listening to “Blue Orchid” is like listening to a buzzsaw. It kills me when people say rock music has died when there are about a dozen bands that are simply outstanding, not the least of which is the White Stripes, who have made consistently awe-inspiring albums. I think part of the problem is that the chunks of rock music that are in the immediate pop culture today are not really anything in comparison to when rock was at its strongest; try comparing Sum 41 or Fefe Dobson, who I shudder to announce as rock music, to bands that were considering somewhat second tier in the seventies, CCR for example, (who absolutely kick ass), and you’ll come up sorely lacking on the contemporary end. Yet, slightly beyond the mainstream are so many absolutely stunning bands (The Arcade Fire, Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Death From Above 1979 to start to name a few) that it blows my mind that someone can be so ignorant to bury rock and roll for the fifth time.
I'm humming along and pouring myself onto the computer screen, thinking back to the time I almost got in a fight in a bar because I accidentally bumped a guy, causing him to spill a bit of his drink on his shoes. If I remember correctly I talked my way out of it by assuring him he would flatten me, which in turn would make every girl in the bar believe he was an ass for knocking me (who is obviously smaller than him) out which in turn would give me some sort of sympathy attraction which would take all the girls he wanted to get away from him. “Hardest Button to Button” was playing in the background.

I started thinking about packing last night. I have one large suitcase I'll borrow from my parents which I'm going to pack with three changes of clothes (extra socks and underwear of course) and some toiletries. Other than that I'm bringing nothing else but a camera and my notebook to jot my thoughts down in.

Actually I'm lying. I'll be bringing three books too. I'm limiting myself to three books because I would likely bring twenty if I could. I haven't quite decided which three books to bring however, as I'm torturing myself as to which will be appropriate. When I was small I would have to say goodnight to all my stuffed animals, my favorite being a floppy necked red brontosaurus, because I was convinced that if I missed one it would feel left out and would then plot some sort of dark nighttime revenge (maybe a smothering. I hadn't quite worked out the logistics). Now I feel similarly about my books, like I should bring them all or they'll plot to fall and crush me one day or something. Anyway...

I've settled on a group of five: *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and Raymond Carver's *Where I'm Calling From*. Each story from Carver has at least one moment that makes me shake my head. For instance, in “The Student’s Wife” he goes into an
elaborate explanation of the woman’s never having seen a sunrise. A sunrise is a clichéd beautiful thing to behold, yet the character’s reaction is to describe sunrise as terrible; The very sight of the sun rising and a new day depresses her to no end. Brilliant. I’m also considering Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, as near a perfect novel and example of writing as I can find (*Remains of The Day* running a close second) along with *Heart of Darkness*. I also want to bring *Bluebeard* by Vonnegut which is my favorite Father Kurt book (which is saying a lot). I had to sadly lay aside *Of Mice and Men*, a favorite since grade ten, because of its length (too short). Fuck it I’ll probably bring it along anyways.

My mom is doing her fake looking for stuff in the computer room as a way to read over my shoulder, probably planning her next soul twisting inquiry about the Neptunes or the New York Dolls or asking me to paint the shed or move furniture or something. Devious. And suspicious. I think she knows something is up, like her My-Son-is-Up-to-Shit-dar is going off like crazy.

I’ve decided I’m going across Canada and back.

That sound I just heard: my mother behind me barely controlling her flailing arms and screaming voice. Now she’s slinking away pretending she didn’t read that last sentence. I’m sure that puts a damper on whatever conniving fun she had planned for me.

So I’ve taken the last few months writing this all in some search for someway to resolve how exactly I’m going to handle this gap between school and reality. I’ve become increasingly aware that the school-me and the real world-me are two different people shaped by their very different circumstances and that to bridge the two immediately would be impossible. I need some sort of easing-in process, like starting at the shallow
end of the pool and working my way towards the deep end (not a super good analogy given the fact that I can’t swim. Moving on…) The actual idea for a trip was never even anywhere near my head until I was at work a few weeks ago, stocking Mr. Noodles and thought of the summer tourists flowing in and out of the parking lot, stopping for pictures and light groceries. The catalyst: I went outside to collect grocery buggies (one of the higher moments of my work day given that I actually get to go outside) and I caught myself looking at the license plates, just kinda staring, listening to the stupid clack clack click of the wobbly metal buggy wheels, when I saw a car from Nova Scotia. Drove all the way from Nova Scotia in the winter.

It got me to thinking: I’ve never actually been to Nova Scotia. I’ve never been to New Brunswick. Hell I’ve never been further that Regina (and even that was when I was six and I remember exactly nothing about the trip). I got to wondering what the Atlantic Ocean actually looks like and what it would be like to travel that highway to P.E.I., to stop in Montreal and hear French being spoken properly. I was thinking about all these different parts and different landscapes that are nothing but static images and projections in my head so intently that I barely missed getting flattened, buggies and all, by a pick-up truck.

These thoughts have kept chipping away at the back of head, sneaking into my thoughts when I was in the shower, on the ride to work, while my parents were trying to tell me about the very nice teacher’s college they had read about in the paper. I decided on this plan last week, slowly balling my courage and rolling it forward everyday until it gained enough momentum to assure myself I could do it. I really don’t want to work in a grocery store for the rest of my life; I have to quit sometime.
The main problem I had with the plan was that I didn’t really feel initially like it would solve anything. The trip sounded like I was simply prolonging my entry into a world that demands less coddledness and more self sufficiency. How do I answer that? Well there’s nothing more “real world” than being on your own in a strange place. And I plan to collect as many strange places as I can.

My plan, a ramshackle set of preparations based mostly on intuition that is hopefully better than my feelings toward the Tony Rich Project, is to go from one ocean to the other and draw and write everything into my notebook and head. I’m going to take my car and drive and drive and stop where ever I please. I can camp I can live in the car wherever I land and I want to take in the country and the people. I haven’t broken a bone yet but perhaps this is the trip where I crack a rib. And when I’m done and ready to come home, whenever that is, I’ll come back to collect my stuff and pick a place on the map and settle there and try and make a serious run at this writer thing. Try and write myself, fingernail by fingernail, until someone is willing to read it. Writing is what I want to do. This trip will give me fodder and freedom to do just that.

Hell, maybe I’ll try and gather the scattered parts of my heart and end up in Waterloo and run into Marissa or see Portia on some random street somewhere (stranger things have been known to happen). Actually perhaps it would better if none of that happens because I plan on asking Brooklyn to come with me. She might. I hope she does. She’s got lots of time to decide (and I guess lots of time for me to screw things up) I mean I wouldn’t be leaving until the start of the summer anyways. I need to stack some funds and get things in order. But I will go and I would like it if she came with me.
So I guess the only real and obvious problem left now is what music to bring. I would like to put forth the same sort of cap as I’m going to do with my books but for entirely different reasons. I want to achieve some sort of balance between the music and world I know, this map I’ve developed here, and new links to new places. The easiest way that I know how to do that is to bring along a soundtrack of some sort. The albums I want to bring then are the ones closest to me, that already have the most stories and the most emotional connection. I know that I am scared to go out on my own and travel relatively aimlessly; the CDs then will hopefully act like a warm blanket, a sort of home housed within the libretto and linear notes that I can carry and feel calm. A group of centre points. Theoretically then, I want CDs that excite me that will help in gathering these pieces of Canadian landscape that I want to grasp; the albums will layer more of my tiny bits of stories on top of each other, blend, become a group of connecting flesh, between an old life and a fresh jaunt forward.

Am I being too idealistic? Am I perhaps a little crazy to think something like this trip will work? Do I ask too many rhetorical questions? The answer is yes, yes and probably maybe perhaps yes. I have a real bad habit of being horribly dramatic over the small details of my life, so when something big like this comes along you’d think I was convinced that John Bonham raised himself from the dead and wanted me to play lead guitar with Elvis and TuPac in a band called “Dead Motherfuckers.” But this is big and I really expect to come back changed, although not vegan or Goth or conservative or anything like that. I can’t see me leaving and coming back the same person. More stable. More ready. The spaces ahead are simply too big not to mold me somehow different.
Right outside this window is a maple tree that has stood there as long as I’ve known, large and strong. Beyond that is the road I grew up on, the highway, the mountains, then a road map east, east, a line with many stops on the way, away, scribbles on a page, notes on a staff.
Someplace Home (lyrics)

Flickering lights on the ground
Deep nights in the sky
Two fish in the ocean
Six words from a lie

Put mouth to words
Put wings to birds
Go away, stay away
Always burn the closest bridges
I always burn the closest bridges
You are my bridge

And if I stopped running
And if my heart started winning
My eyes might start spinning
And I might come someplace home

To you
For you

I’ll put words to pages
I’ll bring birds to cages
If that’s what I have to do
To stop burning my bridges
To stop burning your bridges
Come stay, never go away

Make me a home
Please take me home
I can’t be alone
I want to be home

One hand on a key
Feels like sand in my teeth
My feet always want to move
I need your ground underneath

Me
For me
Make me a bridge
So I can get home
Please be my eyes
I can’t be alone
Tell me a lie
Tell me we’re home.

Tucker 221
The Modern Reader and the Continuation of the Book: The Medium is the Metaphor

1. “intercourses of thoughts, a transaction between contexts”

The challenge to the modern writer is sensory. The Western world is entering a period where the first generation completely immersed within the world of TV, internet and movies is coming of age. These components of media, composed of a combination of audio, video and text, are creating a new generation that is fluent in multimedia-saturated modes of communication. The result of this fluency is that the modern reader, and I mean modern in the sense of current or contemporary, is no longer completely dependent on the phonic alphabet alone as the medium of communication and information transfer, demanding instead multi-sensory, multi-modal amalgamations: the question that arises then is where does the modern writer, with only text as a medium and the word as vehicle, speak within and to this new generation?

In that way, my project, *The Genealogy of Taste*, is a two headed Bildungsroman: the first is a story of a young man growing up like any other, attempting to discover some concept of his own self-identity; the second is the depiction of a generation growing up within a ubiquitous media milieu. With those themes in mind, my goal as a writer is to converse and engage with as large and vast an audience as possible. What my project attempts to do is present a writing style that combines the medium of text, defined by the *OED* as “the wording of anything written or printed; the structure formed by the words in
their order,” with popular music, to create a fiction that is attuned to the communication style of the modern reader.

Since the advent of the printing press, the medium of the phonetic alphabet and its complete takeover as the dominant mode of communication in the “civilized” world forced the human, straight from “womb to tomb,” into perceiving meaning in “a line, bead like, and in a prescribed order” (McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 44). Letters, individually meaningless, are combined to create words and whole works, texts; only by translating that string of beads can an audience receive knowledge. Meaning through text depends upon a set of learned abilities; in the case of reading, that ability involves not only left to right reading and the translation of letters into words, but also vocabulary.

Yet orality and text are closely intertwined. Walter Ong describes the difference between primary and secondary orality: primary orality nests in “a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print” (11); secondary orality is the present day electronic culture in which “orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television” (11). Yet, Ong insists that cultures “even in a high technology ambience preserve much of the mind set of primary orality” (11). Text is based on the oral and yet modern orality is a balance between the “purity” of primary and the technology of secondary orality. How can the writer exploit this tension in his/her own text in order to complete the reading experience of the modern reader?

Reading has become a completely different experience for the modern reader and the writer must adjust. For example, people have been conditioned to experience synaesthesia. Greek for “union of sensations,” synaesthesia is defined simply as the “the
simultaneous occurrence of two different senses in the same perception" (Nielsen, 2006); it is the using of one sense to understand another, such as describing a color as "loud." To extend the notion, I would argue that synaesthesia is the main catalyst for the modern audience's multimedia experience: less tangible items, such as emotions, can be described by more concrete ones, such as music: i.e. slowly played piano can be likened to sadness. Therefore, an author does not have to rely on the traditional form of the word and alphabet as medium. Text can be infused with other media, just as is already common with TV and the internet, so that the reader is allowed to create new meanings based on his/her own experiences with multimedia modes of communication. The writer must be open to the acceptance and diffusion of multi-modality in the media and utilize this induced synaesthesia to his/her own advantage.

I realize here that my project does not use the actual songs and albums but only evokes them; my objective with this project, however, was not to create a multimedia presentation, which would have been the result of combining the actual playing of the music with the text; my goal instead was to address the ways in which the modern reader receives information in their everyday life through other combinations of media and trying to mirror that multimedia presentation as closely as possible within my project by extending, but not breaking through or intruding upon, the text. Therefore the experience of synaesthesia becomes the hinge with which I can create meaning in relation to popular music and self-identity within my project.

Writers, by nature, are already particularly in tune with synaesthesia as exampled by metaphors such as my own example of "rain: smells like blood tastes" in the poem "that number means something to some people" (The Genealogy of Taste, 80). But what
about more subjectively perceived and interpreted phenomena, and I am thinking particularly here about emotions and large abstracts such as "love" or "home" or "sadness," or any significant human life experience. As Roy Prendergast writes in *Film Music: A Neglected Art*, "[abstractions are] not something that can be translated just using one medium" (216). I suggest that the modern writer must rely in a unique way on the multimedia as metaphor.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, renowned linguists, coined the term "conceptual metaphor;" the conceptual metaphor does not simply substitute one word for another, but instead relies upon a borrowing between intercourses of thoughts, a transaction between contexts. The metaphor is a "cognitive mechanism that allows us to experimentally ground conceptual systems and to reason about abstract domain in terms of more concrete domains* (Encyclopedia of Linguistics, 594). That transaction is described as "mapping" which allows "abstract ideas...to be conceptualized in terms of embodied experience" (594), as if Lakoff and Johnson’s example, "life is a journey." The only way in which to understand the metaphor is through comprehending the "mappings," the collection of ideas and experiences that created the respective source, the domain from which the metaphor is being drawn, and the target, the domain trying to be understood ("Metaphor," 222). The conceptual metaphor is gestaltic, a set or web, interconnections, beyond its surface of domain and target. It is then a very subjective and personal device in meaning making: the creator of the conceptual metaphor is enacting his/her own encounters and events, his/her own contexts, as the main base of information and authority.
Instead of the conventional way within text of presenting metaphor, i.e. "the man is a rock," I am evoking a very different process in my project with the conceptual metaphor as its base: the specific songs and albums become interchangeable, through the process of metaphor, with certain specific experiences, people and events and become the integral hinge in his search for the Bildungsromanian self identity.

Deploying the modern reader’s media-induced synaesthesia as a vehicle, I am then able to integrate and combine the medium of popular music inside the text as the corner stone of the meaning-making process within the text. I believe this transaction is a very common event in the modern reader’s life and that by utilizing such a technique I will be able to connect in a much richer, more familiar way to my reader and that, through a highlighting of the conceptual media metaphor, alternative ways of meaning-making are recognized and appreciated. I wish to create an extended text that requires and encourages a reader to step outside the word of the visual eye and text when reading and interact with a greater range of media and subsequent meanings.

2. “the experience of popular music is an experience of placing”

Why then utilize the medium of popular music as the medium to filter my project through? Why not photos, or other texts, or movies or any other equally familiar aspect of media? What I would like to focus on in particular in here is the listening experience of popular music and then finally how, in combination with text, music assists in creating a reading experience more adjusted to the modern reader.

Again, modern society has become completely inundated with popular music, where it is now a near omnipresent presence. The listener is flooded with music in the
grocery stores and malls, when watching TV or movies, while walking down the street; music is everywhere and an essential part of the “cultural repertoire,” essential elements to understanding and interacting within a culture (Stockfelt, 378). In turn, I see popular music as a good gateway into my text as a site of common ground between myself as author and the modern reader. By evoking specific songs and albums, the reader is given a foothold of familiarity into the text.

Popular music also becomes at least part of the answer to the author’s tension between primary and secondary orality surrounding text. At once it is primary in that it is a completely oral medium, reliant upon the act of listening, while still using technology as the means through which to transmit that orality. The songs and albums become a way in which to infuse text with orality of both types.

Popular music is interesting in that it a mixture of sung words and music. Listening itself is an act of creation. Text and lyrics, I would argue, as media are very specific in describing, utilizing the detail and words as the bridge between the structuralists notion of signifier, the representation of a concept or object as word, and signified, the actual object or concept; it is the detail in text that “illustrates” emotions, objects etc for the audience. Julia Kristeva refers to this part of signification as the “symbolic” element. But the musical aspects of a pop song, the instrumentals, break from the signifier-signified pairing and ventures closer to notions of the “semiotic.” The semiotic, in Kristeva’s terms, is “the bodily drive as it is discharged in signification…the rhythms, tones, and movement of signifying practices” (Oliver, 2006); the “semiotic” bridges the gap between words and emotions by providing a sort of emotional language outside of the more “rational” language of the symbolic, rooted instead in the aural and
The instrumentals in pop music are never completely translatable and rely almost completely on the intuition of the listener to decode them; there are no set of meanings that allows the reader to jump between sign and signifier to pinpoint meaning. The listener must instead depend on the semiotic to guide him/her; it is an emotional language outside the standard realm of sign and text, an understanding through the rhythm, pace, pitch of the song. The listener employs the semiotic in combination with the “circumstantial evidence” that is around him/her, i.e. the personal immediate details of the listening environment, in an attempt to create meaning (Stockfelt, 383); the engagement is therefore much more subjective and emotionally engaging. However, in the world of modern multimedia, the semiotic also becomes the shared emotional language, the musical intertext, through which the listener/reader is able to create the private message related to the circumstantial evidence.

It is through very close personal engagement that the listener/reader creates the subjective multimedia conceptual metaphor. Readers of conventional literary texts are greatly involved in the translation and completion of meaning making by translating words into signifiers and recognizing them in conjunction with their signified objects. Popular music as a medium invites the same level of participation but in a much different manner. The listener is much more flexible than reader: text is a private world the reader must enter and stay within for the “reality” of the text to remain intact. There is no room for the reader to include his/herself within that text; it is at an arm’s length. Music, in contrast, mutually melds into the world of the listener.

The listener of popular music listens while interacting with his/her own reality, creating a combination within his/her own “reality;” such a melding allows space for the
individual listener’s own personal experiences to enter and combine with the song(s). As such the song become dependent on situation for meaning-making, defined by the experience in which it was heard, closely and intimately tethered; that song then comes to stand in for the immediate event, becoming interchangeable, as a subjective, unique metaphor, the conceptual media metaphor. Songs then act as an aural cue, as a metaphor, as a direct link to events within a listener’s life. As Simon Firth observes, “the experience of pop music is an experience of placing” (37), the listener placing within the song within his/her own unique life experiences and circumstances.

The function of the multimedia conceptual metaphor is intricate in the experience of the Bildungsroman; it is by examining and identifying elements and experiences of one’s life through popular music that one can begin to gain an image of self-identity, a theme that is very prevalent within my project. While the specific songs within my thesis project are not going to mean the same things to every person, the process of linking music to life events and memory, the making of the metaphor, is going to be nearly unanimous for all readers. While the content of the metaphor is important in which the ways the songs or albums come to represent shared meanings, such as Nirvana’s *Nevermind* has come to stand for the death of the rockstar and the introduction of grunge music, it is the process of the construction of the metaphor that is essential in creating reader involvement.

By highlighting the multimedia metaphorical process through a synaesthetistic blending between text and popular music, a medium the audience is already well versed in, readers is given a gateway into the text that they recognize and connect with.
3. — "restless with the long stretches of valley to either side of his vision"

Film uses both the visual, the image (moving and static), and music, the aural, to create a more emotionally appealing piece of art. What film composers do is shape the mood, audience reaction "realize the meaning of a film" through the activation of music (David Raskin, cited in Prendergast, 213). Similarly, music can be activated as a literary device, as an extended adjective or motif. My project is attempting to work with similar goals and techniques as film music, along with using music in a literary fashion to develop the text: through the use of the multimedia conceptual metaphor and the broad deployment of synaesthesia I am hoping to achieve a similar sort of shaping of tone and meaning by combining both music and text, where the text is telling a story or a narrative, and the music is helping to define the ways in which the audience is reacting to and interpreting that text.

Similar to film compositions, the music suggested in my project controls and enhances the meaning and tone of the text, the way a slow flute may call to mind sadness in a film. For example, "from what I remember" (11) uses the song "The Sprawl" (Sonic Youth, Daydream Nation, 1993) at the bottom of the page as background to the specific poem above it. "The Sprawl" uses loud, messy metal guitar and a lack of an immediate chorus to "stretch" the song out, robbing it of a traditional song structure and "sprawling" it out instead; this sprawl mirrors the tone and pace of the poem: the narrator restless with the long stretches of valley to either side of his vision. The songs act almost as extended adjectives, further descriptors of scene and thought.

A film composer can utilize repetition of sound and tone in order to allow the viewer clues as to previous scenes and provide greater continuity; for example, a
composer and producer may decide to play a simple three note combo every time a
character indulges in alcoholism (Prendergast, 232). In this way the music can become a
unique motif or set of images within a literary text. For example, within my own project
"when sharp tools fail or when a too young boy falls" (48) utilizes "The Red Strokes" by
Garth Brooks (In Pieces, 1993). The song, when fused to the poem, and then utilized
again in Ch XI (154), reminds the reader of the scene of the poem as well as the tone,
immediately tying the themes of the poem, young love and desperateness, directly into
the scene. Interestingly too, the song also then acts as a sort of internal monologue,
inducing the specific language of the poem; the reader could imagine the poem going
through the protagonist's mind as the scene takes places, in this instance as the
protagonist gives the mixtape to Kim Miller, providing a greater insight to the character.

The genre of film music works in two channels: diegetic and non-diegetic, that is
music that is either within or outside the plot of a film. Diegetic film music fits within the
narrative of the film; for example a song that comes on the radio and a character within a
scene comments upon that song is deemed diegetic. Non-diegetic, or extra-diegetic, in
contrast, is music that is played "behind" the scene of a movie, in the background,
unheard by the characters in the film. To reuse an earlier example, a film composer may
use a slow playing sparse piano behind the action of a character, music that can not be
"heard" by the character, in order to evoke sadness. Non-diegetic music is "outside" the
action of the film.

The poems that intersect each chapter in my project are utilizing the technique of
non-diegetic film music in unique ways different from the narrative arc. I agree with the
Romantic view that music is not directly translatable to words, hence the reliance on the
semiotic, and, as such, the best that listeners can do is simply receive impressions, shadows of tone and message (Kramer, 3). To extend that thought to film music, the technique of film music is therefore very effective in suggesting abstract notions such as “home,” “place,” and “time” (Manvell and Huntley, 92); music is so exposed to interpretation that it is flexible enough to fit within many abstract themes. This is especially useful for me, because one of my main themes in the text is “home” and the landscape that is attached to it. The music, for the protagonist, comes to represent his home: “the guitar solo” is described as being similar to the mountains in his valley (107); in Chapter X the narrator says “I can pack these highway gas stations and leaning fences with me within the liner notes of the Velvet Underground album” (145). This ability for music to represent and house the protagonist’s abstract notions of “home” helps to define him in his search for direction and self-identity.

The poems become a direct example of the multimedia conceptual metaphor as outlined in Sections 1 and 2. The songs evoked in combination with the poems stand for the specific moment of the poem, the specific landscape, so that the scene and song are transposable. The songs within the poems come to be interchangeable with the specific moment and landscape described, as direct examples of the subjective conceptual media metaphor; because there is no story attached to the songs, just the stark images/scenes of the poems, the crystallized moment can be interchanged with the song. The placement of the song at the bottom of the page separates the song from the poem so that it is not diegetic music, yet its inclusion on the same page keys the reader to the idea that the two are connected. The date and age at the bottom of the page, for example “October 23: 10” in the poem “blurportait” (29), are further descriptors and filters in connecting the song to
a specific instant. In this way the reader is shown an actual example of the media metaphor in practice through the poems in my project.

Within the fiction narrative framework, popular music is induced in a different way than the poems, as a device similar to diegetic film music; most of the plot relies upon the use of music playing within the memories, to propel the story. The narrative is propelled by the conscious reflection on the aural mapping process that the protagonist uses for his own act of self identification. For instance within Ch VIII the protagonist uses Neil Young and the guitar solo from "Down By The River" (*Everybody Knows This is Nowhere*, 1969) as a way to set a scene and reflect on his initial feelings for Marissa (116). The music is used as a narrative device, almost as a prop, through which the protagonist can tell his stories. In this way, the music employed diegetically in my project is not an illustration of the actual conceptual metaphor, as the poems are, but instead an excellent illustration of the process of making the conceptual media metaphor.

Music then becomes the major way through which the protagonist is able to define himself and carry himself through the Bildungsroman process. As Simon Firth insists in his essay "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music," people use pop songs in order to create themselves in a particular way, as a vehicle of self identification; "the pleasure [of popular music] is a pleasure of identification." (38). Through the conceptual media metaphor, the narrator is able to distinguish and reflect upon his own life events; the music provides a tidier way in which to view his own life events so that he himself is able to look forward to what he wants. It is by espousing and outlining his own set of aesthetics in relation to pop music that the protagonist can grasp a better, fuller image of himself. The protagonist uses popular music as a way to view himself and construct his
own identity so that he is able to place himself in a world thrown into chaos by his graduation from University and in turn come to a decision on how to act. It is through the filter of popular music that the protagonist is able to find a sense of his own self-identity.

4. “what about?”

The ideas raised in this paper open up a number of adjoining questions: what exactly is the unique contrast between music heard on the radio in comparison to music listened to on a personal stereo? How can more “public artifact” albums such as the aforementioned *Nevermind* be utilized to their full potential within a multimedia metaphor? What about the distinction between the “high” and “low” cultures inherent in comparisons of media?

While I do think that my project, through the multimedia conceptual metaphor, is beginning to address the preceding questions there is still the expanding arena of the modern reader as synaesthete. The text must remain open as a medium to melding. The book is not dead. The text must share. The text must shift.
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VITA AUCTORIS

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