

GET REAL

HONORS THESIS

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by

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*In loving memory of John Hood. Thank you.*



Professor John Hood and David Russell, upon the day of the early presentation of this thesis; April 2015.

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## **Abstract**

This project examines the journey of creating an album, detailing every step along the way: from an analysis of the creative thought process behind songwriting, to a commentary on the leadership skills required to organize a well-rehearsed band and schedule studio dates, to an explanation of why specific microphones when placed at a particular distance from a particular instrument will record a particular sound quality. The resulting product of the investigation is *Get Real*: a 34-minute professional-quality album and an essay providing readers and listeners with personal commentary on every detail of the process. *Get Real* strives to serve as a stepping-stone for inspiring the fostering of one's creativity, as the completion of the project has been an exciting opportunity to embrace all project participants' artistry.



## Introduction

I wish for you a wrestling match with your Creative Muse that will last a lifetime. I wish craziness and foolishness and madness upon you. May you live with hysteria, and out of it make fine stories . . . which finally means, may you be in love every day for the next 20,000 days. And out of that love remake a world.

—Ray Bradbury

The above quotation illustrates a summary of the theory behind creating this record. The goal was to explore any and every detail of the human psyche that can be perceived and extract some sort of personal meaning that can be translated lyrically and melodically, in the hopes that someone somewhere might relate and find sanctity in the songs. To me, the making of an album is like making a world. It provides an opportunity to produce ones internal landscape through the story of music. Creating this record has been the retelling of a chapter of my life.

When I began brainstorming ideas for my Honors thesis, there was no question that I wanted to do something involving music. In his Honors thesis, Victor Holk states, “Throughout human history, music has been an intrinsic part of the human experience. Music has the unique ability to capture the spirit of a movement, to say the ineffable, to bring a voice to the voiceless, and to captivate a generation.

From the pulsating tribal beats of indigenous people to Beethoven's fifth symphony, the spirit of the people and their time is inherent within each note" (2). My experience in life has been testament to these words.

Forming the band the Real Hands has been the most important part of my experience at Texas State and the primary reason that I have chosen to continue living in San Marcos for the foreseeable future. I am oh so lucky to have had the opportunity to center this thesis on the band's most ambitious effort thus far.

## **Drawing a Royal Flush**

Ever since I heard “What’s My Age Again?” by Blink-182 on the radio in second grade, I knew that I wanted to be a musician when I grew up. Though I began playing guitar when I was ten years old, I had already started writing songs in my head years before that. I was playing in bands by late middle school, and in my sophomore year of college, I was lucky enough to join with the musicians that would seal my musical fate for three years running.

Along with me, fellow guitarist, singer, and songwriter Bryce Brown was a founding member of the Real Hands and the person that came up with the band’s name. He and I met through a mutual friend who had separately recruited each of us to play in a rock band that existed throughout my freshman year of college. Upon that band’s cessation, Bryce and I decided to start a new project in spring 2013—a project that would become the Real Hands.

Next to join the team was John McAlmon. I met John McAlmon in Professor John Hood’s Honors class The American Song. Each student was encouraged to participate by sharing favorite songs or original songs. After seeing John McAlmon perform a song for the class, I immediately knew that he was a musician with whom I wanted to collaborate. He, Bryce, and I began meeting weekly to write songs and attempt three-part vocal harmonies. With two guitars, a bass, and three vocalists, all we needed to complete our envisioned band was a drummer.

Nathan Glaiser was already in a couple of bands, so I'd heard, and was not necessarily interested in starting a new project. At the time that I requested his services, however, he was indeed willing to play drums with the rest of us for a session at Firestation Studios to record five original songs. Nathan came up with drum parts in a matter of two rehearsals prior to the session. After a successful first recording session as a full band, we didn't question whether we all wanted to continue the project.

Bryce, John, Nathan, and I were soon rehearsing weekly and rapidly adding original songs to our repertoire. A year later we were finally playing regular live shows at house parties, San Marcos' Triple Crown, and the occasional venue in Austin. We independently recorded and released a collection of eight original songs in spring 2014 at Eastern Sun Studios in Austin with our friend and audio engineer Adrian Waterman.

We all felt as if our passion for music finally had a tangible purpose, and the momentum of the Real Hands' progress was only increasing. The summer that followed yielded an artistic boom for the band. It was that summer that I wrote many of the songs that appear on this record. The thoughts, feelings, and experiences of that summer are what the album aims to convey.

## Boarding the Roller Coaster

With the beginning of 2015 came a gust of motivation to commence an ambitious new project. It seemed quite convenient that while I was about to begin my Honors thesis, the Real Hands simultaneously were ready to begin recording their first full-length album. With a collection of twenty-something well-rehearsed songs and a few pocketfuls of savings, we were eager to direct our attention to booking time in a professional recording studio with a professional audio engineer. We were willing to take as much time and spend as much money as necessary in order to see that this record radiated as brightly as possible.

The first major decision we had to make was: *where* do we record this record? What studio was going to provide us with the optimal result? I consulted Professor Alan Schaefer for advice. Mr. Schaefer had been around the Austin music scene for more years than I had and seemed a viable candidate to provide me with a good answer. Mr. Schaefer listed a few studios in Austin where he had had personal success. The following afternoon, I sent emails to all of the studios inquiring about rates and available dates and describing our sound as inspired by Dr. Dog, Futurebirds, and Wilco—three of my and the band members' favorite bands. Upon receiving responses, Good Danny's immediately stood out to us as the best fit. Studio founder and owner Danny Reisch had listened to a few demos that we had online and provided an in-depth response regarding commencing plans to track at his

studio. We were hoping to begin tracking in April, a time in which Danny would be out of town to tour with his band, Shearwater, and were thus deferred to Max Lorenzen. Little did I know at the time how pivotal a role Max would play in bringing the record to life.

One March 2015 afternoon, John McAlmon and I drove to East Austin to visit Danny's studio. We met Max, who gave us a tour, and we discussed logistics of the project. Already seeing the process-to-come unraveling before us, we excitedly drove back to San Marcos and told the rest of the band that Good Danny's was *the* studio where we *needed* to record our record. This soon became a reality. Little did we know that our anticipated four days of recording in two months would turn into over ten days in the studio over the span of a year.

