Talking Bout My…



I ran across an innocuous-yet-aggravating-anyway argument on the Twitter machine this week.Say not so! In this instance, a member of one so-called Generation™ took offense at someone from another Gen™ who claimed that theirs was indeed the best of all possible G™s – because look at all the wondrous innovations theirs could claim – while the other G™s were a bunch of wankers due to their inclination to war, racism, laziness, lousy taste in music/film/etc., and other particulars. The exchange was lively, generally pointless, and, as these things do, escalated into name calling of all sorts.

Naturally, because I am a reserved and mature individual – a proud member of Boomer II™ – I waded right in and reasonably informed the lot of these GenXYZ whiners that their claims and counters were all pure bollocks, that the whole idea of individuated G™s was a load of horse pucky contrived by consultant types who wished to sell their keen genius to gullible commercial enterprises who would *leverage* this deep insight in hopes of extracting hard earned cash from downstream marks more credulous than themselves. So grow up, ya damn punks.

Whereupon my hard-earned insight was met with a volley of contumely. Can you imagine? Call me Cassandra.

In one of my earlier incarnations c.1995-2015, I played dress-

up as a marketing savant, the better to bring home the proverbial bacon. This often meant suffering endless presentations on how best to move product by targeting the characteristics of one G™ or another. A shapeshifting farrago of bullshit spun from a few malleable observations, the knowledge gleaned is of a piece with clickbait listicles and articles that purport to tell us how *WE* feel about some prevailing trend/crisis/fad, and the seven weird tricks we can use to get rich/find love/forestall death/&c.I saw a teaser this week for 7 tricks that will help me “avoid death.” Color me dubious.

Imagine the scene: One or more (tag team presentations were the rage for a while, until these fell from favor in response to the keen realization that one dancing bear was cheaper than two) experts would offer compelling arguments as to which G™ we should be paying attention in that moment, and how we might *craft our message* to best emphasize our sincerity to whichever G™ held the greatest cash extraction potential at any given moment. Here we were assured that Cohort A responds to such and such, while Cohort B is completely different, except for those ways in which they are exactly the same, and that the most important thing to remember is the critical importance of *authenticity* in our efforts to ensure this or that G™ that our product/organization most truly reflects the *closely held values* that are paramount to whichever G™ (or G™s) we sincerely aim to convince.

My memory is rife with garrulous women (almost always women) bedecked in shoulder padded blazers and decorative scarves, punctuating their exhortations with an array of dynamic hand gestures and zesty half-turns of their upper torso.The better to emulate a billboard for realtors and chiropractors, reckon.



Who wants to succeed TODAY?

Naturally, I was eager to report back to my superiors the critical intel I had derived on the company dime, the better to justify my ongoing existence in the corporate ecosystem. I catalyzed a broad range of strategic initiatives to instantiate and effectuate win-win scenarios to actualize upsides to all inspirited parties. Many a noun was verbed in this bedazzling display of communicational derring-do.

At root, Gen™ discussions inevitably assert a we/they formation: “They” are like this, or “We” are some such way. It asserts a claim – often, an accusation – based upon broad generalization, not unlike “Blacks are like” or “soccer moms are like” or “Lithuanian hockey players are like”. Suffice to say that any message that leans on such tired generalizations is safely disregarded. At best, it is a transparent blandishment to detach you from your money. At worst, it is supplemental fuel for the slice/dice alienation machine that dominates modern discourse.

This categorization is typical.

Generation	Born	Current Age
Gen Z	1997 – 2012	10 – 25
Millennials	1981 – 1996	26 – 41
Gen X	1965 – 1980	42 – 57
Boomers II	1955 – 1964	58 – 67
Boomers I	1946 – 1954	
Post War	1928 – 1945	
WWII (The Greatest)	1922 – 1927	

68 – 76

77 – 94

95 – 100

If nothing else, the notion that groups spanning 15 years in age (Gens X, Millennial, and Z) share meaningful commonality is transparent poppycock. It is silly to suggest that a Gen X born in the late 60s has more in common with one birthed in 1980 than with an early-60s Boomer baby. Or that a Millennial born in 1995 is more akin to one sprung in 1981 than with a Gen Z popped out in 1999. Despite the boatloads of survey metrics and sales figures and so on, conferring personality traits on a vast population based on date of birth is nothing more than another flavor of astrology, based on year rather than month, propped up by whatever anecdata are at hand that can be twisted to satisfy an ordained outcome.

