

Shouting Into the Void: I Need You To Know Sean Nelson's Make Good Choices

written by Katie Darby Mullins | June 10, 2018



With almost every class I teach, I take an informal poll: first, who is your favorite musician? I would say at least 70% of my students can answer that. When I ask favorite album, it gets a little trickier. "Well, I don't listen to whole records," they'll start, and when I ask if that's because they listen to the radio, that's not it. "Nothing on the radio appeals to me," one student who had listed Fall Out Boy as their favorite musician said.

Fall Out Boy is on the radio.

The fragmentation of the way we listen to music— streaming systems (which, by the way, I partake in and love), algorithms like Pandora or even Spotify,

and perhaps most insidious for my students (who are less than a decade younger than me, often), YouTube. And I wish I could say this is one of those essays where I am going to tell you how wrong that is and how we need to go back to the way things used to be, but despite the several thousand records I predict are sitting across from me, I don't actually believe that. People say music used to be better— that's not necessarily true, either. It's just that there is so much talent now that it's impossible to keep up with brilliant, unsigned acts. I know: I write for a music festival, Underwater Sunshine, which is an offshoot of another music festival. There are always so many more musicians that we can showcase who absolutely deserve the attention.

So why do I *need* you to be able to talk about Sean Nelson's brilliant solo record *Make Good Choices*? Maybe I should back up. Remember 1998? Sean Nelson— and his band Harvey Danger— were ubiquitous with their song "Flagpole Sitta" (Yes, you know it— "(Baaaaa) I'm not sick, but I'm not well/ And I'm so hot/ 'Cos I'm in hell"). It was a song critiquing a culture of irony— and, perhaps...well, ironically— it was picked up on by the exact people it made fun

of, and the rest of their singles (“Sad Sweetheart of the Rodeo,” full of some fantastic theatricality in the vocals, “Private Helicopter,” and to a lesser extent, “Little Round Mirrors”) were overlooked. They had another hit with a cover of the English Beat’s “Save it For Later,” and it’s also phenomenal. In fact, Harvey Danger doesn’t have a bad song. Their B-sides are great. If I had to guess, I’d say I like their demos more than I like most people’s final product. They push wordplay, literary references, vulnerability, and a seething anger and frustration that almost spontaneously combusts when you turn it up loud enough.

Eventually, Nelson would go on to be the editor for *The Stranger* in Seattle and write a number of incredibly important political, societal, and musical critiques. Though I feel like I’ve summarized some of the most important writing in my life without even stopping to tell you *why* it matters, I am trying to stay focused. Because if I don’t get to the point, I am in danger of you continuing to live your life without listening to *Make Good Choices*.

Music is a uniting force in a way that almost nothing else is. Movies and theatre bring people together, but you rarely see people go to a bar to recite all the words of a movie while they scroll across a screen. One of my favorite games to play with other music fans is, “What is your favorite Rolling Stones record, *Sticky Fingers* or the wrong answer?” Even those people rarely recognize that Nelson even released a record in 2013 on Really Records. How can we sit down and talk about the nuances— the best parts and the cleverness, the anxiety and the reality, all spilled across piano notes— if no one listens to it with me?

Now, you and I— we are friends. I’ve told you about some of the most important music in my life, and told you about my students. I gave you background on one of my favorite songwriters, which makes me vulnerable: Nelson’s lyrics aren’t the kind you can listen to without incorporating a sense of your own self in them. A year and a half ago, I had a stroke a few weeks after my 31st birthday, and what had already been one of my favorite songs— “Terminal Annex”— became even more important to me. With a slow burn beginning, Nelson, somehow already instinctively understanding volume levels and performance in a way that shakes me to the core, almost stage-whispers, “Take something beautiful now smash it to bits/ Save your little wheelchair empowerment films/ Save your swoons I’m spoke for/ It isn’t pretty to think so, but I can’t feign interest now/ I’m dreaming of the fistfight I never got into/ Thinking of all the mean shit I wish I’d said to you,” the song builds on its own momentum, and by the time Nelson reaches the screamed conclusion, “You want ego? I will show you ego/ I’m jealous now,” it’s exhausting. But it’s also true.

Do you remember the first time you felt a tuning fork in your hand, the resonance in it? That’s what happens with Nelson’s writing. And now that you know the lines that strike me hardest— the ones full of rage, posturing, anxiety, and literary references— you know me better than some of the people I know in real life do. We have to trust each other now, because I can’t keep telling people one at a time to listen to this record and know they are going to do it. I want this record, five years old now, to explode like a mushroom cloud, to be downloaded into everybody’s brains, to be something I can bring

up with a stranger at a coffee shop and know they studied the lyrics the way I did: like a map to some unknown treasure.

So you and I, we're at that coffee shop now, and it starts. After a moment of talking, the piano intro ushers in one of my favorite songs of all time, "The World Owes Me a Living (And I Intend to Collect)." Because you've listened to the record and somehow understand what I like best in Nelson, you smile and say, "I know you like this one."

