

Tell them that my last words were: "I dig music!"



Greg LeBlanc/The Brunswickan

Scene favorites Das Radio, consisting of Patrick Reinartz (left), Sean Patrick Sullivan (back, center), and Clark Richards (right), reunited briefly after a two-year hiatus for a show at The Capital on December 29.

And then God sneezed

Book exposes the challenges and glories of relief work in the developing world

Blue Clay People
William Powers
Raincoast, 2005

by Kelly Farish

Originally intended as an academic piece, the book *Blue Clay People*, by William (Bill) Powers, became a memoir devoted to his two-year experience in the African country of Liberia. Powers undertook employment as Director of Projects for Liberia with Catholic Relief Services (CRS). All aspects of his life in Liberia are included: the love he left behind in America, the many challenges he faced with language and culture, the process of adaptation, the violence of war-torn Liberia, the friendships he made, and his process of self-discovery.

Predominant themes of dependency and sustainability are articulated by Powers. He faces difficulties adjusting to the constant cries for support, financially and otherwise. Within this framework, he comes to realize that he will not be able to create change for the entire country in his two-year assignment, but can attempt to put into place some sustainable methods for development, especially in the area of conservation.

"Welcome to my farm!" Chief Wah of Vanjahtown, Liberia exclaims, in one memorable passage.

Recalling the moment as though he was still in it, Powers writes of Wah, "he explains in a lucidity that surprises me and the journalists that he is not doing the usual slash-and-burn anymore. With help from CRS he has created a small farming system that mixes food production with conservation."

The book contains further undertones of a united humanity, taken from a Liberian context, stating that humans are molded from blue clay by God. The impact of this is a larger sense of global community and the shared connections between the two worlds in which Powers exists.

He writes, "God...molded the first six human beings out of blue clay - three men and three women. He sat by the river all day, humming jazz riffs while shaping his creations. By the time the sun was setting, they were almost perfect. All that was missing was a little spice. Pepper would do! But as God was grinding pepper with two stones, something happened that would change the entire course of history.

"God sneezed ... It was a sneeze so mighty that even he could not stop it. It caused the pepper to swirl up and fall on the still-wet blue clay people! He had let loose a fire that would burn in their blood, making people destroy each other and all of nature. They would spoil the whole creation!"

Two of the most significant issues in Liberia that Powers recounts are the smuggling, collusion and market domination of conflict diamonds and the clear-cutting of unique and precious forests. The impact of consumption is astounding in the framework that Powers sets. Liberia is ravaged for its timber and diamonds, with no regard for its citizens; civil wars erupt and armies slaughter at will.

Notes Powers, "diamonds and timber are the lifeblood of dictators like [Charles Taylor, former president of Liberia]. His cash comes mostly from timber and Foday Sankor's from diamonds. They use repression and terror to maintain their control over these resources. Without the timber and the diamonds, these men don't exist."

Powers continues, "this got us going on the demand side of the conflict diamond dilemma: a diamond is basically required for engagements in the States as an expensive symbol of one's love. Its supposed rarity gives it its value."

"De Beers controls two-thirds of the world's rough-cut diamonds. The company carefully manipulates scarcity through hoarding diamonds in London and letting them trickle onto the market at the

time and price they choose. It is the myth of diamonds being rare. And as for 'a girl's best friend'...do they mean a Sierra Leonean girl's best friend? And where would she put the ring, with her hands chopped off?"

Throughout the two-year posting, Powers is granted a week to return to America for mandatory absence for the relief of stress. It is this visit that very aptly demonstrates the challenges faced by those who travel abroad: describing the experience to the folks back home. Powers is confronted by the American reality of mass consumption.

He struggles through dinner with his girlfriend's friend, who has just obtained a mahogany dining room set and is shopping for diamond engagement rings with his girlfriend. He is torn between the two worlds in which he lives and the language used demonstrates the significant demands of integrating his two worlds.