I find it interesting that the so-called Greatest Generation spans a slim five years, a timeframe that might provide some useful insight but complicates the life of the erstwhile marketing slick in search of the most commercially motivating least common denominator.

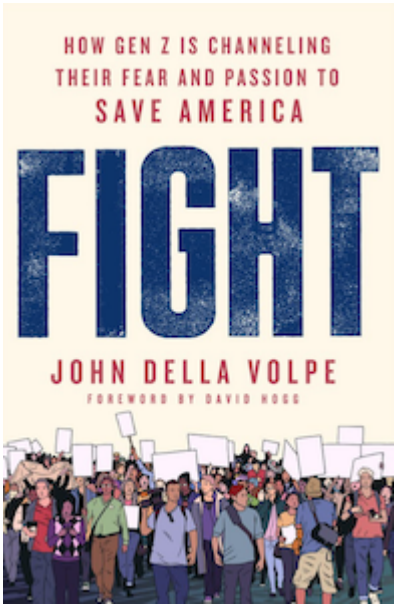
I was surprised to discover that the Boomer cohort has been split into Boomer I and Boomer II aggregations, the original 18 year span clearly too broad to explain anything. Alas, the 17-year PostWar group has not been afforded such fine grained definition, likely because i) population dwindling and ii) that cohort has never been seen as ripe for plucking as the Boomer-and-beyond crowds. Well, until Fox News came along, anyway.

Perhaps it is the inevitable dwindling of the first Boomers that led the market-minded savants to split the target

audience. Whereas early Boomers are now the prime demographic for things like Hoverround scooters, reverse mortgages, and over-heated conservative rage monkeys, the late Boomers are seen as both flush and determined to buy ALL the toys, while also spending freely on pharmaceuticals big and small to forestall the inevitable dwindling that stands in wait. (Or so the profiles would lead us to believe.) Oh, yeah. Big on the rage monkeys, too.

Boomer II has also been dubbed Generation Jones, another gambit by marketing sharps to turn a buck You can buy the book or hire the firm of that name to help you *fashion your strategies*, as they say.; and a handy hook for pundits on deadline to hang 800 words about not much. Generational astrology places me squarely in the middle of Gen Jones, which suggests I don't much care for the Beatles, resent the Boomer I gang because I missed all the free love, and other such simplifications. (And yes, I aver that my depiction is itself an over-simplification of a much more nuanced and textured exegesis of bovine offal.)

Despite the popularity of "OK Boomer" memes, it appears at long last that us Boomers are no longer the generation most responsible for that gigantic shit show 2022 represents. Nope. The worm has turned. It's those lousy Gen X and Millennial slackers are the ones to blame. If things are to improve, it is up to those stalwart Gen Z warriors to save the day.



Another sharp with a book

In a recent column at LitHub titled “Can Generation Z Save America? (And Should They Have To?)“, this author demonstrates in a few hundred words the depth of this charade.

Should they have to? Should any generation bear responsibility for leaving the world in better condition than they inherited it? And is “saving America” really the most important problem facing the world anyway?

Then there is this trenchant insight.

> *The oldest Zoomers…are old enough to have voted for or against Donald Trump in two presidential elections.*
>
> *Della Volpe, LitHub, 1/20/22*

Golly. They are beginning to vote! That changes everything!

Sure, the majority of this cohort voted against the most abjectly unfit candidate this nation has ever seen. Gen Zers are on the whole more progressive than not, but not monolithically so; this is standard for any so-called “youth cohort” going back at least to the 60s. The “youth of today” is always going to upend the gameboard within the next election or three, you just wait. It just never seems to come

about, and soon enough your Gen™ is the target of the next generation's ire and resentment.

The other Gen Zers, fully on board with marching authoritarianism, are not going away; if history is guide, their number will swell over time as the betrayals of becoming an adult under resoundingly inhumane social arrangements take their toll. As to the presumed permanence of Gen Z progressivism, I point to the legions of my cohort who peddled Revolutionary Worker tracts in the late-70s-early 80s, who marched against nuclear proliferation and the extremes of the criminal Reagan administration, and who are now as likely to be MAGAbots as anything.

The old Churchillian canardNot really one of Winstons's bon mots, but rather that of an obscure 19th century French academic, Anselme Polycarpe Batbie. of 'If You Are Not a Liberal When You Are Young, You Have No Heart, and If You Are Not a Conservative When Old, You Have No Brain' is oft wielded, typically by those wishing to justify abandoning the generosity of their youth in favor of blinkered self-interest. People in this society tend to grow more conservative as they get older. This is not inevitable to human nature; more likely it is a process of fear and retrenchment as time plods on and the hopefulness of youth gives way to the crushing reality of surviving late-stage capitalism.

