



Guided By Voices

"Glad Girls"

Isolation Drills

04/2001

TVT

Guided by Guided By Voices

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Do you remember what it felt like to be a teenager? For some of us, those years are not far removed. For me, now in my 40s, I look back and think of how much I hated being a teenager, how much I tried to distance myself from the age I belonged to, and who I was. All the ways I didn't quite fit in.

To picture me in 9th grade, it helps to understand the distinction between geek and nerd, two terms that were practically interchangeable at the time. Today, geeks can be self-confident. But, back when I was a freshman, in the D.C. suburbs of the late-80s, all fake colonial-style houses festooned with American flags, there was no such thing as geek chic. Professional athletes didn't yet pose for the cover of GQ wearing plastic frame glasses and bowties. There weren't any Marvel Comics movies grossing trillions at the box office. X-Men was for nerds who read comic books alone in their room, only taking a break to rewind their Rush cassettes to listen to Red Barchetta again for the 14th time. Well, at least for me it was. So, clearly, I was a nerd.

I had few freshman year friends, carried over from junior high, along with the knockoff Bugle Boy pants I wore most days. "Thomas," who was as embarrassed of being Korean as I was of being Jewish due to the prevailing nerdy stereotypes—and as a result, was in the middle of a phase where he wore a large leather Africa medallion around his neck to school every day. Then there was moody, introverted "Joseph," who was the only African-American skater in school, and also the friend who happened to turn me onto Rush. And "Kevin," whose voice constantly cracked and was so scrawny, he made my 98-pound weakling frame look in comparison like a left tackle.

Picture your typical, fluorescent-lit high school lunchtable scene. I returned from the lunch line with tater tots, a carton of chocolate milk, a plastic cup of syrupy mixed fruit consisting primarily of mealy pear cubes with maybe half a pitted maraschino, and what was generously termed a "Philly Cheesesteak." I plopped down my styrofoam lunch tray onto the long formica table across from Kevin. Just then, a girl I've never met sits down next to me and cheerfully introduces herself to us: "Hey, I'm Jenny! What are your names?" I realize she's older, probably an upperclassman, and she's pretty, with shoulder-length brown hair and a friendly smile. Why is she talking to us? Despite my shyness and disbelief, I force a nonchalant reply: "Hey, my name's Marc—how's it going?"

"So, Marc, tell me about yourself," Jenny asks, and before I barely get a few words out, Kevin yanks me away by my sleeve. "Come on, let's go!" Confused, I get up. "What'd you do that for? I was just talking with...." And then, he points out the table adjacent to ours, where Jenny's friends had all been watching and laughing at us all along.

Suddenly, I realized...we had clearly been the victims of a dare prank. In embarrassment, I ran away, abandoning my cheesesteak to cool back into its natural congealed state.

In freshman year, it wasn't just the typical future sorority girls and jocks who made me feel like an outsider. My few friends were already drifting into new cliques. As much as I wanted to reinvent myself into someone cool and hang with the punk and metal kids who congregated on the hill next to the parking lot, as much as I loaded my spiked hair with turquoise LA Looks styling gel, and coughed on cigarettes in the periphery of their conversations, I couldn't escape my nerd status.

Do you ever have that dream that you're back in high school, yet you realize you're an adult? Apparently, there had been some administrative error, the logic goes. The school has no record of you having graduated, and therefore you have to recomplete your senior year in order to finally earn your diploma.

As an adult, I worked in a high school for several years with teenagers with autism, who not coincidentally happen to be the kids least likely to fit in. It's a bit like those dreams, the surreal experience of revisiting the bells, the crowded stairwells, that cafeteria smell.

Fortunately, for the most part, I've since left behind the days of constantly feeling like a total misfit. Not that I've become super popular or successful as an adult. Instead, as my best friend puts it, I've grown more comfortable with not quite fitting in. To the point where I've been able to find a degree of fulfillment working with people who also struggle with feeling outside the club, who struggle to make meaningful connections with others.

