



# Thanks for the Memories

*Artists and the Early Experiences that Shaped Them*

Words by Frank Valish

Illustrations by Dewey Saunders

**E**veryone can point to formative experiences from childhood that influence his or her future endeavors, and most people who are passionate about music can identify definitive experiences that set the course for their eventual interest or musical pursuit. To explore the issue of early experiences and how they relate to future goals, aspirations, and ultimately where we find ourselves as adults, *Under the Radar* spoke with some notable indie-rock musicians and Dr. Jefferson A. Singer, Professor of Psychology at Connecticut College, one of the preeminent researchers in memory and early experience today.

“The most important current goals that we have, the goals that really matter for us in our lives, have a relationship to the memories that are more important, so that it may be that what you want most in your current life colors which memories are going to continue to have a resonance and an emotional importance to you.... I’d have to believe that the vocation that you choose and the direction of your passion in later life is going to give you a kind of selectivity about the memories that you recall and which ones matter most to you.” – Dr. Singer

**I**n the same way that that architects may have vivid early memories of building with blocks or writers may have strong

early memories of reading and storytelling, musicians seem to easily be able to point to musical memories as formative for them. Get them talking about early experiences, and the conversation inevitably returns to music. Amanda Palmer, one half of both The Dresden Dolls and Evelyn Evelyn, relates much of her early interest in music to her mother’s Beatles, Doors, Fleetwood Mac, Beach Boys, and Bee Gees records.

“I remember as a really little kid listening to the same record over and over and over again on my parents’ turntable in our living room, sitting in a big armchair, with giant headphones that covered my head,” says Palmer. “I couldn’t flip the record over by myself, and I didn’t know how to work the turntable, so every time a side ended, I had to go grab someone to come turn the record over for me. I would do that again and again and again and again. And it was just one record. It was *Sgt. Pepper’s*.... I was probably six or seven.”

Unlike Palmer, who was involved in the creative side of music from an early age, performing in community theater and singing in the church choir as a kid, Tracyanne Campbell of Scottish indie-pop group Camera Obscura didn’t aspire to songwriting until her early 20s. Still, for Campbell, music was always her center, and she has similar early memories of being affected by song.

“I remember hearing the Crystal Gayle song ‘Don’t It Make My Brown Eyes Blue’ on the radio when I was a very, very young child,” says Campbell of Gayle’s 1977 rendition of the Richard Leigh classic. “I must have been between three and four, because I can remember the room that I was in and the house that I was in and that my mother was there. I think that was pretty much my

first musical memory.... I still get a certain kind of buzz from listening to that song.”

For many of us, like Palmer and Campbell, our first exposure to music is from our parents, rooting through old vinyl albums or CDs, looking for something to which we can connect. For some, however, like Eleanor Friedberger, it was a sibling who jumpstarted that love of music.

“[My older brother] was probably my biggest musical influence,” says Friedberger, who plays with her brother Matthew in The Fiery Furnaces. “I kind of joke that he brainwashed me. We were in the same house, our rooms next to each other, so I listened to everything he listened to. He would play music very loud, even after I’d gone to sleep. He was a big Who fanatic, and I can remember him listening to *The Who by Numbers*, and the song ‘Squeeze Box’ coming on, and it being time to sleep with my eyes shut. I don’t know why my mother wouldn’t yell at him to turn it off, but she didn’t.”

When Dr. Singer relates memories to goals and the people we are today, he speaks not only about musical memories, but also of general life memories, events, and circumstances that influence us. For Palmer, one of her most vivid memories, and one that she feels explains much about her current pursuits, did not involve music at all, but rather a traumatic fall when she was two or three years old.

“There was a little landing at the bottom of the stairs with two more steps that turned into the foyer,” she says. “I fell all the way from the top, down to the landing; it was maybe 12 stairs. I sort of tumbled and bounced, like a kid would. I wasn’t even really that hurt, I was just in complete shock that I had tumbled all the way

down the stairs, sort of like a cartoon character. And I started crying. I ran into the kitchen where all the adults were—to this day I have no idea whether this really happened, but this is the way I remember it—and I went there screaming and crying that I had fallen down this set of stairs, and nobody believed me.... A lot of my issues as a kid were about not being believed, and I think one of the things that drew me, not just into music but into songwriting and screaming on a stage in front of a lot of people, is probably directly related to wanting to be believed.”

