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ISSUE
NO.
TWENTY
FIVE.
HAPPY




# RDBNPNG ISSUE NO.25
# SPRING 2016

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ANNIVERSARY.

In November 2014 I got in a car with Jeff and drove one hundred and thirty-four miles to Cambridge, Massachusetts. We were carrying a mixer, two speakers, a PA head, t-shirts, a handful of vuvuzelas, and at least two hundred copies of the first issue of the zine that I edited: #23, on appropriation. Jeff played songs by Tycho. I played songs by Neil Young. We talked about Pavement records and the year ahead of us; at the time, Jeff had just been elected as general manager, and I was the new programming director. The next day, Yale's football team would lose to Harvard's football team at Harvard Stadium.

In Cambridge we stopped at Theo's uncle's place to drop off the equipment. Theo was living in the area at the time, and after Jeff navigated the complexities of the Cambridge residential parking system, she came out and gave me a hug. "Welcome," she said. It was dark and freezing cold but there was the prospect of a full night and day and we felt alive with it. I was a sophomore in college.

Jeff went off to play a show with his band, Young Republicans, at a student bar somewhere on Harvard's campus. I stuck around for a while and watched Jeff's group. Then I met up with Anna and she showed me WHRB, Harvard's student-run station. "We still broadcast on the FM," she said. "Ninety-five point three."

I met Anna's friends and told them about WYBC, about the zine, about how we brought Porches. to campus the previous year. They were impressed, they said. That night, Kal Marks and Bad History Month were performing in-studio sets at the station. I drank cheap beer and Anna drank Angry Orchard cider and we watched the artists play.

Anna and her friends showed me Harvard's campus. She showed me her dorm. We went to the banks





of the Charles River and smoked in the brutal late-November air. Thomas texted me saying he was home and I could come over now. Thomas used to be GM, too. That was back when I was a freshman.

"Well," I said. "I've gotta go." I headed out eastwards down desultory Memorial Drive, looking blankly at the river. At a stoplight, I took my earbuds out of my leather jacket and put them in my ears. I scrolled through my iPhone and pressed play on Tonight's The Night by Neil Young. *Tonight's The Night*, sang Neil. But I was pretty stoned, and my night was mostly done. I flexed my fingers in my gloves to increase the circulation and walked the mile and a half to Thomas' place. The next day WYBC had a tailgate outside of the stadium. Not too many people showed up, but the bartender was serving a horrific cocktail called yucca flats and I drank it with my friends and we ate soul food and played music and laughed. It was even colder that day, but we talked until our throats were sore and our hands were numb.

I never entered the stadium to watch the game. In fact, I don't think I even had a ticket. Instead, I went home on an Amtrak train and thought about the absurdity of falling in love—not with a person, but with a radio station. A community, to be sure, but a community orbiting around the radio—a format so dead that it's part of the unofficial WYBC tagline that introduces this issue. Love is love, I thought. Absurd or otherwise, there's no wrangling to be done. I thought about my dad, who had attended Brown in the 1980s before WBRU went commercial. I queued up *Tonight's The Night* again and drifted off to a half-drunk sleep as the train rolled back to New Haven.

The liner notes of that album, most of which was recorded in a single day in 1973, feature a cryptic letter

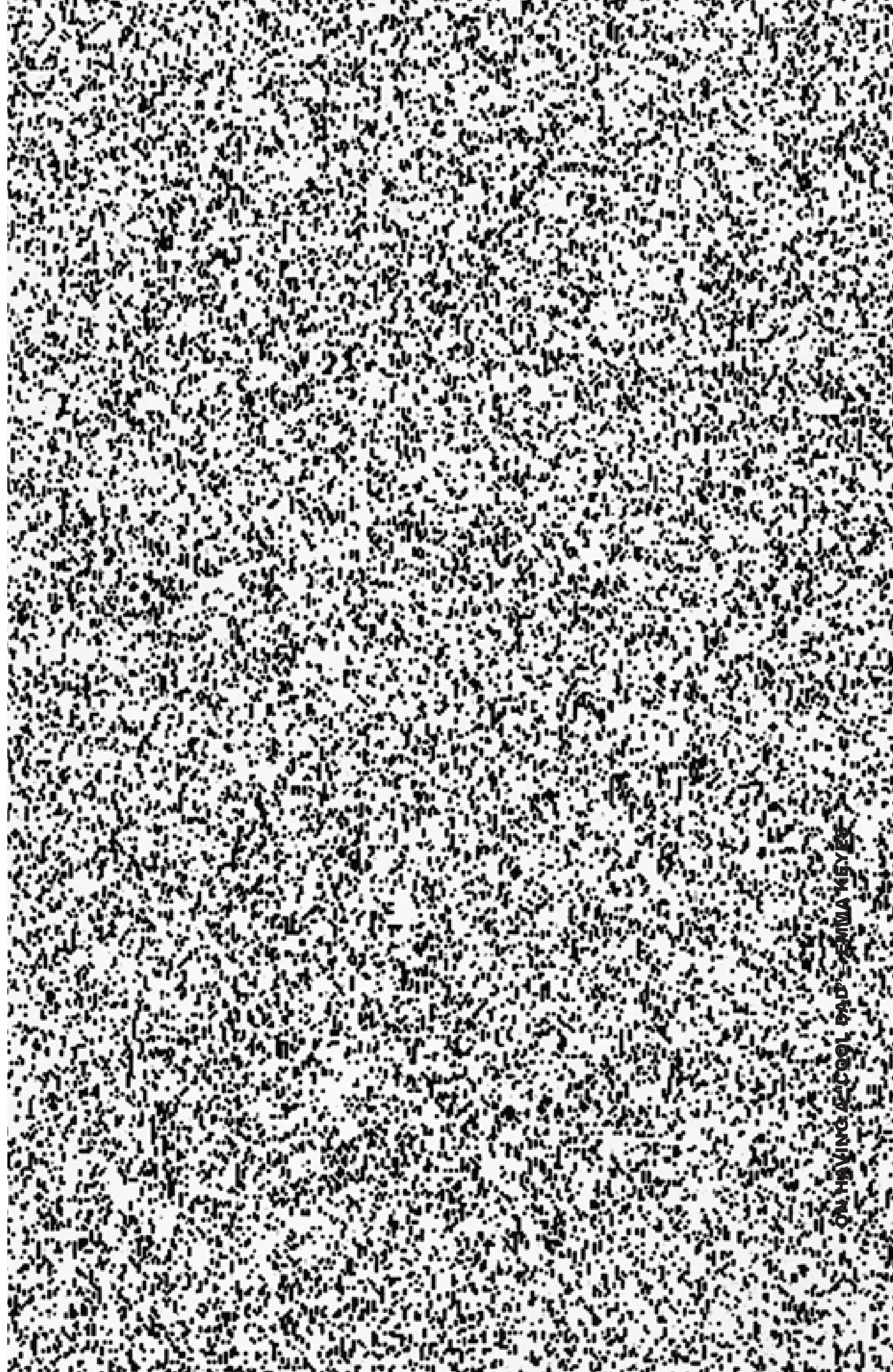
written to a pseudonymous figure called Waterface. "I'm sorry," says the writer. "You don't know these people. This means nothing to you." If that quote sounds familiar, it's because the Staten Island indie rock band Cymbals Eat Guitars interpolated it in their song "Lifenet," which came out in the summer of 2014 on an album called *LOSE*. This, to me, seems to express the fundamental anxiety of the confessional artist—what if what I wrench from the bottom of my heart doesn't mean a thing? What if I give it my all, and nobody wants to take? "I'm climbing this ladder, my head in the clouds," sings Neil on "Borrowed Tune," a lonesome song with a melody self-consciously cribbed from the Rolling Stones. "I hope that it matters," he sings. He draws out the last word over piano keys as if to extend it—as if to drive in his stake just a little bit further.

In his biography, Neil Young says that the Waterface character wrote the letter, too—to himself. "It's a stupid thing," says Neil. "A suicide note without the suicide."

This being my last issue as editor, I guess you can consider this letter to be of a similar nature. But this is our 25th issue and we've all worked hard and I know that this publication's future is in good hands.
So with that in mind—Goodbye, WYBC. We'll always have Cambridge.

— C





Teenage rebellion is a time-honored tradition. Kids are supposed to start considering their rebellious phase when they turn thirteen, and then get over it once they move out of their family homes. I mostly missed that integral stage of life because I never had any reason to rebel. My dad was cooler than I was, and I needed all the help I could get. (I love my mother, but I would not have gone to her for anything related to “coolness,” although it seems like bluegrass is becoming a hip genre to listen to, so maybe I’ll need her help sooner than I anticipated). In sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, a pretty large chunk of my identity was based on the music I listened to, which I stole straight from my father. If I had rebelled against my dad, I would have lost access to the channels through which I formed my identity at that time.

Full disclosure before I continue: I am writing this while listening to the soundtrack of the musical *Hamilton*, which is probably not that cool, but that doesn’t mean I don’t listen to “cool” music. When I was thinking about the opening paragraph to this piece, I was listening to the Replacements, who are the epitome of cool college radio-era bands. Anyway.

My dad has told me that one of his proudest moments as a parent came from hearing my brother and I in the shower (so you know we were real young





at the time) singing “Bastards of Young” by the Replacements together. Since I’ve already mentioned the band twice in this piece, it bears mentioning that the Replacements are the coolest eighties indie band hands down, and yes, I will fight someone about this. One of my favorite musical stories my dad told me in my it-feels-far-away-youth (besides when I made him explain the entire narrative progression of “American Pie” to me probably ten times) is about the music video for “Bastards of Young.” From my (probably bastardizing (ha)) memory: The Replacements had a record deal, as many bands do, and that record deal included some requirement that they make [x] number of music videos or whatever. The band didn’t want to make a music video, but they did want to get paid, so they said, “fuck this,” (metaphorically) and filmed a guy (half off-screen) listening to the song on a speaker, smoking a cigarette. At the end of the song, the guy gets up and kicks the speaker to shit. That’s it. That’s the video. I thought that was the greatest thing when I was twelve years old. My opinion hasn’t changed much in the past six years, either.

I have a memory of having gone into our basement on some morning when I was probably eleven years old with my little green iPod shuffle to try

out our dusty stationary bike. Really the only memorable thing about that moment in my life is that I was listening to “Another Saturday Night” by Sam Cooke. Looking back at myself, I’m impressed. Eleven year old me was cooler than eighteen year old me and that’s probably because I’m out of the house and away from my father’s musical influence. Damn you Yale, you’re making me less cool.

The first real concert I ever went to was Robyn Hitchcock playing with Peter Buck at the Black Cat in Washington, DC. I was twelve. We didn’t stay for the encore, because I was little and tired and overwhelmed, even though the only Robyn Hitchcock song I really knew was Balloon Man, which was definitely going to get played during the encore. In the classical Hollywood sense of the phrase: It was the start of a beautiful friendship. That beautiful friendship has taken a couple of different forms over the years. There’s my friendship with music and my friendship with concerts. Most importantly, there’s my friendship with my dad. At concerts we venture into the great unknown as equals and we’re better for it. I would be a very different person from who I am now if not for the musical relationships that my dad has helped make into such an integral part of my life, and that’s not necessarily a good thing or a bad thing, but it’s something that feels true in this moment, and that’s enough.

My parents are the same.

Both grew up in St. Louis, MO and attended Parkway South High School. Both thought the movie *The Tree of Life* was vastly overrated. Both know Jim Moriarty, my mother's Irish Tennis Captain High School Boyfriend. Both watch their favorite sports alone and cursing. Both have been to see the Stones, Springsteen, and Aretha.

My parents are different.

My mother grew up rich, with a new refrigerator and clothing that was her own. My father grew up with six brothers, a secretary's salary, and shared twin beds. My mother is loud and effusive, a consummate performer whose big break was birth. My father is quiet, with few friends, and a preference for quiet voices in enclosed spaces. My mother cooks and does not eat much. My father can cook but almost always buys a rotisserie chicken from the grocery store if he's hungry and there's nothing on the cooling rack. My mother is black. My father is white. My mother calls folk music the songs of white people who don't have the talent to steal properly. My father loves Simon & Garfunkel and Joni.

My mother doesn't have music to drive to.

