

# The Cobra's Nose

## The Cobra's Notes

Volume 41

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Every year it's the same and I feel it again. The solstice is just past and the days are getting longer. Not long enough to bug me as they will starting, let's say, April. But starting December 22nd, I begin missing the lengthening nights. Every year I think I would be happy if the nights won and it would be dark for good. I could sleep at any hour for any length of time and wake up tired. And it would all be fine—the darkness is comfortable, forgetful, and free of scrutiny.

Until I awaken with an unaccountable image in my head, as I did the other morning. It was some sort of field with trees around the perimeter. The grass was mown to make way for a parking lot and a big tent. And in the tent...folk dancing. I'm there, but cannot think why. I probe the memory and can make out blue spangles on the costumes. I get the impression that the audience was made to sit on bales of hay. Heck, with a little more time and effort, I could probably recall license plate numbers. These embellishments are almost certainly fraudulent, though sincere creations of my unconscious mind reacting to relentless interrogation by consciousness. Mind calls upon memory to explain itself and comes up with fragments and non-sense.

It seems real, but I've had some pretty convincing dreams. I've awoken certain that I could walk on air, just climb right on up invisible steps. One morning found me confident I had Brittany Spears' moves. A week or so ago, I was so bummed about a dream fender bender that I rolled over and balanced my check-book. Why not? It wasn't like the morning could get any worse.

This folk dance scene might be genuine, but I don't have the goods to build a case. Whatever it was got tucked away in some cranny in my brain where dust and moth doth corrupt. Whether this was by accident or design is lost. I've refused to remember lots of things. Not that I've lived a terrible life. If only! It just seems shamefully dull. People around me reminisce, and later I reminisce about their reminiscences, or particular turns of phrase that caught my fancy. Like when a few weeks ago I was with a group of people listening to a local classic rock cover band called Doctor Ruth. "This is not Lynard Skynard," I told Amy. "When it is I'll let you know, so if people ask, 'what do you hate?' you can say, 'Lynard Skynard.'" She beamed and clapped her hands, because I was obviously quoting somebody's grade-A material. "Who said that?" she asked. "Please tell me it was me!" When I talk about my life or thoughts, however, it feels like a tactical mistake; the prelude to a conversation that will end, "...and that's why I won't be calling you again."

I've been careless about some memories, and avoided others like they owed me money (probably do, the bastards), and they have slipped away without a trace. Well, not quite.

Removing data from the brain is not a thorough and efficient process like emptying the trash on a Mac. Rather, it is sloppy and unscientific like deleting files on a pc. The information isn't entirely removed. It remains in a vestigial form which bats

## The Memory Hole

around my brain like a gang of pain in the ass ghosts. The phantasms bump up against dreams, they trail random bits of information and become strange. And so I nearly throw out my back springing out of bed and trying out Brittany moves, and scratch on Partick's door to ask him,

"Are you and Peggy and Sophia moving to Hawaii?"

"No."

"Are you sure? Because I think you might be."

"Get out."

Today, I found a ticket stub at for a railway passage on October ninth. What? When did I take a train anywhere? I couldn't remember having set foot on a train since the Tube in, ahem, London. Six or seven hours of concerted effort later, I remembered my Los Angeles subway adventure. And how I was going to write all about it for The Nose.

Instead, the memory dropped down the same hole that claimed the dance festival and whatever it was my dad and I fought about that one time. Little fragments escape from the abyss rather worse for wear. Are anybody's memories misty and water colored? Mine are more like lepers. Not all bad, any more than lepers are all bad—just tattered and fraught...not whole. That's what happens when my memories, decayed and starved, wander lonely in my brain—I end up getting haunted by myself.

So I need a back-up database, something that I can check to remind myself if my brother is moving to Hawaii. And it may as well be *The Cobra's Nose*. So it will continue in a more robust form than it's been in the past couple of years (though less than in the days of Cosmodemonic, as I now have a job where people expect me to do things all day long). Because if I'm going to have so few memories of the past I should be much younger, and I don't think it necessarily works that way.

So here's Volume 41, which I hope you will enjoy. And if any of you can help me out with the folk dancing thing, please contact me using one of the methods listed on Page 14 (yeah, I know—the Whit Stillman article kind of got out of hand). Provided I remember to include it.

Sharon C. McGovern



Editor/Publisher/Cobra-in-Chief

# Living and Living Well

My Great-aunt Ann Pace had a wonderful house, a big ranch style with a much bigger field behind it. In front was a fluffy cumulous pine tree full of grackles, and an arched driveway with exits onto Elliot Road. Inside, was a long living room next to a long family room with a divider I never saw closed because it the dining room table was dead center. The porch had a sliding glass door, which a cousin once ran through, and a stick from a flower arrangement that Aunt Ann put in a bucket of water then transplanted when it began to grow. The yard had a swing set that accommodated decades worth of Pace descendents, and a tree that another cousin fell from on the same night as the sliding glass door incident.

That was during a family reunion, one of many hosted by Aunt Ann and Uncle Max because, as I might

have mentioned, they had a wonderful house. It was stocked with toys appropriate for children on any age, and books, books, books. When Sophia was about four, she looked at them and sighed, "Aunt Sharon doesn't read to me."

"You *read* to that child," said Aunt Ann. Her daughter Maryann was there, too. "You *read* to that child," she said.

For the record, I did *read* to that child and don't know she rewarded me

thus, but boy did she pick her slander well. Aunt Ann had strong opinions and the importance of reading was among the strongest. Her brilliant brood is the evidence of its validity.

Though not perfectly ancient, I remember when Gilbert was hicksville and Aunt Ann's house was the middle of nowhere. At some point, people began moving to Gilbert on purpose, en masse, into big stucco structures on little lots. Traffic on Elliot Road became thick and fast. We would visit Granddad in the hospice down a block or two down and had difficulty turning left to leave. Uncle Max would wander away and frighten Aunt Ann into distraction. Strangers began to use the arched driveway as a turn-around, and as Aunt Ann was alone by that time, her children took steps. A wall was erected that blocked one entrance, and a gate with an intercom was installed at the other.

"Time for the gold 'AP' on the gate," said Danny.

"No, no, no!" said Aunt Ann, but you could tell she got a kick out of the idea—as long as it was never actually realized. Aunt Ann took more pleasure in annoyance than anyone I ever knew. And Danny took pleasure in making sure everything ran smoothly and looked great. My sister and I busted in on him at work once. We were in town for the Elegant Evelyn's wedding and lucked into some cryptic signs that said *Killing Mrs. Tingle* to us. We followed them through deepest Pasadena until we came upon an old high school with lots of trailers parked behind it, and a couple of lackadaisical security guards milling around the chain link fence that ringed the property.

"We're here to see Danny—Dan—Arredondo," we told them, and they waved us in. We ambled amongst the trailers until we spotted Danny holding a clipboard and sporting a Madonna headset. We giggled and waved, and if he murmured curses and threats to the guards we would never have guessed. He showed us Helen Mirren's trailer and promised to tell her how nuts I was about *Prime Suspect*. Then he led us to a hallway in the school from where we could see Vivica A. Fox filming a scene in one room and Kevin Williamson directing her from another. He was sorry we hadn't come on a day when we could have been worked into the background as extras. And we were expecting no more than a "how are you? I've got to get back." If we were lucky.

Danny looked after people. He monitored family gatherings to make sure nobody was alone and everybody was fed and welcomed. On a visit to (cont. on page 8)





I am so tired of scumballs. Okay, I don't know a lot of scumballs, but they are everywhere in movies. Take *Mystic River*. Or better yet, don't. You may know the set-up. A boy, one of three friends, is picked up and horribly abused. He grows up to be a dysfunctional adult who may or may not have murdered the eldest daughter of one of the other boys who happens to be a local crime boss. The third, a cop, investigates.

Contrived? You bet, and that's without even mentioning, for one thing, the gratuitous slap at the Catholic Church. One of the men who kidnaps the boy is only—and very conspicuously—identified by a crucifix encrusted signet ring, though there is no indication he is a church officer, nor that religion is of more than perfunctory importance to any of the characters, and the topic is never raised again. But if it's Boston and a child is to be molested, who better for the job than a priest?

