
TORTURING THE SAXOPHONE

—
ROBERT CRUMB to MATS GUSTAFSSON
2014

In 2014, celebrated Swedish free jazz saxophonist Mats Gustafsson sent a copy of his forthcoming album to one of his idols, the legendary comic book artist, record collector and musician Robert Crumb. Gustafsson's upcoming record was a compilation of his experimental interpretations of some jazz classics by people such as Duke Ellington, Lars Gullin, and the Ayler brothers, and he sought Crumb's opinion. Crumb, baffled, pulled no punches and responded with this brutally honest letter. In honour of the critique, Gustafsson named his next album *Torturing the Saxophone*, and proudly reprinted the letter amongst the liner notes.

Gustafsson:

I finally gave a listen to those LPs and the CD you sent me, of your own saxophone playing and some Swedish modern jazz. I gotta tell you, on the cover of the CD of your sax playing, which is black and has no text on it, I wrote in large block letters, in silver ink, "Torturing the Saxophone—Mats Gustafsson." I just totally fail to find anything enjoyable about this, or to see what this has to do with music as I understand it, or what in God's name is going on in your head that you want to make such noises on a musical instrument. Quite frankly, I was kind of shocked at what a negative, unpleasant experience it was, listening to it. I had to take it off long before it reached the end. I just don't get it. I don't understand what it is about.

You actually go on TOUR with that stuff. WOW. People actually... sit... and... LISTEN... to that. I mean, they voluntarily go to the place, maybe even PAY... PAY to hear that stuff. And then they sit there, quietly, politely... and LISTEN. Unbelievable. I should go myself sometime and see this. Witness it with my own eyes.

I don't say these things with the intention to insult you. You seem to be a perfectly nice, civilized guy with a good sense of humor. I am speaking the plain truth of my reaction to the records and CD you sent. That this noise could give anyone any aesthetic pleasure is beyond my comprehension, truly. Is this the logical end of improvisational music? Is this where it ends up? Where does it go from this point? Is there any audience for this "free jazz" besides other guys who play it and maybe their wives who must patiently endure it?

I just don't get it. Am I too un-hip? Am I a square from Delaware? A hick from Battle Crick? A shmuck from Keokuck?

—R. Crumb

Facing page:
Cartoonist Robert Crumb, 1985

FOR LOVE AND HONOR

—
HOLLIS FRAMPTON to MoMA
January 7th, 1973

In December of 1972, Donald Richie, then film curator at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, wrote to artist Hollis Frampton and suggested that they organise a retrospective of his work at this most prestigious of museums.

To an artist of any standing, this would be a tempting offer; however, Frampton took issue with one particular line in the proposal, a single detail of Richie's which rendered the suggestion entirely unattractive: "It is all for love and honor and no money is included at all..." Unwilling to work without financial reward, Frampton responded at length with a rousing letter that has since become legendary in the art world for reasons which are plain to see.

It's fair to assume that a fee was later agreed: MoMA's Hollis Frampton retrospective ran from March 8–12, 1973.

DEAR ONE

—
RACHEL CARSON to DOROTHY FREEMAN
September 10th, 1963

Published in 1962, *Silent Spring* was a pioneering book that alerted the public to the devastating harm being caused by fertilisers and pesticides – a hugely important exposé which, in the eyes of many, triggered the modern environmental movement. In 1960, as she worked on the book, its author marine biologist Rachel Carson was diagnosed with the cancer that would eventually, in 1964, take her life. Seven months before she died, with her health failing, Carson spent a morning at the coast with her dear friend Dorothy Freeman, watching the migration of monarch butterflies; that afternoon, she wrote her friend a letter.

