Glam Metal and Guilty Pleasures: Sailing Away with Chuck Klosterman and David Grazian

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Why do people make fun of tribute bands? 
Because they’re unoriginal, completely inauthentic. But to me, anytime you’re onstage performing for people, there’s a degree of fabrication.

up with—Twisted Sister, Motley Crüe, Poison. Although metal might be denigrated by rock critics as well as by large members of the upper class, this music was extraordinarily important to the youth audience that embraced it in the 1980s and continues to be important to metal-heads across the country, especially among working-class and rural audiences.

CK: This music was so incredibly popular and so ingrained in the teenage experience that I remember—to say it was the soundtrack of my life would really be understating it. It sort of informed the way I thought about things, and at the same time it didn’t seem to have any of the problematic manifestations that were so often associated in the media about metal. I wanted to examine that, and I wondered, if nothing else, why I cared so much about it.

DG: Although heavy metal has become representative of the sort of music that’s now considered “trashy,” what’s great about your work is how you resuscitate it for all of us. In a way, this is emblematic of what I see as a deeply populist and democratic thread in your writing that separates you from other rock critics.

Take “Appetite for Replication,” an essay that I teach in my sociology of media and popular culture classes at Penn. You wrote it for The New York Times Magazine and it appears in Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs. It’s a profile of Paradise City, a Guns N’ Roses tribute band. As you point out in that piece, viewed as one of the most authentic musicians of the rock era, goes onstage and has these over-the-top performances for three or four hours, where he’s sliding across the stage on his knees and taking off his shirt—that’s as much art rock as Yes or Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. I mean, that’s inauthentic in a way, too. That’s a construction. So, when you look at a tribute band, it’s almost as if they’ve boiled down the reality of rock music into its purest form. This idea that you can be someone you are not, that you can embody a character, as opposed to who you really are.

I suppose my interest in tribute bands, in some ways, is for the same reason why my two favorite bands, by far, are the Beatles and KISS. And although people are never surprised when I say the Beatles, they’re always surprised when I say KISS. But to me, KISS is the clearest manifestation of big-time arena-rock music. I mean, they’re literally becoming different characters. Part of their thing is being a cat, or a space alien, or whatever. Everything about it, when they talk about being larger than life, it’s more than just having bigger amps, or a really extravagant show—it’s out-sizing what life has the potential to be, a literal attempt to become superheroes.

DG: Right, even music like blues and folk music that we think of as authentic, because it’s roots-oriented or because it seems to come from the heart of a group of people, has to be performed in a certain manner to be considered authentic. Yet as you argue, the payoff that the guys in Paradise City get from their performance, and the meaning that they attach to that performance, is very real.

CK: In a weird way, it’s purely musical. Those guys in Paradise City seemed to like music more than any other “real” band I ever interviewed, almost more
than Guns N’ Roses themselves. These guys are doing all the same things as the original band, but with none of the rewards, purely out of desire. Now, clearly they’re dressing up like them and they’re acting like them, so they like all of those other things that we associate with a rock ’n roll lifestyle. They like the idea of Slash being on heroin, and Axl Rose being this crazy person, and Izzy Stradlin wobbling around drunk—but they could do all those things without being in this band. I mean, it’s actually pretty easy to live like Izzy Stradlin.

But everybody in that band has musical talent, and they had a choice. They could have written their own material, and tried to do their own thing, and by any sort of critical perspective, that is more valid, more original—it’s closer to art. But their reason for choosing to play this music was because they felt like, “These are the songs we wish we had written. These are the songs we like to hear. We’re not going to try to create something new; we’re really going to embody something that already exists.” I just think that’s an interesting thing. Even for me, it’s a hard thing to totally get my mind around. As a writer, I would never want to do that. But it makes me think then that maybe my perception of my own writing might be less pure than their perception of their relationship to music.

There’s no reason we ought to associate consuming popular culture with guilt, even if it happens to be the Patrick Swayze film *Roadhouse*.

**DG:** You wrote a great essay for *Esquire* in which you attack the use of the phrase “guilty pleasure.” As you point out, there’s no reason why we ought to associate our experiences consuming popular culture with guilt, even if the pop culture in question happens to be the Patrick Swayze film *Roadhouse*. I’ve always personally felt that the term “guilty pleasure” represented its own kind of snobbery.

**CK:** Oh, totally. I hate that term. I think people often use the term “guilty pleasure” to somehow imply that if they weren’t watching *Roadhouse* they would be trying to cure AIDS or doing something else really important. But I don’t understand this idea of feeling guilty about entertainment.

