

# STOREREPRESENT



november 2020  
vol. 12 issue 10



*inside: - a day at the polls - anarchy from the ground up - hydrogen jukebox  
- still nerdy - the year of music dying - salacious crumbs - comics awaiting  
the collapse - still poetry - record reviews*



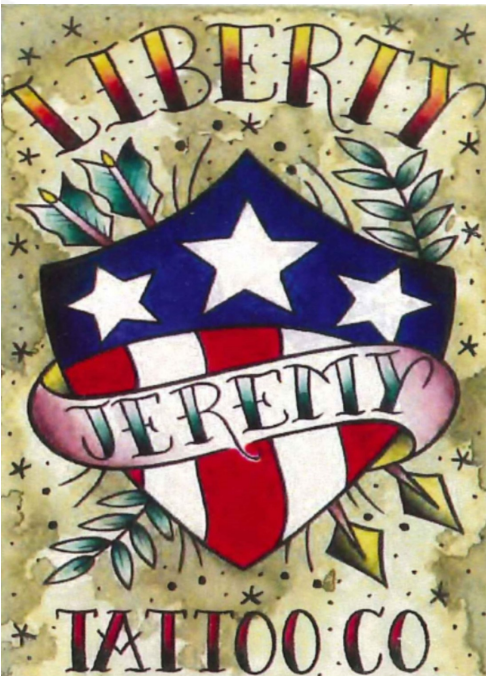
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for the discerning dirtbag.**

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katie killer with maren farmer & wonko  
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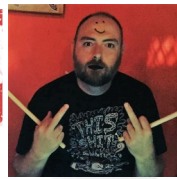
**folks that did the other shit for us**  
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# POLL FIRST, ELECTION SECOND

I knew the 2020 election was going to be a real humdinger. I decided that I wanted to help in any way I possibly could to make sure the election ran more smoothly. I at first attempted to volunteer as a poll worker. It turned out that everyone else had the same idea and my county was overwhelmed with volunteers. So my help was not needed. Towards the end of October my wife told me she'd heard from a friend who was active with our county's Democrat party that poll watchers were desperately needed. So I figured here was my shot to help make a difference and whatnot. I signed up. After an hour's worth of Zoom training, a print manual, a nifty little button that says "Ask Me How I Can Help Your Ballot Count", and away I drove to the far north end of the county to spend all 13 hours of Election Day helping voters.

I wasn't initially nervous about my decision to be a poll watcher. I joked, "what do the polls do that they require watching? Do they dance?" I asked off from work and my boss and her boss and her boss's boss all messaged me to tell me I was doing a really brave thing and I should make sure to stay safe. Hmmm. Then the weekend before Election Day I read a story in a slightly older issue of *Time* about how both Facebook/Instagram and Twitter had removed ads for the Republican Party seeking poll watchers. The language used in the ads was militant and their editorial staffs felt that the language was increasing the chance of attracting aggressive and violent poll watchers. To top it off, I later learned that this precinct had an incident with armed Trump supporters trying to bust through the 50 foot buffer zone on the very first day of Early Voting. Okkkaaaayyyyyyyyy. Maybe this wasn't the best idea. Nevertheless, come 6:30AM Election Day morning I was posted up at the Weaverville Town Hall, awaiting the events of the day.

First thing I did was meet with the outside poll observers and the other Democrat Party volunteers. There had been some confusion over the difference between state poll regulations and local municipal regulations pertaining to poll signage. By later in the day this would be resolved but for the first several hours the Democrats were not allowed to have any political signs in their location, which was located more than 50 feet from the entrance to the polling location as required by state law. This was the closest thing to voter disenfranchisement I saw the entire day. It was very, very, very quiet at this polling location. Before the day began the precinct had already seen 78% of its 12,000-ish voters pull the lever via Early Voting. Let that number sink in for a couple of reasons. For starters, it is rare that the electorate turns up in those numbers even during a presidential year. 65% voter turnout is a banner year. 78% had already shown up before Election Day. With such a record turnout earlier in the process it made this precinct a ghost town on Election Day. This precinct saw another 250 or so individual voters throughout the entire thirteen hour day. Only 130 of those voters were allowed to vote. This may seem like massive disenfranchisement however nearly all those voters were turned away because they had come to the wrong precinct. Most had assumed that since Early Voting allowed voters to cast votes at the location of their choice that they could show up at the polling place most convenient to them and vote. On Election Day you must vote at your actual precinct polling location. In some instances there was confusion about the voters' actual precinct. The precinct map

looked like a gerrymandered mess, a giant inverted horse-shoe thing with a tail off to the side. I learned that this particular precinct had moved boundaries slightly within the last year as a part of the federal government ruling demanding North Carolina redistrict more fairly. New voter registration cards were issued to the registered voters affected by the slight change, however a good number of our stray voters either did not receive them, tossed them out, didn't really pay attention, or didn't care. They knew that this was where they voted, so they showed up to vote there.

This was mostly what I was around to help with. Inside poll workers are trained to identify when a voter is turned away to alert the outside poll worker as to what the voter looks like and why they were turned away. Then the outside poll watcher can approach the voter and help get them pointed in the right direction. I did not have to do this a single time because the elderly women who worked the polls and the veteran poll chief (he had been working elections since the Reagan/Mondale race in 1984) went out of their way to make sure that voters knew what district they were assigned to and how to get to the appropriate poll. In most cases it was to the neighboring precinct which was located only two blocks east. That proximity only aided in the voters' confusion. It turns out that the precinct had to move polling locales because the school that was normally used as the polling station could not meet the state's covid protocols so the station was moved to a church right down the street from our polling station. I found this confusion to be a sign, albeit a small one, of voter disenfranchisement and reported this to "The Boiler Room", a website set up for poll workers to share issues with the lawyers volunteering for the Democrat National Committee. I knew this issue was small potatoes, but it was my hope that the DNC would complain to the state election board so this could be tightened up for all voters.

Towards the end of the day a young woman came in to vote and was at the wrong precinct. She raised her voice in frustration, stating that she had been sent to our precinct by another wrong precinct's poll workers. The poll judge attempted to tell her the location of the correct polling station but the woman turned to leave and said, "it doesn't matter anyway". The polling judge could have stopped her and let her cast a provisional ballot there at our precinct but he did not. I tried to chase her down to bring her back in to vote but she left before I could get to her. It is always best to make sure that you vote in your proper precinct. It is the only way to 100% guarantee that your vote counts. In situations like this woman's a provisional ballot can be cast. It is subject to challenge and there is a decent chance the vote will be thrown out, but this woman was headed home to not vote at all. Had she cast a provisional ballot at our station at least there would have been a good chance that her vote would have counted. Going home in frustration at being pointed to a third location to vote means no vote is cast. At one point we saw a couple who had new voter ID cards with the old precinct listed on them. This was another mistake that I reported, as this was a case where the county elections office made a mistake that nearly disenfranchised these two

two voters. If it happened to these two then I felt it was important to make sure that it was addressed for the future.

We also had a dozen more people show up to register to vote and vote the same day. The state does not allow for same-day registration on Election Day. Individuals are allowed to same-day register during Early Voting, however had the individual wanted to register prior to voting on the actual official election day the individual would have had to have registered a month prior to Election Day. That rule is pretty fucked up and confusing. The way the poll chief decided to handle these individuals was to have them use a provisional ballot. He did not explain to them that their vote would not count. When asked about this, he told me that because it was not his jurisdiction to toss out the vote that he didn't feel it was worth getting into it with the voter about it. I thought this was a really shitty approach. Those voters left this precinct thinking they had cast their vote. They would have to wait 10 days to find out if their vote counted or not. The poll judge knew very well the likelihood that the voter would check was minuscule and his choice as to how to deal with this situation reflects that certainty. While this was not illegal I still felt it was wrong. There was one voter who turned up led in by his wife and teenage son. He wanted to register to vote and vote at the same time. Rather than deal with him the same way he had with all the others individuals who'd tried the same thing, the poll judge told them outright that he could only register to vote but cannot vote the same day. So they left. My GOP counterpart took off racing after them. The would-be voter had come in wearing a confederate flag sweatshirt so the GOP operative thought this would be one of his voters and attempted to get them registered and provisionally balloted elsewhere. Of course, this man's vote would not have counted but it was my feeling that the GOP wanted every vote possible on file so they could have them to argue over in court after the election was over. Looking at how election night played out my feeling was probably correct.

