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A time-traveler attempts to explain They Might Be Giants to someone from 1972.

Shawn Patrick Cooke (4/24/19)

Why forty-seven years? I mean, fifty is a nice round number, or forty, or even forty-five, but who kidnaps a guy just to bring them back in time by forty-seven years?

Fine, I'll get the obvious stuff out of the way first. Everybody has a computer in their pocket which they use to share photographs of themselves and their pets. Sometimes their meals. We all think everyone else's pictures are happy and life affirming and perfect and evidence that our own lives suck. Suck. It means "to be shitty". Never mind, give it a year or two.

Like, I have the entirety of human knowledge at my fingertips and you know what I do with it? I shitpost. Shitpost. Okay, imagine you saw a picture of a celebrity in a magazine. Who is sexy right now. Yes, okay fine, Burt Reynolds, sure. Imagine you took that naked picture of him and wrote "Bert ryend. olds bi sexu" on it with a marker, and then put it on a bulletin board somewhere, and then complete strangers from all across the country came by to say whether they liked it or not.

What does it mean? Nothing, it's just a meme. Meme. An inside joke that everybody gets. Never mind.

No, there's no such thing as creativity any more. Everyone is nostalgic for decades you haven't even lived through yet. Television, movies, music, it's all one big shitpost, you know?

Well yes, there are some exceptions. One big exception. Let me tell you about They Might Be Giants.

No, not the George C. Scott movie that came out last year. (Really? Last year?) No, this is a couple of guys named John with a drum machine. Not as cool as it sounds, it's not like a robot drummer... You know what? Yeah. They had a robot drummer.

So these two guys and their robot drummer would tour these nightclubs. One of the guys had a guitar and the other had an accordion. And they would sing these nasally songs about... well, that's the best part. Half the lyrics are just anxiety and death cloaked in about six layers of metaphor and set to peppy music.

Every been to Disney World? Yeah, I know it's only been open for like a year. Anyway, there's a show called the Country Bear Jamboree, where there's a bunch of singing robot bears. No, not like the drummer. You know what? Exactly like the drummer. Their drummer was a robot bear.

Imagine if that show was cowritten by Franz Kafka and Ogden Nash, sped up about one-and-a-half times, and sung by two dudes from Massachusetts. No, really picture it. Close your eyes, see what I see.

That's a lyric! But from like, fifteen albums later. Because these guys, they get popular. Not stadium-filling popular, not like the Beatles or Elvis or, I don't know, is Steely Dan a thing yet? But it just appealed to a certain class of nerd. No wait, nerd means something different now.

Okay, you know that one girl in your English class that was really into Emily Dickinson? Her hair never really looked like she washed it enough? And she hung out with that guy who was kind of too skinny with facial hair that was real patchy, and you heard them get into a screaming match once about philosophy? Like, it's not that they were super smart, but they

just disdained to participate in the things that everyone else cared about, like homecoming and prom. Except they did show up to prom together but only stayed for about an hour and never danced. It's music for those guys, because in the future, they're like ten percent of the population.

Anyway, after a few years they fired the robot bear drummer and hired a bunch of guys named Dan. For a little while, they put horns in everything, sort of like the way restaurants put sun-dried tomatoes in everything in the early 1990s. (You've got that to look forward to, I guess, bon appétit.) The music got more complex, if anything. I mean yeah, it was rock music, but with very little relation to what passed for the popular music of the time.

Have you ever been to Canada? In the U.S., you see Exxon gas stations, but in Canada it's Esso. All the logos and everything are the same, but the name is different. It's like someone went back in time and changed one minor thing, and now everything is almost the same but not quite.

That's how They Might Be Giants does rock music. They followed a different path from everybody else, and now it sounds almost but not quite like the music everyone else plays. It's the rock music where JFK wasn't assassinated and someone killed Hitler as a baby.

Speaking of babies, did I mention they do kids music too? Sort of like if The Banana Splits sang about people in comas and haunted houses and parades of robots.

You ever see Sesame Street? Yeah, it's still on the air, fifty years later. Think of the music on Sesame Street as like a kind old man sitting in the park and telling kids stories.

