

TOTAL PERMISSION IN BLUE UTOPIA

By Tim Kinsella

Between the ages of 18 and 33 the hardest thing for me about playing music was forcing myself to occasionally stop so I could maintain some semblance of a life. And thanks to that compulsive, unbroken spell, my life apart from playing didn't particularly flourish. The only other thing that mattered was seeing every band in the world play. Genre, style and technical setup didn't matter. Every performer I saw pressed me hard against my own limitations of imagination, feeling, dexterity, daring and hearing.

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When asked about "The Chicago Music Scene" it's been common for decades for Chicagoans to mention the perceived rat races of New York and Los Angeles. We have all the same access to culture while also being more affordable, allowing musicians time to be playful. New York demands competition for limited resources. You must demonstrate dominance. And that phantom *Fame* is always looming in Los Angeles: the possibility of achieving it, the positioning to have a shot at a shot at it. Of course that warps you, however pure your intent. Recognizing playfulness as a key to creative discovery magnetizes particular people to Chicago.

Because the dollar does colonize minds brutally. You're thought a naive fool to consider any other standard of success. But isn't success largely about the inability to distinguish between work and not-work? That's about your attitudes of valuation. So living somewhere cheap certainly can't hurt.

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Chicago has deep music histories, but it's not Nashville or New Orleans. There's no dominant cultural tradition. The dominant form is hybridity.

And hybridity comes from playfulness.

And playfulness comes from openness.

And openness comes from precise proper ratios being maintained; every big city requires that the minute negotiations you have with thousands of strangers on the street

each day become second-nature, while you also protect a sense of personal space. But Chicago isn't too big. It's not Tokyo or Mexico City.

And Chicago big and open is at the center of a lot of things geographically, culturally, and historically.

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The collapsing of inherited forms into hybrids is now a given. In less-skilled hands, the potential powers of each element often unwittingly negate each other and ostentatious hybridity itself becomes the point. But the masters make it look easy to press the forms in stress against each other, doubling and deepening the nuances. Pulsing within the scrims, screens and gels of identity, hybridity awakens new self-awareness. And I'm not just talking about Black Punks and White Hip-Hop Kids. All kinds of edges get balanced on and leaned into. Like the breathing slime between stones, some new thing blooms when squeezed tight.

But no matter what genre allegiances, and especially when pushing joy hard, it's all variations of the blues.

Fifteen years I've remembered this line from Dave Hickey's *Air Guitar*:

"Today, having written some songs myself, I see that (Chet) Baker knew what all songwriters know, what singers like Judy Garland and Patsy Cline and Karen Carpenter knew most profoundly, that *all songs are sad songs*, borne as they are on the insubstantial substance of our fleeting breath."

The beginner's default ambition, whether bold or sullen, is always to summon some moment in which he's felt himself to be most real. And nothing shocks you awake like pain. But the masters give this same jolt a streak of joy. And what a complex ecstasy, that jolt awake without a predetermined emotional name or category.

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Each group develops its own codes to use when crafting songs. My group sometimes distinguishes between a design and a pattern.

Freud believed you unconsciously seek out and relive your traumas in order to conquer them. Is that a design? That's a pattern, right?

Every waking moment and mostly unconsciously, we each remake the world in our own image to fit our present experiences into our expectations. Occasionally we do this more consciously. Creation— poetry, art, music— exists at that moment, when we consciously confront the flux of troubled surfaces to negotiate meaning.

And that's the feeling of freedom evoked: the profound realization that meanings are not fixed. Constructions are not a given. They teeter as historical outcomes that could've gone any other way. And sometimes if the timing is right, these assumed truths just unhinge easily.

Hybrid forms cast a spell to break the spell of the romantic comedies and weapons manufacturers whose spells are so omnipresent that they're functionally invisible.

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My mom just sold the house I grew up in. It's been eight years since she's lived there. Until retiring last year she worked near my grandma's house, the house that my mom grew up in, so she just slid into living there a couple days at a time, transitioning slowly. And my grandma is in bad enough shape that it made sense. My mom meant to sell her house years ago, but then death and life and momentum interfered and everyone grew accustomed to this empty house. Some Saturdays my mom would sit there for an afternoon reprieve. Every few months when I could block out a couple days, I'd stay out there alone to write; no Internet, no TV, and stocked deep as they were— my mom always bought bulk— no food in the pantries that you could trust.

My dad and her bought the house in 1975 when I was one-year old. Packing it over these last months has been the worst of both worlds: 40 years of acquired stuff and eight years of entropy.

This is the house I lived in when I was 2-years old and my mom bought me my first KISS record from a neighbor's garage sale. The cover had *25cents* scratched into the corner in pencil. I started my first band within days— KISS 2.

