

# Confessions of a Yakuza

I WANT IT IN WRITING: I.O.U. EVERYTHING.

Bruce Springsteen said, “Trust the art, not the artist.” (Well, someone said that, and then Bruce heard it and said it, and then I heard it and started saying it, too.) Bruce—and anyone else who ever said that—was right.

The whole idea of where ideas come from...if I’m truly confessing here, I first heard it from Bono. Bono!

It was the middle of my senior year and U2 was about to release their new album, *Achtung Baby*. Now listen: I didn’t like U2. I didn’t like the *Joshua Tree* thing, with the grainy, Ansel Adams-y Anton Corbijn photos, or the faux Americana that came with *Rattle & Hum*. It all seemed so...damn...earnest.

And then one night on MTV, it was time to premiere the music video for the much-anticipated new U2 single. You may remember this. The single was called “The Fly,” and it was downright shocking. It’s one of the earliest *what-you-once-were-isn’t-what-you-wanna-be-anymore* memories I have. (That’s the best kind of memory about the best kind of feeling. (And I would love it if a band would come out with a song and just repeat that *what-you-once...* idea over and over.))

But here’s the thing about “The Fly.” After you got over the shocking—shocking!—sound of the song, and the dark, supersaturated video that looked nothing like U2, after all that, you got to the lyrics, and the song had this one particular line:

*Every artist is a cannibal, every poet is a thief;  
they all kill their inspiration and then sing about the grief.*

Fuckin’ Bono!

He’s an easy guy to hate, but you have to admit that’s an incredible lyric, and he deserves credit for writing it. Which is to say, he deserves credit for finding inspiration somewhere and turning inspiration into that line.

An art director I used to know (and a brilliant one, too; bordering on genius, and certainly a madman) used to say, “If you steal from me, you’ve stolen twice.” I’ve always thought that statement was a little clunky. I’ve also never forgotten it.

Everyone’s read Austin Kleon’s *Steal Like an Artist*, right? Great book. Liberating, even. Because even though it has “Steal” in the title, it’s really all about *inspiration*. And that’s the thing—all of us, every day, are soaking it all in. We used to worry about it more than we do now. I certainly did. But here’s a not-so-secret: *Nothing* is original. *Everything* is inspiration.

What you do is this: you find as many wells as you can—sources of ideas and thoughts and art that feel true and authentic to you. And you pump your heart full, and you pump your soul full, from every one of those wells, and you jump and shake and run and spin and swirl it all around, and then you close your eyes...and you see rainbows. Or, you barf it all in a bucket. That’s up to you. But at that point, either way: you are making your own kind of music.

What I’m trying to say is: every vaguely creative decision I’ve made in the last 20 years has been inspired or influenced by Paul Westerberg. I haven’t concealed it. But since not everyone studies or swoons at the man’s feet, this may have all been a bit hidden the entire time. Until now.

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I was an art director, and two things blew my world wide open in the early ‘00s. The first was a trip to Hatch Show Print. I walked in those hallowed doors on Broadway in Nashville TN like a Latin American girl on the night before her 15th birthday. And when I walked out, I had learned how to dance. The tenets of Hatch’s design drove me. Being in that space...I mean, it *smelled* like the process. It was as distinct and unique and colorful as any scent I’d ever taken in before. But I wasn’t a purist, unlike them—I didn’t have (much) access to letterpress printing and wood type, but I also wasn’t about the historical accuracy of the printing. I loved the design, and I loved the feel.

It was everything I’d ever wanted to do, but I had never touched lightning before. And so like a folk singer with a long lost melody or a hip-hop artist with a sampled beat, I took the longest, deepest breath—you could

*smell* the process—and then I ran as fast and as far as I could before I exhaled. And when I did, the air I had breathed no longer smelled like Hatch. It was the earliest scent of OLG.

The other soul shaker was the release of the Grandpaboy album *Mono*, which was quickly followed by (and packaged with) Paul Westerberg's *Stereo*, with its scrawled, scratched and scabbed aesthetic—and that was just the songs.

Grandpaboy? It's complicated. But it's brilliant. You see, Grandpaboy *is* Paul Westerberg. It's his alter ego, introduced in the mid-'90s after The Replacements had broken up and PW was signed to a major label where someone was trying to make him into a star, again. In the middle of the proper "album cycle" for Paul Westerberg, Grandpaboy appeared.