I saw a few folks wearing Trump hats or t-shirts to vote. I thought that was considered electioneering but apparently it is not. There were a couple of other interesting things (a voter who could not read or write had her son read the ballot to her and color in the bubbles for her and then another voter who was mentally disabled and could not fill out his own ballot — his careworker filled it in for him) but nothing illegal. By poll's closure at 7:30p there was no one still waiting in line. I recorded the poll's results to the Boiler Room and I was on my way back home, shellshocked from a lack of sleep combined with the adrenaline rush of working the poll all day. I had successfully dodged physical harm while sitting all day as a Democrat in a deeply Republican precinct. It was obvious that the poll workers and judge were very Republican but I eventually won over their respect. I admired how seriously they took their positions helping their neighbors to vote. I think perhaps next time I will take a shift rather than monitor an entire day, but I felt like the experience was entirely worthwhile and I hope to make this a habit on election days in the future. — KELLY MENACE



# COMICS I ENJOYED WHILST AWAITING THE COLLAPSE--PART 1

I have read a whole bunch of comics in my life. I ride the bus to campus, so I have two 20ish minutes each way, unless one of my bus buddies is on the bus, then I talk with them. My older brother and I used to collect comics. He liked *The Flash* and *Captain Carrot*, I liked *Groo the Wanderer* and *Twisted Tales*. I also collected *Hawkman*, but kinda only because he wasn't really anyone's favorite...not really mine either. I think my brother still has all those comics, I believe even some #1s are in his collection.

I have a few *Ren and Stimpy* comics that I bought in the 90s. The #1 came with a large square printed on the plastic liner, covering the front cover image, and it said something about opening it as soon as possible to see the cover of the comic, which was basically an image saying that I had just dropped the value of the comic by taking it out of the plastic liner. Classic.

We both also loved *Mad Magazine*. I know that isn't a comic per se, but it kinda is. I can still see Sergio Aragonez and Don Martin influences in my art style to this day.

I have some favorite comics I have read, of which I'm not going to reread during our COVID house arrest, but they might get mentioned at some point. OK, let me get a couple out of the way. *East of West* was awesome. *Sixth Gun* was super good. *The Boys* was intense. *The Walking Dead* should be required reading in schools. All of those I would recommend. In fact, the ones I talk about here and subsequent articles, I recommend. I'm not going to talk about ones I don't like or get bored with and don't finish.

I don't know if you care or not, but here's a short lesson. Comic series usually come in arcs, which is a storyline. Still part of a larger story, but a shorter part of that. Some are just a short run series that is only four to six books, and that's it. Like a whole story told in a few books. I am mostly drawn toward the shorter ones, unlike *Batman* or *Spiderman* or *X-Men* that do in fact have arcs, but are part of a massive amount of books. The arcs might be a specific villain or a stint in space or turning into a dark version. I'm not into that. I like the short ones. And in fact, some of the short ones come out with subsequent arcs in their own series. That's cool too.

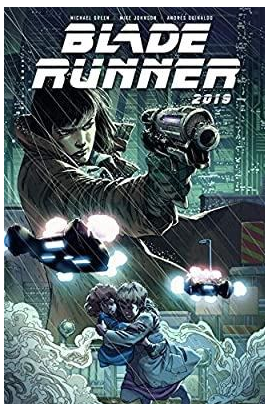
I don't particularly get into superheroes (ala DC, Marvel), although *Watchmen* was cool because it was such a defining pivot point in comic book standards and format, or so I was told. The closest superhero type that I like is probably *Rocket Raccoon* and *Deadpool*. So, don't expect much on that front. I'm impressed with art style, characters, world building and story. I also like unexpected and new stories. Those are the best. I get tired of "Good guy defeats another bad guy" trope. Meh.

Although, it's also pretty much every story, where the bad guy might be an apocalypse or the opening of a wormhole. Maybe I just don't like capes. IDK. I'm not actually reading physical copies of these, they are digital that I'm reading on a Kindle Fire. I just delete them when I'm done.

OK, here we go:

## *Afterlife with Archie*

I grew up reading Archie Digests on family road trips and vacations. Veronica was always hot, but such a bitch, Betty was also hot, but so enamored with Archie, and both Archie and Ronnie were just kinda lame. Jughead was the fave. He liked to eat, knew what he liked and didn't like and was basically friends with everyone. Well, this comic series was super dark, and intense. Jughead's dog Hotdog got run over, Jughead took him to Sabrina to resurrect him. She did, but it made Hotdog a zombie dog who bit Jughead, which started the spread and demise of Riverdale. Awesome. It read like a true zombie movie. It also delved into some dark territory with Ronnie, which was psychologically satisfying, and Sabrina, who was punished for reanimating, and even Josie and the Pussycats had a whole vampire story. Seriously, a great read, and not cutesy. Amazing art style. It was dark and tragic.



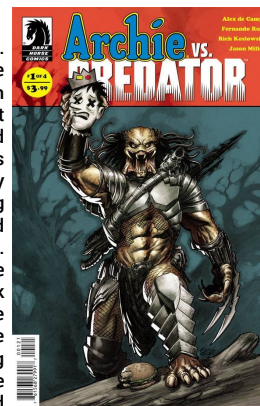
## *Blade Runner 2019*

This one takes the replicant and Blade Runner world and keeps it going with a detective trying to figure out why a little girl was being targeted for capture, and basically chases her down, and helps her. So far it's a two part story, the second part is after they escape Earth and how the girl learns to do what she needs to survive and thrive. Excellent art, really good story, nice extension of the Blade Runner world and my-

thos.

## *Archie Vs. Predator*

Yes, another archie. Again, I loved Archie growing up. This one is in the Archie style art, but it's got a ton of blood and terror. The story was super cool, with Betty inadvertently causing hardship on the gang, and ultimately, Riverdale. Pretty awesome to see characters die and freak out. And dang were the girls hot. Basically, the Predator thing is chasing them down, killing those presenting a threat. And yes, there are skulls, vertebrae, blood, and thermal vision. Jughead's death was a particularly good one. Seriously, the juxtaposition of the cutesy Archie art style with the blood and gore and intense theme elements was fascinating.



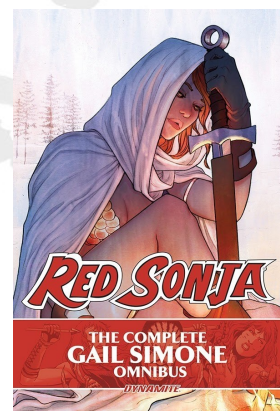
## *Die Kitty Die*

First thing's first, Kitty is super hot, and she is in her underwear a lot. Even fights baddies in her underwear. The premise is that she's pretending to be a superhero, but she's actually a witch, but superheroes are more accepted. Similar to *The Boys*, superheroes in this world have merch and movie deals and all that, and so, the plot of this first series is that her comics are not selling very well, so they need a new idea, and that idea just happens to be to kill her. But she's a badass. So, it's a cool meta story...a comic book about comic books...and fun character. Lil Satan, and Dippy the Dead Kid. I've got a couple other series to read, and if they are good, I'll write about them too.

## *Edward Scissorhands*

This was a cool find. The art style is similar to the Beetlejuice cartoons. Kinda funky, but really dark and cool. The story takes up after Kim has died, and her granddaughter gets curious about Edward. The series has two

arcs, one where Edward finds and turns on an older prototype and ends up kidnapping a kid from the neighborhood, and the other arc where a TV reality show is interested in "fixing" Edward by giving him hands. Considering the very teen/kid type storylines, the themes of identity and death and loyalty and trust and being different and being goth was extremely in your face. The characters had some real world teen issues, but the overarching theme was that it was OK to be different. Really sweet. I fucking LOVE Edward Scissorhands.



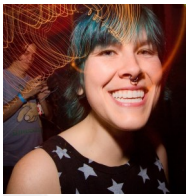
## *Red Sonja Gail Simone Omnibus*

This was a surprise. I realise the Gail Simone run (different author than original) might be different from the original, and I may try my hand at the original run, but I read this was a good one to start with, and I was super impressed. I love Sonja. She's a bit of a meathead, but is fine as shit, and undefeatable. She also is very much loved by those she doesn't kill, which is

good, because she gets captured quite a bit. Plenty of fan service in this one, and there ain't nothing wrong with a hot redhead who doesn't wear much. This series has three great main arcs, Art of Blood and Fire was my favorite. She's tasked with gathering a group or artisans for a final party for a dying emperor in exchange for the freeing of thousands of his slaves, and much blood is spilled in the process. Really well written. The characters are phenomenal. The other two arcs are equally well done.

I'm still reading. Already have a few more favorites. To be continued. — JORGE GOYCO





# \$ALACIOUS CRUMBS

Kroger has been trying to topple Whole Foods for a long time. A few years ago, they started a big initiative to get more organic produce, processed foods, and pantry staples...mmm, organic staples. But NOW they've outdone themselves. They've released FIFTY NEW VEGAN PRODUCTS from their Simple Truth brand!! I'm a die-hard HEB shopper and think Kroger is an overpriced store for old people, but here's a top 5 of new things I've found there that you can't sleep on.