As a toddler, I somehow talked my mom into letting me go into the bathroom, close the door and scream and scream and scream until I was so exhausted I'd end up splayed out on the floor, hoarse. I recognize this as the beginning of making my own music.

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Chess Records, House Music, Wax Trax, and Post-Rock are all examples of hybridity associated with Chicago. But to be clear, I'm not researching this. This isn't a scholarly sociological essay. This is my personal blah-blah on hybrid forms.

I'm a 40-year old motherfucker. And however many rites you pass through that all feel like the final signifier of no longer being a kid, 40 certainly feels real. And it feels right. I've weathered enough shocks by this point, it's simple to absorb one more. And even knowing what 40 always represented to your younger selves— and might still even represent to the people you date— you're ready. You've seen it coming. It doesn't creep up on you.

And if the past is some sense of grounding, we can think of it like a place. Intentions emerge and distorted corners get functioned into nests. And within it, old familiar chuckles come to sound like scripted seizures. I know. I've seen it. But I'm cool looking at Chicago Music or hybrid forms a little bit from the outside. I'm not a hermit crab carrying the past around on my back.

Alan Watts wrote: "To feel that life is meaningless unless "I" can be permanent is like having fallen desperately in love with an inch."

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A music community lives in its live events. Mostly, either a live band goes into the studio and records some version of their live event -or- the electronic records created in the studio get repurposed awkwardly into live events. Either way it ends up being ultimately about when the people assemble.

The recording of a live band is comparable to a photo of a sculpture. The live version of an electronic band is comparable to screening old family films. The records are useful archives of live bands and the live events are useful gear demonstrations for

electronic bands. And no artist can succeed without acknowledging the impact of this collision.

Walter Benjamin wrote that the history of sense perception has been dictated by technology.

Marshall McLuhan wrote an eerie forecast: "Man would become...as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms."

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At every layer of exchange, music shimmers: words and body, self and community, self and machine, tiny ear bones and tinier breeze. Meanings collapsed on each other can seem instantly familiar while totally new.

But neither performing nor listening can be hurried or faked. The meanings emerge from sound. The material reveals its intentions to you the player, and you then, for better or for worse, reveal your intentions to the listener. And on the surface, at a more immediate and primal level, the resonances of association invoke and evoke meanings independent of whatever you ever intended them to carry.

It's like how broken English sounds to those with ears for poetry or a sunflower might reveal the mysteries of a specific engine's design to one with an eye for engineering. Beauty is in the ear of the beholder.

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As a kid I never recognized how much that kid that pushes himself up to the front at shows has to prove. I thought those were the cool guys, except for me, who pushed myself up front to prove that I was also one of them.

I've been deeply invested in hybrid forms since I was a teenager overwhelmed by the freedom and infinite potential that it represented to me. I've participated in equal ratios as a performer, an organizer, and a fan. And in the same way that turning 40 feels OK, it also feels perfectly fine and natural to let hybrid forms fade away from me. The drawn out process of its receding happens so slowly, you don't even notice that you

don't notice. Let the kids have it. They're the ones with the energy to close the bars every night.

And the ritualized closing of the bars is especially necessary on the nights without shows. That's how the necessary connections happen. Every local can sniff out some anxious small town kid who just got to town and expects to sing for Tortoise or play lead in Shellac. And I love their earnest, dorky outsidersness, but I'm not talking about contrived networking. That happens in New York and L.A.

I'm talking about established friendships. Who've you handed your keys off to and struggled to clarify some plan to get them back? Who've you heard tell the same story of a blind-sided breakup over and over, patient while they unravel the whole yarn again in hopes of stumbling upon some previously overlooked understanding? Sharing the shock of each of our own situations, this is *Life*. This is it. This is what happened and now this is what's happening. So how do we plan to respond? These are the issues a community deals with, not a scene.

And like the secret language between lovers and the codes within a band, a community crafts its own lingo and jargon.

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And friends start bands. But while friendships might be based to some degree on feelings and the effect of music might be about feelings, bands are not about feelings. Bands are about construction. And when planning how to build a house no one cares how you feel about the house. The negotiations are about intention, and intention may be emotionally motivated, but intention does not get the house built. To do that, you discuss resources and strategies. These are implicitly political because they beg the question of who gets excluded from this access.

And the meanings, consciously or not, happen at every step and get handed over, over and over, from thought to hand, hand to amp, amp to listener, listener to association. And this constant negotiation is itself the meaning.

Graham Greene, describing his observation of a mother screaming for her dead child, identified the key to his technique. The "splinter of ice in the heart of a writer. I watched and listened. This was something which one day I might need."

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Notes, chords, scrapes, the feedback of an open string, like words in a dictionary, have no power or value except through their position and relation.

T.S. Eliot believed that the poet's work is a series of formal processes that filter and reconfigure the cultural inheritance. Modernism is a curatorial act on the past, setting history in negotiation with itself by exemplifying what ratios the different priorities of different historical moments will enter into new work. It's logical and requires a deep history of the medium. And emotional detachment helps.