When driving, my mother does not play music. She is the reason I learned the acronym NPR and titled all my early poems "This American Life." Pulling smoothly down Lake Shore Drive with the Chicago Skyline bouncing yellow light like so many rows of water glasses, Tavis Smiley's voice would rumble low under our seats afternoon after afternoon. I kept my eyes shut during his show, either sleeping or culling imagination, trying to conjure a body to match his sound to. Today, his voiceimage still stumbles around my head as a *Proud Family* sketch of Al Roker crossed





with Michael Jordan. I broke my meditation only when the radio shut off, and the car found still life silence in park mode.

My father needs music to drive to.

When my maternal grandfather died, my grandmother sold my father his 1980 navy blue Mercedes below market price. Because the car was old, its disc chamber was in the trunk. You could load it with 5 CDs at once but couldn't change anything from inside the car except what order they played in. My father cannot drive in silence or with news radio. It has to be music. Part of this may be a residual fear left over from his father's early death, sleepy at the wheel of a beer truck while cruising down a highway. My father has always hoarded music. He was one of the first people I know to invest in an iPod; when filing taxes he blasts Top 50 hits from flashy speakers; and in the old Mercedes he stacked CD on top of CD in the trunk, sometimes pulling the car off to the side of the road to make a necessary substitution. I heard Joni Mitchell, Carole King, and Adele all for the first time on that car radio and sang brazenly until my lungs were empty and exhausted. I preferred riding with my father. His music dictated the direction of my mood... the direction of my mood, upwards and upwards regardless of destination". But it is NPR that fills my silent nights and mornings.

My mother has no music.

It took me until 19 to realize that my mother does not listen to music independently. She says when she was younger she bought CDs and tapes, played Jesus Christ Superstar so many times in the car the edgings on the back of the disc ran together, saw Talking Heads with her 30-something boyfriend her freshman year of college. But somewhere in between

"Early 20s" in D.C. her move to post-grad wandering around my father's empty Printer's Row apartment while he worked, she lost it.

My mother dances to black music.

When my mother talks on the phone to people from St. Louis her voice changes. People call her Dee-Dee rather than Dietrich and ask after "Andy and the girls." Her responses come out in a register I am unfamiliar with: it is something brassy and low that swings out uncontrolled and involuntary. When my Aunt Linda comes to visit from STL, we dance. She is in her early 70s, a breast cancer survivor, stolid and steeled in cheetah print pants and lime green shirt. She frequents dance clubs and recommends playlist items for me to put on my dad's sound system. She is a much better dancer than I am, but we would pop and drop together for hours. It was like my middle school socials without the white kids who would crowd around me and ask if I could teach them to dance. On nights spent with Linda my mother would dance. She wasn't cautious. She didn't need to be peeled or coaxed off the couch. One moment she was sitting and the next she was across from me shouting lyrics to a song she somehow learned even in her cone of soundlessness*.

After we danced together, Aunt Linda and my mother would sit with two glasses of wine while





I lay on the floor cooling off and on the edge of sleep. They compared my young movements with what they used to do in Aunt Carolyn's basement—my mother a kid, passed around bouncing laps to be looked at, her mother a skinny teenager with big earrings and narrow legs; my mother a pre-teen awkwardly bumping along as the adults took pride in rhythm, touch, and sway, the motions aging and dying with every shift in tempo, pitch, et cetera.

My mother, a teenager joining in—Motown, soul train. She loved Michael Jackson, had a picture of him on her wall, wore a bright red velvet pantsuit to his concert, and screamed out "MICHAEL! MICHAEL!" The day he died she watched vigils for him on our television. I came home from smoking cigarettes with my friends to find her sitting alone on the couch, crying as "Man in the Mirror" played in the background.

The silence and the sound.

There is a distinct rhythm to being the black half of an interracial couple. I cannot say I know it because I have always been mixed, but I have seen it move through my mother's body. Certain things my father will never understand. My sister and I will never understand. She is alone in those. I have watched this rhythm of isolation, representation, shame from my sister and I drown out her sound, whatever sound came with Linda left just as easily when she got on the train, when Michael died, when I sang Simon & Garfunkel at a jazz concert only my mother attended.

When my parents are in the car together they listen to music that predates both of them by

*The first song I ever played on the radio that she asked about was "Gold Digger" by Kanye West; the second was "Ice Cream and Cake," a jingle from a Baskin Robbins commercial.

about 30 years. "This is the good stuff," they say, "this is quality." But I know my father combs through David Byrne's public playlist weekly, so he can stay informed of what "new shit" is pulsing through the alternative airwaves, and Corinne Bailey Rae, the only artist I remember my mother playing in the car ever, made us all smile something equal to Ella. This is the art of compromise at work. My mother married a white man and will always be the exception standing next to him, will always be thrown against a white background, will always hold the real rhythm in a room full of off-beat side steps, will always be the black girl from STL that married a white man. I did not realize what this could do to a body until I was thrown into my own rhythm-less white background where, though my biracial status made my difference less than my mother's, no one looked like me, understood the rules that governed my body, my presence in the world, my hair, my ass. At the socials, where my tight clothes and popping made things more obvious, I came to understand my parents' attachment to the old standards—it is easiest to choose neutrality, the music 30 years too old, drowning out the sound of what each partner can't have.

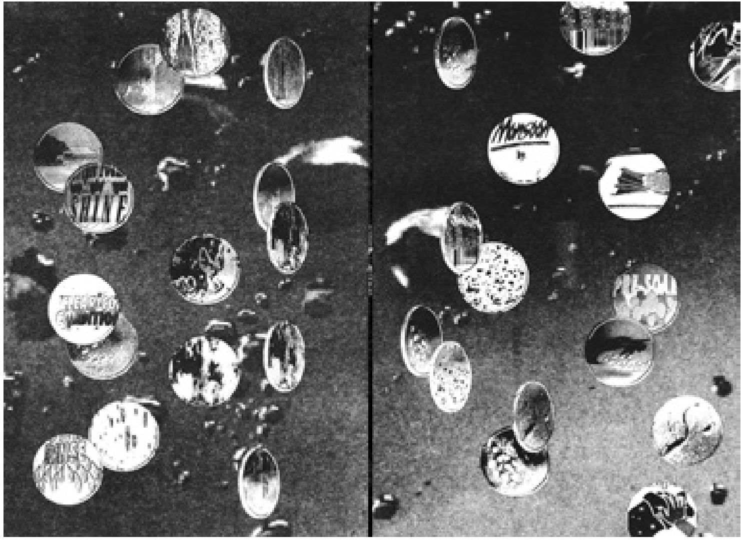
My mother learned music in her own context: a powerful one, full of jumbled up family, rhythm, dance, and love. But the world I was brought into is one of distinct silence, a push and pull that shutters any possibility of organized song. Our house is quiet always unless someone is making a concerted effort at talking, or my father is alone in his office filling the room up with his iTunes library. My mother does not control the soundscape and has never expressed a desire to. "Mom why don't you listen to music?" I asked last July. She said it only holds memories for her, reminds her of her age, what's come to pass, what's





been lost in the fact of passing. Music is the size 0 pair of jeans that fit her in the '80s but not anymore, the childhood best friend whose kids' ages she can never quite remember. When people change they can't take everything with them.

My mother left music.



Joshua Tillman is on a curious quest to be genuine. In 2013, in an effort to achieve this evasive goal, he adopted a new persona and has since released two albums steeped, perhaps ironically, in sarcasm. *I Love You, Honeybear* (2015), the second LP released under the name Father John Misty, delves into a new, distinct sound, while providing both humor and insight to the listener.

The album cements Tillman's dramatic departure from his earlier days as the former drummer and backing vocalist for Fleet Foxes. Tillman helped successful indie folk band promote their 2011 album *Helplessness Blues*. As opposed to the fast-paced, chaotic moods portrayed by *I Love You, Honeybear*, *Helplessness Blues* depicts a more sophisticated, analytical, and dark attitude. In *Helplessness Blues*, songs such as "Montezuma" and "Grown Ocean" create an atmospheric and calming effect, all while portraying a deeper meaning of regret and omnipresent loneliness. In "Montezuma," the lyrics depict a depressing landscape of nothingness—a universal state of emptiness. "In dearth or excess," they sing, "both the slave and the empress / will return to dirt, I guess." Smooth vocal tones accompanied by Tillman's background vocals create an eerie, mysterious mood.

Only four years after the release of *Helplessness Blues*, Tillman's game has changed. Look no further than the song titles on *I Love You*, Honeybear to see how dramatic this shift has been, at least on the surface—"Holy Shit", "Bored in the USA", and "I Went to the Store One Day" are among the highlights. The eerie, acoustic atmosphere of Fleet Foxes tracks have been replaced with a chaotic medley of orchestras, brass instruments, and thick chords, all led by Tillman's strong voice. As a member of Fleet Foxes, Tillman rarely had the opportunity to play his own style of music, the very style so clearly exhibited by his latest album. Fleet Foxes had already acquired their folksy, melodic sound before Tillman's arrival as drummer. In fact, as a member of Fleet Foxes, Tillman often played as an opening act soloist, proceeding after his set to sit back as the drummer during the main show. While it may appear that Tillman has revolutionized his own sound since his departure from the band, it would be more truthful to say that the Fleet Foxes' sound was never truly his.





Underneath *I Love You, Honeybear*'s brusque exterior, Tillman explores and questions the expression of love through music. In a January 2015 interview with *The Guardian*, he states that he "just wanted to write about love without bullshitting." In Tillman's eyes, the only way to write clearly about love is to write about daily, tedious occurrences and interactions, which collectively define a meaningful relationship. In the titular song, Tillman introduces the listener to the album by describing its subject: his relationship with his wife, Emma. The song oscillates between specific personal situations and visual images from their relationship to greater themes that define them as a couple. Tillman sings, "I've brought my mother's depression, you've got your father's scorn and a wayward aunt's schizophrenia," in one line, depicting a situation which only he and his wife can remember. This line references the specific emotional and psychological barriers of Tillman's marriage, specifying conditions such as depression and schizophrenia and their familial origins. Here, a public song tells a story of an intimate problem. An ordinary listener does not recall the same memories as an artist, and the phrase effectively separates Tillman from his audience. In contrast,

he later sings, “Everything is doomed and nothing will be spared / But I love you, honeybear.” These lines relay the inevitable conflict and desperation that each relationship confronts, regardless of its strong emotional ties. By speaking about a condition universal within relationships, this phrase broadens the scope of the song and resonates with the experiences of Father John Misty's larger audience.

This juxtaposition of experience is the essence of Father John Misty. *I Love You, Honeybear* does not only describe love, it expresses it. Tillman realizes that love stories are not always dramatic or theatrical, and relationships are a continuation of one's routine life. Tillman successfully describes his own relationship in a seemingly ordinary fashion and throughout writes about events that are personally meaningful. At the same time, he is able to connect ideas specific to himself to others, by expressing the often mundane, yet incredibly special, moments of a relationship. Although the album is an individualized creation, it quickly transforms into a universal declaration of love.

Taylor Swift is a pop phenomenon of the 21st century. Lou Reed is an experimental rock phenomenon of the mid-to-late 20th century. Father John Misty isn't a much of a phenomenon at all outside of his moderately successful stint with Fleet Foxes and his less successful solo venture. These three artists had nothing in common, until Father John Misty decided to unite them.

In September 2015, Father John Misty dropped a cover of "Blank Space" by Taylor Swift in the style of Lou Reed. Stylistically, the cover is equal parts brilliant and barbaric, breaking the musical structure that makes "Blank Space" such a catchy tune. Pop, especially Swift's pop, relies on melody and rhythm. With his band the Velvet Underground, Lou Reed stripped away much of those elements, exploring instead a rawer, less organized musical frontier. The Velvet Underground's experimental drum beats, coupled with Lou Reed's droning guitar, is almost antithetical to Taylor Swift's meticulously designed, self-consciously commercial music. Father John Misty's version of "Blank Space" can barely be called the same song because it's so stylistically different, but oddly enough, however, the cover works. If you disregard the lyrics, it feels as if the song could have just walked off the Andy Warhol album. And even though the lyrics are trivial at best, they can be interpreted with the same dark, punk lens that permeates all of the Velvet Underground's music. It's a cover that could really only exist now and today.

