

July in Christmas

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Saturday

American Carnage

Well, dear readers, here we are. The year is crawling to a close, leaving a trail of American carnage behind it. Our 45th president referenced that carnage in his inaugural address:

This American carnage stops right here and stops right now.

Well, it didn't stop; the body counts are growing. We're now in an interminable interregnum, waiting for one administration to end and another one to begin, but it would be a mistake — a very serious category error, in fact — to have any faith in the Biden administration, which is shaping itself into a completely blunted instrument instead of the scalpel that is called for.

One of my co-workers tested positive for COVID-19; she left work after her husband tested positive. He then wound up in a hospital emergency room. I don't know her condition. She worked downstairs, in the manufacturing area. My boss did not close down manufacturing for a week and put the hourly assembly workers on paid sick leave, telling them to send him two negative tests spaced three days apart before they could return to work.

The engineers can, and are, working from home as much as possible. I'm an engineer in title only as I don't have an engineering degree, but I can do some of my work at home, so I've been going in only when I need to test code on our prototype hardware. The assembly workers can't actually do any of their work at home.

I listened to my boss argue with an employee from downstairs who was telling him that he had tried to get tested, but had been turned away, since he did not have symptoms, and tests are in short supply. Yes, nine months into a pandemic, and tests are being rationed. The clinic advised him to quarantine at home. He was asking my boss if he could quarantine from home for a few days. My boss told him two lies: one, that we “can't just shut everything down” (we can, and should, especially if doing so might prevent much more damage to health of the

employees, and therefore to the ongoing operations of the business), and two, that “we’re all this in together.”

I credit the CBD oil I’ve been taking at bedtime and the wine I’ve been drinking with every dinner for helping me not to contradict him, said contradiction taking the form of shouting at the top of my lungs.

I’m comforted, somewhat, by the fact that I’ve been in touch with several of my engineer co-workers — smart people — who agree that our boss is still not taking any of this seriously enough. He has asked all the employees — over twenty — to join him upstairs for an end-of-year meeting on Monday. I sent him a note back saying that I’m sorry, but I just don’t believe that this kind of gathering can be safe, and sent him yet another article demonstrating the risks of indoor spread, which is lowered somewhat by the mask-wearing we’ve all been doing, but only somewhat.

I think there’s a high likelihood that asymptomatic transmission has already taken place in our workplace. But with employees unable to get tested, how would we know?

I’m not actively trying to lead an insurrection — I’m not working on a union drive, or rallying all the staff for a strike or anything like that — but I have been quietly encouraging several of my co-workers to also express their reservations at our boss’s handling of virus safety.

He wrote back to me, saying that if I wanted to skip the meeting that was fine, which of course didn’t address my actual concern. He was making this all about freedom and personal choice and personal responsibility — I’m free to opt out, although, as I’ve pointed out, some of my co-workers aren’t able to opt out of risky working conditions.

I’m not likely to suffer any immediate career consequences for my refusal to be a team player and put my family at what I believe is unreasonable risk, although I *do* expect to get some feedback in my next review about my refusal to be a “team player” or some such drivel. And long-term, people who aren’t willing to die for the company’s quarterly results simply aren’t on the management track.

This “personal choice” approach to a pandemic — the ultimate example of a *shared, collective* health crisis — expressed from the top down — is pretty much *the* reason why thousands of Americans are dying each day. By late January I expect the death rate to be double what it is now. And I expect that we’ll see a little something I call “vaccine riots.” We’re already seeing vaccine protests:

An algorithm chose who would be the first 5,000 in line. The residents said they were told they were at a disadvantage because they did not have an assigned “location” to plug into the calculation and because they are young, according to an email sent by a chief resident to his peers. Residents are the lowest-ranking doctors in a hospital. Stanford Medicine has about 1,300 across all disciplines.

Only seven made the priority vaccination list, despite the fact that this week, residents were asked to volunteer for ICU coverage in anticipation of a surge in COVID-19 cases.

Meanwhile, Michigan's Governor Whitmer (also known as "that woman from Michigan") put the administration on blast:

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said Friday that doses of the vaccine were waiting to be shipped in Portage and she could not get a straight answer from the Trump administration about why Michigan — as well as many other states — were only receiving a fraction of what they were supposed to get.