## **Inside the Studio**

The ambience at Good Danny's set the ideal environment for us to work and let our creativity flourish. The studio consisted of a large living room and several smaller rooms. The living room functioned as the control room where Max's technical precision could thrive as his mind and fingers danced around the computer keyboard and mixing board, feeding commands into the digital audio workstation—Pro Tools. Upon listening back to our recordings, we would hear a more polished-sounding Real Hands than we'd ever heard projected out of a variety of speaker monitors. It was in this same room that John and Bryce and I tracked most of our parts.

Originally having narrowed our twenty-something songs down to our fourteen favorites, Max helped us narrow these fourteen songs down to the eleven that we all agreed were the best written, arranged, and rehearsed. Fewer songs meant more attention to detail on each song. It was of high importance to us that each song be recorded and produced to its optimal potential. We were to multi-track these songs, meaning that we'd track most instruments and sonic layers independently of one another. The first of these layers was drums and bass, the rhythmic backbone of the soundscape.

In order to achieve optimal drum and bass performances on the recordings, we wanted to track them live to achieve an authentic and genuine performance of

each. We needed for each of these tracks to be isolated so as not to have bleed-over from the other instruments during the live performance. This was easily achieved at Good Danny's. All linked together via headphones, Bryce, John, and I stood in the living room while Nathan sat in one of the smaller rooms with his drums. While Bryce and I sang "scratch" vocals and played "scratch" guitar parts to simulate a live performance, Nathan heard us through his headphones and simultaneously played the actual drum parts that were to be used on the record. The same was the case for John, whose bass signal traveled through a large bass amp that was closed off in a separate room. In addition to hearing the drums, bass, guitar, and vocals to the songs in our headphones as we played, we all listened to the pulse of a metronome to ensure a consistent tempo and to make things much easier for overdubbing more parts down the road.

Seeing that the set-up for tracking drums entailed an elaborate array of microphone placement and signal flow routing, it would be far more convenient to track all of the drums and bass in a continuous series of sessions, without the interruption of having to take everything down and then set it back up again, as this was a process of a few hours. Given that the band members had either classes or work during the week, in which the studio was bound to be booked for other projects, we essentially had to track all drum and bass parts between a Saturday and a Sunday to achieve a consistent flow of all these rhythmic parts on the record.

Between April 18 and 19, 2015, we spent roughly twenty hours setting up microphones on each drum and overhead the whole drum kit as well as on the bass amp and then recording drums and bass. We had already rehearsed the songs



countless times in my garage, so it was to our delight that we were able to yield a satisfactory drum and bass part to every song within this time span. I was amazed at how seamlessly Nathan and John knocked out their parts. After one weekend we had a solid backbone to the eleven songs.

The remainder of tracking sessions called for a less elaborate set-up than that of the live tracking of the weekend. This was due to the fact that all further parts would be recorded individually and thus would generally only require one or two microphones for each so it would be relatively easy to change the set-up on a daily basis, or as needed. We therefore had the freedom to book any individual days without the pressure of abiding within a specific time span. Therefore, due in part to the studio's and the band members' fluctuating availability and in larger part to the need to save up funding for each day we would book, we made the decision to take our time on the record and space out the tracking sessions. We were therefore allowed to continue to grow as a band as we gradually added layers to the record, letting the sound at the end of each day determine what else needed to be done.

The remaining studio sessions continued to grow in number; for a while we wondered if the record would ever be complete or if we'd endlessly come up with more parts to add to what was quickly becoming a wall of sounds. These sessions consisted of a fair balance of pre-planned ideas and a bit of spontaneity that arose as a result of the resources that the studio had to offer. The first couple of overdub sessions were devoted to guitar. While I usually play either a Martin acoustic or Fender Telecaster for live shows, Good Danny's had a beautiful vintage Gibson acoustic and a 12-string acoustic guitar that I used to add strum-y and steely

textures to the songs. Bryce went to guitar heaven as he experimented with a vintage Fender Stratocaster, a hollow-body Harmony Rocket, and a variety of amps and effects pedals. We had a ball of an afternoon experimenting with various distortions and reverbs and other guitar effects to spice up his electric guitar parts on the songs and add a variety of color to the songs that we had no idea existed. In between takes we'd listen back to the guitar parts and make adjustments in tone for the next take until we found exactly what we were looking for.

In addition to the four-piece Real Hands lineup, we knew of a few other musicians in the community who had unique perspectives and instrumental abilities to offer. We had no limitations for the final product of the record and wanted to incorporate any new elements to the songs that might transform them in a beneficial way. The first studio musician to add extra flavor to the record was Wes Maxwell. While not a full-time member of the Real Hands, Wes is a good friend and plays guitar with fellow local band Canvas People. In the spirit of bands like Futurebirds and many country-inspired bands who actively use a pedal steel, we recruited Wes to play lap steel on the record. In a matter of a couple of rehearsals prior, Wes was able to come up with beautiful parts to "Gasping Up for Air," "Fidelity," "Adore," "Catch You on the Flipside," "Pledge," and "Bright Rust"—the six songs that we had deemed in need of the addition of the smooth and dreamy atmosphere of the slide-y and steel-y sound that the lap steel emits.

The next musician to add his artistic touch to the record was pianist and composer John Sessions. Like Wes, John only needed to meet for a couple of rehearsals prior to his tracking session to come up with an array of piano ideas to

add to the record. Having been classically trained, John's approach took the piano parts in a different direction than any of us could have fathomed, and in the best possible way. Within one day at Good Danny's, John added the fullness of a grand piano to "Tarantula," "Such a Light," "Fidelity," and "Catch You on the Flipside," the fiery energy of a Farfisa organ to "Burnout," the mystic ambience of a harmonium to "Fools" and "Bright Rust," and the chaotic quirkiness of a Wurlitzer to "Brown Lungs." John's ideas oscillated between taking rhythmic roles and lead melody roles, depending on what the song needed in a given part.

The final musician to join the project was viola player Alec Woodruff. I had always envisioned "Fidelity" with a dense and mystical soundscape, including an orchestral section. This was achieved by the layering of parts that Alec scored to the song. In addition to adding strings to "Fidelity," [the day of his tracking session] Alec came up with a violin part to "Catch You on the Flipside" that steered it even farther in the country/folk direction for which we were aiming, and a layered viola part for "Pledge" that reminded me of "Eleanor Rigby" by the Beatles—certainly a direction that we were all willing to go.

