

10/11/10

DON'T GO BACK ALL FOR THE SAKE OF A DOLLAR



I agree with you-- who needs stuff?

On Friday we drove to the small town of Fairfield in southeastern Iowa. I drove, actually. It was probably the longest I've ever driven-- two-plus hours!-- and I promised Mrs. Des Noise I would do it, sort of as a sweetener for making the trip to see bands on a Friday night instead of, I dunno, going to Fong's Pizza or something. I guess you could say my efforts at re-learning driving are going well.

There wasn't much traffic. To get to Fairfield, you take a four-lane state highway that turns into a U.S. highway, or a U.S. highway that turns into a state highway, I forget. Once you're past Des Moines and its suburbs, you go through miles and miles of farmland. The ["American Gothic" house](#) is off from one exit. [Roseanne & Tom's Big Food Diner](#) used to be around that area somewhere, too.

And then there's Fairfield. Once home to Parsons College, remembered by my Midwestern mom as a "party school," this town of 10,000-ish now holds the Maharishi School of Management, which bought Parsons after it went bankrupt in 1974. Yes, we're talking about the same Maharishi the Beatles studied under during their time in India. In fact, Fairfield is a huge hub for practitioners of Transcendental Meditation. David Lynch is a regular, among many others-- the town likes to respect its Hollywood visitors' privacy. (I can say that Paul McCartney's son James made his U.S. performing debut less than a year ago at the Fairfield Arts & Convention Center.) Jammy psychedelic guitar was emanating from the town square when we arrived-- my wife was behind the wheel at this point, because we had to stop to check the directions and I didn't want to parallel park-- and the overall feeling of the charming downtown reminded us of sort of a cross between Madison, Georgia, where my parents live, and the Northern California coastal town of Sebastopol. Way more food options than you'd expect from a place like this: Thai, Indian, Turkish, and on and on. We met our gracious hosts at a delicious cafe/bookstore called

Revelations, which has a menu with more vegan-friendly options than just about any place I've seen in Iowa. Locals were walking around in white, flowing pants. They were some of the healthiest, happiest-looking people I have ever seen. All that organic food will do that for you, I guess. Not to mention living someplace where you can see the stars and the Milky Way actually looks milky. Or might there be something to that meditation stuff, after all?



Now how we've grown so serious and dull.

In *The New York Times* on Sunday, Ben Sisario wrote a [fascinating article](#) about how bands are turning for their financial support from CD sales to corporate sponsorships. In other words, rather than fans supporting the music themselves with their purchasing power, companies like Toyota, Nike, and PepsiCo are the Medicis of critic-friendly independent music. Or, as Sisario puts it: "Lifestyle brands are becoming the new record labels." The piece prompted no small amount of commentary in music-critic circles. Some mused that it's probably no longer possible for bands to "sell out" anymore-- there's no money left. Others focused on a cringeworthy quote by Best Coast's Beth Cosentino, but her entire persona is based around not giving a damn, so I have to take her shilly word choice at face value: I assume she really does want us to have fun dancing around in our Converse in the summer. (Incidentally, Cosentino apparently gave her interview around the time of [Best Coast's Grinnell show](#).)

The broader debate is whether or not we *want* our culture to be corporately financed. It's hard to fault a musician for trying to make a living. But it's even harder to argue that art will speak truth to power when it's as dependent on existing power structures as any of the rest of us working stiffs. (People will surely make this argument. Don't trust them. There's always a [Pangloss](#) to say we live in the best of all possible worlds-- and if it were up to them we'd still be living in it.)

I don't think anyone can say they have a single perfect answer to the question of how best to foster creative, independent musical expression *and* help people get paid for it. It might just be that musicians have to give up on the money part, but that doesn't seem right, either. There are so many of my favorite records that could only have happened with the backing of ridiculous amounts of major-label dollars, you know? We want the greatest artists to be able to focus on creating great art. Or at least I do.