**NUMBER 5: CHEESE! LOTS OF IT!** They have Vio-life, which is the best vegan cheese around besides Miyoko's, and frankly, I'd say an easier to use cheese, because it comes in shapes like normal cheese. You want shredded mozz? Monterrey Jack? Sliced aged mature cheddar? FETA? PARM? Vio-life's got it! This is the stuff to pick up when you're making something cheese that'll be shared with omnis who immediately turn their nose up at the word vegan, even though everyone with 2 brain cells knows french fries are vegan and only monsters don't like fries. Simple Truth has also come out with shredded cheese and slices, and they're really affordable (hey, there's a theme!). I've only tried the spicy cheddar, and it's real tasty, and melts really awesome on a sandwich or grilled cheese. It's definitely more for the vegan's vegan, but what the heck are you?!

**NUMBER 4:** I follow a lot of vegan baking groups, so I hear about all the other interesting ingredients people get in other countries. I've heard about Flora butter, but people always made it sound like it was just margarine, which is gross. BUT KROGER now sells Flora butter, in salted and unsalted varieties (and if you've been vegan for any length of time, especially a baking vegan, you know that unsalted butter is a HUGE deal, and has been nearly non-existent in the US until maybe the past year). It comes in a cute little matte paper wrapper, like a fancy European butter (which I guess it is? Maybe? I don't actually know where it comes from). And it is a dead ringer for dairy butter. I've been using it for EVERYTHING, even lopping off a knob to snack on. If you want to impress someone with vegan shortbread, buttery toast or pancakes, or anything with a pie crust, GET IT. It's incredible. Better than the Country Crock sticks!

**NUMBER 3:** I once heard someone say in a cooking video to add more cauliflower, who doesn't like

cauliflower?! And I was like lady, I don't know who you think you're kidding, but also, I live in that same world. I love cauliflower. Fried, breaded and baked, roasted, rice — but put it in a pizza crust or steam it and you're fixin' for a lickin'. Anyway, Kroger brand Simple Truth has introduced a slew of new cauliflower-based dips, including a spicy queso, tzatziki, buffalo, and cilantro-jalapeno flavors. Yes friends, you can just go BUY vegan tzatziki instead of searching the globe for unsweetened vegan yogurt, letting the other half of a cucumber wither in your fridge, and foraging a handful of fresh herbs. It's great, it rules, eat. They also have a spicy queso, that resembles my favorite vegan queso in the world from Good Foods (sometimes Aldi has it, and Target sells it). I haven't tried the other two flavors, but I get the idea that these are basically copies/rebrands of the Good Foods stuff, and their dips are all really great. ALSO these don't taste like cauliflower at all. Like, not even a speck, when they're cold or hot. I don't know how they manage to take the fart flavor out, but hot dang, they did!

**NUMBER 2:** Remember those little Earth Balance cheddar squares? The only alternative to Cheez-Its we had? They're alright, and even better if you throw the whole box in the oven to get extra toasty, but they always needed more salt, more flavor. FRIENDS. May I present Back to Nature CHEDDARLICIOUS CRACKERS. They're salty. They're cheesy. They're bigger. They're toastier. They're better in every way than poor little old Earth Balance squares, and YOU. SHOULD. EAT. THEM. Whether you're vegan or not (I guess that always stands, here). They're like Better Cheddars or something — they don't have crack in them like a real Cheez-It, but they have crack-lite, so you should still pick up 2 boxes.

**NUMBER 1:** Remember Just Egg? They made Just Mayo? And Just Ranch? And Just [Sweet] Mustard? AND TRUFFLE MAYO? They disappeared off the face of the earth and left us with Just Egg, which is expensive and only really has like 2 servings in a bottle. WHELP, they just came out with JUST EGG PATTIES. READY FOR YOUR BREAKFAST SANDWICH DELIGHT. Just pop one in a pan or the toaster and throw it on your favorite bagel, toast, English muffin, between two pancakes, inside a breakfast taco. It's easy as a mini Mari

Callendar's fruit pie (which, BTW, are accidentally vegan). You, too, can pretend you're that super busy, getting-it-done person in the TV commercials who only has 3.6 seconds in the morning to get their breakfast made before they go off to their middle management job in banking! I've been eating these gat-dang patties every Saturday and Sunday for brunch for 4 weeks. Here's my favorite breakfastwich, which is certainly not a trick to take up more space in this column. Toasted Texas Toast Top  
Maple Mustard (dig through back issues for recipe)  
Smashed Tater Tots  
Tempeh Bacon (again, dig for recipe)  
Vegan Cheese Slice  
Just Egg Patty  
More Maple Mustard  
Toasted Texas Toast Bottom

Honorable Mentions: These are things that I either haven't tried, aren't super duper brand new, or just aren't particularly remarkable, but are still great options!

Simple truth has their own cheap vegan butter, sour cream, and cream cheese — ALL OF THIS IS KROGER BRAND. Store brand vegan stuff!!! They've also got super accessible nugs, sausage patties, and veggie burgers. They have great deli slices, which seem pretty similar to the LightLife stuff, and vegan sausages. You can get a cheap, shitty queso dip or a french onion dip. It's pretty amazing that the old, stodgy, dingy Kroger is killing it in this category.

I also have to mention their candy section. They have Cocomels, vegan caramels, and sometimes, if you're lucky, you'll find the chocolate covered ones! You want a vegan Lindt-style truffle? THEY GOT IT! Alter-Eco makes one, and also has tons of great vegan chocolate, that doesn't involve child slave labor. You want peanut butter cups? You have a choice of TWO different brands, AND you can get them with crunchy bits in them! There are also vegan gummies and mushroom jerky.

Ok, Kroger, can I have my year's supply of Just Egg patties, Vio-life, and peanut butter cups now?! — KATIE KILLER

## STILL POETRY

TRESPASSING:  
A CONFESSION

the problem was not  
the cage  
or the door  
slammed shut  
from the outside  
nor the heap of corn  
like a biblical metaphor  
set to entice  
weary travelers

the problem was not  
even the opossum  
curled round on himself  
like convictions  
the morning after  
or shame  
in the blush  
of a thief

one could almost  
look past  
the silent threat  
in his gaping  
mute-mouth  
the plush-doll fur  
of his pink-gummed  
jowls bearing  
such clumsy teeth  
at that distance

no, the problem was not  
his imprisonment  
on another's property  
but me seeing him  
and knowing  
the night was  
still young.

— KEVIN STILL



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# ANARCHY FROM THE GROUND UP

It's goldenrod season. If you live in North America, you might be able to look out at the edges of your fields, fence lines and wooded thickets, and

find goldenrod growing tall and elegant this time of the year. The distinct gilt of her flowers glows like the sun's rays during that 5 o'clock golden hour, piercing through the terrain around her, refusing to be unseen. She dances with her sisters, as they all stand proud, proclaiming their territory at the edges of their environment. Her crown is heavy and hangs and sways in the wind. Her pollen is thick. It weighs her head down, steadily bent in prayer for the strength to make it through our coming dark season.

Our ancestors knew goldenrod. They would gather bundles of this ancient medicine and follow its growth to natural bodies of water or springs. Goldenrod goes by many names such as blue mountain tea, wound weed, woundwort. The latin name, *Solidago*, is derived from the word *soldare*, which translates to the phrase, "in solidum ago vulnera - I consolidate wounds." When I see her growing, I remember her medicine. I look at the wounds that I need to heal, the ones that are new and fresh, still bleeding. The wounds that I cannot see or name but feel just the same. The wounds I inherited from the same ancestors that watched goldenrod growing in their own seasonal change.

If you pay attention and you venture close enough, you can see goldenrod's purpose is more than just beauty but abundance as well. The same golden pollen that radiates in the sun provides food for pollinators as the flowering season comes to a close and winter's barren

landscape increases. Bees will be dancing around her head, picking up every succulent morsel they can sense and then they will fly home to store it as food for the winter months ahead.

I gather my own goldenrod every year, well after the bees have had their fill. I meet her at the edge of my world vs hers. We both know how it feels to be here. At the edge. Me: balancing on the rim of Life, carrying the weight of the past year having come through a pandem-

ic, sobriety, teenagers and heart ache. Her: at the boundary of a new season, the last heat from the sun leaving as the cold darkness of winter approaches. She reminds me to remain steadfast. She reminds me to give abundantly. She reminds me to stand tall in the good you do for others. As she has done for you. I greet her in gratitude. She nods her head with honor and pride. And I ask for her medicine. I cut each rod, low and long to the base, and stack each sister's head gently next to the other. They are gathered here together. A tribe of sunshine. Glowing into the darkest nights of the year.