With the addition of lap steel, piano, viola, and violin, as well as a much more complex variety of guitar and bass and drum tones than we had known possible, all that was left in addition to vocals was experimental sounds. We wanted the record to sound like a collage of various elements and steer the listener's ear in a roller coaster of unexpected directions. Daniel J. Levitin posits in *This Is Your Brain on Music*, "Recording engineers create what I call 'hyperrealities,' the recorded equivalent of the cinematographer's trick of mounting a camera on the bumper of a

speeding car. We experience sensory impressions that we never actually have in the real world” (108). Our later recording sessions at Good Danny’s were attempts to achieve these hyperrealities on the record.

We spent three studio sessions devoted to exploring the possibilities of strange effects that we could sprinkle on top of the soundscape. This included all sorts of purposefully placed shakers, tambourines, and other auxiliary percussion, as well as using vibraphone tones on “Adore” and creating a violent surge of feedback to swell in the last verse of “Brown Lungs.” We wanted for the ambience of sound to personify the meaning of the words on the record, so we aimed to add strange and unexpected sounds in sections or even exclusively after a specific line in order to highlight a given piece of a song in a different light. I began to picture the songs as paintings, each full of a multitude of shades blending together into one bigger picture.

We saved tracking vocals for last, as they were my most-dreaded session. Never having been happy with the sound of my voice, I feared that this could break the record overall and detract from all of the magnificence that I thought we’d achieved so far. I surrendered my worries to Max’s confidence. He’d worked with tons of bands before and had heard our “scratch” vocals throughout the duration of the recording process. Surely if he seemed to believe that all would turn out fine, all would. Without the need for all of the resources of Good Danny’s studio for merely tracking our voices, we were able to book time with Max at another Austin studio, Terminal Utility.

The day of the first vocal session, I had just returned from a seven-hour drive from Big Bend National Park. The tranquility of the previous few days outdoors was a perfect segue into a full day of singing. Over the course of the day, I managed to knock out all of my lead vocal parts and John his. A few weeks later we returned to Terminal Utility for Bryce to knock out his lead vocals and to start experimenting with harmonies. I was amazed at what the magic of an RCA-77 ribbon microphone and a Shure SM7B dynamic microphone could do to our voices. The ribbon microphone picked up more of the lower frequencies and had a darker and silkier tone. This added more detail to the vocal phrasing. This microphone was selected for songs such as “Adore,” where I sang softly and very close to the microphone so as to pick up the intimate character of the vocal performance. The dynamic microphone picked up more of the mid-range frequencies and thus had more punch and felt closer to a live performance. The dynamic microphone was used for songs such as “Burnout” so as to achieve a more aggressive and compressed vocal performance. Having the option of either microphone for each song gave us more range in the overall texture of the vocal. Both of these microphones represented a darker sound in the overall range of microphones, meaning that they expressed more low-end frequencies. This was a choice that Max made to cater to the timbre of Bryce’s and John’s and my voices.

Like our instrumental overdub sessions at Good Danny’s, our harmony sessions started with some planned-out ideas and turned into flat-out experimentation. The final tracking session was February 7, 2016, on Super Bowl

Sunday and ended with my trying a variety of random “ooh’s” and “ahh’s” harmonizing with my own voice.

In the spirit of expanding the complexity of the soundscape of the songs, I got the idea to include ambient sounds from the real world on the record. I had been reading about the making of some of my favorite albums for ideas to improve the Real Hands’ approach. Julian Koster of Neutral Milk Hotel said of his home studio:

My bedroom cassette world was the most important thing to me in the world then. It made my existence. It was the most peaceful, satisfying thing I knew, and there were probably hundreds of hours of recordings... I was obsessed with making tapes that felt like places, like worlds you could go and visit. I wanted to make records that were like carnival rides, roller coasters. Tape recording was my imaginary world—it was safe (Cooper 11).

Since the eleven songs that composed the album were reflections on times in my life spent living in San Marcos, I decided that I wanted to weave the sounds of the town into the record. One afternoon John and I went around San Marcos with a handheld recorder and got audio of anything and everything we could think of: the river, the train, traffic, etc. After much experimentation with these field recordings, we found a couple of places where the ambience indeed seemed to fit in with the songs. In a few sections of “Bright Rust” we sampled the sound of the train passing through San Marcos, recorded from the outside section of Cheatham Street

Warehouse. Additionally, a surprise sound came to us our second night of tracking. While our session was nearing a close for the night, this end came earlier than expected when a thunderstorm caused a blackout and we could no longer track. But clouds may have silver linings. We recorded the sound of the rain and thunder from the front porch of Good Danny's on an iPhone and used this sound at the beginning and end of "Fidelity," the song we were tracking when the blackout hit. This random turn of events feels like a gem of magic hidden within the making of the record.

Between sunny days and blackouts, we had gone into the project anticipating four days in the studio. By the final vocal session, we had booked nine days and had tracked a multitude of layers that we still had to sort through and blend together for a cohesive sounding record. The outcome was to be determined in the mixing process.

## Mixing It Up

In addition to the excitement of hearing our songs come alive more than I could fathom prior to recording them at Good Danny's, the process of mixing all of the tracks yielded another level of excitement. Though the songs sounded amazing to me after leaving our final recording session, this "amazing" became a mess of unfiltered sound compared with the product that surfaced throughout the mixing process. I was stunned by the difference. While I am much more a musician than an audio engineer, I learned a lot about what goes on in the post-production realm by sitting in on a few of Max's mixing sessions.

One of the largest tasks of mixing was to make sure that each instrument fit into a pocket without interfering with the frequencies of other instruments. Achieving optimal clarity of each part was essential to the cohesion of the whole. As each track spanned a range of frequencies, Max applied EQ to each individual track in which he manipulated the prevalence of certain frequencies in the given track. This way he was able to carve space across the frequency spectrum for each part to sit with as little interference from other parts as possible.

The hardest instruments to fit in the pocket properly were bass, kick drum, and snare drum. The bass has the biggest sound waves, so it was the hardest to fit in with the acoustics of the room without its presence being overbearing. Different sized rooms yielded different sounds when listening back, as did different speakers,



so we had to listen on a variety of different players in a variety of different settings. This included everything from Max's Adam-A7 speakers to the speakers in my Subaru Forester to laptop speakers to various brands of headphones. We'd leave the studio with what we thought was a perfect mix, only to hear too boomy of a bass in the car. Then it was back to the studio for another revised mix!