It's a cheap shot, and sloppy, similar to the common movie phenomena that only about half the actors seem to be interested in playing a regional dialect. Of them, Laura Linney alone refuses to condescend to it. In fact, you wonder why an actress with such obvious poise and ability bothered with the nothing role until toward the end she breaks into a Lady Macbeth speech which is pretty cool except it comes out of friggin' nowhere. Her business about how much her husband (played by Sean Penn) loves his remaining daughters is somewhat undermined by the fact he hasn't looked at or mentioned them hardly at all in the previous two hours, and the idea that they as a couple rule the neighborhood seems rather weak considering how utterly crappy their circumstances are—and how similar to their peers'.

For most of the three or four hours of *Mystic River's* running time, Penn shrieks and bawls to indicate "sorrow" and pushes his lips out really far to signal "cool." Tim Robbins as the damaged adult shuffles, bugs his eyes, and drones. Marcia Gay Harden as his doubting wife shrinks and whines and makes her vowels the flattest in all of Baaasten. In short, the three put on such a display of Acting that their Oscar nominations (and wins for Penn and Robbins) were as inevitable as official recognition the unforced, plausible work of Linney, Kevin Bacon (as the third childhood friend) and Lawrence Fishbourne (as Bacon's partner) was unlikely.

In the end, the characters return to the old neighborhood and watch a parade go by. Likewise, *Mystic River* is ultimately stagnant; an unworthy expression by driven, talented people about how the under classes teem with misery and corruption, and even those who seem to have escaped are inevitably drawn back into the maelstrom. It's simply

# Radical Decency

The films of Whit Stillman



another example of how often actors wallow to cover themselves with glory, and an Important Film is one that makes you want to go home and scrub yourself with steel wool. (By the way, everything about *Mystic River* goes double for multiple Oscar nominee *21 Grams*. The only relief in the movie is in snickering at Benicio del Toro's hair job, which looked like someone dropped a bag of flour on his head.)

Even more grueling are the Important Independent films. If you can't bring yourself to watch the orgies of child abuse and drug addiction, or the picaresques of philosophical hit men in the theater or on tape, you can taste their flavor by catching the Independent Spirit Awards on IFC sometime. The shows usually start promisingly, with an introduction and MC duties by dapper Indy legend John Waters. For decades, Waters has written and directed twisted little productions featuring

his hometown of Baltimore, and strange local actors like Mink Stole and his cross dressing pal Divine. As his notoriety grew, Waters could afford to hire more famous though equally unlikely types such as Patti Hearst (really!) and Iggy Pop, then mix them in with high wattage celebrities including Johnny Depp, Kathleen Turner, and Melanie Griffith. The blend works because Waters knows and loves them all, and celebrates "the world's filthiest couple" as gleefully as he does suburbanites and movie stars. His movies are frequently weird, shocking, and repulsive, but the subversive element in them is how affectionate they are. Waters doesn't condescend, but rather is expansive. He creates space for outré types and they never mind about the squares.

Then Waters hands the mic to the Independent Establishment and the next couple hours are given over to defensive group-think. Every film is "daring," every outlook "controversial," every artist "original," even though they are as uniform as the impeccably tousled hair on every presenter and recipient. They damn Hollywood as an incestuous nest of timidity and conformity, then invariably give their award to whichever nominee is also up for an Oscar. They second the opinions of the previous winners (especially if Michael Moore is one of them), and flatter the audience for having the courage to agree with them. It's a scene where the most scandalous utterance imaginable would be, "You know, I think Christianity has been the most important organizing principle in the western world, and that the bourgeoisie have (cont. on page 10)

# The Marvels of Modern Technology

So I've got custody of this Titanium Powerbook, a relic of a former employee of CD Travel where I currently work. That employee's name was "Fro." He got the job using fraudulent credentials, but the company didn't know that until well after they invested fifteen hundred bucks in a device incompatible with every other computer in the business, and with which nobody (Fro included) had any real facility. When the small extent of Fro's talent and the large extent of his deceit was discovered, he was fired and the Powerbook was tucked away in a cupboard with crushed and forgotten office supplies, a portion of the ten thousand Ethernet cords, eight hundred mouse pads, seventy five tea kettles our Maximum Boss bought at some auction, and a cardboard box of superannuated cellular phones (see illustration right).

Eventually, it was excavated by a workplace descendant of Fro's named Milton. If you've seen *Office Space* (and if you haven't, why haven't you?), this Milton was like that Milton except less personable and more combative. When he got his mitts on the Powerbook, he stripped it clean of everything useful and fun, including the voluminous cache of pornography Fro had allegedly compiled over his weeks dinking around on CD Travel's dime. What Milton did with it is a mystery that will go unsolved, as speaking to him was no joy for me and seemed to cause him physical pain. But my Overboss ordered him to hand it over so I could load it ill gotten programs to use in creating company propaganda. This I did thanks to the invaluable Somebody who will go unidentified because he works Somewhere.

And now I can take it out and feel like a bigshot. Or at least like Mr. P-body, who had a Titanium Powerbook of his own until he upgraded to something even more spectacular. He compared it to a leggy supermodel and would present it as his "new girlfriend." I was relieved when everybody had finally met it. When he made the introductions in my presence, his friends would arch an eyebrow and I would have to put their minds at ease—no, not me. Their relief was not flattering.

Now, I have a leggy girlfriend and at least some of the attendant benefits. I was with her at AZ88 one night, typing away at the table P-body had assigned me to, when two guys rushed up and said, "We love your PowerBook." Naturally, the gentlemen were gay (and yet Rush fans, go figure), but the mojo of this piece of equipment is powerful. With it by my side, I can even go to The Coffee Plantation at the Biltmore without fear. Without much fear. Well, I can order and find a table and not look at anybody, and sadly, that's progress.

Will Powerbook + nifty coffee shop close to CD Travel = more Cobra's Noses? That remains to be seen, but the odds just went up, up, up!

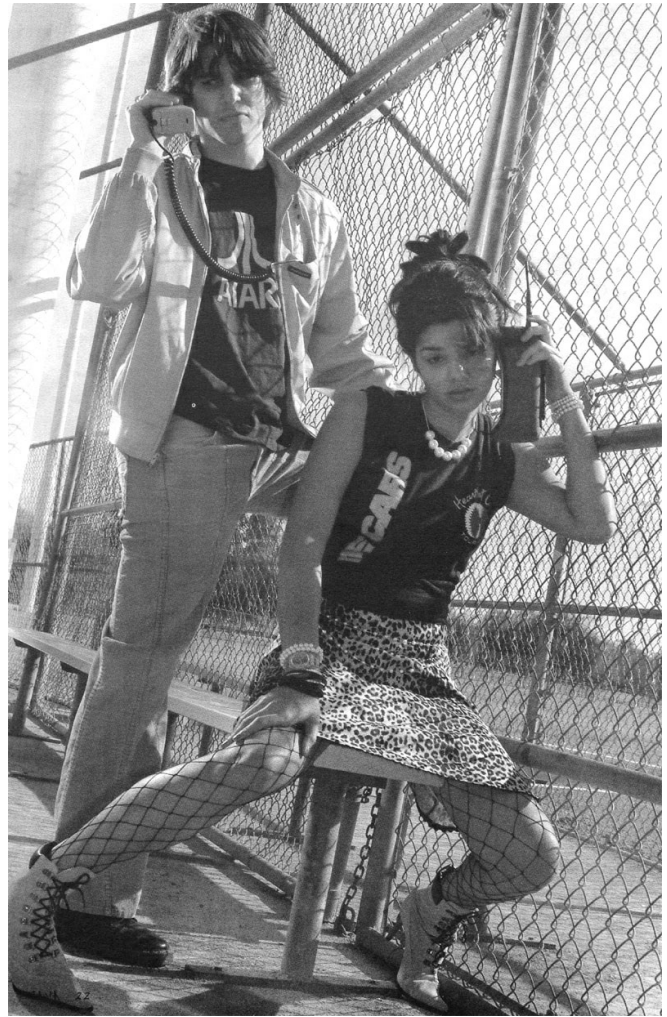


Photo from the December 2003 edition of *Java Magazine*, taken by Chris Loomis, from a concept by Mr. P-body, used without permission which is why I'm attributing like crazy here.





About a year and a half ago, Partick brought Mojo kicking and screaming into the McGovern household. Okay, I was the one kicking and screaming. Mojo is more into YIPE!ing then looking wounded when you do something sadistic and unexpected like *being there*, completely without warning, when he rounds a corner.

But lest you think I am the only pox upon Mojo's life, you should have seen what he had to contend with on the porch.