Well, the kids music that They Might Be Giants does is sort of like that same park, only the old man waits until the parents are distracted and claims to be from another planet, and he shows them a magic trick with a spoon and a stuffed rabbit and way too much fire, and then puts a finger up to his mouth and says, "Shhhh" when their parents come back. His eyes twinkle like he's told them some dark secret fact about the world and when you turn around to look he's actually just an overcoat draped over a statue of Don Quixote.

Their more recent albums, the stuff for adults, is weird as shit. They did this one song about a woman that got fried in a nuclear explosion and now she's a monster except for one perfect hand, and I think she fights crime? Or commits crime, I can't tell. And they did a song about Nicola Tesla — you know, the inventor. (He's not popular yet, but one of these days, people are going to turn on Thomas Edison super hard.)

Anyway, they did this song and just randomly put a bunch of kids counting even numbers in the background. This other time, they performed a song about spies, but in the live version they just looped some Christmas music for ten minutes. And let's not forget the one they did about dying alone and screaming in terror. It was pretty catchy.

No, I'm fine, why do you ask?

Hey, thanks for letting me go. I need to go back to 2019 pretty soon, but I'll leave you with one last description. You know those roadside attraction places, the ones where gravity looks like it's going in the wrong direction, or you can look super tall or really small just by walking from one side of a room to another? That's the way the music sounds. Then take a college literature professor and put everything he says onto 3"x5" index cards, get someone to translate them into Russian, then into Japanese, and then back to English. That's the way the lyrics sound.

Now have someone blindfold you and drag you out into the middle of the woods. And with your hands tied behind your back, have them spoon feed you an exact replica of your favorite dish from childhood, the one your mother made on special occasions that you haven't tasted in fifteen years. You are trapped and blind and uncomfortable and threatened, but your brain is spraying endorphins all over the place as you are plunged into inescapable nostalgia of the limbic system and you don't know whether to scream or weep or orgasm or embrace the world. That's how the music makes you feel.

Gotta go. Hey, enjoy the whole Nixon thing.

[compile-er's note: Sean Patrick Cooke has a collection of short stories/essays out that I recommend, at the very least for "Your Blind Date Mansplains 'Token Back to Brooklyn' While he Sinks in Quicksand." It's called [A Magnet to A Flame](#).]

john flansburgh is a raccoon (a short essay)

Apollo (9/20/10)

there are many factors which point to the strange, non-human relations between john flansburgh, evil walrus with a thirst for human blood and simplistic guitar-playing abilities, and the friendly neighborhood raccoon, friend of few, consumer of garbage. for starters, both creatures are ravenous, seem to be eating constantly, and plump and around the mid-section. featuring somewhat square complexion and torso, not to mention oddly-shaped, long ears abound, the two figures of political impressionism are obviously one and the same. one may even have noticed flansburgh's tendency to sport dark-lense'd glasses, with thick, rounded frames. this is an attempt to harken back to his simple beginnings, and also let potential mates know that he is potent, single, and ready to mingle. his nose is even slightly upturned, resembling the ridiculous snout of a 'coon. and could you not imagine american hero davy crockett slaying evil platypuses* in a john flansburgh hat? i can picture it.

so there's no need to stop the presses. let's all just accept that john is a different kind of mammal. and he's actually a reasonably good guitarist, considering his species.

*"platypi" is not correct english or latin, god dammit.

[compile-er's note: more evidence for this fascinating conspiracy theory resides at flansyon-lotor.blogspot.com.]

Ham-bones and the Inevitable Turn to Navel-Gazing

Bec_87rb (4/5/07)

There has been floating around this part of LJ a running joke on the idea of someone being a "ham-bone." (For those not familiar with They Might Be Giants, it was either Sarah Vowell or John Flansburgh who put forth the Lennonesque verbal twisting that John Linnell was secretly such a ham that his very "bones were made of ham." It's a small joke, but those are sometimes launch points for extended LJ silliness.)

As part of our usual lateral thinking exercises, it was asked, by tardis60, I believe, since she has rediscovered the tasty sodium lure of actual ham after her gallbladder removal - if ones bones were made of ham, would a person taste of ham through and through, externally, as well? (Not to blame her for her strange thought, since once you fall back into the clutches of ham, it flavors the world.)

I advised, that in the case of our Mr. Linnell, he probably has "the blinding taste of sunlight on the hood of truck." I pilfered a line from something he wrote, which is de rigour in this virtual neighborhood. I have seen entire blogs structured with TMBG song titles, quotes, lyrics.

