

Overture

Today the atmosphere at Fido, a coffeehouse in Nashville's midtown, is the same as it always is: moody, overcast, an almost cliché backdrop for creative people.

I'm here working, soaking up the scene, hoping to find an idea or the beginning of an idea that I can turn into a feature or an Op-Ed for one of Nashville's entertainment newspapers. I like this part of my job, one that simply requires me to watch, listen, drink coffee, and jot down notes on my laptop.

Two tables to my left, a twenty-something female holds a square piece of charcoal. She keeps looking up at two gentlemen sitting against the window, and then down at her sketch pad, practicing her skill at capturing the human form. Her subjects, each wearing a different vanity T-shirt, talk about technology and graphic design. At one point I hear one of them yell at a four-top in the corner of the coffeehouse. The only girl at the table yells back, asking if he's coming to their show on Friday evening. He shrugs. She pretends to be offended.

The majority of people sitting around me are singers, musicians, or wannabe singers or musicians. And most aren't the kind who fiddle, slide their guitars, or sing nasally on purpose. Well, the two fifty-ish men sitting at the booth across the way look like washed-up fiddlers, but Nashville's music scene has grown deep and wide since the

first time I moved here in 1993. Country is still the mainstay of the music business here, but these days lots of people come to Nashville to pursue careers in rock, folk, jazz, blues, gospel, and Christian music, among other genres. Dreams of success draw many interesting people to Nashville—people full of life, passion, story, rage, opinion, and belief. And once in a while, talent.

A young man pushes through the front door, appearing lost, or perhaps hoping to be found. His expression is common here in Nashville, a nervous passion that tends to make talented people look socially misplaced. This man looks particularly out of his element. His eyes move around the room like two gerbils looking for an escape from their cage. I try to watch inconspicuously but fail when our eyes meet. Usually I feel embarrassed when I'm caught ogling strangers, but not this time. He clearly wants people to notice him.

It seems to me he woke up and conspired to put together a “look” that would attract attention: the tight black jeans, a multicolored T-shirt that shimmers in direct sunlight, a skinny black tie, and a purple vest are only the beginning of why he stands out. His hair is unnaturally shiny, dyed a color between blue and black, and shaped into six perfectly formed horns that jet out from his head in various directions. The eyeliner brings his look together, and for me, confirms the possibility that he's the love child of Boy George and Beetlejuice.

I'm not culturally ignorant; I realize a lot of people look like this guy. But he catches my attention because it isn't a typical fashion statement for people hanging out at Fido or any place else in Nashville at eight thirty in the morning—at least not without signs of a hangover.

It occurs to me that he and I might share one thing in common: neither of us looks like we belong at Fido. Most of the “creatives” who frequent this hangout are hipsters looking for their morning cup of coffee and free wireless. I wish I was cool enough to consider myself a hipster, but rather than make music, I mostly write about the hipsters who make it. Furthermore, I don’t wear corduroy in the summer or shop weekly at the local farmers’ market, and my wife, Jessica, says I look ridiculous in a fedora. And trust me, I try one on every time I shop at Target.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the young man walking toward me.

“Excuse me,” he says, “are you David?” He tosses a legal pad on the table next to mine and straightens his thin black tie. “I’m *Adam*.” He says his name like he anticipates it being familiar.

“No, my name is Matthew. Sorry.”

Glancing around the coffeehouse, Adam spins with all the drama of a model at the end of a catwalk. He sighs, plops down in a chair, and pulls his cell phone out of his pocket so he can use the screen as a mirror to check his eyeliner.

Shutting his phone with one hand, he says, “Can I just vent for a moment? It has been quite a morning—wow!”

I fear this could be the beginning of a lengthy conversation, and I wonder if it would be rude to remind him that I’m not David.

“And you know what?” he continues. “I’m actually relieved you’re not the fellow I’m supposed to meet. This meeting is important, and I was so afraid that I was late. My taxi arrived fifteen minutes later than scheduled. But I guess he’s late too.”