Grandpaboy was a made-up character that made up the most ramshackle, ragged and riotous rock & roll. And in those days, when you didn't know anything about everything all at once, it was like a secret. A hidden EP, with reverb-drenched '50s rockabilly songs like "Hot Un" and "Psychopharmacology" and "Homelessexual" with that thin, reedy voice and verb-y guitar...rowdy throwaway songs, and then the most beautiful flower, "Lush & Green," right in the middle. *That* was the tell. Grandpaboy? His identity was a secret, and you kept it like one.

Back to the story. It was late '01, early 2002. PW had pretty much disappeared after *Suicaine Gratification*. No tour, and the album sank. In those early days of 2002, we needed the things that made us feel alive, as much as we ever had or maybe ever would again. I remember robbing Paul Simon when I said to a friend, "Where have you gone, Paul Westerberg, this nation turns its lonely eyes to you."

And then one day, a website popped up, and it had three new Grandpaboy songs on it, including a video for one called "Let's Not Belong Together." That particular song is as remarkable as its title—it's not about *not belonging together* but instead about *not belonging, together*. (It's all about nuance, and if you ever felt that feeling, you got it—and quick. Perhaps Paul's greatest gift.)

The video to the song played what looked like a decayed Betamax replay of someone—The Replacements?—on an old TV, peeking out through a cardboard sheet with the word "Grandpaboy" cut out of it. The songs were raucous and raw, piss-filled and snarky, unlike anything we had heard from Paul in the era when he was being produced by the folks

in California. Musician credits were a mystery, and pure fiction: Grandpaboy on vocals. Zeke Pine on bass. Luther Covington on guitar. Henry Twiddle on drums. Elrod Puce on handclaps. Rumors ran rampant—was that Tommy Stinson on bass? Chris Mars on drums? Was this actually *The Replacements*? Paul wouldn't say that it wasn't. Soon enough there was talk of a tour that was going to pick up in Duluth, and play the unplayed dates on Buddy Holly's ill-fated Winter Dance Party tour, and nothing more.

I loved the tall tales. Later a songwriting friend would say to me, "Never let the truth get in the way of your story" and I've never forgotten it. PW built a world, and in it, everything was loud and mono, everything was raw and real. Exaggeration. Mythology. Marketing.

Grandpaboy's *Mono* came out as a full record, with Paul Westerberg's *Stereo* on its heels, and it was a new era for PW. Gone was Hollywood, gone were the major labels. Here was a man in his basement, seeming to go mad slowly, writing and recording and recording and writing and running out of tape and never getting in tune and on and on and on and on and *creating*, and then releasing it as an album. He became a recluse, an island, and I wanted to be a recluse and an island, too. And at a point in my life when I had to decide whether to be part of one world or another, PW's basement became like a little lifeline, tied around my waist, and I'd give it a tug every now and then, and it would tug back, first snapping, "Leave me alone, kid!" and then also, "Let's not belong, together."

As an art director, the design of those albums—so perfectly DIY—floored me. Polaroids. Hand-drawn linework and text. Scanned wallpaper and manipulated art. Cardboard slashed with a box cutter. I scratched my chin and went, "Oooohhhh." It was then I realized as a designer how stiff I really was. "Oooohh." I thought about Hatch and coughed myself hoarse. "Mmmmm." I jumped up and down on printouts of my own work, ground it into the floor, "Ooooh. I see." I wadded it up, tied it to the back of my car, duct-taped sandpaper to it and drove down Columbia Avenue. "Oooohhh." Then I scanned it all back in and called it final art.

Now, there's a filter for that. But I was not completely analog myself. I got the suspicion that PW wasn't either, and that made it OK.

Oh, and one other thing. Look, I was an English Lit major. I loved lyrics. I love the quintessential American, cinematic novella that is "Thunder Road" and I love Dylan's wild imagination, painting the corners of the

mind, a Beat poet lighting fire to the great questions and tossing off new ones like burning rain, falling from the sky. But you know, it doesn't have to be so *wordy*. I mean what I love about music...what I've learned, more and more...is just the thing you can do with one great idea and one great riff. That maybe that's all that you really need. Can we just be direct, for once? And so I present for your consideration "Eyes Like Sparks" from *Mono*. It is one of my all-time favorite songs, and it has maybe the best lyrics ever. Every word, the truth. It's just about...butterflies, I guess. Attraction. Things you can't, or shouldn't, do:

*Just stay where you are / Baby, stay away from me /  
with your eyes like sparks / and my heart like gasoline.*

(The whole song is just that lyric, and a single gnarled guitar riff, repeated like 10,000 times.)

