

# The Cucuzza Phenomenon

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*Devin Harner*

It's Spring Break 2003 and I'm charging south towards the North Carolina coast in my Saab. I haven't been there in over a decade. It's 11:00 at night and there's a beautiful girl with too-red lipstick sitting in the passenger's seat and playing with the radio. I downshift into third gear, round a corner, and attempt to kiss her as the brackish smell of baywater creeps in through the sunroof. There's a faint sliver of moon visible, and the engine pulls, confidently doing its work as we glide past assorted gas stations, fireworks stalls, and roadside diners. We've heard Smokey Robinson's "The Tracks of My Tears" that brings to mind young Charlie Sheen and the film *Platoon*, and we've heard Jackson Browne's "Running on Empty", which makes me recall cruising North on the wide-open Maine highway early in the morning with my dad and my brother, heading for another far-off coast of the same ocean, and chasing down pulp trucks with the pedal to the floor.<sup>1</sup>

Suddenly, Don Henley's cover of "The Boys of Summer" blasts through the static and comes on loud and clear and it's strangely appropriate. It's a song about nostalgia and lost love, and I've got a history with the song that spans nearly twenty years of lost friends and coastal towns, involves another girl and another Saab, and centers on a composite of summers that slipped away. My eyes are on the road, and my hands know when to corner and when to upshift, but my mind is somewhere else. There are multiple versions of the song, and successive summers, and other girls, and even lots of experience with the song from a time when I preferred the company of snakes and tortoises to the company of women, and because of all of these factors I'm not exactly sure whose song I'm hearing, and how the act of listening – in this Saab at this moment – relates to my previous encounters with the song. More specifically, within the context of the cover song, how is any discrete listening experience informed by the listener's history with the song in all of its incarnations?<sup>2</sup> And, post-cover, can there ever truly be another discrete listening experience?

The last time I saw Gregg Cucuzza he told me that the girl I was with had eyes like flypaper, then he whispered something incomprehensible in my ear, and kissed me on the cheek, Mafioso style. I couldn't grasp his simile, but it didn't matter. I'd not seen him in two years, and before that, in ten. But I'd heard new legends of Gregg Cucuzza failures and excesses every couple of years throughout high school and college. His twin, Keith, the more successful of the

pair, was nearly as spectral. He was in a couple of bands in the early 90s that achieved fleeting national attention. One, Freefall, had a single on Berkeley's Lookout Records before "alternative" became a target demographic.

A few years ago, after a failed attempt at securing funding for graduate school at Berkeley, I drove, feeling defeated, down an eighty degree hill in the perfect eighty degree heat to Lookout Records hoping some power chords would make me feel better. Under the store's cartoon pink and turquoise sign, under a clear blue Bay Area sky, I was reunited, for just under ten bucks, with the first friend that I made when I started school nearly twenty years ago. In a bin full of CDs I picked up the *Jar of Pork* compilation from 1992, my senior year in high school, back when I was still in awe of Nirvana. Kurt Cobain, though, had likely been listening to *Jar of Pork* while I'd been busy listening to him. The CD included tracks from bands like the Winona Ryders, the Horny Mormons, and Spit Boy. But song number 23 immediately caught my eye: the band was Freefall, and the song was "The Other Day" featuring one Keith Andrew Cucuzza.<sup>3</sup> The Cucuzzas, and my first grade of school, have somehow become a point of departure for all memories since.<sup>4</sup>

Back in 1981 summer felt infinite. I'd just finished first grade, and all that I wanted to do was go off the high dive at Lancaster County Pool. The first dive ever, not just jumping like the year before. The first attempt of the season. The thrill that comes after ascending the ladder and discovering that it's not as scary if you run and spring up, instead of just pecking and scratching off the end like a chicken. The velocity that you gain in running pushes you out, in an arc, and not just down, and because you're arcing, you feel the arc and not the fall. And you think for an instant that you're cheating gravity, and you're hanging, and then splash. Coolness comes in waves, surrounding you, shimmering. The Cucuzzas were there already wet and shaking water from their hair.

My mom used to drive us to the pool for a morning swim in her new white Ford Fiesta after we'd run errands. The Fiesta was the precursor to the Escort, but it was German made; sort of a knock-off VW Rabbit, but hey, I was six and three quarters, and the Fiesta was just plain groovy. It could have been a Porsche for all that I knew.

I thought you had to be turning the radio's tuning knob in order for the car to go because my mom always had one hand on the knob, unless she was shifting. And whenever she'd shift, her hand would leave the knob, and she'd release the clutch as she shifted, and the car would momentarily hesitate until the new gear was selected. I didn't know about the clutch, so I equated music with motion.<sup>5</sup>

My mom lived just up James Street from the 7-11 in a funky apartment building that generally catered to college students. The members of a couple of local bands, the Speed Boys and the Sharks, lived in the apartment downstairs. The Sharks won the "Basement Tapes" contest on MTV and were off to L.A. to shoot a video. As is often the case on the coast, the rock and roll dream proved too much for them, and they broke up, and eventually slunk back to Lancaster. A couple years ago they played a reunion show downtown at the Village Club on Thanksgiving night, but I missed it for Spanikopita and *E.R.* at my then-girlfriend, Marya's.<sup>6</sup> But it's O.K., I think I'll get a second chance, if not with Marya, then at least with the Sharks. As for the Speed Boys, I used to take guitar lessons from Russ Blake, their rhythm guitarist. I never felt like practicing, so I didn't get too far, but I've still got the pearlescent pink Yamaha electric in the back of my closet in case I ever want to give it another shot.<sup>7</sup>

Keith's most recent band, Brody, was based out of Philly, and I had the accidental pleasure of seeing them play once. I've got a 45 of Brody covering Don Henley's "The Boys of Summer" the way it was meant to be played. If Don ever has a spare minute, I've been meaning to invite him over to my place to hear "The Boys of Summer" the way his subconscious really wanted him to sing it.<sup>8</sup> Full-bore black and white boardwalk pathos, and the change of seasons feeling like a terminal condition.

I was midway through third grade when my mom bought a house on the other side of town, I changed schools, and I saw less and less of the Cucuzzas. I met other kids. We would muck around in swamps and creeks, catch snapping turtles, seine for minnows, and play soccer. It wasn't the suburbs yet, but a row house in a nicer part of town, and a step towards another kind of life that my mom sensed my brother and I needed. My grandmother later told me that one of the fringe benefits of my mom's move was that it got us away from the band practices and from hanging around vacant lots with the Cucuzzas.

