

Sunburn, Dirt, Bug Bites, and Gratitude

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Monday

We've had some difficult days, with bad weather and kids stuck inside, so I'm running a day or two behind. I'll get this one out Monday May 18th, or possibly Tuesday, if tonight doesn't go well.

Music

I didn't get five songs sent out via Marco Polo last week. I missed Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, but then sent one out on Saturday. So I sent out three songs:

- "Days" by The Kinks
- "Space Oddity" by David Bowie
- "Closer to Fine" by The Indigo Girls

Of these, the best one was "Space Oddity." I was able to get the vocal part working pretty well with the guitar part. I worked out some guitar effects to use: a distortion effect for the solo parts, and an echo effect for the two spacey sections of the song: first, when the countdown ends and Major Tom heads into space, and second, when his spaceship heads out into space.

So I've sent out sixteen songs. I've worked on a few other Indigo Girls songs and streamed some practice sessions on Facebook. None of them seemed quite ready to send out. The other Indigo Girls songs just don't seem complete without harmony parts. Today I worked on a song by Weezer called "Undone — the Sweater Song."

Here's the video. The song is pretty simple. I often find that the chord and tab sheets available online are very wrong. In fact, the transcriptions I find are usually *more* wrong for simple songs than for difficult songs. This sounds odd, but I think there's an explanation: more advanced musicians won't even bother to try to write out transcriptions for simpler songs, but instead, if they play them at all, will just play them by ear, while beginners will gravitate to transcribing the simpler songs because they can at least get a foothold on the project.

I'm somewhere in between, so I wanted to at least start with a transcription. I'm not really great at working out chords by ear (although better, apparently, than the folks that made the transcriptions I found). The recording was made with instruments tuned down a half-step, so instead of E, A, D, G, B, and E, the guitars are tuned to Eb, Ab, Db, Gb, Bb, and Eb. Once you get your guitar tuned down, you can play along.

I said "the song is pretty simple" and it's also dumb, but in a fun way. There is a guitar riff, two verses, and a chorus. The guitar riff plays for a while, then we hear the first verse, then a short form of the chorus, then the guitar riff, then the second verse, then a full chorus, then a solo section, then another full chorus, then another solo section, then some doo-doo-doo's over an outro. On paper it's very simple. The lyrics are downright ridiculous. The verses go:

*I'm me, me be, goddamn, I am
I can, sing and, hear me, know me*

and:

*Oh no, it go, it gone, bye-bye
Who I, I think, I sink, and I die*

The chorus goes:

*If you want to destroy my sweater
Hold this thread as I walk away
Watch me unravel, I'll soon be naked
Lying on the floor, I've come undone*

In the recording, the guitar riff has some speaking over it, like some fans having a conversation as they walk into a show. Then the choruses are made more interesting with some ad-libbing by a second vocalist singing different phrases along with the lead vocal part. The solo sections aren't technically difficult.

What's challenging is for me, as a solo musician, to do a live version that somehow sounds as varied and fun as the original. While I can sing over a guitar part, I can't really *talk* over the guitar riff — that uses different mental muscles. I don't have a second singer, second guitarist, bass player, and drummer. So I can't really play the solo parts, because I'd be playing notes along with nothing. And while the band is a four-person band, studio tracks almost always have a number of extra parts to fill out a mix, and I certainly can't play those.

One way to try to figure out how to do a song live is to see if there is a recording of the original band doing it live. There is. It gives me encouragement, in several ways.

First, because Weezer wasn't really that good live, at least not in their early years — that helps me feel better about my own playing and singing. Outside of the studio, the band members, who look to me like they were about twelve years old, clearly weren't highly polished musicians. In the first verse the lead singer forgets a few words and just blows a raspberry into the microphone, and keeps

going. The other guitarist and bass player both have trouble keeping their vocal parts in key. Maybe they can't hear themselves well through their monitors — a common problem. They just keep going and sing louder.

Second, the band did in fact figure out some tricks to make the song more “performable.” During the guitar riff parts, they each have some gibberish to speak or sing, so they don't have to play the same phrase over and over for eight bars with no variation and nothing to go over it. So, I could sing something over that guitar riff part. It might be funny to sing something completely different. Some lines “Rocky Raccoon” might fit.

For the solo, I need to try to get my loop pedal working — it ought to be quite possible to record four bars of the rhythm guitar part, then start it playing back in a loop, and solo over it. I'd like to then be able to record and play back a second part for the second solo, but I'm not sure my pedal will do what I need. I'll find out!

Gardening

Last week was a big week for our gardens. On Wednesday we were finally past the last likely frost date, so Grace and I went back to Coleman's, where the shelves in their outdoor plant displays were overflowing with herbs, flowers, and vegetables. We brought back a lot of plants, and then spent the rest of the day, until dark, planting them. Then on Thursday, we went back and got some more. On Friday, I built up three separate extra garden beds on a small strip of grass in our driveway just for mint varieties.

