

Free Music

Every year on the summer solstice, my hometown holds a festival called Make Music Madison. Throughout the city, musicians play in outdoor venues big and small: yards, garages, parks, up and down State Street, and outside churches, restaurants and coffee shops. It's a beautiful, DIY, inclusive event; all of the performances are free, and anyone is welcome to host, attend, and perform. And while it's been years since I've been involved in anything remotely related to the music scene here, on each solstice, I make a point to clear the day and visit as many venues as I can. This year, though, an old friend of mine, Rick Weingarten, was bringing in some acts to play at his house, and he wanted my help for set up, crowd control, and stage management. According to Rick, I was a last resort; none of the other people he had asked to help were available. And I was hesitant as well, mainly because over the years our musical tastes have diverged, I wasn't sure I'd like the acts he'd bring in, and spending the afternoon there would limit the time I would have to wander the rest of the festival. But in the end I agreed to help because I think Make Music Madison is a tradition worth supporting, and, unlike me, Rick is a fixture in the music scene. Though he doesn't play anymore, at least in public, he has a weekly show on WORT, the community radio station, that features interviews and performances from local musicians. He is, in fact, a bit of a celebrity, and I had no doubt his back yard concert would draw a crowd.

June twenty-first was a perfect day. You can never tell what you're going to get in Wisconsin in late spring, so we were all relieved. It had been cold and rainy almost every day the week prior to the solstice, but on the twenty-first, the sun came out at last, and the temperatures held in the mid-seventies. Around eleven, I made my way over to Rick's place, a beautiful historic bungalow at the end of Spaight Street on the east side, two blocks from the lake and the mouth of the Yahara River. The large rear deck that would serve as a stage was a recent addition. Its thick, square cut balusters, painted white and maroon, were supposed to help it blend in with the house's art deco style, but it still looked out of place. Rick wasn't there—he'd gone to collect the chairs he'd rented, but Sandy was on the deck, setting up a PA system that one of the bands had lent to Rick for the event. While she connected the amp to the mixer, I ran lines from the microphones and plugged them in. Once the sound system was humming happily, I went to the

garage for the table that would hold the soft drinks, carried it outside, and set it up in the back near the edge of the yard where it would be shaded by a couple of maple trees and a pagoda dogwood. In one of the maples four crows were making a racket. A lot of people don't like crows, but I think they're beautiful—one of the most intelligent creatures on our planet. When I was younger and used to ruminate over such things, I thought that humans were born blank slates and had to learn to do everything through study and practice while animals acted on pure instinct. Fledgling crows, though, live with their parents for five years, learning through practice just as humans do. Crows make nearly three hundred sounds, each with its own meaning, use tools, and can remember individual human faces for eight years. I guess the point is that now I suspect the difference between human and animal intelligence is one of degree, not kind.

I was still watching them when Rick returned with a pickup truck full of chairs. I helped him unload and set them up, then Sandy and I brought jars of iced tea and lemonade out to the table. Rick went into the house and retrieved an easel and a large chalkboard with the day's program written on it in colored chalk, decorated with cartoons of guitars, people, dogs, cats, and cows. He had nearly a full day of music planned—five acts, each an hour, with a half hour break between each one, starting at noon and going until seven. I read over the names of the bands; none of them meant anything to me until I got to the last one: Francis Pettis. When I read that name I felt the ground under me tilt forward and may even have started as if I were dreaming of falling then suddenly woke up. Rick was on the deck, tapping the microphones. I fixed him with an angry look, and eventually he made eye contact then turned away quickly. He hadn't told me Francis would be playing. He must have guessed I wouldn't have agreed to help him out if I knew, and he was probably right.

