Perfect Flat

I dropped a new article on Salvation South yesterday about guitarist Shane Parish, a talented and committed artist who is carving a unique musical path for himself. His determination to follow his own instincts and put in the considerable work required to realize his vision is inspiring, not least because the overwhelming directive of our late-capitalist society is to conform, follow, and obey.

I love to explore and write about artists who turn their backs on this directive for two big reasons: 1) They are inherently interesting and instructive, and 2) Their very existence is sand in the machinery of those who wish us to conform/follow/obey.

There is a saying in Japan: “The nail that sticks up must get hammered down.”

It refers to the so-called perfect homogeneity of Japanese culture, but like so many pithy turns of phrase, it belies a more complex reality: under the shiny flat surface, Japanese culture is a roiling cauldron of cultural variety as reflected in its fashion and tastes in music, movies, and so on.

Still, that illusion of an unblemished ethnic and cultural gloss often elicits wistful sighs of envy from Americans who wish we could be more like that.

In my own imposition of oversimplification on a spaghetti-ball topic, I’ll split that group into two categories: Those Who Want Everything to Stay the Way it Supposedly Used To Be and

Those Who Strive For An Easier Target Market That Will Buy More Useless Shit.

Let’s call them the UsedToBes™ and the UselessShitters™.

Note: These terms are of my own invention and original work and thus subject to all trademark and copyright protections. (As if anyone would steal them.)

The first group *demands* the flatness and is more than willing to impose the leveling by coercion if need be. The second group is more subtle, striving for a high sheen of uniformity via seduction and temptation. This segment urges us to relax, enjoy, consume, all the while subtly ratcheting up the dread of perhaps losing the precarious toehold on ‘prosperity’ we imagine we enjoy.

There is a third group, too. Read to the end to discover the seven weird tricks this groups etc……

Together, these three groups serve to impose what I call The Great Flattening.

The UsedToBes

Let’s start with the old times are not forgotten revanchists who pine for an imaginary past where America was Great, men were men, women were housewives, perverts stayed in the closet, and knew their place, dammit. The people who say, “this is how we’ve always done it” and “if it was good enough for my Daddy and Grandaddy then it’s good enough for me” or phone up the police when Those People™ ˢ disturb the peace by acting all equal and human.

This is the motivating force behind the current crusade against the disturbers of a nice, quiet, *decent* society: the LBGTQ community who just refuse to act normal; those uppity people of color who demand to be treated as human; or those

soft-on-crime coddlers who dare suggest that the billions spent on policing might be better invested in more humanitarian directions. You know. The dreaded ‘woke’ brigade.

These are the people who have their panties in a twist over teaching CRT, a legal theory that most people could not explain under threat of torture. CRT is a useful-if-incomplete explainer of how the world works and has rarely been mentioned outside a law school classroom until a culture war conman fabricated a social media firestorm suggesting that CRT was teaching tender little white kids to hate themselves. The grifter specifically tweeted ahead of time that he was going to do this, but the low-information rubes in the Fox bubble swallowed hook, line, and dog whistle.

And if you don’t agree, refuse to comply, you will be ostracized. Hounded, subject to the limits of the law. Often, refused the opportunity to earn a living.

Like Moe in the Three Stooges, the bullies of MAGAworld are threatened by non-conformity because deep down they know they are the ones who are deformed; any expression of freedom reminds them that they are the true cowards, afraid to engage the world and their fellow citizens with compassion and creativity. And like bullies everywhere, any serious pushback draws plaintive cries of victimization and efforts to demonize their perceived enemies, like those evil cabals of teachers. They hope to win by convincing everyone that if you do not fit their conception of what is acceptable you are to be cast out. And if they can’t win by intimidation, the violence is never far behind.

MoeRon
(photo wixardry by barry stock)

Seriously, name a more perfect distillation of Moe Howard in today's public arena than Ron DeSantis, a none-too-bright bully suffused with barely concealed terror, anger, and ignorance, and all too anxious to unleash state violence to ensure compliance.

The pile-on has become especially acute this year as several state legislatures are rushing to criminalize discussing specific topics – or placing reading materials on the library shelves where tender minds might be sullied – as though such a move will wrench the clock back ~~50~~ ~~60~~ 70 years. Bundled under a banner of "parental rights," the impulse here is to keep those dastardly teachers and librarians from indoctrinating their little angels with lies and filth. Things like accurate

histories about slavery and the true origins of America the Great, or information that lets kids who are different understand that they are not alone, not defective, not disgusting just because they experience their sexuality in a way not in line with Mister and Missus Cleaver. I could go on. (Boy, could I.) But I'll leave it with this: several state legislatures, in their rush to criminalize abortion or sexual transition therapies, have added provisions that would make these services a crime not only in their own state, but would charge any person who leaves the state to obtain these services with a felony. Shades of the Fugitive Slave Act.