The implication is of course that no poet has meaning on their own, but only in terms of context to the countless dead poets. This is the evolutionary process and it's why Eliot speaks of each poet as a channel for the vehicle of poetry.

Acknowledging distortion, Harold Bloom wrote "strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves." The form evolves through your stumbling misunderstandings of your predecessors.

Robert Bresson wrote: To create is not to deform or invent persons and things. It is to tie new relationships between persons and things which are, and as they are.

Also: a sound must be transformed by contact with other sounds, as is a color by contact with other colors. A blue is not the same blue beside a green, a yellow, a red. No art without transformation.

But of course on some level emotions motivate us to create anything at all. Joy deepens after having learned to live with disappointment.

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And sleeping in their sweaty flannels in Dostoevskian squalor in a Pilsen loft, with cracked walls kept together with plastic and cardboard, the kids live for the privilege to keep their equipment set up in the center of their home. There's wear at the edges of everything, the simplest sense of civics played out in the toilet, and this curatorial sense of relating to the past is the dominant sensibility; not only all the books and records like

externalized memory, but the clutter of incongruous objects and obsolete technologies. What's more stylish than old things that were once nice new, now worn down but not quite broken? The rare object's aesthetic value is a simple model of the economics of scarcity shifted to demonstrate some enlightened worldview. Cables draped and strings strung, old cheat sheets and thrifted LED screens, airbrush and black-light. And the clutter itself changes your thinking; you think, 'better hold on to this— we might need this beat up cardboard box.'

Camouflaged next to graffiti rendered invisible by more graffiti, the cast aside silkscreen's image is inverted in blurred layers of paint.

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Once I asked my mom to let me go scream in the bathroom when my dad was home. That was the only time she ever tried to talk me out of it. But I went in and closed the door and I began screaming and within seconds my dad crashed in screaming at me to be quiet. Referring to our deaf neighbor, my dad scolded me, "you sound like that retard."

By third grade I wanted to play drums. Following the recommendation of my school's band teacher, my mom got me a snare drum to learn on, again at a neighbor's garage sale. My parents walked me down to the basement and set up this single drum. They stood over me and smiled until I began to hit the drum as hard and as fast as I could, screaming at the top of my lungs with no conception or regard for rhythm or melody. The look of terror on their faces is the second distinct step in my evolution as a musician.

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You befriend a jazz guy, surprised to realize all the weirdos in common that you're both fans of but approached totally differently. And you meet a disciplined shredder that's happy to sit for an hour with a singing bowl. And you realize that those pipsqueaks three years younger than you that you thought of as the next punk generation are energetic and committed, prolific believers whose various inter-woven

incarnations all uphold a standard of skill and creativity. And Squiddly Diddy on the kit, his playing speaks to non-musicians and musicians equally.

And all together you learn how to live beyond any models that any of you had ever seen. And the joy is contagious. The rhymes and symmetries of self-identification within a group hop genre distinctions, seem to leap twenty streets at a time.

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By fifth grade I mowed the lawn weekly for \$5. It was a short walk to the record store and it was dank and dreary there, but we recognized this as expression of its disinterest in the mainstream. Just seeing the flyers for all-ages shows in back rooms of bookstores and sports bars on their off nights, my sense of possibility in the world grew.

Tapes were \$7.98. Each week I'd sell back the tape I'd bought the week before and \$5 would be enough to get a new tape and a blank cassette to record it. I'd linger all afternoon choosing that week's tape. I knew I'd do nothing else except listen to that tape over and over for a week, smelling the cover.

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Trust matters much more than proficiency. If you're anxious about impressing anyone, you limit your options. And collaboration is all about the willingness to fail together over and over. These failures set the parameters of what's possible. I know I need space to follow hunches that may seem corny or wrong. And whatever the conceptual departure point, nothing's ever resolved until its absorption into the whole.

And with momentum, you get lost in that surface and the simple joy of that struggle, song-by-song, day-by-day. Hybridity blooms. You're *being*, not seeming, deep enough in it to no longer even need to remain on defense against those terrible habits of technique.

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The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. – Matthew 6:22, King James Bible

Bresson says you must rid yourself of the accumulated errors and shortcuts and untruths. Master precision. Become a precision instrument yourself. Each gesture must move through and beyond your expectations going into it, re-invention, on the spot, over and over.

Anne Carson writes: Nothing is left in you but desire for that perfect economy of action, using up the whole heart, no residue, no mistake, as simple as water if there were any such thing as simple action for animals like us.

Zizek thinks there's greater truth revealed in the masks we choose to wear than in the pretentious attempt to wear no mask at all.

This is why we all love the tension of someone playing pressed up against the limits of their abilities, about to wobble out of control. The stakes are primal and out in the open.