I don't know how many millennials know who Lou Reed is today. Perhaps the Beatles are as far back as our collective musical consciousness goes. But the relatively outsized subset of millennials who do know Lou Reed tend to be conspicuous—





they're the ones who clutch their vintage *Hunky Dory* records, wear the same pair of Converse/Keds/iconic sneaker until the soles have fallen apart (at which point they'll duct tape them back together), and drink PBR on the weekends while discussing postmodernism. They're part of an intellectual pastiche of sorts, pulling elements of the past into the present under the facade of "being ironic" to create a new culture that coddles them with sentimentality and provides them with a space to feel emotion against the growing harshness of the modern world.

Our generation is obsessed with the culture of nostalgia. From the way we dress to the music we listen to, we are trying to replicate the sentimentality of a specific moment in time. Modern fashion draws as equally from the 60s as from the 90s, and everything in between, as seen in the resurgence of everything from high-waisted jeans to oversized Reeboks. From Doc Martens to flannel shirts, grunge is suddenly having a moment again. Bands like the Smashing Pumpkins and Nirvana serve as the inspiration for new post-grunge albums such as the Foo Fighters seventh studio album. Proclaiming yourself as a 90s kid even if you were born in 1996 is a street cred requirement.

We propagate the culture of nostalgia because contemporary life has stolen it from us. Every moment worth remembering is captured on Instagram or Facebook, every experience worth sharing is shared with the world on Snapchat. This kind of lifestyle prevents nostalgic experience. With all the highlights of life visible on your computer screen at the click of a button, the mind finds itself unable to procure meaningful remembrances—to couch experience in the ameliorating vagueness of memory. The import-

ant stuff—the emotions and thoughts coursing through your head—are obscured and neglected in the process of trying to take the perfect selfie.

Father John Misty succumbed to this culture of nostalgia. Lou Reed was never mainstream, he never held the kind of fame that stripped him of his authenticity. He was a figure in the cult of nostalgia cultivated by millennial hipsters and their PBR. Yet Father John Misty's cover of "Blank Space" has racked up over 100,000 views on the internet; it's made its rounds of web fame, an attempt to turn Lou Reed into the mainstream. The reason so many of us like Lou Reed is because he's raw and because he's exclusive to the mainstream; he's delegated to a specific group of friends, a specific time, or a specific place. Basically, he's a product of nostalgia. The desire to capture that nostalgia and convert it into something part of our lives is so strong that Lou Reed has applied onto the frame of Taylor Swift. This is a 2015 phenomenon because try as hard as you might, when appropriating the past, you're still stuck with the present.

Father John Misty sees the absurdity in nostalgia culture, but do we, the consumers, see this distinction? Misty, with his covers, was poking fun at Ryan Adams, who covered all of 1989, and the whole concept of covers especially. But in doing so, Father John Misty ended up pandering to a market that desperately longs for something in the past that they can't have. I think Tilman recognizes this. After he posted the cover online, he pulled it down saying he had an insane dream where Lou Reed spoke to him and said that the covers were a disgrace to his memory. Two weeks later, Father John Misty said he was simply upset over the fame that he attracted with the covers. Misty, via dreamscape Lou Reed, said, "'The collection of souls is an expensive pastime.'" It is, and it's an exhausting one, always putting up pretenses of historical omniscience. We need to understand that the past is the past, and rather than trying to recreate it today, we should focus on creating a new present.

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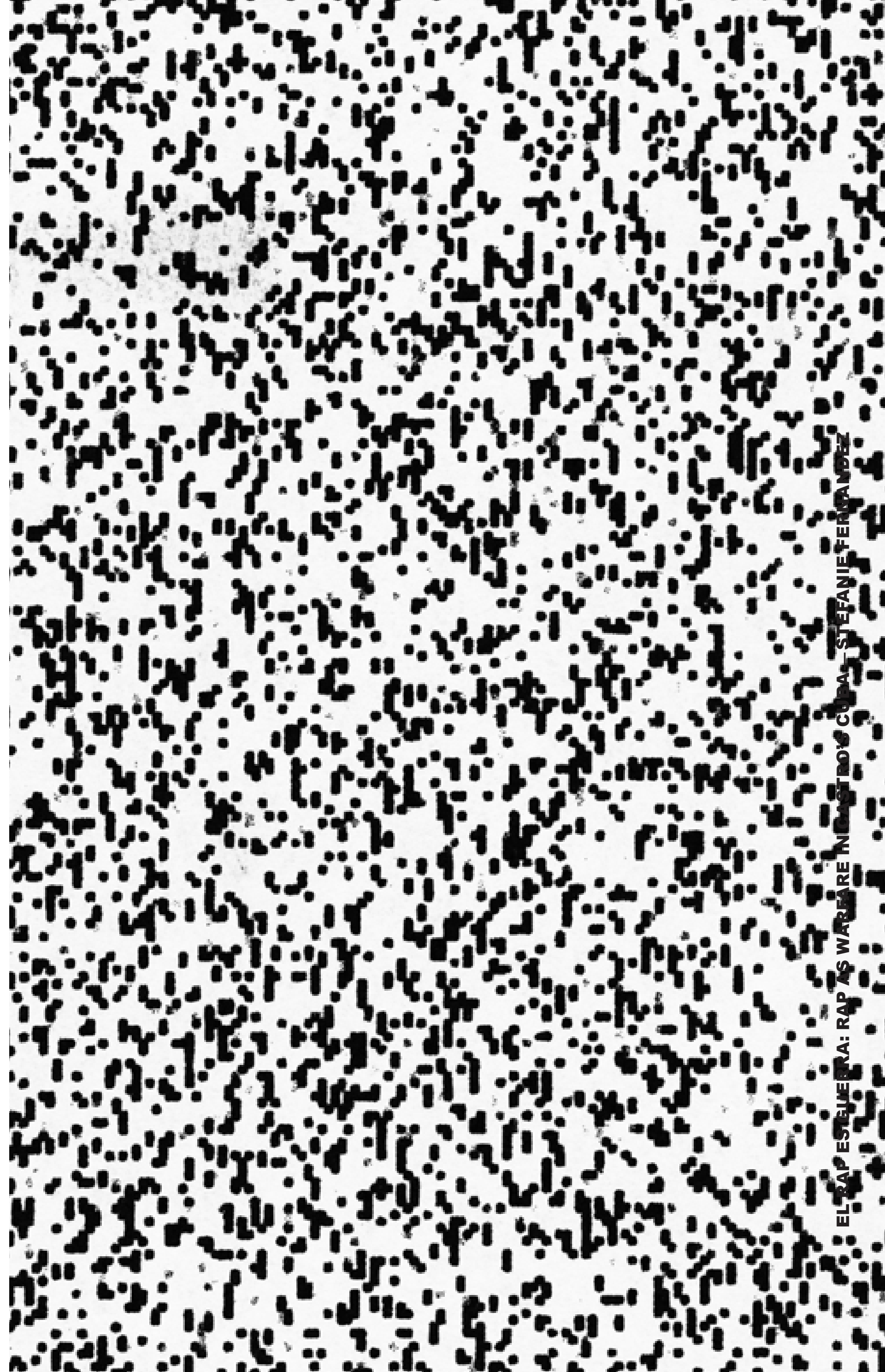


"You really need to listen to more Spanish music," she told me as we were walking down the street back to our summer apartment. I didn't bother to tell her that in Miami-Cuban culture, Pitbull was not the norm, nor that Romeo Santos and bachata, are not as popular in South Florida or Cuba as they are in (the white half of) Queens. I felt my skin crawl with the volatile mix of subtle recognition and doubt that always accompanies microaggressions. But what do we do when these outward acts of microaggression invade the territory of our iPods, or worse, our national musical identity? While we happily bump Pitbull or Marc Anthony or Daddy Yankee or Shakira here in the states, white saviorism is infecting the musical culture of Cuba with unsettling consequences.

The United States has traditionally consumed and co-opted popular Cuban music—from reggaeton to Latin jazz to salsa—when it's about love, or dancing, or partying. But when the discourse shifts from the uncontroversial to the political, the voices of radical change are too often silenced—in Cuba for lack of the right, and in the States, for lack of caring. It's no secret that the Castro regime has historically and systematically oppressed freedom of speech and anti-government art since the Cuban Revolution of 1959, landing millions of Cuban men and women, including the author's own great uncle, in jail for sentences as long as and longer than ten years for the most minor of offenses—all for the expression of an opinion on paper, on screen, or in music.

Late in 2014, the Associated Press released a quiet report that for over two years the dubiously-named United States Department for International Development has been infiltrating Cuba's rap and hip-hop scene to "break the information blockade"





and spark revolutionary change from the ground up. The operation was disastrous at worst and amateurish at best, involving the creation of international NGO initiatives to implement a "Youth TV project", a DVD distribution system to circumvent Cuba's censors, and a "Cuban twitter social network, among other cultural projects to inspire Cuban youth to promote radical change through hip-hop." The projects, buried under layers of documents involving overseas banking, cover stories, and the whole bit, were funded by USAID grants to plan workshops on the island under the guise of "communication" and "media" workshops and to incentivize young artists to create socially-minded, anti-Castro art. The project documents retrieved from its contractor, Washington D.C.'s Creative Associates International, indicate millions of government dollars backing the initiative.

The problem is not that Cuba lacks any foundation for nouveau-revolutionary art; the island in fact has, since the 80s and 90s and simultaneous to the work of Tupac and Biggie, given birth to one of the most innovative grassroots rap and hip-hop scenes in the world. Aldo and Bian Rodriguez of Los Aldeanos, one of the most prominent groups of the Cuban hip-hop renaissance affected by the USAID project, both bear tattoos on their forearms of the phrase "el rap es guerra"—"rap is war." The problem is with the United States' assumption that the rhetoric of revolutionary change is filtered through the distinctly American lens of *if you're not against it, you're for it*. Meanwhile, the population of an island scrambles for extra rations of cheese and meat on the black market, contraband wi-fi connections, and access to cell phones. The narrative of survival—physical and artistic—is one that has been foreign to United States

foreign policy as long as the Revolution has stood in place, and longer.

In the Los Aldeanos' song, "Viva Cuba Libre!" ("Long Live Free Cuba!"), Aldo and Bian deliver a scathing, not at all subtle critique on Fidelista socialism, citing household hunger, health-care inequality, and the hypocrisy of traditional socialist rhetoric as examples of the kind of lives Cubans live while the government advertises its false brand of anti-capitalist, population-driven success to the world. Aldo raps on the song's second verse: "El pueblo marcha ciego, credibilidad no logras / Dile al capitán que este barco hace tiempo que zozobra", transforming their words into weapons of social change:

*The people march blindly,*
*you have no credibility*
*Tell the captain that this*
*ship's been sinking rapidly*

Sentiments such as these have existed in the music of Los Aldeanos and other Cuban rap groups—such as predecessors Orishas—since the genesis of the Cuban rap scene. But just as Orishas had to relocate to Paris in 1998 at the height of their popularity under threat of government arrest, Los Aldeanos found themselves in a similar situation, this time at the hands of the USAID, whose unwittingly high-profile involvement with the group resulted in Aldo's detainment for illegal possession of a computer just weeks after a 2009 concert planned by the agency with Juanes as a headliner. While this concert and others like it were purported to have "no political agenda," and while the acts themselves certainly were unaware of the management behind the scenes, one representative of the agency was quoted as saying that the USAID was heightening publicity efforts "to focus





[Los Aldeanos] a little more on their role as agents of social mobilization," according to the Associated Press. Since then, Aldo and Bian Rodriguez moved from Cuba to South Florida because the Cuban government made it impossible to create their art. Since the release of the project documents, USAID has not commented further on the operation.

When the United States transcends the barrier between good intentions and the unwitting manipulation of vulnerable artists, American intervention becomes a catalyst for artistic repression. By replacing grassroots lyrical efforts with government-implemented "programs" shrouded in secrecy and bureaucracy, the efforts of USAID have done more to harm the people of Cuba than their government. As the United States and Cuba enter a new era of "normalized" relations, it's important to remember that in the barrios of Old Havana, nothing has changed. As we raise our flag over the American embassy, hundreds of Cuban dissidents are being jailed. There remains an embargo on thought, art, and the humanity of the artist as citizen, and it is being perpetuated on both sides.