I believe I also mentioned in an earlier *Cobra* Partick and Sophia's rats, the "blue" one and two mostly hairless, entirely creepy mutants. They were Trojan pets, allergen bearing precursors to the "dog," and heck, maybe a goat or pony or something next. To be fair, the rats never lived indoors. They had a roomy set up in an aquarium full of fluffy recycled paper bedding and the Christmas gifts from my former boss. Eventually, the blue one and one of the others succumbed to heat and old age, leaving one wrinkly, tumor-ridden survivor named Jean-Luc.

Partick gave Jean-Luc the run of the porch and laundry shed. This was probably as advantageous to the natural world as to the rat. The rat gang had been known to slaughter doves that fluttered down into the aquarium. Not that I blame the rats—let's face it, rats are aggressive and doves are stupid.

You know what else are stupid? Parakeets. When Partick and I were younger, we went to the swap meet with some friends. It was a revelation. The cds, the videos, the housewares, the Nagel prints! And parakeets at low, low prices. So we bought a couple without parental consent, and hid them in Partick's bedroom—a scheme that lasted entire minutes before Mom was onto us.

She didn't rage at us, I'll give her that. Maybe because she was relieved we didn't take in another grackle. Which is another story. Now back to Omner and Himni, which is what we named the parakeets. Turns out, parakeets bought for low, low prices at swap meets are frequently inbred and more nuts than not. Himni's psychosis manifested in his flying into the spinning ceiling fan again and again until he expired from head wounds. So we got another and named it Second Himni. To avert another ceiling fan tragedy, Partick clipped the wings of Omner and Second Himni, so they spent their days racing back and forth on a high bookshelf, committing acts of vandalism, and yelling. A cone shaped Santa doll with long felt legs was their particular target. They knocked it on its back and spent hours standing on it, pecking at its eyes, and yelling. A ring of green and white guano accumulated around it.

That's how I remember them still. A few months after I moved away, Partick's pet rats climbed up to the shelves and, well, that was the end of Omner and Second Himni.

Partick called me with the news, and explained that he wasn't angry with the rats, which were after all just following their

instincts, but he missed the birds and made impromptu sarcophagi for them out of Hershey's syrup cans (which back in the day had air tight lids so there would be no problem with

smell). He left the cans on the shelf when he went on his mission, and a few days later (the longest shrine-like behavior toward a child's bedroom ever made it in out house) I got a call from Mom. "What

do you know about the Hershey's syrup cans...?" she said. I don't think she had been so alarmed since she found a full set of her mother's dentures in a spice rack when she was readying grandma's house to sell.

With Jean-Luc at large, the dove population was relatively safe, but Mojo was driven almost to nervous collapse. The rat ate first, both from the food dish and whatever bones or scraps were about. After Jean-Luc

made off with a chicken bone the "dog" had been enjoying, Partick tried to talk some sense into the beleaguered animal. "Mojo," he said, "he's the size of your head." Mojo would put on an occasional show of defiance—growling and snarling and raising hackles that have an area about the size of my thumb. Then the rat would but flex the muscles in his shoulders and arms and Mojo would scamper off whimpering. On cold mornings, the "dog" would shiver on the doorstep instead of curling up in his blankets because an eight-ounce rat barred the door to the laundry room.



**Two of Partick & Sophia's late pets--Jean Luc is the one on the left. This is what passes for adorable in some quarters.**

I've heard dogs have no sense of proportion, and that's why tiny breeds come on so fierce and enormous ones don't destroy them for their insolence. But Jean-Luc didn't have the manic edge of a Chihuahua or Pomeranian. He was more like the Edward G. Robinson of rats, small but menacing. Until Partick scooped him up and tickled his belly, then the rat would grimace and squirm and become grotesque.

But if I could get used to having a small dog on the back porch, having a creature that came to act like a teeny one wasn't that much of a stretch. Even Mojo began acting casual around it. If Jean-Luc approached the water dish, Mojo would saunter off as if he were through anyway, that's cool. That just left the hapless pizza deliveryman, who had just accepted the yappy little dog when a rat marched out of the laundry room and flexed at him. And Sophie's friend Alex (daughter of Shane), who used her walkie-talkie to inform Sophia, "THERE'S A RAT! A RAT! THERE'S A RAT ON THE PORCH!" And a few others.

My attempts to convince Sophia rats are basically destructive, pestilence-ridden bad news failed. To his credit, whatever Jean-Luc did all day and night, it didn't seem to result in plague and ruin. Who knows what we will find when we move. Maybe Jean-Luc himself, whom we haven't seen for a few weeks. It may well make us nostalgic for Hershey's syrup cans.

# The Cobra Car Chronicles Continue!

Last Saturday on NPR, Scott Simon reported a great and famous racehorse had been sold to a Japanese interest, then slaughtered and resold as pet food. That inglorious end, he went on to say, has been the fate of millions of horses worldwide—from champion, to family pet, to wild mustang poached off public lands. Simon was making some sort of point, or maybe just wanted to buzzkill the Run for the Roses scheduled for later that day. But sad as it is, what do you do? If the animal wasn't important enough to his masters—for whom he had made a prettier penny than I'm ever likely to see—to memorialize, why should I give it another thought? Frankly, I was surprised to hear he had hung on for so long.

You know what other creature is still around? That freaky Oliver creature, who habitually walked upright, smoked cigars, made passes at human ladies, and was rumored to be the unholy offspring of human and chimp. Oliver is very elderly these days. He's blind and crippled and living in a preserve run by a soft voiced guy who wears short shorts and flowing t-shirts, and who feeds the ape chunks of fruit mouth to mouth. Not the worst way to go, I suppose. Heck, I should be so lucky if I happen to become as infirmed. But if I'd heard Oliver died and was ground into dog chow I'd probably manage to carry on.

But when my mechanic began a conversation about my car with the words, "Just how attached to it are you, anyway?" I began to reckon on some serious loss.

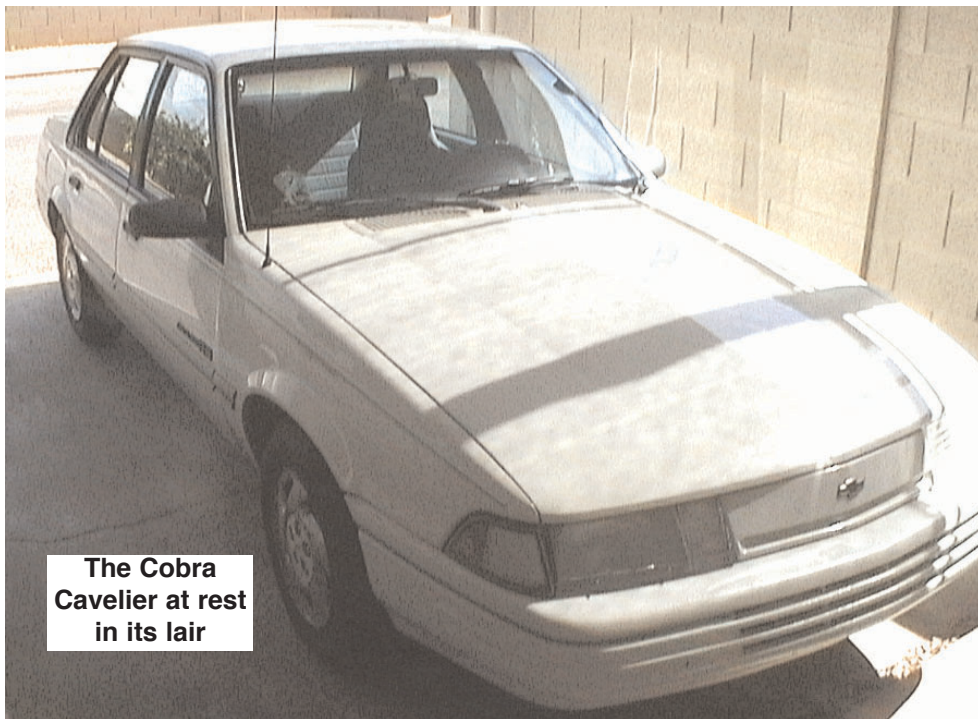
Car problems played a significant part of The Cobra's Nose in the early days. Many an edition was begun whilst waiting for a repair estimate or for a tow. Over time, the problems kept cropping up, but whatever small appeal they had dwindled. The last big operation on it was a brake job, notable for the creepiness of the guys who looked at it first and the costliness of the establishment that got the job. Oh, and the colossal dickitude of the flunky who ferried me to and from the shop to work. I've a fairly high tolerance for disrespect, but when the guy started mocking my hand gestures and vocabulary I shut down. And due to his patronizing behavior I will never again patronize his employers.