If you have found your light glowing low or even if it feels as if it has been snuffed out, do not rue it over in despair. We are all moving through this season together. Pay attention to

the evidence that Mother Nature will always provide. Seasons begin and seasons end. Each transition is marked with beautiful signs of the circle of life. When darkness approaches, we can focus on the last golden rods that are still standing up, giving their light to the world around them. I hope you find your goldenrod this year. Keep shining. Keep standing tall. I'm standing up right here with you. — **HALEY RICHARDSON**



PLATE 206  
(left) Scutell Goldenrod, *Solidago sempervirens* (right) Grass-leaved Goldenrod, *Solidago graminifolia*

**JUSTIN HONEYKUT  
DARLIN' BRANDO  
WISDOM CAT  
ROBOT XOPS  
MISO THEIST**

**FACEBOOK  
LIVESTREAM  
PERFORMANCE**

**SATURDAY  
NOV. 14  
8 PM**

# THE YEAR OF MUSIC DYING

Right off the bat, let me address the fact that November is NOT the end of the year when this retrospective of music deaths should come, but the fact of the matter is this: I can't stand to wait to see who else goes in this trainwreck of a year. I just can't take dragging out the pain. My feeling is to look back now, and that will help me, hopefully you, go back to the music these fine folks left us to cradle you through the rest of this 2020 dumpster fire.

We lost Adam Schlesinger, songwriter extraordinaire. Sure, maybe you knew him for Fountains of Wayne, but this guy got nominations for Academy awards, Emmy awards, Tony awards, and on and on. Who else could work with The Muppets, Robert Plant, and Sarah Silverman? A loss felt across the entertainment spectrum.

Little Richard is gone. How did a religious gay Black man get so popular in Jim Crow America? Wonders never cease.

Florian Schneider of the hugely-influential Kraftwerk died – every electronic artist must tip his or her hat to this man. He's riding the endless "Autobahn" in the sky.

On the obscure one-hit wonder side, Steve Martin and Tom Finn of The Left Banke both passed, leaving behind the haunting "Don't Walk Away Renee" for all time.

The recent deaths of two Americana legends – Jerry Jeff Walker and Billy Joe Shaver – is just cruel in the same year that we lost the incredible John Prine. Walker and Prine were just as good at performing as they were at songwriting. Shaver, though, left several gems to keep his name alive. (Personal note: I saw Walker live twice, separated by three decades.)

Probably the biggest popular rock performers to go this year were Neil Peart and Eddie Van Halen – talk about your heavenly rock band. Crank up the volume on these boys.

Trini Lopez is one of those singers who was all over the top of the music charts in the Sixties, but he's now unfortunately dismissed even dead, probably better known as an actor in *The Dirty Dozen*.

Keyboardist Lyle Mays left behind a wealth of music, the best of which was with guitarist Pat Matheny – *Last Train Home* is a fitting memorial.

A pair of great voices joined the heavenly chorus this year: Bill Withers and Johnny Nash. While Withers totaled a clutch of memorable tunes ("Ain't No Sunshine" and "Lean on Me" are just two) before leaving the field, Nash will forever be remembered for "I Can See Clearly Now."

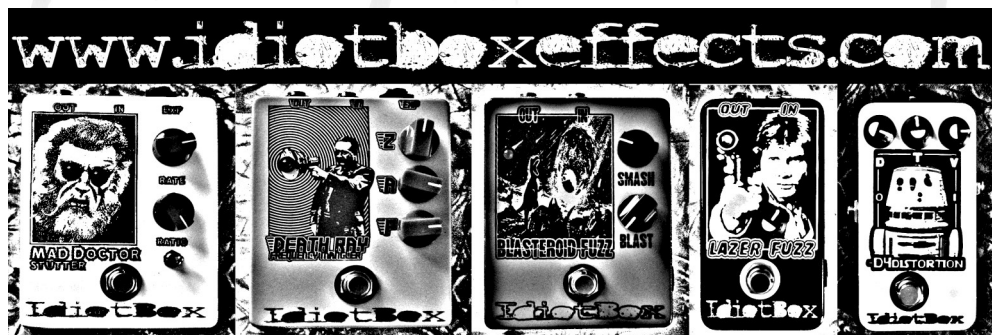
Two sidemen from divergent sounds left for the great gig in the sky. Keyboardist Dave Greenfield spent nearly half a century with the punk group The Stranglers while Paul English drummed for Willie Nelson for 54 years, still on the skins at age 87.

Two other figures on opposite ends of the political/musical spectrum who are currently dueling in heaven are Ivan Kral from the Patti Smith Group and Charlie Daniels (of "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" fame). Now there's a musical collaboration I'd like to hear.

Peter Green was in Fleetwood Mac, but before it became the worldwide sensation that it is now. Green wrote great songs and was widely esteemed for his guitar prowess, but ahead of his time. Helen Reddy brought a feminist swagger to pop music although she'll likely always be remembered for "I Am Woman."

Finally, Mac Davis died. Davis seemed to make everything effortlessly, whether it was writing songs popularized by Elvis Presley, playing his own hits, hosting his TV show, or acting on Broadway and in movies. It was just nice to see a Texas boy do so well for so long.

Turn on the music now. — MIKE L. DOWNEY



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The following is a collection of Nerdy thoughts I recorded, in some place or another, over the past month. My hope in sharing is to inspire Nerdiness and invite recommendation -- [hamsterglory@gmail.com](mailto:hamsterglory@gmail.com).

**EARLY OCTOBER (a first attempt to keep a "Still Nerdy" journal):** I'm trying a new thing at night. In our guest room we have a rocking chair beneath the window. A lamp cranes over the chair. A stool serves as a table to the left hand side. And on that table I've set a few books that each night I try to spend an hour reading—sometimes more and sometimes less—just before going to bed. It's easy to whittle away those final moments before bed, all those last minute messages and chores and whatnots. But I want to whittle those moments away in pages, which I've not been particular good at these past few months. So I've set my reading nook into place, assured the table was at the right height for a cup of something hot, and then I set out the first book I'd read solely in that chair and only at night before bed. I chose to begin with Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*.

*Hill House* is a short novel. In my Penguin Classic Edition, it spans just under 250 pages. Carving through 20-30 page chapters each night, it's taken me the better part of the past week and half to work through it. I am eager already to read it again next fall. Four people go to a house for a summer to live in total isolation and explore the possible psychic phenomena of an old mansion where even the groundskeeper and his wife refuse to spend anymore time than necessary. Through the course of the novel, one character has especially pronounced encounters with another realm—until you begin to wonder if she herself is the other realm. Jackson gives so little away. The novel is not only short, but the narrative is sparse as well. Loads of scenes offer barely enough details to grasp what has happened. The reader feels as confused as the characters most of the time, and the ground is never solid beneath anyone's feet. It's unsettling, but still intriguing. This whispered evidence, I think, is how Jackson hooked so many readers.

But the thing I found most interesting about the Hill House was not the ghost story. It was the story of mental illness in the 1950s, particularly female mental illness. As the one character begins to unravel, it's fascinating to watch the other characters, in essence, vote her off the island. She's edged out of conversations. She's pandered to. She's tip-toed around. And, eventually, she's fully shunned. But why? She didn't do anything except lose the plot. And I can't help wondering if this lead character isn't Jackson herself remarking on how she feels in her own life as artist, an intellectual, an alcoholic, and a mother in the community. She's doing it all wrong for her time and space, and I'm sure she felt alienated by her talents more often than not.

I'm also curious if the character of Eleanor Vance is the model for Stephen King's Carrie White. They both share telekinetic energies and social awkwardness and the shunning of society—even intimate society—but King takes Carrie's retribution in a totally different direction. King adored Shirley Jackson. He saw her as a heroic psychological writer. How much did he emulate her, even unintentionally, by influence of his adoration?

Although she's referenced as a psychological writer, the macabre Jackson describes is fully spiritual. She

# STILL NERDY

describes Hill House as living. It's an organic thing. And it shifts itself to deceive its inhabitants. Early in the novel the narrator says that "an exorcism does not change the facade". Why would such a statement be noted if such a thing were not needed? So do we watch our spiraling lead lady lose her mind or her soul? That's where the ending comes so largely into play. That's where King took the story in a different route.

**MID-OCTOBER PART ONE:** The problem with George Orwell is that he's too damn Biblical. What I mean is that, like the Bible, Orwell can be quoted at any time, towards any political persuasion, and feel relevant in any direction. He's a prophetic voice. Orwell's penchant for Big Brother and Double-Speak are as perpetually current as John the Baptist declaring the ax is at the foot of the tree. Bob Dylan said of the Civil Rights Movement, "The times they are a-changin'". Kurt Cobain said to the pre-Internet hysteria of mass media, "Just because you're paranoid don't mean they're not after you." And a few years before #MeToo and the revolt against an elite patriarchy, Jay-Z declared, "Ladies is pimps too, go on brush your shoulders off." Some sentiments can be too easily cut-and-pasted from any calendar or climate into another. For really punching-up the End-Is-Nigh anxiety, Orwell is perhaps the most famous. Neil Postman is a close second. C.S. Lewis and Maya Angelou might tie for a third place, depending on speaker's race and religion, and only if we're putting a kissable bow on things. (Personally, I'd prefer more Dorothy Parker peppered into conversation, for any occasion, but you can't always choose other people's working bibliographies, now can you?) The point being that you know people mean business when they toss around Orwell or Postman, or even Marshall McLuhan in place of Postman. They're just too damn applicable.