Aldo and Bian Rodriguez, who keep love, family, and the reality of human suffering at the hands of institutional oppressors at the heart of their music, represent a generation of Cuban youth who have been slighted by not one, but two governments. One day, bodies and words will not be forcibly exiled from Cuba, and television and radio programs will broadcast the uncensored voices of everyday Cubans like them. Like us.

*Yo crecí con sus mentiras y sé*
*que existe algo mejor*
*Combinado con el dolor,*

*cambio será indetenible*
*Paz y amor para mi pueblo*
*Viva cuba libre.*

*I grew up with your lies and*
*I know that something better*
*exists*
*Combined with pain, change*
*will be undetainable*
*Peace and love for my people,*
*Long live free Cuba!*

A few minutes before midnight, in the early morning of December 13th, 2013, an album was made available for purchase on iTunes. The album was not announced with fanfare—its minimalist cover artwork, with the artist's name in pink over a jet-black background, was unceremoniously displayed on the digital store's front page. No advertisement and no promotional event preceded the album's release; instead, on that early December morning, it just—appeared.

Yet that didn't stop the album from selling over 600,000 digital copies in the first three days after its release, thus making it the fastest-selling album in iTunes history. Within moments, the surprise-release unleashed a deluge of hastily-written online news articles, enthusiastic social media posts, and water-cooler conversations that consumed the country and, quickly, the world. In an industry that relies on generating enough public hype in order to sell its products, how did a work that was entirely unadvertised prior to its release manage to move so many copies? Of course, it had to do with the name emblazoned in pink on the minimalist cover: *Beyoncé*.

When Beyoncé's adoring fans purchased the pop star's self-titled fifth album in the three days after its release, they were buying two things. First and foremost, they were buying a spectacular album—a multimedia work of art that transcended, by virtue of its videographic element (one music video for each song), traditional notions of what an album could be. But the second and unavoidable product that consumers bought into was the novelty of the release—the surprise fact. Consumers met the release with a collective, synchronous reaction of "Wow, she fooled us! We had no idea! How did she





record it without us knowing?" "Well," they reasoned, "Now I have to hear it for myself!"

The success of Beyoncé's surprise release has catalyzed a movement within the pop landscape to capitalize on this "wow" factor. When Chance the Rapper's band The Social Experiment released their album *Surf*, the Chicago rapper chose to both withhold his name from the album (primarily crediting the album to Social Experiment trumpeter Nico Segal aka Donnie Trumpet). He also chose to release the album for free, in the tradition of the online mixtape. This past August, Miley Cyrus took advantage of her gig hosting the MTV Video Music Awards by using it as a platform to drop a surprise album immediately after the show was over, again for free. The current industry mentality seems to be that every album needs a gimmick in order to sell—something that curbs or subverts the tradition mechanics of the album release cycle.

Undeniably, the old conventions have been altered, if not entirely displaced. Marketing efforts today are more focused on social media posts than on television appearances or print interviews. Paying for music used to be a requirement in order to enjoy it outside of radio; now, thanks to free streaming services, to actually spend money on music

functions more like a courtesy to the artist. Innovations such as these are inevitable in the music world and should not be rejected. But these two innovations are like any change: if they're around long enough, they become the norm. And these two norms in particular—namely, surprise releases and free downloads –are trends that lesser known artists cannot afford to adhere to.

Challenges to the conventions of music sales used to actually be countercultural. Twenty-five issues ago when this magazine was first published, it was practically unheard of for established artists to release their work for free, and those that did tended to be seen as desperate. However, these deviants from the norm were no longer seen as such when they gained an unexpected ally: Radiohead.
On October 1st, 2007, Radiohead made a brief online announcement on their website:

*Hello everyone. Well, the new album is finished, and it's coming out in 10 days; We've called it In Rainbows. Love from us all. Jonny.*

The music world, in turn, nearly ruptured. The album would be the first one that the band had ever released after their contract with EMI expired in 2003, meaning that the band had no safety net should the album fail. What's more, the band released the album on a pay-what-you-want basis, the first time a popular band had utilized such a model. It was a bold move, and one that altered the landscape of the music industry. At the time, Radiohead was considered "alternative" enough for their choices to be considered rebellious, but still popular enough for





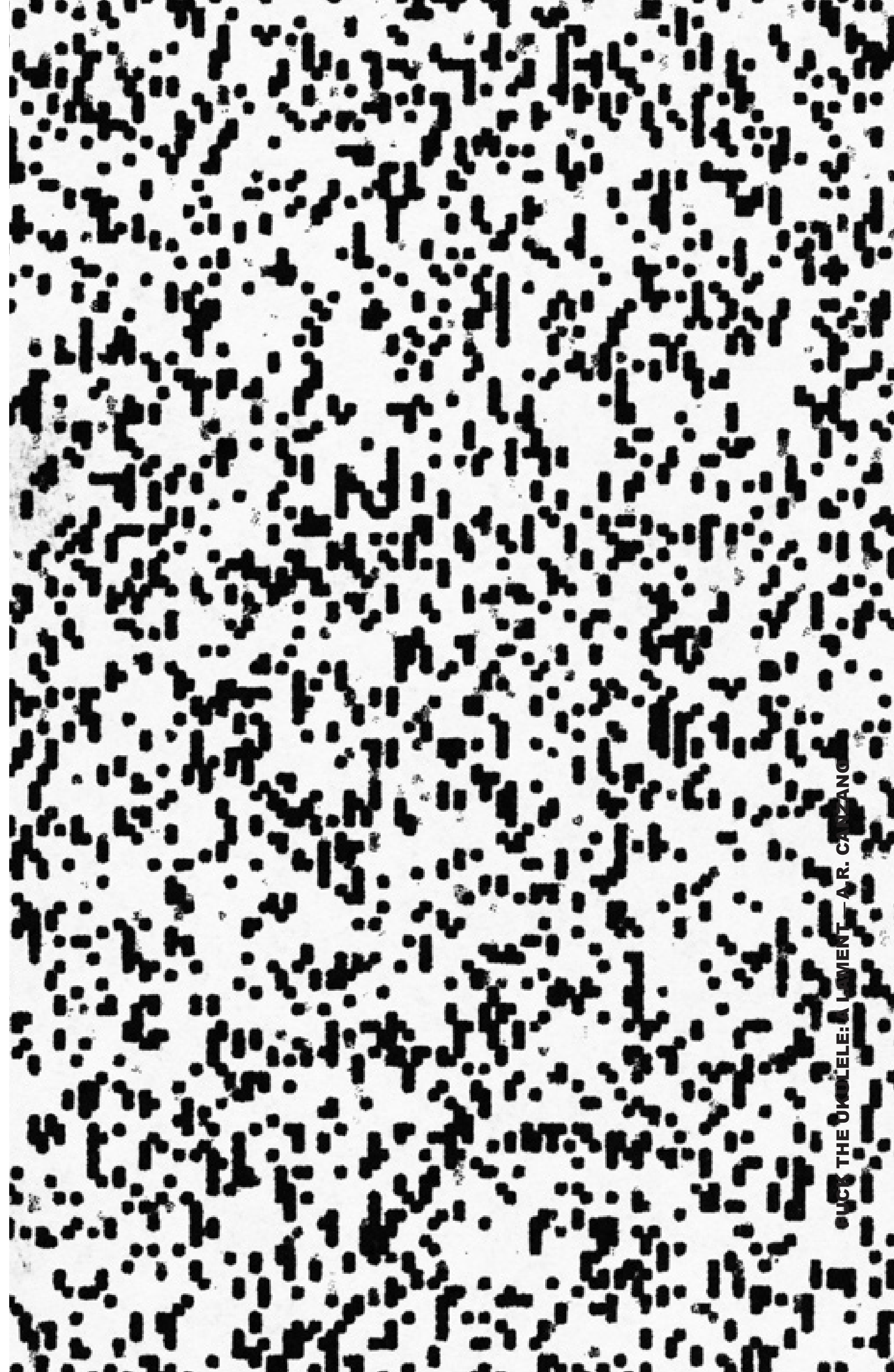
their album to gain respect as opposed to criticism. Their choice to release *In Rainbows* exclusively as an MP3 download on their website demonstrated their embrace of the budding digital market, encouraging skeptics to embrace the inevitable change in music distribution. And because fans could pay anywhere from £0 to £99.99 (approximately $212 back in 2007), Radiohead empowered listeners, not companies, to become the ultimate judges for the monetary value of music.

But a lot has changed since 2007. Streaming services such as Spotify now exist. Fans can use their iPhones to record entire concerts and put the videos of them online for free. And with the market for such releases becoming saturated, the "surprise album" as a model is no longer such a surprise. At this point, it's almost expected that an international superstar will release their music without prior notice. These new expectations represent a dramatic inversion of the old system: superstars use their immense popularity in order to release music for free, resulting in fans praising them for being visionary and progressive. Unknown artists, who are now forced to sell their music in an increasingly competitive market, are not able to stand up against such giants, now that pop has adopted the democratizing modalogy of the Internet. The tactics that made them stand out are now the basis on which they are judged.

The shift in music distribution that has taken place since Radiohead brought the pay-what-you-want and digital innovations to widespread attention have benefited music listeners globally, convincing both artists and labels that their audience, not their brand, is what matters. They are innovations that all music artists, from international

superstars to up-and-coming indie bands, should share. But the shift has created an unprecedented amount of competition in which industry titans like Beyoncé and Chance the Rapper dwarf the lesser-known artists who used to be alone in the field of unconventional album releases. If a musician needs to sell their music in order to make a living in this new market, they must not be criticized for "selling out." All music artists deserve a chance in the business, and now that listeners are free to pay for whatever music they want, they should judge music on qualities like composition and production value, not pricing or advertisement tactics.





In the contemporary music culture, the ukulele has become inexorably associated with the Quirky. Zooey Deschanel, as the Quirky's poster child, wears polka dots and strums. Ingrid Michaelson strums, too—and sings about sweaters. She rhymes words like "honey" with words like "money" and "funny." Like the sweaters in her songs, the ukulele is perhaps a bit too comfortable. Sweaters are nice, and ukuleles are nice—but that's all there is to it.

In theory, the accessibility of the ukulele should lend it a kind of D.I.Y. aesthetic, a certain democratizing aspect. A black-painted "economy" model only costs $29.99 from Amazon. A standard uke weighs less than two pounds. Most people can learn how to play one in an hour. When it comes to the ukulele, talent is unnecessary. But there's something about the sound—the saccharine plinking, the last vestiges of its Hawaiian origins fading out in a beachy twang, the muted, monotonous strumming. The ukulele—a hollow instrument—is bereft of soul.

Perhaps its mechanics are to blame. With only four strings, the instrument faces severe limitations. Strumming patterns are repetitive and simple. This combination of strumming and four strings tends to produce homogenous songs. Unlike more complex stringed instruments, the ukulele's lack of necessary practice-investment leads to appropriately low returns. On the other hand, advanced techniques such as fingerpicking usually require a mentor, which removes the appeal of the D.I.Y. ethic. YouTube tutorials can only go so far.

Sometimes, only sometimes, is the ukulele acceptable: for example, when the player can play more than 5 chords. Master





players such as Jake Shimabukuro and Jake Hill are not held back by the limitations of the instrument—their virtuosic playing transcends what so much of contemporary ukulele music has made us expect.

One band that manages to transcend these limitations is Beirut, whose inclusion of the ukulele began out of necessity. As a teenager, frontman Zach Condon broke his wrist, thus preventing himself from playing guitar. Although most of Beirut's songs do feature a repetition of three or four chords, Beirut couches the ukulele within the sound of a full ensemble. Stripped of the rich arrangements, Beirut's music might verge on Michaelson's cheery cutesiness.

Another band that achieves a certain redemption of the ukulele is the Magnetic Fields. The extensive use of ukulele on their 1999 triple-album *69 Love Songs* is appropriate to the ironic concept of the album. Moreover, the Fields eschew base Quirkiness by way of lyrical complexity. The song "Queen of the Savages" features repetitive strumming, but frontman Stephin Merritt redeems the instrumentation with lines such as, "She don't know this modern world and its ravages / Instead of money she's got yams and cabbages." The rhyme here and the lyrics are much richer than Ingrid Michaelson's nice sweaters.

