



They Might Be Giants

"Birdhouse in Your Soul"

Flood

1990

Elektra

May Dumb Art Be Your Guide

Michael Wayne Hampton

I was a dumb, hyperactive kid with a bowl haircut, and an abiding love for quoting *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, and reading comic book serials out of order. On the verge of my teenage years I had no prospect that my heartfelt affection for the sincerely weird would ever result in more than looks of "ick" from girls who were busy imagining that everything Bryan Adams did, he did for them, and boys whose mothers didn't order their clothes from a catalogue. Isolated deep in the forest-covered mountains of eastern Kentucky, my contact with the outside world was limited to the three main broadcast networks, and a box of back issues of *National Geographic* my dad had bought at a flea market. My musical palate was composed chiefly of the Weekend Top 40 that was heavy with Michael Jackson and Wilson Phillips singles at the time. Any access to the world of music beyond my radio in that pre-internet age was limited a sole avenue—the yearly visit of my world-wise cousin Jennifer.

Though only a few years older than myself, she had lived across the country since birth, and glowed with the occult knowledge of music I *had* to hear. The summer before I started high school she came to visit—a vision of thrift-store cool with a head full of punk show stories to share once we snuck away from my Baptist kin. She'd slung a bag over her shoulder stuffed with indie rock cassettes like a college radio Santa determined to rescue me from wilting on the kudzu vines. She was the first to introduce me to 10,000 Maniacs, Living Colour, Indigo Girls, and to the band who'd shape my high school years more than any who followed—They Might Be Giants.

While my family spent that hot summer night rocking on the porch as they watched lightning bugs dot the dusk and shared stories about fishing and untimely deaths, Jennifer and I huddled close to the stereo that took up half a wall in the living room of my small home where every noise echoed. I sat with my legs crossed under me, mimicking her yogi repose, as she searched through her huge corduroy purse for the treasures she'd transported from cities without rural postal routes. I opened the second cassette tray, and dropped in a blank tape usually reserved for copying songs off the radio while Jennifer popped her copy of *Flood* out of her Walkman and into my stereo altar.

"You're going to love this," Jennifer said, with charity and mirth radiating from her like a trickster angel as she hit play. Though we were alone, a couple of kids in front of a stereo bigger than a microwave which was wired into speakers two feet tall, I leaned in so close I could watch the spindles turn inside the cassette as if what was about to play had to be buffered from others who'd never understand or appreciate it.

As preceding a sermon, the album began with a choir, although their voices lifted in harmonic unison begged questions about a planetary revolution of love and rising ocean levels before making a proper introduction in front of my bowed head. Artifacts couriered in secret from such distance for the benefit of my education deserved that level of reverence.

The first track, "Birdhouse in Your Soul," began in a plaintive voice that sounded as if the singer was crooning through existential problems and a clout of allergies. He sung taking stabs at defining who he was to another, considering, "I'm your only friend. I'm not your only friend. But I'm a little glowing friend. But really I'm not actually your friend," before drums hammered away his fight to recognize himself as a part of, or separate from. That fleeting passage alone was enough to lock me in the wonder that there were goofball nerds like me who celebrated their inability to fit in. I'd always considered my socially

awkward love of Dungeons and Dragons and science fiction novels a personal defect that, like my acne, was best to cover as much as possible. But as the song went on I caught my first glimpse of art that was at once earnestly dumb and playfully bright. Art that was a hodgepodge of allusions approaches, alive in its inability to be anything but its mutant self, and proselytizing well-read nuttiness to outcasts like my theatre school cousin and myself.

Dumb is an aesthetic that cuts its own trails, bends genres, and weaves disparate devices into work that's evocative as it sways between the irreverent and immature to the cemented classical and scholarly. As a kid too short and skinny for to excel at sports, but a beast on the academic team on subjects from history to astronomy, I was proud I got the references about Jason in the Argonauts. It felt that in a small way, as I did my best to make out every lyric, I had hope of deciphering, "the secret to tell/from my electrical well," alluded to from the start of the track.

Unfortunately my grasp of what exactly "Birdhouse in Your Soul," was trying to convey didn't extend very far. I had no clue what *Longine's Symphonette* was, much less what it meant to put "too fine a pine on it," but as the song sped frantically ahead to a marching drumbeat over synthesized whistling rhythms interjected by brass horns, I came to see that whether there was a sense to the song's message didn't matter. The point wasn't to define what it meant to, "make a little birdhouse in your soul," or reason what a "bluebird of friendliness" is or why one should "keep the nightlight on inside the birdhouse in your soul." The point, if there was one, was in the way my cousin and I sat enraptured wordlessly by the speakers, and smiling without attempting to attach objects to the stream of words. The *being* was the meaning. As I meditated mindless on the turning of the cassettes' wheels, I experienced my first koan; a work meant to free you from the bonds of understanding so that you can be delivered to the realm beyond knowing. I look to "Birdhouse in Your Soul," as a necessary affirmation for my belief in the power of considerate nonsense, and also as my secular initiation of Zen.

After Jennifer went back to a college in Maryland she'd leave for Seattle in quick order; I was on my own again. But this time I'd been armed with roadmaps to sustain me as I made my first efforts to do weirdo art projects with no identifiable market. I wore out my bootleg copy of *They Might Be Giants' Flood* trying to map its construction which meandered from abstract poetics to social commentary, to short cut mad tracks like "Minimum Wage" to children's songs like "Particle Man," which would later appear on *Tiny Toons*, but each time was left to surrender to the truth that listening alone in my room, away from worry and aspirations, was enough. The beauty isn't in comprehending each turn of phrase. Even the language of Shakespeare is ruined by explanatory footnotes. The joyful dumb was where the sweetness lay to be savored.

The lesson to let go and love what is as it is would lead me to a world of outsider artists fighting to present their open brains without the overly-considered self-aware smog that pollutes so many creative attempts. The cheerful, earnest dumb of "Birdhouse in Your Soul" is a precious commodity in a life that is often grim, and blighted by bleak facts too often. That single two-minute song on an album filled with bizarre arrangements and non-sequitur verse gave me the license to chase my passion for the nerdy disparaged interests of my youth. It allowed me to become a writer free to spend years sweating over books about roller girls and 70s punk rock without the weight of worry as to their future commercial prospects. The way "Birdhouse in Your Soul" rejects the easy to digest and categorize taught me to let go, and do work I dig if no one else does. Beauty follows no diagram. Creative works that are dumb and juvenile often have the most to offer. The greatest philosophy a writer can adopt is to ignore what is outside the work and one's own control. Forget being clever. Forget being important or popular. Do cool shit that makes you smile when you sit at its feet alone.