(Aside: I always get tickled when people reach further back—to say Churchill or Lincoln or Emerson or, if they're feeling really frisky, a dadgum Greek—because you just read that quote off a coffee mug this morning, didn't you?)

Although she's referenced as a psychological writer, the I say all this because, well, have you heard that the world is going to hell? SPOILER ALERT: it is. In fact, we are on a lubricated path straight-into anthro-intolerant bowels of Sheol. And it's the totally fault of the Left because, like Orwell predicted, those progressives are challenging our speech codes and instituting Newspeak with their Cancel Culture. It also just happens to be completely the fault of the Right because, as Orwell revealed, Big Brother is coming after immigrants and they're taking away our choices and they're making us way too binary in way too many Brother chosen ways. Then again, the Left and the Right are both to blame equally because, like Orwell said would happen, the damn media they both poison with their biases is a like a cage of rats slipped over your head. Do you want a cage of rats slipped over your head? Of course not. Who does want a cage of rats slipped over their heads? What's the safe-word in that scenario when both sides own the language. So get off the internet, get naked, get outside and let some real

ants nibble your real nipples instead.

Seriously and truly, I've seen Orwell recently quoted to support polar opposite ideas. Our confusion inspires poor reading (or memory of what we read long ago) as we attempt desperately to make sense of the fuzz in the air. I get it: people are doing their best to read the moment and to form some level of sanity while still feeling like they're not walking around stripped of their intellectual and emotional skin. That's no small task. And I wouldn't wish 2020 on anybody, expect maybe people born before 1965 when shit was too hard to toss around pithy quotes. After all, like Maya Angelou said, "Nothing will work unless you do." I'm not even sure how that applies, but it's mothertruckin' Maya Angelou.

**WAY LATE OCTOBER—I MIGHT GET FIRED FOR THIS:** Eight of us sat in a circle near a Chimenea not doing its job, when the friend I have retroactively named "My Favorite Person of 2018" asked a question that affected my digestion. She said, "If you could only choose one of the following ladies to ever hear again, who would it be?" She then proceeds to name Taylor Swift, Beyonce, and Adele.

My initial reaction was, "Really? These three? We jumped straight over Linda Ronstadt? Indeed, 2020 has done a number on all of us."

My second reaction was a flummoxed reach for Tums I did not have as one person said, "Probably Taylor", while everyone else said, "Oh, no question: Beyonce". Again, I'm flummoxed. The computer is Queen B's microphone. The production booth is her voicebox. The question was who I want to "listen to", and I don't hear much more than the spectacle of the moment in any given Beyonce track. Also, I loved pre-Jay Bey and will take Destiny's Child "Say My Name" over "Formation" any day of the week.

So I took the foul route as my third reaction: Adele. She's the only one of the three who could be recorded raw in a car or in the shower or even singing through phlegmatic bronchitis and make a solid gold record to stand the test of time. Her pipes are flawless. Her charisma is enormous. And she'd probably barf before skipping the chance to share the stage with anyone she adored, including Beyonce or Taylor. So, you know, choose Adele and you don't have to choose between them at all.

This was random, and somehow also possibly the most controversial account of anything I've written so far this year.

**MID-OCTOBER PART TWO:** What you do is this. You find the record that best suits your current mood. For me this past month, that's been a blend of new Enslaved, Maggie Rogers, Jeff Tweedy solo business, and live Bobbie Gentry ("judge not, lest ye be judged!"). Once you've chosen, you put that record on at about a half-way decent volume, enough you know it's there but not enough to take you away like a Calgon commercial. Then you go to Amazon's Shudder Channel for horror-nerds—or

maybe good old fashion Netflix and Hulu if you're so concerned about your soul—and you select a film that is visually stunning. Then, right before you push play on that film, you mute the television so as not to interfere with the record you've done chosen. *Voila!* Do you see what you've got yourself there? You've got what I like to call "moving wallpaper". It's beautiful. This is prime working conditions, right here. Once you've established your music and your "moving wallpaper", you are set to crank out all your grading and planning and Thank You notes from last year's birthday soiree.

My "moving wallpaper" is easy because I just type these three words into the search engine of any movie streaming service: JAMIE LEE CURTIS. October proved a fabulous month for JLC themed "moving wallpaper". I probably viewed portions of the original *Halloween* 17 times, the newest *Halloween* about six times, and bits of *Freaky Friday* only once. Oddly enough, the "moving wallpaper" I streamed most frequently turned out to be JLC's *Prom Night* (1980), which is a terrible movie. It's a blatant rip-off of De Palma's *Carrie* (1976), all the way down to the John Travolta and Nancy Allen lookalikes who plan to sabotage the prom with a prank. There's a good chance I streamed *Prom Night* 15 times over the past month, sometimes two-to-three times on loop in a single day, and I can't tell you why. Maybe it's the stark color and lighting palette. Maybe it's the too easy to follow plot with no dialogue needed. Maybe it's JLC with short-hair and that one little pre-Perfect dance routine in the high-school gym. Who can say? As the great sage Sarah Silverman once said, "The heart wants what it wants." And right now my TV screen is pitch black. Not for long ...

**MID-OCTOBER PART THREE:** The proliferation of Orwell as the chosen breath-mint of every talking head this side of Communist China made me think fondly of Vonnegut for reasons I as inexplicable as my ocular affection for *Prom Night*. On a rarely quiet weekend in my mid-Halloween advent, I decided to plow through *Slaughterhouse-Five*, perhaps in search of one of timely and pithy quotes all the cool kids are sporting these days. Three pots of coffee, two long sits, and a handful of Extra Strength Tylenol later and I had what I was looking for. Here it is: "So it goes." (Insert appreciative whistle.) Ain't that a beaut, Clark. That right there is all the syllables you need to toss out of any rhetorical situation. You've got the entire ethos of Gen X wrapped up in three small words, which was all the chords Cobain ever needed. "So it goes." Nevermind the context. Nevermind the way it punctuated only certain sentiments in the books. Just—"So it goes"—nevermind. I'm telling you this right here—SPOILER ALERT—Vonnegut delivers. Everytime. Vonnegut delivers. You know, we lost Vonnegut back in 2017 to complications from a fall he'd taken several weeks earlier. So it goes.

**YESTERDAY:** I wrote the tip-top meditation there in early October. Since that time my eyes have grown weary. I do not read as much now—only a month later—as I did then. My days are spent staring at computer screens either writing notes or assessing papers. At night, the last thing I want to do is squeeze more print through the Venetian blinds of my ocular windows.

No, sir. Ironically, this weariness played into my teaching as I introduced myself my new eight-week semester students.

**CONT.->**

I like to begin my class with a small lecture—15ish minutes—on the fact that humans were never born to read. Our brains do not come preloaded with a reading center. Rather, as psychologists and neuroscientists such as Maryanne Wolf, from Tufts University, and Daniel T. Willingham, from the University of Virginia, have explained, our brains appropriated and linked parts of our mind dedicated to other tasks and energies to create the action we refer to as reading. We combine efforts from the auditory, the visual, the linguistic, and the memory centers to all “fire-up” together, allowing us to gather the image representations of print and establish language-based comprehension—this thing we call “reading”. It’s a gnarly process, one that we easily take for granted as supposedly natural.

The point I try to make to my students is that it’s way okay for them to hate reading. In fact, because they’re brains were never meant to read, we should view the act of reading more as a miracle than an obligation. I want to give them permission to explore their intellect and curiosity in other ways. The reverse psychology here is that by deflating the great idol of reading as the only pathway to intelligence and career success (which is what most young college students seek, including myself at that age), I hope they will feel more permission to read for the sake of reading alone. Not as a means to end, but as a glory and enjoyment unto itself. That’s the hope anyway.

We’re three weeks into our new eight-week semester, and I am pretty sure my students have remembered nothing else I’ve told them so far. They all latched onto an old guy—a teacher, no less—saying, “*You don’t have to read to be brilliant. Your mind is built to make loads of wildly imaginative and creative and critical connections. Reading is just one of them.*” See, they remember that. And I would, too.

Far too often I’ve been shamed for not reading the right things or the smartest people or the oldest books or the rightest or most leftist wing. The good news is that, ever since I discovered Stephen King’s *Carrie* my junior year of high school, no one’s been able to steal my joy of reading. I may not have been born neurologically capable of reading, but I was born with a great affection for it. And I’ll be damned if someone’s going to shame me in my particular loves for it. But I’ll also be damned to know I was that shameful voice to anyone else, although surely I have been. It’s an inevitable career hazard. Still, even as my own eyes weary to the task of visual reading and my ears perk to the beauty of observing stories the old-fashion way, I find it interesting that I’m telling young people they have other avenues to nourish their inner-lives. Maybe I am finally learning to say such things as a true believer.