More recently, since around 2008, the contemporary music culture has become itself saturated with the ukulele. Since then, perhaps due to the popularity of artists such as Deschanel and Michaelson, it seems that more and more people have tried their hands at it. Gone are the days when the ukulele could posture as an innovative or novel instrument—now, hordes of teenagers use

it as a cheap validation of hipness-*sans*-effort. A faux signifier of musicality, of alt-elitism.

Post-recession ukulele, if it is to break free of the Quirky designation, must be used to innovate. On the 2011 Tune-Yards album *w h o k i l l*, Merrill Garbus manipulates and layers her ukulele to such a point that it becomes nearly unrecognizable as such. Garbus' vision points towards a hopeful future for the instrument, yet artists such as Michelson continue to define the ukulele culture.

To those uke-toting teenagers I say: Adopt the virtuosity of Shimabukuro and Hill, the scope of Condon, the lyricism of Merritt, or the innovative vision of Garbus. Only then will your playing transcend your current phase of wannabe hipsterdom. Or better yet, go learn a real instrument. Why not try the theramin? That's still under the radar—for now.

You probably remember it like it was yesterday. You probably think about it every day. You probably spend every second of every day thinking about it. You probably are literally incapable of thinking about anything else. That's right—I'm talking about the magical moment you lost your virginity.

It happens for each of us at a different time and in a different way. For some of us, it's an elaborately planned affair: rose petals, candles—the works. For others of us, it happens when we least expect it, but is still really amazing: with Gavin in the captain's room of your father's boat and he's wearing his St. James sailor shirt and when he takes it off you catch a glimpse of his gorgeous clavicle… And then, some of us are still waiting to lose the stigmatic associations of childhood and break into that beautiful world of adult romance. Those people will probably lose it at some point, and there's nothing wrong with them—they just haven't found the right person yet! Not me, though. I've had sex, and lots of it. In all sorts of ways. Standing up, sitting down… You name it, I've had it. Still, the first time is a unique experience. The kind of memory that you'll hold onto forever, for better or worse. Right?

Well, sorry to burst your bubble, sex fiends, but newsflash: it doesn't actually count as losing your virginity unless you did it while listening to the beginning of "Sweet Escape" by Gwen Stefani where Akon is going "WOOhoo YEEhoo." Unless you got down and dirty while listening to the seminal 2006 hit, you are for all intents and purposes in the same boat as an eleven-year-old Jewish boy: not yet in the realm of adulthood, definitely inexperienced, and probably hairless.





This isn't all bad news—sure, you're still liable to be used as a blood sacrifice at any given moment, but it also means that any children you've already had will have a good fun fact (that they were immaculately conceived) for the first day of classes for the rest of their life. You win some, you lose some.

You may be wondering: "But if I wasn't losing my v-card, what was I even doing?" The same thing you did in Ms. Thomson's 3's class with Kara in the bathroom during blocks time: something that seemed a lot like sex, that definitely felt good, but that definitely, unequivocally does not count. Ms. Thomson would agree on both counts.

Although this news might sadden you, please try to see the silver lining: now, when the time comes for you to first experience the real joys of sexual intimacy, it will happen just as it was meant to be: you, your lover, and Akon's piercing falsetto. Just as God intended.

UNITED STATES
POSTAL SERVICE

### *AM*

When the Arctic Monkey's fourth LP *AM* won Best Album at the 2014 Brit Awards, the British band's lead singer, Alex Turner, gave a cool look to the camera, puckered his lips slightly, and stood up to swagger towards the stage. "That rock'n'roll, eh? That rock & roll. It's always waiting there…ready to make its way back through the sludge…looking better than ever," he prophesied. Then, attempting a display of Rock & Roll indocility, Turner put out his hand and dropped the mic with which he had given the speech. "Invoice me for the microphone," he announced with Mick Jagger-esque insouciance. I had stopped following the band a few months before this speech because I found *AM* unbearably repetitive and prosaic. But while watching this spectacle at the Brit Awards, I couldn't help but think, "What the fuck happened?"

Ever since their first album, *Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not*, began to make waves on the Internet in 2006, I had been obsessed with the Arctic Monkeys. That record was a revelation to me. I was drawn in by the energy and amusement in each song. Their flippant lyrics revealed a contentment with adolescence and immaturity unlike the weighty lyrics of classic rock to which I had become accustomed. Their sound was simple and fun: they played catchy guitar riffs, that was all they did, and they were absolutely okay with that. Take "A Certain Romance," a song about the romantic sensibilities of Sheffield teenagers, centered around one bass riff. Despite banal subject matter and uncomplicated music, the sheer catchiness of the riff and cleverness of the lyrics made "A Certain Romance" a great song.





It all worked so well because it reflected who the band members were: a loose crew of teenagers with nearly incomprehensible Sheffield accents, smatterings of acne across their barely post-adolescent faces and knackered Chuck Taylors on their feet. They embodied an appealingly amateurish DIY attitude—a slacker/go-getter ambivalence that drew me and countless other young people into the alluring world of indie music. The music video for "Cornerstone," which features Alex Turner standing alone singing the song into a tape recorder, could have been made by any kid with a video camera. This playfulness, though, belied the lyrical acumen and songwriting skill it took to write "Cornerstone."

I loved Turner & Co.'s attitude. Through the Arctic Monkeys, I discovered bands such as Arcade Fire, The Libertines, and, of course, the Strokes, who inaugurated the wave of revivalist garage rock that Turner and his band inherited. And there I was in 2014, watching that group of oblivious teens preaching their sermon on the mount. After I had loved Arctic Monkeys and bands of their ilk for so long, the Brit Awards speech first instilled in me the vague notion that indie was dead. It wasn't just that the Arctic Monkeys had reached a level of popularity that made it impossible to call them indie—it was the feeling that the whole thing was manufactured. Turner's pseudo-contrarian speech at the Brit Awards was the culmination of a period of confusion within the indie world.

UNITED STATES
POSTAL SERVICE

## Was Indie Ever Relevant?

In a recent dialogue on the state of indie music/culture, Ezra Koenig and Hipster Runoff founder Carles took it for granted that "Indie," as we know it, is dead. "'Indie' was about romanticizing amateurism in music and media," Carles explains. Indie had a sound, but, more than that, it was a culture that privileged originality over craftsmanship, experimentation over polishing, and honesty (i.e., amateurism) over pretension. The early Arctic Monkeys typified this style. They were honest about what they offered. As the title of their debut LP asserted: whatever people said they were, that's what they weren't.

This vibe has become almost unachievable. Koenig explains:

*The amateur/professional dichotomy is just about destroyed now. The biggest celebrities now show the openness/vulnerability/'realness' that was once associated with 'confessional' 'bedroom' indie. The smallest artists now rely on big corporate money to get started. All the old dualities are jumbled.*

The Information Age ushered in a new type of celebrity, and this celebrity looks very much like the indie stars we idolized a short time ago. A superstar actress like Jennifer Lawrence can now go on talk shows and reveal the realness of her day-to-day life. On an





appearance on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, she related having gone to "a diver bar with senior-citizen strippers." "I got a lap dance from Little Bo Peep, who was very bossy and kept getting on top of me," she explained. The mainstream celebrity no longer has to fit the norms of the pre-naughts. Lawrence lives in Beverly Hills but has adopted the authenticity that used to be off-limits for someone of her stature. She has taken on a Turner-esque flippancy towards her fame. The mainstream has subsumed the attitude of indie acts and vice-versa.

This cooptation of authenticity and disavowal of pretension on the part of mainstream artists remove a level of the charm that earlier indie acts had. And the more explicit aim at something beyond "bedroom" music makes it more difficult to view indie acts the way we used to. The presence of the Hold Steady's Craig Finn in commercials for the food delivery service Seamless is less the act of a sell out than it is a microcosm of the broader embrace of commercial success on the part of indie bands.

### Condé Nast Buys Pitchfork

Now, we have news that media conglomerate Condé Nast has purchased Pitchfork Media in order to enlist "a very passionate audience of millennial males into [its] roster," as Condé Nast's Chief Digital Officer rather unsubtly stated.

When Ryan Schreiber began Pitchfork Media (then called Turntable) in 1995, he had just graduated high school. With no experience in writing or web development, the only thing going for him was his passion for music. Through a thirst for innovative new acts, Schreiber and his team created a venue for the appreciation and curation of indie music. He is now a gatekeeper in the indie world, an amateur turned professional.

As much as I want to be terrified that corporate America is encroaching on my beloved space to appreciate independent music, I don't think much will change. The rise of Pitchfork's influence over the past decade mirrors the aforementioned shift in indie culture. A group of young writers interested in music have become the arbiters of indie relevance. Insofar as it aimed at excellence in music journalism and influence in the indie world, Pitchfork Media could not avoid corporatism.

Perhaps people are more honest now than they used to be. Good indie bands now cop to a degree of dedication to craft and attention to detail. While we'll miss the indie vibe of yore—the flippancy, the intimacy, the immaturity of it all—indie's current iteration allows a greater degree of honesty. Honesty, after all, was the source of indie's attraction. As with Arctic Monkeys' increased influence and success, Pitchfork will now have more reach than ever before. It seems disingenuous to criticize a music publication on account of an earnest, large-scale effort to increase its scale and reach.

But the Arctic Monkeys suck now.

PRAWN NEWS
BY DAVIS!
KRILL FEATURES SYNDICATE
Under no circumstances is Sybil to be disturbed! She is meditating! She is in an altered state of consciousness! Her metabolic rate is lowered! She is totally serene and at peace! I will not allow you to disturb her tranquility with any negativeness!
But
But NOTHING, young man! You can use some of her serenity yourself! Just give me the message and in twenty minutes, when she's finished, I will relay your news to her!
Okay, if that's the way you want it! At that point in time, just tell her in a calm manner that…
…her apartment's on fire!!

In 2006 my parents purchased R.E.M.'s CD compilation *...And I Feel Fine*, a collection of hits and b-sides spanning the band's six-year tenure with the independent label I.R.S. Records. Disc two features a live performance of the song "Life and How to Live It," recorded in the Netherlands on the band's 1987 tour, which I recall being particularly struck by as an eleven year-old due to its spoken preface. Amidst the noise of the Dutch audience, Michael Stipe tells a curious story about a man who constructed a wall that divides his house in two. Each side of his newly subdivided home had its own set of media, appliances, and furniture, Stipe describes, and the man would live on one side for a while until he got tired of it, at which point he would put down whatever he was reading, strip naked, and walk across to the other side of his house, where he would resume a punctuated life. This cycle repeated, Stipe says, until his death, shortly after which the man's landlord discovered in his closet a vast collection of identical books, unsold, undistributed, and authored by the deceased tenant. "And the name of the book," Stipe says, as the band prepares to lurch into song, "was 'Life and How to Live It.'"

The story, and particularly the way that Stipe delivers it, fascinated me as a child. The short, terse sentences, the lack of exposition and detail, and the vaguely uncanny and humorous conceit all resonated with my younger self. But it was not until I went to college that I learned to associate these traits with the artistic movement of which R.E.M. were surely a part: postmodernism.

"Life and How To Live It" appears on *Fables of the Reconstruction*, the group's Joe Boyd-produced third album, released in June of 1985. Neither critics nor fans knew what to make of the





album at the time, although it has enjoyed something of a critical renaissance in the thirty years since. Its murky tone, resistance to hooks, and vague conceptual underpinnings made *Fables* a complex and difficult-to-digest release, in contrast to its relatively straightforward though by no means simplistic predecessors *Murmur* and *Reckoning*.

Released a few months earlier in January, Don DeLillo's seminal postmodern novel *White Noise* has proved similarly divisive. Despite winning the National Book Award later that year, DeLillo's text was criticized by some contemporaries, such as Washington Post critic Jonathan Yardley, who called it "irritating...frustrating [and] monotonously apocalyptic" in a 1985 review. More recent readings have been similarly muddled.