Our main kitchen garden bed now has these plants growing in it, and many others. Off the top of our heads, Grace and I can recall putting in:

- Parsley (flat-leaf and curly)
- Sage (several types including a purple sage and a tri-color sage)
- Rosemary (several types including a trailing rosemary and a lemon variegated variety)
- Thyme (quite a few types including lime thyme, a silver thyme, and three creeping varieties planted in between stepping stones and around the outside of the garden bed)
- Irish moss
- Basil (several kinds)
- Oregano (several kinds including a “hot and spicy” variety)
- Alliums (leeks, shallots, chives, and bunching onions)
- Lamb's ear
- Rhubarb
- Epazote
- Cilantro
- Celery
- Chervil
- Tomatoes (Black Crim, Yellow Pear, and Amish Paste)

- Tarragon (French and Russian)
- Fennel (two kinds)
- Lovage
- Assorted flowers (Veronica, Black-Eyed Susan, Pansies, Alyssium, and others)
- Lavender (four kinds)
- Dill
- Stevia

There are probably a few plants I've forgotten. We put some marigolds among the herbs and vegetables, and some hardy plants in the crevices in between concrete blocks. I'd love to eventually have creeping thyme varieties all along the driveway and paths, but that is probably a project to work on over the course of the next few years.

In the mint beds, I planted ten different kinds of mint: lemon, lime, orange, strawberry, apple, chocolate, two kinds of spearmint, peppermint, and a variegated pineapple mint. There's one other kind, Corsican mint, which is a low-growing, shade-loving mint, that is set to go into a separate shade garden. I don't know that we'll find uses for all the mint varieties even if they all grow and don't crowd each other out, but it's already been fun to have the kids taste and smell all the varieties and watch their faces as they realize that, yes, chocolate mint really smells and tastes like chocolate.

I don't really expect all these herbs to thrive, but even if we lose some, we should still have a huge variety of fresh herbs.

I also planted four kinds of peppers in a small separate bed: cayenne, Scotch Bonnet, Paprika, and sweet cherry peppers. And we are getting ready to plant potatoes, corn, cucumbers, and watermelon into additional beds in the front yard. We only got a few corn plants to try, as an experiment, mainly to see if they work out at all. We are still working on a large hügelkultur bed in the front yard.

Meanwhile, Joy is working on growing a number of additional things in the back yard in pots and on the borders of our wooded areas, including sunflowers, more tomatoes, lemon balm, horseradish, and places for cultivating mushrooms. She's been doing a huge amount of clearing, waging battle against invasive buckthorn, and chipmunks.

We're planning more, including beds for greens and a children's garden planted in an old canoe that Joy found. So there will be lots of things growing here this year, in addition to the kids.

It's been raining all day today and rained most of the day yesterday and will rain more tomorrow, so everything is getting thoroughly soaked, but by mid-week we should have some sunny days again, and I'll be back out in the garden.

Bugs

As I write this, my legs are covered with ugly red blotches that itch like crazy. These are not mosquito bites but something nastier — the bites of black flies.

The first May we were here, we were surprised when the kids came inside from the woods with bloody welts all over their necks. We thought they must have been stabbing each other with something sharp. The welts didn't look like any insect bites I was familiar with — they weren't flea bites, tick bites, spider bites, mosquito bites, or bee stings. I finally found a clue online. This corner of Michigan has black flies, which are small flies with razor-sharp jaws. They land on your collar, or on your hairline, or on an exposed leg, and carve a messy gash into your skin. You don't feel it at first, because their saliva contains an anaesthetic, as well as an anticoagulant, so the gash bleeds freely. They suck up the blood and fly off. It's usually only after they have left that you start to feel the burning itch. The saliva is also a potent allergen.

They're back!

Unlike mosquito bites, which tend to fade within a day, these bites get worse for several days, and can produce large bright-red blotches that look horrifying. They aren't actually infected. These black flies don't carry any known diseases. But the saliva and your body's immune response can do a lot of tissue damage. You can get a condition called "black fly fever," which mimics an infection, and involves aching joints and a headache. I've got a baker's dozen of ugly red blotches on my legs. I got most of these bites on Saturday. It's Monday night and the itch isn't really fading yet. I seem to have "black fly fever."

I should have worn long pants and a long-sleeved shirt on Saturday, but it was already quite warm and humid, and I had to shovel wood chips and soil, so I didn't. I should have. I didn't realize the black flies were out in force. You don't feel the bites at first.

A couple of weeks ago I got several nasty spider bites on my legs, too, and I also had a nasty reaction. Spider venom is a neurotoxin and it can cause neurological side effects in humans. I had tremors and difficulty walking. I kept dropping things. In a practice session, I dropped my guitar pick over and over again, and that never happens normally. Something wasn't right, but I got better.

Our little corner of Michigan is trying to kill me, or at least the bugs are. But I'm still so happy to have had this time to work on the garden. I've wanted for years to grow all these herbs. I'm pink with sunburn, speckled with dirt, and itching madly with inflamed insect bites, but also overflowing with gratitude.

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