I heard it and I thought, "That's the last song I ever need to hear, and this is my favorite album ever."

One last note on the graphic design. *Mono's* album art has this big numeral "1" on it (*Stereo* has a "2," of course). It's a killer "1," so, I had it tattooed on my left arm. The deal was some friends and I were having a very hyperbolic conversation, about "best-ever this" and "best-ever that" and we just got to the point where it was like, "Are you ready to take a stand for your band?" And we were.

For me, *Mono* was my all-time favorite album, and I thought that while I could make a note that I wanted to be buried with a copy of the album someday, would anyone take such a note seriously? What if they missed the note? How would I know for sure?

Well, now I know for sure.

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PW is still doing all that same shit, too. Still in the basement, we think. Released four or five more albums of those kinds of recordings, each sloppier than the last, and each blindingly brilliant. I'm the guy that thinks the last decade of Paul's career is actually better than the first. I truly do. And it all culminated with *49:00*. Have you ever heard *49:00*? I mean, it was only out for a week or so before he got sued by Yoko Ono

and the album got taken down—never to be seen or heard again. But for that week...

49:00 perfectly captures everything I've ever loved about the burn-in-your-veins greatness of rock & roll, in one single track. (It just happens that the track is more than forty minutes long, and contains about 25 songs.) It's sloppy, loud, cocksure and heartbreaking. It's funny, sneering, frustrating and so, so sadly beautiful. It's hoarse and out of tune, it's a hundred hit singles, it's ridiculously creative. It's roll down your windows, break the steering wheel off the column and lose your voice hollering along great.

Paul's approach on this record is endlessly inspiring, with its youthfulness, its snark, its creativity, its swagger, its confidence, its resignation, its fragility, its passion and its vulnerability.

If you ever worried about your age, about growing up but not growing old, then listen to this record, and let it kick your rock & roll teeth in.

History: Paul released 49:00 as a \$.49 MP3 a few years ago—on June 49th to be exact (ie July 19th). He was 49 years old at the time. (Oddly enough, the album is only 43:55 in length.) Due to including snippets of covers of songs he didn't write near the end of recording, he was quickly hit with a slew of lawsuits, and the album was deleted and made out-of-print ten days after it came out. A week later, he released the scorching "5:05" as a follow-up single, addressing the lawsuits.

(That's right: including "5:05" finally makes 49:00 an even 49 minutes in length. *As if* I could love him more.)

If you dig around, you can find the album out there, on YouTube or wherever. On first listen, it's a bit coy and bemusing. On second, it makes a move. By the third pass, you've just leapt out of an airplane and are suddenly realizing you left your parachute on the seat next to the one you were sitting on.

You can do anything now—you're a shooting star.

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Before all that, though...

At the tail end of 1999, I was working at one marketing firm in Fort Wayne, but getting recruited by an ad agency downtown. It was the place my two best friends in the biz had gone to work. It is/was the best agency in town, and is/was the best place to work: their team is/was the most talented in town, hands down.

But the thing was, this was the third time they'd recruited me.

The first time they called, they said it was a done deal. Then I went in for an interview, left my portfolio behind for further review, and...nothing. The portfolio was eventually delivered back to me, by my friend who worked there, with no comment—and never a word from the owner/creative director with his name on the door.

A year later, that same owner/creative director called and said, "Let's try this again. That was Eric's decision last time; come see me." And so I did. And again, nothing. No replies. Crickets. You're left to sit and wonder, until you stop wondering, and you realize that no reply at all is simply, "No." (Never forgot that one, by the way.)

Not gonna lie—it hurt my feelings, and made me question my skills, my worth, what I was bringing to the table. It also drove me to go to excruciating lengths to prove 'em wrong. And I'm quite thankful for that.

To console my ouchy ego, I played this song "Ain't Got Me" from Paul Westerberg's second solo album, *Eventually*. The song isn't humble, but I didn't need humble. I needed *fuck you*. It went like this:

*Your hall of fame is littered with famous women and men.  
You've got 'em all on your wall, except the last of a dying breed,  
'cause you ain't got me. (No you ain't, no you ain't.)  
No you ain't got me.*

(PW has a way with "Ain't" in a chorus. Every hear "AAA" off *Mono*? My lands. Of course, we tried that in Go Dog Go with "All That Lonely" (and also name-checked him in two other songs). Hat tips, nods and winks, I suppose.)