Conversely, Pixies’ Black Francis had a pleasant early experience that he points to as bringing him into live performance.

“I credit a fourth grade teacher named Mrs. Newstat, or Ms. Newstat—I don’t know if she was married actually,” says Francis. “She had a folk guitar, to use the vernacular, and she used to bring it to class and teach folk songs to the kids. Sometimes after school or during lunch, she would go to other schools in the district and would do her leading-the-children-in-song routine. She kind of took a liking to me, and so she would bring me as her sidekick. She would be there with a guitar, and I would be standing there in the front of the room teaching the class how to do rounds, for example. That was probably pretty important for my development. It wasn’t just musical exposure, but it was getting up in front of people to address them in a musical way.”

Friedberger can recall going to the Greek Orthodox church for which her grandmother was choir director until she died. “I can remember being very young and also very scared going to church,” she says. “[I remember] going up to the choir loft, which was a



very steep staircase, and seeing my grandmother standing there. Often they would plop me down next to the organist so that I'd be out of the way, but also just staring at the organist playing. And also seeing my grandmother, and not really understanding what was going on, because the service was in Greek."

Friedberger later went on to collaborate with her grandmother on The Fiery Furnaces' 2005 album *Rehearsing My Choir*.

For Broken Social Scene's Charles Spearin, appreciating sound grew out of his youth with a father who is both blind and Buddhist. Spearin's understanding of how his father experiences the world may explain some of his own current musical pursuits, such as The Happiness Project, where he uses people's recitations on happiness and the intonations of their voices to create music.

"One of the things [my father] enjoys a lot is sitting and listening to wind in the trees," says Spearin, who is currently working on a film version of his Happiness Project. "That's how he places himself in the world. So I used to sit with my father in the backyard and basically just listen to the sounds of what's going on around us. I really enjoyed those times. We still do it, all the time actually."

"One thing that we know is that human beings are attracted to familiarity. Things that we know and have repeated exposure to are more pleasing to us. So having listened to music early, and maybe even certain kinds of melodies or tunes that were familiar to you as a child, there is a pleasure that you'll take probably for the rest of your lives in coming back to those familiar melodies or familiar tunes." — Dr. Singer

**B**en Goldwasser of MGMT describes his own musical education as being in several phases. He grew up in rural Upstate New York listening mostly to his parents' '60s records — The Grateful Dead, The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Traffic — before gravitating toward edgier and more electronic sounds, things like My Bloody Valentine, Sonic Youth, and Stereolab, and finally early industrial music like Throbbing Gristle. Goldwasser's own creative endeavors

have been equally varied, the first MGMT album, *Oracular Spectacular*, being more geared toward the electronic and experimental, and the band's most recent work, *Congratulations*, following more closely the classic psychedelic sounds of Goldwasser's youth. Many in the public and the media questioned the band's directional shift, but the chronology may also represent, like Dr. Singer says, a returning to the pleasurable sounds of early experience.

