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*welcome to volume ten, issue six of*

**UNWINNABLE**  

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MAT MARRONE JAY CASTELO LEVI RUBECK  
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**This Machine Kills Fascists**

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## ***Presented by Exalted Funeral***

*FUNERAL RITES:* DEPTHS OF THE ABYSS

## ***Longform***

*DON'T HURT GIRLS WHEN YOU DANCE (OR ANY OTHER TIME):* JUNO STUMP

## ***Contributors***



Dear Reader,

And now back to regularly scheduled programming!

In this month's cover (and sole) feature (cover art by the excellent Christina Wald) is Juno Stump on the brief and transcendent life of Kurt Cobain. We've not yet done a single feature issue in my tenure. It won't be common, I swear! But, well, you'll just have to wait and see.

For this month's Funeral Rites, brought to you by Exalted Funeral, Noah Springer bears the pall for Max Moon's occult-infused series of setting zines for *MÖRK BORG*, *The Abyss of Hallucinations*. Read on, and do what thou wilt.

As for our regular columnists, feast your eyes on Oluwatayo Adewole, who ticks the clock back a few beats. Jay Castello delves into Hyrule. Maddi Chilton checks boxes and rips through a to-read list. Matt Marrone is a billionaire. Emily Price doesn't have to answer to anybody. Justin Reeve Foucaults around and finds out. Rob Rich wields a (Ted) Lasso of truth and honesty. Levi Rubeck deals in puns, the highest form of writing available. Ben Sailer makes a deal with Lucero(fer). Noah Springer has ever more selections for us! And Autumn Wright continues to draw a circle of sunbeams.

Behind the scenes we're churning along and getting ready to unleash our annual subscription drive in a few months. Lots of fun to be had there and we've got some really special goals we're looking forward to having you help us unleash.

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

Happy Pride to all!

**David Shimomura**

*Chicago, Illinois*

*June 6, 2023*



## THE BEAT BOX | NOAH SPRINGER

Well, it's half-way through 2023 somehow, so it's time to round up some notable releases from the first half of the year. It's been a bit quiet in my opinion and I don't think anything is sticking out as a classic to me quite yet (except for maybe that Danny Brown and JpegMafia joint), but that doesn't mean some quality stuff hasn't dropped, or that I haven't overlooked a ton of albums. Either way, here are a few more new drops from this year that stuck out to me just a bit.

### *Jack Harlow – Jackman.*



What can I say, [this goes down easy](#). Maybe not that greatest album of all time, but it's nice and smooth – a throwback to the style of hip

hop with a simple breakbeat, a nice sample and some competent lyricism. It's not particularly boundary pushing and fairly easily forgotten and certainly not giving Harlow the "best white rapper brand since Eminem" brand that he's looking for, but I gotta say, I

enjoyed it for what it is. It's solid, and I think Harlow's heading back in the right direction after a few missteps in his previous albums.

### *Prof – Horse*

Prof has been in the game for over 15 years making rap tunes, but I have never really tuned in before [Horse](#), his eighth album. It turns



out, I've been missing something right up my alley. Prof is funny, smart, biting and engaging. His lyrics are quick-fire bullets and the production is a tight, sonically unified selection that pulls the project into a new universe. Plus, Prof has gotten some fantastic features from Methodman and Redman, Kevin Gates and Cozz. I'm going to have to go back and dig into his earlier stuff now. More on Prof soon!

## ***billy woods x Kenny Segal – Maps***



I told myself I wouldn't do this. I said, "Noah, haven't you written about Billy Woods enough?" "Noah, do you really need to

plug his next album after you plugged his last one and the one before that?" I really, really, really tried not to write about Billy Woods again, but what can I say, he doesn't miss. *Maps* is the sequel to his work with Kenny Segal on 2019's *Hiding Places* – which, if you are interested, goes for over \$2k on vinyl these days. Their newest collaboration is everything you expect from Billy Woods – esoteric but profound bars over a layered production, full of abstract sounds and exciting vibrations. If you liked what you've heard before, you won't want to miss what comes next.

## ***Metro Boomin – Heroes & Villains (Villains Version)***



Metro Boomin has been running the production game out of Atlanta for the last decade or so, and along the way dropped a couple solo


albums, including last year's *Heroes & Villains*. I took a listen then and as always it was immaculately produced, but it felt a bit empty somehow and really long. This year, in the lead up to his production-lead on the new *Spiderverse* film, Young Metro **dropped the ChoppedNotSlopped version**, full of pitched down vocals and slowed-down, promethazine-infused beats. To my mind, the purple version is much-improved, especially if you like that chopped aesthetic. And if you don't like your beats chopped and

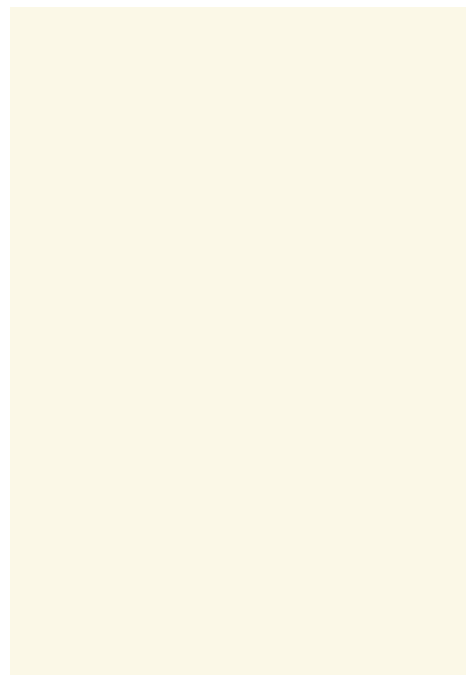
screwed, well then, I assume you're not fucking with Metro Boomin anyway and if Young Metro don't trust you, Imma shoot ya.

## ***Spark Master Tape – The Sale of a Soul***

Speaking of chopped-up-sounding music, after a five-year absence, Spark Master Tape is back with some fresh



SWOUP! With his trademark pitched voice and Memphis-inspired trap beats full of heavy bass and snap drums, Spark's return brings along a level of consistency rarely seen. With a decade and five mixtapes under his belt, his latest album is nearly as strong as his debut. *The Sale of a Soul* sounds like it could fit in with any of his earlier albums – Spark is just as funny, dark and aggressive as he ever was and the production is the same sample-laden, bass-heavy, trunk-blasting mania as a decade ago. Now if only we could get it on some other streaming services, Spark might break on through. 





RUN IT BACK | **OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE**

## **YOU'VE GOTTA STOP LIVING LIKE YOU'RE ALREADY DEAD**

“You’ve gotta stop living like you’re already dead” is a repeated central message in Aloe Vera’s self-produced album, which delivers righteous anger and self-doubt in tandem. As marginalized people, we are often pushed into just-about-existing, spending so long fighting that it becomes hard to detach the self from the slogan, from the struggle, from the fighter. Vera embodies this detachment from certain self by lacing her rhymes with references, as if desperately invoking borrowed power. It’s that constant maintenance of *The Fight* (or at least the artifice of it) which can become a powerful defense mechanism; after all there’s no time to admit that you’re hurting when you have committed to martyrdom. But ultimately, naming every factor and every system won’t save you. What use is it to name the knife that slides between your ribs if you can’t let yourself be helped?

By contrast, in *Pig*, the rich are the deadest of all. When they eat, they’re not eating food, they’re eating authenticity. They want

a story that they can put in a doggy bag to reheat in the aga later.

What’s even realer though is the underground endurance game. The rhythm of domination reaches its crescendo in a dingy warehouse, Rob (played by Cage) is the undisputed champion of a set-up which easily could have been an underground boxing ring but turns out to be something much darker – a betting pool on how long a person can physically endure being brutalized. And there the mask is off. There is nothing more fun to them than reasserting their dominance. Battering someone who cannot hit back because they need the money to pay rent. The example Michael Sarnoski and Vanessa Block present is deliberately extreme but a clear parallel of when (to paraphrase Jamelle Bouie) there are people who dine out at places with table service just to feel the power of it all – especially when they can hold the promise of a tip over the head of the staff serving them.



This is not a way of being that knows how to create. All it can do is churn and churn, bear more and more down on the people it looms over. It is the dead, speaking to the dead, praising each other's exquisite taxidermy.

*15 seconds. This man was no superhero. 30 seconds. There was no secret technique to ensuring this. 45 seconds. The only trick was to rid yourself of the illusion. 60 seconds. That you were anything but a vessel and a receptacle. 90 seconds. An automaton unbidden. 120 seconds. And so there he stood. 240 seconds. The steel tipped punches grew slower and breaths heavier. 480 seconds. They'd be better off trying to punch a tombstone.*

In Edson Oda's *Nine Days*, with arguably his best performance to date, Winston Duke plays an ambiguously defined supernatural being (Will) interviewing human souls to decide who gets the chance to be born. As we get more and more snippets of his personhood, we discover a deep well of loneliness and misery behind the professional exterior, contrasted by his friend and sometimes assistant Kyo, played by Benedict Wong in a hilarious but also deeply sensitive

performance – something he's been denied in his MCU roles.

Oda (and production designer Dan Hermansen) makes the transcendental physical. There are metal filing cabinets, long walks through the dust, stages built from scrap metal, a projector with giant film reels. In giving this film materiality, we are moved beyond vague platitudes about what it means to be alive and into the sharp realities that make this something rather than nothing – like the feeling when sawdust gets stuck in your nostril. In that physicality, you are forced to consider these existential questions as things with actual heft.

*Kyo watched Will drag the almost-rusted bike onto a pedestal then helped him secure it down. He never got how Will did it, kept so stoic in his grave duty. The pair brought out some rags and oil, cleaning the bike until it was almost-new, and Kyo could see concern reflected back at him. He didn't know why he and Will didn't fade like the rest, why it was their task to do this now, why they couldn't hold on to these souls for just a little longer. When they rose from the bike, Will suddenly moved in and before Kyo could say any-*





*thing had wiped a dark streak of oil from his cheek. Startled, he gave a muffled thanks though Will had turned away already, but in the reflection off the bike – he could've sworn he saw an almost-smile.*

Both of these are very tangible films, with leads that are men who do not get to play this sensitive role often. It's been a long time since anyone tried to cast Cage as a serious lead, with the camp Cage-mania often obfuscating the fact that he's a very talented performer. Whereas with Duke, he's usually a comedic second fiddle and/or physical threat, with either element riffing on his relative size and Blackness, so seeing him so restrained (with one very intentional and moving exception) was fascinating.

I never used to cry at films, but it always presented a sort of distant fascination for me. I think to cry at art, and I mean a real cry not the sort that a charlatan forces out of you by playing the same four heartstrings in a minor key, requires you to truly open your chest and give yourself to the world playing out in front of you and that's . . . hard. It's a lot easier to maintain that firm and critical distance, to sit like Will does as the start of the

film with notepad in hand, emotions locked behind thick glasses and V-neck sweaters. Or to disappear like Rob, hide away from anything that ever hurt you and pray the world doesn't come knocking on your door. But both of these films brought that out of me, made me give a little bit of openness I wasn't anticipating – maybe it won't even take a two-hour film next time.