No matter where one finds oneself on the trajectory of time's arrow, there is and always has been a generation gap and two extremese of attitude towards the younger generation. It's either "damn kids these days" or "the kids are alright". My own view is that the young upstarts are damned fine, as fine a group of humans as you could ever hope to meet. At the same time, I recognize that a huge percentage of Gen Z is damaged, tormented, filled with self-doubt/loathing as many of my time were, with a considerable portion of rabid authoritarians, fascists, and neo-Nazis. In other words, not at all different

now than any time since the U.S. became an imperial power.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

From the agonies of the Depression and the sacrifices of WWII, to the soul-crushing conformity of the post-war era and the social upheavals of the 60s and 70s. From the specter of nuclear holocaust to the resurgence of purely corporatist governance around the globe, environmental decline, climate change, and so on. Feudal serfdom, Black Death, Christian Crusades and Inquisitions, rampant disease, starvation, gruesome wars, &c. Things have been Fucked Up and Shit (FUAS™) for as far back as we can see.

But it seems that every generation must see their own struggles as *sui generis*, as somehow worse than it ever has been before in the history of forever. In this, they are correct. And also wrong and missing the point.

The struggle has been real for as long as time is recorded.

History is a catalog of FUAS™, with a broad exemption for the select few throughout history who lord it over the masses. The ability of the select to maintain their status has always rested upon an arsenal of carrots, carefully bestowed to instill ambition among the lessers, and sticks, indiscriminately wielded to instill fear among same. But the greatest weapon the top dogs have is the ability to create divisions among the mass of people whose core interests diverge sharply from the swells and overlap almost completely with each other. Dividing the underclass into subsets, and then turning them one upon the other, loads the hard work of maintaining an empire on those upon whom the empire lies heavy.

Check the subtitle of that LitHub article. "John Della Volpe Wonders If Demography Can Save Democracy" is a forehead slapper typical of the genre.

No. The answer is no. Just. Fucking. No.

Demography has no agency, no collective will. It is mere counting and sorting, a chimera propped up by statistical and anecdotal evidence of questionable utility. But sure, let's set an impossible expectation and divert the polity from recognizing that, if democracy is to be saved, it will require a epic display of communitarian effort and solidarity across all ages, genders, races, and classes. "Let those kids handle it" won't cut it, just like we can't count on Black women to save us, or The Squad, or Bernie, or or or….It is up to all of us.

Generational definitions are manipulations, several among many that get repeated enough to become 'common sense'. These flatteries, designed to appeal to base emotion, are fundamentally tools for moving widgets. But they also serve a more pernicious purpose as part of the rampant flattening of citizenship and community.

Too many of us appear desperate to be told who and what we are, eager to accept the kind of labeling nonsense that the Gen™ hucksters serve up in shiny packaging. But we also see it elsewhere: in party affiliation or devotion to one or another sportsball (game or team). In our identification with one religion over another, and the antagonisms that arise even (especially) when the differences are so slight. Vax and anti-vax. Regional identification and prejudice. Stones or Beatles. Paul or John? There is not end; the quark will never be found.

The impulse to belong to one tribe or another may be the most dangerous infection we face today, and unlike COVID there is no vaccine. The slice and dice machinery is uncanny in its ability to ferret out fissures. It makes us all less appreciative of both the individual differences that make each member of any tribe unique, but to the actual, meaningful commonalities we share within and without our alleged tribe. This reliance on conferred identity flattens, makes us

numbingly similar under the guise of superficial difference. And comfortable in our received identity, we begin to see significant cultural variations as threats to be defended against. And here lies the real danger, as fear turns to aggression and of fantasies of dominance and purity.

Writer Ted Gioia is best known for his music criticism and histories. (His *Music: A Subversive History* is a real banger for anyone interested in the social. Highly recommended.) But on his blog, *The Honest Broker*, he often branches off into other realms. Today, as I was struggling to wrap this essay, he published a piece about philosopher Byung-Chul Han that included this observation:

> *"It was once fashionable to opt out from the groupthink and reconstruct your own life in a free-spirited or even openly dissident way. But the groups and power brokers have gotten less tolerant of dissent nowadays, and it's harder to find a space for self-invention outside their purview."*
>
> *Ted Gioia, The Honest Broker, 1/24/22*

I cannot fully agree. The 'groups and power brokers' have never been particularly fond of self-invention beyond narrowly prescribed guardrails. Self-invention and self-realization are threats to the prevailing order, and the machinery in place to set the seal on bland conformity is relentlessly efficient. And pretty much anything that feels transgressive in one generation (long hair, tattoos, rainbow hair coloring, clothes made of U.S. flags) will be quickly flattened into yet another commodity that trades its signification as rebellion for that of consumer obediance.