The silver lining in all this is that the greater the pressure to conform, the greater the likelihood of a backlash. The advance guard is already on the march. Their success depends upon the support and participation of anyone who is appalled by the bullying, but has never been one to act out and makes waves.

Make waves, people. Disrupt the smooth surface.

The UselessShitters

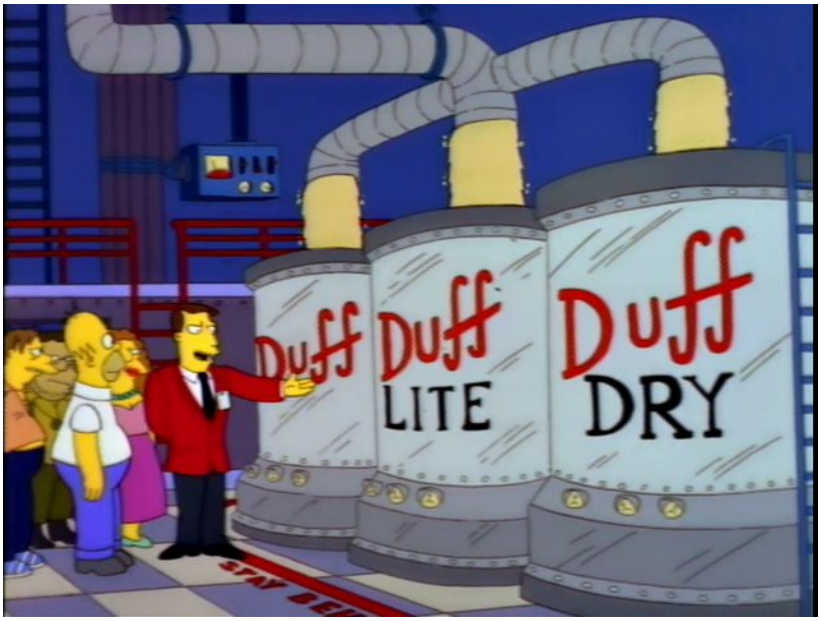
Not quite as overtly oppressive as the UsedToBe gang, the UselessShitters are every bit as opposed to individuality as the UTBs. And this is the crowd that wants the majority to remain quiescent in the face of Moe's bullying. Not because they agree with Moe, but rather because they are afraid Moe might turn on their happy little nook of the world.

We could call this gaggle of go-along to get along trimmers Larry to the UTB's Moe. But I find UselessShitters more apt.

Their aim: To constrain the range of choices we consider possible and desirable. The better to sell us products that are easy to manufacture cheaply and in bulk.

Despite claims that capitalism encourages a wide variety of

choices in a vibrant marketplace, we are in fact offered pitifully narrow options for consumption. Consolidation in nearly every economic sector offers the illusion of choices – WOW! Look how many sodas/beers/toothpastes there are to choose from! – while in fact we have only a handful of large corporations offering us infinite and minimal variations (Lite! Dry! Crunchy! Extra Crunchy! Minty! Diet! Zero!) on a theme.



The UselessShitters feed our longing for equilibrium and plentiful variety. That satisfaction demands, however, that we do not examine the situation too closely. In this realm, The Great Flattening serves to create a critical mass of docile and reliable consumers, well-conditioned lab rats eager to press the lever for another pellet of useless shit.

Mass entertainments like the Marvel Cinematic Universe are a huge force in the flattening. Insipid and poorly written melodramas papered over with hyper-expensive CGI wizardry, these epics convey all the emotional depth and feeling of a 1930s Western serial reel, with a largely unchanged undercurrent of good/evil conflict that, in the end, reassures us in our flatness. The proceedings are turbo-charged to disguise the hole at the center.

The basic plots and paper-thin characters are almost always

retreads of something you have seen before, a salutary attribute that massages our infantile yearning for equilibrium and familiarity. If it weren't for the visual whizbang and high-decibel audio effects, most viewers would fall asleep as quickly as if they were watching a Hallmark or Lifetime product. (To name yet another realm of "content" with all the heft of a potato chip.)

Everything in this realm is product, or its cousin in UselessShittery, content. You are meant to buy, consume, and forget all about it to empty a space for the next product. And the product comes in only a few colors, though they are described as though there is infinite variation at hand. But not too much variation! There is more profit to be made in reproduction of existing product than there is in something threateningly innovative.

