

## **Do I Dare?**

By Mary Warner

“Do I dare?”

Her hands hover over the keyboard as she tries to decide. (Writing in the third person makes her feel strange, like brittle paper. One blow and she will scatter upon the floor in tiny pieces.)

She’s twenty-plus years out from her teen-hood and being a fan isn’t what it used to be. She’s no longer interested in engaging in sycophantic drool-fests.

Why can’t she just take the path of least resistance and join the damn fan club like everybody else? But no, those twenty-plus years have made her a careful consumer. The benefits won’t do her much good. The band rarely makes it to her state, so what’s the point of advance ticket sales? Special contests? Statistically, there’s a low probability of winning one. (What’s that they say about lightning strikes?) Even if she did, she’d have to take time off work and pay airfare and lodging to stay in some far-flung place. It’s not like she has money to burn. Nor is she free-wheeling and unattached. She has responsibilities – a husband, three children, the lawn to mow. (It’s not getting any shorter, you know.)

There is that benefit of being able to talk to other fans. *Why*, she thinks, *do I have to pay to talk to other people when I can do it for nothing?* Now, if a portion of fan club dues went to one of the band’s charitable causes, that’d be something she could get behind, make her membership seem legit. There it is, the real reason she hesitates to join. She’s pushing forty and it looks undignified. Fan clubs are for kids. She can imagine the eye rolls of acquaintances if she paid the dues and revealed the news. If they were blunt, they’d say, “Get a life!” If they were polite, their eyes would say it for them.

She has a life, thank you very much. Quite a nice one, rich and full, one she wouldn’t trade with anyone in the world, not Oprah, not Bill Gates, not Stephen King, hell, not even the band members (although she aspires to the lyric writer’s ability). So, here she sits, at an impasse, like Groucho Marx, unwilling to join any club that would have her, and she wonders some more.

*Why this intensity of feeling? Why, at her age? Sheer insanity?*

A wise woman once said, “The things you love pick you; you do not pick them.” Of all the unlikely places, she heard this bit of wisdom during a church sermon. She ponders it and realizes that she did not choose to love this band.

Thinking back, she knows she missed the boat. She wasn’t in on the beginnings of the band; she even missed the point at which the band Crash-ed and made it big. Everyone knows that the only true fans are the one’s who’ve been there from the beginning. She wants to slap ‘everyone who knows’ silly and knock this false notion from their heads.

*Stop being so selfish*, she thinks irritably. Just as parents don't own their children, no one owns a band.

It hadn't been her time to love the band, that's all. She'd been busy getting married, birthing babies, creating art, becoming a writer, managing a museum – busy having a life through ushering it into this particular universe and nurturing it once it arrived.

It didn't start until she bought a gift for her husband. Some Devil that was. And the gift, thoughtfully selected for her husband, became hers. (*That's okay*, she thinks, *he got the motorcycle and hours of wind-blown entertainment.*) The devil was flying solo, away from his legions, but she didn't know that then. He spoke to her with a pearl in his mouth, a cotton-wrapped pearl, and she got caught in the fibers of his orations, but not completely.

A year later, her family, who loves her dearly and feeds her whims, bought her some Busted Stuff that wasn't really busted at all. This was when the tide advanced and she was pulled into the endless deep, a place of continuous imagination and inspiration. She likes that term – endless deep. It rings poetic and she's determined to turn it into verse someday, but for now she's got this puzzle to figure out, this puzzle that keeps sidelining her writing. Jeez! Not sidelining! It's actually hi-jacking her writing, throwing itself onboard her ship of thoughts and making off with all the booty. Are these ideas her ideas, or is she channeling – merely a pawn amplifying the band's already profound transmissions?

“Remember,” she tells herself, “The love chose you.” It comes back to this. She didn't ask for this, didn't need the extra creative juice. She'd been an artist since she was young, born into a family of artists, with all the encouragement she needed. She knew how ideas were generated, how they came when she least expected, a combination of unrelated thoughts that magically bound themselves into an alchemy of the new, the different, the “whiz-bang, gosh-golly that's cool,” such that they were unrecognizable as her own once she got some distance from them. As creative beings, surely the band's members shared this feeling. *Of course they get it*, she thinks. *How could they not?*

She's looking for commonalities, which she hopes will lead to an explanation. If she breaks it down, maybe she will understand her attraction to the band. Wait a minute. She parses it out. It's not the band members themselves. After all, she's never met them. For all she knows, they've been Affected – yes, Affected with a capital 'A' – by their fame. It's happened before; fame turning people into impossibly spoiled terrors. While she hopes this is not true, and the band's charitable works indicate otherwise, she is not in a position to make that judgment or allow it to sway her philosophical musings. She clings to what she knows for certain. It is the band's music she loves.