The Cucuzzas showed up once or twice in high school. I think Keith was at school on the first day of 10<sup>th</sup> grade - cargo pants, a skate t-shirt, and an Old Ghost Guardian deck in tow. Then I went to college an hour's worth of country roads away from Lancaster, and it was not until the summer after I graduated that I encountered a Cucuzza again. I was downtown at Wish You Were Here, a dirty little café with great "Swedish" Oatmeal Pancakes and just plain mean owners. They had picture postcards for coasters. They were likely going for a 50s nostalgia open-road kind of theme, but it came off like some washed-out early 70s aesthetic, like a John Boorman movie.<sup>9</sup>

I ate a veggie gyro that had slipped in quality since I was sixteen, like so many things in Lancaster. Gregg waited on me and we managed to recognize

each other by the time the check came. He finished his shift and we walked over to Central Market together so that he could pick up some flowers for his girlfriend. I remember Gregg's genuine smile for the old flower woman and her careful selection of the fresh cut mixed bunch. I made a mental note of the flower stand's smell at the end of May, and I've been back myself twice since. Once when I worked at T.G.I. Fridays I stopped in at Market and picked up a bunch for the girl who'd been spending a lot of time in my mom's attic with me, but she worked a double, and the daffodils spent the day wilting in the back of my Volkswagen.<sup>10</sup> This was my first and last lesson that romantic conventions and restaurant work don't mix. The last time I was there to buy Marya a bunch, I felt like the guy from the Mentos ad, or was it the women's deodorant commercial, walking around downtown dressed in Ray Bans and sandals and carrying a bunch of flowers on a weekday. I've not been back to see the flower woman since. I just couldn't get it right. Gregg, though, he had poise with flowers.<sup>11</sup>

When we left Market I gave Gregg a lift back to the converted garage where he was staying. He played me a rough tape of some fills that he'd written on guitar and was sorry that he didn't have anything for us to smoke. We talked about Jeremy Enigk's solo work, about Enigk's Christianity, and about the subsequent demise of Sunny Day Real Estate - now resurrected. It was all very 1996. It was here that I saw the 90s, in this garage just around the corner from the Queen Pharmacy. Truth be told, they only really lasted for a couple of years. Like a standing wave at Ocracoke where the ocean meets the bay, the 90s were overwhelmed at their edges by the inertia of the "Me Decade" and the premature Millennial bleed of Y2K, and they nearly disappeared in the froth.<sup>12</sup> After Seattle fizzled and primary colored punk got more than a little bit poppy, kids who grew up in the 80s in arcades, in the shadows of Mike Miliken, Junk Bonds, and *Beverly Hills 90210*, rediscovered the power of guitar-bass-drums, of boy meets girl, and of sweet and clean production that jumps up and says "Christine", "Valerie", or "Matt" doesn't love me, but that's O.K. The two-minute eleven-second vignette lived again for a couple of years: it breathed, bled, and sweated, and it lived that day in that garage.

Around holidays it's easy to get overly reflective and analytical. Around Memorial Day, in particular, I always look back and count summertimes because when I worked as a lifeguard in high school and college, the end of May always signaled the start of the season. And since the time I was bold enough to sneak into the bar through the side door, Memorial Day weekend has always ushered in the summer bar season in Lancaster. Letting the memories flow, I can see the weekend of my college graduation, the move out, a mylar balloon bouncing in the breeze, a discarded love seat, and a long gone girl named Kelly. The next

year I'm bussing tables at T.G.I. Friday's and in love with a pigtailed waitress with endless legs home from Pitt for the summer. Finally, I flash forward to the Memorial Day weekend when I met Marya, who's now gone the way of the Cucuzzas, and haunts only my memories of Mays past.

So it's another Memorial Day weekend now, and I'm in search of a swollen top down spring moment that I can kiss on the lips, in search of 1984, and in search of the Cucuzzas.<sup>13</sup> I don't think that I'll find them, but I'm listening to the Gameface E.P. - the one with the song "Chasing the Sun" on it, the one with a proven record of paradoxically helping me negotiate love and love lost: "I hope I make it home by summer, sometimes I wonder, if there'd be one without me." In a bold move, this song's speaker takes ownership of summer and masters the flux of the universe, at least for this track. I'm digging through 45s and looking for the Brody "The Boys of Summer" record in an attempt to quiet this tempest of youthful highlight clips. I haven't listened to it in years. When things are going your way there's no need for lyrics like "someday I'm gonna get you back, I'm gonna show you what I'm made of". I'm in the same bizarre emotional state that used to cause sudden late night changes of geography when I was in college; the need to hear that Brody single is far more urgent than my need for food, drink, or companionship. But the turntable is busted.

At Radio Shack, the clerk can't even find a replacement cartridge in the catalog for my garage-sale-special Technics turntable. This irritates me enough that when the other clerk says they have in stock a universal P-Mount that'll fit, I pull out my credit card, not minding that the cartridge costs \$35, about twice as much as the turntable itself. At this point in the afternoon, I'd pay nearly anything to listen to Keith Cucuzza sing "The Boys of Summer".<sup>14</sup> The quest for the cartridge has taken on nearly spiritual significance, and I'm convinced that my old friend Keith, who I've not seen in years, holds the answer, if I could just get a handle on the question.

The P-Mount goes on in a matter of seconds, one screw and done. I fire up the turntable, and place Brody on the spindle, then I place the needle on the record. I'm greeted by pounding drums at long last, as if coming from a wind tunnel, or from a battered and rattling Mustang convertible doing 90 and beach bound on the Jersey Turnpike. But the left channel's out. I turn up the right side, mute the left, and blast "The Boys of Summer" at long last, in monaural. Phil Spector would be proud - this is a wall of sound if ever there was one - and so would Joey Ramone, if only for the crash factor. The boardwalk in September pain of the song is much better suited to mono anyway. There's a picture of Brody playing at Lancaster's "world famous" Chameleon Club on the record's sleeve, the band's

sweaty and ripping it up, Keith's smiling, dancing in his socks, and clenching the mike like an ancient playground promise, and I want to go home again. So I do.

Coming into town I pass the Buck Demolition Derby where Marya and I had our first date. It was an accident, but it was a damn good time. I jack the stereo up to the max and try to concentrate on the Jawbreaker song "Chesterfield King" rattling the dashboard and easing my mind cathartically out of women and into punk rock songs about women.

We used to have a joke back when it seemed highly unlikely that we'd ever break up (and so could afford to have such jokes) that, if we ever broke up, we'd rendezvous where we first met, at Stanford's Bar, on our anniversary and work things out. I don't even think that I want to see her, but in Lancaster things get tangled, especially in the summer, and unlike Don Henley's "The Boys of Summer" video, it's not all black and white.<sup>15</sup>

On my way to Stanford's I stop in at my friends Mike and Liz's place to inquire about the Cucuzzas. Keith used to date Liz's friend, Bridgette, and according to her he's now married and living somewhere in Northern California and working as a graphics artist. So I guess that rules out seeing him tonight. Maybe Gregg'll turn up. Although I don't know what I'd say to him. Maybe I'd kiss him back and get him to explain the "eyes like flypaper" thing to me.<sup>16</sup> Get some advice about women. Swap notes on recent shows. Ask him what went wrong, why I'm in grad school, why he's waiting tables, and why we're both fighting different kinds of demons and listening to the same damn records. Maybe I'd just thank him for first grade and row houses and arcades and reminding me what it felt like to dream.<sup>17</sup>

At the bar, my beer's sweating as much as I am. Time's been compressed to the point where the last year has seemed like a McCaskey High School 5<sup>th</sup> period study hall right before "C" lunch, and now, as summer approaches, it's lunch time yet again. I've seen plenty of people who I don't talk to regularly anymore because we ran out of things to say ten years ago. This communication that happens at the bar in the summer is a dance that we do - we know the steps by heart, it's not at all jazzy, more like a box step at a wedding when you're fourteen, sort of awkward, and takes way too long to be over. We care about each other, and everybody wants the best for everybody, and we are genuinely interested during our brief encounters; it's just that we're on different wavelengths, and I think that, actually, we always were. The connection of proximity used to count for more than it was actually worth, a fact made apparent by the reality of today's distance. It's amazing how quick a decade melts in Lancaster, but I guess in this heat anything could melt, save for memories.