That's why a different shop had custody of my car for what I thought would be a major tune-up to get me through emissions testing. I'd failed once, and let the clock run out on the repair extension. Alas, I got a patch and part one of the car's eulogy instead. Did I know the head was about to crack?! With a copy of Auto Trader (Foreign)

and Saturday's Arizona Republic, I began my search for another car.

And soon became discouraged because I simply do not have the cash on hand to pick up a sporty little something made within the current century. So I went to my perpetual Plan B—start making calls to Mom and Lauren and other reliable advisors and ask them questions relative to my situation that would lead them to offer to solve the problem themselves (preferably by buying me something). This almost never works. Still, they did give me some valuable guidelines in car shopping, which commenced as soon as Partick—another font of wisdom and locked checkbook—and Sophia—a font of remarkable patience—returned from some business at the Tae Kwon Do studio.

Our first stop was in Mesa to see a '96 Toyota Tercel. It was a stick shift with four speeds, which I noticed on the freeway



**The Cobra  
Cavelier at rest  
in its lair**

when I couldn't persuade it to go into overdrive and came perilously close to choosing reverse as a default. So, no.

We then went to a small auto lot on Van Buren, a street in Phoenix with a notorious reputation for matters only tangentially related to cars, to see a fetching Paseo. There was also a nice looking Nissan, reminiscent of the one my Mom used to drive. "We'd also like to look at that one," we said to the proprietor. "Nah, not that one—too many problems." Hm—hopeful sign.

We took the Paseo for a spin around the neighborhood, and noted a disturbing rattling. When we questioned the proprietor about the noise, he said, "motor mounts" and said that just for us he would have his mechanic do the repair(cont. on page 10)



Mormons are interesting. And funny. That's a bigger secret than it should be.

Mormons occasionally crop up elsewhere in pop culture. There are a couple in the eighties nostalgia trip *Angels in America*—your typical closeted homosexual and his pill-head wife. *Frasier*

Crane had a Mormon agent for an episode or two, but the guy was just too doggoned nice to be effective. A fairly recent HBO

production, *Shot in the Heart*, was set in Utah and alluded to that state's pervasive LDS culture, but the filmmakers didn't trouble themselves to learn basics like how to pronounce "Nephite" properly, and the Mormons came off like any nutty old fundamentalists.

Neil LaBute is perhaps the most prominent contemporary artist belonging to *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*. His films are shown on IFC and Sundance channels and on theater screens in larger cities, and get press disproportionate to their profits (his latest, *The Shape of Things*, was also included in the Jan/Feb *Film Comment's* list of indy disasters, right along with barely released *Book of Mormon* Movie). His plays are reviewed in *The New York Times*, *The New*

*Criterion*, and other notable publications, and star up and comers like Paul Rudd, Calista Flockheart, and Ron Eldard. Although his work I've seen has the subtlety and visual wit of a firing squad, it does have an appreciation of sin as a grave moral phenomenon. LaBute has been frank in discussing how his religion informs this viewpoint, and the critical establishment grooves to the assumption that any group of people who work so tirelessly to present a spotless façade must have a dark side you would not believe. Though most of the characters in his work are not identifiably LDS, LaBute's status as a Mormon convert gives his depictions of depraved human behavior a tantalizing novelty. But though the stories are moralistic, they are in the end less interesting and inventive than many

other entries in LaBute's rightful genre—horror.

Trey Parker of *South Park* fame has probably been the most resourceful mainstream exploiter of Mormon culture of late. He starred in *Orgasmo*, which he also wrote and directed, as a Mormon missionary who agrees to star in porn films in

order to finance his temple wedding. Once (and if) you get past the implausibilities, and, you know, the concept, the story is

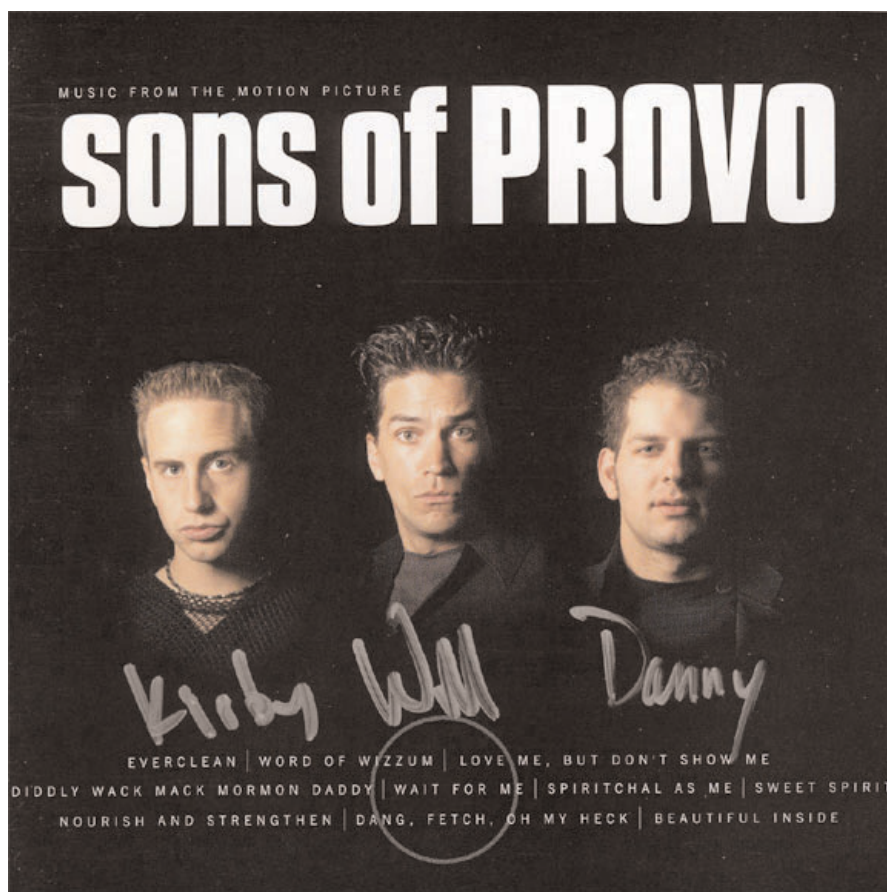
rather sweet. The missionary remains chaste and true to his beloved, and even manages to proselytize on set. Parker may have a spotty knowledge of missionary life, but

he managed to get his hands on a copy of the First Discussion from somewhere and deployed it accurately, flip charts and all.

On one episode of *South Park*, Mormons were revealed to be heaven's only inhabitants. They are cheerful and pleasant, and eager to fellowship a visiting Satan ("let's put on a play about how lying makes you sad!"). On a later episode, Joseph Smith, the first prophet of the LDS church, was included in the Super Best Friends, an

organization loosely based on the lame-o Justice League successor Super Friends, and also featuring Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Krishna, and Moses. This season, a Mormon family moves to South Park, and their lifestyle captivates one of the boys and his family. The Mormons, while careful not to push their beliefs on their new friends, are persuaded to relate the story of Smith and the early days of the church. This is accomplished through several musical episodes, and the refrain "Dum! Dum! Dum! Dum! Dum!" is a giveaway as to Parker's estimation of the tale. But again, the telling is more faithful than not (the construction paper recreations of famous Mormon art would do any CTR proud), and the script concludes that whatever its illogicalities, Mormonism helps the (cont. on page 8)

## A Diddly Wack Mack Mormon Boy Band



(cont. from page 7) family live a happy, ethical life and that is more important than the veracity of the founding myth.

But while I as a semi-interested party have largely neglected recent offerings of Mormon origin, in large part because they played only in the wilds of Gilbert and East Mesa, there is one on the horizon that I will seek after because its soundtrack is virtuous and lovely, and I'm here to give it a good report.

The set-up harkens back to the historic Mormon pop-culture triumphs of the Osmond Brothers and Donny & Marie, who still enjoy a lingering, twilight celebrity. The Osmonds' success was due in part to their immaculate personal reputations, novel and refreshing aberrations during the decade long bacchanal that was the seventies, but their power-pop should not be underestimated. Consider "Crazy Horses" or "Goin' Home." Seriously.