She came back with: I don't know that I'd be able to take that kind of metallic taste, unless you mean tasting him would be to the tongue as blinding light off a hood is to the eye.

Which is an interesting thought. What is the blinding taste of sunlight off the hood of a truck?

I nunno. *hangdog expression* I stole his description from Turtle Songs of North America, so I'm not the true author. :)

I always loved that sentence, "Or it might sound to you like something that isn't a sound at all, like the texture of ants on a log or the blinding taste of sunlight on the hood of a truck." When I heard it first, I was so taken because there *is* an ineffable something about that blinding flash of sunlight off the hood of an auto, and I was elsewhere suddenly - the sunlit bumpy hilly meadow in early summer, the dusty truck, the warmth, the smell and taste of dry earth, grasses, and summer in my mouth, and weird sense that the reflected warmth and light and taste were one, the completely undifferentiated experience of being a child in a meadow in a long summer.

Once again, Mr. L arranged a few words to make an entire experience explode back into being. It's weird why his way of expressing things strikes me that way; I'm not sure what that's about.

You get a moment of confusion when the words of a complete stranger force a re-blossoming of some forgotten experience, or, I do. For a split second, I think, *laughing* "Oh, he gets what that's like, yeah, that is exactly what it's like." Then reality gels again, and I realize that the author just has the trick of selecting and arranging words to ping the right places in my brain. That no ones internal experience is shared, and that we pass each other notes between the iron bars, or tap out code on the walls, but consciousness is imprisoned in its own little bone jail.

It's like a bug in a large cool cup, scrabbling to get up the curved sides. Now there's a thought, looking down into ones own skull cup to see the tiny multiple legs of ones own consciousness tirelessly futilely scratching to escape. Weird.

The Agreement

Tardis60 (11/26/06)

John Flansburgh held a shotgun shell clenched in his straight white teeth, frantically popping empty shells out of the shotgun he held. His hands clasped it awkwardly, sizzling flesh on the smoke-wreathed dull chrome metal. His harsh breath scraped over his ears and told him how much of an auditory target he was presenting, hunched behind a speaker stack on the stage of the Bowery Ballroom.

Danny Weinkauf had left ten minutes ago to get help, or munitions, or both for preference. Dan Miller was hiding in the upstairs office with the only other weapon they could locate, a handgun owned by one of the venue's bouncers. He and a half-dozen surviving They Might Be Giants fans had barricaded the door with instructions not to open it no matter what they heard, unless the building was actually on fire. Flans wondered madly if that might smoke the monsters out. Even now he heard their wretched groaning, the lurch-slide of their footsteps nearing. He jammed bullets into their chambers in shell after shell with sweaty, slippery fingers, scattering some to roll across the stage. How many had he loaded? He had lost count in his panic, but the magazine wouldn't hold any more.

Dan Hickey had last been seen fleeing to the stage door, but John Linnell had vanished even before 'Exquisite Dead Guy' had dissolved into an orgy of carnage and terror as puppets made of rotting flesh and animated by a homicidal urge flooded into the dingy rock club over bouncers' bodies.

Flans snapped the shotgun's barrel into position, cocked the gun, and spun out of his hiding place just in time to remove

most of the torso of a zombie that had been creeping up on him. He screamed even louder than the disintegrating monster. Splattering on the floor, the upper torso contrived by broken fingernails to continue to creep toward him. He gave it another round to the skull to make it lie still.

A rippling, dismayed groan lifted his eyes. Through the haze of smoke he saw John Linnell advancing, his mouth set in a hard line, eyes sweeping the bodies of young fans all over the floor. Brown darkness sparked and glittered, matching the edge of his broadsword. Flans gaped at him, wondering where on earth John had picked up that thing. It wasn't pretty, wasn't decorative. This was cold, hard, highland steel meant to turn a human into a Cuisinart.

No hints of gangly awkwardness marred the way Linnell swung and vivisected zombies about him. Fountains of red sprayed, marked him in a grisly dripping plaid over his orange shirt. His broadsword cleaved through skulls, bone fragmenting under vicious strokes. It was breathtaking even while it made bile hit the back of Flans's throat. For just one night, Linnell had swapped roles with Flans and become the dominant alpha male, protector against the grisly nightmare that had been unleashed.