With the Detroit-simulacrum of Iron City looming literally and figuratively over the idyllic town of Blacksmith in which White Noise is based, we can reasonably place DeLillo's text in the midwest. By contrast, R.E.M.'s album title indicates a southern locus—fitting, considering the band's Athens, Georgia origins. In terms of location, the connection here is twofold—the shared provincialism of the south and midwest in post-industrial America, and the uniquely microcosmic atmosphere of the American college. We can almost imagine a young Michael Stipe and co., themselves just a few years removed from university life in 1985, arriving at the College on the Hill among the grand caravan of station wagons that DeLillo describes on the book's opening page, kissing their parents goodbye, rifling through their "cartons of phonograph records and cassettes" (1). Indeed by 1985, R.E.M. had established themselves as the quintessential 'college rock' band—arty, inscrutable,

and, crucially for their élite collegiate fans, resistant to mainstream radio play. Although crossover success would come by the time of 1987's *Document*, *Fables* furthered all three elements of that ambivalent legacy, much to the vexation of their label, IRS.

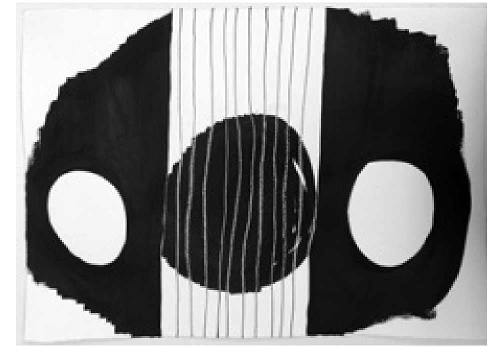
DeLillo's middle age at the time of the book's publication tempts us to connect his authorial perspective with that of the narrator and protagonist, Jack Gladney, a "Hitler Studies" professor at the College. *White Noise* begins with Gladney stupefied by the Debordian "spectacle" (2) of the students' arrival, laden as they are with a litany of consumerist articles that occupies much of the text's first paragraph. Gladney notes that he has observed each annual arrival of the past 21 years, but the reader sees through his claim to its "invariab[ility]" (1). Partaking as they are in the archetypal collegiate journey, the students are nevertheless characterized strictly in terms of their possessions—among them, such contemporary signifiers as "personal computers…birth control pills and devices" (1) and various brand-name goods. These items place the events of *White Noise* explicitly in a contemporary, decidedly middle-class setting. But while DeLillo used the lens of a college professor to probe zones and vectors of the new American mythos—the supermarket, television, the biotech industry—R.E.M. gazed warily homeword at the marginal, the stuck-in-the-past, the outmoded eccentrics who would be lost in that mythos' homogenizing tide.

In "Old Man Kensey," for instance, Stipe describes the titular character as a humble, ostensibly rural person aspiring to various low-level jobs (this being an early R.E.M. record, it's tough to take what he's singing here literally, but bear with me). Instead, Stipe suggests, Kensey is made into a televised





spectacle, a "clown on TV," and driven towards alcoholism ("Drink up the lake," he forebodes). The lyrical narrative admittedly isn't quite as fleshed out as I've suggested, but Stipe's scattershot images cohere into something like a cautionary tale of the televisual. The provincial, illiterate Kensey, who would otherwise be ignored for his mundanity, has been turned into an exoticized and ridiculed object by a medium that transmutes real life into entertainment—into spectacle.

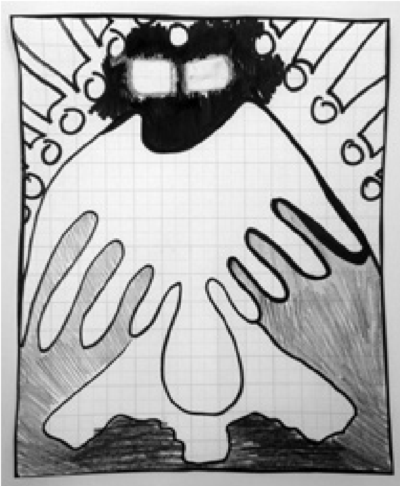


On the other side of this spectacular relation, DeLillo describes the Gladneys' family ritual of watching televised disasters on Friday nights. At one point, his wife attempts to change the channel. "She was startled by the force of our objection," Jack narrates. "We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (64).

Ironically, disaster soon strikes the Gladney's quaint hamlet when a train car carrying large quantities of toxic chemicals derails near Blacksmith. Despite the proximity of the disaster, which his son Heinrich observes fascinatedly through binoculars, Gladney refuses to believe in the threat that it poses. "Nothing is going to happen," he says. "These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas… Did you ever see a college professor rowing a

boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? (113). Gladney partakes of the televisual spectacle but refuses to participate in it; at the very least, he believes that his life narrative and social status absolve him of being included. Gladney's asinine statement reflects the illusory, mythic nature of the power relation between viewer and televised object. The nearby train derailment—an obvious symbol of the grim industrial realities that yet undergird postmodern life—brings TV anchors and cameramen right to the Gladneys' backyard to document the latest disaster. And thus the viewers become the viewed.

If R.E.M. uses the character of "Kensey" to spin a cautionary tale, their treatment of "Wendell Gee" on the closing track is more elegaic. Wendell, rendered as a Wordsworthian hermetic figure, symbolizes on one level the staid grace of rural life in the old South. "He was reared to give respect," Stipe eulogizes in an unmistakably Georgian drawl, "But somewhere down the line he chose to whistle as the wind blows." The song's tone is overwhelmingly sappy, with its prom night drums, piano, and backing vocals ("Gonna miss you, boy!" sings Mike Mills, the band's sentimental ringer). And yet, another glance at the lyrics reveals something undeniably weird about this track—in its second verse, a surreal dream sequence







involving chicken-wire and lizard skin, Wendell is subsumed into nature in a mock-Romantic pastiche, literally burying himself alive inside the hollowed-out trunk of a tree. Surely there's something purposefully ironic about this, a deliberate complication of the wistful, sentimental tone.

DeLillo plays the same game, but approaches it from the opposite end. Continually throughout White Noise, the author winks and nudges, tempting the reader to push back against his characters' oddball culture-crit assertions. See, for instance, the closing paragraph of the book, in which Gladney opines that the "holographic scanners" of supermarket terminals "decode the binary secret of every item" in "the language of waves and radiation... how the dead speak to the living" (310). It sounds ludicrous, but we sense a hot core of genius admid the cosmic storm of crazy. The academic context is perfect for this kind of threshold-idling—one recalls, reading the text, wondering whether this or that middle school-era author really meant for the blue curtains to 'symbolize' sadness, or whatever. DeLillo evokes the same skepticism, but on a meta-literary level. At one point in the text, Gladney recalls going off-script at the end of a lecture. "I found myself saying to the assembled heads, 'All plots tend to move deathward...'" he recounts. "Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean?" (26). A liminal character—at once an approximation of DeLillo's voice and a fictional entity—Gladney is as lost as we are, parsing the jokes from the assertions of the grinning author himself.

The question of "What does it mean" is surely one that many a pre-Warner Brothers R.E.M. listener had asked himself. Even if they had been printed among their early albums' liner notes,

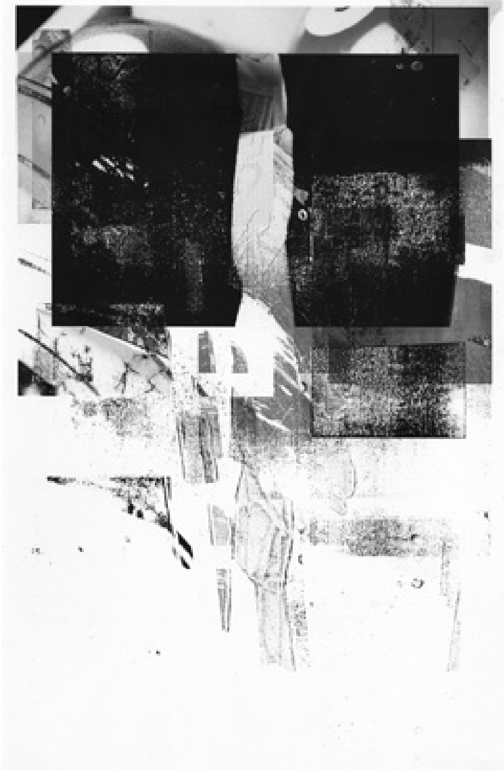
which they weren't, Stipe's famously mumbled lyrics would still have been open to the kind of semantic debate that they've received in the years since. But Fables marked the first instance in which Stipe's lyrical inscrutability became self-conscious, a part of the joke. In various places throughout the record, Stipe sublimates the tonal ambiguity of "Wendell Gee" into individual lines of verse, denoting dichotomous and often oppositional meanings that nevertheless blend into each other through the singer's delivery. For instance, consider the closing line from the first verse of "Maps and Legends," a song whose title itself simultaneously invokes myth and cartography. "He sees what you can't see," sings Stipe. "Can't you see that?" Stipe's delivery blends the line's two sentences across their punctuated divider. Thus mixed, the line becomes almost circular, nearly palindromic. It suggests cyclicality. Similarly, the cardboard sleeve of the album's vinyl edition reads, on one face, "FABLES OF THE;" on the other, RECONSTRUCTION OF THE." The cycle completes itself, reflecting dual meanings. "Fables of the Reconstruction" is on the Discogs listing, but "Reconstruction of the Fables" would be an equally valid reading.

So what do we make of these reconstructed fables, these postmodern maps and legends? DeLillo, quoted in a 1985 New York Times review, suggests a key: "Maybe the fact that death permeates [*White Noise*] made me retreat into comedy." DeLillo's text and R.E.M.'s LP each feature a self-conscious mediation of darkness. With *White Noise*, this comes through in the relentless punning, the provocative send-ups of pomo theoretics, and, among other examples, the ironic third-act centrality of Dylar, an elusive drug said to cure the fear of death (if only DeLillo had a prescription, one imagines). In its lyrics





and music, *Fables* makes use of similar punning and posture, and incorporates the aural elements of reverb, distortion, and Stipe's signature mumbling to further abstract its burning core. Coeval works, these texts remain inscrutable 30 years on. Through their tenuously shared suggestion, each continues to fascinate.



The Carrboro, North Carolina-based record label Paradise of Bachelors is hitting its stride. Its recent slate of releases is strong, and together these records indicate a more coherent and specific vision than many of its competitors in today's indie label ratrace. Think vintage 4AD, but exchange the ethereal goth music for refined guitar interplay and a touch of psychedelia. I talked to Brendan Greaves, one of the label's two curators, to explore that vision and see where its recent projects fit in.

"The label began as an investigation into under-recognized vernacular music of the American South," he explains. But the sound has expanded. Greaves cites "recognition of historical context" as a key component of the quintessential Paradise of Bachelors record, and this is representative of the label's philosophy. While I'd expected the vision to be generic—I hear folk, country, and psych-rock influences in most of these records—Greaves demurs: "Genre is ultimately a fiction, a myth, a manufactured cultural construct like aesthetic 'taste.'"

It's a provocative stand, but Greaves is sincere in his faith that a "strong engagement with song forms, texts, and narratives" is what defines the music that Paradise of Bachelors releases. Greaves hedges, though, and allows that "an emphasis on organic instrumentation, especially guitars" is one stylistic piece common to the label's records.

If anything, that might be an understatement. The label thrives on guitars, especially the sound of multiple guitars twisting through each other. James Elkington & Nathan Salsburg's Ambsace is the most pure realization of this—two virtuosos (and old friends) whose chemistry is apparent as they weave together their acoustic guitars. They flit around these





songs nimbly, constructing a strong LP out of naught but twelve strings and the occasional piano. The two guitarists' Midwestern roots belie the Southern focus of the label, but stylistically this is right in Paradise of Bachelors' wheelhouse.

Actually, this geographic diversity—the label has also released records by Indiana's great folklorist Elephant Micah, the LA slow-burners Gun Outfit, and an ex-Marine from Colorado named Kenny Knight—explains why the label draws inspiration not only from the South but also "its global sound diaspora." But if we are skeptical of Paradise of Bachelors' Southern roots, the self-titled debut LP of Oxford, Mississippi's Jake Xerxes Fussell will provide guidance. Fussell is nothing less than a scholar of Southern folk music, and this debut is the culmination of years of travel and study. He recruits William Tyler—one of the superstars of folk guitar today—to produce and accompany him, and powers through ten numbers with a world-weary yet impassioned voice. It's the realization of the label's goal, to digest the South's folk music and produce something that belongs in that lineage. And if it sounds out of place in the soundscape of 2015, well, that's kind of the point.