Back in the paleolithic days, Rick, Francis, and I were in a punk band, the Splatterlines. At that time, the punk scene in Madison was fairly small, and its center was a bar, O'Cayz Corral, that had opened in 1980. A former country joint filled with wagon wheels, old barrels, and rough wood tables and chairs that lent a somewhat heavy-handed dose of irony to the atmosphere, O'Cayz wasn't exactly CBGB, but it gave us punks a home. We were still in high school when it opened, but we had scored some fake IDs and got in pretty regularly to see bands like Honor Among Thieves and Big Black. Three years later, we opened for Jack of All Trades, though we didn't get paid. We kept the band going all through our college years, cut a couple of singles, and eventually played for money, first at O'Cayz, then at Odd Rock in Milwaukee.

Francis played guitar. He played chords I'd never heard before. Sometimes he used the old Townshend trick of leaving out the thirds, but he also had dissonances like Stravinsky—minor sixths and sevenths together, sevenths without the third, minor ninths, and they sounded big, like four guitars playing at once. His hand looked like a giant spider crawling over the fretboard. He never took a solo, most punks thought that would be selling out, but he could turn a chord progression into an event. Rick played bass. He had a precision you don't hear in punk bands very often, and he and I could carry a whole song with only a couple of chords from Francis, but he never showed off. I was lead singer. I could play guitar, too, but for some reason, I always got nervous playing in front of people. I had no trouble singing or bouncing around the stage like a monkey on uppers, but when I had my hands on my ax, I just froze. Our drummer was Mark Engle; he would take out his earrings in the fall to play with the UW marching band. After we graduated, he left town, and I lost touch with him. And even though Rick, Francis, and I stayed in Madison, we were all working full time, so it got harder and harder to get together to practice, especially for Francis, who was teaching high school and didn't have the energy for anything else. We managed to play a few times, but in less than a year, attrition dissolved the band.

Though I tried hard to stay in touch with Francis after the band fell apart, he did not return a single call, and eventually I gave up. He must have gotten his job under control, though, because he started popping up as a solo act around town, playing that mopey singer-songwriter stuff, fingerstyle on an acoustic, showing off his knockoff Richard Thomspon chops whenever he had a chance, something he never would have considered while playing with the Splatterlines. But I think what pissed me off the most was that, in an interview on Rick's own show, he said what we played was noise, not music. Years later, I saw him at the High Noon Saloon with Rick. It was Rick's idea; I didn't want to go, but Rick was in an auld lang syne frame of mind and offered to treat both cover and drinks. Halfway into the show, Francis brought Rick and me up to the stage and introduced us as his bandmates from the Splatterlines, so even though we were far from friends at that point, he thought nothing of using me to call up the cred that came with his punk history.

I had been looking forward to hanging out with Rick and Sandy. Unlike with Francis, we'd stayed pretty tight. I thought I might even be able to drag him along to see some other music after his venue shut down. If Francis had been first on the program, I simply could have

left for an hour and then come back. I suppose I still could have done that, but the end of the program is generally when trouble happens, if it happens, and I wouldn't have been comfortable walking away for the last hour.

The first band was a bit too emo for my taste, though they had a couple of good songs. I don't understand what's going on with music today—it's all so bland and safe. If "Holiday in Cambodia" were released now, people would probably complain it was insensitive to Cambodians. The next two bands were roots music, what used to be called folk before folk meant a guy with a guitar singing about the rain. They were okay. I guess this kind of music is more appropriate for a backyard concert than the stuff we used to play. Right after the fourth act started, a live karaoke act backing volunteers from the audience, one of the microphones went dead. Rick and I got on stage and looked at it, but we couldn't figure out what was wrong. Rick went out to the garage, and I stood on stage and watched the small crowd move around, come together in little groups then fall apart again, forming random, fleeting shapes across the lawn. Eventually Rick returned with a replacement mike, but our futzing put the band behind schedule.