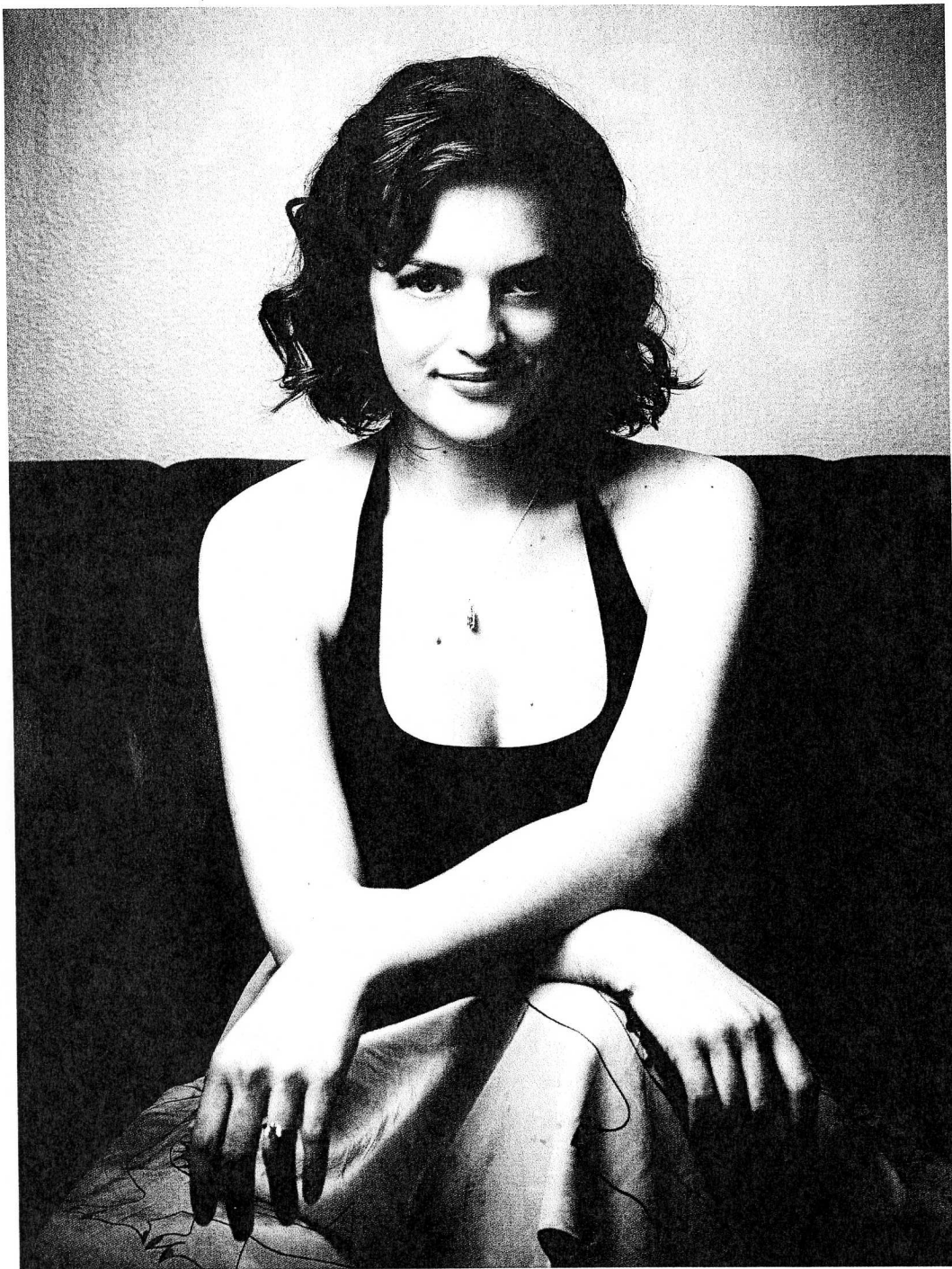
"We weren't really trying to sound like that completely," says Goldwasser, "but I think it's a big

reference point for us, because of the nostalgia that we associate with it, and what it means to people. I think popular music of that time is a universal language. People understand it pretty well."

Similarly, one could posit that Friedberger's contributions to The Fiery Furnaces' experimental, often bizarre approach to pop music is in some way subconsciously related to her experience as a scared and confused child in a church where music represented both a foreign idea and a comforting presence. Causation may not be completely clear, but one can certainly see parallels.

Dr. Singer says: "What you want now and what you're still looking toward in the future gives some of the recollections of your life their continued intensity." It is clear that the templates for those wants can be traced back to childhood. For musicians and those who intensely enjoy music, sound and song are vitally important, something to which we intimately connect and probably will for the rest of our lives. Whether we took our cues from parents, siblings, or other events, our early experiences have shaped us. No doubt we will remember them forever.