Perhaps the most exciting 2015 release from Paradise of Bachelors is Promised Land Sound's sophomore LP *For Use and Delight*. These guys take the sounds of psych and stoner rock to a pastoral setting. They break down the rolling guitar licks of lead single "She Takes Me There" into a drugged-out psycho solo by the time the protagonist realizes that his girl really is gone. It's one of the more haunting songs I've heard this year. When I observe that this band has made a huge leap from LP1 (2013's self-titled) to LP2, Greaves notes, "there is no formula,

but I think we forget sometimes that making good art requires a lot of work, like any other form of labor. And those guys work hard."

Destroying the boundaries and impositions of genre is one way that *For Use and Delight* fits into the Paradise of Bachelors mission. But the recent Gun Outfit record *Dream All Over* takes that even further. Their sound, Greaves explains, "recognizes hardcore punk and hardcore country as existing on the same spectrum of meaning." It's an album that defies explanation, but Greaves' knotty description comes close. The opener "Gotta Wanna" uses sleepy, intertwining, reverberating guitars, like a psychedelic Ambsace or a sedated Bardo Pond. But "Came to Be" is more rustic, conjuring expansive landscapes with its country twangs. Even when the tempo picks up, as on "Pass On Through," the band never sounds hurried. It must be something in Dylan Sharp's lackadaisical drawl, which is central to Gun Outfit's vibe. It's what makes it so funny when he laments "Rock and roll is over" is done on the closer, "Only Ever Over." Rock and roll is dead, but "We're gonna have a fire before we go," he sighs. That's as good of a definition of the label as anything. To buy into that sentiment—that rock and roll is dead, long live rock and roll—is to buy into the sound of Paradise of Bachelors. If you're ready to make that purchase, well, you're in for a hell of a trip.

When I grow up, I want to be Jenny from the National's album *Trouble Will Find Me*. When I was younger, it was the Plain White T's Delilah; later, it was Vampire Weekend's Hannah Hunt. For me, these songs have soundtracked more than a few self-indulgent moments—late nights spent in friends' rooms before middle school dances, getting ready in front of the mirror, singing to ourselves and to each other, pretending that our names matched with those on the lyric sheets.

Our adolescent admiration for these songs stemmed from our desire to grow up—we wanted to experience the kinds of emotions and events that inspired these songs. And slowly, they began to happen to us. Songs in the second person served a therapeutic purpose for my friends and me. When we didn't get the apology we wanted, Akon would tell us he was "sorry for the times [he would] neglect, sorry for the times [he'd] disrespect." When we felt spurned, desiring the commitment we felt we deserved, Jason Mraz would reassure us, "I won't hesitate no more…I'm yours." And finally, James Blunt would simply tell us we were beautiful—"it's true."

The lyrical vagueness of pop songs such as these gave my friend group a collective boost of confidence, but soon I began discovering music that, I felt, applied more specifically to me. On bad days when I





was on the brink of tears, Wavves could cheer me up by singing, "Green eyes, I'd run away with you." I began to curate playlists full of songs that referenced personal aspects: my green eyes, my long hair, my stubbornness. Maybe it was narcissism, but it made me feel better to pretend that the artists I admired most were singing straight to me.

As a young girl, second-person love songs were fiercely marketed toward me, and that trend has continued as I've crossed the threshold from high school to college. Just as corporate advertising and magazines have capitalized on my insecurities, popular music has exploited them as well. The vague validation that I received from boy bands and mass-market heartthrobs taught me how read deeply into songs—to listen more closely and get something out of them that I wouldn't have been able to before.

Now I've come to distinguish the generalized, commercial songs that were marketed to me from those with specificity and depth. When I listen to an example of the latter, I can enjoy being sung to and feeling as though I've entered the song the same way that I would enter a book. I believe the best way to appreciate a song is to gauge how I'd feel if someone I knew wrote it for me—if I felt like they really meant what they were saying. The best ones are viscerally personal, the ones I can feel like were meant for me without having to try hard to pretend.

If the Jenny character were real, she would have had a serious power trip after hearing *Trouble Will Find Me*—I know I would. She wrecked this guy's life—or at least that of Berninger's speaker. The intensity of his spurned love is evident in both the timbre of his baritone and the melancholy of his lyrics. "Your love is such a swamp," he sings in "This

Is The Last Time." "You're the only thing I want / And I said I wouldn't cry about it." The validation one feels in being cried over is undeniable, and I feel as though any listener could relate to that. *Trouble Will Find Me* is essentially so powerful because listeners can come to identify with it, picturing themselves as the subjects of similar situations, similar heartbreaks, or similar pleas for forgiveness or reconciliation. Songs like these don't just tell a story, but rather they offer stories for listeners to interact with. With lyrics that toe the line between easily-relatable vagueness and deeply felt emotion, they provide a vacant space in which listeners can place themselves at the epicenter of the song. That's why songs like these make me feel important; they make me feel that the music I listen to values me as much as I value it in return. The songs I listen to can speak back to me.

*I am who I say I am, not who you say I am. That is the power of music.* It moves us like a life force that controls our movements. It urges us to action whether we own it or not. Music is the constant that shapes our lives.

The standard of beauty constantly changes as a reflection of the creative arts expressed through cinema, TV, music videos, and performances. One of the truest statements I have ever heard is that words make a lasting impression on the mind almost like a blueprint of a building. It makes a lasting permanent impression on your mind and you can remember words, phrases or, in my case, song titles and lyrics willfully or otherwise. Case in point, Jay-Z and Kanye West's "Ni**as in Paris." I'm not a diehard fan of rap. But when I watched them live—on the *Watch the Throne* tour a few years ago at Mohegan Sun—I fell to my knees in awe. I couldn't help but feel the power they shared and recognize the genuine love that exists between these two boyz from the hood now living their dream as American success stories. Some performers are so powerful, even when they communicate derogatory content. For instance, when Kanye raps a line such as, "You know how many hot bitches I own?" his delivery makes a positive impact or is otherwise dismissed because of his and Jay-Z's powerful stage presence. They don't need fancy clothes, dancers, or special—instead, they fully engage the audience with their personas. The crowd goes wild from the special power that these charismatic performers—natural born leaders—deliver to the audience with every breath they take. Bad to the core. This is the power of true talent.

The new millennium has transformed beauty a long way from the Cosmo girls of the '80s with b-cups





and flat buttocks. Richly woven in every clip, lyric, and line are the explicit references to thick hips, full lips and the ever-popular Phat Ass! The ever-popular Phat Ass has dominated the TV screen. You can purchase one near you!

Aesthetic appeal: Does it supersede this little thing we all recognize as the true measure of an artist's worth—talent? Does Nicki Minaj's phat ass serve her up as a talented rapper?

Destiny's Child's "Bootylicious" dominated the charts throughout 2001. It catapulted the sexy, sultry persona of Beyoncé to the top of the charts and made diehard fans and haters of the black Barbie more determined to imitate art or obliterate the fantasy.

As I write these words, I shamelessly reminisce about having my way with video on demand as I twerked to Beyoncé's "Upgrade U," featuring Jay-Z. I could feel my heart beat as if I were on top of the world. I would advance the video to the point at which I could make my ass pop at the same time Beyonce's ass twerked incredible. Wow. Me. Considering all the milestones and perils I have triumphed over in life—navigating inadequate housing structures, dealing with unemployment, pursing a collegiate degree—OMG: I raised a child. In my mind, at that moment, the sum total of my worth was measured by the way in which I shook my ass! Good enough?

The world demands so much from us. As daughters, sisters, mothers, lovers, wives, and leaders, we show up with bells on. We show up! We should dare to be bold. So bold as to demand that the world around us Show Up for us. Say, no more sexualizing women. No more forcing us into mediocre roles for the sole purpose of demeaning women. And no more perpet-

uating disparaging and hateful negative imagery to encourage the world to wrap chains around our waists. Say, “no more!” And show up for us.

Food for thought: it’s almost exclusively female nudity that gets showcased on billboards, videos, movies, and in the collective entertainment world. Nudity is not forbidden by society, but rather is acceptable under certain guidelines and restrictions. We appreciate and embrace nudity—in the right context. So why is the viewing and showcasing of nudity exclusive to women’s bodies? Fast forward to the near future—will we have a day when we openly view augmented, artificial, black, white and multi-shaped dicks on billboards, in rap videos and on television shows?

For the entertainment world, if it is art for art’s sake and we all have an appreciation for the beauty of the human body: why is the nude exposure for women greater than that of their male counterpart? For argument’s sake, very simply answered, we can just lend that patriarchal hand to the almighty ones who make the world turn. It is a benefit to the ones who can gain from objectifying and sexualizing women, all for the sole purpose of using women as sexual objects, all to keep devices in place to create adversarial relationships and maintain what man has loved throughout time, since the beginning of time: Power.

*For the truly Bad, Bold, and Beautiful: for those who dare defy the odds, stand up to represent decency, joy and the pursuit of happiness. I salute you. You showed up.*

When Kendrick Lamar released *To Pimp A Butterfly* in March of 2015, I was infatuated by it. It's infusion of jazz, neo-soul, and funk motifs complements a canonical hip-hop sound that Lamar started in with his album *Section.80*. What impressed me most about the album was how wildly different it was from the record that put Lamar on the map, 2012's *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*. However, it wasn't the release of the music video to Lamar's "Alright" back in June that I thought the album was a true work of art. Though the music was advanced melodically and complex lyrically, the video, and the others he churned out in the following months, elevated the piece and stood out on its own.

"Alright" is a seven-minute video shot in black and white that begins with a montage of Oakland. The camera rushes through dark tunnels sprinkled with artificial lights. Screams in the background turn the mood hellish and disquiet the viewer. Director Collin Tilley cuts back and forth between scenes of destruction and police brutality and archetypes of the urban environment: high-rise apartments, shoes slung over telephone lines, graffiti murals on fences. The interplay of these two types of images emphasizes that the city and racial violence are heavily intertwined.

It is not until about two and a half minutes into the mini-feature that the song actually starts. The focus switches quickly away from Oakland to Lamar, praising him as a messianic figure fighting against racial injustice in America. Lamar, either flying through the air or situated on the top of a street pole, preaches to the city about his resilience in standing up for black Americans. Relatively hopeful, the video simultaneously highlights the blatant injustices within the urban environment but also underscores the fact that Lamar will not be deterred by this discrimination.





The video, to me, calls upon society to combat the racial injustices spread out across the country, and I was sold on Lamar. Though an upbeat song, the music video highlighted the struggle that many black Americans undergo daily; the video had a profound impact on me. My obsession with this pseudo-film led me to think in general about the significance of the music video and its development as a genre of its own over the past three or four decades. I had always associated music videos with the hit pop and hip hop songs that I watched on MTV as a nine-year-old kid, but when examined thoroughly, the medium includes a breadth of sophisticated works. From the early eighties to now, artists are doing innovative work to further develop the music video as a genre, and as an art form.

Music television programming began not in the US but in Australia and England. In the 1960s and 70s, the British show *Top of the Pops* and the Australian program *Sounds* both incorporated live music "promos" to showcase artists' new songs via a video. In 1964, *Top of the Pops* ran their first show, which featured both the Rolling Stones and the Beatles and broadcasted rock music to the greater public. It wasn't until the 1981 arrival of Music Television (MTV) that the music video culture became prevalent in America. MTV debuted

with The Buggles' hit song "Video Killed the Radio Star." Shot on video, the piece showcased the aesthetic and economic value of cheap filming equipment, making the medium more accessible to all artists. Further, the song is rather fitting for the station, making a bold statement that the next decade would belong to MTV and the genre of the music video.

By the mid 1980s, more experimental videos were released. The Replacements' "Bastards of Young" video was taken in one shot and takes place in one room, slowly zooming out one a single speaker. The scene ends with the appearance of a hand with a cigarette, while the speaker remains vibrating in the background. The avant-garde piece raised the artistic bar for the music video. Cinematographers began to shoot their videos on 35-millimeter film, rather than grainy video, which made the genre feel more cinematic. Some directors began adding plot lines to their work, turning the music video not into just a showcase of the artist but also a narrative outlining the true meaning of the song.

