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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL EXAMINATION

Sebastian Blanco, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in 1994, successfully presented the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 22, 1999.

The title of the paper is:

“Go and See the Band: Rock N’ Roll as Art and How We Deal With It”

Dr. Ralph Chandler
Public Affairs and Administration

Ms. Rebecca Janson
English

**Go And See The Band:
Rock 'n' Roll As Art, And How We Deal With It**

by Sebastian Blanco

Honors Thesis

Lee Honors College, Western Michigan University

April 22, 1999

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not be possible without the hundreds of bands that I have seen perform or have heard on album. They don't know their influence, but I do. I acknowledge the influence working in the entertainment journalism industry has had on this paper; being able to see the underside of something is always more real. Thanks to all the friends, who have roadtripped with me to concerts near and far, and to my family, which has a rich and varied musical history. Thanks go out to Katherine Thomas for providing parts of this thesis a ten-week home as a series of articles in the "Weekend Scene." And, most importantly, thank you to Dr. Ralph Clark Chandler and Professor Rebecca Janson for their help in editing and directing this work.

Thank you.

Gracias.

Danke.

Arigatto.

Merci.

Sebastian Blanco

April, 1999

Soundcheck

This is my ode to the curse of loving rock 'n' roll. The curse of always having to defend my love of power chords and high-energy basslines. The curse of trying to describe to people the distinction my mind makes between Pearl Jam and Aerosmith, Ani DiFranco and Jewel. The curse of looking at someone as I explain how important rock 'n' roll is to me, and seeing they don't understand a word.

I have devoted the last six years of my life to listening, understanding, learning about rock music, and I do not consider that time wasted. I offer this thesis as proof. When I began, I thought I was singular, and that I would find ideas for this paper only in my experiences. I have since discovered I am not a crowd of one, though I started this journey on the power of my own emotions.

Six years. Six years ago my friend, Marcel, and I were standing in the schoolyard. An innocent moment. Marcel's friend, Payam, walked up and handed Marcel a tape.

"Thanks for letting me borrow that," Payam said. Marcel nodded.

"What's that?" I asked. Marcel handed the tape over to me; black plastic cassette casing, white and blue sticker identifying the band, crude brown magnetic tape housing what would become my favorite music. I can remember

the next hour as if it just happened. I listened to the album on the bus ride home, the fields passing by in more and more intense movements as the tape passed through the walkman's heads. I remember the bird's voices I could hear above the headphones as I got off the bus. I remember turning the corner to my house as the tape ended. I remember going inside and listening to it again. From that first and second listen, Pearl Jam's *Ten* has been my favorite album. I bought the CD on January 19, 1993, for the first time. I bought it again, a different version, on January 19, 1997, because I had to.

I had to because the music on this album resounded in me as no other had before. Before listening to *Ten*, the rock music I heard, on the radio and on albums had never opened me up, or opened up to me, in the way Pearl Jam's songs did. I felt an honesty in the lyrics of Eddie Vedder, an honesty I had never experienced in any musical art before. I was not the only one, because millions of people bought *Ten*, and more will. When I first heard those songs though, I discovered on my own what millions of kids discover every year: rock music matters. I formed a personal connection to music, and I was not daunted by being one of many. I had discovered an honest art form that coexisted with popular taste. I spent the next six years discovering the tumultuous collision between artistic expression and popularity. It is a battle fought on stages in clubs, in the pages of the nation's magazines, in the lyric sheets accompanying albums, and anywhere else rock 'n' roll rears its beautiful head.

I fight this battle because of my emotional involvement with the music. When Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder sings certain songs, I cannot help my insides becoming beautifully disorientated. When Ani DiFranco puts her love on display, my heart responds. I have often thought this way of "thinking" about

music was not based on logic, and I always felt my emotional reasons for loving music were a bit uneducated. Turns out I was wrong. This thesis is my ode to this discovery, and an ode to others who have helped me make this discovery.

Intercultural communications researchers have studied the connection between emotion and belief, and for a long time they were convinced that feelings about a particular ethnic or racial group were the logical result of factual information obtained about that group. Now, those researchers are saying perhaps it is the other way around: and the feelings a person has toward an ethnic or racial group defines what information a person has about that group (Joyce). Well, consider this thesis to be information I selected because of the strong emotions I have for rock 'n' roll. My heartfelt connection to guitars, drums and bass (oh, and vocals) has led me here, but the stones of the path were laid by tidbits I have pieced together from songs, live performances, articles and interviews I have conducted and read. I will try to collect this multi-media, multi-year observation and collection process into a few pages of words that will convince readers that there is more to rock 'n' roll than beautiful noisy guitars and the best dirty words. Rock 'n' roll is about so many things, and it is one of the few art forms that reach young people in America. I could take the academic route, like the communication professors, and use words such as "cognitive" or "affection," but I will use the words "thoughts" and "emotions" instead. This is about rock 'n' roll, isn't it?

In my hands and in my head, I have music I consider valid from any angle. Not all music I buy, but most of it. Emotionally, intellectually, artistically and aesthetically valid. Some of the songs strike me only on the emotional level, where rock works best, as Noel Coward noticed when he said it is

“extraordinary how potent cheap music is” (Oxford 163:12). Coward probably wasn’t speaking about my type of rock ‘n’ roll, but he knows the power of simple, direct music. Some of the music and lyrics I like hit me hard in the intellect. The artistry of the bands sometimes takes a while for me to piece together, and the rockers I find truly artistic are the ones I love the most. All of the music I like is obviously aesthetically pleasing to me. Rock is my beautiful life.

Rock is also the beautiful life of magazine covers and celebrity lifestyles, a life thrown up against the wall of public consumerism by corporate media corporations. With money that dictates who makes albums and how albums get made, the music industry has to work hard to make friends and influence people. The people music publicists are often most anxious to reach are entertainment journalists, who are able to take the message farther and wider than album buyers can. In the face of this monster system, how can anything remotely resembling art make it to the market? I am using a perspective in this thesis that the reader is fully aware of the ridiculousness of most “articles” on rock bands and the ridiculous music the bands make. The magic is that not all rock is ridiculous. And that’s my thesis. Stated differently: in the media-driven, over-hyped world of rock ‘n’ roll, honest and artistic music still reaches a lot of people in a lot of real ways.

I will analyze two artists and one group of artists to substantiate this claim. I will look at three categories: (a) hugely successful artists, (b) artists who have a sizable fan base, but are not plastered on every music magazine in existence, and (c) bands that have been playing music for a few years, but are still considered local bands in their hometown. The two bands I will look at in this category are Grand Rapids, Michigan’s Mustard Plug and Boulder,

Colorado's Space Team Electra. I have personal connections to these two bands, and my interviews with them are, I think, one of the more important sections of this project.

When studying each band, I will look at what each performer's message is and how it comes across. The band basically has two avenues through which to promote messages: the music and the press. The first is (hopefully) under the artist's control. The second is under the control of thousands of people, from the editors and writers of countless publications to the band's record label and publicity staff.

I will allow the thousands of people a chance to speak. I won't include quotes from all of them, but the views of media members is a vital aspect of the debate of the validity of rock 'n' roll. I have a personal attachment to the media voices, for the genesis of this thesis was my job at Western Michigan University's student newspaper, the Western Herald. From my first day, when I walked in and said I was interested in writing a few CD reviews or band features, to my endless nights as the Arts & Entertainment editor there, I have wrestled with the challenge of writing about artists I often know nothing about. I was faced each week with names and press kit information on someone who has done something worthy of an article, and I must try and find that person's truth and write it into an article. Sometimes this works, sometimes it doesn't.

When it works, I am so happy I don't know what to think. The most difficult, and most fun, articles to write are about people I know. I once wrote about a painter who has been friends with my parents since I was a little boy. She painted my picture when I was about 6 years old. When I was 21, the discomfort of putting her life into words came to me as I was assigned to

describe her show at a local art gallery. After the article ran, she told me she had read the article and said I had captured her message. I felt a deep honor. I have written articles on friends in bands, and when they read them and tell me I did a good job portraying them as artists and performers, I feel as if I have made a significant contribution to the world of journalism.

An important aspect of this thesis is applying the criteria I have for writing a good article to what I often observe as free publicity in entertainment articles. I won't go into criticisms of specific articles, but when entertainment journalists are able to capture the human aspect of an artist in 15 inches of text, they often go against what passes for journalism in most publications.

I will also focus briefly on a few topics that I consider important to the discussion of rock vs. media, but that don't get covered in the main sections. These topics are a separate look at feminism and rock music, the emotional content of certain songs and the impact of those songs and examples of the conflict between musicians and journalists.

These different themes are divided into sections, with this introduction being the "Soundcheck," the individual band analyses making up the "Setlist," the extra information put in the "Set Break," and my conclusion making up the "Encore."

The style of this thesis will be personal and conversational, mostly because my topic dictates that I must write in this way. Rock 'n' roll can be written about in purely academic ways, but there is no way to nail down in words the emotion of a Sonic Youth song. By writing as I often talk about these bands, I hope I will come closer to the truth than if I were to use a purely academic tone. This is not to say that I will not fill the paper with (hopefully)

intellectual ideas and remarks, but I will make them in a way that anyone can understand my points. Rock 'n' roll is beauty for the people. I hope this thesis turns out the same way.

Setlist

Pearl Jam

The story of Pearl Jam is a story of growth. I have traced the history a hundred times in my mind, but the growth I am interested in here is of the growing up kind, and not just the getting older kind. All bands get older, not all bands grow up. All artists get older, not all artists grow up. Artists mature. Their art matures. It is a sign of ... maturity? Intelligence? Savvy? In Pearl Jam's case, I see their changes over the years as a healthy growth that has led to better and better, sometimes the best, music and artistic statements.

Here's an example. When Pearl Jam, from Seattle, was riding a tumultuous wave of unforeseen popularity in 1992 and 1993, the band members toured the world and played concerts in hundreds of concert halls and venues. During some concerts, the band performed other bands' songs. Covering songs is something many rock groups do, and Pearl Jam does it at concerts today as well. What songs a band covers can give an insight into what the band members enjoy, what music they know. Cover songs can be a glimpse into the history of a band, a traceable artistic line into the band's past. In Pearl Jam's case, having a hungry audience eat up the cover songs allowed the band to bring little-known music to people who probably hadn't heard it.

At shows in 1992 and 1993, Pearl Jam sometimes covered a song by the Washington, D.C. band, Fugazi. Fugazi is known for artistic integrity, mostly because the band members are completely independent of the "official" music business, and release CDs through their own label, Dischord. This

independence allows Fugazi to not ask anybody what is “OK” and what isn’t. Pearl Jam often covered a variation of Fugazi’s “Suggestion,” and the lyrics, as sung by Eddie Vedder, contain these lines:

“He wants it easy, he expects her to be easy.
He wants it to be easy.
But she says ‘no,’ but she says ‘no, I don’t want to.’
She says ‘no.’ She says ‘no, I don’t want to.’
He expects it to be easy.
When she says ‘stop,’ you got to stop.
When he says ‘go,’ you still got to stop.
When she says ‘stop,’ you got to stop.
When he says ‘go,’ you still got to stop ...
She says ‘go to hell if that’s all you want me for!’
She did nothing to deserve it,
He just wants, wants to observe it,
We sit back like they taught us,
Keep quiet like they taught us,
He does nothing to remove it,
He’s just as hurt ‘cause he wants to prove it.
We sit back like they taught us,
Keep quiet just like they taught us”
(original song continues with: “we blame her for being there, but we are all guilty”) (MacKaye/Vedder).