*The credits roll. The lights go up. The empty cinema hears the crinkle of her chocolate wrapper. The carpet feels the weight of her boots. The stopwatch ticks time away. The mask tastes wet salt running through its center. The bathroom holds her moment in its gaze. U*



PAST PRESENCE | **EMILY PRICE**

## THE WAKE OF THE WAKE

Sometimes directness irritates. Telling something nakedly can be a form of obfuscating the thing you're trying to say. But then again, irritation can be a defense mechanism too. I find that sometimes, the things that bother me for being gross or obvious are actually hiding something I really want to hear, though I can't admit it to myself. *AJJ* is a band I learned about in college from my friend Maggie and then again from a stranger online, a band I rarely listen to anymore, a band that makes me cry for various reasons. Listening to *AJJ* makes me feel complicated feelings, from annoyed to moved. Maybe because of this, when I mention them I expect one of two responses back: annoyance, or an expression of movement.

More specifically, *AJJ* is a folk-punk, increasingly experimental band from Phoenix, Arizona who have released eight studio albums, including one Christmas album. In the past they've interrogated their own identities flippantly ("I'm a straight white male in America/ I've got all the luck I need")

and more seriously, including when they [changed their name](#) in 2016.

In my opinion, *AJJ* is best listened to when you randomly remember them, like a book of poems you skim through annually and then put back on the shelf. Individual lines are more memorable than whole songs, a quality enhanced by their shoutability, whether that's the refrain from "Rejoice" or my favorite line from "Skate Park": "It's not your job to make everybody happy/ You don't have to answer to anyone or anybody."

Their newest album, *Disposable Everything*, released on May 26, and is their first release since the EP *Good Luck Everybody* in 2020. Similar to 2011's *Knife Man*, it's a project that combines experimental turns with a central root of catchy solos and purposeful statements that are almost spoken rather than sung. The album's ideological position shoots between harsh reality and political fantasy, the latter of which can be boiled down to a line in "Strawberry (Proba-



bly): “Wear it out of the store – everything is free now.”

It’s an album about dissonance, the title of one of the tracks and the line that runs through them all. It peeks through from song to song as well as from line to line, something they’ve played with in most of their albums in the past. *Disposable Everything*’s rawness in the darker songs also reminds me of *Knife Man*, which included the line “You can hope it gets better, you can follow your dreams / but hope is for presidents, and dreams are for people who are sleeping.”

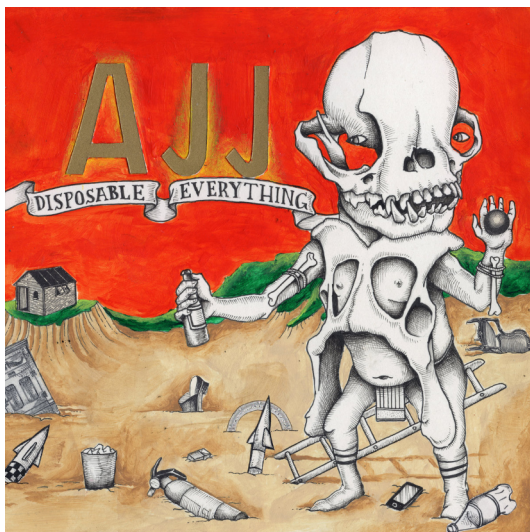
This time, as with the last, dark doesn’t mean serious. In one of the most somber songs it almost feels like they shouldn’t be able to get away with a line like “In the foothills of the foothills of the mountain of death / Where the trees smell like cum and all your friends are depressed”. But even if you don’t like that imagery (though I like it a lot) there’s punch in the lines that follow, where the song positions us in “the wake of the wake of the world in decline / Where everything tastes like a plan gone awry”. It’s a dim message that lands more than a hopeful one would. Right now, it feels closer than the holistic optimism of “People,” which sports the line, “People are my religion, because I believe in them.”

My favorite song on the album is “Death Machine,” which has the exact combo of blunt message delivered poppily that 2007’s *People Who Can Eat People are the Luckiest People in the World* had. (If you don’t enjoy this quality, you probably don’t like *AJJ* very much.) The song is perfectly sur-

face level and begs an equally direct response:

I’m not being hyperbolic, this place is a death machine  
Both literally and symbolic in the belly of the death machine  
Doesn’t matter who is steering, it’s just gonna keep on killing ‘til we find a way to finally break the routine  
You might as well face the music, you’re living in a death machine

A blunt observation suddenly shatters the surface tension, but it does so while being unpretentious. You can sing and dance along to the guitar and drum parts, and indeed after I listened to it on repeat that’s what I did. But no matter the first or tenth listen, something about that shattering still feels good. And a huge part of that is just hearing someone say the truth of living in the dying American empire out loud. It’s as if Sean Bonnette is the person at a dinner party bringing up the Iraq War or



Jeffrey Epstein.

Part of the reason I love this song so much is that, increasingly, I’m that person. My first response to the central message of “Death Machine” was to think about the pandemic and its governmental end just last month, which [kicked hundreds of thousands off of Medicaid](#). I wrote about the pandemic in March [urging people to mask up](#) and get the facts. However, the main thing this song gives me is catharsis. It’s very, very frustrating to be one of only a few people I know who seems to care about Covid anymore. I find myself being the person at the party bringing up the true



thing that no one wants to think about, with the tension and sometimes frustration that comes back when you do that. It's depressing. And it feels good to hear someone else say it: yes, we do live in a country that's gladioly hurtling us all towards death.

*AJJ* never mention Covid on the album, though there are hints of its composition alongside quarantine hobbies, like the mention in "Dissonance" of, "grow[ing] more plants in the window." Bonnette did acknowledge its psychic impact in an [interview in May](#): "there's gonna be echoes of that, like, when you drop a rock into a pond, for a very, very long time to come." But I think their perspective is more zoomed out:

the various systems of oppression and negligence that the US has imposed or worsened, from anti-immigrant legislation to bathroom bills, gun violence, inflation, climate change. Many of these come through implicitly throughout the album, in its more sober songs and even in the closing lines of "Candles of Love," which is set up like a love song but ends with an *AJJ* bait-and-switch: "And also thank you, capitalism/ Never stop making stuff."

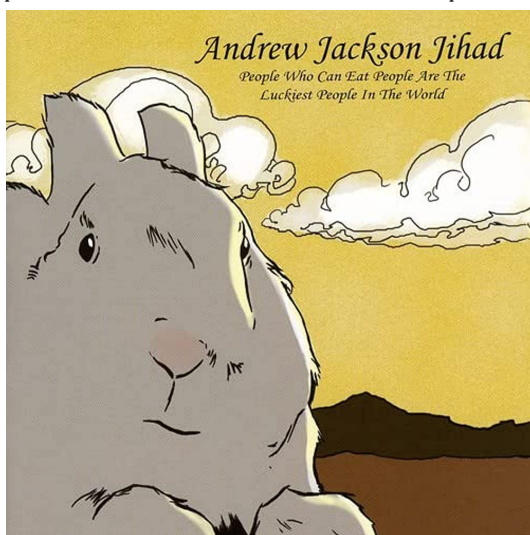
But then again, certain lines use such specific language that I'm catapulted back into finding a more direct point, like "Strawberry (Probably)" again:

Disposable dignity  
there's no taking this seriously  
There's no time for collective grief


The anarchy of the album's beginning is the logical result of its end. Through failure to protect others, it argues, we've broken the social contract and tossed our moral compass away. The only position left to take is to say fuck it and break the rules. But where rule breaking becomes radical isn't pleasure-seeking individualism, because individualism is the thing that got us here in the first place. Rather it's returning to the collectivism *AJJ* praised on their albums fifteen-plus years ago: caring for other people, letting them care for us.

And yet, my favorite thing on the album is that this realization coexists with simple, sheer despair. To paraphrase my therapist,

there can be two opposite feelings at once. And the one that stays with me the longest is on the title track, which asks directly, "How don't I be cynical when there is no relief?"



What's the purpose of music – to inspire us, or to walk with us into despair? *AJJ*'s music always moves between two opposite feelings. It's easy, and even fair, for me to say that it sucks that these ideas exist on this album and

yet they'll be played at concerts without mask requirements (though to their credit, the band encouraged mask wearing at shows through at least last summer); people will mosh to "Death Machine" and they'll get other people sick while doing so. I don't say this to single out *AJJ*, because almost every other band in existence will do the same. I say it because it forces me to engage in the same splitting of myself that these songs require: frustration at a system of misinformation and willful ignorance, and appreciation that these songs exist at all. If it does nothing else, *Disposable Everything* reminds me of that fact. 

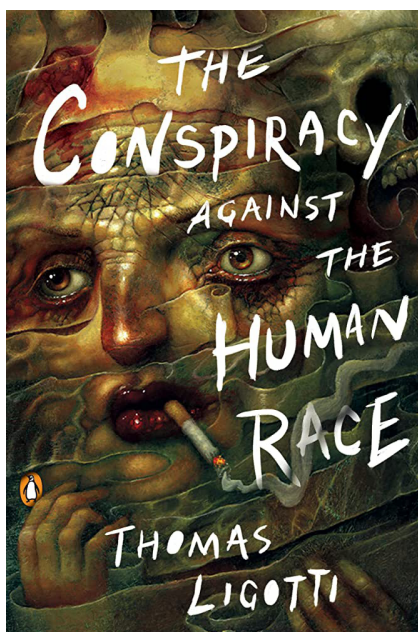


MIND PALACES | MADDI CHILTON

## MARATHON MAY

This month I had an idea, albeit a bad one. I work at a bookstore and am consequently constantly juggling an employee stash shelf full of a truly embarrassing number of things. We have a lot of cool stuff come through our store, and I'm interested in a pretty healthy percentage of them! It's unwieldy and overwhelming after a while of hoarding, though, and also I can technically get written up for it – so this month, I said, in the spirit of crash diets and other unhealthy life plans claiming to turn your life around in a short period of time, I was going to get *through it*. I was going to read and watch as much as I could from the stack that I had – a not-insignificant 42 books and movies – and once

the month was over, I was gonna toss anything I didn't make it to. Clean house, start afresh. This was just a little ambitious, considering I have a full-time job and some semblance of a life, but the constraints were appealing when faced with the enormity of the situation. My eyes have always been bigger than my stomach, and it ended up as less of a fun game and more the taut, satisfying pressure of racing for a deadline you're sure you'll *just* meet. This is not the best way to interact with art, but it's also hard to see what the alternative is.



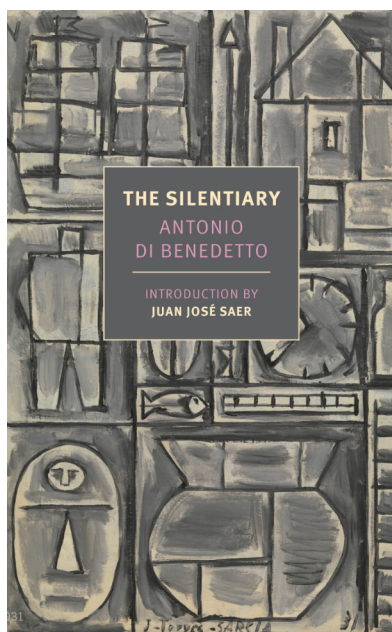
I spent a lot of time thinking I couldn't talk about art because I hadn't been exposed to enough of it. As a kid, I played about a game

a year, just at length; my early forays into games journalism were nerve-racking because I felt I was always behind, trying to discuss something I had no context for, no experience with. It was the same in college, surrounded by film buffs, and only recently have I reached the previously-coveted place where I'm the one with the larger background of knowledge. The problem with art, and the beauty of it, is that it goes on forever – you will never run out of books to read, games to play, movies to watch. Social media exacerbates the problem, when everything new seems urgent and the sense of missing out progresses with the calendar, as inevitably life steps in front of your to-read list or that indie film that only made it to theaters for a week or the shiny new game that would take up 90 hours of your life you can't afford to give up.