At root, this is my objection to the Gen™ industry's role in a broader campaign to determine who we are so we don't have to put in the effort. It is a mechanism of the Great Flattening machine – an array of large and small instruments ranging

across political parties, bread and circus sport extravaganzas, music streaming algorithms, blockbuster movie hegemony, Wordle, TikTok influencers, &c. – that aims to turn us into reliable and docile consumer drones.

When we all do and like the same things, this slouching beast declares, we will all be happy.

Then we can all fall in line for authoritarian rule, because at least the trains will run on time while we all watch the Super Marvel Universe Bowl together.

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Ears Embiggened: 50 Years of ECM



(The first in a series of preview posts as we count down to the
2019 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN.)

Back in the old days – way before the internet machine made hearing just about any recorded piece of music in the world as easy as finding a homemade porno of some celebrity and/or politician – finding out about music beyond the typical commercial channels took some real work. Much of this involved poring over publications of varying literacy levels to find out who was playing with who, where, and how often.<fn>God bless the *Village Voice*.</fn> You had to spend time dialing in college and alternative radio stations (no internet radio! You had to be within hailing range.) and hoping against reason that the stoned DJ <fn>I resemble that remark.</fn> might remember to announce the name of the track you were dying to identify. Often, you would listen to six or eight more songs in a row, only to have the hapless jock (mea culpa) announce only the last two because, well, he forgot, man.

You had to haunt the record stores. There used to be mammoth stores – stores like Peaches and Turtles and Virgin – aisle after aisle of record bins sorted by genre, carefully filed in alphabetical order. This was for the new, sealed releases. Very expensive, at least 5 or 6 bucks a record.

Then there were the used record stores, meccas for music geeks where you could stand for hours flipping through the stacks hoping to find a gem that you could make off with for two clams, three if it was a double disc set. You could drop 20 bucks on a pile of records just on whim. Maybe you saw a name you recognized, or the album cover was cool. Whatever. If you liked it, you win. If you didn't, you could bring it back the next week and trade it in for a dollar credit. A buck for a listen or two seemed like a deal.

After a while, you spent lots of time with the album covers, checking out the liner notes and musician credits. Patterns emerge. You start to recognize more names, and not just the players. Engineers and producers start turning up again and again – Rudy van Gelder, Bob Thiele, Teo Macero. You start to keep an eye peeled.

You learned to recognize the record labels. You started to realize that any Blue Note album was worth the 2 bucks. Same for anything on Impulse. Specialty labels like ESP Disk were always worth a tumble, even though you might end up with a squabbling wall of artifactual noise that all but obliterated whatever the music was trying to be.<fn>Many Sun Ra albums, especially on his El Saturn label, were like this, but you learned to buy them anyway because you just never knew what you might find.</fn>

And then there was ECM. Pretty standard rule of thumb: If you saw an ECM in the cutout bin, you bought it. If not for you, then for one of your pals. Don't recognize the Scandinavian cascade of consonants and diacriticals? Don't worry, just buy it. If it had Manfred Eicher's seal of approval, it was worth the candle.



Codona: A typically lovely ECM cover design.

By the time I got serious(ly addicted) about vinyl collection and music that could be safely characterized as out-of-the-mainstream, ECM was a ten year old label with a solid reputation for attention to detail in curation, design, packaging, and recording quality. The covers were thick paper and beautifully printed, the liner sleeves a refined, no friction material, never rough paper. No cheap, junked vinyl

here; the discs were heavy and thick, an obvious cut above the major labels pressings on horse chips. They had to be, you see: the ECM sound would not survive the surface noise of standard-issue vinyl.

What about that sound quality? The first few years of releases had varying sonic personalities, but by the mid-70s the characteristic ECM Sound was firmly established, notable for its cultivation of audible space and silence. Even on recordings that were somewhat wall of sound-ish (e.g., Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*) Eicher's close attention to microphone selection and placement provided clearly defined separation of instruments in the mix. Add to that a well-articulated stereo image and a layering of reverb that served to build a concert hall in your living room. And no matter who was playing, it was the same concert hall every time.