She actually received an apology for "miscommunication," but not an answer, but a paranoid person at this point might begin to suspect that it has something to do with the election results.

Under Siege

We've continued our preparation for a kind of seige, stocking up on as much food as we can manage. Grace has been buying food from wholesale restaurant suppliers: boxes of fruits and vegetables, and boxes of meats. Today she picked up boxes of meats including ten pounds of frozen tilapia, forty pounds of fresh chicken legs and thighs (seventy cents a pound!), ten pounds of lamb shanks and ground lamb, and a few pounds of shrimp. We will pack our freezers. My co-worker who hunts has supplied us with yet more venison — a dozen pounds. We've gotten forty-eight pounds of short-grain brown rice, and another 24 pounds of bread flour. The kids have continued to bake bread — not every day, but several days a week.

For entertainment during our locked-down holiday, I've acquired more of the twenty-three Marvel Cinematic Universe films from the first three "phases." A few of them are in storage and we probably aren't going to dig those out over the next couple of weeks, but we have twelve on hand and two more should be arriving on Monday. I've been ordering discs from eBay sellers, and also picked up a few from Best Buy using curbside pickup. We're watching the Avengers story arc in their in-universe chronological order, not the order in which the films were released. Last night we watched the "oldest," set mostly during World War II, *Captain America: The First Avenger*. I don't know if I want to write up full reviews of all these films, and it's hard to watch them closely at home surrounded by noisy children, but here are some preliminary comments.

***Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011 Film)**

I wasn't expecting a lot from this film, but I was favorably impressed. In particular, the costumes, makeup, and sets are extremely impressive and look spot-on to my untrained eye, as true to the mid-1940s. The cinematography is also much better than I expected, with many sweeping camera moves and long

panning shots that go above and beyond what I expected from an action-film story. Not having paid much attention to these films back when they came out, I was a bit surprised to see Tommy Lee Jones and Hugo Weaving on the screen. They both are excellent in this film.

The plot involves Steve Rogers, played by Chris Evans, as he attempts to enlist in the army, to join the war effort. Evans is initially a short weakling with chronic health issues including asthma, described as weighing ninety pounds; his application forms are quickly stamped “4F.” Evans is made to look small and frail via a number of different techniques including CGI, but it looks to me like they also used some simple forced-perspective shots of the type used in Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The trouble with forced-perspective tricks is that sometimes, and unpredictably, the viewer’s eye will see through them, and so I found myself laughing a few times when my eye suddenly told me that Evans wasn’t shorter than his co-stars, but just farther away from the camera. But we don’t have to scratch our heads at these scenes for long, because Evans is soon injected with pseudo-scientific gibberish juice and is instantly beefed up into the man he was meant to be (and, remarkably, without any visible stretch marks!)

A film about a character like Captain America can’t help but feel a little bit nationalistic, but the filmmakers play it down a bit, showing how Captain America started out serving his country as an actual performer in wartime propaganda stage shows designed to boost morale. And initially, he’s not very good at it. He gets better, though, and then he’s planted squarely in a situation where he gets to *be* the heroic super-soldier he’s been pretending to be, and the rest is fake history. Captain gets his trademark shield, made of vibranium, tying this story into the Black Panther stories, and takes on the big bad, and the result is pretty good.

July in Christmas: XTC’s *Skylarking* (2016 Surround Sound Series Reissue)

As 2020 has gotten darker, both literally and emotionally, I’ve been turning to classic albums that I enjoyed years or decades ago for solace. As we approach the grimmest Christmas time I can remember, what better album to listen to than one about both a literal and metaphorical summer?

I’m talking about XTC’s *Skylarking*. This album was first released back in 1986 and there have been various versions over the years, with slightly different mastering jobs, and including slightly different sets of songs. Previous releases didn’t sound bad *per se*, but Steven Wilson’s remixed version sounds better, so that’s the one I’m listening to. The difference between this version of *Skylarking* and the older versions is not as dramatic as the differences between the old Yes albums and Wilson’s versions — recording technology was better in 1986 than it was in the early 1970s, and this album had some record label money behind it, along with producer Todd Rundgren.