I need to make an exit. But more old friends show up. They think it's cool that I'm still in school, as long as they're not, and they have other ideas about my leaving. They joke about showing up at my class one day when I finally get to be a professor. Then more jokes about me growing up, getting a house, and not having roommates. And then one about retiring the aging Saab and getting a car that runs. I answer that I like having roommates and a mattress on the floor, and that I've been doing it for so long now that anything else just doesn't feel right. Although on the inside I'm fighting off visions of light IKEA woods and stainless steel kitchen appliances, like the tea kettle that Marya gave me, where I see my reflection through the grime as I make my tea every morning. Too many questions about what happened to Marya, and then jokes that suddenly aren't funny any more about marriage, so I decide to throw out a joke of my own: "She wanted me to get my mattress up off the floor", I say, trying to defuse a no longer funny situation.

Almost out the door and I run into the Greeks. The last time I've seen most of these people was at church on Christmas with Marya, and they, fortunately, know better than to ask. They haven't seen me at church with her since, and news, good or bad, travels quick in their community. Bad news, predictably, travels quicker. Community, and this community in particular, is, I imagine, like an old pair of jeans, but I don't own a pair. I've never bought anything denim. So, for the sake of the truth, Lancaster is like a threadbare pair of khakis. Soft and damned comfortable, but sometimes depressing because if you wear Lancaster to a job interview, or on a too cold and cloudy day, or if you wake up in your Lancaster too many weekends in a row, it starts to take its toll.

Before making my escape in the morning I eat Indian food with my dad and step-mom and agree to watch the John Cusack film, *High Fidelity*. It's a movie that I really want to see, but not really tonight, and not after this weekend. But I agree, against my better judgment. The film's subject matter - single guy, lots of music, record store - is just too close to home. The one nice thing about being over 25 years old and single is that you can watch movies, in the evening, with your parents and not be embarrassed. It's one of those things that happened when I wasn't paying attention, sometime after college. In high school, going to the movies with your parents was even worse than being caught shopping at K-Mart. But tonight, as if proud that I've conquered another teenage demon, I walk into the theater with my head held high.

It's a good movie, but it reminds me too much of *Say Anything*. In both films, our hero, John Cusack, is wet and reduced like King Lear, has his moment of reckoning, and gets the girl back. When I met Marya we used to joke that our lives felt like a movie.

In some ways it was a movie, a second-rate romantic comedy, complete with quirks and dysfunction, like *Singles* or something similar starring someone who used to be in *Twin Peaks*, or like a John Hughes movie from the 80s with a twist of noir and a nice bubble gum soundtrack that runs counter to its unhappy ending. Rendered hopelessly in high contrast Technicolor, it felt like destiny at the time, like the fulfillment of some small town prophesy straight out of *Pretty in Pink* or *Some Kind of Wonderful*.

The night before I met her I was out with my friend Kenny, hammered on Hefeweisen and singing "Born to Run" at karaoke night. Later in the summer, when we were in full swing, I watched her friend Becky's boyfriend, a professional musician, sing "Let's Get it On" in all its glory at the same bar, and I stepped up and followed by doing the only thing that I could do, by working another Springsteen song for all that it was worth.<sup>18</sup> What I lacked in range, I made up for in heart, and it's these kind of moments, sitting in Lancaster in July, belting out "I'm on Fire" to a full house, and meaning every word of it that heighten the whole spirit of 1987 PG-13 movie feel of being in Lancaster and in love in the summer. It's raining tonight, her whereabouts are unknown, and if I could go outside her window, and cry, and drip the remnants of a thunderstorm all over her foyer and her Standard Poodle, it wouldn't matter.

Love, life, music, and film are all about perspective, and I think that what I'm after in life isn't some drunken rehash of a John Hughes movie, or some Molly Ringwald/Phoebe Cates/Jennifer Jason Leigh fantasy. What I don't need the next time around is to be crying out in the rain against a Peter Gabriel tune, like John Cusack in *Say Anything*, where against all odds the dork gets the girl. I heard about a guy the other day who I think has watched too many John Hughes movies. He's been chasing the same girl for over a decade, doing nice chivalrous things, buying her stuff, being the shoulder to cry on. And he thinks that, eventually, she'll give in, and that they'll be slow dancing together forever to "Don't You Forget About Me", the class of 1986's prom song. See, this guy's trouble is that he learned all that he knows about women from fluffy romantic comedies, but, if he were into punk rock, if he could just bring himself to listen to early Blondie, to Debbie Harry's confident sultry snarl, or to the Alkaline Trio's songs of broken hearts, blow torches and chainsaws, or to Blake Schwarzenbach from *Jawbreaker*, or to Keith Cucuzza blasting through that Don Henley cover, then he'd have a better chance of understanding what's going on as far as love goes.<sup>19</sup> It's not that I know, but the dude's in his thirties, and John Hughes hasn't gotten him very far because John Hughes' colors are all primary, and real life isn't.

Back in the summer of 1993, I saw a band called Screaming Trees at Hershey Park with my brother. They were old school grunge, lots of distortion, lots of chops, old power chords and drums like thunder. Two fat brothers basically ran the show. One played bass and the other guitar. Long black hair, flannel shirts, and seven hundred pounds, easy, between them. Eight, probably. They strapped their belts together, back to back, and as they played they spun, and as they spun, they took turns throwing each other into the spotlight. One faced the crowd and rocked, but before his moment was over, the other overpowered him and swung, taking over the stage, and casting his brother to the back to finish his solo facing the speakers and the roadies.

Sometimes I think I've got the Cucuzzas strapped to my back. I'm blazing on my air guitar, even though it's out of tune, I'm jamming my way through life as best I can, and I'm in the stage light. I'm facing the crowd, playing my solo, but there's always a pull, a pull that you can't see, a pull that comes from behind me, from our common past, from a parallel universe that last collided with our world in 1984. It's the Cucuzza twins. I hear them when I'm alone, when I'm in my office, when I'm in my car with the stereo off. When I'm walking in the mall, or when I'm passing an arcade, they're pulling me, they're pushing against my back, and they're whispering stuff in my ears, or directly into my subconscious.