So 18 months go by and now I get a call from the *other* guy with his name on the door—the co-owner. And he says, "This time, we *really* do this. I'm ready. We'll leave [NAME REDACTED] out of it. Meet me at Cheddar's for a beer and let's hammer out the details."

And I thought, “OK.” My mind and a lot of my heart knew this was the right thing to do. It was the next step in my career. It was going to be a great place to work—a secure job, with respectable pay and a reliable schedule. A place I could plant some roots and get in to a groove with, maybe move out north, maybe get a house with a fence. *Get a little something for myself.*

But there was this other part of my heart that was still pretty pissed off. And that part of my heart had a beat that was a little louder, a little more urgent, and it would take over the stereo every now and then, and when it did it would drop the needle on *Eventually*.

*You cram your dreams with computer chips; give me tambourines  
and a pair of shaking hips. You’ve got ‘em all on your wall,  
I’m the last of a dying breed,\* and you ain’t got me...*

Oh, *hell*. So I called and canceled the beer at Cheddars. I said, “You had your chance. Twice.” And I walked away, wondering what I’d done, and I listened to “Ain’t Got Me” just as loud as I could handle, and then a little louder.

A few months later, I left my job anyway, and I started One Lucky Guitar.

Working at the agency that is/was the best place to work in Fort Wayne?

It was the best thing that never happened.

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With just a couple of exceptions, *all* of my all-time favorite bands have that wonderful Mats-y “underappreciated” / “criminally underrated” ethos: From Syndey: You Am I. From South Philadelphia: Marah. From Libertyville: The Ike Reilly Assassination. They have a clear and direct bloodline to The Replacements. The beautiful losers, you might say. And they’re all wonderfully ragged and cathartic and loud as hell and their music will make you believe in the magic and majesty of rock & roll—and yourself—again.

“Underrated and underappreciated.” It’s kind of a funny one. On the one hand, these are artists who have changed your life, and you think they should surely get rich, or at least make a living, with their art. And on the other, you love that they’re a best kept secret, that you and the other few

\* I don’t think I’m part of a dying breed, by the way.

And I now get to work with people every day who remind me of that fact.



who know them—and love them—are a secret society, that you're on the inside and they are yours and yours alone to enjoy.

(Unless there's a girl on a fire escape who loves them, too. And sometimes there is/was. And that's pretty cool.)

I think when the tab is settled, The Mats were alright with being the ultimate version of “underrated and underappreciated.” I think there's pride in maybe not winning the numbers, but instead winning the hearts.

And I think we've felt that at OLG, too. We used to do these larger shows, block parties, Down the Line, these events which kinda unfortunately became about numbers. By the fourth Down the Line, we were nearly out. Out of patience, and out of bands we liked. Our mindset of what the show was actually about was at odds with bands that were popular. (I'm not saying popular bands can't be great, or can't matter, but...it had become about a headcount.) And so we were done.

These days, we book most of our shows at The B-Side, a small room on the back half of our design & marketing boutique.

It's a pretty Replacements-y place.

We're not about a headcount. We're about soul. We're not interested in winning the numbers game. We're interested in winning hearts.

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Tip:

If you ever quit drinking and pick up distance running as a way to burn off whatever you used to burn off by drinking, then I recommend three album playlists with which I guarantee you will set all of your personal records. The Replacements' *Let It Be*. (Best vocals on any album, ever, though I usually drop the cover of “Black Diamond.”) Paul Westerberg's *49:00*. (All the way; wouldn't edit a thing.) And then the bootleg *Talent Show* from Paul's September 17, 1996 at the Troubadour in West Hollywood, which answers the question, “Could any of these songs ever be any better?” with “YES—when they're played live, and it sounds like the last concert on the last night after the last day.”

And also, when you start drinking again, I recommend the song “Knockin 'Em Back” from *Come Feel Me Tremble*. And that you don't get behind the wheel.

Here's the thing about The Good Ones Clothing. The name for that company stems from a You Am I lyric, and by extension, back to Paul. Because, like for a lot of us, Paul's shadow and inspiration are floating invisibly and inaudibly around just about everything that YAI frontman and songwriter Tim Rogers does. (Did I say "invisibly and inaudibly"? Well, unless you look, or listen.)