Finally, Francis took the stage. I asked Rick if he had any booze in the house. We weren't serving alcohol to the audience, just lemonade and iced tea, but I needed a drinkdrink. The back door was on the deck behind Francis, so I went around to the front of the house and walked through the living room to the kitchen, poured a bourbon, and sat at the little formica table. From there, I could hear Francis singing:

"Down the river valley
Where the water runs so deep
Ghosts of paddle steamers
Sing Laveau to sleep"

I helped myself to a second bourbon, trying to remember being in a good mood at the start of the day. Through the kitchen window, I could see his torso, the neck of the guitar, his gray hair in a ponytail falling down his Hawaiian shirt. Finally, Francis announced his last song. As it ended, I heard yelling from the yard. I set the glass on the table and ran back out and around the house. Some guy and a woman, both about my age and both wearing tie-dye t-shirts were standing up in the middle of the audience, wobbling drunkenly and holding their fists in the air, screaming, "Play 'Rags to Riches!' Play 'Rags to Riches!'"

It was one of our songs. One Francis and I had written together. I couldn't believe he fucking remembered it, let alone would play it after spending an hour singing about lost loves and the moon. But a crooked smile appeared on his face as he plucked through a dissonant arpeggio and started in. I hardly recognized it as it wilted under the folksy fingerpicking, spikey edges smoothed into a bland ballad.

"I come from a town where the streetlights never shine
The steel shutters lock, and the useless sirens shrill
Now I've made my bones with the cannibal gourmets
I live in steel and glass in a tower on the hill"

The first verse ended, and he went into a bluegrass style solo. It was clear he'd worked on this, or maybe the solo was lifted from another song. The two who had been yelling sat back down and seemed unlikely to cause any trouble. I drifted away from the chairs, around to the front door, and back into the house.

I wanted to leave, but I didn't want to make Rick and Sandy clean up alone. I did wait until everyone in the audience cleared out, though. But when I went back out to the yard, Francis was still there. He walked up to me with the most idiotic, beatific smile I've ever seen, holding out his arms like he wanted to give me a bear hug. I just stared at him for a minute then shook my head. He sat down on one of the lawn chairs and folded his arms over his chest.

"Whatever you need to say to me, say it," he said.

"You're telling me you don't know?" Deliberate obtuseness was a specialty of his.

"There are so many possibilities," he said.

"I can't believe you played that song," I said.

"Why? It's just a song. And it was a request."

"You turned it into a joke. It sounded ridiculous, like some Jethro Tull wannabe."

"Oh, come on. What was I supposed to do?"

"You could have said you didn't remember it, you could've said it would sound like shit on an acoustic guitar, which it did, by the way."

"Jeremy... they were *fans*. They remember us. How often do you think someone asks me to play a Splatterlines song? Not more than once every other year."

"And you play them? I thought you said our stuff was noise, not music."

"I never said that."

"You said it on Rick's goddam radio show."

I waved at Rick to join us. He did, moving slowly.

"That time you interviewed Francis, he said our band was noise, right?" I said.

Rick rolled his eyes. "I really don't remember."

"You also said you didn't want to talk about the band," I said.

"I do remember that," said Rick.

"I said that cause I didn't want us to be two old geezers reminiscing about the old days.

The radio audience doesn't deserve that," said Francis.

"I don't know why you two can't just stay out of each other's way," said Rick.

Francis looked at the ground.

"Are you saying you never want me to play a Splatterlines song again?" he said. "I mean, we wrote a lot of them together. Legally, you could—"

"Legally?" I said. "Are you serious?"

"I get paid to do this, so I have to think about that kinda thing," said Francis.

"Whatever," I said.

"All right, all right," said Francis. "So... what?"

"I just don't want to have to hear them," I said. "And thanks for that, Rick."

"Yeah, you know, Jeremy, we can probably manage here," said Rick. "You can catch some more of the festival. I know you wanted to do that."

His expression was unreadable; I don't know if he was pissed off at me or if he felt guilty for putting me and Francis together in the thorns.

"I can give you a hand," Francis said to Rick.

I went out to the front of the house, walked over to Rutledge and crossed the river to Yahara Place Park. A little brass band was packing up their instruments while a small crowd drifted away, scattering like dandelion seeds across the grass, glowing in the slanted evening light. The lake was dotted with kayaks and sailboats, and a dinner cruise was headed for the dock by Machinery Row. I sat down on an iron bench near the water's edge and waited for the day to end.