They keep telling me that the fluorescent lights of academia are out to get me. They keep telling me that if I count the flickers, or if I listen to the hum, then I'll see for myself. When it's 2:00 in the afternoon on a Monday, and sunny, and when I'm feeling good, they tell me to find an arcade, or a bar, or better yet, a bar with one of those sit down tabletop Ms. Pac Man machines. That's where the secrets of the universe lie, they holler, like banshees. You won't learn it in school, they tell me. But I keep dancing, keep rocking, keep facing the crowd under the stage lights, and if they spin hard against me, and manage to throw me for an instant into their world, because after all, there's two of them, I've always managed somehow to get back.

I'm driving too fast for the wet roads and the fog. The stereo's off, I'm concentrating, and I've got the Brody single playing in my head. I know these roads like the back of my hand anyway. As I'm driving, I can see Don Henley's "The Boys of Summer" video in black and white. He's standing next to the old nondescript convertible. I want to say a Cadillac, but I don't know. He's singing "Don't look back, you can never look back". And I flash to Brody at the Phoenix Club in York where they opened for Game Face, and Keith's singing the same verse, only this time I can really feel it. Maybe he's singing it to Bridgette, now happily married, as is he, if I'm to believe local urban legend. I'm on the gas now, approaching Newark, and I'm grateful tonight that I have a record.

I realize that my time with Marya was denying the Cucuzza in me. It was an attempt to negate the rock and roll forces that made me. If I'd been the John Hughes dude, content with the suburbs, stuck in binaries, and glued to prime time television and to a Hollywood vision of life, love, and happiness, then I'd still have Marya and some nice Chantel kitchenware. But I'd likely be living on James Street with her because I would not have pushed for more. The push is what hurts. It's where the music comes in. It's the working class purity of dead end jobs and three fucking chords that gets you through the night and into the morning. It's grad school and your late 20's with strange roommates and a car that drips mystery fluids beautifully.

My life's not PG-13 and it's not "Top 40". I thought for a while, for a fleeting feel good instant that I could pound myself into the mold of church on Sunday, Pottery Barn, plastic young suburban stability. But the wheel spins, like a record, and, consciously or not, I traded this stuff in for something greater.

For a while playing the radio hurt. But now it opens up and I trust it. It reveals itself to me if I listen, if I have faith in the strange radio gods that pull the strings. All of us, marionettes moving to the beat, to the inflections, to a message of slippery vinyl love and possibility that comes over the airwaves when we least expect it, but somehow know it intuitively.

It's another July at three o'clock in the morning. I'm thinking shimmering blue pool water. Sunny morning possibility. I remember "The Tide is High", that perfect steel drum sound, the feeling of being in the arc. Somehow I've kept it with me. Through mental dark ages, through the industrial gray bogs of winter, through women and home and possibility and endless smiles and sweat and diesel smoke and empty endless highways and honeysuckle. I've carried rock and roll like a talisman, like sonic sunlight to light my way through the darkest emotional storms. I can still feel the solid plastic knob of the Ford Fiesta's low-fi FM radio. I remember its chrome and its faint green light. A light that never went out. I can fall in love again.

I'm sitting on a hardwood floor in a rented room. She comes over with a copy of Blondie's "Parallel Lines" on vinyl.<sup>20</sup> Debbie's crooning "Picture This". I'm in heaven. I won't tell you her name because I don't want to jinx it. I've got the electric feeling, the arc not the fall, and I feel like I can float on this clear steel drum sound forever. I've been practicing for this, like I invented this moment in my head when I was six and spun it at 33 and 1/3 RPMs over and over again, incubating it, imagining it would come true like a cool blue power pop fantasy if I'd only let it. I know I've traded in all that plastic suburban stability for dreams, a mattress on the floor, big guitar sounds, and the sweet memory of a cheap foreign car driven by sound. I drop the needle on the record, I look into her eyes,

and I trust the radio gods that brought our parallel lives together. They've reaffirmed my belief that the radio really does drive the car, if you listen, and if you let it.

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#### POSTSCRIPT

This summer, while this paper was in progress, this girl left me and went to New York, and, perhaps more problematic in terms of theorizing covers, a new version of "The Boys of Summer" came out. We had a final dinner together at a horrible Turkish restaurant in Queens, and while eating a vegetable ragout that tasted strangely metallic, the original "The Boys of Summer" came on the radio. It was somehow fitting, at least in terms of the symmetry of the narrative. Then, while driving home through inland New Jersey, I heard the Atari's take on "The Boys of Summer".

In the new version two things were different: "Deadhead" became "Black Flag", a punk band from the early 80s which opens up a whole other narrative stream, and "someday I'm gonna get you back" became "someday *when* I get you back". The changes are by no means superficial.<sup>21</sup> The site is *still* bewitched. All other elements being the same, not only does this version make the narrative accessible to a whole new generation of listener, but "Black Flag" references a part of my life that is not just temporally somewhere in the distant past, and directly parallel to the original version's "Dead Head sticker" (and therefore generally emblematic of lost youth), rather it cues another contemporaneous time period, the specific time of my experience with the original song. An alternate past to correspond to Cohen's "alternate virtual futures".

The narrative thread of the Atari's version of the song runs parallel, or even overlaps, and makes the composite narrative, and my own remembering of my own history, loop back on itself, and it allows me to revisit the summer of 1985 from another perspective. As if looking in on my own life from afar, I imagine the Atari's speaker, his heart broken in the 80s by a girl, or by the passage of time, and I see a Black Flag sticker not on a Cadillac, but on a skateboard, because I was 11, and I get the sense that while in the song I'm in a world where time and memory are fluid, and more importantly, I see the power of a narrative space that exists somewhere else, and that I can access through my own life's narrative.

Cars, girls, summer - these things are universal - but the trick that compound narratives are able to accomplish is that they enable us to feel like the narrative is ours, like we have ownership, and we do in a sense, but we don't ultimately, because the narrative space that our memories let us enter exists,

paradoxically, outside of us. An immaterial, though thoroughly interactive, cultural artifact that is best represented by the planet Solaris. This “net” is not driven by electricity, or by bits and bytes, but by the interplay between experience and memory as mediated by cover songs.

I can visit Solaris with the help of these songs, the prototypes and the isomers, and I know what Kelvin knows. I know the power of memory to terrify and to delight and to create worlds from nothing, not in theory, but in practice, because in the moment of the song, in dialog with the artist and with our own pasts and possible futures, the narrative is made real, and the text of the song and of my life’s narrative is fused.

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of the aforementioned songs, memory functions in a manner that is essentially linear. When I hear this particular Smokey Robinson song, I am transported to the scene in *Platoon* where Sheen’s straight, shiny, and idealistic character goes over to the dark-side of soldiering and smokes dope with the heads in the foxhole. I’m not engaged in the song, or in the film, in any particularly unusual way. I’m still very clearly in the car and heading south. While writing this paper I may accidentally think of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (as a story that closely parallels *Apocalypse Now*), and not *Platoon*, while reconstructing the scene in the car. I’m on the right track, logically, but there’s some slippage. Similarly, I may even connect *Platoon* and “The Tracks of My Tears” to the derivative 80s Vietnam-based television drama *China Beach*, which had its own overly-sentimental Motown song, “Reflections,” by the Supremes for its theme. And, although my memories bifurcate and are not entirely accurate, there is an inherent order to them. *Apocalypse Now*, while literally “wrong”, is logically on target. Nonetheless, my mode of remembering here is intriguing precisely because it is inaccurate.