#### AFTER AN IMPULSE BUY AT CURIOUS COLLECTIONS:

Since the release of *Wildflowers & All The Rest*, I’ve spent loads of time with Tom Petty. Reuniting with *Wildflowers* has offered a treat that called me back to other old catalog favorites, but it’s also made me curious to learn more about The Heartbreakers. So I’ve turned to Rick Rubin’s *Broken Record* podcast and Peter Bogdanovich’s mammoth four-plus hour documentary, *Runnin’ Down a Dream*. My claim of spending so much time with and near Petty’s band and legacy might suggest that I have something substantial to say here about him or them or the whole experience, but I do not.

I just marvel at the notion of their career spanning the entirety of my life-span and with few low-spots. I also appreciate Petty’s commitment to the art, to his band, to his fans and his willingness to give the finger to loser critics. There’s a beauty in all of those bits of him that feel timely for me in the current moment, but for reasons I can’t quite say.

Perhaps the main thing that has stood out to me recently about Petty is his conviction of his own value. Bogdanovich devotes a good chunk of his film to telling the story of Petty’s MCA lawsuit around the time of *Damn The Torpedoes*, which I just learned was titled after the lawsuit. I’ll not retell the whole story here, go watch the film, but essentially Petty gets held against the wall by some suits used to getting what they want because of their suits. Petty just laughs at them. When they tell him they could break them, he says, “You can break me, but you can’t make records.” End of battle. The suits roll over. Another David topples another Goliath as the boy recognized that massive hot-air was the giant’s only true strength.

As already stated, I’m not alone in my Orwellian sense of new and gruffing Goliaths hulking at every angle these days, and Lord knows I would appreciate waking tomorrow with more of Petty’s spit in my jaw and less quaking about the table set in the presence of my enemies. After all, the ground is strewn with rocks a-plenty. And Petty’s story, like the shepherd boy of old, proved inspiring as they both walked away singing “I Won’t Back Down”.

#### MY TOP-FIVE TOM PETTY (AND THE HEARTBREAKERS) RECORDS:

1. *Echo*
2. *Wildflowers*
3. Johnny Cash *Unchained*
4. *Hard Promises*
5. *Damn The Torpedoes*

\*\* This order changes frequently, even as the *She’s The One* soundtrack weaves in and out.

Speaking of *Broken Record*, I also found a delightful podcast on Spotify titled BirdNote, which can also be found at [www.birdnote.org](http://www.birdnote.org). It lives up to its name, as the daily podcast it a mere two minute celebration of a particular bird, their song, and a few key details about their situation. I’ve incorporated Bird Note into my early morning coffee routine. Being as prone to anxiety as I am, I like starting the day with a pitch towards wonder, which sounds as wonderfully cheesy as it should. Two days ago I learned that chickadees actually add brain cells to their hippocampus in cold weather, increasing their capacity for spatial memory in order to find the seed they’ve scattered for winter foraging. Yesterday’s episode proved a bit of a downer, relaying the story of Grouse in Washington State who are unable to respond promisingly to the massive wildfires on the West Coast. The BirdNote story focused as much on biologist Michael Schroeder who hopes to see his concerns for the Grouse assuaged in the next year through either science or a miracle. Today’s episode offered a redeeming story of the Bufflehead Duck returning from the boreal forests in Canada and Alaska to winter with us again in the Continental States. Bless his heart, the Bufflehead is also called the Bumblebee duck, as he’s the smallest diving duck in North America, and Butterball duck, as he’s a chunky morsel for duck-eaters. So it goes. — KEVIN STILL





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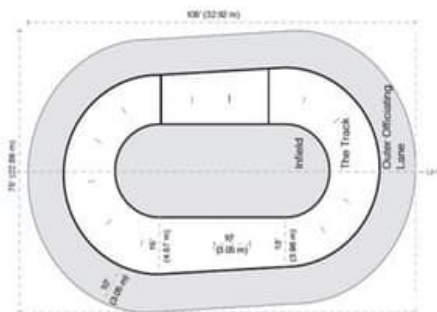
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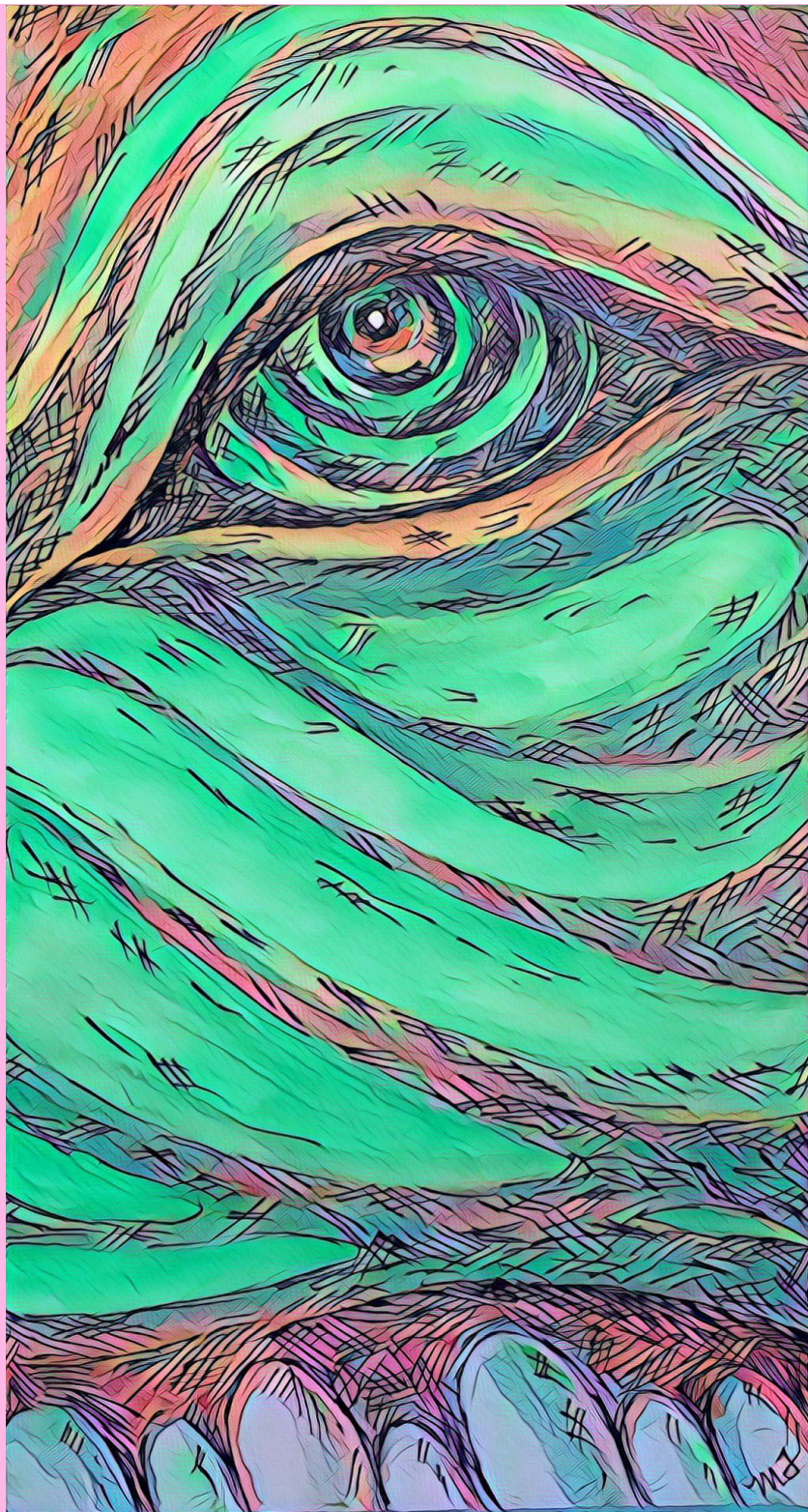


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# HYDROGEN JUKEBOX

Since I was a tiny dude I've been told that I was born too late. Family, friends, random people in record stores, music stores, libraries, teachers, etc. "You should've been alive in the '60s!" they would exclaim. Perhaps my proclivity for long hair, tie-dye, and buying classic rock, jazz, and prog rock records was a signifier. Old grizzled pony tail dudes would tell me, "Aw man, you missed it all! The '60s were way cooler! Free drugs, free love, cooler cars, man. You missed it!" And I began to resent it.