September 10, 1963

Dear One,

This is a postscript to our morning at Newagen, something I think I can write better than say. For me it was one of the loveliest of the summer's hours, and all the details will remain in my memory: that blue September sky, the sounds of the wind in the spruces and surf on the rocks, the gulls busy with their foraging, alighting with deliberate grace, the distant views of Griffiths Head and Todd Point, today so clearly etched, though once half seen in swirling fog. But most of all I shall remember the monarchs, that unhurried westward drift of one small winged form after another, each drawn by some invisible force. We talked a little about their migration, their life history. Did they return? We thought not; for most, at least, this was the closing journey of their lives.

But it occurred to me this afternoon, remembering, that it had been a happy spectacle, that we had felt no sadness when we spoke of the fact that there would be no return. And rightly—for when any living thing has come to the end of its life cycle we accept that end as natural.

For the Monarch, that cycle is measured in a known span of months. For ourselves, the measure is something else, the span of which we cannot know. But the thought is the same: when that intangible cycle has run its course it is a natural and not unhappy thing that a life comes to an end.

That is what those brightly fluttering bits of life taught me this morning. I found a deep happiness in it—so I hope, may you. Thank you for this morning.

Rachel

I'LL RAP YOUR HEAD WITH A
RATCHET

—
STEVE ALBINI to NIRVANA
1992

Although they only existed for a mere seven years and released just three albums, Nirvana were a band of immeasurable influence in the music world thanks in no small part to "Smells Like Teen Spirit", a single track on Nevermind, their second album. It was this song that brought them out into the open, going on to sell millions of copies and win countless awards, its iconic video seemingly broadcast on MTV

every 20 minutes for the next six months. A year after Nevermind's release, the band got to work on what would be their final album, In Utero, produced by Steve Albini, outspoken engineer extraordinaire. Shortly before they formally agreed on his involvement, Albini wrote to Nirvana and laid bare his philosophy in a pitch letter that is fascinating from start to end.

Kurt, Dave and Chris:

First let me apologize for taking a couple of days to put this outline together. When I spoke to Kurt I was in the middle of making a Fugazi album, but I thought I would have a day or so between records to sort everything out. My schedule changed unexpectedly, and this is the first moment I've had to go through it all. Apology Apology.

I think the very best thing you could do at this point is exactly what you are talking about doing : bang a record out in a couple of days, with high quality but minimal "production" and no interference from the front office bulletheads. If that is indeed what you want to do, I would love to be involved.

If, instead, you might find yourselves in the position of being temporarily indulged by the record company, only to have them yank the chain at some point (hassling you to rework songs/sequences/production, calling-in hired guns to "sweeten" your record, turning the whole thing over to some remix jockey, whatever...) then you're in for a bummer and I want no part of it.

I'm only interested in working on records that legitimately reflect the band's own perception of their music and existence. If you will commit yourselves to that as a tenet of the recording methodology, then I will bust my ass for you. I'll work circles around you. I'll rap your head in with a ratchet...

I have worked on hundreds of records (some great, some good, some horrible, a lot in the courtyard), and I have seen a direct correlation between the quality of the end result and the mood of the band throughout the process. If the record takes a long time, and everyone gets bummed and scrutinizes every step, then the recordings bear little resemblance to the live band, and the end result is seldom flattering. Making punk rock records is definitely a case where more "work" does not imply a better end result. Clearly you have learned this yourselves and appreciate the logic.

About my recording methodology and philosophy:

#1: Most contemporary engineers and producers see a record as a "project," and the band as only one element of the project. Further, they consider the recordings to be a controlled layering of specific sounds, each of which is under complete control from the moment the note is conceived through the final mix. If the band gets pushed around in the process of making a record, so be it; as long as the "project" meets with the approval of the fellow in control.

My approach is exactly the opposite.

I consider the band the most important thing, as the creative entity that spawned both the band's personality and style and as the social entity that exists 24 hours out of each day. I do not consider it my place to tell you what to do or how to play. I'm quite willing to let my opinions be heard (if I think the band is making beautiful progress or a heaving mistake, I consider it part of my job to tell them) but if the band decides to pursue something, I'll see that it gets done.