I feel very lucky for the place I'm in. I don't have to rely on the algorithm to expose things to me, but I don't have to do the digging on my own, and as such I feel that I end up with a richer, more varied, more diverse array of things on my plate than the average person in my situation tends to these days. But it doesn't change the fact that there's too much of it, that my curiosity ends up having the same tiring, bloating effect as gluttony. I end up on the other side exhausted, and also a bit guilty, that in my rush the experience wasn't what it should have been, what the hard-working creatives behind these works would have wanted it to be. There is not enough time to *savor* everything, to sit with it, without catching a glimpse in the background of the lost opportunities, the sacrifices made for those longer moments of focus.

This month, I read Thomas Ligotti's *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, a

well-written and interesting but, in my opinion, fundamentally unconvincing treatise on nihilism. I also read Clarice Lispector's *The Passion of G.H.* and Antonio di Benedetto's *The Silentiary*, and I found there to be a fascinating resonance between the three, a dialogue I wasn't aware of when I picked up the books and that seemed almost uncannily lucky when considering the choices of other work I had been faced with through the month. Those are the moments I itch for every time I tune into something new, that little glimpse into the webbing that connects the world, the common ground we all share without knowing it.



And yet I found myself unable to appreciate it. There was just too much else to do, to read, to see, to think about. I knew I'd done it to myself – it was a risk I was willing to take – and yet I still felt betrayed by the ever-present truth that quantity does in fact affect quality. There's no way to cheat it! It's one of nature's most annoying laws.

In some sense, my experiment worked. I read and watched a lot of things I had been interested in, and I pulled off the band-aid of the rest of my hoard, trusting that if it's something that really needs to enter my life it will find its way back to me. I've done a lot of good checklisting. I've added some things to some challenges in some apps. But I haven't yet figured out a real solution for this dilemma, something to curb the emotional claim I've accidentally staked in a problem that isn't real, this thing that *bothers me* that is also an undeniable good! There's just too much art, too many cool things, and not enough time to experience all of them.

Oh well. Of all the problems in the world, it's not a bad one to have. 🍷





NOISE COMPLAINT | **BEN SAILER**

## LEARNING THE HARD WAY WITH LUCERO

The last time I saw Lucero, back in late 2021, frontman Ben Nichols paused in the middle of playing “My Best Girl” and said with a laugh, “This song is so stupid.” It’s a classic in the band’s catalog from their 2001 self-titled debut full-length, one that is endearing in its naivety, and as an early snapshot of a moment in time for the beloved punk-infllected countrified rock and roll band. For a married man in his 40s, it’s also understandable that singing about how the only woman he can trust is his guitar might feel like stumbling across a 20-year-old diary entry and choosing to read it

out loud instead of burning the pages like you only wish you could.



While not everything about that particular track has aged well, to give credit where its due, Nichols looked remarkably clean-cut and in good health (which is more than many of us could say back when live music was slowly returning after the lockdown phase of the pandemic). At one point I turned to a friend of mine and wondered

whether he’d quit drinking, to which my friend responded that Nichols had been sipping on what appeared to be a full pint glass



of straight whiskey (notably, they played in a venue attached to a brewery, where he probably could have just gotten a beer). We never did get confirmation on what was in his glass, but I think I like that version of the story best.

Whether that detail is fully accurate or not, it fits the band's narrative well enough to feel like it could be true. Lucero's music has always had two speeds: "I'm going to party hard" and "I shouldn't have partied that hard." From the beginning of the band's catalog to now, Nichols' lyrics tend to bounce between triumph and defeat, telling tales of living fast and dealing with the consequences. When their 2018 record *Among The Ghosts* carried a mostly somber vibe without as much of the hard-rocking counterbalance that fans have been become accustomed to, it seemed to me at the time that maybe Lucero had finally mellowed out and gotten onto some real "I need to get my life together" energy.

Seeing the band in good spirits and touring on what was then their latest record, 2021's comparatively more energetic *When You Found Me*, felt like a reassurance that a band I had grown up with, one of the most consistent staples in my musical diet, was in no danger of losing their edge. There was once a stretch during a pivotal period of my life where at least half their catalog had become the regular soundtrack to wild nights out (and subsequently wondering what the hell I was doing my life). The band's songs are simple, rarely comprised of much more than a few chords, some tasteful lead lines, and Nichols' smoky voice, but witnessing what felt like a return to form marked the moment where I felt, for

the first time in nearly two years, like things might go back to something resembling normalcy.

Indeed, Lucero have long been masters of concision. Whether that's a byproduct of creative intent or technical limitations is open to speculation; [guitarist Brian Venable once told Premier Guitar](#) that when he joined the band and they wrote their first song, it was the only song he knew how to play. With that said, if there's anything I've learned from years of playing music, it's that writing something simple is often much more difficult than writing something complicated. You can always add more parts to a piece, but a skilled editor knows what to subtract so every note maximally contributes to the song.

Some bands get more concise with age, learning how to whittle down a song into just a few parts that work well together, rather than shoving every idea they have into each track. Others lean into grandiosity, leveraging improved musicianship to craft

sounds that reach beyond the constraints of their capabilities. Over the course of 11 studio albums (and a smattering of EPs and live recordings), Lucero have always kept things concise, polishing their craft incrementally, at times leaning more into country or rock and roll but never taking massive swings that would belie who they are.

This isn't to say that Lucero hasn't matured musically or lyrically since starting the band much earlier in their youth. On their latest record, the recently released *Should've Learned By Now*, it seems like they're still dealing with the same shit as ever. There are songs about arguments with exes and hard-




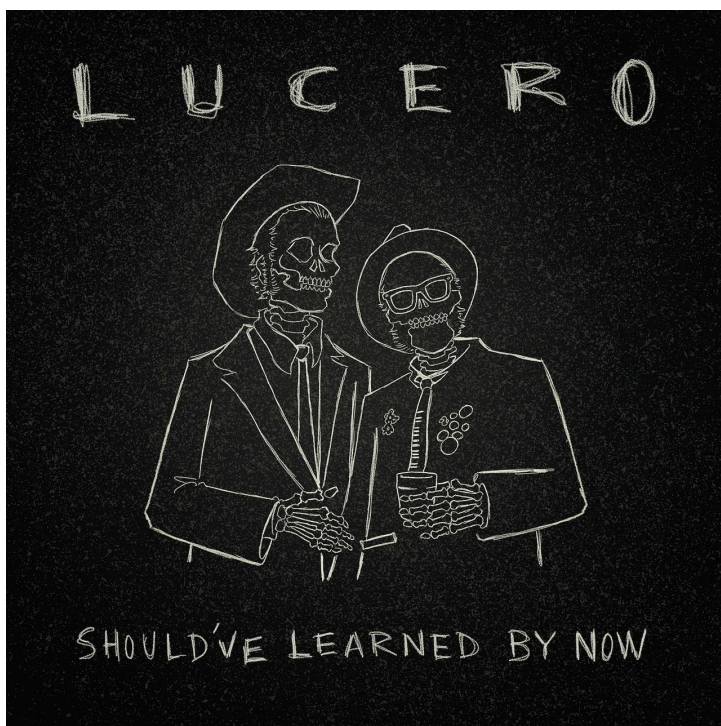
partying nights out on the town. But what's changed between now and back when Nichols was proclaiming his love to his guitar because "she don't care if I come home late" is that he's a little bit wiser and better able to deal when things aren't going your way (and when you have no one else to blame).

For the most part, *Should've Learned By Now* sounds like a Lucero record, and if you've heard at least one of their other albums, you likely have a strong sense of what to expect here. The line "The hurricane makes landfall and they serve another round" off second track "Macon If We Make It" might be one of my favorite Lucero lyrics across their entire catalog just for how well it tells a complete story in a single sentence, setting a scene where your imagination can fill in all the details. It's the kind of line you could spend a career learning how to write and Nichols makes it feel routine.

*Should've Learned By Now* might just be another Lucero record to some. Barring something catastrophic, it certainly doesn't seem like it'll be the last we hear from

Nichols and crew either. But for longtime listeners, or at least for myself, it's landing a little bit different. There's a reflective tone in Nichols' words (particularly on tracks like "Nothing's Alright") that feels wistful and knowing as he's looking back on his life, and by extension, looking back at all the stories he's been telling us for decades.

Listening along, I feel like I'm looking back at all the moments I've attached to those stories myself, connecting with the feeling of reflecting on learning life lessons the hard way, if not the specific substance of these songs themselves. It feels like looking back at the first time I really felt one of these songs hit me in the chest and seeing how far I've come since then. That's the kind of connection that keeps you from cringing at lines like "the only girl a boy can trust is his guitar" because doing so would really mean cringing at yourself. Lucero have come a long way, and for those of us who feel like we've grown up on these songs, so have we all. Together. 





ROOKIE OF THE YEAR | **MATT MARRONE**

## **BREAKING UP WITH A VIDEOGAME**

An hour ago, I broke up with a videogame.

I won't name the game or the platform. It knows what it is and I'm not here to rub any salt.

But I will share this: Over the course of the past several months – OK, much longer than that – I had become increasingly aware that I was in an abusive relationship. The game brought its share of joy, but it also too often took me away from my family, from the moment, from my work, from my sleep. I was playing for hours each day, both looking forward to it and stressing over it, careening between happiness and anxiety.

The final straw? Over Memorial Day weekend, I scored 100 billion points. Now, 100 billion points might sound like a lot, and it is, but it's far from my best. A good weekend has me in the trillions. The slap in the face that woke me up was this: When I checked in the next morning, there was a message from my club leader, letting me know it's been a pleasure, but he was cutting me at

the end of the day – I just wasn't putting up enough consistent points.

I don't blame the guy. He's trying to build a club in a game ravaged by Pay to Win players and degenerates using autotappers to lap the field without even having to be in the same room. I didn't ask, but I am assuming I wasn't the only cut – because I was far from the lowest scorer on the club. He'd be an idiot to single me out.

But I'm not bitter. Being cut from a club, though it hadn't happened to me before, isn't a big deal in and of itself. I'd been a club leader, too, and I had made many cuts. And there were tons of clubs out there that would have loved to have had me.

No, it's not that I got cut. It's not even that I got cut after scoring 100 billion points. It's that I'd leveled up so much, grinded so hard, wasted so much time, that I'd landed on a club where scoring 100 billion points wasn't enough to *avoid* being cut.




After the initial surprise, I went off and had a lovely day with my family. I hadn't quit the game yet but since it was my last day with the club anyway, I didn't feel any pressure – or desire – to steal away when the opportunity arose. At first, I planned to go out in a blaze of glory after I put the kids to bed. I'd use up all my resources, put up huge points and show my soon-to-be former teammates what they'd be missing. But when the kids were all tucked in and I started to play, I realized the spell had been broken.

Why was I still playing? What more was there left for me to do, now that I'd reached a point where 100 billion points was a slow weekend for me, where 100 billion points didn't make me a teammate worth keeping? I already knew the answer was nothing. There was nothing left to do, no reason left to play other than to feed the addiction. But now I had an out – and who knows when the next one would come? I could put up a boatload of points, then find another team and keep doing what I had been doing, day in and day out, trapped by a game that would never give back to me what I put into it.

