



Underworld

Dubnobasswithmyheadman

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Junior Boy's Own

On Underworld's *Dubnobasswithmyheadman*

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In the early to mid-90s I was the production director for my college radio station (no joke: KUMM FM). It was the height of Alternative as a music style and the bloat of the Music Industry. Interest in radio and music was so strong that the station had one DJ on air per hour, every hour of every day, with many more people waiting in the wings to get an on-air slot. People were still lured by tv ads to fly-by-night 'academic' institutions to study radio production. The internet was still in its infancy. We didn't have color monitors for all the computers on campus and our email addresses had multiple dots after the @. There was a very high cool factor in having a pipeline to new music in a town of thirty five hundred people out on the Minnesota Prairie.

Twice a day one of the staff members at the station would go over to the post office and pick up a bin of cds. An average day saw twenty discs come in. A busy day would see sixty. Though there was a music director who stood bravely in front of this tsunami, everyone on staff had to preview about ten albums per week just to keep up. The music director would divvy up selections she thought each of us could tolerate and we would take them home, spin through them, and attach a couple sentence review. While it sounds like a sweet gig to have so much music just pour onto your lap, more often than not the round of discs you had for the week were a tepid stew of mediocrity. It was like the bit where George Carlin talks about old leftovers: Could be meat, could be cake. I used to joke that I could name more middling bands than most people could name in total. The plus side to such a sonic slog is that I got a deep sense of the lineage of music. Soon I could connect the dots and say with confidence what bands sounded similar and what groups their sound might have grown from.

One evening I was down at the station bumming around on the ratty couch in the staff office after finishing some promo work and decided to go fishing about in the stacks of jewel cases for my weekly fair share of abuse. I spotted an album off by itself on the corner of one of the desks and since there was no staff review already attached to it, I circled in for a closer look. The cover was a jumble of black and white text that reminded me of a fax that had been sent, photocopied, and resent over and over again. The back cover featured the same kind of text jumble. There were a few tantalizing hints of what this could be. First was the label, TVT Wax Trax. They were known for harder rock and electronic so already in my wheelhouse. Second, there are key words in the artwork that piqued my interest: "dirty epic" "river of bass" and the album title itself *Dubnobasswithmyheadman*. Not wanting to carry more across campus than I had to, I dropped the disc into the skittish Technics cd player wired to a third hand amp and mismatched orphan speakers strewn across the office.

I was smitten immediately. It was textural, stream of conscious, dark, lush, and most notably, it was unlike anything I had heard before. After walking over the same musical trails so often, I had come suddenly and at random, to a breathtaking vista. It was like seeing mountains for the first time. This album was a new continent on the shores of which I had unexpectedly washed up and in short order I came to call it home. This is, in my estimation, a perfect album. While each song is good on its own, it becomes a journey when taken as a whole. At every opportunity I urged others to join me on this journey.

The commonality of shared experience form the basis of lasting friendships and as I was so eager to share this album with people that it became a thread in many of the best friendships of my life. Lyrical references crept their way into conversations as a type of emotional shorthand especially in letters (yes, on paper) to my then-girlfriend-now-wife. As F. Scott Fitzgerald notes "the intimate revelations of young men or at least the terms in which they express them are usually plagiaristic" and I was no exception. There was most certainly a lot of emptiness in my 501s due to the miles that separated us. These lyrical interspersions were no less common in my non-romantic friendships. When I made mixtapes to send off to one friend or another it was an odds on bet that the Maxell XLIIS 100 minute cassette that found its way to another college in another town would have an Underworld track on it with a line in the accompanying letter asking "What did you think of that track?". Oddly enough, I didn't play Underworld on my own radio show that often. It was too intimate a thing to broadcast into the night without context. The album was part of the dialog and discussion that would accrete into long-term understanding.

Another of the bonding agents in the glue of friendship is thoughtfulness. Late in my college career I had a close friend who was abroad in London for the term. She returned from that sojourn with several cds and a 12" single stowed carefully in her bag. In that magical assortment was the *Dark and Long* EP containing the twenty-minute rarity "Thing in a Book". She had made multiple trips to music shops around London on the advice of various clerks in a deep dive to find these precious things adjacent to *Dubnobasswithmyheadman*. This was an aural treasure beyond compare hand delivered to me from across the ocean. Though our friendship has faded through the intervening miles and decades, I am still touched by the effort and thoughtfulness of this act.

The best art acts as a catalyst in people. It leads them to think differently about the world or themselves, to see from other windows. This album spoke a language I didn't know I was trying to speak. I had the same thrill when I first read Hunter Thompson and Sinclair Lewis as I did rolling these songs around in my head. The phrasing, cadence, and images in the obscure and streaming lyrics spoke to me and in ways I wanted to speak. There was a poetry chapbook competition on campus prompted by the appearance of comet Hale-Bopp. I had some success in poetry through the literary journal on campus but that felt low stakes as I was friends with more than half of the students who served as editors. Finding inspiration in the song "Dirty Epic", I fretted and fussed for weeks and eventually a poem took shape, became clear, and whole. I submitted it to the competition and was giddy to learn that it had been chosen for inclusion. The completion was strong and plentiful (two English faculty made the cut out of twenty total pieces published). I still have a copy of that chapbook and am proud of that poem.

I am not ashamed to say that *Dubnobasswithmyheadman* was often close at hand if not already loaded into the disc player when the long Minnesota winter nights turned amorous. Certainly, each of us at that age had go to albums (I'm looking at you too, *Kind of Blue*) that set the mood by communicating to our partners things that we often can't summon in to words ourselves. What better wingman than such an album such as this?

This marvelous work opened one other portal for me that had permanent ramifications. In my completionist mania I had become aware that there was at least one 12" single of *Dubnobasswithmyheadman* era songs that had eluded me. The internet was becoming a place for more than just Geocities blogs and message boards and in my headlong passion to ferret out any unheard morsels, I turned to a new dot com entity; eBay. My first purchase was the "Spikee /Dogman Go Woof" single. This was the opening of other fertile

pastures beyond the bins at my local music shops as well as a relationship with the now completely commonplace idea of online retail.

Dubnobasswithmyheadman was the rumbling touchstone to magical years of my life. It still holds the power to transport me to those days and remember those times and people so vividly and continues to capture my imagination.