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Feeling comes from selection and sequencing. Meaning comes from context; each part modifies all the other parts while simultaneously being modified by all the others in a constant reconsideration of the established meaning.

Dave carved robots from discarded detergent bottles from the laundromat's dumpster. Rob Roy unconsciously based his circuit board's design on the Persian carpet he paced endlessly pondering the circuit board's design. An amp acquired from an ex-roommate's bandmate's ex-bandmate's roommate in 1995 now stands stacked in a side room years at a time waiting to be needed.

Makers make the most of their shitty equipment. In praise of the parameters of their prayers, they do what they can and do what they can't help. This gear does not get dusted and fussed over.

One standard of success is recognizing and side-stepping the breaking points that prohibit simply carrying on.

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I heard myself say it with a chuckle before realizing the truth and gravity: quite literally, I bet my life on being a musician. I understand that's dramatic and self-

important, but here's what I mean: I don't care at all about technique. I can't just fall in on any session. I can't transpose a song's key on the fly. I still have to look at my hands all the time. So by a lot of standards I'm not really even a musician.

But stability, saving accounts, starting a family: these are the privileges of the non-musician. Musicians have music. That has to be enough. People that aren't 40-year old musicians would never believe how little money I live on.

A lot of my peers bartend or wait tables and it zaps their energy. And gradually things shift so that they're no longer musicians working in the service industry but service industry people that dabble in music.

And this same community that's so inspiring at 25, can get to be pretty depressing. So many cliches are true and embarrassing: the struggles for meaning, all the loneliness and spiritual emptiness. The redundancy of dressing like the guy on your T-shirt becomes inevitable. The weirdos who always know where the parties are display their defenses, and whether it's all black or strange bangs— Wild Style, Velvet Underground or Ramones— they really don't look much different than they always have. And why wouldn't you surrender your individuality to Rock-n-Roll or Hip Hop or whatever pre-fab identity might potentially point you away from pain?

But let's be frank, the only real posers are the people afraid of pain that try to write a song.

It's a community of sad and formerly sad and future sad people in pain or coping with pain together, occasionally smiling unrestrained for loves deep and sudden and delights particular.

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Aristotle's catharsis requires a perfect balance of identification and distance. Striking that delicate ratio is the greatest challenge any artist faces. We want stars to project ourselves up into and we want them to look kind of like us.

Keats defined "negative capability" as "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." People love their genres for their codes of rebellion. But wisdom comes from treading in

insecurity. Expansive definitions of music— hybrid forms— grant access to this realm of possibility and unmitigated primal experience.

Keep Marx in mind: philosophy and worldview spring from material circumstances.

Edgar Allen Poe wrote: “Infinity.” This, like “God,” “spirit,” and some other expressions of which the equivalents exist in all languages, is by no means the expression of an idea, but of an effort at one. It stands for the possible attempt at an impossible conception.

Contradiction is the test of Reality, Simone Weil said.

Hybrid forms resolve dichotomies simply by their inclusiveness.

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Our worlds blew open when these new kids moved in down the street and they weren't only also into punk rock, but their parents gave them lots of money— like \$20 at a time a couple times a week. They could buy all the records by all the bands that we'd seen the people in the other bands wearing the logos of. We'd spend whole days at their house listening to records and watching gore movies— not horror and not thriller— just the perverse thrill of seeing bodies mangled, the DIY production values consistent with the punk records. And my sense of possibility in the world grew.

It was those neighbors and their damp bedrooms that first made me associate punk with the sour whiff of sweat and come.

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When you're 25 and terrified of a petty life and everyone you know burns with inspiration, things are simple. Everyone expects to be like Bikini Kill or The Smiths — bands you remember the first time you heard, bands that manifest with fully-formed aesthetic worlds.

But slowly it becomes evident that the Band-Life's worldly rewards aren't that likely or that great. And low-hanging fruit can appear to be a suitable substitute for the original drive.

And then you're 40 and a lot of these people have been your friends for 15 years. And you watch some of them get smarter and more inspiring and more driven to persevere and encourage each other. And the drive is that much more beautiful with the knowledge that the payoff isn't that likely or that great and so by necessity the act has to be its own reward.

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With practice you learn how to roll with being high in a crowd. And you learn to quell that stupid suspicion that you're supposed to know who someone is every time you go out.

Arms thrown around each other, drinking in big swallows, everyone seems to long for authenticity, but you can't imagine by what standards anyone measures this. All the knicked up, chipped paint scuffs and logos piled one atop the other demonstrate inclusion in the club. The hard stare out from under layers of coding establishes individuality within it.

The sock pulled over the mic isn't a P-popper. It prevents the singer from getting shocked. Paint stains on the carpet and the ash stains on the blanket; when will it hit you to just occasionally wash the bedding?