If we look at cover songs as a glimpse into the personal tastes of the band members, then I can assume that members of Pearl Jam support the idea that sex should be a mutual process, and that forced sexual advances are not desired. This is the message of a song covered by Pearl Jam in 1992, and in the years since then, this message, or a variant thereof, continuously shouts its way out of the band’s endeavors.

In 1996, Pearl Jam contributed a song, “Leaving Here,” to the *Home Alive* album. Home Alive is a group started in 1993 as a reaction to the “brutal rape and murder of Mia Zapata on July 7, 1993” (homealive.org). Zapata was the lead singer of The Gits, a Seattle-based band that played harsh, fast music. The mission statement of the collective says Home Alive

“strives to raise public awareness of a wide range of self-defense philosophies by offering low cost and free classes, workshops, seminars, and public forums on physical and non-physical self defense techniques to adults and you people throughout Washington State. We support people choosing any form of self-defense that is necessary to survive in any situation. Examples of self defense are verbal boundary setting, walking friends to cars of houses, locking doors, planning escape routes, de-escalation techniques, physical striking techniques, fighting, yelling, martial arts, and using pepper spray, knives, guns and other weapons - ANYTHING that keeps us alive” (homealive.org).

This is obviously a strong agenda the members of Pearl Jam have chosen to align themselves with. This affiliation with Home Alive shows two distinct aspects of Pearl Jam’s commitment to influencing life beyond the band’s music. First, the connection shows that Pearl Jam is a part of the group of artists in the city of Seattle. This group mindset is also shown in the band’s friendships with other Seattle bands, in Pearl Jam’s two global Self-Pollution Radio broadcasts, and in countless other sources. Second, the connection reinforces Pearl Jam’s strong belief in helping people, especially women, become more able to defend themselves. The band has also done benefit shows for Indian tribes and Voters for Choice.

Being a fan of Pearl Jam rewards anyone interested in looking for trends, themes that surface repeatedly throughout the band’s history. Starting from the Home Alive standpoint, listen to the band’s second radio broadcast and Eddie’s interest in a 7-inch record promoting self-defense for women by being loud. Then listen to the interview with Gloria Steinum on the same radio show. Their song “Betterman,” from *Vitalogy*, is a testament Eddie wrote about his mother (whom I met in a strange occurrence after a Pearl Jam show a few years ago) and the man who didn’t treat her right. The threads run through Pearl Jam.

Returning to the thread of Pearl Jam's cover songs, revolution songs (the everlasting backbone of rock 'n' roll) make up a sizable part of Pearl Jam's cover catalog. Some of the songs Pearl Jam covers are "Rockin' in the Free World" (Neil Young's anti-American business, pro-American citizen anthem), "My Generation" (The Who's youth blast), "Redemption Song" (Bob Marley, self-explanatory) and "I Only Play For Money" (a song by the Milwaukee-based band The Frogs that is a satirical look at a rock star who is interested only in the monetary aspect of rock 'n' roll). Beyond these examples, the list of songs Pearl Jam covers is long and full of meaningful tunes.

Pearl Jam has continued to promote underheard bands and music by using its own popularity to further the careers of other bands. The Frogs, which will, in all likelihood, never have a major label contract because of songs such as "Dykes are We" and "Homos," put out a split single with Pearl Jam, and so thousands of new fans heard of The Frogs. Pearl Jam brought the seminal Seattle band, The Fastbacks (who have been playing since the early '80s without a radio hit), on tour with them. Eddie Vedder played guitar on a club tour with his friend Mike Watt, who was in the influential punk bands The Minutemen and Firehose, but has never become a huge star. With Eddie along for the ride, people who wouldn't go see Watt alone attended the show. I couldn't get tickets to the Mike Watt show when he played with Eddie, but when Watt played with a different band, I was able to buy tickets at the door.

So, Pearl Jam is obviously a band that recognizes its power to influence fans, and I believe it has done important things with that power. Admirable things. Now, before I begin to analyze Pearl Jam's lyrics and songs, and try to rope myself in from getting into a hundred more topics, here is a brief history,

with some artistic connections and interesting facts. Again, I believe a trend will emerge that shows us a new side of Pearl Jam. This time though, it is perhaps not quite as flattering. But still insightful.

Pearl Jam grew out of the Seattle music scene. Enough articles and books and films have been made that trace this scene's history that I will make this section as short as possible. "Hype!," a 1997 movie about the explosion of the Northwest rock music scene, is a great source to see how Seattle's bands work together.

Some of the relations that would lead to Pearl Jam were first formed in the band Green River, named because of a series of killings terrorizing the Northwest at the time. When Green River broke up, Stone Gossard and Jeff Ament of that band formed Mother Love Bone, and named their band after a giant erection. Mother Love Bone's lead singer, the flamboyant Andrew Wood, died of an overdose before the band was to tour for its major label album *Apple*. Ament and Gossard again formed a band, this time naming the band Pearl Jam, as a reference to semen (Peterson, Introduction). Again, a thread emerges. The names of the bands Ament and Gossard have been in sound innocent, but have a darker, hidden meaning. Now with Mudhoney, singer Mark Arm named Green River, but Ament and Gossard were still involved. The story Pearl Jam told the media when they first became popular was about Eddie's grandma Pearl and her hallucinogenic preserve made out of peyote. A working title of Pearl Jam's second album was *Five Against One*, a name which can be taken many ways, including as five band members against the world, five fingers against one finger, or five fingers against one penis, returning to the masturbation/sex

theme, which, by this time, makes the most sense. Guitarist Stone Gossard has a different opinion:

“For me, that title represented a lot of struggles that you go through to make a record. Your own independence - your own soul - versus everybody else’s. In this band, and I think in rock in general, the art of compromise is almost as important as the art of individual expression. You might have five great artists in the band, but if they can’t compromise and work together, you don’t have a great band. It might mean something completely different to Eddie. But when I heard that lyric, it made a lot of sense to me” (Crowe 58).

Most of the beauty of Pearl Jam’s work, to me, is in the multiple meanings of their works. Their greatest achievement is helping to return the honesty of rock ‘n’ roll music to the money-driven popular music industry. They use the mechanics of major music corporations to deliver a searing and powerful message. In 1991 Pearl Jam released *Ten*, and the rock world has accepted them, with varying degrees of kindness, ever since.

In 1998 Jeff Ament still talked about the hectic days when *Ten* exploded:

“With *Ten* things happened so quickly that all the success was hard to deal with. We all felt a certain amount of guilt; it became uncomfortable to be who we were, and it was hard for us to enjoy what we were doing. We were just kind of persevering, working, and trying to get through it. I kept thinking back to when we were jamming in the basement and writing songs for our first album. There were amazing moments when I thought, Wow - this is music, this is an experience. And later on, when we’d actually get back into a room like that to write or record, it would suddenly feel right again” (Coryat 50).

Luckily, Pearl Jam has been able to keep this music-first attitude throughout its windswept career, and still writes some of the best freaking songs out there.

After the debut album, with all its intensity and naivete, Pearl Jam released its sophomore album, *Vs.* Even though its third album, *Vitalogy*, is the band's most brutal attack on media and economic forces in the music business, *Vs.* contains songs that are powerful notices to Pearl Jam fans about where the band stands, the most obvious of which is "Blood," track number 7:

"Spin me round, roll me over, fucking circus.
Stab it down, one way needle, pull so slowly.
Drains and spills, soaks the pages, fills their sponges.
It's my blood. It's my blood.
Paint Ed big, turned Ed into, one of his enemies" (Vedder).

On the cover of the October 25, 1993 issue of Time magazine, there is a picture of Vedder, with the words "All the Rage." A more violating cover Time probably couldn't have printed, as Vedder says about his media exposure: "I'll walk through a room, and the TV's on, and my face is on, and I start to freak out. I want to call a friend and say: 'Did I lose my mind? I need perspective'" (Crowe 58).

Other *Vs.* songs that are potential commentaries against media are "Dissident," "Rats" and "Indifference." These songs are more oblique than "Blood," but certain lines from each can be given anti-media or anti-corporate meaning. Not surprisingly, "Rats" and "Blood" are two of the more violent sounding songs on *Vs.*, and "Dissident," with its love-story theme and "Indifference," which I will address later, have emotional melodies to match their strong statements.

“Dissident” contains no lyrics that are directly against corporations or the media, but the title is obviously anti-conformist. The main lyric that might be a reflection on how the members of Pearl Jam view the art of their music is “What to say, what to say. Soon she was down, soon she was low. At a quarter past, a holy note, had to turn around” (Vedder). “Dissident” seems to be about a relationship gone awry, but the message of these lines is more one of turning to music when the world is confusing. When you don’t know what to say, when you are depressed, look to music, your holy musical notes, and things might get better.

In “Rats,” a song about bottom-feeders everywhere, not just in the music business, Vedder’s lyrics are quite cruel. Pearl Jam released this song at a time when every possible media outlet was assaulting the band, and the aggressive lines seem to be attacks on the media. Again, this song features rough sounding music, and the deep bass notes resonate perfectly with the song’s agenda. The song is about a group of rats, and what characteristics they share. The rats are possibly a symbol for scavenger-type people, and the picture of a rat included on the lyric page for the song is on the *No Code* CD and also appeared on the bass drum face during some of Pearl Jam’s concerts. Some of the characteristics of the rats found in the lines of “Rats” are “drink the blood of their so-called best friend,” “starve the poor so they can be well-fed, line their holes with the dead ones bread” and “congregate until they are much too loud.” The song seems cryptic, though, as it also contains the somewhat positive lines, “don’t ever take what truly not theirs” and “don’t oppress an equal’s given rights.”

There is a message hidden behind these good words, a message of keeping what is truly important away from the rats. This message is heard when an emphasis is placed on what the rats can't take, instead of what they don't take. The rats do drink the blood of their so-called best friend, but they can't (don't) take what is truly not theirs. Eddie sings about giving up his blood for the record company in "Blood," and he now sings that no matter how much they drink from him, they can't take everything. This is a powerful, strengthening message of fighting for what one believes in. "Indifference" is, by far, Pearl Jam's most dramatic standing-strong song.

Consider these lyrics, and ignore for now the chorus line of "How much difference does it make?":

"I will light the match this morning, so I won't be alone.
Watch as she lays silent, for soon light will be gone.
I will stand, arms outstretched, pretend I'm free to roam.
I will make my way through one more day in hell.
How much difference does it make?
How much difference does it make?
I will hold the candle, 'til it burns up my arm.
I'll keep taking punches, 'til their will grows tired.
I will stare the sun down, 'til my eyes go blind.
I won't change direction, and I won't change my mind.
How much difference does it make?
How much difference does it make?
I'll swallow poison, until I grow immune.
I will scream my lungs out, 'til it fills this room.
How much difference does it make?" (Vedder)

All the lines, excluding the chorus, have the same theme, that Eddie won't back down. He is willing to go through pain, suffering and deformation to make his belief known. Again, this song is tempered by a bit of deflated love, but I easily see this song as a protest against conformity and for artistic expression. Any artist willing to swallow poison, receive punches, burn an arm and go blind

for her art is obviously a strong artist. Vincent Van Gogh supposedly cut off his ear for love, then painted a picture of the uninjured side of his face. Eddie Vedder sings here that he could do the same, but he doesn't seem to want to hide his scars. In fact, Vedder has been known to do dangerous and painful things, including stage diving during the early concerts and sometimes performing with the Jim Rose Circus Sideshow. (The JRCS is a group of performers that tours, sometimes with musical groups, and displays all sorts of human oddities, similar to the freakshows of old. Vedder once drank the bile beer, which is beer that one person drank, then removed from his stomach into a cup for the next person to drink.)