In a 1999 interview with Home Studio Magazine, Eicher explained that he

> *…listened to a lot of jazz records, mainly Impulse! Or ESP releases; I found the music very interesting, but I didn't like the way it was produced, mainly because I felt something was lacking, a part of the message had disappeared. My main concern, when I founded ECM, was to respect every aspect of the music. That meant be able to hear every nuance of the instrument, every colour, and respect the dynamics of sound, as given by the musician. This was quite a different way of recording jazz, and public was sensible to it."*

Some of this attention to detail no doubt grew from his experience at the classical Deutsche Grammophon label, long admired for its close attention to audio excellence. <fn>DG is another label, like ECM, that has somehow managed to maintain fierce fidelity to its guiding principles and pursuit of quality, still going strong 120 years after its founding. Maximum Respect!</fn> But there is a marked difference between

the ECM and DG sound signature. Eicher was drawn to the atmospherics of reverb – both natural and simulated – where DG cultivated a drier studio sound. One is not necessarily better than the other. Vive la difference! But one thing is certain: You could identify an ECM project within a few seconds of listening.

These days, that ECM aesthetic is more widespread, signal of the influence ECM has had on the way we record and listen to music in the wake of their example. (For better or worse, the whole "New Age" genre pretty much owes its existence to ECM and Eno's Ambient Music releases.)

The sound – the company motto calls it "the Most Beautiful Sound Next to Silence" – took some critical shots from those who found it icy, cold, antiseptic. Because Eicher, and many of his favorite artists, were from Scandinavia, the label was dubbed "fjord music" and "the Great Northern Sound". As with too many critical shorthands, the jibes are better as provocative copy than accurate description.

Still, the sound was an ECM signature, and on some releases (like Eberhard Weber's 1979 *Fluid Rustle*, which happens to be the ECM debut of Bill Frisell), the sound itself is often more notable than the performance. Descriptions of ECM as the "beautiful music" label emerged, and not in a kind context. To be sure, there were more than a few releases that were just perfect for those 3 a.m. oh-god-I-just-can't-come-down episodes, times when an ECM record provided just the right amount of sonic-envelopment and gentle massage. This aesthetic would find broader – and less satisfying – expression with the emergence of so-called New Age music from labels like Windham Hill in the 80s.



But the perception is at odds with the reality. Close listening to something like *Fluid Rustle* offers satisfying elements of compositional innovation, and the performances are superbly delivered. I won't likely spin this one often, but there is more there, there, than meets the ear. And on balance, the ECM catalog is studded with recordings that are definitional in their realm, with ambitious releases from the likes of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Dave Holland, Meredith Monk, Steve Reich, Arvo Part, &c. that more than make up for those releases that one might be tempted to dismiss as sonic wallpaper. More than a few people have told me in no uncertain terms that Reich and Part are really just fancy-pants Muzak. For myself, I had long considered Keith Jarrett's *Sun Bear*

Concerts, a ten-album set of solo improvisation recorded live in Japan in 1978, little better than background hum. Yet here I am, about 3 hours into the box's roughly 7 hours of music, and I find myself in a serious re-evaluation of my opinion of Jarrett overall and this recording in particular. YMMV.

With the Big Ears Festival's celebration of ECM's 50th anniversary less than a month away, I find myself immersed in the ECM catalog, revisiting so much music that has fallen out of my regular listening rotation. Most of the label's 1500 or so releases are available via your favorite streaming service. <fn>This is ECM authorized streaming, so you can listen guilt-free, though you should buy some of the recordings anyway. Streaming fees are not enough to keep them going for 50 years more.</fn> This is some deep nostalgia for me, a traipse through the soundscapes that helped establish my overall aesthetic philosophy about what music – and art in general – can accomplish in a world in need of healing action.

How I think about music, how I respond to certain creative gestures and techniques, owes much to the ECM ethos. (Especially to my favorite of their roster of artists, the Art Ensemble of Chicago.) My interest in music that comes from other realms and cultures, music that defies easy categorization, or music that can appear harshly repellent or deceptively beautiful at first listen but that reveals more and more depth with every listen. Music that asks us to open our ears to the unfamiliar, to the possibly difficult and challenging. This aesthetic informs my engagement with pretty much all creative work, both my own and from other artists.

If you get right down to it – and apologies for presuming to speak for the Big Ears director – I expect that this is similar to the formation of Ashley Capps' aesthetic, too. We came of age around the same time and around a lot of the same music. (AC and I met at the Bijou Theater in Knoxville in 1980 at his presentation of the Art Ensemble, one of his first shows.) We both were college radio geeks, the kinds of people

who would spend hours flipping through the cutout bins in search of some holy grail recording of someone only we knew about.