## Mad Men's Elisabeth Moss on *My So-Called Life*

As told to Mike Hilleary

**G**rowing up there was definitely a lot of stuff pop culture-wise that I didn't catch onto until I was older. Of the things I did experience as it happened, *My So-Called Life* was the one that was most important to me.

As a 12-year-old, there were two sides of it that I loved. One was the fact that it was about a

teenage girl. I think any teenage girl that's awkward appeals to real teenage girls living through that sort of thing. At the time, I remember even wanting to dye my hair like Claire Danes. But I actually really appreciated it as a young actor. Claire Danes was so incredible in that show, and she became my role model at that young age for acting.

It was different to see someone who was portraying a really in-

teresting, multifaceted character who just didn't fit that mold that you used to see with teenagers on television. She was dark and deep and had problems, and I had never seen that on TV before, and I think it had a huge influence on me as an actress for what you could bring to television, and how you could elevate the medium to portray real life. I remember very vividly even certain scenes having an effect on me. There weren't a

lot of young actresses portraying such emotional depths and with such complexity, and I felt that she had this wonderful complexity to her. It wasn't all black and white. So many emotions would play across her face. At 12, I couldn't really think of anyone besides her who was doing that, especially on TV.

**“Claire Danes was so incredible in that show, and she became my role model at that young age for acting.”**

— Elisabeth Moss

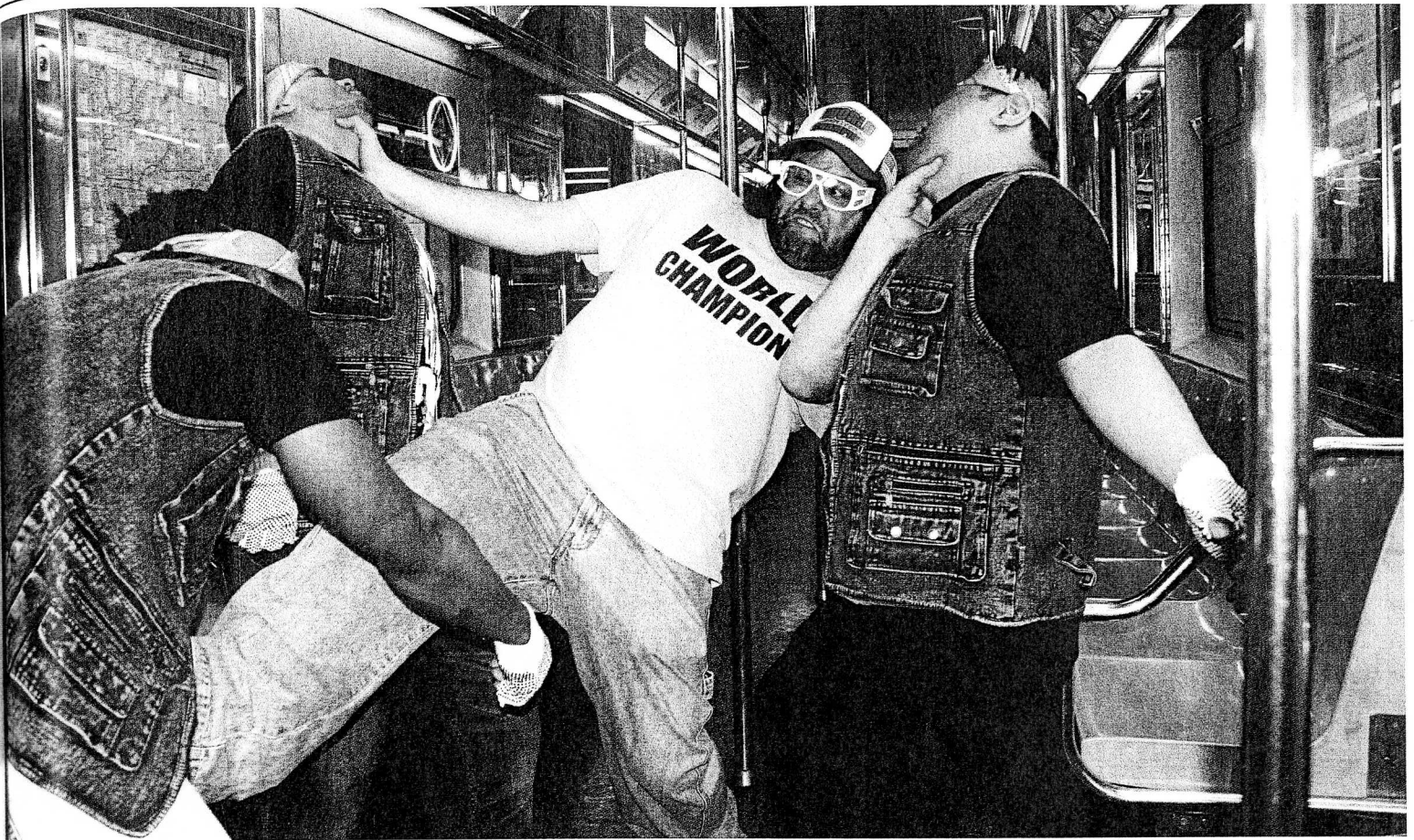
Many years later I actually met her, but never told her any of this. I didn't want to be annoying. But she had a huge influence on me as a young actress. I definitely felt passionate about it and was *devastated* when it was cancelled. I still can't believe it went for only one season. I think some people just weren't ready for it. They might not have been ready for a show like that. Now I think a show like that would definitely survive and thrive. At the time, it was pretty revolutionary. It portrayed the everyday reality, as opposed to things that were more sitcom-related or melodramatic.