This release includes a CD and a bonus Audio Blu-ray containing surround mixes and high-resolution versions of the tracks, as well as several previously released versions of the album, and a number of outtakes and rarities. DVD-A and Blu-ray audio never really became popular formats in their own rights, and this led to a chicken-and-egg problem: there are few titles, and support for these formats on various players is not great.

I don't have an audio setup with five speakers, or five speakers plus the optional subwoofer, that I can use to listen to 5.1 surround sound mixes. So these versions of the songs aren't of great interest to me, and I haven't really even *heard* them, although I have listened to a few of them with just the front left and front right channels extracted to make a stereo track, which produces an interesting simplified mix of the song.

With previous releases of albums that included bonus DVD-A discs, I've been able to put the DVD-A discs into computer DVD drives and extract songs in 24-bit, 96Khz or 48kHz format, which is nice if you have audio interfaces capable of playing the higher-resolution songs. The difference is not dramatic, but it is there; in my view, the increased dynamic range makes a bigger difference than the increased sampling rate. Unfortunately, I don't have a Blu-ray drive connected to any of my computers, and such drives are relatively rare, since Blu-ray discs for data haven't really become popular the way that CD-Rs did.

It's long past time that there was a higher-resolution, widely-supported lossless physical audio disc format to supplant physical compact discs. Unfortunately, the recording industry's stranglehold on copyright law and the imposition of Digital Rights Management and restrictive forms of copy-protection pretty much ensure that such a format will never be born. I like physical CDs because they are lossless (well, they aren't *quite*, but unpacking that would take a huge digression, so let's just say they are, in most cases and for most practical purposes, *pretty much* lossless), and because I can put the songs on other devices and they then can't easily be taken away from me; I dislike streaming services because they are lossy, impose onerous restrictions on playback and copying, and can be taken away at any time. But that's the way the recording industry likes it, so that's the way it mostly is, now, and people who, like me, collect vintage compact discs and a few of these oddball DVD-A and Audio Blu-ray discs are an eccentric, aging minority.

Anyway.

Skylarking is a bit of an odd duck in XTC's catalog because much of it sounds very unlike the band's other albums, but at the same time, it is their most iconic and best-known album. XTC went through several different stages, from a raw-sounding late punk/early New Wave band, to more of a pop act, to this. This album also probably cemented the band's gradual change, already in progress, from a live act to a studio act. Todd Rundgren's work on this record sounds fantastic, but it is definitely a *heavily* produced album, with many overdubs, and so these tracks could not easily be performed live, at least not in the ways that

they exist on this album.

Skylarking is an amazing feast of music. Andy Partridge's songwriting is exceptional and his lyrics remarkably evocative and erotic. In my opinion this record contains many of his best lyrics. On other XTC albums his wordplay is fairly juvenile, often involving a lot of dick jokes, but on *Skylarking* we hear the words of a poet who is reaching for something spiritual as well as sexual. Right off the bat we have the sounds of summer insects, birds, a dog barking, swirling chords, and a simple melody played on a toy melodica. Then Partridge describes a perfect sweaty summer day:

*Drowning here in Summer's Cauldron
Under mats of flower lava
Please don't pull me out
This is how I would want to go*

*Breathing in the boiling butter
Fruit of sweating golden Inca
Please don't heed my shout
I'm relaxed in the undertow*

*When Miss Moon lays down and Sir Sun stands up
Me, I'm found floating round and round
Like a bug in brandy in this big bronze cup
Drowning here in summer's cauldron*

"Summer's Cauldron" transitions beautifully and smoothly into "Grass" which is about... well, it's definitely about literal grass, but also, sex, and also drugs, and also sex while on drugs. It doesn't scan as very politically correct in 2020 — where's the clear mutual consent? But anyway:

*I will pounce on you
Just us and the Cuckoos
You are helpless now
Over and over we flatten the clover
Shocked? Me too! The things we used to do on grass!
It would shock you too, the things we used to do on grass
Grass*