But the funny thing was, there was a band in Rwanda with the name The Good Ones. And they sent us a letter indicating that *our* Good Ones—a fictional group of dogs that we invented (with names that referenced both Paul and Tim, and with songs written and recorded by another PW acolyte, Josh Hall)—might cause a little confusion in the marketplace. I'm not sure we were trying to do the same thing in the same marketplace, but, we love musical dreams of almost every stripe. So we changed our (fictional) band's name.

Around this time, the wheels were catching fire with The Good Ones Clothing. Our business partner had a lot going on with her other, primary business, and it was unclear how we might move forward together with TGO, or if the whole thing would even keep moving forward. (We, and it, did.)

And so, faced with a band rename, we went with something that had a bit of *if-you-didn't-laugh-you'd-cry* humor to it: The Final Hurrahs.

Of course, there also happened to be some Paul Westerberg inspiration at work, in particular these lyrics from *Suicaine Gratification*:

*Clap your hands and stamp your skinny wrists.  
Cross me off your list in the sand.  
And throw this night to the fuckin' wind;  
I don't ever want to hear these words again:  
"If only we had; I wish that we did."  
You're my latest last chance. You're my final hurrah.*

I mean, really.

Wheels on fire. Businesses on the ropes. Relationships on the line.

I never want to hear these words again:

*"If only we had; I wish that we did."*

Never.

At this point, I've left out the way that my life and OLG was forever changed by "Valentine;" "Left of the Dial;" "Seen Your Video;" "Favorite Thing;" Paulson; the Guthrie Theatre in MPLS on June 29th, 2002, and the magic that happened before it; "Born for Me;" what it means when I wear a Minnesota Twins hat; "Anything's All Right;" "AAA;" "We May Well Be the Ones;" talking about PW with Tim Rogers in the basement of the Double Door in Chicago IL, heart racing; "Down Love;" "Live Forever;" Duluth National Guard Armory; or that one call about posters for Riot Fest. And: the day before they played Riot Fest in Chicago in 2013 and the downside of "Knockin 'Em Back." Not to mention talking to Jespersen at the Club De Ville during SXSW in 2005. Oh, and "I Will Dare."

Another time, another planet.

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In the OLG brand book—which is where we try to clearly and concisely communicate what we do, what we stand for, and why it matters—the last words in the book are: "One foot in the door, the other one in the gutter." That's from The Replacements' anti-anthem "I Don't Know," and it's perfect for us.

But there's a little cause and effect confusion. Because to me, it's not so clear that I might say, "Oh, that's us." And then later, "Here's a perfect song to capture the idea!" Rather, I think that hearing that song—which is a sloppy, throwaway song—years ago, and having it work its way through my brain and my heart, and coarse through my veins, and then forget all about it and its inane lyrics until years later hearing it anew and thinking, "Oh, *shiiiiit*." That indeed the song had planted an idea years ago, and it was an idea so strong and so full of conviction—from a song called "I Don't Know," no less—that there was pretty much no way it wasn't gonna come to life.

Because the idea is that at OLG, we have credibility in the board room and the barroom. And indeed that has come to life, time and time again.

What I'm trying to say, or trying to prove, is that I never thought you could do that without being a fraud or a phony or a fake and the reality is, you can. You absolutely can. And I suppose that has been one of the most satisfying realizations I've ever had after becoming an adult.

And that's what I love and loved about The Replacements. A lot of people hate them for selling out or whatever. The world is more complex than that, it turns out. We're all going to change. It can happen to you, or you can force it to happen. And I love that they went for it, and that when they went for it, they were still inescapably themselves: Banned from *Saturday Night Live*. Thrown off the Tom Petty tour. The wonderful moments in the International Rock Awards telecast (find it on YouTube) when The Replacements play "Talent Show," and the producers edit out the "*Feelin' good from the pills we took*" lyric—and so Paul then changes the outro chorus from "*It's too late to turn back, here we go*" to "*It's too late to take pills, here we go...*"

I mean, he is who he's going to be, and he's going to be who he is.

And in that way, Paul Westerberg gave me comfort in my own skin. After I first heard his songs, I didn't feel quite so alone. And later, he gave me *confidence* in my own skin, which is something I never expected, and something I could never repay, but something I try to live up to every day, one way or another.

The Replacements were and are themselves, 100%, and could never not be.

May we all strive to be the same.

You wanted it in writing?

YOU everything

Matt Kelley  
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