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With hearts misspent and fatigued, some people's soaked brains no longer fire neurons right. They've somehow lost the ability to regulate the volume that they speak at. And what sadder tragedy than watching the slow decay of someone you once admired, knowing all along that it was never inevitable? If only this or that, some little thing that didn't fall in place had come together, maybe the habits would've formed differently. Maybe some necessary something would've taken root.

So much is possible before you develop a sense of too-much-coffee or too-much-whiskey. And if you can figure out getting paid, it's a great way to work two hours a day, maybe midnight-two at your most high. And you can still drink most nights through your thirties and make beautiful and inspired music whose beauty and inspiration is probably a little more sparse, but deeper. But it's not moralizing simply to

observe that eventually you can't drink every night and continue to participate in the world in a creative way.

And frankly, romantic as all this may be, some dudes really are just slobs and monsters whose big bodies have grown too powerful to safely channel their adolescent rage.

There's that big noisiness we all share and we shape this noise as it shapes us, carving each other in reciprocity. But all creativity eventually requires some degree of quiet.

The thirst of abject and attritional men increases the more they drink and drink.

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I should admit I'm actually kind of conservative. I don't like it when someone holds an instrument wrong. I generally don't like left-handed drummers and singing bass players. And every time a man younger than 50 with a beard or a man older than 12 wearing shorts tells me that he likes my bands, I feel like I'm doing something wrong.

So the codes must mean more to me than I'd like to admit. Idealistically, they imply taste, taste implies intent, intent implies worldview.

But mostly it's fun to see how the kids get dressed up, made up, pierced, painted and shaved strange, thrilled to tear their pants just right and crack the screens on their phones. The coolest kids won't even notice being looked at, or will look right back at you. How empowering when someone knows it and owns it: exactly that same thing that kept you always a little bit on the outside as a kid now draws people to you.

But of course it's not only the rush of membership that draws people to hybrid forms. All subcultures are embarrassing with their ridiculous pecking orders. The social organizing committee of the Oklahoma church and the party-planning committee for the transsexual political action group have as much in common with each other as either has with the organizations they represent. Only the privilege to subcontract violence distinguishes some other exclusive club's logo from a gang sign. So of course you know to never trust a true believer.

But the walls of your practice space become a kind of collage that reflects the inside of the shared skull and the denser its arrangement comes to be, the more you

who share the space come to have in common. Hand-drawn fliers and setlists in thick markers on tall paper are taped up. Spray-painted logos freckled around the edges drip on the shiny surface of drywall. Which old rebellion might usefully move you forwards? Bold about technique but unsure how to work the gear, you stuff a grubby pillow into a kick drum kept in place with a big brick.

And you realize no one even notices when some grimy guy that you always thought central to all of it gets removed by an unexpected child or rehab.

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And despite what some critics have maintained for 20 years about my supposed ambitions to strip music of all its pleasurable elements, however clumsy and analytical I may be wired, obviously I have a deep love for music and its power; that thrill of some holler beyond all taste.

Its requirements are so strange: the willingness to make any possible facial expression. And its rewards equally unexpected: allowing people to touch in public in ways we never otherwise would, showing each other how our bodies open and fold, while peeling open a coded frenzy of adolescent resentment against a long gone father.

Everyone in the low-ceilinged basement, each draped in their own childish loneliness, looks like a saint at her breaking point. See how the light reflects off her face like an oil painting? The girl with the bare midriff has apparently receded so deep into appearance that she can no longer feel hunger or taste food.

Music is not a surface. It fills the space between things. It comes to feel like a deeper reality: the blur and pulse of a Zen monk's nose after a purposeful bonk; the crowd running from the first movie theater in terror that a train was heading straight for them; the terror of truly believing that you really may never ever feel free again.

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In *Pierrot La Fou* Belmondo turns to Karina and says, "It's got to look real. This isn't a movie."

Walter Benjamin points out that "authenticity as a concept" is a recent development. Broken teeth have a deeper authenticity than greasy hair.

What effort, let alone intention, goes into appearance, these public pronouncements to freak out the suckers. Friends come to look a little bit like each other, normalizing ornamentations.

But certain exceptional people emerge. At 24- or 19-years old, just learning how to be in the world, they're suddenly no longer just your friend that can sing with open eyes, one more part of this bigger thing, but someone who has to adapt to being looked at, that has to learn to look back at a camera un-phased and un-faking.

That's an acquired authenticity.

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Athletic stunts, technique on display, and investment in a hairstyle have never moved me. I like daring public surrender, seeing your shock at your own reflection in the chrome surface of your machine.

A drone, for example, is a simple hymn in praise of the very root of our culture, electricity. It's the sound of electricity itself. And it's pressing down on you beautiful and there's that tension— when will they ever stop playing that one goddamn note— and you wonder if maybe you'd never really noticed a tone before.