Many of the kids I worked with at the school didn't know how to make friends, or mistook friendship for romantic interest, two areas I can definitely check off on my resume; so much I now wonder if I too belong somewhere on the autism spectrum. But that's for a different story.

Some of my students were acutely aware they were different than the other kids, and like me, were relentlessly guarded, afraid to be themselves. One time, in a web design class, a student I was working with refused to complete his assignment, which was to create a fan page for his favorite musician. He was afraid he'd be ridiculed for picking Barry Manilow, but was too honest to choose anyone else. So he just sat there staring at the screen. We talked it through and I eventually convinced him that loving "Copacabana," because he used to listen to it as a child with his mom—or for that matter, finding personal meaning in any work of art—was a lot cooler than having your tastes dictated to you by whatever was popular at the time. I wanted him not to be like I was in high school, embarrassed of what I was passionate about.

It's no coincidence, then, that I relate so much to the music of Robert Pollard, who worked for years as a teacher in Dayton, Ohio, while trying to get his band, Guided By Voices, off the ground. Recording thousands of lo-fi 4-tracks in a basement, conjuring worlds simultaneously strange and familiar, while absorbing and channeling the details of the world around him, including his students and their struggles to fit in.

While his lyrics can seem cryptic or even nonsensical, his musical inspiration is often drawn from phrases from overheard conversations in bars or on the street. The everyday sights and signs of Dayton are transformed by his imagination in song titles and lyrics, a jumping off point into a different realm, somehow both surreal and grounded in the everyday. Like fellow Ohioan Harvey Pekar, Pollard celebrates the working class misfit, the Accident Hero, the Lord of Overstock, the post-punk kid who looks like an X-Man parking a forklift in the auditorium, the Pop Zeus who delivers newspapers.

If you're as much of a GBV nerd as I am (yes, I'm on an acronym basis with them), you're probably familiar some of his songs empathizing with school misfits, like "14 Cheerleader Coldfront," "Bulldog Skin," "Best of Jill Hives," and surprisingly, "Glad Girls," which at first listen, sounds like a song about...getting high with girls. I almost didn't care what it was about, because it's such an ecstatic song, and the repeated chorus, which goes: "Hey hey, glad girls/Only want to get you high/And they're alright...." almost compels you to sing along.

But the more I listened to it, the more I imagined Pollard is singing to the high school me, who, on rare occasions, found himself at the same party as some of the popular kids, the cheerleaders and homecoming kings, and all I'd want to do is hide in a corner. Say a girl came up to me and offered me a hit on a joint: my instinct then would have been to think it must be just another prank at my expense. But in the song's teenage microcosm, the hierarchy of high school coolness has somehow disappeared. There will be no homecoming coronation, no graduation to worry about—just a chance to experience being a regular teenager for right now.

It's rare to discover a new song in adulthood, and somehow, it still conjures that teenage feeling, perhaps better than anything you heard even back then. To me, it's precisely the slightly cryptic quality of Guided By Voices songs that allow me to overdub my memories and experiences, to give them meaning. If only I had those songs back then.

When I first discovered the band, it wasn't until I moved back to my childhood home for a couple years in my late-20s, after living far away for several years. I had no friends there anymore—my old friends had moved away or I had grown out of touch with them. Late at night, I'd spend hours driving around the wide, empty suburban streets, towns called Silver Spring and Wheaton and Rockville, listening to *Alien Lanes* and *Isolation Drills*, two of their albums that formed the soundtrack to that time of my life.

As of this date, Pollard has churned out at least 100 albums, which include dozens of solo and side projects. While I struggle to keep up with his constant new releases, whenever I listen to Guided By Voices, it reminds me that, as much as we think we've escaped the people we once were, our doppelgangers from decades past, we're still being followed by our own Teenage FBI. And that it's ok to be ourselves, even if we never quite fit in.