Instead, I left a message in our team chat that I had gotten a much-needed wakeup call. I wished everyone well. Then I deleted the game.

Like I said, that was an hour ago. I'm writing this column at the end of a wonderful day, and I'm happier than the game ever made me.

I'll never make the same mistakes again.

I'm free. 





AREA OF EFFECT | JAY CASTELLO

## ALL'S WELL IN THE KINGDOM

I feel like I should be a bigger fan of the Koroks in the latest two Legend of Zelda games.

The idea of having a funny little guy pop up as a reward for exploration and curiosity about the smaller corners of Hyrule's vast open world is a good one. But soon into *Breath of the Wild*, I stopped caring about climbing weird trees or replacing rocks in circles. Although you can trade the seeds these forest spirits give you for weapon slot expansions, I never needed that many, and spotting the puzzle was basically the same as solving it.

In *Tears of the Kingdom* it's even less interesting to me. I understand the motivation behind the backpack Koroks; toppled over

and needing Link's building help to reach a new area. They're an engagement with *TOTK's* added mechanics, in the same way that *BOTW's* Koroks tied into its bigger, more open world. But *TOTK's* building isn't that engaging to me, so the backpack Koroks mostly stay stranded. (Sorry.)



When I realized this early on in playing *TOTK*, I was a bit discouraged. *BOTW* and *TOTK* are both wide open spaces with plenty to discover just by wandering around, but too often it was either a Korok or a bokoblin tower that looked intriguing from a distance, but didn't actually offer anything interesting close up.

Not having a cluttered UI full of points of interest still elevated them above other open world games, but at least in *Assassin's Creed*

I know which icons not to bother running towards.

But then I ran into the well NPC.

Fera was just standing at the bottom of a random well that I wandered into. A self-described well enthusiast, and clearly hyperfixated on these underground water reservoirs, Fera is an incredible source of money, which is much rarer in *TOTK* than it was in *BOTW*. Tell them about other wells you've spotted, and you'll get 10 rupees per location. Given that wells are in many common areas, like stables and towns, talking to Fera is about the most lucrative part of the game.

But more than money, Fera also single-handedly invigorated *me* on wells, too, in the way that only a true enthusiast can. The wells in Hyrule are incredible. I want someone to talk to me about all the wells in Hyrule, as well. The way that all the ones under Hateno village are connected, or how some have just a few fish while others have diamonds hidden down there. Or the time I found a child growing extremely valuable vegetables because they wanted to cook a special recipe for their family.

All of that, down the fifty-something wells in Hyrule. You can play the whole game without ever entering one. And that's one of like a hundred things you can do or not do in the game. You only have to pick up a few Korok seeds to be set for life. There's nothing that necessarily leads you to discover that some

of the rivers around Death Mountain are so warm they restore Link's health, like a soothing bath. You're likely to run into a bubbulfrog, but not so likely to find out what you should actually do with them, and less likely still to figure out how to get all of those cave entrances marked with a mysterious glow to make their gems easier to find.

But across Hyrule, there are NPCs who love each of these little details. Explore enough, talk to enough people, and you'll not only be led towards the richness of Hyrule, but made enthusiastic about it by transference.

I moved, recently. There's a two-hour walk that loops out from my house, down through a beech forest, across the river, through some planted fields and then climbs up back to the road through a meadow. When my mother came to visit, she was absolutely taken by the meadow, which I had mostly ignored, because it's a steep uphill, so walking that part kind of sucks.

The next time I was there, my sister was with me, and I told her about it, too. She pointed out that there was speedwell among the other flowers, which is one of her favorites. I love that meadow, now.

Space requires interpretation. In games that's usually through interaction – finding Koroks or fighting bokoblins. But *TOTK* makes it interpersonal. Fera wants to info-dump about wells, and now, so do I. 🍷





CASTING DEEP METEO | **LEVI RUBECK**

## ME, MY WIFE AND EYE-RENE

As I accumulate years like layers of sediment, I fear the intrusion of nostalgia more and more. Not that such reveries are all poison per se, but when I think of the comfort found in dawdling with ghosts and smeared reflections of the past, the potential contentment seems inescapable. The antipodal thrill of some newfound experience dwindles as nostalgia's blanket of solace calls out with amped clarity day after day, and already with videogames I find myself drawn to new titles merely one or two leaves removed from the classics on the inspirational family tree.

This means two-dimensions, jumping, laying waste to wandering hordes, four channels between left and right and scanlines blooming through the bits. And when I'm ambling around PAX East considering what to slow down for, a couch plucked from an '80s basement slams my nostalgia-tuned cerebellum despite my efforts at constantly honing my edge. Though to be completely honest, I'd already made an appointment because an expansion subtitle as vio-

lently punny as *Deux or Die* is one that I couldn't help but investigate.

I'm referring to *Infernax*, a flash game rebuilt in pixels a couple of years ago that the developers accurately pitched to me as a blend of *Simon's Quest* and *The Adventure of Link* (a game with such delectable jumping down-stab attacks and multi-sensory hit-the-weak-spot stimulation so as to be an entire genre of personal nostalgia in itself). With the *Deux or Die* update the player now controls two crusaders returning from their violent colonialism to find a biblically adjacent evil version of the same taking root in their vaguely European home. From there it's screen after screen of mopping up bloody evil, some choices that bend towards chaos or peace though not always obviously, upgrades, missions, blocked pathways and homages to their inspirations.

All of this is dutifully collected and well-crafted, a clear labor of reverence to an age where design conventions and translations were yet solidified. I hadn't played *Infernax* solo, but given the forty-plus hours I've put




into the *Deux or Die* expansion with my wife, I gather that playing solo was an even more tense exercise in pattern memorization, reflex-honing and just knowing when to say “fuck it” and blast past the madness onscreen. I can’t say whether or not this was particularly engaging beyond that exercise in revisiting the past but with inverted crosses and demon guts spilling out left and right. The itch would have been scratched but not soothed, or so I imagine.

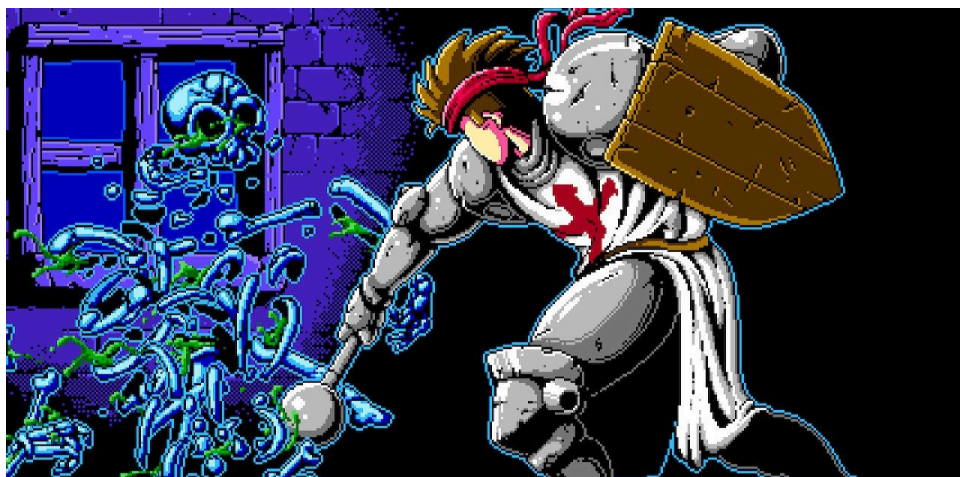
But the *Deux or Die* update nudged the formula just enough to pull away from simple worship of how things used to be. The second character joining the original’s Duke Alecedor is his squire Cervul, and he brings along four upgradable weapons (well, eight actually, depending on choices made) along with a million axes to lob about. He doesn’t change the story, merely serving the Duke and keeping close, but his presence shifted the game from something I might blast through for a squiggly feeling of the old days and then moved on from to a delightful local stress relief for my wife and me after the manufactured drudgery of our day jobs.

Her favorite part was when we first dabbled in evil and she gained access to what we called Eye-rene, a little eyeball demon that she could toss out and which would spawn versions of the same floating eyeballs that the player usually has to pick away out, but this time working for us. Our routine then became 1) enter new screen, 2) toss out Eye-

rene, 3) let her cook and 4) mow down the remainders. We swore to never leave Eye-rene behind and always used the recall button so that Cervul would hold out his arms in a mothering come-hither way until Eye-rene was nestled back in our loving embrace and we could move on. This, and later the jet pack cheat code, really let us fly through the game, slamming the visual and sonic pleasure spikes as enemies fell before us (well mostly Eye-rene) on our quest to secure every ending.

*Deux or Die* added that extra layer to an already well-executed nod to the old ways, shifting things forward enough to freshen the experience. I have plenty of memories of passing the controller but few games let two players crawl through the maze together, cracking jokes and building their own meta-narrative around the thinly scaffolded slash n’ dash experience. It’s just that bit more mutually engaging, both audience and player, equally complicit in our watery deaths and maybe spamming too many grenades, laughing along to mistakes and cheering at the cracked jewels and cult takedowns.

Which is the best way to cut nostalgia, with a little bit of something new. Too much fear of the past is as unhealthy as a thoughtless drive towards the future. It’s nice to revel in the old feelings, in a way that renders them electric again alongside your partner in love and demonic eradication. 





ALWAYS AUTUMN | **AUTUMN WRIGHT**

## **A GOLDEN HAIR THAT COULD BE THE SUN PART II: THE ONES WHO STAY AND FIGHT**

In faer 2019 novella *The Deep*, Rivers Solomon revises the apocalyptic tsunami of clipping’s speculative single to ask: “What does it mean to be born of the dead?” Inheriting the sea from drowned women during the Atlantic slave trade and having generations since fought the two legs ([the same war of clipping’s single](#)), the wajinru manage the trauma of their history by resting all memory in a historian who gives their *self* up as a vessel to bear the weight of family histories, ancestry and the cultures’ traumatic origins.

The position of historian evokes the child at the center of Omelas. Though they do have a place in the wajinru society around them, the psychic load and sheer trauma of the history contained within the historian untethers them from the present. And unlike Le Guin’s tale, it is in fact the scapegoat that walks – or rather swims – away, forsaking the utopia she grew up supporting. The utopia is, in *The Deep*, ahistorical. It demands not just

the sacrifice of cultural history, but family history and the identity that comes with it. Ultimately the wajinru realize their cruelty and can reconcile moving forward with their past using history as a guide – letting Yetu guide them. That is a future left to us to imagine.