And that is likely why Big Ears resonates so strongly for me. When I look at the lineup, it is as though I had just sat down and made a list of the artists I really want to hear and see. It rings the bells that Manfred Eicher started pealing in my head 40 years ago, bells that have shaped much of my life since.

ECM was not the first label to establish such a distinct personality, nor the last. Labels like India Navigation, Soul Note, Black Saint, hatHut, and dozens more have since created powerful catalogs of work in the jazz realm, and Nonesuch is prominent in its delivery of important creative music after its humble origin as a discount bin classical label in 1964. But not many labels have the longevity of an ECM: Fifty years on, Eicher's vision remains intact (albeit expanded to embrace more classical music since c. 1985) and the company's business model presumably solid. Hell, 50 years in the recording industry is about three lifetimes. Certainly such a thing is impossible.

And yet, they persisted. Happy birthday, ECM, and thanks for everything.

(Credit to the Home Studio Magazine interview with Eicher and Tyran Grillo's superb website, a heroic labor of love from a guy who just wanted to write a thoughtful review of every album ECM ever released. And immense thanks to the Big Ears Festival
for throwing ECM a big ass birthday hoolie this year.)

The Greatest Thing That Ever Lived



By the time I could pay attention, The Greatest had already rejected his slave name, embraced the Nation of Islam, and refused to serve the armed forces of the United States.<fn>He was not a draft *dodger*. He just said fuck no, put me in prison if you have to, but fuck. No. That ain't no dodge.</fn>

By the time I could pay attention, I remember adults in my orbit still calling him Cassius Clay, declaring they would never call him by that n****r name, that he had gotten way above his station, that he was a traitor, that he refused to appreciate everything "his" country had done for him, just another shiftless ingrate who didn't know his place.

I can't say I was carefully taught. But I was taught. I was taught that James Brown was barely more evolved than an ape or a gorilla, that MLK was one "one of the good ones, mostly" and that those *animals* were burning down "their own" neighborhoods.

But by the time I could pay attention, none of this stuff squared with what I was seeing with my own lying eyes.

By the time I could pay attention, MLK went from alive to dead, a victim of the racism that my people all wanted to believe was not as bad as "the bad ones" would suggest. You know, the bad ones. Like these guys.



Tommie Smith and John Carlos – American Patriots

By the time I could pay attention, James Brown was the guy who made some of my favorite music, a thrilling force of nature.

By the time I could pay attention, the futility and inherently racist cruelty of the Vietnam War was all too clear, even to this ten-year old. A 4th grade friend and I got in big trouble for refusing to stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, reasoning that there was no way in hell that we would ever fight in Vietnam, so pledging allegiance would be nothing but a lie.

We stood with Muhammad Ali. Even if we didn't know it.

(That week, in an odd turn, Jose Feliciano performed the National Anthem at the World Series. His performance was an outrage, a provocation, yet another example of one of Those People™ showing ingratitude at how much "their" country had done for them. His crime? Singing a British drinking song with a Latin feel. So the next day, the entire 4th grade was summoned to the classroom of one Miss Loretta Karp, a stooped skeleton from hell in high heels, with impossibly bright red hair, a woman who would have been six foot three if she was

not in a constant hunch. She was mean as a wet cat whose bright red lipsticked smile existed only to signal impending cruelty. She began by noting that there had been some "unpleasantness" in school lately with "certain people" showing "poor patriotism by refusing to honor Our Flag". She then went on to note that the World Series had been forever blemished by the desecration of the national anthem by a "foreigner. But by God," we were going to fix that by having the entire 4th grade "stand together and sing the Star Spangled Banner as God meant it to be sung". My pal and I got the giggles and could not stop. We got in trouble again. Such wabble wousers!)

Sure, we were risking nothing more than a stern talking to from our parents and disapproving looks from teachers and staff. Our courage was nothing, a flea fart in a hurricane. But still. We stood with Ali, two dopy white boys in the Connecticut suburbs who basically knew shit from shinola. But we knew that everything we were being taught about the war, about the way our nation was structured, did not square with things we saw on the electric radio picture box every night at dinner, pass the biscuits please. By the way, why are they burning down that village?

Too many things we were taught were just transparently wrong. This is not to cast full blame on our parents and teachers. They were themselves taught untruth, a set of lies that became matters of gospel faith. This was "their" country, and everyone else who was here needed to know their place.