Not since she was in high school has she fallen so hard and she wants to know why. It was Duran Duran and Ultravox then. Maybe there's a clue there. Could it be the violin? She's a sucker for stringed instruments. One of the best compliments ever paid her was when someone told her she *looked* like a cello player, high praise for a person as

musically inept as she is. And this band has a violinist capable of playing so beautifully that the blood threatens to seep out of her heart, from joy incapable of staying where it belongs.

Perhaps it's the horns and woodwinds, atypical for a rock band. (*Come to think, is it rock?* She dismisses this. *No, no, the band's music can't be compared to anything else, falls into a category unto itself.*) At turns, the horns become chortling geese, or blaring heralds. Sometimes, they even mimic the singer's low growl. And that flute? There's one song where it is positively come-hither. She'd follow that flute off a cliff.

Rumor has it that the horn player is the quiet one. She understands quiet, was called The Mole as a kid. It's the quiet ones who have a lot going on upstairs. Did he while away his childhood time in his bedroom, as she did? Or, did he spend it Under the Table and Dreaming? She has an affinity for those who let their art speak for itself, and his says plenty.

The drums, it's got to be the drums! Tappity-tappity-tappity, tsh, tsh, tsh, tsh. Drums get her moving, clicking and tapping, snapping to keep up. This drummer is a multi-armed Hindu god, his rhythms so complex they can't possibly be made by a single human being with only one set of arms. She is in awe.

The bass holds it all together, like the egg in meatloaf. She has to listen hard for the bass. It isn't always obvious, blending as it often does with the guitar. It hit her one day, when she was annoyed and wishing the band would create a song that led with the bass, that instruments vibrate with particular chakras. The bass moved the hips, resonating with the root chakra. It kept the band's music from becoming too heady, from floating off into the stratosphere. There was no denying the bass in concert. It had thunked insistently, bouncing around in her body.

Oh, God, why did she have remind herself of the concert? "Let it go," she whispers to herself, but she can't. It's lodged in her craw, stinging. The concert had been the worst one she had ever attended. Not for the band's music, what she could hear of it. She had wanted to leave, but she never left a performance, no matter how bad, because it was plain rude. She had been this close.

It was her fault, really. The tickets had been a birthday present. She had built a skyscraper of her expectations, what with people saying that she hadn't truly experienced the band until she heard it live. And, she would have heard it live if there hadn't been a girl two rows behind screaming her fool head off through every song. When asked kindly to tone it down, she retorted, "What do you expect, it's a concert!" and continued the siren blast until she lost her voice.

She and her husband had had a good laugh then, not being above enjoying Divine Retribution.

The girl wasn't the only contributor to her lousy time. There were the two young men who stood in front of her, blocking her view, and chanting "Last Stop! Last Stop! Last Stop!" in an irritating mantra, as though the band could hear them. As if! Not with Screaming Girl Two Rows Behind. Why couldn't these people understand that their behavior was disrespectful, not only of the other concert goers, but of the band itself? Rapt silence – that was the true sign of love and respect for the band's music. Shut up and listen, just listen . . . .

She knew she sounded like a curmudgeonly old fogey. Tough cookies. The band's music didn't belong solely to the realm of the young, the hip, the cool. It didn't help that the singer had rubbed salt into the wound. Yes, it was inadvertent – he was trying to be funny – but, by the end of the evening, the pre-concert comment, something along the lines of, "I don't care if you enjoy the show; I've got your fucking money," had become snide. She could forgive his prophetic sarcasm, but what would it take to dislodge the hurt? Retrograde 180, baby. An equal and opposite force, reversing the effects of the first. She'd have to attend another concert, the goal being to actually hear the music and enjoy herself.

As a careful consumer, however, she is not quite ready to plunk down the sixty-or-so bucks it's going to take to try again. She'll see – if the band ever makes it back to her state – if her crusade to get geezer seating in stadiums works – she'll see . . . .