Now, what about all those lines of "How much difference will it make?" Eddie sings these lines softer than the rest, and they seem to exist more in the hypothetical realm than as actual questions. Knowing what path Pearl Jam would take in the next few years, it is easy to look back on this early song and say that the hypothetical part is what won out, and that in "Indifference," the questions are true: how much can one person do, and how will it truly effect the world.

Another hint that makes this riddle more cohesive is a quote from Vedder about what an artist can give the audience. During the first few months of Pearl Jam's existence, Vedder sometimes climbed scaffolds during shows and jumped from them into the crowd. Not any more.

"That climbing happened out of me saying: 'Look, this is how extreme I feel about this situation. This is how fucking intense I'm taking this moment.' You can't do that for long, because what (the audience) really want(s) to see is, they want you to chop your fucking arm off, hold up your arm, wave it around spewing blood, and believe me, if you did that, the

crowd would go fucking ballistic. You only get four good shows like that, though” (Crowe 88).

Bassist Jeff Ament offers an explanation of just what Vedder means when he sings.

“People weren’t looking at his eyes when he was doing that. I think they were looking at the fucking freak, you know. The guy who was dumb enough to put his life on the line. Evel Knievel. But if you looked at his eyes, man, there was an intensity in what he was doing. That was his belief in himself. He was saying, ‘This isn’t just “rock” to me.’” (Crowe 57).

This is where Pearl Jam resonates with me the most. It’s not just rock to me, either. I am not a player, but I occasionally pick up a guitar or a bass or drumsticks and proceed to enjoy myself. There in the basement, anything is my muse, and anyone is my audience. I cannot underestimate the freedom of playing an electric guitar. Even listening to one is releasing.

Listening to *Vitalogy*, it is sometimes difficult for me to be free to enjoy journalism. Songs like “Satan’s Bed” and “Pry, To” put the whole celebrity/rock star/human/story source into a distorted perspective, and when I really listen to these songs, I usually have to sit and ponder why I do what I do.

“Pry, To” is a short, minute song that is nothing more than a beat with Eddie spelling out p-r-i-v-a-c-y over and over. How’s that for a direct statement. “Satan’s Bed” is even more so.

“It’s not all been said, been said and done,
I’ve never slept in Satan’s Bed.
Although I must admit he still visit’s my place,
Uninvited as you know he don’t wait.
Funny how he always seems to fit in,
Funny how I always wanna give in,
Sundays, Fridays, Tuesdays, Thursdays the same
Sometimes the special guest he don’t like to leave.
Already in love, already in love.
Already in love, already.

Who made, who made up the myth
That we were born to be covered in bliss
Who set the standard, born to be rich.
Set fine example, skinny little bitch.
Model, role model, roll some models in blood.
Get some flesh to stick, so they look like us.
I shit and I stink, I'm real join the club.
I'd stop to talk, but I'm already in love.
Already in love, already in love.
Already in love, already. (It's torture)
I never shook Satan's hand, look see for yourself.
You'd know it if I had, that shit don't come off.
I'll rise and fall, let me take credit for both.
Jump off a cliff, don't need your help so back off.
I'll never suck Satan's dick, again you'd see it
you know right 'round the lips.
(Unintelligible)
They think I'm busy, I think I'm doing OK.
Already in love, already in love.
Already in love, already in love.
Already in love, already in love.
Already in love, already (fade out)" (Vedder).

There it is. Pearl Jam's piece de resistance to the media community. The lyrics are harsh, the music is brutal, incredibly abrasive. In the end, incredibly effective. The only way to convey the intensity of this song is to hear it. Only then can a listener hear the well-placed pause in the music right before the "Satan's dick" line comes in. Incredibly effective.

Since this song was written, Pearl Jam has mellowed out a bit, but the intensity of the lyrics and the grinding music still stands as a flash of insight into the mind of Pearl Jam. After the abuses the media made to Vedder, he makes a statement here about shitting and stinking. Is there a more blunt way to knock yourself off of the pedestal others have placed you on?

There are those who will criticize Eddie Vedder for not doing what he said he might do one day: retreat to his home and sell his music on cheap cassette tapes to a small number of fans. They call him a hypocrite for

condemning his popularity, but still using it and feeding it. I see the band's ability to stay together for so many years as a testament to its growth and strength. And, one of the strengths of rock music is that it is a form of art that is so easily accessible to so many people. I am glad that Pearl Jam has not yet given this up and has continued to use their popularity as a forum.

They have not had a steady growth of popularity, though. After people began to recognize songs from *Ten* only by the videos the band had done for them, and when the band couldn't get ticketing agent Ticketmaster to concede to take a cut in profits from sales of Pearl Jam tickets (because Pearl Jam wanted to sell tickets for about \$20 so that everyone could afford them, and was asking everyone involved with the show to take a cut), Pearl Jam began to, in a sense, cop an attitude. They stopped making videos after *Ten's* "Jeremy," did some problem-ridden tours without Ticketmaster, and wrote songs that blasted entities that didn't hold to the same ethics that the band did, the ethics of being honest and fair, open and even. Pearl Jam writes songs to express an idea, and fights to keep these ideas pure. As Eddie said: "Some songs just aren't meant to be played between Hit No. 2 and Hit No. 3. You start doing those things, you'll crush it. That's not why we wrote songs. We didn't write to make hits. But those fragile songs get crushed by the business. I don't want to be a part of that" (Crowe 57).

Even when he didn't want to be a part of it, he was. This is where the rub is. The band is a group of musicians, and they just play songs. Well, a lot of people like their songs, and so the band members are all of a sudden bombarded and exploited.

“I think that’s what pissed me off about Time magazine, when I didn’t have to agree to be on their cover in order for them to put me on it. I felt like, fuck, I’m gonna be that guy I hate whether I want to or not. And pretty soon I’m gonna be an icon that can just be joked about. I’m too sensitive for that kind of stuff. I did my best to hold us back from becoming that, at least after witnessing what happened on the first record. I thought for the second record we were pretty mellow. We took ourselves off TV. But I still feel like we’re that band that everybody hates” (Marks 82).

The band learned to focus its energy into the music, again demonstrating a belief in the power of song. As Eddie says:

“I’m not very good at protecting myself. That’s one of the problems here. I’m either gonna learn how, or what’ll actually happen is that I won’t put myself out there, certainly not in these kinds of forums. I feel pretty safe letting it out in the music, but not in the media. There are people who want to be validated through the press, and through public opinion. I don’t feel that way at all” (Marks 82).

And again, Eddie:

“The only thing that worries me musically is that everything we put out is so under the microscope that it ends up seeping into the songs, and suddenly the music is bombastic just to be able to resist or survive the inspection. There are things on *Vitalogy* that are definitely not typical, so I’m trying to battle against that. There’s two ways: you either give the people what they want, or you become cynical and that protects you. I’m not good at either. We’re still just being brutally honest and giving it our best. I’d like to say I don’t care what anybody thinks, and that I don’t play this music to have it be liked. But I certainly don’t put it out so everyone can tear it up, either.” (Marks 47-48).

Probably because of the fan-affronting measures of touring without Ticketmaster and not making videos, Pearl Jam’s popularity dipped when the band released *No Code*, an expansionistic fourth album with no huge hit song, but plenty of good ones. “Sometimes,” “Smile” and “Off He Goes” all stand out to me. But it is “Present Tense” that illustrates beautifully Pearl Jam’s ability to

mesh deep spiritual and emotional meaning with rock songs. Bassist Jeff Ament speaks about the power of writing a song in 1998.

“After we made *Vs.* and before we started *No Code* there were a few times when several months would go by without us seeing each other. We were just trying to figure out what was happening and trying to make sense of everything. ... But the most important thing for us has always been making music - getting into the studio and writing songs. That’s when we’re truly happiest” (Coryat 91)

They found time to write some damn good songs for *No Code*.

“Present Tense” is actually a study in contrasts: loud and soft sounds, different points of view in the lyrics, searching and answering voices. I almost cried when I saw them play this song at the United Center in Chicago in early 1998.

Here’s what I am talking about:

“Do you see the way that tree bends?
Does it inspire?
Leaning out to catch the sun’s rays,
a lesson to be applied.
Are you getting something out of this
all-encompassing trend?
 You can spend your time alone,
 redigesting past regrets, or
 Or you can come to terms and realize
 you’re the only one who can forgive yourself.
 Makes much more sense to live in the present tense.
Have you ideas on how this life ends?
Checked your hands and studied the lines.
Have you belief the road ahead ascends off into the light.
Seems that needlessly its getting harder
to find an approach and a way to live.
Are we getting something out of this
all-encompassing trend?
 You can spend your time alone,
 redigesting past regrets, or
 Or you can come to terms and realize
 you’re the only one who cannot forgive yourself.
 Makes much more sense to live in the present tense”
(Vedder).

I have indented the choruses because I hear a different voice speaking during these parts, and I wanted to emphasize this. I hear a student asking the questions of a learned individual in the verses, and the wise one giving advice in the chorus, when the music gets louder and more powerful. Notice, too, how Vedder's lyrics bend around multiple possible meanings of "present tense."

Whatever the interpretation of the song may be, there is no denying the adult themes and the honest, appreciative tone of the lyrics. Anyone looking for strength of art in rock can find it here.

Searchers could also find it in "I'm Open" an unusual piece by Pearl Jam because it is almost spoken-word, but usual in that it makes a serious topic the focus of a rock album track. Here are the words:

"A man lies in his bed in a room with no door, he waits,
hoping for a present, something, anything, to enter. After
spending half his life searching, he still felt as blank at the
ceiling at which he stares. He is alive, but feels absolutely
nothing, so is he?
When he was six he believed that the moon overhead
followed him. By nine he deciphered the illusion, trading
magic for fact, no trade backs. So this is what is it like to be
an adult. If he only knew now what he knew then.
I'm open. I'm open.
Go on in. Go on in.
Go on in. Go on in.
I'm open. I'm open.
Go on in. Go on in.
Go on in. Go on in.
Lying sideways atop crumpled sheets and no covers he
decides to dream. Dream up a new self, for himself"
(Vedder).

This song is so obviously childish in its story, but so intensely adult in its theme. Vedder uses a typical childhood illusion to illustrate the universal experience of growth, and he does so in the accessible format of a rock song, but he also allows anyone who is interested to delve deeper into the lyrics to

discover the destruction that comes from growing up, and the power adults can reclaim from their childhood. It seems these themes proved a bit too much for the record-buying masses for *No Code* sold the least amount of copies for a Pearl Jam album. Some people just don't know what they are missing.

Pearl Jam reclaimed its audience with 1998's *Yield*, which was released in a year that also saw the band return to doing massive arena tours (with Ticketmaster), a home video, a promotional video for a song (albeit an animated one), and a live album, *Live on Two Legs*. *Yield* was a turning point, though. Remember the lashes from the song explosions on *Vs.* and *Vitalogy*? Well, listen to this.

Eddie: "(*Yield*) is less challenging. It's a good, mainstream record. You go from 'versus' to 'yield.' Whatever. Things have changed. I don't know if it's age, but I'm just getting tired of complaining. All this energy going absolutely nowhere" (Weisbard 90).

If there is a truer sign of Pearl Jam's growth (the growing up kind, not the growing older kind), then I haven't seen it. Eddie realizes the power of his music, but now wants to focus it with the prism of experience. But somehow, with all the changes in the band and in the music industry (it has become even more money-driven since Pearl Jam started), what Pearl Jam does hasn't really changed. They play songs, and no matter what tribulations came their way, they have released five studio albums that reflect their desire to give. The cover song they used to do, "Suggestion," by Fugazi, somehow fits into this ending as well.

Eddie: "Ian (MacKaye, of Fugazi) came to our show in D.C., and he liked it. (He) came and he said he really enjoyed that it was stripped-down, and that all we did was go up and play these songs" (Marks 49).