"A tremendous lesson," he writes, "perhaps the most important lesson of our time, which Gabriel and other Africans have taught me, is that there is a point called 'enough.' It is elusive, but it exists and Chief Wah and many of Liberia's simplest people know where it is, even if they slip below it during the hungry season, during the warring season. Enough is food, water, clean air, and community. Enough is the rhythm of a talking drum under a moon that speaks to you through its light. Enough is listening to nature rather than dominating it. We in the West must relax and ratchet down to the joyful place called enough; many Liberians need to increase their wellbeing until we meet there, in a sustainable world."

I would highly recommend the book to those who are considering undertaking aid work abroad. Irrespective of geography, the challenges faced by Powers are not uncommon. Adapting to language, culture and lifestyle is especially challenging - only to be matched with returning to home and finding that few, if any, can begin to comprehend the experience you have had. *Blue Clay People* is an excellent and moving book that delves into the many aspects of aid work and the challenges faced by those who endeavour to undertake it.

Forget "MMMBop"

Taylor Hanson discusses his new project, areyoulistening.com

by Jessica Mealey, The Link (Concordia University)

MONTREAL (CUP) -- In the music industry there has been a dramatic shift in the ultimate control of music distribution and the way music is marketed.

Big-time record companies aren't concerned with artist development or fostering talent. They are interested in the business of numbers, commoditization and competition. Artists are being pitted against each other in hopes of selling more records, merchandise, or obtaining the ultimate honour of being featured on MTV's *Cribs*.

Montreal is fortunate to have a supportive and thus, prosperous music scene where bands that are currently successful got their start—bands like Arcade Fire, Stars, and Wolf Parade.

Still, many musicians here and everywhere else go unnoticed because they don't know or have the resources to put out albums, make contacts or the connections to get signed.

Areyoulistening.com is a website dedicated to supporting independent artists and is designed to

form an arena for artists and fans to connect and share their musical interests while staying away from the corporate nature of major labels. Some bands supporting the site include Broken Social Scene, Adam Green and David Garza.

The site was started by Hanson (yes, the blonde-haired boys who brought us "MmmBop" in 1997). While the band's past success has no relevance to the nature of the beast that is "indie," consider their situation and you'll find a band who's in a similar predicament as the most obscure band you know. Things have changed for them, too.

"Record companies are becoming so corporate that they don't have any idea what their content is," says Taylor Hanson.

"We decided that a lot of labels were following the same pattern, so we had to just get completely out of the major label structure."

Between 2001 and 2004, the band—brothers Isaac, Taylor and Zack from Tulsa, Oklahoma—left its record label Island Def Jam and independently released 2004's *Underneath* on their own label, 3CG Records. The album hit the Billboard Indie Charts at number one in April that year.

"We want to help network and give independent bands, fans and labels a place to have resources and to help promote bands and local markets, connecting people to

indie radio stations," says Hanson.

Aside from developing *Areyoulistening.com*, Hanson travels the U.S. college circuit condemning the corporate structure of the major labels and mainstream radio, while emphasizing the importance of bringing music back to the basics and the need for artists and fans to retain control of the industry.

"Indie music can compete at a massive level," says Hanson. "We just need to embrace it. We need to support the labels that are growing, that will be the competition because they are going to do it right; they're already doing it."

There are labels out there that are doing it right; keeping their rosters small and putting energy into developing artists in order to ensure longevity.

Arts and Crafts comes to mind, a label with nine artists signed, all of who are enjoying success and notable exposure.

"I want to be proud when my kids look at me and are like 'what was it like to be there when Broken Social Scene was playing and what was it like to see Arcade Fire?'" says the father of two.

"I can see the end result. I can see these future great companies who are going to be powerhouses but doing it in the right way and the independent music scene becoming more of a breeding ground for great bands."

All filler, no killer

by Alex Pope

We all know the feeling: the excitement of seizing the latest release by our favorite artist off the shelf at our music store of choice, the pain of fingernails tearing as we scabble to rip the plastic wrap off the case, the sheer electric joy of hearing the opening strains of that killer hit single oozing from the speakers ... the disappointment of discovering that the track list on the back cover is actually a barometer for musical excellence, track one being amazing, and tracks five-onward achieving varying degrees of suck.