So it's easy to understand how *my people*, taught from birth that this was "their" country, would look at Cassius Clay's declaration of "I'm the greatest thing that ever lived!" as not just braggadocio, but as a direct threat to their security and world view. For a *colored* man, such a thing was just not done.

And for him to embrace Black Nationalism the very next day, to

clearly state uncomfortable truths about “their” nation, could only mean one of two things: one of them was lying. And it had to be, just had to be, that loud-mouthed *boy*.

And then, he rejected “their” war, “their” draft, “their” nation in terms that offered no comfort, no conciliation:

> *“I got nothing against no Viet Cong. No Vietnamese ever called me a nigger. They never lynched me or raped my grandmother. Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on Brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights? No I’m not going 10,000 miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over. This is the day when such evils must come to an end. I have been warned that to take such a stand would cost me millions of dollars. But I have said it once and I will say it again. The real enemy of my people is here. I will not disgrace my religion, my people or myself by becoming a tool to enslave those who are fighting for their own justice, freedom and equality.… If I thought the war was going to bring freedom and equality to 22 million of my people they wouldn’t have to draft me, I’d join tomorrow. I have nothing to lose by standing up for my beliefs. So I’ll go to jail, so what? We’ve been in jail for 400 years.”*

He gave up everything for this stand. His titles, his income. He was not allowed to practice his craft. He was, in fact, one of White America’s most hated symbols, even as he became a hero to Black America and to people around the world. When he was finally allowed to fight again, the battle lines were pretty clear. Joe Frazier was “one of the good ones”, the guy who would shut Ali up for good. The rest is, as they say, history. You can look it up.<fn>Or you can turn on the electric picture radio machine for round the clock Ali

hagiography.</fn>

As with MLK III, the posthumous softening of the Ali image is underway. Just as King was transformed from a warrior badass into a cuddly teddy bear of non-violent accommodation, Ali is being morphed into an anodyne citizen of the world, a guy who was great with kids, who met with everyone from princes to paupers. A twinkly-eyed elder statesman who, robbed of speech, became a blank slate upon which we could all shine our imagining of who and what this guy was in life.<fn>Even Trump blathered on about how they were such "good friends", ffs.</fn>

But Ali, like King, was way more than a teddy bear.

Last night we began watching the remake of *Roots*. It's a grueling affair. Central to the first episode is the importance of a person claiming and owning his *real* name. Kunta Kinte endured a savage beating before he whispered "Toby" in acceptance of his fate. Ali flipped that, renouncing the name his more recent ancestors had been forced to assume. And he took a beating for it. The nation wanted a nice Joe Louis Negro, a quiescent and accommodating character who would make white folks feel like they are not racists, because they just love them one of the good ones. Someone who transcended race.

Writer Stereo Williams dropped this tweet today:

> *"Transcended race" typically means "Helped me forget to be racist."*

Ali never let me forget to be racist. Such a thing is impossible for this product of White Southern upbringing. If anything, I want to remember that I am a racist, constantly. I don't need to be let off the hook for my part in this legacy.

By the time I could pay attention, Ali helped me understand

that the Vietnam War was an immoral, indefensible violation of human decency. That was early on in my lifetime of paying (variable) attention to our world, and it was no small thing to realize that one of Those People™ was correcting a lie handed me by “my people”.

What else did I have wrong? The list is seemingly endless.

All the Critics Love U in New York



If there’s any celebrity you can be sure you *did not know* in any significantly real way, it was Prince. Shape shifter, name shifter/eraser, master of every style you can name. Intensely private and essentially flamboyant. Exhibitionist. Hermit. You don’t know him except in the ways you think you do, and that has as much to do with what you wanted him to be as it does with which little pieces of mythologizing he wanted you to see at any given time. Like the classic Trickster of legend, he could present multiple faces at the same time, and the face you got to glimpse, briefly, depended on which side of the road you were standing on. If Prince had been around then,

Kurosawa could have made this pint-sized product of Minni-freaking-sota the centerpiece of *Rashomon*. That would have been cool.

What do I know of Prince? We're roughly the same age. He's probably the most under-appreciated guitar player in like ever. Over the years that I have been heralding him as easily the best thing since Hendrix and sliced bread I've received more than a few puzzled looks and dismissive chuckles about me just being a contrarian. This week, many people were surprised when Billy Gibbons described his playing as "sensational".