Ani DiFranco

And then there's Ani DiFranco. She's not Pearl Jam, for sure. She's not much like any one else making music today, but she is a fascinating artist to listen to, to watch, to study. Perhaps I rob myself of some of the joy when I analyze her as I do, but I am an analytical person.

As much as I have raved about Pearl Jam, there is no artist as honest, as open, as true as Ani DiFranco. Pearl Jam has repercussions to worry about that affect how they behave. They try hard, harder than anyone, but they are still conscious of being so Pearl Jam. A 180 degree contrast, Ani DiFranco jokes about being Ani DiFranco, she is herself, but doesn't let herself get in her own way.

Ani's songs are full of Ani, but she is not full of herself. She is self-referential in many songs, and this openness allows for a stunning amount of connection with her fans.

Connections is where it's at for Ani fans. Even Ani probably can't count the times she's toured America. At each stop, each bar and festival, each stage and auditorium, she made connections with people, then returned again and again to refresh those ties. Ani's background as a folk singer is prevalent in these constant tours. She began in the late '80s as a teenager singing in bars. At 18 she moved to New York City from Buffalo to record an album. When she couldn't find anyone to release an album for her, she did it herself. And ever since, she has had total control of her music and her albums.

Ani is powerful proof that artists often need to be given time and control, for the work they will do can become immensely special. Even though almost all of Ani's songs offer something to delve into, I am going to focus on a few songs in which she blatantly approaches the conversation of musical integrity in the modern music business.

In her song "Napoleon," Ani is talking (in my interpretation) to a fellow musician who is having a Napoleon complex and thinking unrealistically big thoughts. Ani keeps her center, while her "friend" succumbs to the promises of the music industry and then falls horribly.

"They told you your music could reach millions,
that the choice was up to you.
And you told me they always pay for lunch,
and they believe in what I do and I wonder
will you miss your old friends,
once you've proven what you're worth.
Yeah, I wonder, when you're a big star will you miss the
earth?"

I know you would always want more,
I knew you would never be done,
'cuz everyone is a fucking napoleon.
Yeah, everyone is a fucking napoleon.

And the next time that I saw you,
you were larger than life.
You came and you conquered,
you were doing all right
you had an army of suits behind you.
All you had to be was willing
and I said I still make a pretty good living
but you must make a killing, a killing.

I hope that you're happy.
I hope at least you are having fun.
'Cuz everyone is a fucking napoleon.
Yeah, everyone is a fucking napoleon.

Now you think, so that is the way it's gonna be,
that's what this is all about.
and I think that is the way it always was,

you chose not to notice until now.
Yeah, now that there's a problem
you call me up to confide
and you go on for over an hour
'bout each one that took you for a ride.

And I guess that you dialed my number,
'cuz you thought for sure that I'd agree.
And I say baby, you know I still love you,
but how dare you complain to me.

Everyone is a fucking napoleon
Yeah everyone is a fucking napoleon" (DiFranco).

Somehow, I feel *too* close to the process the music industry has on artists who bow down when I listen to this song. If only every band thinking about signing a major label deal could hear this, and understand what Ani means, then perhaps we would have a more sane collection of musicians on the radio these days. As my interview with Mustard Plug shows a few pages down, many bands these days do not know the dangers of becoming a major label band. Pearl Jam is one that does, and I hope I was able to show how difficult it is for them to retain their artistic soul. So many other bands are devoid of honest art in their music, and make up for it with flashy videos or by-the-numbers "hit" songs that are forgotten seven weeks after they hit number one. Ani has never had anything close to a number one hit, and there doesn't seem to be much of a chance that she ever will. But she sells out concert halls across the world, and her albums, both back catalog and new albums, sell like ice water at Lollapalooza (quickly purchased and quickly integrated). Unlike the water, though, Ani's albums have an incredible shelf-life, and remain at top quality no matter how often they are played.

Take "Next Big Thing" from 1991's *Not So Soft*. I'll grant that the song might not live as long as Shakespeare's writings, but in the fast-paced music

world, where songs not yet a decade old are sold in nostalgic collections on late-night TV, a song that is still valid after eight years has already proved itself. There is no reason to believe “Next Big Thing” will grow old any time soon, either. Here’s why:

“Hello, it’s me. I’m returning your call
it’s Monday, Wednesday, Friday between noon and three
He says, ‘I usually just let the phone ring,
but I’ve always got a minute of time for the next big thing.’
And I wonder how he can see where he’s going
with those dollar signs in his eyes.
I say thank you for your interest, but my thing is already
just the right size.

Hello, it’s me. Yes, I’ll play for the door,
nothing more, on a Tuesday.
He says baby, what is your name, I forgot.
He says baby, tell me again, are you really hot?
And I think, he does not hear what I’m saying,
he’s just looking at my 8 x 10 and wondering about
the part that was left out.

Does she have a body that will really draw them in?
How much do you want, how much are you willing to do
Baby, this is no business for a sweet little girl like you.
Can you play the game, act it out, frame for frame?
Do you know your lines, let me hear them one more time.

But I’d rather pay my dues
to the six people sitting at the bar
than to all those men in their business suits
who say I’ll take you away from this
if you’ll just get in the car” (DiFranco).

Again, the song is self-referential, alluding to the personal connections of Ani’s folk-singer self and the strength of her independent business side. Even when nobody in the mainstream press knew of Ani’s attitude toward the music industry, she was putting herself front and center for those six people at the bar. How much more authentic do you want it?

Sonic Youth includes a quote by Jack Brewer in the liner notes for their album *Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star* that reads “Once the music leaves your head it’s already compromised.” If someone subscribes to this ideal, which I sometimes do, then obviously no music can be considered pure. Putting aside this extreme though, Ani’s music is as pure as we’re going to hear from a rock musician these days.

But even as Ani rages against being called the ‘next big thing,’ she allows her hand-picked publicity team to include article clippings in the press kit for 1995’s “Not A Pretty Girl” tour that claim exactly that. The most blatant is from New York Newsday. The article leads off with, “It probably comes as news to 95 percent of the music world, but Ani DiFranco is not only the next big thing, she’s already a star” (Robbins). And the article reprinted from GuitarPlayer has this lead: “Ani DiFranco is the hottest young performer in folk” (Rotondi).

It is impossible for a musician to be totally independent of everything. Ani DiFranco is one performer who has tried harder than almost anyone to be free, and yet there it is: even though she wrote a song about how she hates being called the next big thing, the phrase is used by her staff to promote her. I don’t fault her in any way, I am just pointing out the complex relationship between musician and media. They are dangerous couple, but obviously lifelong companions.

An artist does not live in a vacuum. Not much does. But most artists, especially musicians, are faced with the unusual task of somehow preparing their art for a public (or perhaps preparing the public for their art), and they do this with the help of public relations people, agents, or really good posters. Ani says she employs people to work in her music business who have similar

attitudes and morals. But, as I tried to point out above, this marriage doesn't always work out perfectly.

Musicians of any renown are tied to publicists of some sort. Perhaps their publicists are some friends who tell their friends, perhaps they are college students who are offered free tickets and CDs to post some flyers around town, perhaps they are paid secretaries who arrange interviews and photo shoots. Whoever they are, they are one link musicians have with the public. And more often than not, a musician's publicity is arranged with the help of the record label. I know. As a journalist, I've called hundreds of publicity people to get information about band interviews. With some, I've developed a strange relationship that reignites itself whenever a band from a certain label is in town. I would call the guy from Touch and Go records in Chicago, and he would kind of remember me as the guy in Kalamazoo. We weren't friends, but we acted like it whenever he sent a band my way. The best connections happen when I have a band's home phone number because the forced connection with the publicity people is removed. But this rarely happens. To get to musicians, I need to use the music industry. This system works. Somehow.

Ani, though, sings about not being too pleased with the idea of having someone else represent her. Her words carry the weight of planets because she backs them up with her self-created company, Righteous Babe Records. Not only does she address her situation, she does so with a touch of lightness, of laughter. Mary Poppins never tasted medicine as sweet as "Make Them Apologize:"

"My breast is cradled in the curve of my guitar
I'm breaking strings and other things playing hard.
No, I'm not on the rag but I'm not on the run,

I am matching the big boys one for one.
And I must admit I am having myself some fun.

Because the music business is still run by men,
like every business and everything.
But we can sing like a sonofabitch,
make them twitch around their eyes
make them apologize” (DiFranco).

Ani does not shy away from confrontation in her songs. Conflicts arise between her, her way of doing things, and others. She raises these conflicts to poetry. She is fully aware of her place in the placebo-laden music business and she is gloriously happy to be there. Her happiness easily transfers to her fans, who see in Ani a reasonable voice in an unreasonable industry.

“Make Them Apologize” has two more verses that state men run the marriage business and the revolution business. Ani mixes these attacks on male dominance with some answers to the problem. She asserts that when a woman is feeling threatened by a man in any circumstance, she can sing (be loud) to make him uncomfortable. This is the message played by Eddie Vedder on the Self-Pollution II Radio program. Ani is an extremely intelligent artist, and when she shines light on a problem and then provides her solution to that problem, she moves out of the realm of random, wasted complaining and she moves into the realm of whole art. Less *Vs.*, more *Yield*. Art that stands up, beautifully, on its own, and raises consciousness of confrontation to an elegant design.

Ani turns shouts into lyrics to give *Dilate's* “Outta Me, Onto You” a stunning, emotional force. In the song she is confronting someone, a lover, and even in the personal struggle the song describes, Ani is as tough as she is in the anti-music business songs. Check it:

“It’s gonna be sudden. It’s gonna be strange.
I’m gonna stop on a dime, and give you five cents change.
It’s gonna be long overdue. It’s all gonna come out,
Outta me, onto you.

One of these days, you’re gonna push too hard.
We’ll go on like we’ve always done, ‘til you go too far.
Yeah, one of these days, it’s gonna reach the top,
Then it’s gonna start to spill, and it’s not gonna stop.
Some people wear their smile like a disguise.
Those people who smile a lot, watch the eyes.
I know it ‘cuz I’m like that a lot.
You think everything’s OK.
And it is.
‘Til it’s not.

Some people wear their heart up on their sleeve.
I wear mine underneath my right pant leg
strapped to my boot.
Don’t think, ‘cuz I’m easy, I’m naive.
Don’t think, I won’t pull it out,
don’t think I won’t shoot.

Most people like to talk a lot, including you.
There isn’t much I have to say that I wouldn’t rather
just shut up and do.
And I’m gonna miss you when you’re gone.
Yeah, I’m gonna be torn.
Just remember that I loved you,
Just remember you were warned” (DiFranco).

These lyrics are examples of the qualities rock music sometimes has that I am trying to convey in this entire paper. The form of the song, the medium, is accessible rock music. The words are slangish, with “gonnas” strewn throughout, but the theme is an eternal artistic and human struggle. It seems to me Ani is searching for a place to vent, a way to pull out her heart and just go hog-wild. “Outta Me, Onto You” is rock art.

Ani’s strength is her ability to write sublime word phrases, phrases that could be poems all by themselves, phrases that actually took my thoughts away

the first time I heard them. If art's purpose is to cause us to rethink the world around us, then Ani is an artist. What do you think of these lines?

From "Dilate": "Every song has a you, a you that the singer sings to, and you're it this time" and "When I say you sucked my brains out, the English translation is 'I am in love with you, and it is no fun.'" and "Life used to be life-like, now it's more like show biz. I wake up in the night, and I don't know where the bathroom is, and I don't know what town I'm in."

From "Superhero": "And every pop song is suddenly speaking to me. Art may imitate life, but life imitates TV."

From "As Is": "I got no illusions about you. Guess what? I never did. When I said, when I said I'll take it, I meant, I meant as is."