Anyone else who's noticed this phenomenon: can you please help me speculate as to why so many albums nowadays start with a bang and finish with a whimper? Does prolificacy always necessarily equal talent?

The other day, while poring over my music collection in search of iPod-friendly tracks to import to my computer, I was both astounded and dismayed at the number of CDs I own that have never been played beyond track three, simply because the caliber of the music is too dismal to even mention.

The horror continued when I realized that for years, I've been spending upwards of \$15 for one or two stellar tracks that I would listen to repeatedly until I discovered new obsessions, and then promptly forget about. That's hundreds of dollars I'll never get back.

Consider Gwen Stefani's *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.*, which I bought last Christmas because going clubbing every time I wanted to hear "What You Waiting For?" was beginning to take its toll on my health.

Stefani has proven herself a master of the sellable single, even if the songs themselves aren't that musically sophisticated. "Rich Girl," which reprised her partnership with Eve, was second out of

the gate and did astoundingly well for itself, as did the mostly-tuneless "Hollaback Girl" and whimsical "Cool." This was where my playback of the album ended, because what followed was more of the same overproduced, formulaic drivel that was enjoyable at the outset of the disc, but got tired after twenty minutes.

It's a shame, because if anyone else out there is happy on the "skip" button like me, then Stefani's stellar closing duet with Andre 3000, "Long Way To Go" - which broaches the subject of interracial relationships - has never really been heard by the majority of *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* owners. Ultimately, I got my \$20 worth out of five tracks: less than half the album. The rest has been relegated to CD-shelf oblivion, where it should probably remain for a long, long time.

Perhaps it's a matter of taste that causes me to reject certain tracks and embrace others. After all, there are several albums that I can listen to all the way through, finding value and meaning in every song. Pink Floyd's seminal *The Dark Side of the Moon* comes to mind, as does the major anomaly in my music collection: The Rankin Family's *Fare Thee Well Love.* (What's that face for? Trust me, it's going to be a classic.)

I also can't discount my large collection of singles, which are the frustrated and cash-strapped

music fan's saving grace - all the killer, without the filler. You get the radio edit of the hit song (the version that hooked you in the first place), the album version, sometimes a remix or two, plus one or two rarities that either reinforce your adoration for the artist, or ultimately convince you that buying a full-length album with their name attached would be a waste of time and money.

That said, I'm completely enamored with the trend that currently underscores the public world of popular music: instead of releasing a full-length album right off the bat, new, little-known artists will produce four- or five-song EPs and sell them at-cost.

Those few tracks are almost guaranteed to be quality if the band is worth their salt at all, and there is no tiresome, hurriedly-fabricated musical stuffing thrown into the mix to up the cost of the disc. Recent gems include In-Flight Safety's *Vacation Land* EP, and the self-titled release from People In Planes, Sony/Wind-Up's latest pet project.

It's possible that smaller, better-thought-out releases could save the music industry from backing itself entirely into a virtual-reality corner where fans simply steal their favorite singles and pick over the crap like so many vultures. After all, the last thing this world needs is more junk, even if it is of the intangible variety.

In honor of the New Year and new beginnings, The Bruns has compiled a list of

The Best "Side One, Track One" Songs

Of course, which of these is worthy of "Side One, Track One" of your 2006 mix is entirely up to you.

1. Carousal - Blink 182 (Buddha, 1994)
2. Everything In Its Right Place - Radiohead (Kid A, 2000)
3. Wannabe - Spice Girls (Spice, 1997)
4. All That She Wants - Ace Of Base (The Sign, 1993)
5. Where The Streets Have No Name - U2 (Joshua Tree, 1990)
6. We've Got It Goin' On - Backstreet Boys (Backstreet Boys, 1999)
7. Thunderstruck - AC/DC (The Razor's Edge, 1990)

Suggest a mix tape! Email topic/song requests to bruns.arts@gmail.com

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