I wasn't in the normal high school. I have no idea what the experience was like. I couldn't identify with that. I wasn't a super awkward child. I really wasn't dating. But I think it was just Danes' portrayal that got me, someone who had more feelings than “are we going to the football game?” She had real feelings and real emotions and real conflicts, and that was very interesting to me.

(Elisabeth Moss began acting at an early age. She played the First Daughter to Martin Sheen's President Bartlet in *The West Wing* and currently stars as Peggy Olson in AMC's *Mad Men*, for which she's been nominated for an Emmy. She also recently starred opposite Jonah Hill and Russell Brand in *Get Him to the Greek*.)

(As told to Mike Hilleary. Portions of Elisabeth Moss' conversation have been abridged and edited for structure and flow.)





## 30 Rock's Judah Friedlander on Pac-Man

Words by Laura Studarus

The cliché goes something like this: “When I was your age... insert over-the-top trial.” If the recollections of 30 Rock’s Judah Friedlander begin to sound like “uphill-both-ways-in-the-snow” scenarios as he describes the hardships of his Pac-Man-obsessed youth, it’s only because gamers today have it so good.

“The big difference back then is that the home version was a completely horrendous version of the arcade version,” Friedlander says of the gaming system he owned as a preteen. “Pac-Man, for example, had a completely different maze than the Atari home system, and the dots that you were supposed to eat were actually rectangles and the screen had an intense flicker to it so it was very hard on the eyes. If you went to a video arcade you wouldn’t even put your quarter in the machine, it was that bad.”

To get his fix, Friedlander would join his fellow gamers at the local arcade, which presented

its own set of issues. “At the arcade, people don’t understand today, there was pressure!” he says. “There were other people watching. Those people might be trying to bump you so you get out and they can play earlier. So there was always the potential of a fight breaking out and, depending on where you were going, getting your wallet stolen while you were playing.”

To alleviate tensions in determining who was up next at the controls, a ritual was formed. “What they would do is, as you were playing, they would stack their quarters,” recounts Friedlander. “And when they would stack their quarters on the machine as you were playing, it would signify that they have the next game. So there’s all this pressure when you’re playing and outside influences going on that could impede you from doing well.”

However, there were steps a cash-strapped youth could take to prolong his turns and improve his standings. “There were Pac-Man books. There was one

by Ken Uston, *Mastering Pac-Man*,” remembers Friedlander. “I studied that thing. It’s like, ‘Move over homework! I’m reading the Pac-Man book!’” Yet, he recalls

**“At the arcade, people don’t understand today, there was pressure!” – Judah Friedlander**

the results being bittersweet.