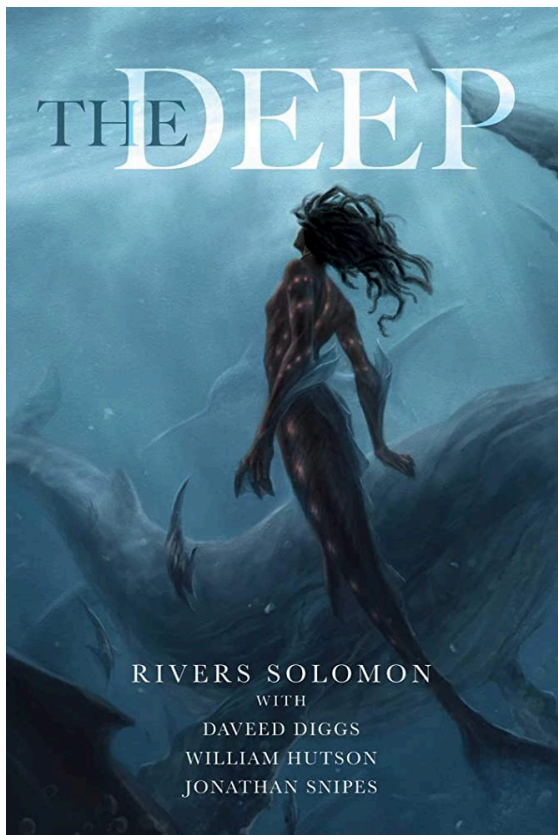
In another version of the story, a colonized people escape slavery in the water. The Talokan, however, make this choice to continue living as conquistadors encroach on their homeland in present day Mexico. Through ritual and potion, they give up their ability to return to land to live in peace beneath the water, hidden from the surface dwelling two legs who go on to colonize the planet. But much like the first *Black Panther* film’s “build community centers in Oakland” is a bastardization of its titular revolutionary political party, *Wakanda Forever* contrives boring villainous motives out of the Talokan champion Namor’s attempts to pro-

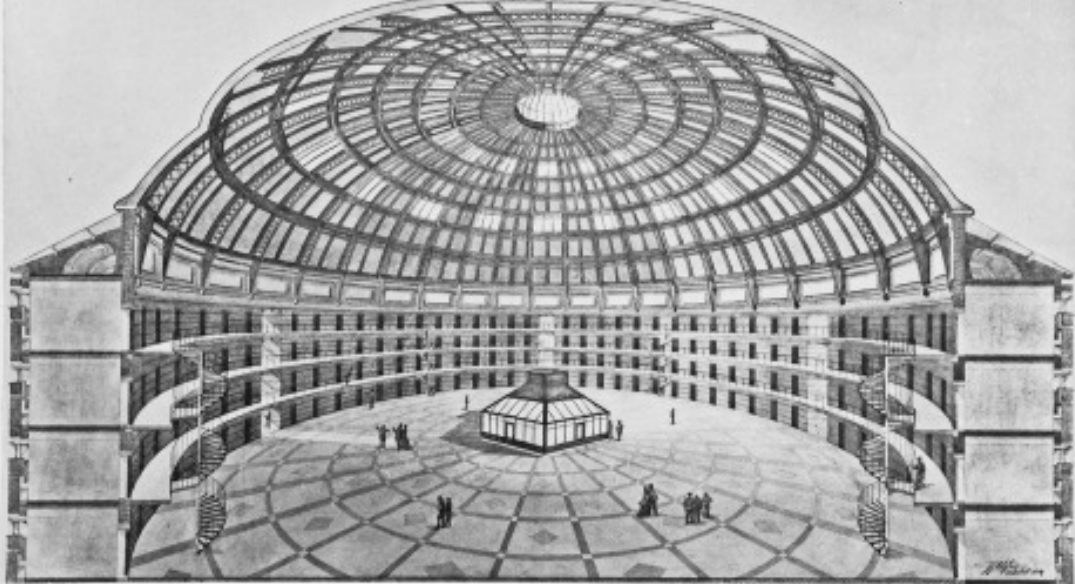


tect his people from colonial governments seeking to extract resources (Vibranium, because Marvel) beneath their surface to preempt any confrontation with the colonial status quo. The film instead finds conflict not between colonized and colonizer, but among the colonized themselves. These two versions of utopia against each other, siding of course with the nonviolent side.

Leila Taylor describes Afrofuturism as a “a nostalgia for what should have been.” Wakanda is a utopia that revises African history, but in its most mainstream form ends up being unable to say very much about the world as it is today. This “*Black Panther* perception of the world” is still valuable, as Taylor writes of herself in *Darkly*, but *Black Panther* goes on to preclude the other kind of utopia – the Black Panther kind, particularly. *The Deep* is an Afrofuturist myth that imagines what to make from it all; Marvel denies revolution, because the apocalypse is bad when it comes from below.

In another version of the story, in a place where war is almost forgotten, a girl buries a father who almost remembered such antiques. He died so others could forget, and so she would join that endless fight. In [Um-Helat](#), utopia is not built on the sacrifice of an innocent scapegoat, but antifascist action. 🍷



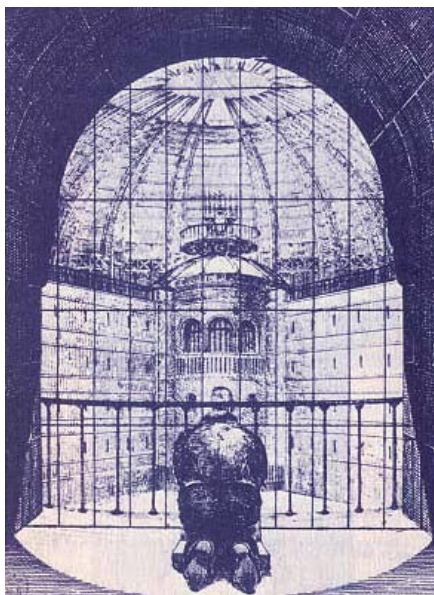


FORMS IN LIGHT | JUSTIN REEVE

## INFLUENCE AND PERSUASION

Architecture and level design share a fascinating and intricate relationship when it comes to influencing behavior, especially movement through space. Both disciplines utilize spatial theory to shape the way that people navigate and experience their surroundings. I've always found the similarities between architecture and level design to be a fascinating topic, so I'd like to dive into the details of this connection, exploring the principles of spatial theory and the ideas put forth by influential scholars like Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre. By examining how these concepts intersect, I hope to give you a deeper understanding of the strategies employed by architects and level designers to guide movement and

create immersive experiences within physical and virtual spaces.



Spatial theory is the study of how places are organized, experienced and understood. The philosopher Michel Foucault most notably explored the relationship between power and space, emphasizing the role of architecture in shaping social dynamics. His work on disciplinary power and surveillance had profound implications for both architecture and level design. Power is often displayed in architecture through the deliberate design of spaces that control and regulate movement. Buildings for example are structured with hallways, staircases and entrances to guide people through a



sequence of interconnected spaces. The design choices made by architects influence how individuals move and behave within a built environment, reflecting the concept of disciplinary power put forward by Foucault. Doors, gates and security checkpoints provide the perfect example.

In much the same way as architecture, power is reflected in the control exerted by level designers over the movement of players in videogames. Level designers have to think strategically about placing pathways, landmarks, obstacles and even enemies to guide players through the game world. This control over movement can be seen as a manifestation of disciplinary power, as designers dictate the actions and choices of players within the virtual space. Levels are both literally and figuratively filled with doors, gates and security checkpoints, often in the form of a trigger for some sort of action such as a cutscene.

The sociologist Henri Lefebvre focused on the everyday practices and rhythms within urban spaces. Lefebvre advocated for a more inclusive and participatory approach to design, emphasizing the "right to the city" as a fundamental aspect of urban life. Architecture primarily deals with the design and construction of physical spaces including buildings and urban environments, architects

aiming to influence movement and behavior by purposefully organizing and manipulating these spaces. Buildings are designed with careful consideration for how people will move through them, corridors for example being used to connect different areas, while staircases provide vertical circulation. Entrances are positioned to control access and redirect the flow of traffic. These architectural elements guide individuals and shape their experiences within the built environment. Architects also employ techniques related to lighting, materials and spatial proportions to influence the emotions and perceptions of those who inhabit a particular space, a good example being the use of natural light to create a sense of openness and connection to the surrounding environment. The choice of material can be used to evoke a specific mood or association as well.

Videogames go beyond the constraints of physical architecture, allowing for the creation of interactive and dynamic spaces. Level designers aim to create immersive experiences by carefully designing environments that players navigate, employing a range of spatial elements to guide movement and create a sense of progression. Pathways are created to lead players towards their objective, while landmarks serve as points of reference and help in spatial orientation. Challenges, obstacles and

enemies are strategically placed to shape the journey of players and to provide opportunities for problem solving and engagement. In addition to spatial elements, level designers use visual and auditory cues to communicate information and evoke specific emotions. Lighting, sound and visual effects are carefully crafted to enhance immersion and create an atmosphere which complements the mechanics and story.

The famous concept of the panopticon put forward by Foucault, a circular prison design with a central watchtower, had a profound influence on level design. The architecture in question creates a pervasive sense of surveillance, leading to self-discipline and self-control among inmates, at least according to Foucault. When it comes to videogames, level designers often incorporate elements of the panopticon to influence the movement and behavior of players. They create virtual spaces with hidden areas or elevated viewpoints that give players a sense of being watched or monitored. This psychological tension encourages players to explore and move through the space, mimicking the effect of the panopticon. The feeling of being observed can shape the actions of a player, prompting them to act in accordance with the aims, objectives or rules put forward by the level designer.

The broadly recognized "right to the city" on the other hand emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and the active participation of individuals in the design of urban spaces. The concept calls for spaces which are accessible, democratic and foster a sense of community and belonging. This idea from

Lefebvre finds a reflection in the design of open world videogames, allowing players to explore and freely interact with virtual towns and cities. Players become active participants in the shaping of their own experience, along the lines of Lefebvre's vision of urban spaces in which inhabitants rather than architects have the most agency. These games often provide opportunities for players to engage with various characters, take on side quests and impact the development of the virtual world in question, creating a sense of ownership and empowerment.

Architecture and level design both aim to create immersive experiences, facilitating flow for inhabitants and players. Architects consider various factors including lighting, acoustics and materials to enhance the experience of a user and evoke specific emotions, a museum for example could make use of dim lighting and sound-proofing to create a contemplative and focused atmosphere. Level designers employ similar techniques to immerse players in their virtual

worlds. They rely on sound design, visual effects and interactive elements to stimulate senses and maintain engagement. The goal is to create an environment which captivates players, allowing them to become fully absorbed in the game and experience flow, a state of complete focus and enjoyment.

The two disciplines in question, architecture and level design, exhibit striking similarities in terms of how they influence movement through space. Both make use of spatial theory to shape and guide experiences within physical and virtual environments. The various theories put forward by Foucault

Henri Lefebvre

## The Right to the City









HERE'S THE THING | **ROB RICH**

## **TED LASSO'S THIRD SEASON**

Much has been said about Apple TV's Ted Lasso since its first season took pretty much everybody by surprise and unfortunately much continues to be said about its now third (and likely final) season. I keep seeing lots and lots of disappointment and chagrin because "it's gone off the rails" or "it's not about Ted anymore" and other bizarre complaints. But here's the thing: Something not being what you were expecting doesn't make it bad.

Spoilers ahead, naturally, but seriously, I don't get these complaints at all. The first season of the show did focus on Ted, yes, but it also spent time establishing other characters and how Ted's influence began to change them. If you'll forgive the cheesy metaphor, Ted was a stone tossed into a pond and we were watching the ripples. It's a very heartwarming and optimistic story that isn't all positivity all the time, to be sure, but seeing how the silly goof starts to crack even the toughest nuts is extremely satisfying.

Thing is, while season three may not be focusing on Ted and his magic whatever you want to call it, it does still carry the original spirit of what came before it. Only now instead of seeing the ripple effect we're seeing just how far those ripples have gone. Heck, many of the supporting characters have even become their own stones with their own ripples.

I never would have believed someone if they told me I was going to be invested in Colin's (one of Jamie Tartt's toadies from early in the first season) personal life or his standing with the team, but here I am in season three genuinely rooting for him and just a bit nervous about how everyone will respond to what he's inevitably going to have to tell them. If anyone told me the resident grump Roy was going to smile and laugh at any point in the show ever I would've called them a liar, but he's opened up so much since the beginning and finally let himself be happy I can't help but cheer him on.