From "IQ": "When I was four years old, they tried to test my IQ. They showed me this picture of three oranges and a pear. They asked me which one is different and does not belong? They taught me different was wrong."

From "Anticipate": "We don't say everything that we could, so we can say later 'oh, you misunderstood.'"

Of all of Ani's lyrics, I think these, from "Fuel," stick with me the most when I try to rationalize the role of someone like me, who wants to write about something as unserious as rock 'n' roll, with the importance music plays in my life, and the importance I see it play in the lives of so many others. Just like Ani, I have read articles and then dismissed them. I have based my opinion of a band mostly on how they look in their 8 x 10 promo picture. I can defend myself a little because there are so many bands out there, sometimes a picture is all I might ever know about them. But it still hurts to do it. This is how Ani tells it:

"In a coffee shop, in a city

which is every coffee shop in every city,
on a day which is every day,
I pick up a magazine
which is every magazine,
read a story, and then forgot it right away.

...
People talk about my image,
like I come in two dimensions
like lipstick is a sign of my declining mind,
like what I happen to be wearing
the day that someone takes a picture
is my new statement for all womankind" (DiFranco).

I don't know how much I proved with those examples, but to me they are road signs to a very serious theme that flows through Ani's works, and if she weren't a folk singer, or a punk guitar band, or a rock star (kind of) or a major label's wet dream, then she might be a poet laureate.

I'm not the only one who feels this way. Ani DiFranco's independence and musical skills resonate with many people, and more get on board with each album. Dave Kirchgessner, lead singer of Mustard Plug (see next section) is in awe of the pixie. "(Ani's) amazing. That's a really unique situation, that she can get that amount of fame or business success without catering to everybody is very impressive," he said.

And on Pearl Jam's second radio broadcast, Eddie played Ani's song "Fuel," which was unreleased at the time. The song obviously carried meaning for him, and hopefully by now we can see why:

"All the radios agree with all the TVs,
and the magazines agree with all the radios.
And I keep hearing that same damn song
everywhere I go.
Maybe I should put a bucket over my head,
and a marshmallow in each ear,
and stumble around for another dumb numb week,
for another hum drum hit song to appear" (DiFranco).

That's my take on Ani DiFranco. But there is one more lyric of hers I can't shake, from the song "Joyful Girl." In an alternative universe, she had my thesis in mind when she wrote it:

"Everything I do is judged, and they mostly get it wrong."

I hope not.

Mustard Plug

Then there's the band I have been following so long I can almost write an article about them in less time than it takes me to sneeze. Mustard Plug, based in Grand Rapids, MI, has been making ska music since around 1991 and was the first local band I began to take an interest in. I first went to a Mustard Plug concert in December 1993 and I still see every show of theirs I can. I don't like most other ska bands that play similar music, I am not in the typical age- or attitude-bracket of most of Mustard Plug's fans, but I love the boys anyway. For me, Mustard Plug is the epitome of connection between performer and fan. And one of the reasons the band is continually expanding its fan base is that the band reaches out to so many people.

I talked with Dave Kirchgessner, the Plug's lead singer, at a coffeeshop a few blocks from his home in Grand Rapids. We've built a relationship over the years through interviews and after-concert chats. It all started with a phone call.

It seems so dream-like now. A group of friends and I had decided to go see this band, Mustard Plug. They were playing at a club we had never been to and we had no idea where it was. Back in those days, the Grand Rapids free entertainment monthly paper printed local band's contact phone numbers each month. I decided that since we were going to see Mustard Plug, I should call up Mustard Plug. So I did. I got an answering machine, so I left a message describing the situation. About two hours later, this guy, Dave, called me back and gave me the scoop. I have ever since been in awe of Mustard Plug, for they reach out to the fans. They reached out to me.

A Mustard Plug show can fall into two typical categories. If the band is playing at a club or a bar, then the crowd will be a beer-drinking one, with all the big guys getting into the fray. If the band is playing at an all-ages venue, then the crowd will have an average age of about 14, and the 11-year-olds will try and skank (a type of dance that fits with ska/punk music, which Mustard Plug plays) with the older kids. No matter what the audience is, Mustard Plug will reach out, and Kirchgessner will hang out by the stage after the show and talk to fans. At a show on October 23, 1998, at the Kalamazoo State Theatre, where security guards were employed to keep the crowd safe, Colin Clive, Mustard Plug's guitarist and singer, mentioned that he felt too far away from the crowd, saying he belonged where the fans could touch him. Most members of the band share this idea of being together with the crowd, instead of being above it. This idea surfaces in the band's songs ("Beer") and has paid a large part in keeping the band popular, even as similar bands, some of which Mustard Plug has known for many years, have gotten immensely popular and then disintegrated.

"At least 50 percent of where a band's career ends up (is decided by the industry/media). You can take two bands that have pretty much the same material, maybe the same stage show, and if one gets pushed by the magazines and MTV and the radio and the other one doesn't, they are going to have two totally different careers' (Kirchgessner).

Kirchgessner goes on to say that in the early '90s, ska music was completely ignored by the media. Then, two years ago an explosion blew apart the ska scene as the major labels and mainstream media suddenly "discovered" ska music. Certain bands got signed, exploded into the public sphere, made popular videos, and sold millions of albums. One such band,

Safe Ferris, used to play shows together with Mustard Plug. Kirchgessner said that what had been a reciprocal relationship changed, because Safe Ferris became a major label band and made a lot of money off of a cover song, “Come on Irene.”

“(Their popularity was) basically all because of the media. That’s really amazing to me” (Kirchgessner).

Reel Big Fish, another band similar to Mustard Plug as a third wave ska band that writes somewhat silly songs, suffered a Save Ferris-like fate. Again, Reel Big Fish got signed, got a video put into rotation on MTV, and got a lot of press. Kirchgessner said they then just blew up. In mid-October 1998, Reel Big Fish released their second album and not many people cared. The media didn’t hype the album, and sales were not very good.

“The same writers that a year ago were writing ‘ska, the next big thing,’ are now saying ‘swing, everybody wants to swing.’ Because (journalism) is all about looking for an angle” (Kirchgessner).

Mustard Plug played a gig in mid-October 1998 in Milwaukee where a year before Reel Big Fish sold out a 1500-seat theatre. The promoter at Mustard Plug’s venue said Mustard Plug’s 450 people was much more than the crowd at the Reel Big Fish show that same month.

“The media has moved on. MTV doesn’t play their video, radio hasn’t picked up any songs. The media, there is no story there anymore. Ska? That’s yesterday’s news” (Kirchgessner).

Yesterday’s new troubadour Kirchgessner said Reel Big Fish’s popular career is over, because that career was so media-dependent. Mustard Plug tries to be more grass-roots, and has the fans to prove it. The small-town boys

from Grand Rapids are now veterans in the ska music scene, and they know what fate they could have been involved in. So far, they have avoided a hyped-up life. How else could I keep in telephone contact with the lead singer of a popular band? I don't say this to brag, because just about anyone can meet and become friends with Dave Kirchgessner the same way I did. That's my point. Dave is a rock star and he is not a rock star.

“If you want to become a major rock star, it is the media that decides whether you're going to be or not, because there is no way of doing it without them. We definitely try to keep it accessible. We don't want to be rock stars. The problem with being a rock star, is that you are at the media's mercy. If you want a long-term career, you have to be very, very conscious of the media, and how they are going to report on you” (Kirchgessner).

Not all media is the same in Kirchgessner's eyes. He's a member of a band that hangs out on stage after the shows, and being on the cover of Rolling Stone is a photo shoot as far away as the possibility of selling out Madison Square Garden. And the glossy reporters from the mainstream media are a far cry from the high school kids who approach Mustard Plug on a regular basis, almost nightly, to write an article for their fanzine. Dave said the best interview he had done in the past few months had been with Etch Magazine, a fanzine published in West Michigan. The good and the bad mix in an interesting way in Kirchgessner's reaction to the different levels of the media.

“I think the more independent press, especially when you get to the fanzine level, can either be the very best or the very worst. It depends on what kind of thought they put into the interview. Usually, when you deal with the more mainstream press, like a newspaper or a weekly, they are going more for a story, a story that has less to do with the music. They are looking for some unique angle. They may focus on a swing band, because swing is the big, hot thing. They really have, probably, not a whole lot to do with the music itself sometimes. (But) the overall writing can be a lot

better. When it comes down to a fanzine level, more independent press, sometimes (the writers) are more knowledgeable about the band, or the genre of music, which helps a lot. And they know more insightful questions, so those have the potential to be some of the best (articles). Plus, they tend to ask questions that relate more to the music and the band itself than an overall angle. Whereas the mainstream press is trying to get the article to relate to a broader audience, ... something on the smaller level can focus in on the band itself" (Kirchgessner).

This is an important distinction. Just as there is a difference between the commercial product passed off by most major record labels as music and the heartfelt recordings of a band that is trying to find an honest voice, so there is a difference in the media. Someone writing from the heart will be, in the end, a better writer than someone writing for a paycheck. The struggle is to be able to write because of both.

Dave understands the problems faced by reporters for larger publications. He put out his own fanzine while attending Michigan State University and has read enough articles and done enough interviews to know what dilemmas journalists face when they go to write about a band.

"A lot of times, a writer will get assigned to a story, for whatever reason, and they'll get a one-page bio. And maybe they'll listen to a couple of tracks off the CD, and then call the person and talk to them for 10 minutes and try to write a story off of that. And a lot of times things get all crazy" (Kirchgessner).

As crazy as it gets, Dave understands the uncomfortable marriage of music and print media.

"It is an enormous challenge to try to cover something like music, which you really have to hear, and put it into print. There is almost no way of doing it. If you are on a radio station, for instance, it makes it a lot easier because you can say 'here's the song, here's what they're doing, you like it or

you don't.' I think there are more serious writers that are music fans that are coming up. A lot of (the kids who put out fanzines) are really smart and they'll end up going through college and maybe they'll want to continue to do that, hone their skills. I think there (are a lot of) writers who are taking music seriously as an art form. Some of it's good, some of it's bad, but it's definitely getting better" (Kirchgessner).

Better, perhaps, but most journalists are still not getting at what the hub-bub is all about. When John the Journalist gets an assignment to preview a band coming to town as part of a three-week tour, and that band has a new album out and just recently got signed to a large record label, John is probably going to ask questions about those three items. I know I usually do. After writing over 200 articles, I thought my interviewing style was pretty much set, but talking with Dave reminded me that the most important thing a band usually does is perform songs.

"The songs are usually the last things people question you about. Unless there is a story behind them, I don't think the media cares too much. I think the press and the media pays more attention to bands with more serious lyrics and that sort of thing. It is almost to the point where a lot of writers or reporters want to be Tom Brokaw of whatever and they want to find the serious dirt behind this band, which I think can be a little insincere. Because what it all comes down to is that you aren't dealing with Bosnia, you're dealing with entertainment" (Kirchgessner).

He's not the only performer to struggle with the balance between the weight of the world and the importance of the music. Timothy White, Billboard magazine editor-in-chief, begins his profile of the band Belly with a quote from lead singer Tanya Donnelly that echoes Kirchgessner's remarks. "Sometimes I think music is important. Other times I think it's an entertaining distraction from things people should be paying attention to, like the healthy control of the world

or their own families; the unresolved issue is the proper place in people's lives" (White 93).

Dave recognizes the limited importance of his music amid the true news items of the day, but he does not say this limits the value of what he does. No, he's a lot like me because we both see the direct value of rock music. The power that it has to get to the common man.