I like to leave room for accidents and chaos. Making a seamless record, where every note and syllable is in place and every bass drum beat is identical, is no trick. Any idiot with the patience and the budget to allow such foolishness can do it. I prefer to work on records that aspire to greater things, like originality, personality and enthusiasm. If every element of the music and dynamics of a band is controlled by click tracks, computers, automated mixes, gates, samplers and sequencers, then the record may not be incompetent, but it certainly won't be exceptional. It will also bear very little relationship to the live band, which is what all this hoey is supposed to be about.

#2: I do not consider recording and mixing to be unrelated tasks which can be performed by specialists with no continuous involvement. 99 percent of the sound of a record should be established while the basic take is recorded. Your experiences are specific to your records; but in my experience, remixing has never solved any problems that actually existed, only imaginary ones. I do not like remixing other engineer's recordings, and I do not like recording things for somebody else to remix. I have never been satisfied with either version of that methodology. Remixing is for talentless pussies who don't know how to tune a drum or point a microphone.

#3: I do not have a fixed gospel of stock sounds and recording techniques that I apply blindly to every band in every situation. You are a different band from any other band and deserve at least the respect of having your own tastes and concerns addressed. For example, I love the sound of a boomy drum kit (say a Gretsch or Camco) wide open in a big room, especially with a Bonhammy double-headed bass drum and a really painful snare drum. I also love the puke-inducing low end that comes off an old Fender Bassman or Ampeg guitar amp and the totally blown sound of an SVT with broken-in tubes. I also know that those sounds are inappropriate for some songs, and trying to force them is a waste of time. Predicating the recordings on my tastes is as stupid as designing a car around the upholstery. You guys need to decide and then articulate to me what you want to sound like so we don't come at the record from different directions.

#4: where we record the record is not as important as how it is recorded. If you have a studio you'd like to use, no hag. Otherwise, I can make suggestions. I have a nice 24-track studio in my house (Fugazi were just there, you can ask them how they rate it), and I'm familiar with most of the studios in the Midwest, the East coast and a dozen or so in the UK.

I would be a little concerned about having you at my house for the duration of the whole recording and mixing process (if only because you're celebrities, and I wouldn't want word getting out in the neighborhood and you guys having to put up with a lot of fan-style bullshit); it would be a fine place to mix the record though, and you can't beat the vittles.

If you want to leave the details of studio selection, lodgings, etc. up to me, I'm quite happy to sort all that stuff out. If you guys want to sort it out, just lay down the law.

My first choice for an outside recording studio would be a place called Pachyderm in Cannon Falls, Minnesota. It's a great facility with outstanding acoustics and a totally comfy architect's wet-dream mansion where the band lives during the recordings. This makes everything more efficient. Since everybody is there, things get done and decisions get made a lot faster than if people are out and about in a city someplace. There's also all the posh shit like a sauna and swimming pool and fireplaces and trout stream and 50 acres and like that. I've made a bunch of records there and I've always enjoyed the place. It's also quite inexpensive, considering how great a facility it is.

The only bummer about Pachyderm is that the owners and manager are not technicians, and they don't have a tech on call. I've worked there enough that I can fix just about anything that can go wrong, short of a serious electronic collapse, but I've got a guy that I work with a lot (Bob Weston) who's real good with electronics (circuit design, trouble shooting and building shit on the spot), so if we choose to do it there, he'll probably come along in my payroll, since he'd be cheap insurance if a power supply blows up or a serious failure occurs in the dead of winter 50 miles from the closest tech. He's a recording engineer also, so he can be doing some of the more mundane stuff (cataloging tapes, packing stuff up, fetching supplies) while we're chopping away at the record proper.

Some day I'm going to talk the Jesus Lizard into going up there and we'll have us a real time. Oh yeah, and it's the same Neve console the AC/DC album Back in Black was recorded and mixed on, so you know its just got to have the rock.

#5: Dough. I explained this to Kurt but I thought I'd better reiterate it here. I do not want and will not take a royalty on any record I record. No points. Period. I think paying a royalty to a producer or engineer is ethically indefensible. The band write the songs. The band play the music. It's the band's fans who buy the records. The band is responsible for whether it's a great record or a horrible record. Royalties belong to the band.