“You know, I actually did it, I did learn the Pac-Man patterns, and it did work, but it did take away some of the joy of it, ‘cause like, ‘Oh, now I can beat Pac-Man.’”

The original elation was renewed with the introduction of *Ms. Pac-Man*. “When *Ms. Pac-Man* came out, the big deal with that was you couldn’t do a pattern,” says Friedlander, who never let character gender come into play. “Any macho-ness was thrown out the window. The lipstick, the pink bow in her hair, the eyelashes, nobody cared. Everyone loved it! *Ms. Pac-Man* was

a big part of the feminist movement is what I’m trying to say.” Even as an adult, Friedlander still visits the first lady of video games. “At this one bar down-

stairs from a comedy club that I used to play at, they had a *Ms. Pac-Man* machine. So, we’d all be down there, making fun of each other. Friends goof off with each other. Guys do that. A video game can be a good outlet for that.”

(In addition to being a noted Pac-Man scholar, Judah Friedlander plays Frank Rossitano on NBC’s *30 Rock*. His upcoming HarperCollins/It Books “instructional” manual/book is titled, *How to Beat Up Anybody: An Instructional and Inspirational Karate Book by The World Champion.*)



## Here We Go Magic's Luke Temple on His Grandfather

Words by Luke Temple

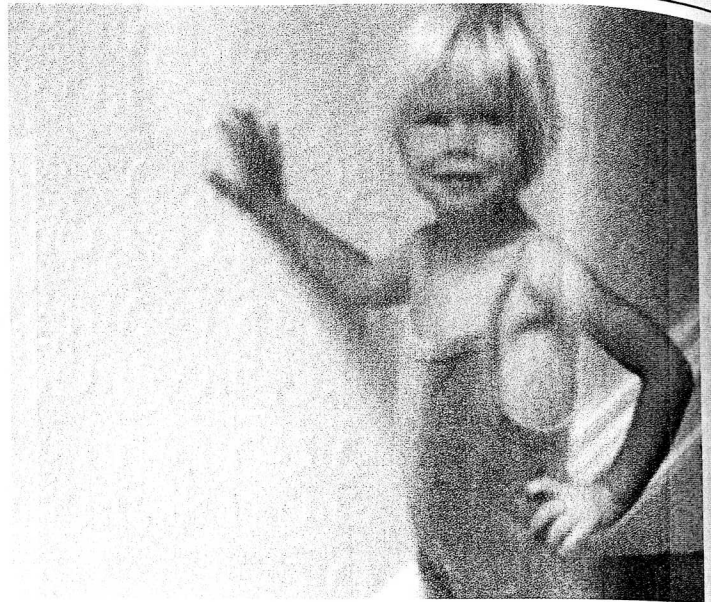
**W**hen I was either four or five I went with the family to visit my grandparents for Easter. They lived in a large dark green house on top of a hill in Greenwich, CT. I had a very strong affection for my grandfather. He was a large man with white hair and a booming voice, he fancied a new pink or yellow Cadillac at the beginning of each year, and had a piece of WWII shrapnel lodged somewhere near his heart. He had a way of dismantling a tense moment with simple humor and enjoyed waking me early to watch cartoons and eat Oreos cookies. My mother told me that he had a party of 100 people in honor of my birth.

With every moment of our approach to that house, each tree along the road would take

on more and more significance; I was almost jealous of the trees that they had, the privilege of living closer to my grandfather. They all had a story that I could see much clearer than my own. They were all his friends, they enjoyed his jokes, and waved to him as he drove to and from work. They knew more than me and in turn took on a strange poetic significance as we drove.

We arrived. Later that evening while introducing me to the game of golf, my cousin Reed thrust his driver into my forehead in the middle of his backswing. I was rushed inside and in the midst of the chaos my Grandfather looked at me with a smile and said, "You got an egg on your head buddy!" "An egg? Yeah, it looks like an egg!" I thought.

"How funny! I have an egg on my head!" I stopped crying.