I look up from my computer and smile slightly, a polite gesture so he doesn't feel like he's talking to himself. I don't mean it to be an invitation for chitchat. However, my good manners lead Adam to ask if I mind watching his legal pad and pen while he stands in line for a drink.

"That's fine," I say.

Adam returns to his table a few minutes later with a hot drink in his hand. He looks at his watch, mumbles to himself—"I wonder where the heck he is"—and then explains to me why he's drinking herbal tea and not coffee.

"I wish I could have coffee. I could use the caffeine," he says, "but my band is playing a showcase tonight at Twelfth and Porter, and coffee does a number on my voice."

He squeezes his throat a couple of times as if he's making sure it's still there or identifying it in case I don't know where human vocal cords are located.

"Well, it's not the coffee that hurts them, but the *cream*, man—and I can't drink coffee without cream. My voice needs to be in top shape for this showcase."

Clearing his throat, he sips his tea.

"So I take it you're from out of town," I say.

Smiling, he nods. "Yeah. Lancaster, Pennsylvania."

"Oh, I've been there many times. My mother was infatuated with Amish people."

"We certainly have a lot of them," he says, like we're talking about white-tailed deer. "But they don't bother us too much, unless you get behind one of them on a busy street."

Before he can begin telling Amish jokes, I change the subject back to his show.

“By any chance,” I say, qualifying my question first so that it doesn’t offend him, “do you sing in a Christian band?” He looks surprised, so I add, “Too personal? Offensive? I promise I’m not going to try to evangelize you.”

Adam laughs. “No, I’m not offended. I’m just surprised you asked me that. I never get that question back home. How did you know?”

“Just had a feeling,” I say. “For some reason I’m pretty good at pointing out Christian rockers.”

He laughs again and starts to blush. He seems to take my observation as a compliment. “What gave me away?”

“Eh, sometimes you can just tell.”

“No, really, how did you know I was a Christian? It’s obviously not the way I’m dressed. I don’t dress like the everyday Christian. Is it a Holy Spirit thing?”

He’s right; he doesn’t dress like the ordinary Christian, but he does dress like the ordinary Christian rocker.

“I’m pretty sure it’s not a Holy Spirit thing. It could be, I guess, but I think it’s more like gaydar.”

“What?” he says.

“It’s different, of course, than assessing a person’s sexual orientation, but not as much as you might think.”

“Wow,” Adam says. He’s still smiling, but I’m not sure he means it as much as before. “That’s...interesting.”

I don’t have the heart to tell him that he reeks of being a “Christian rocker.” It didn’t take a spiritual gift or a sixth sense to know what

kind of music he made. My knowing the difference between a rocker and a Christian rocker is similar to the ability most people possess to distinguish a female from a drag queen. It's usually obvious, like the plot of a romantic comedy starring Matthew McConaughey.

No matter how elaborate the costume and makeup, drag queens can rarely fully disguise their masculine origins. Adam looks like a twenty-five-year-old purity pledge playing dress-up. He smiles too much—and too convincingly—to pull off a fashion statement rooted in the music and lifestyle of the Sex Pistols. I'm sure he's a nice guy and probably talented to some degree, but most of the punk rockers I know, even ones younger than Adam, look haggard, like they've lived several lifetimes. Or had to survive them.

“So what kind of music do you play? I mean, what style?”

“Most people say it's a mix of worship and pop punk.” Adam looks at his watch again. “Us guys in the band call it *worshunk*.” He smiles.

I laugh.

He starts laughing too, but I'm not sure we're laughing for the same reason. I'm laughing because it seems like the most obvious thing to do while I wait for him to retract his last statement with, “I'm just joking.” He never does.

David arrives thirty minutes late. They shake hands and hug and tell me it's the first time they've met in person. Adam introduces David to me as Nashville's most awesome artist-development guy. David smiles, sits down, and the two of them begin talking about Adam's songwriting.

“I can't wait for you to hear the new song we've been working on,” I hear Adam tell David at one point. “It's called ‘Superstar Jesus.’”

“I can’t wait,” says David. “Great title, by the way.”

I put my earbuds in and turn my iPod on shuffle. “Hide and Seek” by Imogen Heap begins playing, and the nausea I was beginning to feel subsides.