Besides the EQing process, the quality of the tracks within songs could be spiced up by adding digital effects from Pro Tools. While the common argument stands that effects sound the most natural when added during the recording process via effects pedals/amps/etc., the mixing process brought us more ideas on tone manipulation that we could tweak by adding digital variations to the effects. One such track that we spent a substantial amount of time dialing in the tone of the lead guitar on was "Fidelity." We needed for the melody to cut through and appear sonically on top of all of the other spiraling layers. One way that we did this during the recording process was by harmonizing a higher guitar line to make it more distinct. In the midst of all other parts, more needed to be done to the tone to make it pop. While I preferred a clean and round tone, it was necessary to add some fuzziness to the guitar part to make it pierce through everything else. We also added a chorus effect to the newly tracked lead to give it a more spacey sound that in turn created the illusion of conveying more emotion. I wanted the guitar to sound like a shy person who is crying his soul out in the spotlight. This emotional sound was further brought to life by having two guitars play the lead line, thus giving it a more wobbly and shaky effect. I wanted the whole thing to sound underwater and buried in mystic fog.

A drastic example of changing the effects of tone is represented in the end of “Catch You on the Flipside.” We added a lo-fi effect on the final section. This was achieved by taking out the electric guitar and many of the drum mics so that all that was left for drums were the snare, kick, and an overhead drum mics. We also used a plug-in called “vinyl” and switched the output to mono rather than stereo. The effect caused everything to sound more warbly and telephoney. By boosting the mid-range frequencies, particularly those around 1 kHz, this telephone-sounding effect could be achieved.

The majority of mixing was done at Max’s house, where he added these post-tracking effects from the plug-ins that Pro Tools offered. But there were a variety of effects that were only available at Good Danny’s, so we booked three more days there to complete the mixing of the album. My favorite effect that was made available to us at Good Danny’s was the use of a tape machine. When we bounced the mixes out of Pro Tools to WAV and MP3 files, we exported the signal through ¼” tape on an Ampex ATR-102 tape machine. This was our ultimate tip of the hat to many of our influences from the 60s who recorded analogue, as was customary and necessary at the time. Good Danny’s also had a variety of other external channels that we could route the sound through to tweak its quality and give it the timbre that it needed to meld with the mix. The bass was recorded with a decent amount of distortion and fuzz in the initial tracking sessions, and as we tried running its signal through different outboard channels, it felt too powerful and dominating. In the end, we ran the bass through a Universal Audio 1176 LN Limiting Amplifier channel that

gave it a more mid-range frequency and allowed for it to cut through the mix more effectively without adding too much fuzz to the overall sound.

Max also actively implemented the post-production tools of automation, compression, and comping to yield a cleaner sounding performance. Automation allowed for the manipulation of volume and the level of digital effects applied to a given track. This was crucial when the volume of the recorded performance fluctuated and yielded inconsistency. It also was utilized to bring up parts that we wanted to pop in certain sections. For example, in “Fidelity” we automated the piano to distort and echo (delay) in the chorus to accentuate the chaos of this section. Initially the layer of this effect was overwhelming and muddied up the section, so we “automated” it to crescendo throughout the section and reach volume by the end, so as not to interfere so harshly with all of the other elements during the section. Automation was also utilized on “Tarantula” at the beginning of the album to make the introduction to the record hit hard. We made the intro to “Tarantula” pop by having the bass and kick drum quieter during the build-up in the song’s intro and then come up to full volume with the first verse. This effect thrust the sonic momentum forward, causing the start of the record to create the feeling of pushing the gas pedal to the floor.

A vital tool to achieve sonic consistency was the de-esser: a special type of compressor. Compression is an effect that evens out the soundwaves of a particular track. For example, if the lead vocal inflections cause certain syllables to be louder than others, a compressor will even out the levels and make the overall track more even. Since the higher frequencies occupied by cymbals and vocal t’s and s’s are

harsher, evening out all the levels of the track can cause these harsher sounds to stand out more in the mix, creating an unwanted sizzling effect on the mix. The de-esser targets this specific frequency range that is most painful on the ear, 3–4 kHz, and puts a ceiling on the volume level so that the frequencies don't come out too strong. Sometimes the frequencies of the s's will all sound fine in the mix, but when the mastering engineer compresses the tracks even more, this frequency range will bite harsher; thus, it is wise to have the foresight and the de-esser to solve this problem before it might arrive down the road.

Comping allowed us to act as if we were instruments during the mixing phase of the record. The comping process involved shuffling through a plethora of takes of each instrument, picking our favorites, and sometimes even creating a collage take that consisted of pieces of various takes. For example, if we really liked the way that Bryce played the beginning of a solo on one take but on a different go-round he nailed the ending, we might combine the two and get the best of both worlds. This was used frequently on "Catch You on the Flipside" to achieve an effective call and response between lead guitar lines, lap steel, and violin.

The mixing process allowed for us to create new versions of the sounds that we had tracked. In "Such a Light" we took out the "ooh-ahh" harmonies in the choruses and added the effect of echoey reverberation to them. We then took out the original "ooh-ahh's" from the mix and replaced them with only the reverb of those tracks to make them feel more distant and echoey. Among the effects that we added to "Such a Light" during the mixing process, perhaps our favorite was the use of the "ass mic." This was a microphone that we sat up underneath Nathan's drum

stool so that it would capture a muffled-sounding version of the whole kit while he played. While the reverberations of the vibrating drums and cymbals sounded the most clear when a microphone was placed directly on the drum or above the kit (to capture the cymbals and the sound of the whole kit in the room), the “ass mic” yielded a sound that created the illusion that the kit was muffled and inside of a box. Max set up this microphone more for fun than anything, not expecting to actually use it. When he showed me the effect, commenting on how bad it sounded, light bulbs lit up, and I knew what we had to do. We implemented the effect on the second verse of the song, taking out all of the usual drum parts and replacing them with only those picked up by the “ass mic.” The resulting effect was the feeling of a dropout that was waiting to be picked back up. When the fully tracked kit came back in, it felt like an explosion of sound. This added dynamic diversity to song.