I had a long talk one afternoon my first year of college with a guy who owned a very small music store in my Kentucky hometown. Gatewood was his name, though I now know his name wasn't actually Gatewood but was something else, like Jeff or Todd or something. Gatewood was probably in his early 40s and was definitely a "you were born too late" kind of guy and spent the afternoon sounding off on how awful the 1980s were for music. I had heard this rap too many times by then and decided I wasn't going to take it. I laid out my litany of 1980s music defense: hip-hop took its first steps out of New York and into the world at large; African music as well as many other musics of the world began to infiltrate Western pop music and its record stores; prog bands learned how to write guitar pop songs and along with other '60s/'70s has-beens created album oriented rock; go-go took over Washington DC and its rhythms informed funk, R&B, and hip-hop by the decade's end; punk became new wave and its remnants flooded the air waves in the early '80s; post-punk became goth and occasionally it fluttered to the mainstream on gossamer batwings; Van Halen birthed the Sunset Strip and a virtual fuckton of dudes in spandex, leather, and teased hair funneled Diamond Dave and EVH into a beautiful hard rocking pop sound that, sadly, by decade's end atrophied into saccharine radio pop balladry, punctuated brilliantly by the street smarts of Guns & Roses and Skid Row; the post-punkers that didn't go goth learned how to make their cheap synthesizers sync up to the new sample-based drum machines and the British invaded America again via techno-pop and the New Romantic movement; Prince and to a far lesser extent Rick James revolutionized R&B, adding elements of new wave, glam, AOR rock, and hip-hop that left its stink all over nearly every R&B hit from the middle of the decade to its conclusion; young country tyros blended new wave, punk immediacy, and an ear for traditionalism into the nascent alt-country movement that would ultimately yield paydirt in the '90s; American punks took the death throws of British punk, sped it up, made it far more angry, and turned it into hardcore; some of those hardcore punks slowed the music down and rediscovered their childhood 45's, wrote amazing pop songs, and along with British ex-punks begat the alternative rock movement that Red Hot Chili Peppers, The Smiths, The

Cure, and Jane's Addiction rode to stardom; hip-hop progressed at lightning speed from party rhymes over R&B vamps to hard urban drum machine and synth minimalism to day-glo druggy psychedelic collages made from digitally sampling a variety of previously recorded music; many R&B producers of Latinx descent took cues from electronic hip-hop minimalism and took it to the clubs as Latin Freestyle; British hard rock took a turn towards speed and aggression and swept the globe as The New Wave of British Heavy Metal; many metal practitioners took NWOBHM and made it even faster and more aggressive, creating thrash, death metal, and speed metal; some American metal bands took the aggression and speed of thrash and merged it with a punk rock attitude as crossover; some metal bands even embraced hip-hop and combined the two into its own genre; musical technology moved at a pace nearly as fast as thrash with cutting edge synthesizers and computers birthing their own genres of techno, house, and industrial, all popularized in gay dance music club; reggae producers took the technology and let rasta kings and queens toast atop Casio keyboard accompaniment presets and called it dancehall; and the music was all delivered to us often bypassing the radio through alternative means like Music Television, Walkmans, movie soundtracks, college radio, mix tapes, and the compact disc with musicians having access for the first time to affordable home studio technology. True, the '80s also gave us gated reverb, metronomic tempos, the sampled orchestra hit, the DX7 electric piano patch, 128th note hammer-on arpeggios and many other production clichés. Gatewood could only sit back and reluctantly agree.

Similar points could be made about why the '90s rule, why the '00s rule, and then also the '10s. One really needs only to really listen with open ears and not make needless assumptions that everything good has already been made. But there can be value in assuming that everything good *has* already been made and you've just not heard it yet. Todd Rundgren once argued that a 15-year moratorium on new releases would allow fans to discover so much music that we wouldn't normally have been discovered. By 15 years end we still would not have drained the supply of great unheard music. The same argument could be made toward local or regional performers versus national and international stars. If one assumes that because an artist is from your shitty little town playing at that weird hellhole downtown that it has no merit or value one is entirely missing the point. Nearly every important artist or genre was created by some artist from someone else's shitty little town playing in their weird hellhole downtown. Having an open mind and open ears will yield a lifetime's supply of reward, something from which the decade of your birth need not have any effect upon. — KELLY MENACE

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HÄG  
HÄG

I love stoner metal, but I don't find it to be a genre that lends well to recording. Most bands in the genre make really boring albums, with a few very notable exceptions. The bands who break through on tape do so by bringing in other influences to break up the monotony of slow and low. Sleep brings in a touch of psychedelia and a touch of old school metal; Windhand brings in Americana, folk, and grunge; True Widow brings in shoegaze and plains minimalism; Bell Witch brings in progressive rock grandeur; The Well taps the paranoid psychedelia inherent in those early Sabbath albums that somehow the other stoner bands miss. These flourishes are greatly appreciated when trying to listen to an hour of these bands on tape. Those 1's and 0's and vinyl grooves reveal the weakness of song smarts and soundcraft that overwhelming volume and the feeling you get in your chest of hundreds of watts of tube amps and colossal drums trying to cave in your chest often covers up.

Newfoundland's HÄG understands this quandary. Their debut self-titled album has the tempos and the heaviness of riff and tone that firmly places their foundation in stoner metal, but there's a LOT more going on than sub-Sleep slothful savagery. Leadoff track "Summon the Earth To Lay Claim Back the Soil" marches along at a spritely pace like a NRBHM track before the band's secret weapon, vocalist Clair Hipditch, flies in on her witchily broomstick. Her vocals are more about vibe than leather-lunged gymnastics. She helps the band set the aura of darkness and atmosphere. The band helps by throwing in a touch of prog renaissance fair guitarwork and a bit of blast beat before wailing away to the end of the song. Dunno about you, but I've never seen a stoner metal band throw in blast beats like that. It's kinda of the antithesis to what defines the genre but HÄG pulls it off and it's kind of astounding

"I had a dream last night/I wore your skin like it was light" Hipditch intones on "Your Skin" in her best Beth Gibbons fashion before the band brings in the glacial heaviness, then the band's double guitarists show

# RECORD REVIEWS

off their lyrical harmony guitar soloing over muted synthesizer arpeggios as Hipditch crawls up from the grave after a psych-heavy breakdown. Her voice lulls from three dozen feet below the surface in a sepulchral pit before Doppler soundings from the guitars tug her and the drums to the surface. Midway through "Funeral", a fairly standard run of the mill mid-tempo metal song, the band slows down and tunes down, as if the tape machine had slowed down, and then it all becomes stupid heavy as if the bands sound was too heavy for the tape machine to carry it along at the proper inches per second speed any longer. "At the End of the Ambush" sounds like late '80s progressive pop, all clean palm muted arpeggios through suspended chords and light jazzy drums. It retains that rhythmic playfulness even when the big gain guitars pop in and the echo looms larger on the vocals. Lots of dynamic shades in this song, far more than the usual quietLOUDquietLOUD of most stoner metal musketeers. "House Sparrow" signs through alternate time signatures like a prog metal or power metal band while Hipditch drags us through the opening scenes of a horror movie. "I watched it die/Mother said she was neglected/She got hurt just trying to protect him" she coos. "Ruins" boogies along like the best south Texas metal band with lots of rhythmic twists and turns. "The Grim Sleepers" ends the album with classic stoner metal epicness, with lots of space between the notes while Hipditch asks for her "Little flame" to "comfort me, bring warmth to our home".

All toll, the impact of this mixed bag of metal and dark ambience is that I believe HÄG has come up with a new twist on a familiar thing. Sludge Noir I'd call it. Fans of a truer brand of metal will find aspects to bang their heads to, but folks who love goth, post-punk, and darker rock will be surprised to find themselves banging their heads along too while still feeling the horror batcave vibes of classic gothic music. Can't wait to see if they can follow up such a monumental debut. — KELLY MENACE



Tom McDonald  
Gravestones

For those of you who have followed my reviews for the past two-and-half years, you are probably used to me reviewing metal records with some folk and alternative rock in between. This time around, I thought I'd throw a real curve ball. Though the cover art of this release, titled *Gravestones*, looks like a cheesy, power metal record, it is, in fact, a rap album. If you are surprised to see me review a rap album, that makes two of us!

I bumped into Tom MacDonald's music on Facebook when a friend shared the song "White Boy". After seeing the video, and listening closely to the message in his lyrics, I was intrigued. It was a song about racial equality that took a very controversial edge concerning the current polarizing state of affairs in America. After hearing it only once, I assumed this was a one-off, intelligently-written song by a white, Canadian rapper who otherwise rapped about partying, drinking, and being a gangster, but after multiple people shared his song, I had to look him up.

After finding more of his songs on YouTube, I realized that Tom's controversial song was the tip of the iceberg; saying he's controversial is the understatement of the year. This guy is not making "conscious rap", he is making well-executed, and very relatable rap with a message. Whether it be racism, crooked politicians (left and right), religion, political correctness, addiction, depression, the corrupt music industry, militant feminism, societal woes, the occult, whiny internet trolls, celebrities using their influence for evil, or mumble rappers writing shitty music, Tom has addressed it and has no filter concerning how he feels about those topics. Nothing but brutal honesty!