I don't just like this one. As someone who has always driven myself as far and as hard as I can, I recognize myself in this song in some unflattering ways. This song is a part of me. I have to assume— I'm sorry, this has been such a one-sided introduction— that you also understand what it means to be an academic, or at least what it means to feel imposter syndrome. So how can you— we— resist a record that starts with the lines:

*Nobody listens very well
They only want to tell you
When you're being self-destructive*

*Nobody understands the pressure you are under
No wonder why
You aren't more productive*

It doesn't take long for us to smile at each other. Of course, these lines are packed with sarcasm. Not every line in the song is— but the sarcasm here is an indictment of "busy" culture, the idea that whoever is busiest and most anxious "wins," and somehow, despite the fact that we've both bought into that, we understand that the gentle prodding in the introduction is a kindness, a soft way to enter a record full of both deep introspection and playfulness, somber, slow pieces and upbeat pieces. This is the perfect song to begin any record on. Perhaps you are a poet. I'm a poet, too. I don't always write metrically, but here, I want to talk about the rhyme scheme, always. I love the rhymes "make provisions" with "bad decisions," "inclination to" and "accept an invitation to," and "honor" with "goner." But perhaps the best part of listening to a Sean Nelson record is that his heroes— Harry Nilsson, Joni Mitchell, David Bowie— all knew how to use their voices as an instrument that could add tension, especially against whatever their primary instrument was. As Nelson's piano part builds, he says, almost on the edge of his high range, almost on the edge of our seats:

*Nobody listens very carefully
Nobody's ever there for me
Not even when they try to be*

*Nobody listens very closely
Except to diagnose me
Second guess, or presuppose me
Adios, mi corazon*

And while we have gone back and forth, tonight, I'll be drinking some kind of white tea (this is becoming more vivid, sharing the record with you: the shop

is building itself in the background, brick by brick. There's a fireplace with no fire lit, though it's cold enough for one. I hold my warm cup with both hands, even though since the stroke, I still can't feel my right hand)—we'll agree that this, this might not be sarcasm. There's something here that feels a little too close to the bone. How did Nelson sneak up on us? He always does. We should be better prepared. (By now, you've listened to all of the Harvey Danger records, including the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, so I can trust you understand the way he writes.)

What are you drinking? Espresso? It's so late for that. But as I'm watching the sun go down out the window, "Born Without a Heart" starts and I know that I probably should have something strong myself to get through this one. It didn't used to scare me so bad, "but listen to it a few times in the hospital on morphine," I tell you. In my hands, the drink changes, some kind of latte. It will do.

For a moment, I wonder if you are my friend Scott. Your face is blurry, but Scott would understand why a song that starts with, "Play me a song on that old guitar/ That will not stay in tune/ And later on we can talk about how you are/ And what you're going through," would be a difficult listen. We always have to ease into a conversation. You don't have to be Scott, but it might be easier if you are. There's not a line in this song that isn't convicting about the way we engage with other people— or don't engage. You and I sit silently, letting the words wash over us:

*I know the hell that you call home
I know you're stranded by the phone
I know that we all die alone and afraid
But we don't have to live that way*

Maybe this is convicting, Scott— I'm sorry, you're him now, his soft eyes and smile— because we are so willing to hole ourselves up and hibernate, even from the people we love. I remember from the hospital asking my husband to call you and tell you what was going on, and you got the news to so many other people. I was scared you'd find out some other way, and not quite know what to do with my being sick— Big Sick—

But we don't have to live that way. We know it. We're lucky enough that we have people we love so much, who love us so much. My husband Andy took such good care of me, playing David Bowie and Sean Nelson intermittently, even though I think some of these songs haunted him.

I won't go song by song because I trust you. I know you've listened to the whole record and you know it, down to the strangely beautiful, broken down Badfinger cover, "I'll Be the One," a song that really, I expect you to have known going in. You and I both pause in the conversation, though, when in the title track, we hear the lines,

*A wise old man was once heard to say,
"The things that always cause us the most pain
Are those from which we are always
The least prepared to walk away"*

We've all been in the situation where we weren't making great choices, and as Nelson's narrator keeps encouraging himself to make good choices— he keeps going back. You and I, we understand that. Who are you now? You look so familiar. This song would have been harder for me to love if I'd not met my husband, if I was still as cynical as I once was. Now, at least, I can appreciate the wordplay and the fun lines, too: "Nothing is more charming than a narcissist with whom you've just agreed/ Make good choices, thank you very much indeed."

Please, please don't just read this. Listen to Sean Nelson sing it. I keep saying that I trust you, but sometimes I worry that I'm screaming into the void, that no one will ever really talk about this record with me, not in a way that is satisfying. All I want to do is go through every line and talk about how much I love it, how the rhyme scheme is sometimes tripled and quadrupled, how the piano is 75% melody, 25% percussion, and that Nelson knows how to use his voice theatrically or percussively himself, between his gorgeous high range and his knowing, confident lower range.