Music has always been present in my life, like God, fear, and McDonald’s. I can’t remember a day when music wasn’t somehow involved. Music is like God in a lot of ways: Moving. Omnipresent. Unpredictable. And sometimes hard to get out of your head—even when you really want to.

I started spending the night with my grandmother and grandfather when I was four. Mammom loved music, but only the kind that played in churches or on PBS. God knew what I thought of PBS. From an entertainment standpoint, of the seven stations that my grandparents’ antenna picked up, I ranked Maryland’s public TV dead last.

As far as I was concerned, PBS fell off its rocker on weekends and every weekday morning after *The Electric Company*’s eight thirty time slot. If it wasn’t between the hours of seven a.m. and nine a.m., when shows like *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* aired, PBS seemed pretty much useless unless you were old, crafty, or illiterate.

Mammom’s obsession was *The Lawrence Welk Show*, a Technicolor variety hour featuring people who looked bred for perfection performing songs popular before Kennedy was shot.

Mammom’s eyes were bad, so she’d sit on her knees about two feet away from the television. Lawrence was like an old friend to Mammom. She laughed at his corny jokes or blushed when he said something that would have been considered naughty in 1925. Sometimes she even talked to Lawrence as if he was singing in her living room.

“Oh Lawrence, you’re so bad,” she’d say, or if he was getting ready to announce the next song, she’d offer a suggestion. “Come on, Lawrence, I want to hear Buddy sing, or Norma.” Then she’d look at me. “Actually, I like any of the singers except the Aldridge Sisters. They’re too flashy. They think they’re something special.”

Mammom knew every song Lawrence’s singers sang. Sometimes she sang along or tapped her hip with her hand or told me where she was or what she was doing the first time she heard it. Sometimes Lawrence played a song that made Mammom quiet, almost somber. If I spoke during those songs, she didn’t respond. Sometimes she closed her eyes. Sometimes she cried. Sometimes she couldn’t stop smiling. Music moved Mammom in ways I didn’t understand; she didn’t just listen, she felt it.

Years went by before I felt the freedom to feel music like that.

I was raised in an ultraconservative Baptist church where emotion and honesty were even less compatible than Christian fundamentalism and self-worth. At my church whenever somebody capable of emotional honesty became a member, it created a situation similar to my father’s lectures about a new puppy: “As long as it never poops on the carpet, I’ll let it be an ‘inside dog.’” Anyone was welcome to join us for worship on Sundays, as long as they never emotionally pooped on the carpet. Most of us kids were “house-trained” before we’d memorized our multiplication tables.

Until I left for college at nineteen, I held most of my feelings in. Consequently, my early twenties weren’t pretty. But they felt good.

That was when music became a companion.

Before MP3 players were invented, I was impressed when I could fit all my music in the backseat of my Oldsmobile Alero and still have

enough room for two skinny friends or one fat one. I took my music collection with me everywhere. And for those occasions when I wasn't driving, I had a fifty-CD "therapy" binder where I kept my most important musical selections.

Some CDs I bought because of one popular song or for the band itself. When I purchased Garbage's first CD, *Garbage*, it wasn't because I thought Shirley Manson and crew rocked, necessarily, though on occasion "Only Happy When It Rains" made me feel good. The real reason was so I could tell my friends I *owned* Garbage's album. The same was true with P.M. Dawn's third album, *Jesus Wept*, and Marcy Playground's debut. In the nineties, owning the right CD equaled power: It could turn a longtime enemy into a best friend. It could make the cool crowd let you sit with them at church or at school.

A CD-induced spike in status was usually only temporary. In most cases the ego boost alone was worth the fifteen dollars or, if you were crazy enough to shop at Sam Goody, eighteen dollars. Once in a while the investment didn't pay off though, like Wilson Phillips's sophomore album, *Shadows and Light*. I thought for sure, based on the success of their debut, the purchase would help me in some way, but none of my friends cared, and in the end, it sort of hurt my reputation. Word got around that I listened to the whole thing in one sitting and liked three songs.