The limitations of your song are determined only by your own parameters for sensation and experience. Your song might bloom to seem boundless. But strange as it may be to feel like a child again inside of it, it can't grow beyond your own conception of the universe. You just never knew your own expansiveness before.

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Hybrid forms have a heightened ratio of implicit meaning. This is their essential utopian thrust, always pointing outwards and beyond toward potential, each thing more than itself. And this pointing is meaningful.

Where genre music fulfills certain expectations, hybrid forms acknowledge that the listener always steers. A blossoming gets set in motion. Blossoming, the unity of noun and verb, the verb becoming a noun; how do you suspend that transformation?

My group used to aim for what we called “dry psychedelia,” a psychedelic effect that shunned any sense of surrealism, and instead of effect pedals, depended on patterns with warping senses of scale.

Think Borges’ “Aleph”: everything everywhere visible all at once in a spot the size of the head of a pin.

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Is it even conceivable to keep a loft clean? Are the scummed couches and cigarette butts smashed out on concrete just inevitable?

A thing held together with duct tape got left in a spot and has become part of the room willing its will, fossilizing.

And then some need prompts you to recognize a familiar thing’s utility. And seeing it spontaneously as a tool, you’re stupefied how the previous generations could’ve been naive enough to never recognize it.

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My mom’s basement was the first place I ever played loud. We had amps the size of Kleenex boxes; none of us ever had any money. Procuring the resources was part of the thrill. And we started to have our own shows in the basement. And we continued to practice there even after three of us had moved to the city.

Years later when my dad passed away, seven of us camped out in that house for a couple weeks, grown men, all in our early-30’s. We made Mike’s old bedroom the control room and my room was the live room. My mom loved cooking huge all-day meals and chatting with everyone waiting their turn to record.

And when my cousin got sentenced to 10 weeks in an Oklahoma jail for an on-stage fiasco at one of our shows, that was the house that four of us locked ourselves in to write and record a record in two weeks before he was locked away.

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Wiping the lip of a big bottle getting passed around, the slender kids at the show move so easily in and out of stress positions.

These kids look at us as older as if that's some clear distinction, but we know it's a continuum; sudden leaps and drops abound, but a continuum nonetheless. And the kids can't know that it's The Lifers whose names they'll never remember and whose faces they'd never recognize that keep it all going.

The old patterns still work: stripes, dots, zippers.

What doesn't get repurposed only gets forgotten.

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Your friend, with actual, real tears in his eyes, is on his knees to squeeze out the last folds of his breath.

Mind, body and spirit all lit hot, you spent 10 hours in a strobe light pondering the shocking hue of the club king's eyes.

"...the music she loved the best – glad and like the greatest people in the world running and springing up in a hard, free way. Wonderful music like this was the worst hurt there could be. The whole world was this symphony, and there was not enough of her to listen." – Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

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The process of cleaning often begins with messing things up a little.

Hybrid forms are a technological inevitability. The internet equalized all nostalgias, made all the pasts equally present.

And sometimes when a nostalgia cycles back, you see some pimply-faced and smooth-necked kid a little off, fetishizing a code that was originally a dead giveaway for not getting it.

Nostalgia is a hokeyness fools sometimes like to muck and muddle up their music with. Of course cynicism brings out the worst in people, that false sense of smarts to flatter themselves. But it's actually quite cynical to load up music with shorthand signifiers of earnestness.

I like things that make me respond, 'oh, right! Simplicity! I could've done that if I was smart enough to know when to stop.'

Simple things seem so cool when done by others.

But my favorite is when I'm made to say, 'what gives you the right?!'
It means someone is being daring.

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Taste has to be challenged in action, but critics will fault you for doing exactly what you set out to do.

For years I was fixated on making music I hoped would evoke a familiar dislocation in the audience, that transitory state which is neither being awake nor asleep. Dimensions of this dream logic might be present in both dreams and waking life, but neither could completely grasp the sensation. Eventually the war on terror crashed my privilege to indulge this aesthetic fancy.

I became fixated on what political music might be like if stripped of slogans. Slogans were the enemy's weapon; the enemy being those that chose to propagate the idea of an "enemy" even being possible. So how could I counter such an ideology without using their same tools?

Slowly I realized both ambitions effectively aimed towards the same ends, a nudge beyond consumer capitalism's everyday blankness. Meaning had to be made negotiable. Confrontation meant playing meanings against each other to destroy dualities.

Language, whether verbal, visual or sonic, exists specifically because we can trust its margin of error. But to feel confident with this, we need to tempt its boundaries. We put our toes to its edges and lean in hard to know how far we can go.

*

All the same people got comfortable packed in there every night. And the drinking loosened you up to each other's dullness. And as much as everyone loved keeping score of each other's manual dexterity, as much as everyone needed to position themselves in case some fireworks might light your faces in the dark, no one really expected much. All anyone really wanted was to stand around the same people each night. And without much to say, the loud music didn't hurt. It uniquely enabled this community of sad people: communication would be limited to monosyllabic blurts.