We both smile through the end of the song, "You said that basically, most people hate their friends/ And I said, "It depends,"/ I have so, so much I want to tell you/ And no where to begin." Of course, there is an understanding that the good choices— they all go out the window when the person you can't get out of your mind is there. For me, it's never a person. You know that. You've always known: I wanted to be Sherlock Holmes, Veronica Mars— some kind of PI, a renegade, someone who knew things no one else wanted known. Even if that meant I wasn't making good choices. You're a stranger again, and I am drinking apple cider. It feels like fall. I make sure there's no alcohol in mine— not with the medication I'm on, not since the stroke. It smells like campfires.

I let that feeling wash over me for a while. I miss that feeling: the warmth, the camaraderie. You know that's why you have to listen to this record, right? So that we can somehow go back to that feeling we had when we were young and music was everything? Because this record came out when I was very much an adult and I still got that feeling. It was like every nerve in my body was shooting off fireworks. Now, I have one whole side that can't feel, and sometimes I still get goosebumps on that side when I listen to this record. Can you explain that? I wonder for a moment: are you my physical therapist now? Is Andy here, watching? I know he's listened. He never makes me be excited all by myself. This record is five years old. The only way I can keep up the momentum of my excitement is for more people to hear it, for it to become a household name. Please.

I always laugh my way through the end of the record, and I'm grateful it's paced the way it is. You seem relieved, too. We need to relax after songs like "Advance and Retreat." So we smile when one of my favorites— "The Price of Doing Business"— comes on and reveals my favorite catty line, "Oh, congratulations on your great success/ It's comforting to see you're still a mess/ (Remind me not to say that out loud)".

"How does he sing it where you can hear the parentheses," I wonder, but it's more of a statement. Nelson just has this way. This command. I feel as though

I can see him throwing his head over his shoulder to get the line away from him.

You smile. "Some punctuation is inherent— it's ingrained in us." That's true. Grammar is so important, and you know that. You *are* a poet. Or a songwriter. Or just someone who has studied the way writing works and manipulates people into feeling things even when they literally, biologically, should not be having a reaction.

"Hey Millicent" has some of the best three-syllable rhymes of all time, but it seems almost like a fun word game until we hit "Stupid & 25 (The Incredibly Sad Shuffle)". Since you've actually heard the record, I don't have to say it first— you smile and say, "What a title," and who am I to disagree? Despite how much I love the back half of the record, I'm always getting a little itchy for "Kicking Me Out of the Band," which, despite the darkness, has always been one of my favorite songs. I have a whisky in my hand now, and I'm not thinking about the stroke medication. Maybe I don't need it anymore. Maybe it's 2013 and it's the first time I'm listening. Maybe this time, I'm alone, and even though the song is full of humor, I don't need you here, just for a moment.

I let the warmth— again, why is the record so associated with warmth for me? With safe fires, not the ones you have to run from or towards to get your loved ones?— wash over me when Nelson begins to build the rhythm of the song with hard, Germanic, words. Perhaps what I like most about this song is it sounds like the beginning of every band— or at least the romanticized version, the version we were promised when Motley Crue and Guns & Roses had private jets and did cocaine off of groupies:

*It started in a council flat in northern England
1999, two wasters on a mission
Two guitars, two hits of acid, two chords and the truth
To maybe one day write a single
Was the extent of our ambition,
But that was then...*

You came back. Is it a mirror? It's so frustrating, sometimes, feeling like I need to hand copies of this record to everyone I meet. It's a funny song, sort of, but it's the reality of what happens when success, which is the true enemy of imposter syndrome, a theme that runs through the record, hits. What do you do then? You smile. Once you've succeeded, the goal has to change, or you have to fill that hole inside you with something else. Maybe it's drugs. In this song, it's drugs.

But you are willing to wait with me through the lines like "So I blew off a month of shows/ It didn't please the fans/ That's why they're kicking me out of the band" to get to the mind-blowing ending of a record that is about the worst insecurity, the scariest anxiety:

*Keith, Kurt, John, Richard, Lou, and Elliott
Don't talk to me like I'm an idiot
They made their greatest records high*

*If they can do it, why can't I?
You're just afraid to try
Like you're afraid of everything
You're afraid of everything*

The record actually ends on the line, "You're afraid of everything." This narrator might be trying to convince the rest of the band that the drugs aren't a problem, but you and I know something bigger is happening here. From the posturing of the beginning of the record—literally, "The World Owes Me a Living"—to "you're afraid of everything." That's what this record is about. Sure, the narrator says to make good choices. He also says that we all die alone and afraid, but we don't have to live that way. This is a record about fear.

I'm trying to be honest with you. I need you to listen to this record because sometimes I'm still scared. Sometimes, I still wake up and hear the machines beeping. Sometimes I wake up and for a minute I think I can feel my right side but it's only mind-numbing nerve pain, which for some reason, is completely active. Now, I recognize your face. Now you are my husband, and you've got your arm around my shoulder, and you flip the record back to the first track, my favorite song, the one where I can laugh at my lesser angels, not the one where I have to admit it's true: that I'm afraid of everything.