Sixty bucks buys about four CDs, give or take. She's collected most of the studio albums, so she can turn her attention to the live ones. And, oh, there are a slew of them. Multiply like bunnies, they do. Her favorite time to listen? There's no one time specifically; she listens Everyday, any and all chances she gets, but, if she has to choose, it's drive-time alone, when she can sing along and not make anyone cringe. Past experience gives her a complex about that.

Thing is, the band's music is not so easy to sing to. The singer's gravelly smooth voice slides imperceptibly all over the scale. It's only by stabbing at imitation that she appreciates how jazzy-complicated the vocals are. No one can duplicate this. The singing, coupled with the guitar, reminds her of lullabies – soothing, even when filled with stronger emotions. Though the world may be going to Hell in a Gucci handbag, or becoming a proverbial Hell with global warming, there's an underlying sense that everything will be okay.

Is it the comfortable crooning that entrances her, keeps her listening until the music seeps into every pore of her being? If that were the case, she'd be equally taken with the liquid satin of a certain other popular singer, a solid favorite of hers, to be sure, but not as psychically mesmerizing.

She has noticed that she experiences a cyclical susceptibility to the band's music. At the point of menstruation, she hears it more clearly, is able to mine deeper meanings from the lyrics. *What's up with that?* She once attended an Indian ceremony in which

menstruating women were denied a puff on the community pipe, the belief being that anyone who bleeds without dying is powerful. Could there be something to this?

It isn't power she feels during bleed time, more a state of disassociation with physical reality. Every parallel universe seems available to her and she might slip into a new one at any moment. Here's where susceptibility sweeps to the fore. The subtleties of the music intensify. Individual words sparkle like sunlight through a dewdrop. She revels in their sounds, their insinuations – sultry; twist; stone; trance – words with weight leading to stories with weight.

Characters in the songs bow before her, introducing themselves, asking politely, “Say, dear, if you've got a moment . . . would you mind terribly fleshing us out a bit?” The characters are mythic, carrying the force of ages upon their backs, but, like all myths, their details are necessarily fuzzy. They have to be if the mythical beings are going to Stand Up, reach out and speak to the multitudes. It's up to the multitudes to fill in their own details, make the songs' characters and stories personal.

She, one of the multitudes, falls into the portal of creativity and writes. She cannot deny the characters their immortality.

*How does the band do it – sprout characters from many moons past?* The lyrics, in and of themselves, don't do it. They remain at half-life until they don the musical wardrobe of instrumentation and vocalization. Layer upon layer, bass, drums, horn, violin, guitar, voice . . . . And, she's done it again. Her deconstruction efforts are for naught. She rounds full circle, back to the whole of the problem. Her head spins, barely able to Remember Two Things.

*This is silly*, she thinks. She's making a mountain out of something that is no more than a molehill of consumer transaction. (“I've got your fucking money” made that clear in a hurry.) The band makes music, she buys it. No more. After all, she doesn't wax rhapsodic about her laundry soap, so why this? And, still . . . .

Exquisite torture, it is . . . attempting to understand her own mind and why this particular music has chosen for her to love it.

The music taunts her. “You can't create anything this good. Na-ne-na-ne-naah-na!”

It comes to this. Envy. She wishes to create something of this magnitude, this beauty. Without love, there would be no envy, no longing, nothing to aspire to. No desire to accomplish something greater than her current capabilities will allow.

This still doesn't answer the question before her: Why does she love the music of this particular band? There are other bands with music so delicious and intoxicating, so worthy of emulation, but none that have captured her fancy so completely. The conundrum stays with her.

She feels dmb. Surely, other fans have figured this out; can express these thoughts that remain a synapse away from her consciousness. She throws her hands up in disgust, frustrated that she cannot figure out the puzzle. There's a piece missing. That's all there is to it, and she's never going to be able to complete the picture, because that puzzle piece has slipped beneath a floorboard, inaccessible.

She contents herself with the realization that she is not alone. The love of the band's music has not singled her out, but has spread Before These Crowded Streets, propagating itself among millions of sentient beings. The music is magnetic north, pulling love to it. The fans are compass needles, driven to respond.

*Yes, she muses, it was much easier being a fan when I was a teenager.* She didn't struggle with the whys then, but accepted the music that chose her. She could toss off a fan letter without regret, not worrying whether it sounded inane, or join a fan club without fear of looking idiotic. Now, she's not so eager to make a fool of herself. She thinks about it first . . . .

“Do I dare?” The arrow hovers over the send key, her finger poised to click the mouse. Her heart flutters in her stomach . . . .

She dares.