**DG:** Nostalgia plays a role in a lot of your writing; for instance, the title of your latest book, *Eating the Dinosaur*, comes from an essay that you wrote about the fantasy of time travel. To my mind, the funniest nonfiction piece that you’ve ever written about nostalgia was “That ’70s Cruise,” a 2004 feature about a Caribbean cruise featuring live performances by the surviving and current members of three 1970s rock bands that haven’t had a new hit in decades: Styx, REO Speedwagon, and Journey.

**CK:** Well, that cruise was super-interesting for a whole bunch of reasons. Clear Channel put together the cruise, and during the day it’s like a typical cruise, you know: people playing shuffle board, eating a lot of food, laying around a pool, you stop in Jamaica, Mexico, all that. But during the evening, there are performances by Styx and REO Speedwagon, and one by Journey. Plus, you’re on a boat with these people, so if you go into the casino, maybe you’ll see the guitar player from Journey or whatever. (Actually, Journey came in on a helicopter near the end, so that wasn’t really true.) So you have a very interesting situation, because you have these pre-MTV bands that were at their height from 1977 until about 1982, and then people who
thing after that. These are people who actually get mad about teen pop. Like, they would see someone like Britney Spears, and it would actually upset them, because in their minds—and you know, this is a crazy thing about how music has changed—in the 1970s, teens were listening to KISS, Peter Frampton, and T. Rex. Now, any of those bands today would seem much heavier and closer to the idea of rock than what we now call teen music. So, for these people who were mostly in their forties and fifties, it was almost as though this boat was a way to sail away from a culture that they no longer had any relationship to.

DG: Did Styx actually play “Sail Away”?  
CK: Yes, it was pretty hard for them to not play that on a boat.

DG: You have interviewed a number of extraordinarily high-profile celebrities from the world of popular music: Bono, Britney Spears, Ozzy Osbourne, Robert Plant, Thom Yorke from Radiohead, Jeff Tweedy from Wilco, Donald Fagen from Steely Dan, the White Stripes, Marilyn Manson, Billy Joel, even Barry Manilow. Having spent time with such an illustrious group, what have you learned about the nature of celebrity itself?  
CK: Well, I definitely learned more about the concept of celebrity itself than I learned about any of these people. People always want to know what these people are like. That’s the big thing, you know, you interview somebody like Robert Plant or Britney Spears, and you mention it to your friends or your family, and they ask, “What are they really like?” And it’s such a strange deal, where I’m sitting there in a position where I can ask them questions that I couldn’t even ask of my friends, because I’m there as a journalist, and that’s the expectation.

By interviewing celebrities, I’ve learned more about the concept of celebrity than I learned about the people.

They’re there to promote a product, or the product of themselves, so they’re very comfortable fully embodying their persona. Even somebody who seems really normal, I mean, like Jeff Tweedy of Wilco. Of all the people I’ve interviewed, he seems like the person who, in a different circumstance, I probably could have been friends with. But, that said, that is his persona.

DG: You once described Bono from U2 as perhaps one of the most self-aware celebrities that you have ever encountered, and Britney Spears as being the least self-aware celebrity that you’ve ever interviewed.  
CK: Somebody like Bono really likes the experience of being interviewed. I mean, that’s part of it. Marilyn Manson was also like this—they’re these guys who seem like they have a desire to be asked questions and to answer them, but they also have an understanding of how it works, and they know that if they say certain things or do certain things, then that’s going to become central to the story. Britney Spears is a really interesting example, because technically she is the most famous person I think I’ve ever interviewed. But I interviewed her in a particularly weird period in her career, where she was trying to become an adult artist, and she’d spent all this time being famous and being interviewed, but never really interviewed. There were always handlers around her, or they were asking her questions about what kind of conditioner she used, or whatever. I feel like when I did interview her, I did it right: I asked her real questions, and she had to answer them all by herself. And it was kind of shocking how little she seemed to have thought about what her celebrity means. And yet with Bono, it was almost the opposite. I was surprised by how incapable he is of not being the famous Bono. You know?

DG: In contrast, your interview with Jeff Tweedy was one of the most normal conversations you’ve had with a celebrity. And yet as you’ve reported elsewhere, Tweedy actually checked himself into drug rehab the very next day. So, what does that mean?  
CK: Well, I felt kind of weird, because not only was he normal, I totally related to him! And it kind of made me wonder. This is a hard thing to admit, but as I have gotten older and I have done journalism more, the interview setting seems less valuable to me as a way to understand people than I once believed. When anybody talks to a stranger and knows that what they say is going to be published or rebroadcast, they are going to be affected by the process.

List to the full exchange between Chuck Klosterman and David Grazian at contexts.org/podcast.