And Jamie. Holy shit Jamie. That little shit being anything other than an obnoxious

prick would've been a shock in its own right, but to see how far he's come – how much he's changed for the better – due to the right encouragement and reinforcement has been staggering. There have been so many times throughout this season that I found myself saying “I never thought” when talking about Jamie and his interactions with other characters it's almost comical. And yet here we are. And it does make sense – it's been earned – when you account for his slow and steady progression over the course of three seasons.

I know everyone (myself included) has been invested in Nate's redemption arc, and it's been a great thing to watch unfold, but I can't help feeling like it's an intentional ruse. We've been tricked into thinking we're there for Nate's redemption, but really the entire capstone of the show is about wrapping up *everyone's* redemption arc. Nobody has been perfect, *everybody* has had secrets and insecurities and doubts and regrets, and they've all been working through them. They're all getting to be their best and most authentic selves and I'm 100-percent here for it. Why can't we all just be happy for them? 🍷



## DEPTHS OF THE ABYSS

FEATURING MAX MOON

by Noah Springer

***This series of articles is made possible through the generous sponsorship of Exalted Funeral. While Exalted Funeral puts us in touch with our subjects, they have no input or approval in the final story.***

In April, Emily Price wrote [a wonderful feature](#) on MÖRK BORG and the upsettingly titled supplement *Portents of the Degloved Hand*, and in February, Levi Rubeck wrote about [his experience playing](#) the nightmare-fueled role-playing game at PAX East. So, I don't necessarily want to spend a lot of time in this column dissecting MÖRK BORG itself. I think I will simply quote the game designers themselves: "MÖRK BORG is a doom metal album of a game. A spiked flail to the face. Light on rules, heavy on everything else."





The other important – dare I say innovative – aspect of *MÖRK BORG* is the creators’ willingness, and perhaps insistence, that players design their own settings. This is where Max Moon stepped in. An educator in the arts by training, Max took to designing his own games during the start of the pandemic with great enthusiasm: “It wasn’t until the pandemic hit that I got serious about making my own games. I think being so incredibly disappointed in the world was exactly the push I needed just to say, ‘Fuck it, I want to enjoy myself and make some beautiful things.’ The world could use a lot more play and a lot less rationalization. So, I went off the deep end, as usual.”

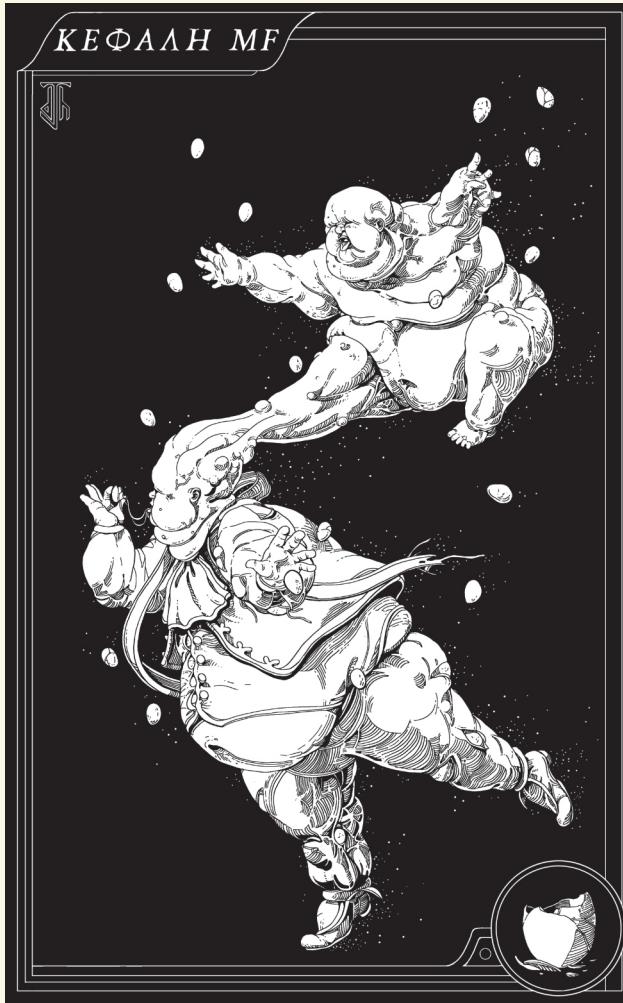
By going off the deep end, Moon means that he started to design a variety of games, including his *MÖRK BORG* settings, *The Abyss of Hallucinations* (now with two volumes), and the two accompanying adventures, “Unicursal Heptagram” and “Vaults of Eternity.” Moon was introduced to *MÖRK BORG* by his regular collaborator and illustrator Andy Webber. A regular player of D&D, Moon was initially confused by the “grungy artwork and bright yellow color.” Despite ripping in a metal band for a few years, the metal aesthetic wasn’t necessarily the first appealing factor for Moon. “I am an outsider when it comes to metal. When I was in a metal band, I was an outsider too. I love playing metal and I adore metal art. Black metal aesthetics and sensibilities are particularly fascinating. But my spirit has too much vomit and glitter in it to put both feet in that world.” Instead of the metal mindset of *MÖRK BORG*, he was intrigued because it was “the first time I had ever encountered an RPG that was treated as a holistic art object. I don’t mean as an art book. I mean the game design, the writing, the layout, the art, all of it was unified in spirit.”

This unified artistic spirit solidified for Moon around the



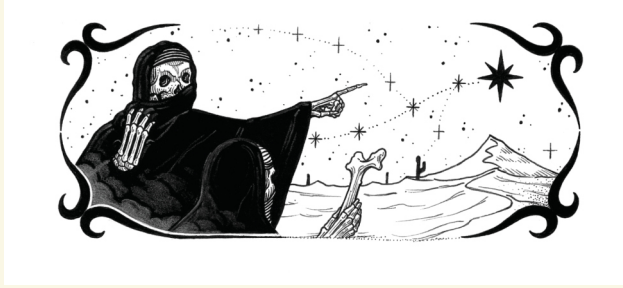
writings of Aleister Crowley aka the wickedest man in the world aka the Beast 666 (insert metal guitar riff here). Crowley's contributions to the occult are innumerable and his impact has been felt across culture, from the development of rocketry to the dubious success of Scientology and, of course, the invention of heavy metal. It seems only natural to Moon then, as a bit of a student of the occult, to embed Crowley's legacy into the metalest of all games. "For years, I used to pull bits from Aleister Crowley to integrate into games I ran, but *MÖRK BORG* was the first game I played where I felt like the Beast really belonged." In *The Abyss of Hallucinations*, Moon kept "the spirit of Crowley's pantheon, cosmology and philosophy. I lean into the concept of 'Do what thou wilt' and am erring on the side of love over accuracy. I also will admit that, at times, I have inserted intentional falsehoods, and I think the old goat would prefer it that way."

All of this makes sense then, when you see the beautiful physical zines that Max has printed up for *The Abyss of Hallucinations*, paired with a copy of Crowley's *The Book of Lies*. In true *MÖRK BORG* aesthetic, the screen-printed covers are two shades of pink with gold inlays of occult symbols and signs, a seeming contradiction to the interior featuring creatures of the darkness like the Demiurge, a lion-



headed serpent who roams the abyss “of one mind and twenty-six bodies,” or the crayfish-bodied Astacus, “a mottled gelatinous crustacean with no carapace. They are cursed with an insatiable appetite for spinal fluid which they drain from their victims through their barbed maxillipeds.” The beauty of the exterior belays the grotesque things found within. As Moon says: “The cover is the first part of the designed experience. It is like a door between you and the sanctum. It is an opportunity to prepare. I also think it can serve as a warning and invitation. If I do it well, then the cover should let you know whether or not its guts are the kind you like to mess around with, or if maybe you should stay the hell away.”

But if you did stay the hell away, you would be missing something amazing! As Moon describes it, *The Abyss of Hallucinations* seems like “Lisa Frank designed a black



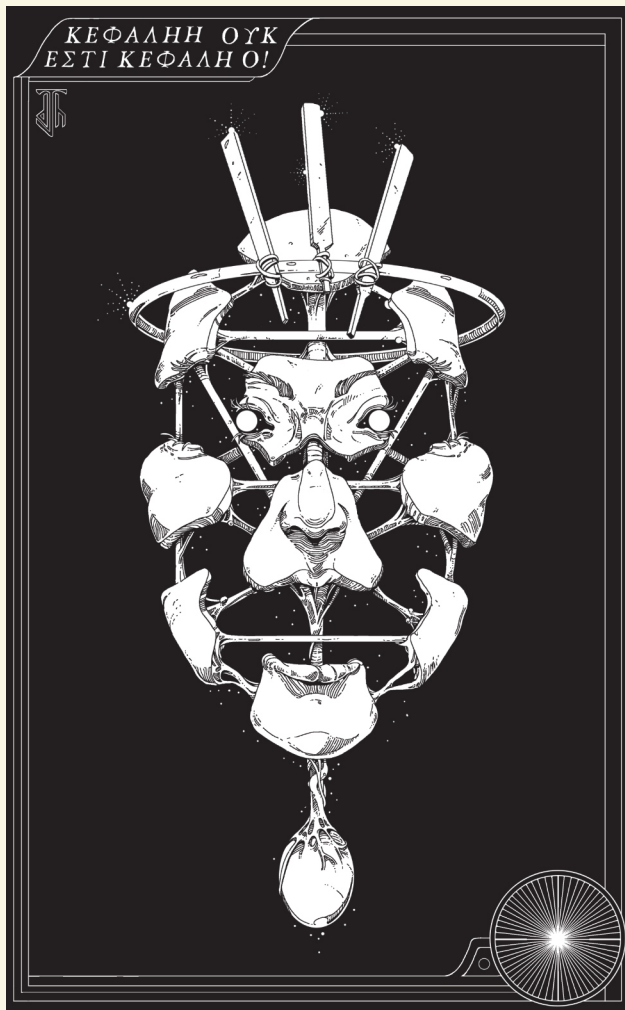
metal trapper keeper,” but with fewer dolphins, or if you will, it’s as “if a black metal band visited Graceland and was given a tour by the reanimated corpse of Douglas Adams.” The Abyss itself is full of ancient, cryptic locales like the Skidoo Inn, the Southern Cross, and the Vault of Eternity, and calls out for some reckless adventure to come die on their steps. You may find buried occult treasures in the sand dunes of The Desert of the Slouching Beast, but you’re just as likely to run up against a brilliant dragon or a rash of cultists. But, according to Moon, Crowley’s influence extends beyond only aesthetics for the game. “I treat my game design in the same way that I treat rituals. The designer gets to lay out a set of objects and procedures and if we engage with them, then we will have a meaningful experience. Understanding how it works reduces its efficacy. This is also why I disdain the whole idea of the one game for all things. It would be like approaching a dying person to ease them into the next life by blowing a noisemaker and screaming ‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY!’ We have different rituals and customs for different experiences because meaningful experience deserves particular design.”