But now that Donny and Marie have seen the cancellation of their latest collaboration, the remaining, graying Brothers have retired to Branson, and seeing as Jets (not Jet, the earlier, Mormoner Jets) and Afterglow never took off in the mainstream, the boy band field is ripe and ready to harvest by Everclean with their debut album *Sons of Provo* and mockumentary of the same name.

One refreshing thing about *Sons of Provo* is how inside the gags are. There's no *Saturday's Warrior* missionary zeal or pretending that maybe this is just an ordinary Christian band of no fixed denomination. The writing is specific. For instance, one song is called "Sweet Spirit," after the Mormon term for a girl too fat to marry. When I defined it for the Amazing Amy, she gasped in outrage. That took me by surprise, for I had long since accustomed myself to the euphemism that everybody in the culture was onto, like calling a retarded kid "special." Of course, in Mormondom, nearly everything is "special" (including the "Special Interest" project to marry off elderly—meaning over 30—singles) so the currency of that word has been critically devalued. The meaning of "sweet spirit," however, has remained current.

As does the behavior the song describes.

*She loves cookin' for the new guy in the ward  
She makes brownies but her efforts are ignored  
She says, "I don't know,  
I guess the new guy's just sick of me"  
She's only getting married if they bring back polygamy  
Ah-ah-ah-ah Sweet Spirit  
You're so...nice  
You may not appear it  
But your soul's a pearl of great price  
You're such a good person  
Sincere and true  
You just keep rehearsin'  
And one day you might say "I do"  
And that will be so nice for you*

Sure it's a novelty song, but it's also nearly verbatim more Young Women's lessons and Bishop's interviews than I care to recall. Mormonism isn't the only ethnic group containing size-ist bigots. As overeating is one of the few carnal indulgences that won't threaten your temple (cont. on page 9)

(cont. from page 2) L.A., the Elegant Evelyn and I contacted him at the end of a sixteen-hour movie shoot. Instead of begging off in the name of health, or sense, or the fact he was facing another one the following day, he invited us to one of those fashionably obscure L.A. clubs that had a bouncer outside but no sign. He was aware of every person in the room, monitoring a number of little dramas occurring therein.

Afterwards, we went to his home. He was just beginning to populate it with furniture of his own choosing. It was a challenge that he barely had time to tackle, but the motifs were beginning to take shape—open, comfortable, and gracious. The deck was being repaired and enlarged. It was like his mother's—where I learned (and am still learning) the rudiments of hospitality.

That was the only time I saw it, and I likely never will again. Both it and Aunt Ann's house—sans the gold AP on the gate—were sold after their occupants succumbed to cancer last year. While I don't believe for a moment Aunt Ann and Danny don't have better plans for the afterlife than to become haunts, I can't imagine fully imagine them apart from the homes where I knew them. How we live is reflected in where we live. My great aunt and marvelous cousin lived very well, in every sense of the word.

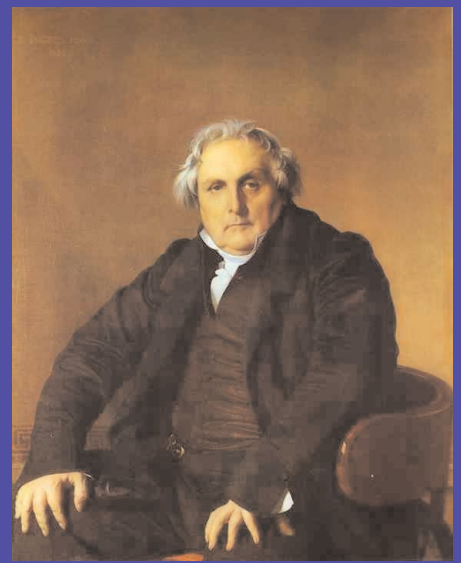
8

## A Note on the Pictures.

The pictures of Aunt Ann and Danny for this article are on loan from Mom's photo album, taken after her father's funeral service. Though only a few years old, the album is haunted. You can hardly turn a page without encountering a dead relative: Uncle Max and Aunt Ann, Granddad and Mirtia, Danny and my brother Chuck, Evelyn's first husband.

I've been to antique stores that market old anonymous photos, and while some of them are lovely, I couldn't help but regret they lost their names and families. Please archive!

Also, in fairness, I'm not sure Aunt Ann would have like the pic I chose to represent her, but it reminded me so much of Ingres' *Portrait of Louis-Francois Bertin* that I couldn't resist. Come on--tell me I'm wrong:





(cont. from page 8) recommend, however, there tends to be a high frequency of Sweet Spirits within those communities. Mormons are highly social, and eating is often a component of their gatherings. Thus the joke, “How many Relief Society ladies does it take to change a light bulb?” “Four—one to change the bulb, three to bring refreshments.” There is a not entirely undeserved sub-genre of Mormon humor dealing with the BYU co-ed. “How do you get a BYU co-ed through a door?” “Grease her sides and wave a Twinkie.” Debates over why coffee and tea are forbidden by scripture because they contain caffeine but how chocolate gets a pass would make a rabbi proud, and the epidemic of Diet Coke-heads would earn a nod of recognition from addiction specialists. Mormon dietary rules are wittily detailed in “Word of Wizzum,” and another song, “Nourish and Strengthen Our Bodies and Do Us the Good that We Need” is a tribute to the prayer over food that has no official text though virtually everybody uses the same words.

So the Sweet Spirit population booms, dresses abysmally, goes on missions (but not to Temple Square, where lithe figures and comely features are mandatory), and “when it comes to giving hugs, [they] tip the scales.” They are held as examples of patience and purity on the approximate level of Quasimodo. “Though she may be nerdy, and you may not want to hear it/ We all should be more like her, that Sweet, Sweet Spirit.”

Food is not the only temptation to which Mormons are vulnerable, of course:

*You know, girl, I love you, but I hope you comprehend  
This body is a temple and you don't got no recommend*  
--Love Me but don't Show Me

*If a girly wants to pursue me do me I say  
“No, girl, not with you—me, I be waitin’ for my baby  
Dressed in white, not beige.”*  
--Diddly Wack Mack Mormon Daddy

The Mormon practice of sending nineteen year old boys on two-year missions is the setting for “Wait for Me,” in which the young men ask a few favors of the girls they leave behind:

*Do not go out in public or converse with any males  
Our love can be assured to stay alive and kept on track  
Put your life on pause, we can press  
“Forward” when I get back.*

It's only fair, after all he'll be true and faithful as he magnifies his love for her as a missionary. And no, it is not an unprecedented line of argument for a prospective missionary to use.

When the missionary returns from “preaching love and peace with other well dressed guys,” he is usually equipped with a lexicon of pseudo-curses, including “dang, fetch, oh my heck, what the holy scrud, aitch-E double-hockey sticks, that frickin’, flippin’ crud.” [Apparently in the new movie *Mean Girls*, one of the in-crowd tries to introduce “fetch” as an interjection, but her clique mistress tells her it will never catch on. Little do they know! --ed.] They are fairly thoroughly covered in a song that takes its title from the first few non-profanities above. There's even an interlude in Spanish, after the returned missionary practice to testify in

the language they proselytized in.

But the album's finest and funniest song is “Diddly Wack Mack Mormon Daddy.”

*I was born in The Church,  
Just like my daddy was, yo  
Of pioneer stock, my grandpa  
Crossed the plains in the snow  
got my Eagle Scout at twelve  
With some assistance from my mom  
I was home before nine-thirty  
When I went to the prom  
I love to sit in my pew,  
And praise the Lord with a hymn,  
I'm hyper-active, yo,  
I even got the keys to the gym.*

It's a stereotype, but a keenly observed and underused one. And as legendary movie producer Samuel Goldwyn once said, “I'm tired of the old clichés, bring me some new clichés!” The “Diddly Wack Mack Mormon Daddy” is the paragon of young Latter Day Saint malehood. And why not? Hale and hearty, full of righteousness and facile charm, he is the Mormon Ben Affleck—ripe and ready for a takedown.

But the marvel of the song, indeed of the album, is how it manages to be canny and accurate without blatant viciousness. The Everclean view of the culture is much like that of

that of the culture toward the Sweet Spirits—kind on its face, withering in its impact. Mainstream Mormon product tends toward kitsch and that of counter-Mormons to bitterness and expose. I don't know much about the creative team behind



*Sons of Provo*, though in the time I spent with one of the movie's producers he would not shut up about the Mountain Meadows Massacre (an abomination perpetrated by Mormon settlers more than a hundred and fifty years ago). But the final product suggests affection, if not devotion, to Mormon society that compliments the go-for-broke looting of boy band conventions. The creators are openhearted about both to realize there is enough there there to have fun with and produce something...okay, I'll say it—special.