Still, something I saw in Fairfield gave me hope for one way communities can still enjoy

adventurous live music, at least, and not depend on the profit motive. [The Beauty Shop](#) is an all-ages, do-it-yourself community space right there in Fairfield. There's no alcohol, which I imagine is part of what allows it be all ages, but that wasn't really a problem Friday night. The venue is run by Phil and Dom Rabalais, a pair of I'm guessing early-twentysomething brothers who closed out Friday's bill with their band [Utopia Park](#). Dom, as I soon realized, also plays as Coyote Slingshot-- I bought a 7" and a handmade T-shirt after he blew my mind with a [recent Des Moines show](#). These guys also run a label called [Sweat Power](#). The whole experience was just so positive, seeing a bunch of enthusiastic teenagers and old fogeys like us crammed together dancing in a small, hot room, listening to Dugout Canoe's loop-based drones, or [Christopher the Conquered](#)'s dystopian big-tent-revival Harry Nilsson-isms (it was the release show for CTC's [new cassettes](#) on Sweat Power), or [the Poison Control Center](#)'s unhinged, heartfelt rock, which nods equally to the 60s classic and 90s indie varieties (PCC had played a 10-year-anniversary live-band [karaoke show](#) the previous night in their hometown of Ames), or the music of Fairfield's own Utopia Park (who I am bummed to confess I missed-- our hosts understandably needed to feed their dogs-- but I hope to catch you dudes next time). Here's what I learned: No matter what changes take place in the rarified world where people make decent sums of money from their art, as long as a few people care an awful lot, someone will find a way for music to do what it does best. And that's to bring people together.

It turned out that our hosts, a wonderful couple with a daughter in her second year of art school, knew a lot more people in the room than we would've expected. They also got a chance to meet and talk with new acquaintances-- one conversation saw PCC's Pat Fleming and one of our hosts trading yarns about great concerts they'd seen (Pat: Radiohead on the *OK Computer* tour. Host: Bruce Springsteen on the *Born to Run* tour. Pat: Was Max Weinberg playing on drums? Because he doesn't actually play on "Born to Run"!). As for me and Mrs. Des Noise, we got to see old friends from Des Moines and meet new friends from other towns. And we got to introduce our hosts to new music. Music is how I met the couple in the first place, eight or nine years ago-- on a John Mayer message board, of all places.



What's the use in living if you can't live?

A venue like the Beauty Shop definitely won't work everywhere. Costs are low here, and the meditating community (known derisively to the non-meditating locals as "roos," short for "gurus") seems generally to be super-intelligent and successful in business, as well as highly supportive of the arts. Nor can a place like this work forever, because you have to guess the Rabelais brothers, like so many others, will eventually gravitate toward other projects as they grow older, right? Still, I couldn't help but feel that if a cool little space like this for touring bands can happen in a tiny little town in Iowa farm country, it can probably happen *somewhere* else, too. All-ages DIY venues are obviously not the answer to the music industry's woes. But it's a reminder that music isn't just an industry, although I'm sure everybody up on stage would love to finally make some decent money from their constant touring and giving up of steady jobs. Music is about community, too. And as long as that exists, dedicated music fans will always be able to find new sounds that interest them, whether or not those sounds get some self-serving stamp of approval from an insular circle of privileged people who have nothing better to do than appoint ourselves to rate the quality of other people's art. Sometimes we even get paid for it.

Sorry not to say more about PCC and CTC, who were both great and played some different songs than usual, but I've said so much about them already on this blog that all I can do is recommend you check them out. Our gracious hosts gave us a tour of Fairfield and the neighboring Maharishi Vedic City on Saturday morning, so we saw the geodesic domes, the houses designed after ancient Vedic principles, the Waldorf school whose students always used to defeat my wife's high school speech team, a "Vedic stonehenge" with an accompanying observatory that has been turned into condos, the home (or another house close to it) of Natural Law Party presidential candidate John Hagelin, the namesake Utopia Park where TM practitioners live in trailers near the domes, the bustling farmers' market next to a California Zephyr train track that will soon be a "quiet zone" so no trains can blow their horns when they go past (our hosts graciously treated us to some extremely tasty chile relleno crepes), the Arts & Convention center with some pretty impressive artwork on the stone floor, the Sondheim theater (one of only two in the world that bear his name-- there's now also one in London), the gorgeous woodlands where our hosts live (did I mention you can see the stars?), and on and on.... it was a lively and unique place full of interesting contradictions, right there in the middle of rural Iowa, and I'm sure I'll visit again. We could've stayed around longer and checked out an art gallery, among other things, but we had to get home to watch Northwestern's football team lose embarrassingly to Purdue.