Still, this type of remembering is logic- or intellect-driven rather than emotion-driven, and while it seems to give depth to my process of memory, it doesn’t really because of the fact that *Platoon* and *China Beach* are thematically similar, and more isomers than discrete elements. Similarly, when I hear Browne’s song “Running On Empty” I may think of my past experience with the song, or of Browne’s horrible album “Lawyers in Love”, which featured a picture of a BMW sinking in a lake, and being paddled by an unhappy couple on its cover, but my mode of remembering, although somewhat strange, is still linear, and therefore two dimensional and a chain rather than a web.

<sup>2</sup> The situation here is distinctly different from the act of apprehending the previously mentioned songs. Although the three-dimensional model of memory that Cohen puts forth in “Webwork” and “Mnemotechnics” is intended to theorize communal intellectual discourse in the field of cultural studies, it can nonetheless help us understand the relationship between texts and memory in terms of the individual. Cohen’s nonlinear model of memory in which textual semaphores ‘haunt’, ‘inhabit’ and ‘bewitch’ other texts is well suited for a discussion of cover songs as texts. Cohen sees “the materiality of language [as something that] lingers as a repressed trauma” and is at these points of trauma that the listener is able to experience the song-as-text in a powerfully unique way (Tom Cohen *Ideology and Inscription: “Cultural Studies” After Benjamin, de Man, and Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1). Furthermore, because songs exist both in the collective cultural memory, and simultaneously act on the mind of the individual, there is another level of ‘bewitching’ going on, and the relationship between the self and the whole is problematized in a way that is somehow organic, and the experience of listening is able to achieve further dimensionality as it cues mnemonic events on a whole other axis.

Cohen posits that Benjamin’s “‘materialist historiography’ would expose the trace-chains that manage anteriority as *virtual*, together with their semantic capital and canonical accounts . . . en route to a projected re-decision of sorts” as a way of bringing a memory-centric model of intertextuality into his discourse. He goes on to speculate that textual events inscript themselves on later texts as “virtual interventions”, and attributes this process to external factors not within “the private crypt of memory” (Cohen, 4). We must remember that Cohen is speaking collectively here, and not of individual memory, but, nonetheless, his argument gives agency to the text, and, in our case, the song in terms of its relationship to the mnemonic processes of the listener.

Cohen’s call for a discourse based not in the “official and the political, but in the narrative” seems, initially, to put him at odds with Hayden White, who ascribes an inherently political drive to the desire to narrate, but there’s room enough at the inn for everyone if we conceive of narration in terms of the

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personal, rather than in terms of a group-based or collectively constructed history (Cohen, 5). That is, for the listener, the desire to engage mnemonically with previously discrete cover songs is a way of making order out of the chaos of our memories, and this act, in itself, is political. Furthermore, the process whereby the synthesis of discrete cover songs takes on a common narrative that comes through the listener's engagement with the cover songs parallels White's notion of multiple narrations of an event's occurrence being necessary for it to be rendered "historical", and, thus, "real" (Cohen, 281). From a Lacanian standpoint, we have listeners seeking to give wholeness to their own fragmentary experience, "a discourse of the imaginary", through gazing at it, not in a mirror, but as reflected metaphorically in their own experience with the various permutations of a text already produced and systematically accepted as "real" in a larger context (Cohen, 281).

I am not concerned with the cover song as a political act in which the oppressed appropriates the text of the dominate as a way of dissembling or masking, and/or achieving the distance necessary to critique the dominate ideology safely. Neither will this paper address the solidarity between marginalized populations that comes as a result of collective musical performance. These phenomena exists simultaneously with cover songs that engage memory in a special way, indeed politicized cover versions derive substantial power from the mode of listening based in the three dimensionality of memory, and in Cohen's notion of 'haunting', that is being addressed here. But to limit the role of the cover to the realm of the political is to sell it short. Hopefully, through removing the overtly political, a mode of discourse will be possible that theorizes a universal model of our apprehension of cover songs.

Cohen's model of collective memory as "non-linear, a narrative of folds and counter-folds, or regressions" is important in considering the relationship between the cover song and the original as reversible or two-way (Cohen, 6). That is, texts inhabit and inscribe in both directions, independent of linear chronology. For this reason, the notion of the 'original' song is important only in terms of the listener's first encounter with the song's narrative.

Still, how exactly do we listen to a cover song's narrative? My working hypothesis is that listening to an alternate version of a song that you already know is a particularly rich and active form of engaging with a text, because of the fact that there is a perceived dialog at work between the original artist and the cover artist that exists independent of time and space.

In a letter to Benjamin Bailey musing on the mechanics of memory, John Keats asserts that:

the simple imaginative mind may have its rewards in the repetition of its own silent working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness (John Keats, "To Benjamin Bradley, 22 November 1817" in *Complete Poems and Selected Letters* (New York: Random House, 2001), 479).

Keats goes on to reference music specifically, and even the cover version, by proxy, as he asks if Bailey ever:

by being surprised with an old Melody - in a delicious place - by a delicious voice, felt over again your very speculations and surmises at the time it first operated on your soul - do you not remember forming to yourself the singer's face more beautiful than [for than] it was possible and yet with the elevation of the moment you did not think so - even then you were mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high - that the Prototype must be here after - that the delicious face you will see - what a time! (Keats, 480).

Keats' language may be excited and flowery, and his syntax convoluted, but he makes a useful point; that is, he is aware of the fact that when we hear a song that we know in terms of an original context and voice performed by a different artist in a different place, there's something "delicious" going on in our minds. When the listener hears George Michael sing the opening verses of Elton John's "Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me", it's not the same as hearing John's own version, it's somehow more powerful. And the power is in no way derived from the lyrics, which are not particularly "delicious" in their own right. The listening experience resonates because it is as if the singers are somehow communicating in an imaginary space that the song(s) create(s). John and Michael inhabit a realm that exists on the radio, and over the airwaves, a realm that is specifically 'Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me-land', and most importantly, because of their dialog, they invite the listener into the song's space in a way that is atypical of an ordinary listening experience. Keats identified the primacy of the experience, but he didn't get at the root cause, the dialogic aspect of the process of the cover.

In this song, the listener's suspicions of a dialog are realized literally when John joins Michael half way through the cover version. However, the actual cameo isn't necessary for the phenomenon to function, because of Cohen's conception of 'haunting'. In fact, when a cover becomes a duet it may resonate less because it is overtly self-aware of itself as a cover. "Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me" functions, likely, because John's entrance is delayed until Michael achieves agency in the song. Whether through John's actual presence, or Marvin Gaye's virtual presence in the anonymous-sounding Caribbean dance hall-tinged remake of "Sexual Healing", the listener is invited into the song's space, and therefore able to engage in dialog with the artists, in a way that he or she is not typically permitted when listening to music. By virtue of this dialog, cover versions of songs achieve an open-endedness that privileges the listener's own life experience, and his or her own history with the texts specifically.

