

JOHN RODERICK EXPLAINS HIMSELF

Instead of attempting to integrate factual history and compelling spin into the usual banal bio, Barsuk sat an unsuspecting intern down with John Roderick to ask him some questions. Here's how it went.

So, who, or what, is / are the Long Winters?

Well, I'm a klutzy ding-dong who managed to stumble into a record contract with a label run by a bunch of naive hippies. I threw together a band out of the guys in my neighborhood, borrowed a van, and started living the dream. That was four years ago. Most of the original band members have quit because they didn't understand my "vision", but there's a sucker born every minute so the band soldiers on.

I thought you were the Steely Dan of Alaska...

In the sense that the State Band of Alaska is .38 Special, you could make a case that I am Alaska's Donald Fagen. We're both very handsome, we both use jazzy chords in the service of scoring ladies, and we both spend too much time in the studio monkeying with the bass parts. That would make Eric Corson my Walter Becker. This is getting truer by the minute. All I need to find is my Michael McDonald.

Are your songs fictional or personal reflections on past events?

I'm not sure that my mind makes a clear distinction between those things. I mean, for fiction to be any good it has to be emotionally "true", right? The fictional plot is just a vehicle for the writer to make his characters sing and dance, and we judge it based on how much we believe the characters are real. Because my songs are usually telling an "emotional" story rather than an actual, plot-driven tale, there's a blurrier line between fact and fiction. The crime narrative might be made up, but the feeling of resignation and betrayal it engenders is taken from my real experience.

What are your songs about?

Everybody has little disasters pock-marking their memory, and little triumphs growing up between the cracks, and I write songs about that stuff without any grand historical message, without any self-conscious yelping, and without any one-sided conflict with "the man". You've got your girls and boys of all shapes and sizes and they bump into each other in all possible combinations and that's enough raw material for pop songs stretching to infinity.

Do you think pure love and true insight into another person is attainable? Should we even try? Does the bittersweet beauty of life come from this futile struggle?

People who are in love, or who believe in "true love", are special people. You can't convince them that there's no such thing as true love, or that they're not experiencing true love, even if their lover is standing over them beating them with a bicycle chain. I'm not trying to convince anyone of anything, I'm just writing songs for the people who are missing somebody, or are angry at somebody, or who otherwise might take issue with someone telling them that love is a precious flower that only needs a little water and a little sun.

Does a listener deserve a profound emotional reaction for the price of a record? Or is it all about the artist making a statement and screw 'em if they don't "get it"?

These days, I guess, you've got to research the right music for yourself. If you want a record that makes you feel like you've been doing bad coke all weekend with skeezy people you barely know, there are plenty of those records available. Likewise, there are plenty of artists who want to show you pictures of them having sex for the first time, or who want to throw poo at you, or yell at you about Africa, or whatever. I try to write songs that make you feel like you've been talking to someone really interesting in an airport for the last hour and, although you know you'll never see them again, you just told them your whole life story and a part of you will love them forever.

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Do you feel songwriters have a responsibility to their listeners, and to the entire history of art as a whole?

If the twentieth century taught us anything it's that artists don't have any responsibilities, to their art or otherwise. But I don't really put myself in that category. I feel a personal obligation to not make crappy things, and I prefer it when other people don't make crappy things, but it's almost completely divorced from a theory of art. I like chairs that don't creak and songs that don't suck.

Is there a distinction between Musicians and Entertainers, and do you feel it's important to be both?

I don't want to go on record saying that musicians have an obligation to be entertaining, because what if some night I feel like being a totally immobile lump? I think it's every musician's right to stand facing their amp for the whole show like Santana. Most mainstream concerts now are like step aerobics classes for pre-teen hookers, so one way you know an artist is "legitimate" is that he (or she) is fat, dirty and motionless. I try to split the difference and shake it a little for the girls.

Who produced this record, and why did you choose them?

I produced it myself. I wanted to make a record that sounded like our live performances, and I didn't want anyone in the producer's chair making sour-lemon faces about every guitar solo. I mean, I love glockenspiel solos and hammer-dulcimer solos as much as the next guy, but there are times when the glockenspiel just doesn't have the 'oomph'.

How long did it take to make?

We took about a month. We had a lot of friends play on our last record so this time we tried to keep it simple and keep the studio door locked. This was our first record playing with Nabil Ayers and his drumming really solidified everything, plus Eric Corson really brought his 'A' game, so we were able to lay down the basic tracks really fast and no-nonsense. That gave me the freedom to try fifty different flangers before deciding that I hate flangers.

It's quite the rock record, yet you don't seem to wear excessively tight jeans or thrift store cowboy boots, or even a skinny tie... what gives?

A few years ago there was a moment, a single moment, when all the thrift stores across the country all ran out of cool stuff at the same time. Somebody bought the last, great thing. All they had left to sell were used Old Navy rugby shirts, Dockers, and all the Members Only jackets that had been sitting, unsold, for fifteen years. So eventually Members Only jackets became hip, because they were the only thing left to buy! But the truth is: they aren't hip, and spandex isn't hip, and tucking your jeans into your boots isn't hip, and all the cocaine in the world won't make it so.

Why should anyone care about this record?

Good songs are hard to write, hard to find, and are unrelated to fashion. There's a lot of music being made as an accessory now, music to match your distressed denim, your deconstructed jacket, your asymmetrical hair, but there will always be a need for actual songs. The Long Winters are working on making those.

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