Soon none were left standing but the victor. Flans remained half-hidden behind his precious speaker stack, watching.

Linnell picked his way over bodies of concertgoers and zombies toward something shadowing the doorway. He tipped the point of his sword to the floor and folded his hands on the haft. One of his bloodied Chucks crossed over the other, toe down, heel out as if he was waiting casually for a bus.

"You broke the agreement," said Linnell.

"Some kids got out of hand," rasped a voice that bats could have lived in. "They come back to life and think they're invincible."

Linnell shrugged. "You're responsible. That's the deal."

The zombie nodded. "I'll personally ensure this doesn't happen again."

Linnell didn't appear to be listening, squinting at the stage. "Is that...?" He sighed, put his foot down, and hefted the sword with the air of one taking a mop to clean up a grease stain. The stroke separated his companion's arm from its socket. It flopped wetly on the floor and oozed something black.

The zombie looked down at its limb. "What was that for?"

Linnell pointed the dripping sword at the stage. "Our drummer, you piece of shit. Now we have to get another one."

"We could fix him up," said the zombie. "Good as new. With some Glade sprays you wouldn't notice the smell..."

"No. Bring him back, or don't, but I won't work with undead," said Linnell. "If this happens again I will hunt you down, dissect you, and nail your head to a fucking church door just for the irony. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Linnell strolled stageward. He laid the sword by the sneakers of the zombie Flans had shot. With heavy breath, Linnell hoisted himself up. He stepped over the body and knelt by Flans.

"Hey," said Linnell. "You all right, John?"

"What the hell was that about?" said Flans, made aware by Linnell's icy grasp on his arm that he was shaking all over.

Linnell ran a hand through his hair, leaving finger-width streaks of blood on his forehead. “Remember when I used to drink quite heavily, before I met Karen?”

“Yeah?”

“I... saw things. Like, normal alcohol-induced hallucinations, only mine were real. They started hanging around our shows. See, intellectual rock enriches the brain. As I understand it, hippocampi become... tastier. So I struck a deal. They get their pick of what fans they can catch—which is not many; we have clever fans—as long as they stay away from concerts. If they trespass where we’re playing, I absorb the power necessary to kill every mother-loving zombie in New York.”

“Absorb... from where?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“You’re telling me you struck a deal with the devil?” Flans wanted his friend to let go, to lean away, to give up enough space so Flans would stop wanting to crawl out of his own skin.

Linnell laughed mirthlessly. “There’s no devil, and no god. Only us.” He rose and offered a blood-spattered hand to Flans.

“Uh...” Flans looked from Linnell’s hand to the dead zombie, to what remained of Dan Hickey behind the drums. Some sheepish-looking lady zombies with white, patchy hair like cotton fuzz were failing to reconnect his limbs.

Linnell’s voice softened, almost normal now, reminding Flans of his best friend despite the layer of gore coating Linnell. “I just want simple, little things, John. To protect my home, my family, and my friends. That’s all. I made the deal I knew you couldn’t. You would never have gone for that much collateral.”

All Flans wanted to do was go home and cuddle Robin and sob hysterically for a few hours. He had Linnell, and though the guy scared the shit out of him, Flans felt protected. Just not safe. He let Linnell pull him up.

“Oh, crap,” muttered Flans.

“What?” Linnell tilted his head.

“How are we going to get Dan Miller out of the office?” said Flans. “I told him not to trust our voices in case we’d been zombified.”

Linnell’s eyes sparkled as he bent to pick up his sword. “Oh...” he said, “we’ll think of something.”

[compile-er’s note: I have mixed feelings about fanfiction of any sort, but it’s almost all forgiven in my book once zombies are involved. EVERYTHING could use more zombies.]

Review of The Spine

Bibliophilia (11/17/04)

The Spine was a little slick, and also contained a disappointing lack of the WTF Factor. Any TMBG album that I eventually love starts out with me being puzzled and surprised - if it's all laid out neatly, according to a larger, easily- penetrated, grand schema, the album will get boring fast. Mostly, The Spine was too thin in the two axes on which I want TMBG albums to swing.

Axis 1: Flansburgh necks-ercise. There were too few of those tracks by Mr. Flansburgh that usually make me sit up and bob my head around in a pathetic white girl way. Mr. Flansburgh's works are big juicy hamburgers - thick, dense, redolent of tasty reliable middleness, middle culture, middle America, a center of things. Buddha belly music.