There's a new Mormon centered film in town about a gay missionary, and one about small town geeks made by graduates of the BYU film school, which is beginning to get some major press. Having had my fill of both during my life, I had planned to avoid them. But on the basis of the *Sons of Provo* soundtrack, I may have to revise this plan. Maybe LDS art is beginning to flourish as the late prophet Spencer W. Kimball predicted it would a few decades ago, and the weird delights of Mormon ethnicity will at last be revealed to the public at last.

*Everclean* is Will Swenson, Danny Tarasevich, & Kirby Heyborne. *Sons of Provo* was produced by Jenny Jordan Frogley. Evelyn Jensen is thanked in the liner notes. For more, visit [www.sonsofprovo.com](http://www.sonsofprovo.com).

(cont. from page 6) with no addition to the sticker price. I told him I had a worthless Tercel I was looking to unload, and he said bring it on by maybe we could make a deal.

At this point, Partick and Sophia bailed due to a previously arranged social engagement, and I returned on my own (making leading phone calls all the way that resulted in tons of advice). The proprietor drove my car for a few blocks and declared that the mechanics from earlier in the day might well be fools or crooks because the Tercel did not seem to be in a desperate condition. Maybe his mechanic could fix it up and I wouldn't have to mess with the Paseo at all.

Now this puzzled me. I wasn't going to buy the Paseo without independent verification of its roadworthiness (all of my advisors were firm on this), but I had resigned myself to buying something from someone. But heck, if I could slide with a major tune-up (the proprietor's suggestion) I could always buy something later. We arranged for me to bring the Tercel in on Monday for his mechanic to inspect, and the Paseo would go to an independent mechanic for the same. In the end, Peggy very kindly assisted in the latter half of the operation with a mechanic with whom she had a fruitful history.

Sunday, I spent wandering around the house wringing my hands.

Monday went as outlined above, with two significant rulings from mechanics. The first was from the proprietor, who added more problems to my car's rather impressive list of fatal and just mightily irritating flaws. He seemed a little hurt that I would take advantage and try to palm such a hunk of junk (did I know it had a tendency to overheat?!) off on him, but he was an honorable person and would give me a few hundred in trade. The second was from Peggy, whose mechanic had found a mysterious leakage of motor oil in the Paseo.

I don't pretend to know much about cars, but "mysterious leakage of motor oil" is a deal killer. As far as I was concerned, the search for a different car was about to start afresh, but Peggy's mechanic said bring the Tercel because maybe I could slide by with a major tune-up.

I wasn't optimistic about this plan, but the mechanic, Tim Smart by the way, said he would include the evaluation of the Tercel in with that of the Paseo. What the heck? I took the Tercel in the next day and awaited the diagnosis.

Tim when he called seemed a little dismayed that I would demand he perform a miracle on such a hopeless wreck. Did I know one of the cylinders was wet?! Well, no, but since virtually everything else was defective it wasn't much of a surprise.

Long story...well, short is no longer an option, but to conclude, Tim also sells cars and after some fierce negotiations on my part ("What would you advise Peggy in this situation?") and hard-nosed parries on his ("Aw, geez..."), I bought a '91 Chevy Cavalier that has four whole buttons for the radio, cold a/c, and a name that doesn't irritate my spell check. It's an automatic, so I had to find another spot for the cobra's head gearshift Amy gave me for my 25th (prove otherwise) birthday, and to accommodate a few other cobra themed gifts she, Partick and Peggy were nice enough to bestow.

Now, what more could I want in a Cobra Car?

(cont. from page 3) **been more crucial to widespread liberty and social progress than any other phenomenon in history." And it will never happen.**

**Unless, just maybe, Whit Stillman ever makes another movie and is invited to the party.**

Stillman was born in 1952 to a Democratic politician and a former debutante in reduced circumstances. He went to Harvard, then worked in journalism, ran an advertising business, and had a job in sales and film distribution in Spain, all the while toying with literary pursuits. He finally rejected novel writing as too solitary an endeavor, and turned toward filmmaking. When nobody approached him with a script to direct, he ended up writing his own, *Metropolitan*, which earned him an Oscar nomination. He followed it three years later with *Barcelona*, and three years after that with *The Last Days of Disco*. The three films share actors and characters, and form an unofficial trilogy that extends from "Manhattan, Christmas Vacation, Not so long ago" through *Barcelona* in "the last decade of the cold war."

Like Waters (!), Stillman focuses on an underrepresented and overly maligned segment of the American population. Though the former adores the no-class carnival of social outcasts and the latter chronicles the "young bourgeoisie in love," they both treat their subjects with a generosity of spirit all too rare in film, mainstream, indy, art, and otherwise.

But where Waters has achieved cache amongst the trendy (witness his hosting duties) for reveling in perversity, Stillman is radically decent. Where rancorousness and depravity are reflexively embraced as audacious in movies, it's the striving for civility and propriety by Stillman's characters that is revolutionary.

In *Metropolitan*, the mother of a young deb named Audrey Rouget comforts her daughter after her son made a crack about his sister's posterior. The mother of Tom Townsend, the boy Audrey likes, loans him money for a second hand tux and makes soothing non-committal statements about her ex-husband's concern for him. Aside from a glimpse of Audrey's mom at a



**Metropolitan:** Group Social Life

(cont. on page11)



(cont. from page 10) midnight mass, that's the last time a parent is shown in a Stillman film. *Metropolitan* is set almost entirely in a series of after-parties held during the Christmas holidays. The parties last until "people go, or whenever the parents get up." The arousal of parents in this context signify looming maturity, the end of good times, and the beginning of dire, even doomed adulthood. In *The Last Days of Disco*, parents are distant check providers. In *Barcelona*, they are entirely absent. Even when one of the characters is gravely

hurt and when another marries, no parents or other family members fly to Spain to check in, and nobody thinks it's amiss. The young characters—often children of broken homes, shuffled off to boarding schools and later colleges—look to literature, philosophy, and one another for moral guidance.

When Audrey tells Tom how much she enjoyed Jane Austin's *Mansfield Park*, he is dismissive of the plot twist

that had the virtuous heroine resisting participation in a play put on by her wealthy, and slightly decadent relations. "In context, nearly everything Jane Austin wrote is near ridiculous by today's standards," Tom tells Audrey. "Has it occurred to you that today looked at from Jane Austin's perspective would look even worse?" she retorts. Audrey's sensibilities are informed by her love of literature (she fell for Tom over the letters he wrote to her schoolmate Serena), and particularly by the example of Austin's heroines. She is more reserved and decorous than her peers. She refrains from a round of strip poker (she and her friend Charlie play chess), and, like Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* protesting the play, warns against a game of Truth. Excessive candor became taboo in society, she explains, because previous generations knew how harmful it could be to harmonious relationships. When she succumbs to group pressure to play anyway, Audrey is wounded when Tom is asked to name his romantic interests and she doesn't make the list.

Austinesque propriety seems discredited as more tactless and unscrupulous characters thrive. At a particularly low point for Audrey, she spies a scarred set of Austin's novels for sale at cut rates. Romantic rival Serena offers mocking praise when she tells Audrey Tom described her as "well read." When Tom and Charlie worry that Audrey has fallen in with a scoundrel, they cite her admiration for Austin as a sign of her innocence. But like an Austin heroine, Audrey has formidable inner strength and an implacable sense of self. The author and the character share the first two letters of their names, and AU is also the symbol for pure gold. In the end, Audrey and the two most upstanding bachelors in her circle, Tom and Charlie, embark on a long journey at dawn, toward their parents' houses.

Released in 1990, *Metropolitan* preceded, and perhaps fore-

told the rash of Austin adaptations that began with the suburb A&E version of *Pride and Prejudice*, continued with the excellent *Clueless*, the underrated *Persuasion*, the competent *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma*, and bottomed out with the tarted-up indy version of *Mansfield Park*, and with *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which re-imagined the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* as a chunky, slutty dope obsessed with trivialities. Movies that extol the maintenance rather than the violation of social norms are simply not common, and movies that feature young women

who are not just babe-alicious but virtuous even less so. With the exception of Stillman's projects, and, weirdly, the cheerleader movie *Bring it On*, the fad ended as soon as soon as Austin's major novels were filmed.