We surprised ourselves by utilizing some unconventional techniques such as those in “Such a Light.” I discovered that subtracting sound from a mix can be just as crucial as adding sound. At the end of “Tarantula” we used a noise reduction plug-in that works by first learning the sound of a cluster of unnecessary frequencies in the mix. One such cluster presented itself as a hum that was noticeable during the sustained C minor chord that ends the song. The noise reduction plug-in learned the sound of the amp humming after the guitar chord was finished and then subtracted that sound from the guitar chord itself to make a cleaner sounding chord. Little tricks like this produced substantial effects on the quality and clarity of the mix.

While these mixing details only provide a glimpse into the complexity of all that was involved in this process, it is hoped that this section gives some interesting insights into what all it entailed.

## Afterglow

At the end of April 2016, the final mixes of the eleven songs were finally completed a year after our initial tracking sessions had begun. In order to add the final polish to the sound, the task that remains is to send these files to a mastering engineer. Mastering the album will entail advanced mixing in which the volumes and subtle differences in the overall sound of all of the songs will be fine-tuned so that the album as a whole is more cohesive, louder, and brighter. The mastering of a record often makes the difference that boosts the songs to a high enough quality for radio play or to be picked up by a record label. Both of these are possibilities that the Real Hands would love to entertain!

The final master of the record is scheduled for completion by summer 2016. At this time the album will be released to the public via Spotify, Bandcamp, iTunes, and as hard copy CDs that will be sold at upcoming Real Hands shows. With the original working title of *Get Real* for the record, while this title remains the name of this thesis, the band has decided to give the album a name that is less pun-y. The soon-to-be named record will be available for streaming at [therealhands.bandcamp.com](http://therealhands.bandcamp.com). The Real Hands have never worked so hard and invested so much passion in a project before and are thrilled to publish the fruits of this labor to the public!

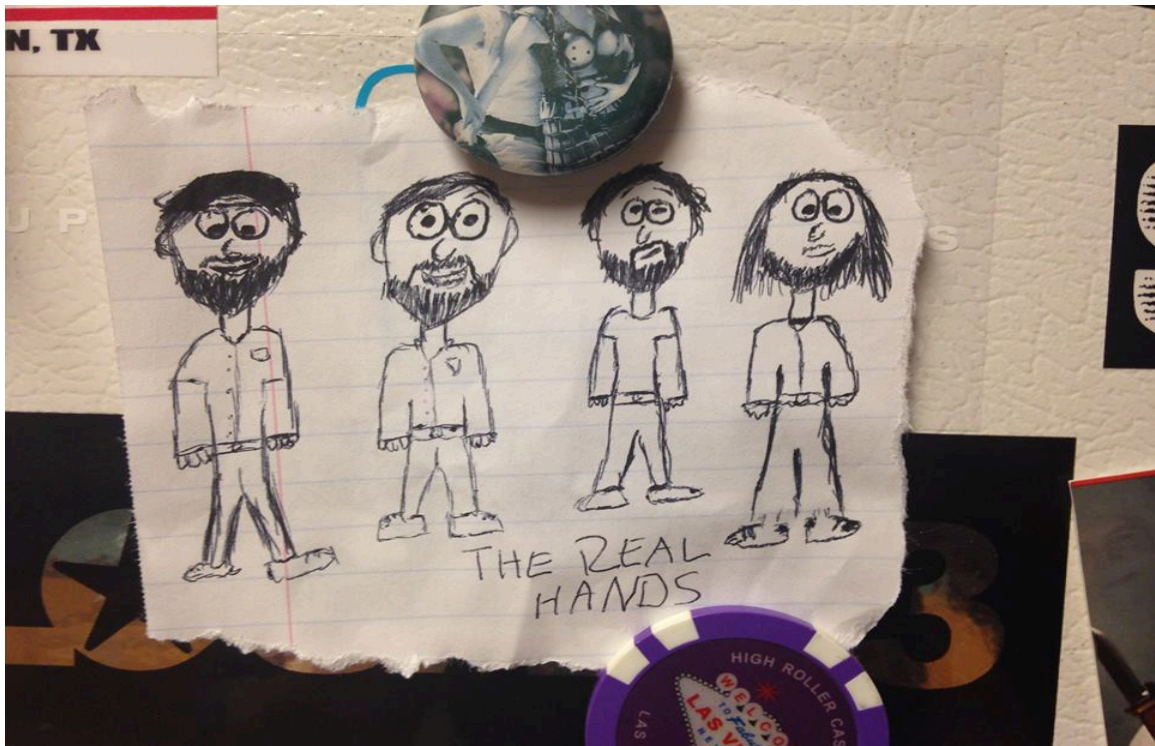
With a full-length album out, the next steps for the Real Hands will be to promote like mad and book many shows in San Marcos, Austin, and beyond to disseminate the record to any and all ears that are willing to hear it. In addition, the Real Hands will continue to write songs and prepare for future recording projects. In her Honors thesis, Michelle Methvin explains, "I should stretch out the ideas amongst many projects to allow myself to work through each idea individually and if the ideas overlap within projects, a more comprehensive cohesive body of work will result" (21). The same notion of letting current ideas overlap with future projects holds true for the Real Hands. As we continue to write and rehearse new songs, we are picking up where this album left off, continuing the story with new projects to come and excitedly cruising down the road that unfolds.



## Inside the Songs

All music and lyrics by David Russell, except “Such A Light” and “Pledge” by Bryce Brown, and “Fools” by John McAlmon, “Burnout” and “Gasping Up for Air” by David Russell and Bryce Brown, and “Catch You on the Flipside” by David Russell, Stephen Hurdle, and Jason Brazil. All songs arranged by the Real Hands and Max Lorenzen.

“There is something more to a song than just lyrics and chords which are easily memorized. Each song has its own life and story and I was forced to recognize this aspect of the song and embrace the song as a whole.” (Holk 25).



## Tarantula

Oh I believe

You should get lost when you're sleeping

Gazing at ceiling tiles, counting ain't a waste of time

Your thoughts are all seeping

Deep in your eyes when you've had enough of outside lives

Oh there's a light in the corner

Sparks of indoor fireflies

Seconds get shorter, they fall out of order

And I lose my mind too many times

Always hounding for a fixin'

Scrounging just to listen, to some other lies

Oh it's a namesake secret promise after class

Another night of floating in grass

A daze is so simple, still so complex

And we're soaring through a vortex

Some string and a thimble, oh what a vex

When I'm waiting just to play this set

Sweat in the indoor sun

I'm sharing all my secrets with everyone

Oh it's the same game recipe just for having some fun

Where my brain is just the bullet in the gun

*Commentary:*

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars.

