

Variations on a Theme: Pancake Island

written by Erick Sáenz | December 5, 2016



*

Thursday nights we'd all gather in front of the campus market; beers overstuffed in bags. Most nights there were more at the beginning than the end, riders electing to search for parties instead of drunkenly pedal downtown. We knew who they were, talked shit about them not being true "killa beez." Although the ride changed course often, I knew the streets by heart. Could tell you exactly when you'd have to stand and pump hard, the cool air at your back. I knew where the heat pockets were, a stark contrast to the cold night. Everyone knew that downtown was our ultimate destination, stop to eat a slice of pizza and drink now slightly warmer beer from our bags. The ride was relatively easy, an unlit path stretching perpendicular to the sea. Some of us would get caught up in the sites, stopping to breathe in salt air and watch the dark blur of crashing waves. It was a free for all once downtown, we'd all split up with the common goal of disrupting local traffic and wasted college kids. The ride home was always somehow easier, now a little more drunk, time non-existent. All moving together in a pack, quietly enjoying the tour through Fort Ord.

*

The next morning we were all hungover and wondering why the fuck there were pumpkin guts all over our driveway and in the middle of the street. Everyone in the house congregated in the tiny space that was our kitchen, sipping coffee and piecing together the night. There was definitely a band from Canada, 5 rowdy kids somewhere in between all of our ages who drank a lot more than we did. No one was 100% sure who contacted them, let alone convince them to play our garage. It was (((LOUD)))... and almost immediately shut down by the R.A. across the street. People were hanging from rafters, jumping up and down frantically; a sea of costumed college kids suffering from a cacophony of sound and alcohol. I was in a cow suit, urging party-goers to

"squeeze my udders." (the only photographic evidence of this lived briefly on the walls of another punk house on campus before disappearing somewhere to the midwest, assumedly forever). Someone was freestyling clumsily on the porch bumming cigarettes. Allegedly somebody was trying to sell cocaine in the backyard. After the cops came, people wandered off. I left to go down the street and hang with the water-polo girls. They smoked weed and talked and I shared a grilled cheese with one of them. Too many *scenes missing,* as my housemate would say. My last memory: the stars above & laughter & whiskey & pumpkins flying in the air between panes of fog.

*

My first release was a band from New Mexico, young punx who perfectly captured the early 2000's "screamo" sound. I had just moved (back) to Monterey after a short stint back home in L.A. Figured I *might as well* get a teaching credential, live with my best friend in a city I loved. It was a 7", one 6 minute song. The lyrics dealt with good consent, the music equally dissonant and melodic. I was in love at first note. My best friend did most of the ground work; getting the master recording, sending it to get pressed, etc. By the time I moved in, we were eagerly waiting for the boxes of vinyl to be delivered at our doorstep. The band was handling screen printing covers, we were responsible for screening the "b" side with an image of a flower and the words "summer forever." I remember how long it took to burn the screen without access to a real print shop. We tried and failed several times before getting it right: expose under the glaring sun, wash, repeat. When we finally got it right, felt like victory. Some of them got fucked up, screened on the wrong side so that the song would be impossible to listen to. The records were laid out everywhere, consumed the house; became part of it. I can never forget that first release; the memories that will always be connected.

*

I taught a block period: Transitional English. Plus I had my own college classes in the evenings; mostly just an hour of people venting about their teaching assignments. The block period consisted of English Learner students ranging from grades 9-11. The thing was, the class was a wide range of kids; some fresh from another country and others long abandoned by "the system." Students who didn't have a good command of the English language, and were being left behind because of it. They'd never test out of the class, only be shuffled along each year and then graduated; out of sight // out of mind. This left a lot of kids with a bad taste in their mouths. They were "troublemakers," "gang-related," had various mental health issues. I'd witness panic attacks and burst of violence each day. Somehow they all knew the class was bullshit, and weren't willing to play along. That made the two-hours especially difficult. It was virtually impossible to plan a 120 minute lesson that would keep their interest. Discipline was a mess, something I didn't want to deal with either out of laziness or guilt. It never seemed right to yell, send them to the office. As if misbehaving was their fault. Most had gotten to the point of being unfazed by detentions; just another mark on their "permanent record." I had to pretend, go through the motions of Shakespeare & grammar like nothing was wrong. But we both knew.

Sometimes I still think about them sprawled throughout the classroom, wonder who made it and who didn't.

*

There were days when the sun shined so bright it was a shame to go to class. A beach close by, untouched by the student population and tourists in the area. My housemate would attach his bicycle trailer, pack his little dog into the nook with some blankets. I'd be in charge of beers, grab a book. The route took us through campus, past buildings and wandering college kids. After the tunnel it opened up; sand dunes and an endless gale. We'd lock up at the top of the dirt road, hike down through the ice plant and shrubs. Suddenly it opened up, infinity loop of incandescent blue. Most of the time we sat stunned by what lay before us, that reminder that the world is big and we are small. Phoebe would run wild, stopping only to smell various things in the sand. It was easy to be envious of her, the carelessness and abandon. I was ready to finish school, but not to move on.