Because of this open-endedness and active engagement on the part of the listener in making meaning, the act of listening to a cover song is different from the act of listening to the original version of a song

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that you already know, because, on a semantic level, in terms of meaning, both versions are accounted for, and the cover version is heard as part of the dialogic narrative, and because, on a temporal and spatial level, the context surrounding the original version of the text is reactivated when the listener hears either version of the song. Furthermore, the level of listener participation is higher when we are listening to a cover song because all of its components are reopened for interpretation at once during the listening experience. In a sense, the listener's experience with the song becomes a meta narrative that is embedded within the prototype, and that becomes infinitely revisable based on further encounters with the song, or versions of the song, in a manner reminiscent of Cohen's take on relationships between texts across time and space. In the event that the listener hears the cover version first, and later stumbles upon the original, the song-as-prototype is inverted, but the relationship is essentially the same.

<sup>3</sup> As with "The Tracks of My Tears", this song cues memories in a manner that is essentially linear and two dimensional. Although the fact that I know the singer makes me react emotionally, I am not particularly actively engaged in this song's narrative, despite the fact that, like "The Boys of Summer", it is about lost love. The mode of identification is, essentially, empathetic at best.

<sup>4</sup> When we hear any song, whether accidentally on the radio or on purpose via our hi-fis, we automatically position it within the context of our previous experience with it. Our first conscious moment with the song is often privileged, but significant later life events in which the song is present are also important in establishing a prototypical listening event or primary narrative. The first literal encounter with the song might not be the prototypical experience. It might take hearing the song and actually 'getting it' later, whether 'getting it' is an emotional reaction, or a better understanding of the narrative on an intellectual level. Once the prototypical experience is established, its narrative is commodified for later mnemonic use.

Listening to music is an opaque act in which we are able to engage in our own life's narrative, while still apprehending the text, in contrast to film and literature where we must suspend disbelief or remain sutured into the text's own action. Therefore, when we hear music, our life's narrative continues to happen while the song is happening, and the music achieves currency in a way that it does not in other more typical textual experiences. Most of us can recall our first encounter with a favorite song when we hear it on the radio, or, at the very least, we're transported momentarily to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade dance in the gym, and unfortunately to all of the associated awkwardness, or, in a dark and unfortunate instance of rampant capitalism, regardless of our past history with the later-day Stones, we are cued to think "Windows 95" when we hear the Rolling Stones' "Start Me Up". But we aren't as apt to conjure up "Mrs. Thomas' 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class" in the same level of detail when we accidentally stumble upon George Eliot's *The Mill and the Floss* at Barnes and Noble. We may think "9<sup>th</sup> Grade English" as a label, as an emotionally empty marker of time, but we don't render the narrative of the day's events in the classroom as fully, because we are deprived of the emotional and cognitive engagement with the minutia of our own lives at the actual time of the reading since, by necessity, while reading *The Mill and The Floss* we were engaged in the text fully.

In contrast, our own life with the song, the initially parallel narrative that happens while the song's own narrative is unfolding, is embedded into the song's narrative, and is able to be accessed every time that we listen. In the case of the cover version, we are encouraged by the dialog between the artists to decode our own past experiences as relevant to the narrative action in a manner that we are not during a conventional listening experience. And, in this regard, we are given agency in a narrative that exists outside of the bounds of either discrete song.

Furthermore, because of the phenomenon of the cover version that self consciously references collective cultural memory and nostalgia, the song's compound myth, or sum-synthesized narrative is historicized, and made real, in a manner in keeping with White's conception of what makes an event "historical". When faced with a cover, the ultimate narrative is constructed for the listener on the fly, and becomes a collaboration between the artists and the listener that assumes a dimensionality reminiscent of the topography of memory as conceived of in Lem's *Solaris*.

<sup>5</sup> Once the listener's own experience is brought into the narrative's world through the process of accessing these memories, it is framed by the songs in such a manner that the listener's personal history is ordered, or given meaning, by the dimensionality and space of the songs, both temporally and chronologically, and more specifically, by the pockets or ruptures that exist between them. In a sense, Cohen's 'semaphores' that bewitch texts play an ordering role in terms of our own memories as texts that are, in turn, haunted by themselves. This process of ordering is part of our attraction to the cover version. Human's have a tendency to narrate experience, and through the collective narration made possible by cover versions, this need is somehow both recognized and validated.

<sup>6</sup> Not the girl in the Saab at the beginning of the paper.

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, when I want to sing, I'm confined to karaoke - in a sense the ultimate textual experience in terms of the listener's agency, in that the listener's life narrative and the song's narrative intersect literally and not just virtually in a projected composite narrative. Because karaoke is a cover, the original artists' role as a performer is privileged as well, and karaoke becomes not *Being John Malkovich*, but a situation of a tension between the possessed and the possessor, because the boundaries are not discrete and are refigured through performance.

<sup>8</sup> The multiple histories that are the versions of the song, and the listener's experiences with them, project a supertextual narrative that exists in a realm outside of any one distinct listening experience.

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"The Boys of Summer" is particularly well suited to a critical examination based in modes of remembering, and in complimentary narration, as it is a song that is self-conscious of the act of memory and of nostalgia. Because, in all of its versions, the speaker engages in both linear narrative exposition, and the lyric mode, and because all takes on the narrative happen in specific, but slightly different temporal contexts, the song comes apart easily and is useful as a model for future modes of inquiry involving the phenomenon of the cover version.

Hearing the opening synthesizer riff of the original version of "The Boys of Summer" in 2003 simultaneously triggers the original's narrative, my own life's narrative involving the original, and all subsequent narratives centered on the cover version as well. At 11, I had no idea what the verse "Someday I'm gonna get you back / I'm gonna show you what I'm made of" was about. Similarly, I couldn't make much meaning out of "Last night I saw a Dead Head sticker on a Cadillac / A little voice inside my head said don't look back / You can never look back". But, in my later experiences with the song, the allusion to the Grateful Dead became clear. In fact, we interact with songs through a process of gradual revelation in which we always have a narrative on some level - even if it's just in terms of beat or instrumentation - and the details are filled in as we gain life experiences that resonate with the song's own themes or narrative features. It's like waiting for a Polaroid picture to develop and getting a rough sense of the subject's features before the landscape becomes fully realized. In this case, knowing that "Dead Head" references the Grateful Dead opens up a whole other narrative stream in the song that is somehow more powerful than just an allusion. "Dead Head", like most words or word combinations, is a container for an idea. But the word exists as emotional currency as well. In a sense, a musical allusion to another song functions as an emotional and intellectual 'hot button' that is automatically actuated if the listener has the requisite knowledge or experience.

<sup>9</sup> I came to appreciate the Grateful Dead relatively late in life. As recently as last week, actually, and my experience with the Dead's "Shakedown Street" on a particularly sunny Fall Thursday afternoon has retroactively imbued "The Boys of Summer" with a 'new' narrative thread that used to be strictly intellectual, but that is now more emotionally engaging and dense. It's as if the text has been backfilled, and once I was able to locate myself within the Dead's own narrative, the thread flowed into "The Boys of Summer".