I would like to be paid like a plumber: I do the job and you pay me what it's worth. The record company will expect me to ask for a point or a point and a half. If we assume three million sales, that works out to 400,000 dollars or so. There's no fucking way I would ever take that much money. I wouldn't be able to sleep.

I have to be comfortable with the amount of money you pay me, but it's your money, and I insist that you be comfortable with it as well. Kurt suggested paying me a chunk which I would consider full payment, and then if you really thought I deserved more, paying me another chunk after you'd had a chance to live with the album for a while. That would be fine, but probably more organizational trouble than it's worth.

Whatever. I trust you guys to be fair to me and I know you must be familiar with what a regular industry goon would want. I will let you make the final decision about what I'm going to be paid. How much you choose to pay me will not affect my enthusiasm for the record.

Some people in my position would expect an increase in business after being associated with your band. I, however, already have more work than I can handle, and frankly, the kind of people such superficialities will attract are not people I want to work with. Please don't consider that an issue.

That's it.

Please call me to go over any of this if it's unclear.

-*Stacy*

If a record takes more than a week to make,
somebody's fucking up.

Oi!

SORROW COMES TO ALL

—
ABRAHAM LINCOLN to FANNY
McCULLOUGH
December 23rd, 1862

As the American Civil War raged in December of 1862, US President Abraham Lincoln received word that Lieutenant Colonel William McCullough, whom he had befriended many years ago whilst working as a lawyer in Illinois, had recently been killed in battle, leaving behind a distraught 22-year-old daughter so suffocated by grief that she was barely able to function. Her worrying refusal to eat and inability to sleep prompted a mutual friend, David Davis of the Supreme Court, to make Lincoln, who long ago had played with her as a child, aware of Fanny's deep depression. This compassionate letter was Lincoln's response.

Executive Mansion,
Washington, December 23, 1862.

Dear Fanny

It is with deep grief that I learn of the death of your kind and brave Father; and, especially, that it is affecting your young heart beyond what is common in such cases. In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, to the young, it comes with bitterest agony, because it takes them unawares. The older have learned to ever expect it. I am anxious to afford some alleviation of your present distress. Perfect relief is not possible, except with time. You can not now realize that you will ever feel better. Is not this so? And yet it is a mistake. You are sure to be happy again. To know this, which is certainly true, will make you some less miserable now. I have had experience enough to know what I say; and you need only to believe it, to feel better at once. The memory of your dear Father, instead of an agony, will yet be a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer and holier sort than you have known before.

Please present my kind regards to your afflicted mother.

Your sincere friend
A. Lincoln

I SEE NO BEAUTY IN LOPSIDED
TRUE LOVE

—
ELIZABETH SMART to GEORGE BARKER
September 27th, 1946

Elizabeth Smart was in her 20s when she first met and fell for fellow poet George Barker; despite his already being married, by 1941 she was pregnant with the first of their four children. Smart and Barker's unorthodox relationship was a famously rocky affair due in no small part to their excessive drinking and Barker's repeated empty promises to leave his wife, Jessica. In September of 1946, Smart left him once again, and not for the last time. This was her parting letter. Their relationship eventually waned and Smart brought up the children on her own. George Barker remarried and went on to have fifteen children by four different women.

27th September 1946

I do not think that I want to lie down in your crowded bed for bouts of therapeutic lovemaking. Loving you, I see no beauty in lopsided true love. It really is in sorrow & not anger that I say: I do not want you any more because I simply cannot bear it. It isn't only the unfaithfulness. It's the loneliness, the weeks and months of being alone, really cut off from you, receiving perhaps a postcard saying I fuck you as you pause for breath in fucking somebody else. It would have been better if I had married before I met you, because then you could have given me a few months of fulfilling attentions which is all, apparently, that women need, & then I could have returned to the someone who, possibly, would have cared for me. For you do not want the responsibility even of love & by this I do not mean either money or guilt.