—Jack Kerouac, *On The Road*

I came home one day with the intention of studying, but I ended up sitting on my back porch for a few hours writing songs. “Tarantula” was the first of these songs. I felt captivated and lost in the dream of life, attempting to extract all the substance I could out of it, and holding the weight of a trance in every moment. It was the sensation of being consumed by the urge to reach for something, to chase some internal flame without knowing where it led or if it was real or an illusion of desire. The words to this song attempt to blend the glory of this feeling and the desperation of trying relentlessly to pursue it. It was placed first on the record to start the album off with the notion of the nebulous but passionate journey toward self-fulfillment and actualization, blindly seizing each moment with the intent of desire.

## Such a Light

There you witness a scene of betrayal  
And you hop back into your night  
And you listen to the rolling waves  
You can tell that that is what you're meant to find  
In the evening grass see her set sail  
Into echoes of what's inside  
And all the time that we spent in the weeds  
Was the genesis of all I have to write  
And all I have inside  
Through a looking glass see over there  
At that woman who shares your life  
And you listen to her biting her nails  
And wonder how you ever found such a light  
Where you found such a light

“Such a Light” was inspired musically by one of our favorite bands, Dr. Dog. It's structured like a very simple three-chord pop song with as many melodies as we could muster. The lyrics are a reflection on my five-year relationship with my wife, dating back to when we were both in high school. The first verse is a prelude,

representing my mindset going into the relationship, with the actual depiction of the “rolling waves” being an epiphany that I had while sitting on the beach, drunk and miserable, on the night of my prom. The second verse jumps to the beginning of us starting to discover each other. We would sit in the grass and play music together with a group of our friends, thus the line “all the time that we spent in the weeds.” The third verse jumps to us living together in Austin, as we presently were when I wrote this song. It is a very artistic depiction of us sitting on the couch, enjoying our time together. This song was a huge benchmark for me in that it gave me the juice to continue to experiment with songwriting.

—Bryce Brown

## **Burnout**

I tripped when I spoke out  
But I'll still smoke you out  
Get into that mystic psychic feeling  
It's been years and we're still stealing for that sound  
Stealing for that sound  
You always said life was a joke  
So funny it'll make you choke  
I rattle dust out of my bones  
Gasping in panting flailing seizure  
Grind the core until my teeth hurt  
Or we burn out  
Yeah we'll burnout!  
You can take my gold for pleasure  
You can steal my soul forever  
Cuz it'll burn out

“Burnout” is a special song in the Real Hands’ discography because it happens to be among the first songs that were written collaboratively by Bryce and me. It serves as the brother to “Gasping Up for Air,” as the two were written

consecutively in the same sitting. One summer evening, Bryce and I stepped into my garage, each with a guitar and a headful of color. It was as if we merely let the chords, lyrics, and melodies flow from our subconscious. Bryce began playing the opening progression, crediting inspiration to Lou Reed's "Waiting for the Man" (from the album Velvet Underground and Nico). I could image the melody and words naturally. I was enamored with the glamour of examining the world through the lens of a mystical mindset, one in which perceptions seem brighter and taller and more fantastic. The lyrics "You always said life was a joke / So funny it'll make you choke" and "You can take my gold for pleasure / You can steal my soul forever" accentuate the motif of life being so fleeting and small compared with the grand scope of the world that we may as well ignite the fire in our hearts and dive into whatever indulgences we desire. While this record straddles the duality between this mentality and diving too far to the point of self-destruction, "Burnout" is intended as a surface-level celebration of hedonism, with a deeper contrast existing in the satire of burning out and turning the substance of life to ash. It flows into "Gasping Up for Air," the other side of the coin of this duality.

## Gasping Up for Air

I would tell you a secret  
If you open your ear  
I only want for you to hear  
I only want you to be here  
So listen to my plea  
Or call it a prayer  
And you can listen anywhere  
Call it love, or an affair  
Call it gasping up for air  
I'm gasping up for air  
I could show you so many things  
If you lend me your eye  
We have to promise not to try  
We can stay up all night  
And turn out the light

Melodically, this song is meant to epitomize the transition out of the surface-level sensory explosion implied by "Burnout" and farther into the depths of the mind, into the more obscure and opaque shades of consciousness that exist there. It



follows “Burnout” with an intentional sequence meant to personify the mental movement from the exterior of perception into the core of one’s essence. This is an important theme to the whole of the record, as the pleasurable side of the coin represents the surface and is characterized by fun and glamour, while the destructive side is only shown through deeper reflection and reveals shadows that are clawing away at one’s essence as they lose touch with themselves and reality in the pursuit of fantasy and a sensory ultimatum. The song is directed at the record’s muse, meant to be a love song on one level but a song of infatuation beneath that. It serves as an introduction to “Fidelity,” guiding the narrator’s perspective to thoughts that are absorbed in the muse. For example, the line “I only want for you to hear / I only want you to be here” is intended as a double entendre in which from an initial glance it may imply that “I only want for you *to hear* / I only want you *to be here*”; however, beneath the surface exists the reality that “I only want for *you* to hear, I only want *you* to be here.” This emphasis on the “you” is meant to imply the movement from feelings of love and attraction to the feeling of need for the muse and for it to be only her and the narrator in the bittersweet comfort of isolation. This is symbolic of neglecting the importance of balance in life to pursue the desire that in excess may cause one to burn out as one places too much focus on an infatuation.

At the time of writing this song, I had been reading lots of Harry Potter and was currently on *The Goblet of Fire*, which had the character of Mad-Eye Moody, who could take out his fake eye. The line “I could show you so many things, if you lend me your eye” is an ode to the magical realm that exists if the narrator and muse blend their realities, creating something that transcends reality but consequently

isn't real. The lyrics flip between the positive intentions and results of this relationship and the negative, contrasting notions of "plea" and "prayer" and "love" and "affair." Ultimately, the state of mind in which the song was written and the message of becoming overwhelmed by the feelings of need for the muse can be summed up with the suffocating idea of "gasping up for air."