*

It started off on the mixtapes we'd exchange, "summer forever" scrawled on the inner label. The music was mostly punk that we had discovered together or separately during the semester, silly interludes in between. Filler for the 225 miles that separated us those 3 months.

*

By the end, I was exhausted. Things had changed; we were all wrapped up in our own existences, hardly hung out with each other anymore. One housemate moved out a week early, wanted to just be done with college. We stayed behind, compelled to make the most of it.

The last night home we wanted to go down in style: a fire sale (everything must go!) We emptied everything from the apartment to the backyard, and then when that was full, to the periphery. We had been drinking all day: now found ourselves lighting a barrel fire, burning things indiscriminately. People came and scavenged; a lamp with a busted bulb, couch with beer stain. It became a party of sorts.

If we were leaving, it would be on our terms.

*

Before Pancake Island there was an unusually cold winter. I was a few months away from a Bachelor's degree (see: uncertain future). I had quit my job, choosing my sanity over capitalism. We had a scam at a local market, knew they left their produce outside overnight. It became our weekly ritual to scavenge, felt it was our duty. We'd enter the cold chamber of his van, blasting the heat as high as it would go. The soundtrack was always the same; Unbroken's "Life. Love. Regret." Something about breakdowns. The highway would be abandoned, save for us & the fog & the blackness & churning sea. Apples had priority, then whatever seasonal vegetables laid in piles. Sometimes we'd venture to the back where pallets waited to be unloaded;

coconut water, boxed bananas, tortilla chips. All for the taking. The old adage of “eyes being bigger than stomachs” was certainly true, but we didn’t subscribe to proverbs. Driving home we’d eat sublimely sweet apples, listen to catchy hooks. The path somehow brighter than before.

*

(a suggested accompanying playlist)

Wu-Tang Clan – “Triumph” *from Wu-Tang Forever*

Raein – “Traccia 05” *from Ognio nuovo inizio*

Mouthbreather – “Dropping cylinders” *from Thank you for your patience*

Unbroken – “In the name of progression” *from Life. Love. Regret*

Loma Prieta – “Trilogy 2: planar analysis” *from Last City*

Arches – “Carcharodon carcharias” *from 17:48*

Street Smart Cyclist – “Hoods up” *from 7”*

Teenage Cool Kids – “Sleeper hold” *from Queer salutations*

Graf Orlock – “50 year storm” *from Destination time yesterday*

Burial Year – “White wash” *from Pestilence*

Joan of Arc – “Just pack or unpack” *from Boo Human!*

The Holy Shroud – “Sinners and sailors” *from Ghost repeaters*

Funeral Diner – “Lie in headlights” *from split with zann*

Cease Upon the Capitol – “Untitled Track 3” *from Untitled 2007*

Jawbreaker – “Do you still hate me” *from 24 Hour revenge therapy*

Shinobu – “Zwishenzug” – *from split 7’*

Deers! – “Parts two and three” *from unreleased 7”*

*

After Pancake Island there was a dry heat & dogged sense that something special had happened, burned into memory.

Forever.

*

prologue

I've wanted to write this zine for a long time, but could never figure out how to do it in a non-nostalgic way. Those 1.5 years at Pancake Island felt like an eternity, and I will always look back on them fondly as some of the best days of my life. I think that writing can be nostalgic in a way that conveys emotion without sounding too cheesy and convoluted. I hope I achieved that here.

Much love: Ian, Jonathan, Michele (with one l), Sam, and Zach.

Thanks to the bands who played the apartment (despite nobody attending): Adobe Homes, Deers!, Black Ships, Home is Colored Gold, and Matsuri.

A bag full of beers for all the "killa beez" riders.

...and last but not least 2739 Princeton Court for serving as homebase for all these stories.

previously self-released into a zine for an event in San Jose called Summer of Discontent.

Music can hold enormous power in memories and experiences, transporting us instantly to an age, location, or person. What sonic joys, mysteries, disbelief, and clarity have you experienced? Identify songs of influence in your life and explore them like variations on a theme, melding syntax and song structure, recalling the seriousness or levity that accompanies. Whether it's an account of when a specific song first entered your life, the process of learning to play a song, teaching someone a song, experiencing the same song in different places as it weaves through your life, unbelievable radio timing, sharing songs with those in need, tracking the passing down of songs, creative song analysis, music as politics, etc, I am interested in those ineffable moments and welcoming submissions of your own variations on a theme, as drawn from your life's soundtrack. Please email submissions to meganentropy@gmail.com and keep an eye out for others' [Variations](#).

("song" is a broad phrase: could be a pop song, a traditional tune, a symphony, commercial jingles, a hummed lullaby, 2nd grade recorder class horror stories, etc)