The rise of the director coincided with this spike in avant-garde videos. Feature film directors like David Fincher and Spike Jonze actually started their careers in the music-video business. Fincher made his entrance in 1984 by directing the Rick Springfield's "Dance This World Away," depicting a duality of a post-apocalyptic world compared to a sterile and almost dream-like dancing hall. The stark contrast was very well done on Fincher's part, and gives the viewer a sense of discomfort, similar to that in Lamar's "Alright." Jonze experimented as well, particularly in his work with Fatboy Slim on "Praise You," where Slim performs in an impromptu interpretive dance in Westwood, CA. Both directors pushed the boundaries





of the form of music video production that significantly changed the industry.

With the rise of the internet, MTV turned away from music videos and began to incorporate reality TV shows into their repertoire. However, that did not stop directors from churning out great work. In 2002, Coldplay released their music video for "The Scientist" which was shot in reverse. The video tracks the band's lead singer as he travels backwards through London, evoking the song's chorus, "Oh take me back to the start." Even more recently, director Hiro Murai, pieced together Flying Lotus' "Never Catch Me," which depicts a funeral of two African American children. Despite the subject matter, the tone of the video is rather positive, with the kids springing up to dance. Energy reverberates through the two children's bodies as they combine jazz-tap with hip-hop movements down the center aisle of the church, and Flying Lotus through this scene comments on the ambiguous nature of the after-life. Though morbid and even inconsiderate, the video demonstrates that artists are still trying to tackle deep and existential questions.

It would be a shame if I failed to mention Drake's omnipresent "Hotline Bling" video. It can be perceived is a misogynist piece that objectifies women and only praises thick curves in tight clothing. Even on top of that video itself has no real plot; it is simply Drake rapping his song. However, the set design of the film is extremely appealing. Drake's white background with color interspersed is clean yet mysterious, almost replicating a work of the famous artist James Turrell. Thus, "Hotline Bling" is one example of the music video evolving in terms of the visual, not conceptual.

The artistry of music videos will continue to develop for the years to come. With the advent of new

technology and the emergence of even more musicians and filmmakers, it's inevitable that this culture of creativity will cultivate amazing art. Videos will keep getting more provocative and will spur conversation within the musical community. An appreciation for the genre will rise with its prevalence in popular culture, and hopefully, that appreciation will grow rapidly and exponentially.

According to family lore, I became a jazz-head at age two. My parents had taken me to a bar and grill in L.A. that happened to have a jazz trio as its house band. I spent the entire meal fawning at the saxophonist. Maybe it was the music, or maybe just the shiny horn, but for whatever reason, I spent the whole time watching with my mouth agape and my eyes fixed on the player. My parents took it as a sign that playing the sax would be my destiny. Seventeen years later, that prophesy has long since come true—I've been playing jazz saxophone for over half my life. In the process, I've assumed a role that's become increasingly rare in contemporary music culture: I've become a jazz fan.

There is no question about it: jazz today is a niche. Once, however, the genre held mainstream relevance. Jazz originated in the late 19th and early 20th century from the "ragtime" march music of African American communities in New Orleans and St. Louis. Its popularity peaked during the "Jazz Age" of the 1920s and the "Swing Era" of 1935 to 1946, in which





large jazz ensembles called "big bands" played for huge, raucous crowds in dance halls. For over two and a half decades, jazz was the uncontested mainstream music of America. However, in the late 1940s it began to fall out of mainstream American culture. By the 1950s, the genre had been relegated to the periphery.

I see two reasons for this. Firstly, be-bop, an intellectualized version of jazz that incorporated complex, Western classical harmonies and blazing fast tempos, became jazz's dominant mode in the late '40s. Jazz had gained and maintained its popularity through its role as dance and party music, the equivalent of our day's EDM. However, listeners could no longer sing and dance to be-bop, the new iteration of jazz.

Simultaneously, the rise of rock 'n' roll in the late '40s and early '50s, which was facilitated by a burgeoning youth culture, enabled that genre to supplant jazz as the definitive popular mode. Rock 'n' roll trumped even the danceable "big band" jazz in the eyes of teens partially because of its embrace of new technology: rock musicians used electric instruments, while jazz remained acoustic. Additionally, rock 'n' roll's grittier and edgier vibe, derived from the blues, made jazz seem less hip and daring in contrast.

From the late 1950s on, jazz became increasingly more cerebral and less popular as it moved in modal and avant-garde directions. Artists experimented, and listeners followed them. Jazz retained a cult-like audience that enabled the artists' creative choices to steer the direction of the genre, rather than listeners' tastes and demands. Many rock and hip-hop groups have appropriated jazz's improvisational nature and some of its harmonic and rhythmic aspects into their music. However, the pure form of jazz, unmixed with other genres, has fallen to the wayside.

Many people, especially contemporary youth, dismiss jazz as "elevator music," "lounge music," "smooth jazz," or "old people's music." These remarks are ignorant, and this ignorance stems not from blindness but rather from a general lack of understanding—jazz, unfortunately, is widely misunderstood.

Though some aspects of jazz have been preserved in the music that's followed it, there's one element that no other genre has captured completely in its popular form: the unadulterated creativity and expression of jazz improvisation. Improv lies at the genre's core. It occurs not only in the extended solos of players, but also in the melodies of the songs themselves. Jazz musicians constantly interact with one another during songs by responding to each other's spontaneous musical creations. If the pianist decides to lay down a fat chord on an off-beat, the drummer might hear him and hit a rim shot, and the trumpet player will blow a lick in response. In jazz's ideal form, nothing is really fixed.

Because of its open mindset, its spontaneity, and its social dynamism, jazz is more actively creative as a genre than other musical styles. I would argue that creativity is not only music's essence, but also the end-goal of music, as well as the vector by which it should be judged. Sure, you can enjoy dancing to music; you can enjoy singing along. This enjoyment might be sincere, but it comes from considering music purely as entertainment, rather than as music itself. Since jazz fell out of the mainstream, music has by and large become more superficial and less musical in the sense that I've delineated. Whereas a jazz song is a living, breathing, adaptable organism, contemporary mainstream music tens to be sterile, inorganic, mindless, insensate. Jazz's fall from the mainstream





has dealt a damaging blow to music and to the world that listens to it.

So, in order to save music, we must find some way to reestablish jazz, or at least its improvisational spirit, as something popular. We must take the "zz" out of jazz. How do we do this? Perhaps the key lies in my experience at that bar and grill as a toddler.

The reason that I became a jazz listener was because, after drooling at that saxophone in the restaurant, I became a jazz musician. And this is the case, it seems, for most young jazz listeners. Sure, eclectic and knowledgeable music junkies might own a copy of Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* or *'Round About Midnight*, but the only kids I've met who are really into jazz, who have a large collection of albums and a formidable knowledge of the genre, are jazz musicians. It seems that playing jazz gets people into it.

This phenomenon occurs on two levels. Firstly, learning jazz history and respecting its tradition are important when it comes to learning the music. Jazz musicians feel obligated to listen to as much as they can of what came before them in order to perfect their own playing. Jazz instructors and older players instill this value into younger ones. However, the more important reason that jazz players are especially inclined to listen to jazz is that the music gives them a unique pleasure that most non-players haven't accessed. They get a thrill out of it because they've experienced playing the music. They've felt the rush of spontaneous and social musical creation, and thus when they hear it executed deftly, and oftentimes sublimely, they revel in it. On the other end, to many people who haven't experienced the genre as players, jazz sounds either like "elevator music" or a self-indulgent and unpleasant scattering of unrelated notes. I believe

that most people's dearth of experience in playing is central to why jazz is misunderstood.

Of course, we can't expect to correct everyone's listening tastes by having them become jazz musicians. Nevertheless, we can teach them how to think like jazz musicians, how to adopt the jazzer's creative mindset as they listen to the music. In order to access the spiritual and emotional joyride of jazz improvisation, they must picture themselves at the keyboard, behind the drums, or with their mouth around the saxophone. They must imagine, and by way of imagining, feel the unstoppable beat reverberating through the very room they're in. They must realize that the space is free, but that the stakes are high. The possibilities of what to play are endless: there are 88 keys on a piano, infinite variations of rhythm, and thus infinite combinations and permutations of what can be played. The challenge is how to make poetry out of it all.

So when they hear the pianist play a lightning-fast run down the keys, when they hear that perfectly-timed hit from the drummer, they should imagine themselves attempting to do the same, and how difficult it would be. Hopefully, with repetition, this will inspire the same awe in a listener as that of a sports fan when his team's running back breaks through the defense for an 80-yard touchdown. This not only produces an adrenaline rush, but also a sense of amazement—he stands with his mouth agape, in awe of the seemingly impossible spectacle before him. He gazes up at giants, gods. This is where new jazz listeners need to start. Progressing past the extreme of registering the shock value of musical flourishes, they gradually will begin to see more subtle wonders: inflections, references, idiomatic mastery, sensitivity in the music. To do this, it might help to not only adopt

a creative and open mindset while listening to jazz, but also while going about one's daily life. While writing, conversing, or even shopping for groceries, aspiring jazz listeners should take risks, become opportunists and adventurers.

An understanding of the jazz idiom, or the vocabulary of musical patterns that characterizes jazz, will necessarily accompany this process. Musical creativity does not rely on the jazz idiom—it should be able to fit into any musical language. However, listeners must first apply creative musicality whole-heartedly to the established idiom of jazz so that they can attach it to other genres and mediums later. In order hear and comprehend the basic units of the jazz vernacular, they should listen for recurring melodic, harmonic and rhythmic phrases in solos and melodies. By piecing these patterns together, the idiom will reveal itself. Everything will become more beautiful and coherent in its light.

All of this might seem challenging, but the gratification that comes with a true appreciation of jazz vastly outweighs the expended effort. The path to appreciating jazz does not have to be academic at all. In fact, it can be best communicated casually. Therefore, we need someone to preach jazz to the public and especially to the youth, to encourage the appreciation of it so that it can take on that viral quality of the mainstream. We need the equivalent of a Carl Sagan or a Neil deGrasse Tyson to translate the wonders of

jazz from an unintelligible “rocket science” to jazz’s own *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*. We need a visionary figure to hook the public on the unique creativity and spontaneity of jazz. Then, finally, after more than seventy years, jazz will be brought back into the public ear. Its essence of creativity, expression, spontaneity, and sociability will then hopefully spread into all other genres, and especially into their pop sub-genres. With jazz at the helm, the musical ship will be steered away from its over-structured, repetitive, and soulless current trajectory.

So let’s silence the cries of “Jazz is dead.” Let’s save humankind from becoming an army of robots dancing homogenously to the next formulaic pop song. Let’s save music.

When I listen to Ibeyi, I imagine myself floating along on a slow-moving river illuminated by campfires at twilight. On the shore, two women are singing. They might be ghosts, and they sing spirit-songs.

Ibeyi is the name of Lisa-Kaindé and Naomi Díaz, a pair of 20-year-old French-Cuban twins based in Paris. Their father was the Cuban percussionist Angá Diaz of groups including Buena Vista Social Club. They sing in English and Yoruban (the language of the Yoruba people of West Africa), with a bit of French. They combine elements of jazz, electronic, and hip-hop with Afro-Cuban influences and chilling harmonies. The resulting sound is dark, complex, spiritual, and utterly unique.

Although their self-titled album combines an array of diverse influences, it proves to be cohesive in its themes of family, love, and spirituality. The sparse instrumentation highlights the spiritual and emotional depths of the songs, and the otherworldly voices of the duo. "Mama Says" begins with piano chords and clapping, to which they add a bass-heavy beat.

In fact, Ibeyi do sing of spirits: in this case, the Orishas such as Eleggua, a god associated with cross-





roads and doors—liminal spaces to which one might connect the multivalently-influenced sisters themselves. Many of the songs have repetitive lyrics, such as the repetition of "take me, Oya" in the song "Oya." But the repetition lends a hypnotic quality to the songs. Thus, listening on repeat is a joy. The songs are not necessarily trancelike, but rather baptismal, and often catchy—like the chorus of "River." They sing of ghosts, too: to their mother and father in "Think of You," and in the song "Ghosts:"

*My ghosts are not gone*
*They dance in the shade*
*And gives the black core of my heart*
*making words making sounds making songs.*

### Contributors

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