And the rituals and designs embedded within *The Abyss of Hallucinations* are there to make a specific point: “There are so many horrific things in our culture that worm their way into our minds to make us not just less human, but less extant. We learn that to be in the world is to serve. And who do we serve? Corporations, religions, systems, vampiric demons who feed on our attention, money and power. The activities in which we find ourselves most human, or maybe most bestial, are play. Humanity has sought to identify itself through negation. On this long journey to separate ourselves from the world, we define what we are not. It is a toxic endeavor. We isolate ourselves, parts of ourselves, our whole selves. We want so badly to demonstrate our existence that we are willing to denigrate anything we believe is not us. We reject our infinite nature, we bind ourselves in rationality so that we can see where we end and the other begins. But to play is to break this binding. To be the beast.”

To play then, at least for Moon in the world of the Abyss and *MÖRK BORG*, is to participate in a ritual that can potentially



ΚΕΦΑΛΗ ΟΥΚ  
ΕΣΤΙ ΚΕΦΑΛΗ Ο!



break the reality laid out by the capitalist trap. Play and the rejection of the real is a method of occult resistance to the status quo. *The Abyss of Hallucinations* offers horrors unknown in the real, but in such horrific delights, we can find a retreat from real horrors that crush us under their weight. As Moon said, “to retreat from our nihilistic dying world into the one *MÖRK BORG* offered just felt like it was exactly what I needed. It was cathartic to imagine something worse, to indulge the pathetic, and to just try and survive, not for heroism or glory, but just out of pure avoidance of death.”

\* \* \*

Check out the website more [Max Moon Games](#). Buy the [complete Abyss of Hallucinations set](#) (or pick up the zines individually) at *Exalted Funeral!*



*Don't Hurt Girls  
When You Dance  
(Or Any Other Time)*

by JUNO STUMP





It's been nearly thirty years since Nirvana's *MTV Unplugged in New York*, a legendary live show that could only have come from Kurt Cobain. Though the concert series had provided a quieter, acoustic format for dozens of artists up to that point, including [Paul McCartney](#) and [Pearl Jam](#), few have stood out or stood the test of time quite like the show put on by Nirvana.

Disagreements between MTV executives and Cobain started almost immediately. The 26-year-old rock star wanted Nirvana's performance to be different than every other artist's in the *Unplugged* series; MTV just wanted a quieter Nirvana show, maybe without the acoustic guitars being smashed at the end, too. The network still wanted a Nirvana concert, though Kurt's vision was starting to sound a lot different than what they'd imagined. [Nirvana's rehearsals](#) didn't do much to calm anyone's nerves either.

Biographic accounts from people around him at the time state that Kurt was "really, really nervous" and "terrified" as the time for [the concert approached](#). Cobain had a vision of exactly what he wanted from the

very beginning, but he was still an artist that wanted everything to go well.

Amy Finnerty, Alex Coletti and other MTV executives were hoping maybe Kurt Cobain and Eddie Vedder could duet onstage or finagle a Tori Amos appearance. They also wanted to hear lots of well-known Nirvana songs. Kurt was instead offering cover songs from [the Meat Puppets](#), one of Kurt's favorite bands and friends of his, with their long-haired guitar players joining Nirvana onstage, and bassist Krist Novoselic playing an accordion.

The band's fourteen-song setlist did include original hit singles, such as "[Come As You Are](#)" and "[All Apologies](#)," but six of the songs were covers, with five songs in total being about death. It wasn't the show MTV or anyone in the audience was expecting, but it was exactly what Kurt had envisioned from the very beginning. When the show was still in the planning stages, Kurt was asked what he wanted the show to look like, the stage's decorations and the atmosphere. He reportedly suggested stargazer lilies, black candles and a crystal chandelier to the





MTV *Unplugged* producers. When producer Alex Coletti asked, “You mean like a funeral?” Cobain said that was exactly what he meant.

Kurt Cobain always maintained that many of his decisions were random and last minute. On one occasion, before playing for a radio station a year before *Nevermind* saw release, he had attested that the lyrics for the songs he was about to perform were written on the way to the radio station, “[while driving with one foot.](#)” But this just wasn’t true. It was just another piece of cool myth-making; contradictory rock-star lore that made Kurt Cobain sound cool.

According to *Heavier than Heaven*, Kurt’s official biography, written by Charles R. Cross, who had full support from Cobain’s estate and access to all of the musician’s journals, we know that Kurt Cobain had “obsessively planned every musical and career direction, writing ideas out in journals years before he executed them.”

Kurt Cobain claimed in interviews to “detest the exposure he’d gotten on MTV, yet he



repeatedly called his managers to complain that the network didn’t play his videos nearly enough.”

From carefully orchestrating career moves while complaining about the success that came with it to all the pages in his journals dedicated to scribbling out exactly how the tracks on *Nevermind* should be sequenced (even though he’d casually, verbally provide it to record executives, as if he didn’t really care) and how it would all culminate and lead up to MTV *Unplugged* in New York, Nirvana’s death-scented and funeral-flower acoustic set, on November 18, 1993.

Nothing could have prepared anyone in that room – not even the rest of the performing band – for how well the show went. No one, not even Kurt, who planned every move in music he ever made, could have predicted just how magical the night would be. Classic Nirvana songs like “Dumb” and “Something in the Way” amazed the audience, with [the original tunes](#) being rearranged entirely in tempo and style [for the format](#), which also included the addition of a cello that added a haunting edge to the already otherworldly





show. Nothing can compare to the raw, emotionally-charged howl that rang out of Cobain's voice during the band's cover of Leadbelly's "Where Did You Sleep Last Night?," which closed out the night.

There's a pause in the final vocal refrain where Kurt looks up, toward the lights, with his glowing, azure eyes and it's like time stops. He takes a breath before continuing and it's as if the band and everyone else in the hushed room takes a breath too, not knowing what to expect next. Kurt lets his breath out before charging back into the final chords, ending one of the most powerful performances of his life.

After finishing the song, Kurt looks to the crowd and smiles, offering up a polite, "Thank you," before playfully pretending to smash his guitar, like he had done at so many shows before that night. He signs three autographs for fans and then quietly and very briefly argues with MTV executives, who are wanting an encore from Kurt and the band. Kurt insisted he was done.

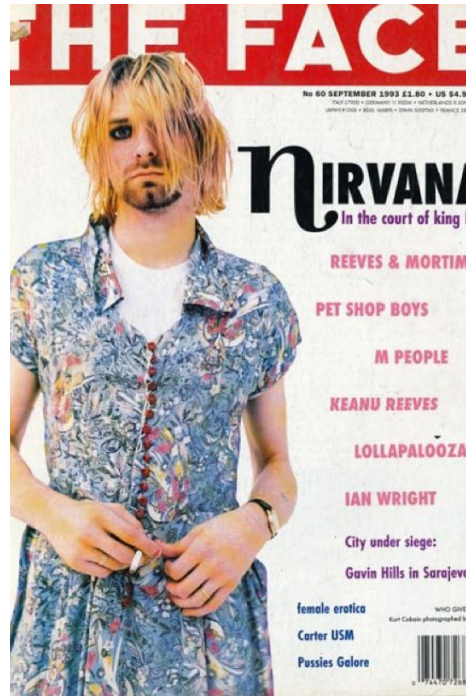


Nirvana would play [about forty more live shows](#) after this night, but I believe Kurt Cobain intended for *MTV Unplugged in New York* to be his farewell as the rock star he had spent nearly a decade playing, wrapped into a final "fuck you" for anyone that never bothered to listen, to him or the band; at this point it was the same thing and he was done. It's clear he was hurting but I don't think he knew how to untangle, especially at this point. He kept playing shows and going through the motions, numbing the pain and healing as best as possible with drugs along the way, until he could no longer continue, [ending his own life on April 5, 1994](#).

\* \* \*

I don't know if Kurt Cobain would still be here today if he had the ability to inject estrogen instead of heroin, but I know his journal pages carry the same pain as me – and so many other women like me.

I grew up in a small world, just like Kurt Cobain but decades later, surrounded by the same kinds of family and people, and with



the same kind of sorrows and wishes for myself and the world around me. Nothing felt right to me and everything felt wrong, around me and within me.

*"I love to play music, but something was not right. So I decided to medicate myself."  
- Kurt Cobain, in an interview with Rolling Stone*

Growing up trans, queer and closeted is hard for anyone, but it's even harder when you already know your parents don't love or accept you. This was the case for me. I tried to come out to my parents several times, as early as age four. My mom wouldn't listen. My dad called me a "faggot."

I already felt like I was on an alien planet, condemned to some strange, discarded flesh vessel, with just enough room for me in the corner, to waste away and think of another

day, all while having the responsibility of inventing a stranger to keep me out of danger. All I could really do was not die while trying to hold on, with the hope that I would one day feel alive.

I didn't have any men in my life that felt right or worthy as guardians or role models when I was growing up. My feelings then, at ages four through nine, were that all men felt like a hostile force on a planet that everyone but them was trapped on. But that changed one day, when I first heard Nirvana's songs and Kurt Cobain's words – and saw pictures of him and his swirling blue eyes that seemed to be home to familiar pain. I couldn't explain it entirely at first. I just knew right away that this man was different. My asshole dad seemed to be the norm but Kurt Cobain was nothing like him.

I listened to all of Nirvana's albums on repeat while reading about Kurt Cobain online, on every credible website I could find. It was sometime in 2002, I was 12 years old and I had found my first hyper-fixation, a man that was not only cool but cared about marginalized people and complained about the same



things that bothered me. I clung to every word I found in interviews, with the lyrics of songs hitting my brain like pure rain, washing everything artificially manufactured away. I didn't know how but he was the first person that felt familiar. The first person that seemed to have the same pain. I'd never met a woman or man like me, until I grew to learn about Kurt Cobain.

I disagreed with everyone that said Kurt's lyrics were just random words, including him, who, in an interview suggested fans stop asking him for meaning, instead imploring fans to just listen to the band's music and find their own meaning. I found that meaning but I think it also might have been his.

I spent so many nights crying because I felt empty, isolated, alone – like I wasn't even alive.

I'd tried to forget I was trans and closeted, years after my parents had swiped away my fears and pain. It was impossible to forget but I tried nonetheless – like you would if you heard a major plot twist revealed in the theater bathroom, right before the movie you're



about to see, trying to ignore that overheard detail, that character's death, that crucial part that affects everything – but it was stuck - stuck - stuck - stuck, just like a popcorn kernel behind your back-most tooth.

I wasn't allowed to remove the popcorn kernel so I just tried not to think about it. I knew I was a girl. I knew I was trapped. My parents, God (???) and everyone I thought who would help me instead insisted everything was fine. I just needed to go to school, follow the rules, read my Bible, listen to God and only play videogames and music at a certain volume. Then, they assured me, everything would be okay. I would feel fine. I would feel great.

Nothing ever felt right and everything always felt wrong, but everyone said that was just me and not real. I just needed to stop acting weird. And then I would feel fine. Life kept moving, almost without me. I just wanted to feel okay. I just wanted to feel normal. I just wanted to feel right.

And many, many times I thought, if I could just make some changes to my body, then





maybe I would feel okay. And if I wasn't successful, and started to need the help of a doctor, my parents would have to take me in, and maybe then, a doctor would hear me and help me.

This cycle continued. Everything was mostly about survival, saying the right things to fit in for safety, while I dealt with my predicament. I didn't know what else to do, outside of dying and trying again, which was something that always felt kind of, sort of on the table. I worried about God, mostly, but hoped He would understand. But I kept going, with the hope that I would eventually feel better, or at least a little okay.

Nothing really helped and nothing felt real, until that first day I heard Nirvana, when I was 12 years old. All of a sudden, I felt a *little* grounded, a little present. I wasn't quite disassociating as much as I normally did. Not only did something finally feel real but it also felt familiar.