This fact is significant with regard to "The Boys of Summer's" primary narrative because, thematically, "The Boys of Summer" has much in common with the Dead's canon. "Scarlet Begonias", for example, is a guitar-filled, optimistic and jingly take on the same nostalgic drive for summer and girls gone by that Don Henley accesses in his song. In a sense "The Boys of Summer" is an ironically charged take on the Dead's whole project that derives emotive velocity from the fact that it is rooted firmly in the style and the culture of the 1980s, despite the fact that it looks back to the 60s longingly.

"The Boys of Summer" is over-produced in a way typical of mid-80s pop and it is filled with synthesizers and digitally altered guitar sounds. The speaker is nostalgic and he is distanced from the song's narrative action not just temporally, but through the song's overly clean production values as well. In the opening lines "Nobody on the road / Nobody on the beach / I can feel it in the air / Summer's out of reach" there is a plaintive plea for a lost history that is not just personal, but collective. The speaker is isolated both physically and temporally, and he sees the loss of a specific summer as representative of the greater problem of transience. With what follows, "Empty lake, empty streets / The sun goes down alone / I'm driving by your house / Though I know you're not home" the speaker establishes conflict in the narrative, and makes the idea of loss that opens the song not just abstract and tied to the seasons, but specifically personal.

<sup>10</sup> Not the girl in the Saab at the beginning of the paper either.

<sup>11</sup> In the next verse the speaker breaks into lyric mode with the lines "But I can see you / Your brown skin shining in the sun / You got your hair combed back and your / Sunglasses on, baby". As the speaker reminisces and breaks the narrative's forward progress, the tension is heightened by the fact that the listener is witnessing nostalgia inside of nostalgia, because we already think we know that "summer's out of reach" and that what is lost cannot be recovered. The listener prejudices a narrative structure here that is linear and not revisable. But in lyric mode the song's speaker is not bound by chronologically oriented narrative conventions, and this freedom, in turn, liberates the listener as well, encouraging us to check pre-existing notions of time and memory at the door. The listener is in a position where he or she knows more than the speaker, but because of the song's structure as parallel to memory, the speaker is pushing us to come around to the idea of the lyric, and the reversibility of time. In lyric mode, the speaker believes that through the act of bringing the song into being, through the act of breaking the silence, the passage of time will be reversed ritualistically. And once the listener begins to accept the grammar of the song's universe, its laws of physics, they too are open to this type of fluid take on time.

The verse "My love for you will still be strong / After the boys of summer have gone" adds yet another thread to the narrative because "boys of summer" is on one level a colloquial reference to the baseball players who serve to demarcate the change of seasons culturally. However, the tone in which "boys of summer" is delivered in the song, and the song's ironically rendered title indicates extra-narrative action in which "the boys of summer" were the passing romantic fancies of the unnamed woman in the song whose love for the speaker has faded with time, in contrast to the speaker's own never ending devotion.

In this context, the speaker's resolution at song's end "Someday I'm gonna get you back / I'm gonna show you what I'm made of" is internally directed and affords the speaker some sort of rhetorical closure. It's worth noting that the speaker can conceive of change, of a revisable future, only in lyric

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mode, and is largely hopeless in the narrative's present. For the listener, this fact is metaphorically a testament to the power of the lyric both to shape the present and add order to the past.

<sup>12</sup> As a kid, the way that I understood "My love for you will still be strong / After the boys of summer have gone", and "Last night I saw a Dead Head sticker on a Cadillac", were profoundly different than my present understanding. The song may have impacted me emotionally because of the music, because of the beach and the summer imagery, or because of its relationship to the seasons, and to the place that was the North Carolina coast in the mid-80s. My mom lived for summer and for the yearly week at the beach, and for the pilgrimage that we made from small-town Pennsylvania, down the Eastern Shore of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia, to arrive finally at the Outer Banks.

In the summer of 1985, I did not know about the kind of love that Henley's speaker was singing about, and I understood the song only as an ode to summer directly connected to my own childhood experiences at the beach. I could understand the overt sentimentality of the song in terms of the music, and in terms of the plaintive and somehow impotent delivery of the lyrics, but I wasn't old enough yet to apprehend the song in terms of its primary theme: loss, and, more specifically, loss of love.

In the strip mall ice cream parlor (there was no boardwalk in N.C.) behind the cottages where we stayed my take on "The Boys of Summer" included extratextual elements like the feeling of mint chocolate chip ice cream on my tongue, the vaguely coconutish smell of the girl behind the counter's suntan lotion, and the feeling of normalcy that the week at the beach lent momentarily to an otherwise hectic childhood. Indeed, my prototype experience with the song reflected a simple nostalgia for childhood experience at the shore. There is nothing in the song's narrative to cue such a reaction, rather I likely picked up on the song's essential atmosphere and substituted a set of mnemonic registers that fit, and that I could relate to somehow emotionally, for the lost love that Henley's speaker is dealing with.

In a conversation with my mom nearly twenty years later about the song's video, I recalled the little boy playing drums, and I was oblivious to the teenage girl painting her nails on her bed and preparing to go out and break somebody's heart. This context-dependent and experientially-governed notion of memory is key to the fact that my identification with the song was centered on something I could relate to: the boy and the drums. Similarly, my mom brought her own experiences to bear on the video, and on the song more specifically, and, as a member of Henley's generation and target demographic, she was able to experience the song in such a way that all of the narrative cues made sense. Nonetheless, I walked away from the song with the tools needed to feel it later because the semaphores are slippery, and because I adapted and unknowingly substituted the geography of the North Carolina coast as a revisable marker that would later point to the girl, and/or to the coast, for the 'original' song's girl. Because of this mnemonic process, the ideas girl/coast are somehow unnaturally close in my mind.

<sup>13</sup> The listener is unlikely to hear the Dead in this context without thinking of the Summer of Love, 1967, and of how much things in America have changed since then. This reference serves as a way of delineating collective cultural memory as a backdrop for the individual act of remembering. The listener sees not just a narrative of their own life experience when faced with the Dead reference, they see the singer engaged in the act of remembering as well. Henley was a founding member of the Eagles, a band whose country-inflected pop achieved a grotesque level of radio play and commercial success that continues to this day. Somewhere on earth "Hotel California" is always playing. But, in the mid-80s, Don Henley was a fallen radio god who was attempting a comeback and aging at the same rate as his listeners.

Similarly, by 1985, the Grateful Dead were no longer musically relevant. The line "Don't look back / You can never look back" comes then as a plea for forward progress on the part of the listener. Henley is loosely of the same musical generation as the Dead, but he stakes his fate on the future, whereas the Dead relied on nostalgia for a collective and heavily self-mythologized past to propel their extensive summer tours into the 80s. Similarly, Henley's primary demographic, the Baby Boomers, were watching summer slide away as quickly as Henley was, and were grappling with the passage of time, and with their own memories of summers past. Boomers immersed in the dominate Yuppie culture of the 80s likely would have reacted to the "dead head sticker on a Cadillac" with a mixture both of disdain and longing, as they recognized that part of their lives was passing for good, at least literally. And it is in this conflicted reaction that the original song derives considerable emotional power because it highlights questions of nostalgia and of memory.