After those two openers, the album settles down into a series of songs that describe various stages of life. But they are, still, each, all about growth, sex, aging, and death. This is a true song cycle; it uses the season of summer as a metaphor for an entire life, from youth through adolescence and early relationships into responsible adulthood and marriage and then to middle-age. The songs are relatively short, and thus each one never gets dull. In "The Meeting Place" Partridge sings about meeting a young working-class woman in the woods. But it's slightly ominous, with fire imagery that sets up the symbolic bonfire that ends the album:

*Strolling under grimey skies
Machines that make you kiss in time
Smoke on your breath, smoke on your breath*

“Ballet for a Rainy Day” is just gorgeous:

*Ballet for a rainy day
Silent film of melting miracle play
Dancing out there through my window
To the backdrop of a slow descending grey*

This song transitions smoothly into a string quartet and acoustic guitar, introducing my favorite song on the album, “1,000 Umbrellas,” in which Partridge sings mournfully

*One thousand umbrellas_
Upturned couldn't catch all the rain
That drained out of my head
When you said we were
Over and over I cried
'Til I floated downstream
To a town they call
Misery*

The arrangement is beautiful — it’s fast and upbeat, but also undeniably sad, and Partridge bends and flexes the notes to bring out the exhausted sadness of someone who has cried himself to sleep and then cried himself awake. At one point the whole mix seems to swirl through a spinning speaker of the type used on vintage organs. That’s probably Rundgren’s doing, and a clear nod to the Beatles, who used this effect on songs like “Tomorrow Never Knows. But I also love this song performed as a simple cover with acoustic guitar and voice — the accompaniment is a series of jazzy 13th chords that descend in an unnerving series of half-steps: F13, E13, Eb13, to Dadd4. Even on the chorus, the chords remain unsettled; Partridge never chooses simple major or minor chords; instead we’ve got a rapid-fire selection of seventh, ninth, augmented, suspended, and diminished chord forms. I can play the guitar part, although it’s not all that easy. The fact that the song works so well without all the studio magic testifies to Partridge’s strong songwriting.

There are more strong songs. Lots of them, in fact! “Season Cycle” is a bit forgettable, but “Earn Enough for Us” has sentiments most of us can relate to, and it is more like one of XTC’s earlier straightforward rock-and-roll songs:

*I can take humiliation
And hurtful comments from the boss
I'm just praying by the weekend
I can earn enough for us*

There’s a song about getting married, “Big Day,” with lyrics that are simple and charming, and the spinning speaker effect again:

*Big day come and big day go
Life goes on after the show
But will your love have the fire and glow
Like on the big day?*

There's a song about being tempted by another relationship, outside of the singer's marriage, but it's not about the affair; instead, it's about his resolve *not* to violate his marriage:

*My heart is taken it's not lost in space
And I don't want to see your mooney mooney face
I say why on earth do you revolve around me
Aren't you aware of the gravity
Don't need another satellite*

There is a song about trying to hold on to the imaginary things of childhood, in "Mermaid Smiled," and then a song about the sadness of realizing that you've achieved adulthood, but you don't like what you see in the mirror:

*The man who sailed around his soul
Came back again to find a hole
Where once he thought compassion and the truth
Had laid to warm his freezing carcass on return*

And then we get to the singer's personal existential crisis, perhaps a midlife crisis, in the song "Dear God." In 1986 it was still relatively daring to write a song that openly expressed an atheistic viewpoint. I don't know (or much care) if Partridge actually considers himself an atheist or not; the song is of more interest to me, and the song is in the form of a letter to God. Does one write letters to someone who doesn't exist, your present author started to write, before recalling that he himself has written a previous issue of this newsletter in the form of a letter to his dead mother?

In the song, it isn't so much that the narrator doesn't *want* to believe in God, but that he feels *unable* to believe, or unwilling, because of the list of grievances he's accumulated against God. It's actually a cry to a God who may or may not be listening, in the tradition of the book of Job:

*Dear God, sorry to disturb you, but...
I feel that I should be heard loud and clear
We all need a big reduction in amount of tears
And all the people that you made in your image
See them fighting in the street
'cause they can't make opinions meet about God
I can't believe in you*

It is one of the best songs on the album, but it doesn't *quite* fit, philosophically, because the rest of the album seems not so much atheistic as *pagan* in finding the sacred and timeless in nature; Partridge makes this pretty explicit in "Season Cycle" when he sings