I immediately felt connected to nearly all of his songs and their lyrics, but especially tracks like "Dumb," "Something in the



Way," "Sappy," "Even in his Youth," "Been a Son," and "You Know You're Right."

I didn't have all of the words to explain my predicament, yet. I tried to tell my parents with everything I had, from "God might be punishing me" to "My bones are wrong and are hurting me, inside and outside." That only got me slurs and abuse. I didn't have anything else, including anything resembling comfort or anything that encapsulated the pain I felt, until I heard the following words from "You Know You're Right," in the second verse of the last song Kurt ever recorded in a studio: "Let's talk about someone else / Steaming soup begins to melt / Nothing really bothers her / She just wants to love himself"

Hearing those words against my heart, I knew that nothing was actually wrong with me – and that I just wanted to love and be myself. I held onto that as tightly as I could. The idea that I wasn't broken was enough to know I wasn't alone. And that was enough for now.





As the years passed, I dealt with my suffering by trying to numb everything with drugs and alcohol, much like Kurt Cobain did across much of his life. He had his music and tried not to feel. I had videogames and did the same with my feelings. My popcorn kernel.

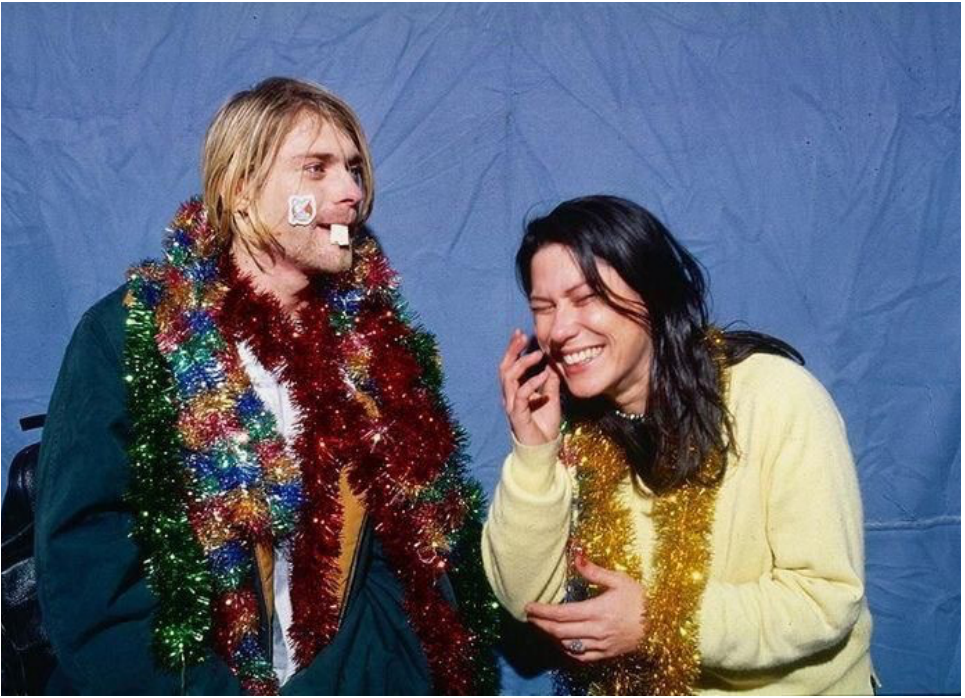
\* \* \*

*"No true talent is fully organic, yet the obviously superior talented have not only control of study but that extra special, little gift at birth - fueled by passion. A built in, totally spiritual, unexplainable, new age, fuckin', cosmic energy burning love for passion."  
- Journals, page 174*

Kurt Cobain's *Journals*, released a few months after the release of "You Know You're Right" in 2002, containing chronologically organized pages from the musician's personal writings and notes. No single book could hold all of his jottings; he was always writing and filled up hundreds of notebooks in his life. *Journals* collected notes from the Nirvana years, giving fans a glimpse into Cobain's mind during his time in the spotlight.

Inside the book are nearly 300 pages of doodles, scribbles, rough drafts of letters to friends, important phone numbers, answers to hypothetical interviews, comic strips, song lyric drafts and concept art for album covers, but also personal details about how he felt in his body, growing up and as an adult and how even with the fame, success, money and everything else, he still didn't feel right.

And that ... helped me, alongside his music, as I went through the wrong puberty. As my bones grew, they hurt really bad too, just like Kurt, and even though he wasn't here, knowing at least one other person had



known what I felt like, tormented and suffering inside the walls of a stranger's fleshy prison, helped me a lot.

I didn't have all the language at this age. It was 2003, 2004 and 2005, in my small, Michigan farm town, and words like 'trans' and 'gender non-conforming' were just . . . not around me. I had Bible verses and whatever my public school taught me.

But I always had my suffering. I just didn't know how else to articulate it at this point. My parents already made me feel unsafe, traumatizing me for years, so telling anyone else was beyond me at that point.

I never did let go of that popcorn kernel that was stuck in my teeth. I just tried not to pick at it.

And I think that's what Kurt did too.

*"I wish there was someone I could ask for advice. Someone who*

*wouldn't make me feel like a creep for spilling my guts and trying to explain all the insecurities I've always had for. oh, about 25 years now."*

*- Kurt Cobain. Journals. page 189*

\* \* \*

There's only so much you can do when you never feel right or like yourself. All you can ever feel is isolated. We may never know for sure, but I think [there's a reason](#) that [so many trans women have been able to identify with Kurt Cobain's joy, pain and suffering](#), so strongly.

Kurt Cobain suffered from a stomach problem his entire life, to the point that it agnized him almost daily. Despite attempts to



get diagnosed by several doctors throughout his life, especially in his later years, he was never able to cure whatever ailed him. He tried changing his diet. He tried everything doctors suggested, but it never went away, only fading occasionally, during intermittent instances in his life. A few women in Kurt's family, including his mother, were briefly affected by debilitating stomach issues, but it always eventually subsided and calmed.

Kurt's stomach pain was the subject of many pages in his notebooks and came up in plenty of interviews. It's possible that this pain came from how Kurt felt about himself. Many trans people [experience an assortment of issues and symptoms](#) from dysphoria, including physical pain, especially while still closeted.

Kurt also hated his body, which affected the way he dressed in nearly every situation. This included rarely wearing shorts, hating how his knees and legs looked, unless the temperature was particularly high. He even wore long johns under jeans to the beach on more than one occasion. He complained about his body often, in his journals and to those around him.

*"Such an easy thing - such a shiny  
ring  
Let me grow some breasts - I  
cheated on my test  
I don't have the right - to say  
what's on your mind  
You're not allowed to sing - All  
Apologies"  
- Kurt Cobain. Journals, page  
212. early lyrics for 'All Apolo-  
gies'*

Seeing another human being grappling with what might have been body dysphoria wasn't something I had ever experienced before. I didn't even know there was a word for dysphoria when I was a teenager. But here was someone else that was also upset about their body. Someone else that felt trapped. That thread of questioning and torment helped me know that I wasn't alone.





It wasn't in the songs, but seeing this in his journals, in his thoughts and with penmanship that looked pained and frustrated ... it couldn't be nothing.

Kurt Cobain would also often dress in drag, which included dresses and other female-coded clothing and makeup on many occasions, including for [photo shoots](#) and [concerts](#). There were other rock stars, even Dave Grohl, Krist Novoselic and Pat Smear in the band, who had worn or would wear eyeliner and lipstick, but Kurt just always looked much more comfortable, happy even, when dressing in drag and/or wearing makeup. It was even [commented on by those who interviewed him](#) and captured him on film, though I don't think they saw it in the same way as me.

Kurt consistently spoke highly of female artists, such as The Breeders, Shonen Knife and Bikini Kill, throughout his life. Nirvana would tour with many of these bands, including Calamity Jane in 1992. During that tour, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Kurt decided to sabotage his own band's performance after the crowd booed Calamity Jane off the stage. He did this by repeatedly playing the opening notes for "Smells like Teen Spirit" throughout the show before stopping and

changing to a different song, then refusing to play it and other requests from the crowd.

Kurt always showed up for women, including in his political beliefs, even playing charity and [benefit concerts](#) that [helped rape victims](#) and empowered women. He was also outspoken, especially for his time, [for how much women were oppressed by society](#). This extended to queer rights, which Cobain openly supported, even going as far as saying he wished he was gay "just to piss off the homophobes."

Kurt provided just one interview for Nirvana's 1992 release, *Incesticide*, a compilation album of outtakes and b-sides, and it was to [The Advocate](#), a gay and lesbian publication. Kurt's support for queer rights and the band's opposition to racists and homophobes is something that's made clear in the piece.

Kurt loved performing music despite all the suffering he endured. He would often find joy and confidence from women around him, choosing to surround himself with feminist music and ideals. These punk rock ideals and Kurt's proximity of closeness and respect for riot grrrl bands, [such as Bikini Kill](#), only served to amplify Kurt's contempt for macho men and male-dominated culture,





which could be heard in interviews, read in album liner notes, and even during many of his songs, including “[Very Ape](#)”, “[Mr. Moustache](#)”, and “[Territorial Pissings](#).” He was gender non-conforming and constantly lifted women up, despite dealing with the clear-as-day body dysphoria, which is visible in nearly every photograph of Kurt Cobain.

There’s just so much evidence to suggest that Kurt Cobain was a closeted trans woman that did the best they could, with the circumstances and trauma they had, while jamming through their hyper-fixation and trying to make the world a better place for other marginalized people, right up until the very end.


The LGBTQIA+ community and its allies typically try to avoid diagnosing people, especially if they’re not here to speak up for themselves. It’s part of listening to people when they introduce themselves and tell you who they are. But Kurt Cobain also has a page in his journals that reads, “Don’t read my diary when I’m gone. OK, I’m going to work now. When you wake up this morning, please read my diary. Look through my things, and figure me out.”

I think he would be okay with a girl like me finding catharsis in his pain, seeing his strug-

gles and taking something good from it. I think it would make him proud that a dyke like me was able to hit ages 16, 20 and 30 with his help. And while he may be the only one that truly knows if he was a closeted, trans girl, I know if he was here, he would be happy to learn that an untold number of trans women, cis women, non-binary people, queer people and gender non-conforming people have found their days easier because of things he wrote, sang and said.

Kurt Cobain should have had the chance to grow some breasts. I’d rather have that than “All Apologies.”

A world with trans rights would make less pain for people like Kurt Cobain, who was at the very least gender non-conforming, regardless of how you want to see him.

We should all be supporting laws and building communities that support people from all gender identities and sexual orientations. The anti-trans and queerphobic legislation sweeping across the nation can only lead to more people feeling isolated and alienated like Kurt Cobain. And if he was here today, he’d say something cool, like “God is gay” or “May women rule the world,” but he’d also most certainly say “trans rights.” 

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### *Illustrations*

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Cover: *Christina Wald*



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*From this month's cover artist, Christina Wald, and author Shari Lyon, a children's book about a shy hippo standing up to protect other animals against poachers who threaten their lives.*

*Back it on Kickstarter until  
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# HADORI STANDS UP

When night came, Hadori heard the poachers sneak through the trees. She smelled the sticks that spit hot fire. When she saw them close to the big elephant, she stood up and bounded out of the river. Hadori stood between the elephant and the poachers, opened her huge mouth, and belloved out the biggest, snortiest roar that ever she could make. Then Hadori sang out in her strongest voice:

