

Music Trivia

Edna died. At the precise moment of death, Doc Maloney failed to appreciate the cascading implications of an Edna-less world. But soon, the linkages became obvious, overwhelming, and paralyzing—without Edna then this, and then that, and so on. Convinced that determination and righteous anger would prevail, he pumped and pumped in an attempt to get the old girl to turn over. No response. Getting out was giving in, so Doc resisted a bit longer and pumped a few more times. Reality seeped slowly into Doc's consciousness like the fitful acknowledgement of flu symptoms. Heat, like a fever, permeated the death chamber. Locals caveat it as a dry heat as though standing fully clothed under a blow dryer is somehow preferable to a sauna. (Comparing something that sucks with something that sucks more may provide interesting context, but never diminishes the original suck.) Heat sucks. Air temperature in Edna's final and fatal space exceeded the summer swelter outside by more than twenty degrees. Smothering was a noun. Sweat was instantaneous. Edna was presumed. Doc Maloney would be late to class because Edna was dead.

To have a name is to have a soul. Mechanical hospice care had compassionately supported Edna's journey to the other side for some time so her passing should not have surprised anyone, least of all Doc Maloney. For several years, Edna had subsisted on a slow drip of 10-w-40 motor oil into an internal combustion system doomed by age, miles, and pot holes. Edna didn't have a living will or anything like it and no extraordinary measures would be taken to extend her life. Her pallbearer would be a tow truck.

Doc thought briefly about hopping on Onus and peddling to campus the old fashioned way. Although Onus possessed an essence of mechanical immortality that

Edna lacked, Onus required a level of interactive participation Doc found physically less attractive—especially given his advanced age, poor physical condition and the suck of heat. Scripting a mental movie of a ride on Onus illuminated too many plot problems: where to put his briefcase (Satch), the probability of low tire pressure and the subsequent sub-plot implications, trouser snags, sweaty shirt, and physical exhaustion. Anyway, his attraction to being on Onus had always been more philosophical than practical. The final scene with Onus literally on him—tangled limbs, bleeding abrasions, and entertained students pretending to care—ended the film.

Cancelling class was a tempting option. Summer term was always his least favorite filled as it was with students who had other winter obligations or were repeating previously failed courses. His current crop of summer sloths cared little about anything but their own titillation. Kurt Cobain pegged this generation just right: “I feel stupid and contagious/Here we are now, entertain us.” Sitting and sweating in Edna’s carcass, Doc could not have cared less about returning the latest installment of mediocre papers.

Intuitively, Doc knew that like most his age or older or even younger, there would be a time when driving would end. For most, it comes as a simple realization of no longer being able to respond quickly enough or pay attention long enough to safely navigate a car. For others, an accidental trip through the front window of the grocery store or some other cataclysmic automotive event signified the end of driving. Even Doc was becoming increasingly wary of peers (“Pull up behind some of these old biddies and all you can see is knuckles and a hat”) who were gradually losing the ability to safely operate on city streets. Since Edna was dead, no self-reflection was required.

The train station was a five minute walk from Doc's house and his office on campus was a five minute walk from the campus station. The ride would take fifteen minutes (presuming a timely train appearance) which gave Doc a twenty-five minute best-case travel scenario for a class scheduled to start in thirty minutes. Doc slammed the door on Edna—closure complete, mourning over—and stomped back through the house pausing briefly to call the departmental secretary. Three trees in the front yard (Emerson, Lake, and Palmer) needed to be watered, but there was no time. Satch generated additional heat friction and misery—heavy with student papers fed to him last night.

Reaching into Satch's bowels, Doc extracted Mick the iPod; a class gift from an especially resourceful and insightful group he had taught last winter. Mick was born fully loaded with Doc's favorite tunes from a more intelligent and purposeful era of music. Last winter's American Culture class seemed to truly appreciate the existential qualities of a good four-chord rock band. Neil Young's pathetic wailing about lost love and social injustice diverted Doc's anger into a more intellectual vein. Something approaching peace started to emerge as he ambled toward the blue-line train.

The sudden peripheral image of a large white object passing directly in front of him brought Doc to a terrified halt. The side mirror of Mrs. Nelson's SUV missed Doc's nose by mere inches. Mrs. Nelson honked and offered a fluttering wave as the vehicle lurched onto the street and screeched off in the opposite direction. Doc swung Satch wildly at the intruder, missed badly, and only narrowly avoided a catastrophic loss of balance. Powerless to extract justice, Doc muttered "Bitch" under his breath and increased his walking pace.

Independent of issues related to environmental hubris, Doc had always suspected a universal relationship between vehicle size and driver arrogance. “I know how I will die.” He once told his late wife. “I will be squashed like a bug by a twenty-something cell-phone impaled trophy wife wielding a vehicle larger than those used to conquer Europe in World War II.” Curious about his thesis and as professors are wont to do, he researched the technical specifications of modern sport utility vehicles and compared them to the World War II era M1-Sherman Tank. To his delight, Doc discovered that the vehicles used to transport all the Mrs. Nelsons to and from Starbucks were only a few inches (6.4 to be exact) shorter in length and 27.9 inches shorter in height than a medium sized Sherman tank. Sweaty, exhausted and somewhat bemused by the near fulfillment of his fatal prophesy; Doc arrived at the train station with only moments to spare.

Very White and Spike were seated together in a section of the train where four seats face each other—as though strangers need or want public transportation conversation lounges. Doc was not surprised to find the seats facing backward toward Very and Spike empty, even on an otherwise full train. Very White was presumably female. Evidence of breasts bulged from under her black and chrome-studded leather jacket. Heavily tattooed and pierced in an absurd variety of visible places, Very projected the image of a living acupuncture horror story. “Back Off” was needlessly tattooed across her forehead. Seated next to Very, Spike successfully oozed an aura of slumping disgust and anger. The sleeves of his matching black leather jacket ended above hands tattooed with a web design, presumably Spider Man inspired. Spike’s impalements were less numerous but much larger than Very’s. Spike’s nose piercing supported a delicate silver chain from which a tiny cross dangled.

Doc Maloney surveyed his audience. There were approximately fifty people on the train car including Very and Spike. Most of the riders were engaged in activities of some sort—reading newspapers, books or futzing with cell phones. Only a few looked up to note his arrival. A lifetime teacher, Doc viewed the captive audience as an opportunity for engagement, entertainment or both and he set to work immediately.

“Nice jackets” he said loudly as Satch slid off of his shoulder. “Wish I would have thought to bring mine—it gets cold in here.”

Doc tossed Satch onto the empty window seat and flopped directly across from Spike just as the train started to move. The electric hum of the train gained volume and pitch as it accelerated. Doc amplified his voice to account for the competing noise.

“Mind if I take a closer look at your cross? That’s great work—symbolic and all that.”

“No problem” Spike replied in a tone communicating the opposite. Doc ignored the tone. Spike leaned uneasily forward toward Doc’s waiting eyes. Doc carefully examined the cross, noting the interesting contrast of nose hair and upper-lip acne to the symbol of Christ’s final sacrifice.

“No problem.” Doc repeated. “I can’t quite place the accent—Liverpool or Odessa, I get them confused.”

“Sherman....Texas.” Spike replied.

“Sherman, huh? Bet it’s hard to find a good tattoo artist in Sherman.”

“Actually we go to Gainesville for most of it.” Very joined the conversation with a surprisingly fragile voice sweeping her hand over the joint collection of accoutrements—jewelry, jackets, tattoos.

“Gainesville? Good tat parlor in Gainesville? I’ll be damned.”

Doc noted with satisfaction the attention shift of a number of riders. He retrieved Mick again and hummed an old Rolling Stones tune as he scrolled through selections—the train rocked and rolled in time. Seemingly in response, Very plugged her iPod into a set of external speakers which instantly filled the train car with screeching guitar riffs and angry vocals.

“Tat parlor in Gainesville doesn’t sell headphones huh?”

Very White offered a satisfied smile and gazed around the car confirming the desired irritation on the faces of other passengers.

“Meat Puppets” Doc observed passively. “Good band. Maybe the only good band to rise from the Arizona desert. Is that from *Up on the Sun*? Western thrash. That’s what critics called it. I’m not sure what that means, but it’s a hell of a CD.”

Very White looked stunned. Spike smiled. Doc rocked his shoulders to the beat and accurately mouthed the screaming lyrics. Everyone on the train was now tuned to the show.

“Did you know, Paul Leary of Butthole Surfers produced *Too High To Die*?” Doc asked rhetorically. “You know that CD, right? ‘Pups recorded that one in 1994 I think. Well, I know it was ’94 because that’s the same year they were on *MTV Unplugged* in New York with Kurt Cobain of Nirvana. That was about six months before Kurt blew his brains out, or before Courtney blew them out for him—depending on who you believe. Too bad. The *Unplugged* version of *Lake of Fire* with Kurt was arguably the ‘Pups best moment and pretty much Kurt’s last.”

Very White turned off the music. Doc thought about standing up, but didn't. He placed his hand over his heart and animatedly recited the lyrics as poetry:

*where do bad folks go when they die?
they don't go to heaven where the angels fly
they go down to the lake of fire and fry
won't see 'em again till the fourth of july*

Doc paused reflectively. "I think of Kurt Cobain every July 4th."

Spike spoke. "Dude, 'Pups seem a bit radical for you huh?"

Doc spoke. "What should I be listening to? Frank Sinatra?"

"No man, but 'Pups are out there for an older guy huh?"

"Or in there as it were. I think Cris Kirkwood got out of prison in July of '05. He whacked a security guard with a baton, I think. I wonder if he got out on July 4th. I should check on that."

Doc diligently reached into Satch for a pad of paper and scribbled a note.

Very White spoke. "How'd you? You know. 'Pups?"

"Well phrased young lady. I teach at the university. Music mirrors culture. Understanding or at least appreciating the music of my students' generation is essential to connecting with them."

Very White spoke again. "Wow. How about Jethro Tull? You know him too?"

"Amazingly, several things you said require comment—I'll take them one at a time" Doc said, holding up a stubby finger. "Yes, I do like Jethro Tull—I'm partial to *Aqualung*, but nothing gets my motor running quite like *Locomotive Breath*. I'm a bit curious how you know the band, you know, more of a 70's band. Next, there is no

“him.” Jethro Tull is not a member of the band. Back in the early 70’s, the band was having trouble getting gigs in London and they changed the band’s name frequently so they could return as a different band to the same clubs. Jethro Tull was simply the name that stuck. Jethro Tull the person was an 18th-century agriculturist who, among other things, invented the seed drill. Nobody in the band is named Jethro Tull. And finally, Ian Anderson is a genius with a flute.”

Very White covered Spike’s web with her hand and spoke again. “Wow.”

“Here’s another “Wow,” Doc continued, “Jethro Tull is not the only band with a unique first person name. There are at least five others. By unique first person name I mean the name of the band is the first and last name of someone who is not in the band. Care to take a guess?”

“Lynyrd Skynyrd” Spike said immediately.

“Very good” Doc exclaimed, rocking back on the chair. “Rumor has it the band is named after a high school gym teacher who frequently kicked members of the band-to-be out of class because of the length of their hair. His real name, I think, was Leonard Skinner. Speaking of cultural connections, you might also be interested to know that *Sweet Home Alabama* was written as a rebuttal to Neil Young’s criticism of southern culture in his song *Southern Man*, hence the line; “I hope Neil Young will remember. A Southern Man don’t need him around anyhow.” Well done children. We have correctly identified two, and frankly the most obvious two, can you think of others?”

Captivated or captured train riders mumbled to each other. Someone a surprising distance from the conversation lounge yelled, “Steely Dan.”

“Right you are my good man.” Doc replied loudly in his best professorial voice. “A wonderful jazz-rock fusion band—or duo if you will. Given contemporary moral standards and an unknown audience, I will say only that the name Steely Dan was taken from William Burroughs’ novel, *Naked Lunch*. If you are a fan of 50’s beat literature, then you already know the thrust of Fagen and Becker’s inspiration.”

Very White spoke. “Dude, you know a lot.”

“Yes I do. I also know that epiphanies are usually an idiot’s sudden discovery of what everyone else already knew.”

“Is that a band? Never heard of the Epiphanies.”

Spike spoke. “Dude. Little harsh.”

“My apology.”

Very White looked innocently to Spike for clarification. Spike shook his head dismissively. “So you teach? What do you teach?”

“American history and culture at the university. I’m in a musical mood because today the class will discuss personal soundtracks.”

“You mean like a list of favorite songs?”

“More than that. A soundtrack for life. If your life were a movie, what ten songs would be on the soundtrack? You also get to design the CD cover.”

“Sweet. And the people in your class, they get a grade for this?”

“Sweet indeed and indeed they do. Unfortunately they are also required to write a paper in which they attempt to connect the music to the contemporary history of their time—that’s the hard part” Doc said, patting Satch.

Spike whispered a few words to Very who had withdrawn sullenly to his shoulder. Very White arose and whispered something to Spike.

“*Contra Flow*.” Spike announced. “That’s the name of our soundtrack.”

“What’s on it?” Doc asked immediately, leaning forward.

“Obviously some Tull and ‘Pups. Haven’t thought about it enough yet, but it’s a sweet idea.”

“How about you young lady? Other bands you might add?”

Very shrugged her shoulders and moved a large strand of impossibly black hair from in front of her face. “Collective Soul” she muttered in a barely audible whisper.

Doc rocked back in his seat in one piece like a bobble doll and exclaimed with delight, “Ah!, *Where the River Flows*. Perfect. Well done young lady and a perfect title fit.”

Very’s sheepish smile belied her acceptance of Doc’s guised apology. Others in the train car were discussing their own personal soundtracks—illustrating cover art with their hands, laughing, connecting.

Spike spoke: “So Dude. What’s the title of your Soundtrack?”

Doc paused for effect, not reflection. The gentle sway of the train and the rhythmic sound of metal wheels on metal tracks punctuated the anticipation of bonded riders.

“*Rounding Up*” Doc announced. “On the cover is an open book. A quill pen lies across a blank white page. I don’t know the song list exactly, but I’m sure we would share some of the same favorites. ‘Pups have to make the list for no other reason than to commemorate our conversation.”

Spike nodded approval, and then added, “I think your cover should be an easel holding a blank canvas and a crayon.”

Doc smiled. Very giggled.

“I like it” Doc announced approvingly. “An easel on the cover might suggest the inclusion of some of my favorite contemporary Jazz artists on the list—painting images with sounds rather than words. Most novice listeners think Jazz song titles are silly at least and irrelevant at best until they start to see images created by the music and frequently suggested by the titles. David Sandborn’s *Camel Island* comes to mind. In any event, food for thought children. Food for thought.”

The train lurched and groaned into University Station. Doc stood briskly and retrieved Satch.

Doc announced loudly, “I am late for class because Edna died. Damn her.”

As the doors opened, Doc waived a few fingers in Spike’s direction and Spike nodded. On the bottom step, Doc looked back at his confused and concerned audience.

“Anybody want to know the names of the other three bands?”

Two tones signaled the imminent closing of the train doors. Doc smiled, turned, and walked off toward campus. The departmental secretary had placed a note on the classroom door announcing the cancellation of Dr. Maloney’s class due to a death in the family.