When he is doing his Flanburgherest, you get stuff like "Prevenge." I am listening to it right now, and my head is doing the involuntary bobbing thing. With Flansburgh, you know what you ordered, what that hamburger (Flans-burgerh with cheese, please) is gonna do on your plate, on your palate, and when you have finished, you're satisfied.

I'm still hungry after I listen to The Spine. My neck hasn't gotten a complete work out, either.

Axis 2: Not enough WTF. To get this flavor, one should order his Flansburgher with a side of Linnell. I do, anyway. The Linnell platter is chef's choice, and you might get a Pierian pimento sandwich on white with broken shards of 100 watt lightbulb artfully embedded in it. Or you might get fried chicken heads on an eyeball polenta, with a ladle or two of sinfully creamy bartione, or maybe with some whiskey in smoke flavored black cherry reduction. The whole cherries blink back at you from the plate. Yikes. WTF, I mean, WTF.

It is the integral to the TMBG experience that you get a little creeped out in places. The Linnell side order, like your 'burgher, is finger food, but it's food you fear, eat anyway and then gingerly lick your fingers. Sometimes the food licks your fingers for you, which makes you squirm. Not enough of this creepiness on The Spine. Museum of Idiots does it: listening to it, all the hair on my upper torso stands straight up. But very little of that piloerection occurs on other Spine tracks.

If you talk to me later, I may have listened to The Spine more, and may have decided it is a meal, but I still am thinking "snack."

John Flansburgh Declared Dead by Idiot

Posted to Sol-D.tmbg.net (Author/date unknown)

On Tuesday, members of Alt.Music.Tmbg all recieved messages about the untimely death of their favourite rockstar—Mr. John Flansburgh. Some were shocked, many were skeptical, and no less than three regulars took the initiative to end their lives.

“It was a real bummer,” claimed one reader who managed to de-lurk for this interview. “I mean, John’s, like, invincible and stuff. He can’t die! We won’t let him!”

Apparently, the message of Flansburgh’s untimely demise was first posted by 12 year old Timothy Zarble. When asked how he found this information out, he replied:

“Well, I was walking along the beach when I saw him. He was just laying there, with his mouth hanging open. At first I thought that my eyes were playing tricks on me, but they weren’t! It was really Flansy. I ran over and asked him for his autograph, but he just laid there, unmoving. That’s when I got a real good look at him. He was all bloated, and there was a fly on his face. It was really gross.”

When Timothy got home he quickly posted his message to the newsgroup, where it spread around the internet like wildfire. Al Gore, closet TMBG fan, claimed that “...this just goes to prove how wonderful a tool the internet is. When such impotent information can reach those who need it in such a short amount of time..I..I...” At that point, Gore began to cry for dear, long-lost Mr. Flansburgh.

Flansburghologists claimed at a recent press conference that John was not dead but, in fact, pining for the fjords. This statement may have been due to the fact that they had all just gotten back from a Monty Python Convention, and thus should not be trusted. They also went on to claim that if anyone needed a good Linnellographer, their resumes were on the bulletin board by the door.

When John Flansburgh found out the news of his death, he was shocked. "I've never been dead before. It's a real trip," he said, while washing dishes. "But I guess that no one lasts forever. I mean, one minute you're asleep on the beach, and the next your fertilizer. it happens to evryone. It will be nice to get some rest for a change." Then he proceeded to smash every plate in his cupboard and sing a lively rendition of "He'll Be Cummin' Round the Mountain," which he learned in a bar the night before. He also added that he's not bloated—just big-boned.

The Spine Seymour "seymourgalore" (6/3/19)











“If anthropologists of the future ever sit down to categorize the sundry varieties of nerd and require as precise a definition for “spaz” as possible, they need only listen to the drum machine/guitar intro to “Don’t Let’s Start.” If you close your eyes and listen closely, a crystal-clear mental image of a skinny kid getting his head dipped in a flushing toilet materializes in the mind’s eye and repeats for the duration of the song. Maybe this is the difference between how a They Might Be Giants fan relates to the song and how a non-fan does: fans swell with pride and imagine their own heads being dunked, and the non-fans become enraged and picture themselves administering the swirlies.”

--Your Band Sucks, 2005