*I really get confused on who would make all this
Is there a God in heaven?
Everybody says join our religion, get to heaven
I say no thanks — why bless my soul, I'm already there!*

After “Dear God,” we get a short but moving song about death. Interestingly, Patridge avoids making it maudlin because it isn’t all about a man worrying about his *own* death; it’s set up as a man who has observed a *friend’s* death, and the actual fact of his friend becoming, incontrovertably, a dead body, suddenly makes his own inevitable death real to him:

*It frightens me when you come to mind
The day you dropped in the shopping line
And my heart beats faster when I think of all the signs
When they carried you out your mouth was open wide*

The song cycle ends with “Sacrificial Bonfire,” which is a happy-sad song — a dark lyric set to an upbeat melody and arrangement. The narrator isn’t dying, at least not yet, but the summer of love, sadness, and death has changed him:

*Change must be earnt
Sacrificial bonfire must burn
Burn up the old
Ring in the new
Burn up the old
Ring in the new*

I would argue that this album makes one of the best cases ever made that pop music can be art, and it is, simply put, one of the best albums of the 1980s. But the band’s story is ultimately not a very happy one, since, per Wikipedia:

Between 1979 and 1992, XTC had a total of 10 albums and 6 singles that reached the UK top 40, including “Sgt. Rock (Is Going to Help Me)” (1980) and “Senses Working Overtime” (1982). In the US, “Mayor of Simpleton” (1989) was their highest-charting single, while “Dear God” (1986) was controversial for its anti-religious message. The group also inspired tribute bands, tribute albums, fan conventions, and fanzines across the UK, US and Japan.

But yet:

Due to poor management, they never received a share of profits from record sales, of which there were millions, nor from touring revenue, forcing them into debt throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

I’ve been listening to XTC since I was in high school. I first discovered their music in a discount cut-out record bin, where I found a copy of a double album comprising two previously released collections called *Waxworks* (Singles) and *Beeswax* (B-sides). It’s an amazing collection, and it’s also long out of print. Most of these tracks can be found on other albums released over the years,

but I'm not sure if all of them can. I've been meaning to try making myself a "mixtape" reconstructing, as closely as possible, the series of tracks that I listened to so many times back in the day, first on vinyl, and then on my homemade cassette of the vinyl record.

Besides *Skylarking*, XTC has released three other albums with the Steven Wilson remix treatment, each including a disc of surround mixes and other material. There's also a remixed album of the band's retro-psychedelic side project, when members of XTC recorded two albums as The Dukes of Stratosphere. I love psychedelic British and American pop from the late 1960s including bands such as Strawberry Alarm Clock, so I am excited about this remix project; I have ordered a copy and will likely write about it when it arrives.

Unfortunately some of XTC's best albums, including their best-selling album *English Settlement*, have not gotten the remix treatment, and may not ever get it. XTC's efforts to re-release more of these records, on their own label, have been somewhat hampered by the fact that some of the original multi-track tapes have gone missing, and unless they are found, no remix is possible. Virgin records, the record label XTC worked with (and, arguably, *for*), and made millions *for*, harmed them incalculably, in more ways than one.

If you want a copy of *Skylarking*, I recommend that you get this version, if you can, because the mix is better, and also because it is on the band's own label. If you can't find that one, or want a less expensive version, order this one. They may not make much, trying to sell copies of *Skylarking* 34 years after its initial release, but at least the possibility exists that they might earn *something*. If I wind up with a little extra cash, after Christmas, I'm going to order myself an English Settlement t-shirt; truly, I want many of the same things at age 53 that I did at age 14.

Lines to Code Before I Sleep

It's been a hard few weeks. I've been working long hours at work, sometimes going in to get extra work done in the evenings and on weekends. I'm doing this to try to finish up as much work as possible so that I can take an unbroken series of vacation days from next Wednesday (Christmas Eve Eve) through New Year's Day. It's possible that I'll be called in to work on something, but I'm hoping I won't be.

There is much more I wanted to write about. Writing time has been scarce. So I'm going to get this one out as it is. I'll try to write again before this hell-year ends.

Have a great week, and please stay safe!

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