And once confident feeling part of the tribe with all these sullen guys with their dopey friends trying to keep a straight face— all obviously the same fuck-ups at twenty-eight that they must've been at four— then there's the secondary impulse to distinguish yourself within the tribe. How quick everyone gets to tell each other that they know something: I've been there, I know that guy, I used to practice there, I've seen them.

*

Of course you can articulate your critical notions more effectively than your songs can convey them, because your tastes set your goals.

But your intuitive hunches are smarter than you could ever know.

People respond to all kinds of things you had no idea were even present. But with daring, this can be an advantage. Profound honesty is key. Affectations are readable and distort. The subtext is the text. Your only real move is to get clear.

*

The music blooms from the search for hidden meanings between and within notes. When pressed, meaning bursts. You have to get deep into it. Especially with hybrid forms, people need to see this strange new thing being inhabited. The very same devices that hybrid forms employ to create connections can seem alienating.

And still, this is not about feelings, but investment.

Accepting that meaning is negotiable means denying yourself the privilege of taste. I can speak of efficiency, effectiveness, surprise, rhythm, but I can't say good or bad. So many things I don't respond to are among the most pervasive expressions of popular culture. People must get something out of them. I can find their motives cynical or offensive, but I can't deny any sucker's right to enjoy them.

*

Being a musician is ritualistic and redundant: noodling while your hands stumble into a part, looking out windows at afternoon cornfields, the stroll at dusk through some ghetto and that same ranch dip backstage. This ritualism is true whether you are

refining a particular aesthetic or exploring, working towards the center of something or outwards from the center.

People really understand very little of one another, but through playing, groups develop telepathic exchanges. So much of the satisfaction of playing is collaborative and social. Playing solo is a completely different thing. We behave and remain largely the same people we are outside of the group, except for our code words and our telepathy.

You twist yourself into some poses because you've seen so many other people do them so many times in comparable situations, they've come to seem appropriate. Other times, your body moves into position to help you concentrate while sweating. Your cool posture held like stacked boxes before being made to move just makes your involuntary movement that much more profound.

*

Of course you intentionally curate the past. Your past joys and traumas filter how you experience and process your sense of the present.

And conversely, we all witness in our own lives and relationships every day how the present warps the past; you downplay some things, exaggerate others.

How a band or a specific event gets remembered creates its aura; think of the legend of the storm cloud that formed up in the ceiling at the Fugazi show, below zero out and so hot inside. This aura accrues haphazardly through beery gossip and then hits a tipping point and gets disseminated by weapons manufacturers and their official oral histories. The accumulated baggage might be either flattering or problematic, but either way it equally skews how the thing existed as itself in its own present. This baggage comes to represent the thing itself.

And I can't believe that it's now too late, my mom's house is filled with boxes, no room even if there was somehow time. Somehow we let it get to this point before realizing that we owed it to the house to play one more show there, maybe not even inviting or telling anyone.

*

Your relationship to music is simple: say yes to everything. Of course you can say no afterwards, but only after you've said yes first.

Your relationship to your audience is even simpler: compulsive humility and service. This might seem counterintuitive: how should you presume the right to purge and curse and praise and strut on behalf of your audience and do so humbly? That's the challenge and balancing act.

You express the particulars to represent the universal. And the inwardness this requires implies a certain vein of self-centeredness. But if the ends are truly that of expression, it must be a self-centeredness that constantly keeps its attention on its ends. No true expression could come from a truly self-absorbed person. What does he care about being understood? Jimi Hendrix the human, for example, had to humble himself to such a profound degree that he could channel a personality so huge and expressive as Jimi Hendrix the musician.

And by service I mean getting clear: the deep and quiet accounting for yourself. As both subject and object, it's an act of loving detachment so that others may be liberating of their nagging introspection and go about the business of keeping society spinning. You offer them short-cuts to understand their own subjective experiences; thoughts, feelings, etc. We could never sustain a society of rockers— someone has to farm and someone has to drive the vegetables to the store and someone has to carry the guns to guarantee the rights of the rockers to condemn them for carrying guns.

And this reciprocity is exactly why your work must be done with a spirit of service and gratitude. You win back some sense of wonder not to hoard for yourself but to offer to everyone else. This isn't a heightened anointing into some gnostic duty, just the least it takes to make decent music. You set the parameters of a playing field of possibilities. Jimi Hendrix's tone alone did that before he ever lifted his hand to the strings.

And you drive and drive and drive, sitting next to your good friend in silence, thinking forward and thinking back, keeping a list of things you have to remember to tell everyone back home.