## Fidelity

Almost took my feet from me  
Always said you're sleeping briefly  
Now I wanna go with you  
We don't settle to sort the past  
And the present is felt so easy  
Do you wanna go with me?  
And the sky is sun and rain  
And the clouds they speak so softly  
Do you wanna go with me?  
But we're all just pieces on the floor  
Rolling around with heart of an  
Innocent little secret, giving me rest  
You're just my innocent little secret, giving my rest  
Am I your innocent little secret, giving you rest?

I was sitting with my guitar on my back porch as I heard a sweet yet strangely haunting melody echoing through my mind. As I sculpted guitar chords around this melody, "Fidelity" began to take form. This was during a period of time when my head and heart were floating in a cloud of attraction and desire for the

muse of the song. We were spending constant time together and losing sleep and a sense of reality in the process. This is represented in the lines of “always said you’re sleeping briefly” and “innocent little secret, giving me rest.” I was replacing actual dreams that come with sleep with a dreamy state of mind that came with a sleep-deprived reality. Yet at the time it all seemed so beautiful. Henceforth, “Fidelity” serves as a bittersweet anthem and makes me think of the Greek Sirens: seeming so beautiful at first glance, but as you approach them closer and closer, you become consumed in shadow and eventually swallowed by the darkness. The contrast of the dreamy and melodic verses and the aggressive and chaotic choruses of the song is intended to convey this transition, oscillating between dream and nightmare.

## Adore

Gone

And my blue house is a ceiling

The broken glances I'm stealing

Are broken clouds on the floor

This melting puddle's a door

Strong

I am just waiting to see her

A mystic tunnel appear

Two vintage hearts on the floor

The sweeping feeling's a door

Adore

This was the earliest song written among those on the record. The guitar part came to me unexpectedly on a late night in fall 2013. It only took several minutes after writing the guitar line to come up with a simple melody to accompany it. The lyrics almost filled in themselves. I was thinking about personifying the idea of young love and floating on a cloud. I liked the double entendre of the act of “adoring,” or loving, to be “a door” into a greater, broader universe. This song was placed halfway through the album to serve as a sort of bridge from the first half to the second half of the record. It holds thematic relevance to the record as a whole

because it intends to paint a genuine image of the fantasy sought out in Side A, as if the first half of the album traces a vivacious life that burns so bright and full until it burns out and dies and goes to the dreamy heaven of "Adore."

## Fools

The fools of the world dance on my rooftop

Late in the night, passing a jug of wine

I hear them sing songs about lost time

They never rhyme, the fools do not mind

We are the fools of the world

Chasing the sun 'til we die

We laugh 'til our throats burn dry

The moon hates the sun, it's always on fire

The sun thinks the moon is a cold liar

How can a fool make it in this world?

All he can do is wait for it to unfurl

Hail to the fools of time

You with the holes in your mind

Pour me your sweet, sweet wine

At the time I began writing "Fools," most of our songs were in conventional 4/4 time. I decided to write a song in 6/8 time to add some variety to our repertoire. My first attempt had a similar rhythm to "Fools," but its chord changes were more complicated. Its chorus in particular had some key changes that, while interesting,

felt lacking in direction. I scrapped that song completely and started again from scratch, keeping the same rhythm but simplifying the chord changes. “Fools” was the result.

The music to “Fools” came quickly. The lyrics, however, did not. I had no vision of what the song should be about. To solve this, I first sat down and quickly wrote out a complete draft of lyrics by stream of consciousness, jotting down whatever words popped into my head. I then revised the lyrics line-by-line over the course of several weeks. As a result, almost none of the lyrics in the initial draft made it into the version I sang on the record.

Since I assembled its lyrics gradually, without a unifying meaning, I’m still not really sure what “Fools” is about. It’s mostly composed of images or scenes that I concocted without an intent to convey any particular theme or emotion. The first verse was partly based on my then-neighbors, who would drunkenly laugh and yell and swear into the night. The second verse is absolutely the highlight of the song; people often tell me they like the part about the moon and the sun. The second line of the chorus was originally “I know that we’ll never die,” but when I showed the song to David, he felt that line was somewhat cliché, so I changed it to “Chasing the sun ’til we die.” That change turned out to be immensely helpful—the chorus is more powerful because of it, and people often tell me they like that line as well.

—John McAlmon



## Brown Lungs

I often roll up a smoke between songs  
It helps me reflect on all the things I'm doing wrong  
I've got a pocketful of lists and papers  
That are burning into ash each time my brain wavers  
I think I'm losing it oh too often  
Every thought I get is just another nail in the coffin  
Always been more of a dreamer than anything  
So tell me when I'll wake up from this sleep that I'm living in  
This green town is making me blue  
Lately I've been lazy choking on the things that I don't do  
Didn't get 'round to buying them filters  
So I'll paint my lungs brown and pop some pills with her  
Cuz motivation comes quickest in shortcuts  
But I've got the longest hair in this whole class of dumb fucks  
And I can't digest a word the teacher says  
Cuz rather I'm asleep in this dream and I can't seem to leave it  
Oh the voices echo 'round my mind  
Singing her name in sweet clear rhyme  
Oh well the world gets heavy

And every task is burden that I'm dreading  
I get tired of singing the same song  
Like I obsess on the same thought all day long  
So I suppose it's time I wrap things up  
And get off my ass once I drain another coffee cup  
I wanna drop out and hop on a train  
And flee the damn sun, move somewhere where it rains  
I wanna wake up and not feel insane  
Find a way to get this fire out of my veins  
I wanna forget about all the shit that I can't get used to  
But lately I've been staining my lungs brown until I find  
Find something better to do

I wrote this song on a frustrated Saturday afternoon in fall 2014. I was in my (first) senior year of college and had hit a dead end of motivation. This song was written chronologically right after the dream that I was seeking throughout the first half of the record came to a sobering halt. All of the fun quickly caught up with me, and I suddenly felt jaded and faded, wishing I could find some scrap of inspiration to set me free. I was busy drowning my insecurities in self-destructive thoughts and chain-smoking, hence the name "Brown Lungs." The song is meant to set the stage of being in a place of complacency in which the narrator is idly wasting away through a chimney of unhealthy choices while waiting for some rebirth or new phase. Sometimes one's mentality can hit a roadblock of defeat, and nothing can seem to

pull the mind out of it. "Brown Lungs" is the explosion from when all of the momentum of the fantasy from the prior portion of the record caves in on itself and reality hits. This song is meant to capture that frustration and unleash it in an aggressive fireball of fury. It serves as the antagonist to the song that follows it on the record.