## Liars' Angus Andrew on Duran Duran

As told to John Everhart

**I** came across Duran Duran through my older sisters. Their vinyl records were passed down to me along with a lot of other really good stuff. But I never really picked out a particular record at the time as a favorite. I loved them all. I really liked *Rio* and *Seven and the Ragged Tiger*. But since it came from my sisters, I didn't have to explore all that much the way I would with bands later. It was just kind of handed to me.

They were a part of the first generation of the super MTV image thing, and to this day they're branded as the pretty boys or the most beautiful pop stars around, kind of all about the image of doing the videos and really taking advantage of that time period, which is how they got so big. But no one really gives them the thumbs up for the songs they made, which are so incredible. The songwriting that they did was unbelievable and really amazing. I have a specific memory of sitting down and trying to play the bass line for "The Reflex," and it's just so difficult. Not trying to play it probably would've been a better idea in the long run.

They had some horrific, not-so-polite-towards-women videos that at the time seemed cool, but now they seem gross. But they're a band that hit during that time period of when the world just turned so visual. It happened in the '80s with MTV and television

in general. During the Reagan era, crack.

Later in life I came across Duran Duran again. Well, I never really left, but I had another good listen to them when we were making our first record. We were so into Duran Duran at the time, and no one was picking up on it. And if you look back now, you can really just appreciate the music.

I remember not that long ago thinking that I should check out their *Best Of*, and it's just hit after hit after hit, man. And then you go back to their records, and that's such good stuff too. It's so weird to think of them as songwriters, because their history is so discomobulated with so many members. But they even had some great, really kind of tender lyrics. "Save a Prayer" in particular is so good.

But the resounding stomp for me is that they were Princess Diana's favorite band. That was just huge for me, because I loved her so much. Being from Australia, the whole English thing comes from a different perspective, but she was really out there, and totally loved Duran Duran. They recently did a Diana tribute concert in England and Duran Duran played. We were there at the time and got to see it and it was just really rad.

Sometimes I think of them as a complete early incarnation of the boy bands that we have to deal with like The Backstreet Boys. But man, I'd swap them for what we have now any day.

(As told to John Everhart. Portions of Angus Andrew's conversation have been abridged and edited for structure and flow.)





## Tegan and Sara's Sara Quin on Phil Collins

Words by Chris Tinkham

**B**orn in 1980, Sara Quin was too young to experience the juggernaut that was Phil Collins during the mid-1980s. As a solo artist and the lead singer of Genesis, Collins became a persistent hit-maker and pop culture presence, from his chart-topping theme song to the 1984 film *Against All Odds* and his 1985 transatlantic Live Aid performances, to the use of "In the Air Tonight" on *Miami Vice*, and the Genesis track "Tonight, Tonight, Tonight" in Michelob commercials.

Quin didn't fall for Collins' music until circa 1989, when she saw him performing "Groovy Kind of Love" on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

"If I was really being truthful about how I discovered Phil Collins, and what really resonated with me as a kid, it was definitely not what would be 'cool' Phil Col-

lins," Quin confesses. "That would have been when it trickled into my world, which was the suburbs of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. And I was like a nine-year-old. That would have been the time when I was also listening to New Kids on the Block. I would have had the whole spectrum of kid music but also would have gravitated toward the pop songs of somebody like Phil Collins. But, definitely, I've gone back and discovered the old Phil Collins stuff that's genius. He's a great pop writer. I've actually tried to cover Phil Collins before, and I find it really challenging. I love covering Bruce Springsteen and really love to cover Prince, but, for whatever reason, I'm not able to cover Phil Collins. There's just something about his songs; they're too progressive for me."

"I have this really embarrassing memory of a couple years ago, being in Australia, and we were on tour, and we were in a private karaoke room, and it was all of our band and crew," Quin

continues. "I got up thinking I was so cool and I was gonna impress all these people, and I tried to sing 'Groovy Kind of Love,' and I remember looks of horror on people's faces. Usually, I'm the fun

For Christmas 1989, Sara and her sister Tegan received a cassette tape of Collins' 1989 album *...But Seriously*. "Tegan and I would fight over the Phil Collins cassette; we both had little

**"I tried to sing 'Groovy Kind of Love,' and I remember looks of horror on people's faces."**

— Sara Quin

one at karaoke; I'll do the whole Bon Jovi catalog, but Phil Collins, for whatever reason, is just outside of my range."

Quin's parents, who came of age in the '70s, loved serious rock music and acts such as Led Zepelin, David Bowie, and Steely Dan, but their tastes were broad enough to include The Police and Phil Collins as well. As a kid, Quin found an approachable quality in Collins. "I thought Phil Collins was goofy and fun," she recalls.

boom boxes in our room," Quin remembers. "There were songs on there that I really played the heck out of. 'Another Day in Paradise' comes to mind."

Perhaps due to the power of TV, Quin's favorite Collins song at the time remained "Groovy Kind of Love," a 1960s composition that he didn't write but took to #1 in 1988. "Tegan and I, we probably overplayed that song," she says. "I'm sure my parents wanted to strangle us."



## Portishead and BEAK>'s Geoff Barrow on Post-Apocalyptic Films of the '80s

As told to Stephen Humphries

**W**hen I was a teen, my mate's parents used to disappear every Saturday, and so we used to have this thing we called The Saturday Club. We'd get all the booze out of our parents' cabinets, pour it all into one bottle, and go to his house. Then we'd rent one slightly sexual film that had some boobs in it, and also a movie like *The Terminator* or *Scanners* or something. The main influence on me at the time was definitely those cheap post-apocalyptic films like *Mad Max*, about what happened after a nuclear war.

In the '80s, the Cold War was still going on. At school, we were shown *Threads*, a documentary-like movie set in Sheffield about a thermonuclear war. There's a scene with a woman in a supermarket who hears a three-minute warning and pees herself. It was very harrowing for me as a kid. I was absolutely convinced that the world was going to end. The strangest thing about

the Cold War was that I had more faith in the Russians than the Americans, because I thought the Americans were more likely to push the button.

Films like *War Games* were very striking and, also at that point, *The Day After*, which was an American post-nuclear war TV movie. Because *Mad Max* was Australian, it had a slightly rougher edge to it than the American films. *Mad Max* was a harsh revenge story because his wife and kid were killed. It wasn't a glamorous series until the third film, when Tina Turner showed up.

*The Terminator* had a rough feel, too. I loved the relentlessness of it. The synthesizer soundtrack was really heavy. I would have been 13, still quite a young age to watch *Terminator*, especially the scene when the cyborg takes his eye out. My favorite scene is when Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn) is being chased by the cops and he nicks a shotgun and goes into a mall. He finds a trench coat and puts on those wicked Nikes. I was desperate to get those Nikes. My mate managed to get some. He used to walk around with a trench coat and

a pair of those and he was what we would call "the dog's bollocks!"

John Carpenter was a massive influence on me. In *Escape from New York*, images such as

that we were heading that way as Portishead. And then when we met Beth Gibbons, that whole combination worked to create a melancholic side of film music.

**"At school, we were shown *Threads*, a documentary-like movie set in Sheffield about a thermonuclear war. There's a scene with a woman in a supermarket who hears a three-minute warning and pees herself." - Geoff Barrow**

the toppled Statue of Liberty were quite compelling. The film was a bit rubbish but the soundtrack was great. The soundtrack of *Assault on Precinct 13* is immense. Carpenter wrote it himself on a 16-track with a drum machine and a couple of synths.

When I first got a synthesizer, I was sampling Carpenter, which was slightly starker and even more European in the sense of its composition than the funk and soul music that was being sampled by a lot of hip-hop artists. So it seemed

(Geoff Barrow is a multi-instrumentalist and producer for Portishead, which he formed in Bristol, England in 1991. Portishead's appropriately titled and acclaimed third album, *Third*, came out in 2008. Barrow's other project, the Krautrock-influenced trio BEAK>, released their self-titled debut album last fall.)

(As told to Stephen Humphries. Portions of Geoff Barrow's conversation have been abridged and edited for structure and flow.)