*

The exact same songs aren't exactly the same at all with different production values. Do the people that don't play music get that? We're all so drawn to those people whose production values come across as inevitable because they seem authentic.

Take Johnny Cash. His songs were like prayers. They're mythic with flawed narrators drenched in regret in nuanced crises told in simple words in simple rhyming schemes, at peace with having enemies, and feelings— no ideas, all feelings. And lots of apocalypse.

Apocalypse implies some expectation for nature to express its inherent justice. We feel that. And we feel that Johnny Cash feels that. But we think we know that's how we feel in a way that he doesn't know how he feels because he's authentic.

*

Packing my mom's house we found boxes that haven't been opened in 20 years, dozens of demos no one's ever listened to. All this activity before the internet means quite the paper trail survives, so many fliers and zines. And it's hard to know what to keep. All the information we headed out on tour with fit on a single sheet of notebook paper: date / city / a phone number. And so many kids from all over wrote us letters. Isn't that weird? When it's happening and you're in the middle of it, you know it's exciting, but you don't understand how unique it is.

And mixed in with all the fliers for our shows are fliers for our friends' bands and it's difficult to distinguish where one band ends and another begins. Our band, after the fact, became regarded as this singular thing. But anyone around back then knows it was part of a bigger thing. Every weekend variations of that same thing happened and everyone went every time.

*

You learn to take your time. False starts aren't wasted time and not even false; they're the necessary starts.

You learn to know that just because you wrote it and know you did your best, that doesn't mean it's any good. That might be the most important new song because it

shows you what to throw away. Are your own biases and tastes really the only standard of a song's success or failure?

Keep your tricks simple like the cloudy little folds they use to bounce lights.

A hi-hat pattern that complicates the rhythm might be done best by taking away instead of adding.

You realize how sensible the arrangement of wild things. So how do you utilize the most familiar clichés in self-aware ways that maximize their power?

You have to look into your cerebral cortex, your nervous system and digestive tracts.

More is not just more than less. It's different.

Holiness is in the lowly activities and objects of everyday life; the most common deeds and language. And smooth bass below will unify everything.

Given the tragedy and violence of the world— America, Chicago— to seek, let alone achieve ecstasy, is a step towards the heroic, heroic in itself.

*

Do the weapons manufacturers have their talons so deeply ingrained into everything that they compromise even the distribution of our hybrid forms? It's true of the gaudy signifiers of rebellion sold to youth markets— that letting off of a little steam guarantees you don't look too closely at the bigger designs. You can feel empowered by your enlightened purchases, but remember that even though the intentions of the weapons manufacturers financing the romantic comedies may be sinister, the suckers can't be blamed for submitting to whatever offers them comfort or connection to what feels real.

Still, for you, acknowledging the audience at all will intrude upon the purity of your process. How could you recognize when choices about your hybrid forms themselves have begun to be made according to expectations of the marketplace?

*

Lost and at peace with it, eyes closed in a crowd, it's all ceremonial. Even the sweat of carrying your heavy equipment is a good warmup for the sweat of the release of the show.

And of course we beings with bodies seek comfort. These same five senses that grant us access to the fundamental wonder of being at all, are so much more often the sources of great burden. I'm occasionally surprised by the need to walk at all, that I have to literally carry myself from place to place. What incredible dislocation from myself does this imply? How could I've gotten so far away from my own body as to even feel its primary functions strange? And music solves that; mind aglow and body trembling unify to create a sense of heart.

And what does it mean this history of taking off your shoes to play? I wanna try that.

*

Applause is so embarrassing for everyone involved unless you've been so moved that it's impossible to not cheer. We all want to be made to scream, to be thrilled into shouting involuntarily, to grab at each other in strange ways without noticing we've done so. You can't help but throw your arms up in the air. Every time we clap politely for each other we contribute to the death of the potential for that thrill. When it's working, you never make a choice.

Can you cope with being seen dancing? Or have you moved to the center of the room to be seen?

*

The ultimate potential experience of feeling this thing in each particular and the whole, being immersed by it until you're absorbed by it, the way to think about this whole thing: it's like being let in on a secret. This pure truth that can't be reduced or paraphrased, it's esoteric espionage.

It's never been about learning some new thing, but understanding what's already apparent in plain view.

Whatever the difficulties, your business is to make *exactly* what you think you should. You owe that much to yourself and to those you love.

Form is content is form is content is form.

Seek clarity of communication against the cryptic.

On Hybrid forms, Edgar Allen Poe wrote: What you call the Universe of Stars is but His present expansive existence. He now feels his life through an infinity of imperfect pleasures; the partial and pain-intertangled pleasures of those inconceivably numerous things which you designate as His creatures, but which are really but infinite individualizations of Himself.

Honored as I am to've been asked to write something here, more so I'm just jealous of every person pictured in it. I never intended, or even imagined, that I'd do anything else than what we see them doing.

*

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