## **Catch You on the Flipside**

A penny for an answer, maybe we'll see you there  
At the top of the stairs, or somewhere down the road  
With hearts like angels, we don't always have to choose  
And did you read the news? It's sending us home  
Guided by sparks, we toss into the wind  
Let them twist and bend, and see where they go  
It's funny how coincidence can turn into so much more  
Songs of a sacred score, and we're listening in  
So sing your melodies and let them climb  
In spiral smokestacks painting clouds upon the sky  
And we hope someday our paths will align  
But in the meantime, I'll catch you on the flipside  
Living is easy, when you choose to breathe  
Just roll up your sleeves, and feel the air  
And when the road gets heavy, you can still stand still  
You can stop and chill, and braid your hair  
So sing your rhythm and STOP! To start again  
It takes a stranger to become a best friend  
And we know someday our paths will align

But in the meantime, I'll catch you on the flipside

Yeah in the meantime, I'll catch you on the flipside

This song is placed toward the end of the record and is meant to signify the light at the end of the tunnel—a beam of hope in the midst of chaos. Of the songs that I wrote on the record, chronologically it is the last and stands as a symbol of turning over a new leaf and moving forward. It was written collaboratively with my friends Stephen Hurdle and Jason Brazil on a car ride back from Big Bend in December 2014. After a dramatic rise and fall of emotions over the previous year, as is represented throughout the record, I had escaped for a few days with these friends into the wilderness to reflect and hike. Nothing could have been more therapeutic. While the mentality behind the previous songs on the record either embodies the notion of indulging in the now to achieve some unreal fantasy and sensory overload or yearning for a greener pasture on the other side of the hill, “Catch You on the Flipside” finally presents an ode to celebrating the present moment for everything that it actually is. Because we felt so alive and replenished on the trip, the lyrics on the car drive home flowed out of us like water from a refreshing spring. The title and opening line were inspired by a funny coincidence: while hiking we met a few travelers from Austin whom we became friends with on the trails. After breaking away from them and continuing onward, we reached a fork in the road and decided to flip a coin, a penny, for the answer of which trail to take. As we were departing for the “heads” route, our Austin friends arrived at the same fork, and as we were leaving they called out “we’ll catch you on the flip side.” We

were quite amused by the fact that they'd unknowingly just referenced a pun to our penny-flip decision, and we decided to use their words as the tag to the song. The lyric "braid your hair" was also a reference to our group of friends, as one of the girls had a long hair braid. As is natural, it was extremely flattering to present the song to the band and have them tell me they thought it was the best song I'd written yet. "Catch You on the Flipside" points at the glow on the horizon and the brighter days to come.

## **Pledge**

I wonder why I can't break free  
I wanna see the big stars in the streets  
And normalize  
And when I get to where I'm found  
I'll sing this song and hope you'll be around  
To walk away  
So I can't unwind my self-struck mind  
Make it all right, make it feel all right  
I'm merely sober and aware  
I hate the way that all the people stare  
In weekend lines  
And when we finally make a sound  
And all the people in the crowd  
Would understand  
We take our pledge on the winter wall  
It takes us down to where the sound leads us all  
To never come back

“Pledge” is largely a manifestation of my ambition to become a musician and a songwriter. It is written in an internal voice and from an internal point of view. In a sense it is drawing from a very universal yearning, to escape your surroundings for a life of greater significance. For us, it would be for people to understand and appreciate our direction as musicians and songwriters. But before that can all happen, we have to work to get better and pay our dues, which is depicted in the beginning of the second verse. I worked at Costco at the time at a cell phone kiosk, so naturally I was feeling a little hung over and depressed to be there on a Saturday. So the “weekend lines” were actual people standing in line on a Saturday trying to buy their cliff bars in bulk. To match the somewhat primal lyrics, we structured the song with a war drum-like tom beat and low steady guitar, and incorporated a lap steel and a layered viola to add more depth to the chorus.

—Bryce Brown



## Bright Rust

Stare at the wall the art is bright rust  
Beauty's a beaut when it's faded and crushed  
Trigger in hand is a figure of a trust  
I'm a sinner for lust  
Open the door and the window of time  
Let it all pass, a storm in the night  
Shoot through the frame when the game is white light  
And we're burning our minds  
Yeah we're burning our minds  
Well I packed my bags to leave this damn town  
Run for the reasons we still haven't found  
Turn with the seasons were fleeing the ground  
And I'm dreaming of clowns  
Well I've got a bag and a singing head buzz  
Take the long way just to say just because  
Try to avoid the feeling of love  
When she fits like a glove  
Yeah she fits like a glove  
But she's not a glove

It was the spring of my junior year at Texas State University. As was common for me at this time, I was at Lampasas, the Honors College building, about six cups of coffee deep and laboring away at an essay for Professor Alan Schaefer's course on European Cinema in the 1960s. I was writing about surrealism in the works of Federico Fellini. My head swarming with dreamy thoughts and caffeine, I took a break to sit on a bench outside and ponder life. I found myself enamored by a blotchy stain on the concrete wall across from me, a stain that I suddenly referred to as "Bright Rust." A melody appeared in my head out of thin air, and after a few minutes I was mouthing words to the first verse. Before long I darted back inside and scribbled down this verse, along with lyrics to a second verse.

I didn't know at the time that this song would kick off a series of original songs that embody a phase of indulgence in the pleasures of life. It was only appropriate that I wrote it in the midst of writing a paper about Fellini's representation of gluttony through the vibrancies of surrealism. The "trigger in hand" was a symbol of my hand-rolled tobacco cigarette, and the "white light" referred literally to the white lighter with which I lit it. The first verse painted an abstract scene of me sitting on that bench, damaging my health for the sake of achieving the "singing head buzz" mentioned in the second verse. As an ode to Fellini, I threw in the line "and I'm dreaming of clowns," in honor of the fact that he recurrently used the motif of clowns in his works.

To me, "Bright Rust" represents the epitome of the album, the struggle between the highs achieved through stimulating one's pleasure drive, and the lows

of the withdrawal and dishonesty that this course of action can cause in turn. The darker side to this duality is expressed in the final line. Though “she fits like a glove,” this fit may be a mere illusion of the charmed senses, waiting for the cold bite of reality to come back around and remind us that “she’s not a glove.” Perhaps this declaration of reality was the lesson learned through the process of writing this record.

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