Even Whit Stillman's sensibilities darkened with his movie *The Last Days of Disco*, released in 1998. Though the most recent of his films, *Disco* is set before *Barcelona*, and several years after *Metropolitan*. In it, Audrey Rouget, in a bit appearance has become a legendary editor in the pub-



**Last Days of Disco:** Lady & the Tramp

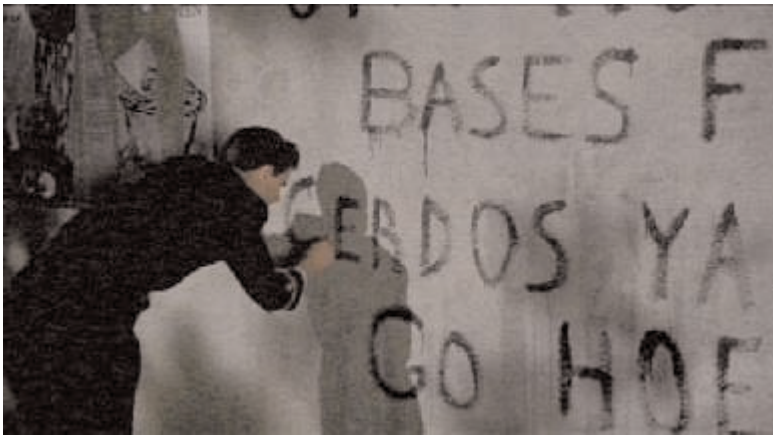
lishing firm where Alice and Charlotte land their first jobs. As in *Metropolitan's* roundelay of after parties, a circle of young adults try to engage in group social life, free from "all the vicious pairing-off." Alas, Charlotte, the main proponent of the idea, is awfully vicious herself. She admits early on to having sabotaged Alice's social life at school, but still insists they would make a good team. "In physical terms, I'm cuter than you," she tells Alice, "but you're much nicer than I am." Charlotte is the human embodiment of the Truth game from *Metropolitan*, a fearlessly candid social wrecking ball who gets away with it because she can also be engaging and fun, and did I mention pretty?

Alice is shy and defensive, uncertain in social settings. Eager to embark on post-collegiate life, Alice takes Charlotte's advice and seduces Tom Platt, on whom she had a crush years before. "There's something sexy about Scrooge McDuck," she purrs when she learns he collects first edition comics and original drawings.

And then she doesn't hear from him. Then Charlotte viciously pairs-off with a guy she had disdained until he mentioned he liked Alice. Then Charlotte deduces and announces Alice has a venereal disease while they are out with friends at the hottest club in the city.

Even worse, Alice takes Charlotte's advice about how VD can be an excuse to reunite with former lovers, and how it can all be very sweet. She calls Platt, and he lectures her about how he thought of her paragon of virtue until she came on like a tramp. I mean, really, Scrooge McDuck is sexy? She tells him that until that night she was technically a virgin, and he apologizes for giving her not only G but H. H? Her eyes widen, and she knows she'll be getting sympathetic looks from pharmacists for the rest of her life.

(cont. on page 12)



### Barcelona: "NO SI! OTAN GO HOEM YANKEE PIGS DEERS

(cont. from page 11) This may seem like Stillman punishing a character who failed to live up to her principles. After all in a similar situation in *Metropolitan*, the indiscrete character Nick remarked, "It's not hypocrisy, it's sin."

Stillman's movies reflect the tenets of American transcendentalism, the belief that humans can have direct access to God especially through nature and quiet reflection. As its most prominent proponent Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God." The characters in Stillman's films who betray their ethical selves seem to suffer more because they have cultivated ethical selves to betray. Like Audrey feeling embarrassed during the game of Truth where her shameless friends were not, Alice's infection seemed more significant than Charlotte's and Platt's because it was a token of a betrayal of her principles—which were in truth finer than theirs. The line between cultivating inner goodness/godliness and indulging egoism is a major theme in Stillman's films.

The struggle is highly individual, though organized religion gets a respectful nod. A midnight mass is attended, and Martin Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" opens *Metropolitan* (though it quickly shifts to swing music). In *The Last Days of Disco*, a clinically depressed character quiets his mind with the words to an Episcopal hymn, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, forgive our foolish ways/ Reclothe us in our rightful mind, in purer lives they service find/ In deeper reverence, praise." When Alice suggests this is odd, Charlotte, ever eager to one-up any one and any thing, busts into a rendition of the abolitionist hymn "Amazing Grace."

The most idiosyncratic approach to religion is Ted's in *Barcelona*. Ted is essentially an extension of Charlie from *Metropolitan* (played by the same actor, and vested with the same mannerisms and basic opinions), who wrapped up his transcendentalist theory that "the sensation of being silently listened to with total comprehension represents our innate belief in a supreme being, [but] at some point most of us lose that, after which it can only be regained by a conscious act of faith." Asked whether he experienced that, he replies, "No...but I hope to someday." Ted tries to make good on that hope.

Unhappy at how a good friendship had soured when it turned "carnal" without the benefit of true love, Ted vows to swear off pretty girls in hopes of returning to traditional morality. Physical attraction clouds the mind to more refined perceptions of soul, he believes, and even persuades his cousin Fred (who is to Nick in *Metropolitan* as Ted is to Charlie) on the merits of his argument by using examples of mutual friends and family

members. To Ted, this "leads pretty directly to the Old Testament," which he conceals within a copy of *The Economist* magazine, and reads whilst listening to "Pennsylvania 6-5000" and almost unconsciously dancing the Lindy-Hop. When Fred, with a pretty Spanish girl on his arm, catches him at it, he asks, "What's this? Some strange Glenn Miller based religious ceremony?" "No," says Ted, "Presbyterian." When the girl wonders whether this is what Protestant churches look like, Fred says, "Pretty much."

Well, maybe not. But Ted is certainly a seeker in a classic American tradition which, when not a variant of Presbyterianism, is also manifested in ethical business practices. "Like nearly everyone else," he reflects, "I had seen Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* and, as a youth, had the usual sneering, deprecating attitude toward business and sales." In

college, however, he was inspired by a professor of business, and discovered a worthy culture in the professional world. "Franklin, Emerson, Carnegie, and Bettger were our philosophers, and thanks to the genius of Carnegie's theory of human relations, many customers also became friends." Ted is shown expounding on this theme to a rather bored looking Spaniard and later to a patient co-worker, and in their disinterest Stillman grounds Ted's enthusiasm. Still, Ted perseveres. "In true sales," he explains, "you provide a real and constructive service [and] help people make their lives more agreeable, or make companies more efficient, and so create wonderful economies of scale from which everyone and the whole economy benefit."

This is a valid statement, but virtually unrepresented in movies where the "sneering, deprecating attitude toward business" is de rigueur. Far more typical representations of work include the despicable In the *Company of Men*, *Changing Lanes*, and *One Hour Photo*—none of which evinced any sympathy for working life, or any indication their creators had ever held a nine-to-five type job (unlike Mike Judge, the writer-director of *Office Space*, who clearly had a bead on the frustrations of working life, but advocated ethical workplace behavior nonetheless).

The kinds of jobs Stillman's characters hold, their educational backgrounds, and their social class are also typically reviled in modern film. After Charlie in *Metropolitan* laments that their little group is almost certainly doomed to failure, or at least disappointment in life, Tom remarks that a bunch of people losing their class prerogatives wouldn't be such a bad thing. Audrey protests, "Those 'people' are everyone I know!" Though Stillman is a self-described "natural born social-climber," his willingness to invest the "untitled aristocracy" with empathy and complexity is yet another rarity.

The filmmaker to whom Stillman is most often compared is Woody Allen, and it's true they share some stylistic similarities. Allen also populates his movies with highly educated talkers, and employs a relatively static camera. But Stillman has a knack for writing about the upper crust from the inside, free from Allen's churlishness and culture vulture tendencies. Allen's movies, especially the later ones, seem almost designed to expose and punish the character types Stillman celebrates (think *Interiors*, *Husbands and Wives*, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*). This is in part because Allen equates moral seriousness with misery, and his own Intellectual Little Tramp is the biggest wretch of all (though he still beds stunning WASP chicks and they pronounce him fabulous).