I realize that if you had cared about me the small necessary amount you would not have left me alone with so much pain, but would have contrived to find some other way of doing what you had to. This is the depths & the final & the end of my misery & degradation & if I say goodbye to you now I will be able to keep from being bitter because I am so grateful to you for your last few moments of frankness.

Dearest George, I will NOT give up the belief in true love or if you will romantic love—IT IS possible I KNOW. I never wanted anyone since you. IT IS possible to cometh to rest in someone—but you have not evidently had enough pleasure and power. Maybe I want the middle-aged things now. I've had my fuck, but I've lost my love. My womb won't tear me to pieces now, maybe, but my heart certainly will. Goodbye. Elizabeth.

Facing page:
Canadian poet and novelist Elizabeth Smart, 1952

MY EARTHLY MISSION IS
ALREADY FULFILLED

—
VIVIAN ROSEWARNE to HIS MOTHER
1940

In May of 1940, a 23-year-old RAF Flying Officer named Vivian Rosewarne was killed during the Battle of Dunkirk when the Wellington bomber that he was co-piloting was shot down above Belgium. Shortly after Rosewarne's death, his commander, Group Captain Claude Hilton Keith, discovered an unsealed letter amongst his belongings, to be forwarded to his mother in the event of his death. Such was its impact in private circles that the next month Vivian Rosewarne's mother gave permission for it to be published anonymously in *The Times* (pictured here) to wide acclaim. In fact, the letter was so popular that it was soon published in book form; 500,000 copies were sold that year alone.

Dearest Mother:

Though I feel no premonition at all, events are moving rapidly and I have instructed that this letter be forwarded to you should I fail to return from one of the raids that we shall shortly be called upon to undertake. You must hope on for a month, but at the end of that time you must accept the fact that I have handed my task over to the extremely capable hands of my comrades of the Royal Air Force, as so many splendid fellows have already done.

First, it will comfort you to know that my role in this war has been of the greatest importance. Our patrols far out over the North Sea have helped to keep the trade routes clear for our convoys and supply ships, and on one occasion our information was instrumental in saving the lives of the men in a crippled lighthouse relief ship. Though it will be difficult for you, you will disappoint me if you do not at least try to accept the facts dispassionately, for I shall have done my duty to the utmost of my ability. No man can do more, and no one calling himself a man could do less.

I have always admired your amazing courage in the face of continual setbacks; in the way you have given me as good an education and background as anyone in the country: and always kept up appearances without ever losing faith in the future. My death would not mean that your struggle has been in vain. Far from it. It means that your sacrifice is as great as mine. Those who serve England must expect nothing from her; we debase ourselves if we regard our country as merely a place in which to eat and sleep.

History resounds with illustrious names who have given all; yet their sacrifice has resulted in the British Empire where there is a measure of peace, justice and freedom for all, and where a higher standard of civilization has evolved, and is still evolving, than anywhere else. But this is not only concerning our own land. Today we are faced with the greatest organized challenge to Christianity and civilization that the world has ever seen, and I count myself lucky and honoured to be the right age and fully trained to throw my full weight into the scale. For this I have to thank you. Yet there is more work for you to do. The home front will still have to stand united for years after the war is won. For all that can be said against it, I still maintain that this war is a very good thing: every individual is having the chance to give and dare all for his principle like the martyrs of old. However long the time may be, one thing can never be altered – I shall have lived and died an Englishman. Nothing else matters one jot nor can anything ever change it.

You must not grieve for me, for if you really believe in religion and all that it entails that would be hypocrisy. I have no fear of death; only a queer elation ... I would have it no other way. The universe is so vast and so ageless that the life of one man can only be justified by the measure of his sacrifice. We are sent to this world to acquire a personality and a character to take with us that can never be taken from us. Those who just eat and sleep, prosper and procreate, are no better than animals if all their lives they are at peace.