In "The Boys of Summer" Henley highlights the fact that our experiences, and our relationship to time, are somehow organized through our experiences with music. "Dead Head" is a cue to the listener that Henley, too, is haunted by a particular historical context: the 60s. If the 80s were a reaction to the 60s lifestyle for Henley's listener, then they were a checked or measured reaction that ends up somewhat bittersweet because careerism, child rearing, and the responsibilities of adulthood during the Reagan years ran counter to all that summer entailed as expressed by Henley.

<sup>14</sup> When hearing the original song, how do listeners deal with their own desires to access memories of similar summers? How do listeners not get stuck in a myth pit of their own summertime memories of a love tied to the changing of the seasons? The answer is that "The Boys of Summer's" primary narrative ritualizes nostalgia. For the listener to be content with their radios on in the 80s, and with the shift in dominate cultural norms since the 60s, they must make peace symbolically with their past and keep their reflective drive to remember in check. In "The Boys of Summer" the listener hears nostalgia reenacted in all of its glory. We can see a suntanned woman, we can smell the cocoa butter and iodine, and we can see the rag top of the Cadillac thrown back. The cover version, though, obliterates the

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possibility of the song as catharsis and encourages us to wallow in memory like Kelvin in *Solaris*, because of the fact that it posits both multiple pasts, and infinitely revisable futures, governed both by past listening experiences and future encounters with/revisions of the narrative.

<sup>15</sup> “The Boys of Summer” video was shot in grainy black and white and includes multiple crosscuts in the spirit of original MTV production values. More importantly, rather than serving as concert footage or as shots of Henley posturing cosmetically, it features a storyline, and visual action, that is structured somewhat differently from the song’s primary narrative. The video is a montage of related, but chronologically fragmented, narratives and it includes characters who are distinctly different from those given agency in the song proper. The result of this is that the characters in the video are engaged in the composite narrative as well, and they open the narrative up further through contributing to the virtual dialog.

As it starts Henley is walking down an empty seaside street. But the video also features the little boy with a stoic look on his face practicing drums, and scenes of an adult man and woman engaged first in conversation, and then in liquor-fueled conflict. Additionally, the video makes use of a super-imposed target fading in and out that is reminiscent of home movies during the heyday of 8mm. The video’s aesthetic reflects the broken black and white despair of the song’s lyric action. But, in featuring an isolated Henley as an older adult, the boy drummer, and the adults-playing-grown-up scene of conflict in crosscut, it represents all of the phases of life as if they happen not chronologically, but at once. In its video, too, the song is self conscious of the process of memory. Finally, there is a beach scene in the video that features a couple running towards the surf and holding hands. It is returned to as a sort of refrain, and it serves as a positive or revisionist interlude that reflects both a potential past, and future, as seen through the rose-colored glasses of the speaker’s mind’s eye. Stylistically and thematically, this part of the video alludes to the beach scene in *From Here to Eternity* and opens up an additional narrative thread.

<sup>16</sup> A friend of mine recently suggested that the single kiss means “you’re dead to me”.

<sup>17</sup> In the summer of 1997, Brody’s “The Boys of Summer”, and my experience with this version of the song at this point in my life, was colored by my experiences with the original version in the 80s. In fact, I could not read the cover as a discrete entity. Instead, it was inflected or haunted by the original, and by its similarities and slight differences to Henley’s song.

<sup>18</sup> I’m not quite sure how to read the presence of both Springsteen and “Let’s Get It On”, as performed by Jack Black, in *High Fidelity* within the context of this paper (or within the context of my life). Things are further troubled if I listen to the *High Fidelity* soundtrack while writing this paper as it includes a cover of the Velvet Underground’s “Sweet Nothing”, which was also covered by Phish, and which threatens to open up a whole other narrative thread that involves Pittsburg, and that nearly intersected this one a few pages ago.

<sup>19</sup> As a quasi-adult, I felt “Someday I’m gonna get you back / I’m gonna show you what I’m made of” differently. I knew a little something about tanned thighs and lost love at this point in my life, and I could hear this version of the song in a way that I couldn’t have as a kid. But rather than personify the loss, rather than give it a name like Kate or Sandy or Jenn, I was able to respond to the nostalgic drive in the cover version of the song by being nostalgic both for my life’s narrative experiences with the original song, and, more predictably, for lost love. It’s not that hearing Brody’s version of “The Boys of Summer” made me want to listen to the original. In fact, the opposite is true. In retrospect, Henley’s version seemed sentimental to a fault and too cleanly produced and clearly enunciated to be credible. Henley’s delivery makes the listener think that he’s at home writing and bleeding all over the page in despair. But the song’s production is crystalline and too poppy, and the listener can’t help but feel that if it hurt so much then some of the hurt would be reflected stylistically in the song. In contrast, Brody’s version of the song makes “The Boys of Summer” feel like death. And, in this regard, it is almost more in line with what Henley’s speaker was feeling. There is irony in the fact that the cover version of the song is somehow more fully actualized than the original song’s speaker’s vision.

Hearing the cover version of the song made me want to quantify and revisit my own memories connected with the original song. Brody took me back to the N.C. shore and back to Henley’s black and white video, and back to my mom walking on the beach in the morning and crying because we were leaving for home in the afternoon. I didn’t understand her tears, but I understood the emotion behind them. With this version of this song, I am able to refigure my own memories in a manner that makes them easier to order or more logical. Again, the song’s lattice offers me another level of semaphores on which to hang my own memories. The cover version of the song allows me to revisit my own extra-narrative experiences with the original song, and bring them into the narrative as a sort of virtual reality or directed memory.

In a sense the listener creates their own mythology around a song, and around their life experiences with it, and the event of listening becomes somehow liturgical, in that the listener brings God down into the congregation that is themselves, the song, and their memories associated with the song so as to keep the universe spinning as the narrative perpetuates itself. On this level, the listener’s own narrative infringes on “The Boys of Summer’s” primary narrative to the point where it nearly obliterates it. However, in experiencing the cover version of the song as an older listener, I am able to connect my own narrative with the song and then reread the original on-the-fly, as I am hearing the cover, in a whole new way. When I hear the Brody version of the song, it’s a song of my generation, but I am able to understand the song that I heard at 11 as rendered more relevant to my own experience. None of these levels or narrative events can be made discrete again; instead, they are woven together and

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intersect at synapses or points of particularly dense and emotive memory. The features in the various takes on the narrative work together to produce a narrative that is transcendent and exists only in the listener's mind.

<sup>20</sup> The girl in the Saab at the beginning of the paper.

<sup>21</sup> In terms of "when" versus "someday I'm gonna get you back", the Atari's reverse the doubt of Henley and of Keith Cucuzza, and seek to revise our narrative's history. And this ambiguity is, at this point in this narrative, welcome.