What is it that draws a

metalhead like me towards Tom MacDonald, aside from his fearlessness conveyed in a genre I normally never listen to? The answer is that his ethos is the same one I recognize in metal artists. All of his music is completely underground, and only the singles can be downloaded from Amazon or iTunes; full albums can only be purchased physically from Tom directly. He has stated in both his interviews and songs that he hates the music industry, and blames it for much of the societal corruption in the last few decades and stifling the creativity of musicians by making them slaves to the business which promotes them. In the age of digital downloads, you'd think that an artist making his music totally underground would be career suicide, but through his own efforts, self-promotion, and bold character, Tom has managed to accumulate a net worth of 12 million dollars! If that isn't metal, I don't know what is. If you need further proof, go check out his music video for "Ashes" wherein he wears a classic Bathory t-shirt, or his social media photos where he is wearing an Aborted tank.

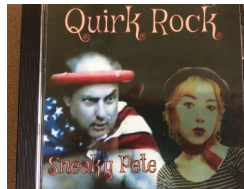
Now that the introductions are out of that way, this brings me to Tom's new album (one of two he has released this year). Upon receiving *Gravestones* in the mail—personally signed by him, no less—I threw it on one evening only to be surprised. I knew six of the songs on the record from YouTube playlists, which you'd think would be half the album...WRONG! While a guy with my musical tastes is used to albums with eight to twelve songs, I was stunned to see that *Gravestones* has fifteen additional songs. It was later that I discovered that Tom only puts out songs that he has done music videos for, whereas he requires that someone actually buy physical copies to hear the other songs. I can say with the utmost sincerity that the songs on YouTube are good, very good, but he has truly hidden away the gems for those who dedicate to buying his records.

I would characterize *Gravestones* "100% catchy" and "if you get offended, you lose." Tom manages to hook listeners into nearly every song, constructing each one as if it were meant to be a single, in and of itself. What *Gravestones* has going for it is that the songs are written in a very traditional format with two

verses, a repeated chorus, and a bridged, which are easily identifiable. Yet more, the lyrics and choruses are instantly memorable for singing along; simple and effective. In addition, Tom enunciates his bars very clearly, and he also has a great singing voice. I truly appreciate this approach, as it seems that many artists across genres attempt to showcase their artistic prowess so much that they forget about the fans who simply want to sing along in the car or at live shows. Tom's music is a true "blue-collar" man's rap, so to speak. What's more is that Tom's musical approach is that he can be anything from seriously stoic, depressively sorrowful, hilariously corny (he even has a song titled "I'm Corny"), to furiously angry. Whatever kind of emotions one prefers to feel, *Gravestones* has it.

While there are many high-points to *Gravestones*, if I had to narrow down the top five songs, they'd have to be the title track, "Piss the World Off", "I Hate Hip Hop", "People So Stupid", and "Just a Man", but there are many more songs that deserve recognition on this 21-song whopper. Regarding the record's length, it clocks in at one hour and twelve minutes. When an album is that long, it can be rather easy for the listener to zone out, or simply play it as background noise. In my opinion, if one is going to have a record that long, most every song must be worth listening to. While I can honestly say that most of the songs are definitely worth listening, *Gravestones* does have some mediocre songs; there are at least three tracks I could have done without. However, given the fact that the majority of the songs are very listenable, I believe Tom has produced something that is worthwhile and masterful, and I am glad to have it in my collection.

Overall, *Gravestones*, and Tom MacDonald in general, has managed to get me, a metalhead, to expand my musical radar by introducing rap with a common ethos to the musical genres I care so deeply about. What's more is that I believe Tom is a true artist who will change for no one, but also one who takes the time to care for the well-being of his fans, both on and off record, and for that I genuinely admire him. All considered, give *Gravestones* gets a 4.8 out of 5. Consider me a member of the Hangover Gang of fans! — CALEB MULLINS



Sneaky Pete  
Quirk Rock

This 2020 recording of 15 tunes from the longtime DIY musician was finished pre-pandemic but not released until now due to circumstances beyond control.

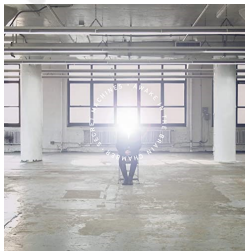
Sneaky Pete Rizzo's music pedigree reaches back to the Eighties in Bryan/College Station alternating stages with Lyle Lovett, nearly two dozen songs played on Dr. Demento's famed show, and dozens of albums released from his own studio. His latest CD claims a new sub-genre of music defined as quirk rock: adding a bit of comedy to old-time rock and roll. For Sneaky Pete, that comedy is delivered with a wink and a sly grin reminiscent of Weir Al Yakovic ... without a flair.

*Quirk Rock's* subject matter is evident from the titles: "Sperm Donor," "Boner from Miss Piggy," "The Concept of Conception." While nearly half the album plays with innuendo and double-entendres, five songs also are parodies of older rock tunes, likely not in the manner the songwriter intended. Bob Dylan's "I Shall Be Released" is repurposed as "Sperm's Lament," complete with acoustic guitar and harmonica. It's about a lone sperm pleading "Any day now/I shall be released." "Geezer Sandman" is a parody of the Fifties' Chordettes tune "Mr. Sandman" with the singer crooning "bring me a dream" that turns out to be a blowup doll. "Tooter Town" is about, well, gas, a parody of Lee Hazlewood's song done by Nancy Sinatra in 1967: "Sugar Town."

The originals include the perky "If I Was A Plant" ("Would you introduce me to your uncle and aunt/If I was a plant?"), the unexpectedly funny "Vasectomy Blues," the puckish "My Daily Sensations" ("I'm good with a boner/She's good with one too"), a tale of the cockroach's fortitude ("La Cucaracha Padarosa"), and the harmonica-driven "My Girl Meow." A surprise remake is the

melancholic "Gonna Miss You" that opens the album with Rizzo's lyrics added to the late Peter Green's instrumental for Fleetwood Mac: "Albatross." Also unexpected is the straightforward "Mary Messengill" that features nice keyboards.

Naturally, the album ends with the brief acapella chant of the two-word title of the last song: "Boner, Boner." — MIKE L. DOWNNEY



Secret Machines  
Awake In The Brain  
Chamber

Ever fallen in love with a band just because they drum sound is fire? I have. I remember fondly the shitty C-60 tape a friend taped his dad's copy of *Led Zeppelin IV* onto for me and how I could not stop listening to "When the Levee Breaks" and John Bonham's Echoplex'd stairwell drums. Or the time Jay Satellite taped me a copy of Comsat Angels' *Sleep No More* and I fell in love with the elevator shaft drums. Or when *In Utero* came out and I heard Dave Grohl lay into "Scentless Apprentice." Or when I fell immediately head over heels in love with Autolux upon hearing the first few seconds of "Turnstile Blues". In 2005 I experienced a similar feeling when rounding the corner to the A/V part of Target and seeing a video on all the TV's at once of Secret Machines banging away at "Sad and Lonely" from their debut album *No Here Is Nowhere*. The bass drum sounded MASSIVE, the snare tight and snappy, the drummer led with his kick drum foot (much like I do) and pushed that big marching band drum right up the band's ass from behind. So I stood around waiting until the video was over and saw who the band was. And then bought the CD and became a big fan.

Their story is a sad one. The band consisted of two brothers and the drummer. One of the

brothers left the band to start his own thing, a Curve or Garage-esque blending of electronic pop with a rock sensibility. A few years later he developed cancer and died. The band could not recover. Ten years later the surviving members reconciled and began making music again. *Awake In the Brain Chamber* is the result. And were I hearing the band for the first time I would fall in love all over again with that monster bass drum, banging away on lead-off track "3,4,5, Let's Stay Alive". What follows are eight songs weaving shoegaze, synthpop, goth, motorik, and indie rock.

"Dreaming Is Alright" and "Everything's Under Control" have that classic anthemic guitar rock over strong 8th notes feel that Secret Machines have employed to such brutal effect over the past 15 years. "Talos' Corpse" makes like the song Billy Corgan most desperately wanted to write for *Adore*, all whoozy gauzy synths and pop songwriting smarts with strutting rhythms spread out over shifting time signatures. "Give up I want to give up but don't give up, I won't" Brandon Curtis sings and it really does sound like the mutant child of Smashing Pumpkins' "Beautiful" and "Perfect". This mid-tempo vaguely '80s synth rock approach is a new thing for the band and its presence greatly colors the rest of the album. "Everything Starts" kinda sounds like the beginning of an awful Eddie Money hit but somehow Secret Machines finds new life in the detritus of the 1980s. "Angel Come" follows right on its heels with the same muted arpeggio as the previous song but in a different key, taken to darker more minor chord places. "There's no reason with the storm, Curtis coos.

This moody new approach suits Secret Machines. Fans of the more psychedelic rhythmic pilderiver of its early albums will find familiarity but the black mascara synthesizer darkness set to glorious pop melodies infused with lyrics of redemption and rebirth fits the band's overall story of brotherhood, death, and reconstruction. It clocks in right at 30 minutes and I know you have wasted a half hour on worse endeavors than listening to excellent new music. Come and spend a 48th of your day with this new Secret Machines' record. — KELLY MENACE



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