"(Popular music) should definitely be as valid as any other art form. In a lot of ways, it is even more valid because normal people can express themselves through rock music, whereas classical music is the expressions, mainly, of rich people who have been dead for 400 years. It seems most art form are inherently elitist. It costs a lot of money to go the opera or the ballet. Joe Schmo off the street can't organize an orchestra. Punk rock and rock 'n' roll (are) the folk music of the '90s. (They're) the music people make and listen to" (Kirchgessner).

Kirchgessner underlies his encompassing words with Mustard Plug's theme of connection with the audience, as when Clive is extremely interested in being close to the crowd. Part of staying together with the fans is to stay modest, and Kirchgessner has difficulty putting modesty together with an important part of a band's self-publicity he's working on: Mustard Plug's biography.

Bios are sent to journalists by the band or by the record company, and they are usually found on top of the packet of press information that contains pictures, information and perhaps a CD. The bio is the journalist's initial sight at a band. I have unfortunately become a bit numb to the effects of most bios, because I have worked at a college newspaper for so long and seen so many. Entertainment journalists are continuously bombarded by these sheets of paper, yet their worth cannot be underestimated. It is how most editors will first

hear of a band, and can determine if a band is worth a story in the paper. Dave knows all of this. He's ready.

"I've been struggling to write a new bio. Our old one was very old, and we were kind of sick of it. 90 percent of all reporters, that's all they know about you is that bio. How do you express what you're about in one page. That's a really challenging thing. How do you make it unique? A lot of things that I have been focusing on is just putting in things that you wouldn't normally put in. Almost the anti-hype sheet" (Kirchgessner).

Some of the uncommon items Dave is mentioning are Mustard Plug's first real show at an open mic night, where the band was kicked off after three songs and that at the band's first practice, only the singer and the drummer arrived. The bio moves from these humbling beginnings to the band's current, self-arrived successes.

One of the reasons for the lack of quick successes lies in Mustard Plug's refusal to hire a manager. The band remains self-managed not because they hate all managers, but because all of the managers that have approached Mustard Plug have been interested in aspects of the band that do not jive with the band's values.

Kirchgessner said all the managers that expressed an interest in managing Mustard Plug were focused on getting the band signed as quickly as possible and getting as large an advance as possible, because once a band is signed, the members get a cash advance. The band's manager usually gets 10 percent of this advance. On a \$250,000 advance, the manager makes \$25,000. Mustard Plug asks: for what? What has the manager done to earn this money? Plus, managers have the option of leaving a band and acquiring another when the first loses favor. Dave said he recognizes the near impossibility of a

manager being genuinely interested in the long-term success of a band because most of the money that is available is in the initial signing.

Luckily for Mustard Plug, Kirchgessner knew a little about managing from his time booking shows in Grand Rapids, at clubs like the Reptile House and the Intersection. He transferred that knowledge over to his band. The band remains independent, but isn't nearly as successful as they could be with a manager. For example, Mustard Plug can't get on the Warped Tour, a popular summer tour that features bands with music similar to Mustard Plug's, but the band members have seen bands that draw smaller crowds and sell fewer albums get on the tour because they have the right manager. So far, Mustard Plug remains happy with their loyal fan base, even if it doesn't reach into every house in America. The band remains loyal as well.

As a member of the fan-centric group, Kirchgessner worries more about fan reaction to songs than about possible media or consumer criticism. He said Mustard Plug thought more about what the fans would think about such songs as "Lolita," based on the Nebakov novel and also about young girls, "Kill the Gov.," a song from the band's first album, *Skapacolypse Now*, that talks about killing the governor, and "Throw a Bomb," a new song that features tongue-in-cheek references to terrorist attacks around the world. Kirchgessner said he hopes no evil comes out of these types of songs, and said most fans understand the satirical humor in Mustard Plug's music.

What most fans don't know is how hard Mustard Plug works. Sure, fans around the country can count on the Plug to make the trek to the fan's hometown every year or so, and fans can see the hard work there, but how many fans know that during one week when a subsidiary of Hopeless Records

(Mustard Plug's record label) was releasing *Evildoers Beware!* in Australia, Mustard Plug had to do six interviews in a row for Australian media. Hopeless Records set up the interviews, which usually took place in the middle of the night because of the time difference. Dave identifies that time with a sarcastic "we're lucky because we're not on Warner Bros., or whatever, which could be a real invasion of our personal time."

Dave understands the invasion, because he's been on both ends of the interview. When he was a student at Michigan State University, he once interviewed the singer of Naked Raygun for the radio station and Dave's fanzine. The singer sounded so bored, but Dave still wanted to do it. He said he now knows what it's like to give interviews even when he doesn't want to.

Where does all this leave me and Mustard Plug? As I write this essay in the Fall of 1998, the band is touring Japan. From the dirty dungeons of Grand Rapids to the dirty dungeons of Asia, Mustard Plug has grown in the time I have known them, and we have watched each other. I more than them, but the band has commended me on my articles about them. But the best part of this story is that when I was in Japan in early 1997, I was watching TV when a familiar song began to play. It was Mustard Plug's "Mr. Smiley," and it was being used as a theme song to a nationally televised program. I remember writing a letter to the band about this, asking them if they were aware of this amazing international phenomenon and how it came about. At that time, the band had no idea they were on Japanese television, and now Mustard Plug is over there, and the band members can play the song live for the fans. Playing for the fans is what they have always done.

Space Team Electra

“Tis my delight, alone in summer shade,
To pipe a simple song for thinking hearts” (Oxford 577:22).

William Wordsworth wrote those words in 1800. Perhaps the connection between souls is older than I know, for I hear my body responding with delight, alone in a hazardous bar, to hear simple songs for my thinking heart. Good ol’ William and me, we’re tight. He pipes away, I listen. He wrote, I hear them. Extremely clearly in the songs of Space Team Electra, I hear remnants of Wordsworth’s image of delight. And my connection with the band began when I was alone.

It was a May night that felt like a May night. One of my favorite bands, Morsel, was making the trek from Ann Arbor, MI, to play a show at Kalamazoo, MI’s Club Soda. They’ve been there many times, I’d been there many times. We’d been there many times together. Part of enjoying a local band is watching them play through the years. On this night, I couldn’t convince anyone to go to the show with me, for another part of enjoying a local band is watching them play many times, and their shows stop being an event a lot people are excited about. I still wanted to go though, and so I biked to the club by myself.

I walked into the bar. Tentative, because I don’t go out by myself all that often. Happy, because I was ready to see Morsel deconstruct music, and then build it again, in front of my eyes again. But I knew I would have to wait, for Morsel was headlining, and three other bands were on the bill.

I walked into the bar and was struck. Up there, where the stage rises a foot above the floor and where monitors sit each night and broadcast music, was an amazing sight. A singer, in a silver dress flashing red and green, then blue with the lights, was calling my name. Somehow, in all of the swirling guitars and powerful lyrics, I felt as if Myshel (as I would later learn) was singing directly into my heart and my head. I had to sit down.

I listened to this band and tried to place them. I knew enough about the local music scene to know where most of the bands are from, but Space Team Electra I had never encountered before. So I filed them into a “new band” category and watched them play the rest of their songs.

I am a habitual bootlegger. I sneak a handheld recorder into concert venues almost every time I go. I’ve recorded over 100 tapes, getting caught at the door once, and getting caught inside the theater once. Not too bad. The first time I saw Space Team, I didn’t record them, for I didn’t think I would have enough tape for them and Morsel, and I had come to see Morsel. Plus, my guess was that I would be able to see Space Team again the next month.

I was wrong.

I did record Morsel that night, and after the show I noticed their set list lying on the stage. I picked it up in order to have an authentic record of the songs played that night, and this is where the beautiful hand of Fate slapped me. On that setlist was the address of a woman named Myshel out in Colorado. I had spoken with the singer of Space Team Electra for about a minute after Morsel’s set, and learned that her name was Myshel and that Space Team was from Colorado. When I noticed the address on the paper later that night, I felt, somehow, that I had to write her.

Call it blind luck, call it stupid chance, call it unreasonable thinking on my part, but I sent that letter, and Myshel and I formed a connection before too long, and I now count Space Team Electra among the bands that matter in this world. Maybe it is the fool thought that I have to have a personal connection to a band to really like them, but I am convinced of Space Team's power, and I'm not alone. This time though, there aren't quite as many fans as with Pearl Jam. But the music? Amid songs that could be mistaken for simple, the band plants lyrics and music that feeds a hungry mind. The band is young, they formed in 1994, and hasn't had too many lengthy articles written about them, but their relationship with the press is already sour.

Kit Peltzel (drums) and Bill Kunkel (guitar) both spoke out against the press the band has received, noting that the band members are "hyper-critical" of those articles.

"In our eyes, they (screw up) every time they put pen to paper. But we're so hyper-critical that it's pretty pathetic. No one else would probably notice except for us. There have been articles about us that have been well-written or what not. It is hard to say, because a lot people who have interviewed us or people who have written about us aren't really professionals. It's just a school thing or just a paper that came together for a little while" (Kunkel).

Kunkel admits the fault might not always lie in the media, though. An idea that seems quite responsible, brilliant, even, to a journalist like myself.

"We're so undeveloped as far as interviews go, that we don't really know how to do an interview, I believe. Other people in the band might feel differently. I don't think certain people don't know how to say 'no' to questions that are asked if they don't want to answer and they just end up answering. Next thing you know, everyone is complaining about 'why did they write about this.' And it's like, 'well because you told them everything about it, that's why they wrote about it.' I think we're very undeveloped as

interviewees. So, I don't wholly blame the people who are interviewing as far as supposed screw-ups go" (Kunkel).

Peltzel also puts some of the blame on the band. What's this? Two reasonable members in one band?! Unheard of.

"Usually we're highly misquoted and I don't know why that happens. I think most of it is our fault. We're all very verbose people sometimes, and I think it gets lost in the muddle" (Peltzel).

Peltzel said STE might one day agree that a good article had been written about them, but so far he hasn't seen one. He said the band isn't that jaded, yet. His idea of music, and being involved in a band, is optimistic, long-sighted.

"When I see other people in the music business who are jaded, its just such a sad thing to me. I feel like they've lost, and in a sense they have, and they're just reacting to it. It makes me sad to see people close down instead of trying to open up and trying to develop themselves, they just close down and get jaded and mean. It's just disillusionment, because there is so much possibility and then when that doesn't happen people get really crushed and really mad" (Peltzel).

So, what can the future hold for Space Team Electra? Where does the band belong in the rock 'n' roll tree? The band may decide the exact course they will plot through the rapids, but the flow of the river is not the band's to decide. Without a history as dirty as Mustard Plug's, Space Team still has a little more optimism.

"To a large extent, (the band's future) is determined wholly by the four people in the band. But, obviously, there are elements that affect the reasons why people keep doing things or don't keep doing things. We've really never had any kind of (record) labels happen for us, and we've still gone and kept writing tunes even after people said no over and over again. What's 15 more 'no's" (Kunkel)?

And what's a contract look like that the band could say yes to?

"We wouldn't sign anything where we got totally screwed over. There would have to be some sort of compromise as to what we feel we need to make music and be happy and what (the record companies) need to have the music and be happy. God knows what those compromises would be. I know we're pretty strong about keeping the rights to the songs ours. We haven't had contract talks for awhile, but I remember that was a biggie for some of the bad ones that have come along. I would be more than willing to compromise some things for other things. It doesn't really matter to me that much. It would all depend on the specifics. ... There have been times when that has happened already, but then again there are compromises where you still feel you are making out. You know you're not giving the heart of it away, but you're giving part of the process away. And sometimes it's kind of easier" (Kunkel).

Bill sees more than one side of an argument, and the band is itself a myriad of viewpoints. Each person plays a different instrument, each person contributes different talents to the inner workings of the band, and the answers that Myshel gave me are totally different from his answers, which are different from Kit's. Greg plays bass and lives in a different house from the three members I talked to, but he is different, too. I'm saving Myshel's thoughts for their own section at the end, for they somehow ask to be roped off in their own pasture. In all of this, though, the band truly seems to agree on at least one thing: the music they make is as honest as they can make anything.

Honesty in music is the not-so-hidden message of this paper. So many people claim it, so many records are sold that proclaim it, so why is so much music so damn empty of it? Listening to Space Team Electra, the people and the music, is a successful experiment in understanding what honest music means. Honest, artistic expression is why Bill makes music.

“(I do it) because I can. Like anything that you can do that makes you feel good, you tend to do it more often. It’s one of those things where when the reward does come, it makes the haul seem like it never happened, or lugging the gear in and setting up, or all the crap you have to do. It just makes it all disappear and you forget that that was even part of the process and it feels easy as cake. The only thing I can really relate it to is being a teacher or working with children and seeing some kind of breakthrough. That’s what you worked for. It doesn’t matter how small the forward movement is, that’s what its about” (Kunkel).

Kit studied music teaching at the University of Northern Colorado and was involved in the jazz program there, and likes “having (music be) more of an artistic, internal thing. Creating music for an expression as opposed to creating music for a dollar. Music to me, if you’re not doing it honestly, out in front of people, then it’s not worth doing. Most of the artists I like, that have made it, have a really self-centered approach to their music” (Peltzel).

Peltzel doesn’t just like musicians who bare their insides. He is one.

“Being a musician who plays rock music, I think more about the internal nature, more like how an artist might think about it. When I am creating, sometimes I actually do feel like a painter, or like a poet, because I am creating a landscape or a canvas. Any rock music you hear, there is a canvas, there is a painting being made. Not that I’m saying rock music always matches up to other art, but some of it does” (Peltzel).

Space Team has toured around America a few times, but nothing too extensive. The band is just feeling its way at this point. But taking the music on the road is about as challenging a thing you can do if your music is an honest representation of what you carry inside. There are all brand new ears to introduce to your music. But, when you are a band playing wherever you can get a gig, these ears are usually interested more in the beer at the bar than the notes you slaved over. But if you never experience new crowds, then how

honest of a reaction can you get from the audience? Kit sees the beauty of the challenge of taking the music outside of Denver.

“Playing in our hometown everyone knows us, so we feel a lot of love. That gives a lot of encouragement and support. Whereas when we play for new people, I think our music, characteristically, has a lot of people up in arms the first time they hear it or see it. They are not sure what to think of it. The in-town is easy, because you’ve already won people over. Whereas in another town, it is more a raw experience, like you’re starting all over again” (Peltzel).

Bill doesn’t falsify the challenges of creating a band the way Space Team is currently doing it, but he’s happy where he’s art.

“I really don’t know what it’s like to be in, not a ‘real’ band, but one that tours the whole year. I’m sure that is a completely different thing than a band like ours that is trying to do-it-yourself and goes out whenever they can. But we’re still writing tunes that I think are great, and if not great, they make me feel a certain way. There is definitely no reason to go anywhere else right now, that’s for sure” (Kunkel).

Space Team Electra formed in typical “real” band method, with Bill and Kit meeting in college (at the University of Northern Colorado) and moving to Denver to start a band. They put an ad in the paper and met Greg and Myshel through that. They all voice their happiness about making music, currently as a band, but Kit voices the unit’s understanding of what being in a band means.

“Have you heard our version where the bands fall in the whole scheme of things? They’re on the bottom of the totem pole, basically. Ask any producer, or anyone who has any dealings with music as far as making money. The bands that are famous, that’s an exception, but in the overall scheme, you’re the last to get paid. It’s an interesting structure” (Peltzel).

A band’s structure is also, to me, infinitely interesting. In most cases, a band becomes reduced in the public eye to only the face of the lead singer, something Eddie Vedder spoke out against. But the singer is often the singer

because the songs need lyrics, lyrics are made up of words, which is a common form of communication, and the singer is the communicator. Thus the singer becomes the voice of the band in the public as well as in the songs.

In the articles I have read about Space Team Electra, very few mention the names of Bill, Kit or Greg. Almost all mention Myshel. Unfair? Yes. Unfortunate? Not so much, for Myshel Prasad has a lot to say, and I'm just grateful I was able to listen.

I connect strongest to what Myshel does when her lyrics become poetry. She is obviously a fan of poetry. Memorized lines flow through her conversations like water, and she often pauses after reciting a particularly good passage to comment on its beauty. Her thoughts travel from the notes of the master poets to the shots of music videos, from the Greek philosophers of old to the rock philosophers of now. She is, perhaps, the best example of my thesis: a rock artist.

I'm going to leave her quotes as unedited as possible so that the reader is able to follow along, as if Myshel is having the conversation on this paper, right now. This is also going along with the simplified nature of this thesis. I am trying to make accessibility imperative.

Myshel, for example, says:

"'Shards of Love' is about the origin, its called 'Exile and the Origins,' of the lyric and the lyric poem, which, of course, was sort of set to music. There is a lot of stuff in 'The Birth of Tragedy' about that too, what (Nietzsche) calls the folksong. In 'Shards of Love' it compares what we would call troubadours now, provinson (?), the combination of what was actually considered very low culture, very suspect nature of these poets. With Jews fraternizing with Moslems fraternizing with Christians and all of the mystics and all of the music, coated sexual language, never knew if it was just a metaphor for union with the beloved in Rumi terms or if

they were really talking about getting laid. This author compares a lot it to modern rock aesthetics with a similar view of the unsavory nature and actually the real power of sexuality and the idea of unions, unions that are unspeakable or unacceptable. At higher levels of culture that is really more of a problem than separations, the idea of impossible unions, uncomfortable unions. Although these days, I used to have this description that I usually save for what I consider if something is going to qualify as rock 'n' roll, it has to have one of the three. It has to either challenge form, like the form has to be so fucking out there that you don't know what else to call it, so it's rock 'n' roll. Challenge ideas, lyrically, what they are actually saying to you, where they are actually going with it. Whether its to the mythical realm or to the political realm, it has to have courage in terms of where its willing to go and where its willing to take you. Or three, the life that that person leads, even if their lyrics are conventional and their sound is conventional, is out there enough and interesting enough that there is something enlightened in just their presence. Of course, to have all three at once is pretty fucking amazing. You'd probably get crucified for that. But these days it is rare to find anyone who is willing to pick up the gauntlet on any one of those and actually make it to popularity, or there seems to be a leveling effect of the people who listen to it. I am very surprised by what people want from music these days, what they seem to want. People in general. There are always extraordinary, very exciting, exceptions. But, what the hell, exceptions are good enough for me" (Prasad).

There's a lot there, but not too much. Myshel said she doesn't try to be oblique, she doesn't even think she talks or writes too high above the heads of others. Myshel believes in letting truths hang out, both in her life and in her music. Her lyrics to "Shadow" rival Ani's lyrics for openness, but don't actually compete in the same arena because Myshel prefers to keep her message in front of her honest self. "Shadow" is all about being big, thinking encompassing thoughts, striving. And not backing down. "Shadow" is about Myshel:

"I am what I say I am.
Am I spitting in the wind?
Are you what you say you are?
You are like a falling star, a falling star
Every little lie you tell, decorates the gates of hell.

Every truth you understand, becomes a truth in angel's
hands, in angel's hands.
I don't want you to tell my story,
I don't want you to dim my glory.
I don't need you to own it for me, this one is mine.
What you see is the measure of you,
You're looking at a picture of me you drew.
Cinematic magic venue in your mind
Shadow, shadow here I go.
So far away, out of your sight.
I wanna be just like the snow and melt away in the sun light.
I am gruesome, I am pure,
I am too much to endure.
I am flying without strings,
I'm too much of everything, of everything.
I am not afraid of shadows,
Fear is the dust of broken arrows.
My desires are the wings of crows against a white sky.
Wasn't put on this earth to please you,
Run away if I fucking scare you.
I don't bow to the gods you bow to,
I'd rather die.
Shadow, shadow here I go.
So far away, out of your sight.
I wanna be just like the snow and melt away in the sun light.
Wrapped in the web of skin and bone,
Golden lotus flowers blooming in my veins.
Particles of light exploding,
Spiraling my mind away at lighting speed" (Prasad).

Poetic. A few obscure phrases, a few so direct they could injure. Myshel does not mix viewpoints at random, but somehow sculpts her words into a representation of her thoughts. A representation any artist would be proud of. I read her blooming golden lotuses and flying without strings as signals of her desires to be together with something more dramatic than everyday life, something more mystical. It is a theme she picks up at other times as well:

"Usually because there is such a loss of a sense of inner life, and inner connectedness, usually people want art forms to support a sense of their own image. It's more of a fashion accessory than it is an invitation to the other side. It's hard for me to imagine living without that desire, but I think there is a real pervasive emptying out of anything that can't be shaped into a commodifiable desire, so

everybody's getting spilled out into these weird imagistic, pseudo, symbolic, ritualized non-sensical gestures. It's that post-modern surrealist nightmare" (Prasad).

Prasad has high ideals of what art should be, but the bar is not set so high no one can achieve them. Patty Smith, Hovercraft(3), Tom Waits, Nico and Nick Cave somehow fit into her current scope of true rock 'n' roll. Most of these bands aren't exactly setting the sales charts on fire, but Myshele can still realize their value.

"Not a lot of bands get mass consumption, but that doesn't necessarily lessen the impact that they have. Sometimes mass consumption does ... exactly that, lessens your impact" (Prasad).

Sometimes a band's impact is diminished right from the get-go by the attitude the band creates. There are basically two tracks an artist can go down: the artistic route that will be pot-holed by everyone and everything, or the commercial route that will be paved by people with money and power. This is a choice all artists must make, but in the music business, the choice is especially integral to a band's everything. Myshele sees the concept of rebelling, which was once the artistic, difficult path, as one that is now often taken by bands on the commercial trail.

"I think it's really unfortunate that the idea that 'the rebellion,' maybe when people weren't rebelling anymore it became this game to pretend you were rebelling to sell it to other people who wanted to pretend they were rebelling, was to have this really anti-elitist, anti-academic, anti-whatever stance, which is fine, except it included a lot of stuff that actually is at the heart of where that kind of power really comes from. It was like they were cutting themselves off from the source that actually made this shit subversive and dangerous. By having it be this parody, this 'fucking rock 'n' roll, fuck you, fuck your dumb books, and fuck your stupid poetry, man, we don't need that shit. We're just going to play our three chords and then "fuck you again." Did I say

“fuck you?” Well fuck you.’ There is potentially a great aspect to that energy, but it doesn’t satisfy me. I’m a little hungrier than that. It takes a lot of concentration for bands to stay together. Everyone’s got a million stories about a million different breakups because people were too fucked up. In bands who really stay together there is a sense in each person that this is important, ‘I need this.’ And why lie about that, pretend you don’t care” (Prasad).

Myshel isn’t real big on pretensions. Her quote on pretensions is big though. She was watching a video by the cookie-cutter band Matchbox 20 and noticed a discrepancy between what was sung and what was shown.

“It’s a pretty mellow song, whatever song it was, it’s pretty mellow. Fucking nothing wrong with that. And he’s standing there in an alley, with an angry stare on his face, and wearing lots of leather, looking likes he’s screaming, but he’s not. The song’s playing in the background, and it’s obviously something very different. ... As though the song has something to do with that, but it doesn’t. And people will sort of buy their response to the video as though somehow they are connecting with something. That’s what I mean by the weird surrealist factor. It’s like, ‘am I crazy. Does any one else notice this completely disjointed manipulation.’ I’m watching that and I’m like ‘oh my god. It’s the same fucking manipulation, we’re going to sell you this idea, this fucking hard-ass rock band.’ Well maybe you should have written a little more of an intense song. Maybe you oughta fucking go there if you want me to believe, to buy that. Literally to buy that. I don’t understand how anyone can feel connected to that. Why does that work? And the only reason I can think that that works is that people are scared enough to rather have something fake, and it makes them feel better about being fake, and it’s an easy-access, convenient spray-on rock ‘n’ roll” (Prasad).

Myshel would not be unhappy if all the spray-on rock bands just got up and left, especially if they made room for the thinkers and the artists who made a difference.

“I really want to see the old powers walking and breathing out there again. Which is part of the reason I’m so into B’tai, it’s why I really go over and over “The Birth of Tragedy,” because I think what Nietzsche’s trying to talk about in that book in particular, even he himself thought it was one of his

worst books, is closest to trying to get to that sense of the ancient power. The chaos that destroys is at the same time the only possibility for real life. ... The motion of modern culture is against those truths. You can't sell a mystical experience. You can't. There is no way to put a price tag on it. And once people get a taste of that, the sense of liberating possibilities, the danger, you might evoke a pulse. Nobody makes a dollar off that" (Prasad).

So far, not too many people have made dollars off of Space Team Electra, either. But that isn't the point of the band, as I hope I've conveyed. I suppose I could have shortened the entire section on Space Team Electra to Myshel's last quote, for it perfectly captures what she and the band are about. Her love of art (poetry), the band's refusal to sign whatever record label contract is shoved at them and her commitment to staying true. Here it is, and here I sign off on STE:

"There's a Rumi poem where he gets really exhausted by the shallow superficialities around him. He says 'I am tired of cowards, I want to live with lions.' I don't know how much those guys told you about the various conversations we've had, the various offers. But more and more, the more I realize the level that a lot of these people are living off, that's the phrase that kept coming to my head, and I started not returning phone calls" (Prasad).

Set Break

So far I've looked at a few bands in detail. I've looked at their views of the high-pressure, media-influenced, rock music driven world. I didn't grab a hold of everything each artist is, but I hope it was some interesting reading.

There is more, though. There are a few aspects of the rock 'n' roll conundrum that don't quite fit into the above sections. These are thoughts I've had, things I've read and other musings that I feel need to be in here somewhere. I don't follow any specific thesis rules when I write this paper, for that would detract from the rock culture this was written in. But somehow, even in this freeform prose, some things fit and some things don't. As my roommate Ryan King said during one of our broadcasts together on the student radio station, "If you don't like that art, make your own." I'm making this thesis my own.

Rock groups have existed to promote any thinkable sort of agenda. Obviously, some bands are involved with rock only to get laid, and there is an unavoidable connection between rock music and sexual energy, but there are so many more reasons people start bands.

An underground trend started in the late 1980s that continues today, living on in an extremely mainstream and commercial form called the Lilith Fair music festival, is the girl band. Female-fronted music groups have been around for a long time, but these bands are different. Originally called riot grrrls, most of these bands put being a girl/woman in the forefront of the music, and let the music back it up. The sound and the music has been softened over the years, but in the beginning, the music might be loud and powerful, such as in the bands 7 Year Bitch or L7, or quiet and intimate, such as the bands The Softies

or Tori Amos. Attracting all sorts of female audiences and, later, male audiences, the abundance of female musicians in a once typically male scene caused a sort of attitude shift in the portrayal of what a rock band is or could be. Rolling Stone, one of the main bibles of rock 'n' roll, recently put out an all-woman issue. Rolling Stone usually has half-(or more) naked girls on the cover. What does this say? Whatever it says, there is a society of women musicians that isn't buying it. They're often called riot grrrls.

As Emily White writes in "Revolution Girl Style Now," "Riot Girl (or Grrrl) was started by a group of musicians and writers and friends who decided to aggressively coopt the values and rhetoric of punk, fifteen years after the fact, in the name of feminism - or as they call it, "revolution girl style now." Riot Girl was organized in the wake of the 'angry girl' mood, which has overwhelmed the post punk scene in the form of a series of confrontational girl bands (Bikini Kill, Hole, Babes in Toyland, Calamity Jane) and a plethora of fanzines by and about women After a while, their anger didn't feel like a fad, it felt like hope - compelling certain girls to organize meetings every week, start calling themselves soldiers, messengers" (McDonnell 397).

These riot grrrls are only one faction of the rock world. The emotions that run through their community are strong, and extremely valid. Also important are the feelings of rappers, MC, and others not "officially" a part of the guitar/drum/bass structure of rock 'n' roll. Sure, rock musicians often expand their orchestra by including various ethnic sounds, but the simple three instrument trio is still the most prevalent band today. The line between rap and rock is fading, though, as both music types find themselves in the similar situations.

In the ongoing conflict between musicians and journalists, the problems continue. As of this writing, the most current issue of Rolling Stone, the bastion of rock journalism, contains a letter from Method Man, a member of the rap

group Wu-Tang Clan, in which he chides a Rolling Stone writer. “The power of the press: readers don’t realize that while a store may seem to be a means of promoting an album, movie or book, all artists take a risk in entrusting a writer with their words. I was greatly disappointed by some of the implications in Anthony Bozza’s piece. ... I felt disrespected as an artist and as a man (Method Man).”

This wasn’t the first time. In August 1994, dream hampton wrote an article in Essence magazine describing her run-in with Method Man after she wrote an album review in The Source magazine that compared him with Busta Rhymes. Method Man got angry about the comment, saying he felt disrespected and threatened to hurt hampton. Later, she ran into the Wu-Tang Clan at an airport, and had a talk with the angry rapper. She told Method Man she was proud of what she wrote because “in my heart of hearts I felt that way and I didn’t mean for you to take it like a dis but I gotta do my thing as a writer” (hampton). They smoothed out the tension.

This is an example of a conflict between those who write about rock or rap music and those who perform it. The two sides are in constant conflict and yet they need each other. They are connected in the worst way. Trying to make connections is a strange bother though. No one can really become tight friends, unless the relationship is allowed to develop through a long period of time. In the music business, you usually have less than fifteen minutes to conduct an interview. The whole mess revolves around money and selling units, and attempting to be a friend to someone in a band can easily be mistaken for being slimy. It is uncomfortable for everyone.

The reality of emotions that surround the rock 'n' roll environment cannot be disregarded. Just as musicians can feel approved of or rejected by words in a magazine, their songs can impart an important emotional whirlwind in a listener.

There are many emotions I can match up with rock 'n' roll CDs. Just as painters try to capture emotions on canvas or writers put feelings into their words, so do musicians. For most critics, jazz or classical contains enough emotion to write about in a million magazines, but rock music critics always seem to be the bitter leftovers. Maybe because young people so often make this kind of music, it is seen as juvenile and therefore contains no real emotional value. I can agree with this assumption when the subject is Hanson (pop's newest kiddie group), but how old was Mozart when he began composing? Five?

George Elliot wrote that "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (Oxford 205:16). Even though this was published in 1919, this is a perfect, if a bit intellectual, way of describing what good rock 'n' roll should do. When the music is played together (the sensory experiences) are given in the form of a song (the formula), emotion is evoked in the listener.

Of the songs I know, the one that contains the highest amount of negative emotion is "God Damn the Sun" by the Swans. Starting right there in the title,

the band curses the source of all life. In this depressing song, which is full of low sounds and a somber voice, the lyrics are:

“When we were young, we had no history
So nothing to lose, meant we could choose,
Choose what we wanted then, without any fear,
Or thought of revenge.
But then you grew old, and I lost my ambition,
So I gained an addiction, to drink and depression.
(They are mine, my only true friends,
And I’ll keep them with me until the very end.”
I’d choose not to remember, but I miss your arrogance
And I need your intelligence, and your hate for authority.
But now you’re gone, I read it today,
They found you in Spain, face down in the street.
With a bottle in your hand, and a wild smile on your face,
And a knife in your back, you died in a foreign land.
And they found my letter, rolled up in your pocket,
Where I said I’d kill myself, if she left me again.
So now she’s gone, and you’re both in my mind,
I’ve got one thing to say, before I am drunk again:
God damn the sun
God damn the sun
God damn the sun
God damn anyone that says a kind word
God damn the sun
God damn the sun
God damn the light it shines and this world it shows
God damn the sun” (Gira).

Encore

I have shown in this little thesis of mine that some rock performers are thoughtful artists who try to portray themselves with integrity and class no matter where they are or who is listening. Pearl Jam tunes into a global radio satellite and gives Gloria Steinem a chance to speak to all the young fans. Ani DiFranco has been making her music and her thoughts available to anyone for a decade. Space Team Electra infuses its music with the threads of the ages. Mustard Plug tries to have fun in the face of an unfun industry. Everybody gets labeled, everybody gets tossed around. Am I going to be able to solve this problem?

No. But I do have a solution that might continue the path the true journalists (those who strive to make their subjects interesting and human, real and inviting) and the true musicians (those who strive to make their music as honest as possible, without succumbing in any hurtful way to the influences of business) are already gently walking down. The way I see it, the musicians want publicity for their work, but don't want to be pressured into talking to someone who will screw up everything they say. And the writers, like me, want to speak to interesting subjects who will take the time to provide a good story and a look into the soul of the artist.

My solution is to shift the balance where the pressure comes from. Instead of hiring publicity people to go out and stuff the day full of interviews, musicians should take control. Instead of allowing journalists to write about whoever they want, journalists should be able to restrain themselves and do

quality work about quality artists. The way this should work is to have the artists and the journalists meet each other. Not in any way that is organized now, but have musicians approach the magazines that they like. For example, if a singer has been reading a magazine for six years, and recognizes that a certain writer has the touch, the feel of someone who can truly capture a subject, then the singer should contact the writer. And writers should be involved enough with the music that they are writing about that they can approach the musicians on an informal, first-name basis and ask for an interview. This would turn the music industry into a circle of friends.

All right, my idealism got out of hand. I hold my solution up as an idyllic possibility, not as something that can be put into practice today. Even if only one magazine begins this process, and starts revealing itself as an organization that deeply cares about the quality of its writing and its subjects, I foretell nothing but the best for the future of rock 'n' roll.

I wrote a lot of this paper at a time when I did not attend any shows. I was in a live rock music drought. And all the writing I was doing was academic, theoretical. It was still me writing the words, but I had forgotten so much of why I was writing this. Then I went to a show. A small show, by a performer I didn't know much about. It wasn't even guitar/bass/drum rock 'n' roll. It was a hip-hop/rave-type concert, headlined by DJ Shadow. But there it was, the vibe. The true expression of one artist to a group of young people. Plenty of different folks standing in the crowd, some dancing. The beat went on, and I closed my eyes and felt the music. I stood there, amid the lights and the noise and I put my fingers together in a meditation pose. I felt around for the art and realness of the moment, of the music. I tried to capture this feeling in my body, and then came

home and attacked this paper with a renewed angle. This is the truth as I know it. See you at the show.

Footnotes

1. - Fanzine - a magazine put out by a fan. The term magazine is used here as loosely as possible, as fanzines are typically published at a persons home and photocopied. Their importance to the world of independent music cannot be underestimated.

2. - Third Wave Ska - Ska has had three surges of popularity, and the current crop of bands, who often combine ska music with other types of music such as punk or jazz, are referred to as third wave ska bands.

3. - Hovercraft - In the context of this paper, it is interesting to note that Myshel enjoys Hovercraft for Pearl Jam singer Eddie Vedder's wife is a member of Hovercraft.

"Music is essentially useless, as life is; but both lend utility to their conditions" - George Santayana (Oxford 414:3)

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