But even that is only a piece of it. From his textbook knowledge and respect for those who came before him – JB, Sly, Jimi, Miles, George Clinton, &c. – to his savage dance chops and ultra-sharp fashion sense, to his early adoption and mastery of technologies like the Linn Drum; the guy put a package together that was both historically intelligent and, somehow, way out in front of the coming surge of hip-hop and Michael Jackson/Madonna style pop that followed him by a few years. The man had his gifts. Add in an almost incomprehensible work ethic, and you have Prince.

How Prince helped me know myself comes down to this simple question:

How could anyone possibly fail to recognize such evident talent?

Probably the way that I did.

Because instead of listening, I reacted to the packaging cues that came with the Prince product. And because he hit the scene in the late 70s with a funky beat, puffy shirts, lots of synthesizers, and a (deceptively) silly reliance on lyrics about fucking, I saw him clearly for what he was: just another callow Disco Boy, a Travolta, a Bee Gee.

It's hard to remember (or, if you are a little younger,

comprehend) the degree to which DiscoSux fever encompassed the world of funky music. Earth, Wind & Fire, James Brown, P-Funk: all these and more took their share of unfriendly fire from people who were essentially painting the entirety of black popular music as beneath-contempt shit.

DiscoSux fever was a symptom of reaction against gay and minority encroachment into the historically masculine world of rock and pop. This music was aimed at gender-fluid communities and urban black folk. For a generation of mostly white, hetero-norm critics and fans for whom rock'n'roll equaled priapic guitar stroking and golden-maned Dionysi sporting socks stuffed into spandex trousers, this was music that threatened the natural order. <fn>The pulse belonged on the 1 and 3, dammit, none of this 2 and 4 backbeat shit. Whaddya, Disco Duck?</fn> It was outsider art storming the academy. And I was a privileged, by-birth member of the patriarchal academy, though I didn't even know that such a thing existed; such is the blindness of by-birth membership.

Prince said fk all that noise, and it was pretty clear that he was throwing down on, well, people like me.

> *Look out all you hippies, you ain't as sharp as me*
> *It ain't about the trippin', but the sexuality*
> *— All the Critics Love U in New York*

Hey. I resemble(d) that remark.

So I could "listen" to *When Doves Cry* or *1999* and quickly sort this alleged genius off into the "just another over-hyped fraud" bin.

In that same song, this upstart had the nerve to sing:

> *It's time for a new direction*
> *It's time for jazz to die*

As a burgeoning jazz-bo, I tooks what I tooks and it was more than I could takes. I didn't need to hear the music behind this pixie poppinjay. These crude insults told me all I needed to know! Pistols at dawn!

Later, when Miles compared him to Duke Ellington and Chopin, it was easy to dismiss the comments as Miles trying to glom onto the popularity of the younger phenom. Because come on: he's really just another Disco Boy, and everybody knows that DiscoSux, so pass the bong and cue up some Coltrane or some real rock'n'roll. Dude.

One night in 1993 I watched a terrific Neil Young *Unplugged* on MTV<fn>In those days, children, the M stood for "Music". You can look it up!</fn>. The next show was Prince live in some mega-arena, and I watched it and thought, "Meh, pretty good" and then he walked offstage and into a limo that took him somewhere and he walked into a small club and took the stage and proceeded to melt my face with a yellow guitar and the most scorching Hendrix-style blues I'd heard since before Stevie Ray died. For the next hour I was slain. I've been listening to Prince ever since.

So what does the phenomenon of Prince teach me about myself? Every time I hear his music, even as I am digging it down to my toes, I am reminded that I am a fallible human being, prone to unpleasant bigotries and prejudices that cause me to stop paying attention to what is real and true. The impulses that put me on auto-piloting sort mode – this person is this, that music is that, I don't like "those" kinds of people/music/movies/food/&c. – are the things that make me miss the My Favorite Worldness of life. It's good to have a ready reminder – one that the iPod throws up randomly and often – that for all my pretense to erudition and discernment and such like, I am just as likely to react like a dope as I am to apply any kind of intentional awareness to, well, anything.

Which means, naturally, that any opinion I hold is inherently suspect and worthy of re-examination. Consider yourself duly warned.

The most delicious part of the irony is that the song I quote above, had I bothered to listen to it in 1983, would have delivered exactly the kind of face-melting guitar heroics that won me over ten years later. Check it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJxt_Ey6tbo

Who knows? I was full of myself in those days<fn>Unlike now, when I am extremely humble and enlightened.</fn>, so I might have dismissed it anyway.

Thanks, Artist Who Formerly Bestrode The World as Prince. Somehow, having you be the constant reminder of my proclivity to dopiness ain’t all that bad. You sexy motherfker.