(cont. on page 13)



(cont. from page 12) Stillman advocates morality for its own sake, and is suspicious of equivocation. His movies are to hipster cinema what the American characters are to the European ones in Henry James's novels—bumptious, honest, good-hearted, and constantly underestimated. Still, it's not much of a surprise his movies are not more embraced. The concerns of the young overclass don't have the populist appeal of scrappy outsiders, and Stillman's characters realize it even if they don't entirely comprehend the hostility.

In *Barcelona*, Fred, a young naval officer, is scorned by street kids as “facha,” Spanish slang for “fascist.” He is alarmed, but Ted tells him not to take it so hard—shaving, short hair, neat dress—all facha. Naval uniform? Definitely facha. “Oh, then it's a good thing!” Fred concludes; though after some reflection he decides, “They definitely didn't mean facha in the positive sense.” Likewise, the little group in *The Last Days of Disco* are derided as “yuppies.” The character Des (the same actor who played Nick and Fred) says, “I wish we *were* yuppies. Young, upwardly mobile, professional—those are good things, not bad things.”

Stillman through his characters parses the attitudes, behaviors, and struggles of a tiny social segment with almost anthropological precision. The relative costs of Old Crow and Jim Beam, for instance, becomes a semi-important plot-point, and when a character announces he is a Furrierist all the others appreciate what that means.

In absence severe financial worry or perceived physical threat (though anti-American terrorism plays a role in *Barcelona*), arguments over ideas become battlegrounds. Tom Townsend's acceptance of (an into) a higher social class is signified by his renunciation of collective socialism (“I wouldn't want to live on a farm with a bunch of other people,” Charlie concurs). In *Disco*, the unassuming Josh vies with the disreputable Des for Alice's attention using *Lady and the Tramp* as a metaphor. “Essentially it's a primer about love and marriage directed at very young people,” he says, “imprinting on their little psyches that smooth talking delinquents recently escaped from the local pound are a good match for nice girls in sheltered homes. When in ten years the icky human version of Tramp shows up around the house their hormones will be racing and no one will understand why. Films like this program women to adore jerks.” Fred's critique of *The Graduate* in *Barcelona* is even more damning, and tonic to those of us who have found the former's appeal elusive.

Where incessant and at times esoteric cultural references have been praised in movies written by Quentin Tarantino and Kevin Williamson (perhaps because they are punctuated by slaughter), Stillman's have often been condemned as self-indulgent and rarefied. It's certainly true that his movies have an unusually high density of conversation, but it wears well over repeated viewings (believe me) because it is so precise, so literary, and free of cliché. And it's not all earnest young adults discussing philosophy and the arts and modes of goodness. There is a strong counter example in the Nick/ Fred/ Des character, who is not so much anti-intellectual as disinterested. For instance, a Spanish girl derides “...life in America with all of its crime, consumerism, and vulgarity. All those loud, badly dressed fat people watching their 80 channels of television and visiting shopping malls; a plastic, throw-away everything society with its notorious violence and racism and finally a total lack of culture.” Fred shrugs and says, “It's a problem.”

In *Metropolitan*, Nick is roundly and rightly accused of snob-

bery; but in fairness, he is also the most discerning. He insists Tom Townsend join the group because he is aware of the escort shortage and sympathetic to girls who are required to call the boys and put themselves on display. He also divines Tom's compromised financial situation and advises him on how to maximize his means, then crushes Tom's philosophical objections to deb parties by asking how him would feel about some much richer guy sitting at home worrying about how Tom can't afford a proper overcoat. “Has it occurred to you that *you* are the less fortunate?” Nick asks.

Of all the characters in *The Last Days of Disco*, Des is arguably the most keenly aware of Alice's essential goodness, and of Tom Platt's hypocrisy and cruelty in denouncing her.

Chris Eigeman, the actor who portrayed Nick, Fred, and Des, has described himself as Whit Stillman's evil alter-ego, the guy who says all the awful things Stillman would if he weren't so polite. Stillman has described the characters and Eigeman as having the smarter, cooler, older guy affect he aspired to but could never pull off. Both characterizations are accurate. Nick/ Fred/ Des are the natural allies/ antagonists of the “bible-dancing-goodie-goodie” types embodied by Charlie/ Ted/ Josh. Tellingly, the Eigeman characters who trade in uncomfortable truths are finally undone by their own dishonesty. In Stillman world, though principled behavior isn't the easiest path it is ultimately the most rewarding.

Now for the disclaimer I should probably have put at the beginning: I do not have a philosophical problem with movies about confused, mean, petty, vicious, even evil people. Artists and the business structures behind them should always and forever be free to create and market as they see fit. The glorification of vice, however, has saturated the market to the extent that serial killer movies are unremarkable and nearly un-remarked upon, but a literal interpretation (taken from traditional sources) of *The Passion of the Christ* is condemned as a “snuff film” by film critics in major publications.

Whit Stillman's movies are not to everybody's taste. Of my friends familiar with his work, he is mostly known as “the guy you like, but who kind of bothers me.” But when it comes to a worldview which is vanishingly rare in contemporary American cinema (if not contemporary America itself), Stillman's has the greater claim to originality and independence.

Since *The Last Days of Disco*, rumors have circulated about what his (cont.--but not for long, it's almost over!--on page14)



**Barcelona:** The Dance

(cont.--but see how little is left!--from page 13) next project might be. The latest (though it's also growing a beard) is an adaptation and combination of two novels Jane Austin left unfinished at her death. Though that would be an appropriate match, it would be a shame to miss a wholly original script and an American setting. Even if another Stillman film ever materializes, his contribution is unique and lasting, and if you have the inclination to see something genuinely novel, I hope you'll keep *Metropolitan*, *Barcelona*, and *The Last Days of Disco* in mind.

## End Nose

I started this volume of *The Cobra's Nose* just after the winter solstice, and am due to complete it somewhat after the summer one. The days are long and hot and the nights are short and hot. The folk dance memory remains elusive, though I have seen Morris dancers (of all things) in action more often than seems probable. The Britney Spears moves have not been repeated. Some other moves have been attempted with mixed results. My friend Mr S has the idea that he can teach me to dance. That was until the first lesson. "Feel the beat," he said. "Move with the rhythm." And my old favorite, "Relax!" Relax—that's a good one. Eventually, it was down to, "Do you even like music? Really, it's almost if you don't."

I threw my arms out and turned my face heavenward and proclaimed, "I dig music!" But the lesson was too far gone even for an *Almost Famous* reference. "Was she drunk? Try that," said Peggy when the experience was recounted to her. I've a bit of an inner ear problem and tend to slightly stagger in the best of times, so maybe with a bit of impairment and a soundtrack my natural wobble could come to look intentional. Perhaps I should give blood as well for maximum effect (and a break to the drinkin' budget).

Meanwhile, people all around me are having no problem moving and grooving. Partick and Peggy moseyed over to Greece where they made it Official. You know—It. The thing that will enable them to live happily ever after and put me on the street, but that's okay and totally, *total-ly* worth it. I tagged along with the Amazing Amy to San Diego where she ran her third Rock n' Roll marathon. Her time was impressive. How impressive? When she crossed the finish line, her mother and I were parking the car, thinking we could leisurely stroll there and choose flattering angles for snapshots of her breaking the tape.

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**That's the Amazing Amy at mile eight. Eight! And that's her mom in the white jacket. The rest is San Diego and people I don't know.**

Nope.

And how is the memory problem? No better, alas. And with some dire consequences. For one, I forgot which brand of dog food Partick wanted me to get, and as a result Mojo acquired an otter-like sleekness, a nice round bottom, and love handles just behind his shoulder blades, which apparently is where Italian Grayhounds get them. Eventually, and with the help of the neighborhood grackles, the high fat (carb? I can never keep it straight) kibble was consumed and I again boast the highest body fat ratio in the house.

As for the rat, we have still seen neither hide nor...well, hide of him, which will do for now.

Oh, wait--here's something. I'm back in the drawing biz, so if you want a portrait please contact me using one of the means to the left. You can checkout my portfolio online at <http://www.thecobrasnose.com/xxportfolio/portfolio.html>.

Speaking of on-line, I'm thinking of adding a Friends of Cobra page to The Cobra's Website, so if you have a URL that you think could benefit from the link, please send it on to me.

And finally, I have HAD IT with Quark. I implore anybody who has access to a better means of occasional desktop publishing to share it with me.

Have a lovely summer, and *The Cobra's Nose* will be back in the fall. If I remember to write it.

Let freedom reign!

Sharon