Most of the time, the music I bought was far more than just entertainment or status seeking.

In 1991 I bought Amy Grant's 1988 album, *Lead Me On*. I wasn't allowed to listen to Amy until I turned eighteen and was deemed by the government old enough to vote and fight in wars. That night I sat on my bed and listened to Amy sing stories for three hours. People at

my church described Amy in a lot of different ways: Heathen. Satan's "angel." God's Madonna. One youth pastor told us that if Amy had been alive during biblical times, she would have been little more than a talented concubine. But that night in my bedroom, Amy's songs brought me some hope. I listened to *Lead Me On* over and over again until I memorized every lyric. The words she sang resonated with something deep inside of me that, at eighteen, I was only beginning to understand.

I had always valued music. Before I could talk, my mother claims I could sing. But *Lead Me On* was the first music to wake me up, to cause me to pay attention. The songs made me want to change. Sometimes when I listen to *Lead Me On*, the songs still make me want to change.

Good music changes me, shocks me, makes me feel uncomfortable, and drives me to think and hope and believe differently. And once in a while, it makes me cynical and sarcastic.

As Adam and David talk, I watch one of the spikes on Adam's head begin to wither. David watches it too but pretends it isn't happening. Eventually the spike's pointed tip falls over Adam's left eye. He pushes it out of the way, but it keeps falling.

Their conversation only becomes audible to me between songs. I hear David talk about his expectations for the band at tonight's showcase. I hear Adam discuss the band's desire to help end poverty. When I hear Adam say something about "connecting," I push Pause and listen.

"Our goal is to be real and honest when we're on stage," he says. "You know what I mean?"

David nods.

“Cause if we’re vulnerable, it’s like we’re giving our audience permission to become vulnerable too. In some ways the music, the look, the live show—it’s all a means to an end, man. We want to usher people into the presence of God and see lives changed. I don’t know if I’m doing a good job of explaining, but...”

Adam loses his thought and David nods. “You’re making complete sense. That’s exactly the kind of artist or band that we want on our roster: Vulnerable. Vulnerable is good.”

I think about how many times I’ve heard this type of conversation. Hundreds, perhaps. The context is sometimes different, but much of the dialogue is the same—people talking about how to create something “real” and “authentic” rather than just being real and authentic. So many of us Christians are all about being *vulnerable*, especially when we’re on stage, dressed up in a costume and wearing makeup, putting on a performance we consider “a means to an end.”

There’s a short lull in Adam and David’s conversation. David pulls at the collar of his shirt and says, “Now, Adam, you’re not planning on talking too much at the showcase, right?”

“I was planning on talking some; you know, so people get to know us.”

David squints. “Hmm. I’d keep the talking to a minimum tonight. Most of the audience is going to be managers, booking agents, producers—those sorts of people. And they’re not interested in hearing you talk, so let’s keep the focus on the performance tonight.”

It sounds like David has a bit of performance anxiety.

“Oh, okay. Whatever you say.”

I take out my earbuds and begin packing up my belongings. Adam sees me preparing to leave.

“You heading out?”

“Yeah,” I say, throwing my book bag over my shoulder. “Good meeting you and I wish you the best of luck tonight.”

He smiles. “Thanks, I’ll need it. Quick question. Check out the guy sitting in the corner.” Adam shifts his eyes toward his right, indicating the tall man sitting alone with a cup of coffee and a book. “The guy dressed like a hobo, except his clothes look expensive. Is he a rocker or a Christian rocker?”

David laughs. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No. Why?” Adam looks at the man more closely.

Shaking his head, David looks at me. “You tell him.”

“That’s Jack White,” I say. “He’s definitely not a Christian rocker.”

Adam looks again. “Is he in a band?”

“Have you heard of the White Stripes?”

Adam’s blank stare is familiar—full of innocence and wonder and curiosity. I know that expression. It wasn’t long ago that I looked at people the same way.

“Can I get them on iTunes?” he asks.

“Yeah, you can,” I say. “And you should buy the album. They’re good. Give it a chance. It might teach you something about being vulnerable.”