This is true across all media. Corporate news wants you amped up so you will tune in or click through, but once you're there you are unlikely to learn anything useful about whatever crisis-du-jour is on offer. (And if there is no actual crisis, don't worry; they will make one up. Invasive spiders, anyone?) Worse, what you find will more likely reinforce your conditioned sense of helplessness, a why bother defeatism that makes the next episode of Dancing With The Stars so tempting, accompanied by a bag of whatever-flavored Dorito you have at hand.

And by next week there will be another breaking story to fill your void, last week's spiders replaced by this week's ZOMG THE SKY IS FALLING product. COVID is a fine example of how we generally prefer our crises to come with a short shelf life. (Goddamit, I want my resolution served up by the top of the hour!) I expect Ukraine fatigue to settle in any time.

Here's where the third group comes in. And that group is us. All of us. The possibilities for our commonwealth lies in how each of us responds to the blandishments of Moe and Larry.

As to the transparent and cynical manipulations of Moe, it's pretty simple. Say no. Say fuck no. Vote and organize and march. Do everything and more to stop these marauding bastards from making America over into the image and likeness of their imaginary nostalgia.

As to the blandishments of the UselessShitters, things are less potentially violent, but no less difficult for that. We – all of us and mea culpa by damn – are susceptible to the little temptations. And those acceptances lead to larger ones, and so on. Once ensconced in the comfort zone, it becomes harder to object, to say no.

Sure, we all want a little dumb downtime here and there, and there is something to be said – though not much, and almost nothing, good – about the relative charms of The Bachelor or Big Bang Theory or Big Times sports or reruns of Cheers/Friends/Joanie Loves Chachi. I mean, I love ice cream, but if that were all I ever ate…well, fill in the rest.

The deeper problem with succumbing to the temptations of the Flattening, with its limbic appeals to not think too hard, is that it leaves us utterly helpless against the campaigns of the UsedToBes. We grow comfortable in our constrained range of comforts and fearful that we might lose what meager buffer we have managed to erect between us and a world whose 'harsh reality' is intentionally exaggerated to keep us flat.

Sure, something truly different slips past the gatekeepers from time to time. The rock music of the 60s is a perfect example of a creative moment that confounded the gatekeepers at first, and the impact rippled far beyond the record bins. But the great superpower of the UselessShitters is their ability to absorb difference and transform it into sameness. Rock music has long since been among the most conservative of art forms. Led Zepplin sells Cadillacs and Metallica (in Abu Ghraib) and Van Halen (Panama) are weapons-grade instruments of torture to knuckle the imprisoned and defiant.

(I know, your favorite is the exception. Point granted. The exception that proves the rule.)

Language, too, is a victim — and a weapon — much as Orwell foretold. One pertinent example out of hundreds: The word creative has been denuded of any real weight in its service to the UselessShitters: Once simply an adjective describing innovation, it has become a noun and a verb that denotes bland and abject lack of itself, a referent to a person (a "creative") who regurgitates familiar formulae to the applause of their paymasters. And let's not even get started on the obscenity that underlies the term "the creative class," a cohort that sadly stands in stark opposition to true creativity. (Sorry, folks. It's just true.)

Words that by all rights should express genuine human feeling and yearning — words like freedom, family, community, even happiness — have died from their overuse in sales appeals, stripped of their actual meaning and now just code words of commerce. Freedom Banking. The Subaru Love Promise. Buy our doodad and be part of a community. The Happiest Place on Earth.

Again, that's why I like to write articles about artists like Shane Parish, whose creative practice is itself an act of rebellion against the Flattening. So too for us as listeners: The simple act of seeking out his music, and other creative work like it, is a blow against the Flattening, an air bubble under the latex sheen. Working in tandem, audience and artist conspire to defy the messages that tell us to accept and be satisfied with the chosen flavor of the moment.

The amount of truly remarkable artistic endeavor going on right now is staggering. But unless you dig for it you are unlikely to know even a decimal point's worth of what your fellow humans are up to. We are remarkable, truly, and we should be celebrating each other every fucking day.

Go beyond that, too. Write a poem, dance, sing a song. It doesn’t matter if it is great art, or even if it is “not really very good,” as your inner critic might tell you. Just fucking do it. I guarantee the result will be more satisfying than another night slouched out in front of the telly.

That refusal to conform, to be a nail that sticks up, is where our hopes for a decent future lie. Because once the nails start sticking up en masse, the hammers become useless.