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No Man's Band

The Life and Death of Reclusive American Musician James T. Selway
(Excerpts from the Documentary Interviews)

1. RICHARD WALTON, LANDLORD

I'm not a religious man myself. I haven't read the bible, don't put much stock in Revelation, but if there's an apocalypse, his music will provide the accompaniment. That's what it sounds like to me, at least. All moaning and grunts, yelps and weird out-of-tune instruments.

He left me his computer when he died. Don't ask why since we weren't close, but his mom and dad were dead, and he didn't have anyone else. That's where it all came from, the music. It was all recorded there. Before I listened, I almost had it wiped clean. Wouldn't have thought twice about it, but something stopped me. Again I'm not religious, so I'd call it a nagging curiosity or sheer nosiness, but it might have been divine intervention. Might have been his ghost. "What was on there?" I wondered. "What did he spend all that time in his room working on?" You ever hear that Tom Wait's song called "What's He Building in There?" Yeah, it was kinda like that. Creepy, but in a way you can't avoid. Like murder. It's gory, but you want details. When I found him, I thought he'd offed himself. Ripe smell coming from the room. I wouldn't put it past him. But doctors said brain aneurysm.

We shared a duplex. I owned the joint, and we got along well enough. Had a conversation every now and again, but he was quiet, didn't share. Anyway, I went to check on him, and he was lying there. Knocked his keyboard to the ground, his trumpet and sax were lying on the couch like he just used them. He played during the day when I was at work, so I didn't hear, and I was startled by what came out of that machine, but a voice kept telling me, "This is important..." so I had to get it out to the world, right?

2. SHEILA SOMMERS, MUSIC BLOGGER

The music industry has changed drastically since the advent of the Internet. No one buys music in stores anymore. They either pay to download it, or they do it illegally.

For decades, it was static. Back in the day, a phenomenon like James Selway could never happen. If you didn't have the money for a big budget studio and didn't write your music down, it didn't get recorded and distributed, and it was lost when

you died. It's only possible in the age of digital recording, the access this puts at everyone's fingertips, not just musicians, but listeners too.

My job is to create hype around music, like a critic. Only I get to be a real fan too. I'm not limited by professionalism. I can have a gut reaction, and it can be just that. I don't need to intellectualize, to explain or justify it with objective reasoning, which is what a critic needs to do if she's being responsible. My harshest critique is ignoring an album. If I like what someone's doing, I write a review, post MP3s and plug the band. But when I first heard Selway's music, it made me ashamed to have raved about anything that came before it. I mean, it was just...

In painting, you had Van Gogh. To a lesser extent, in literature you had John Kennedy Toole's *Confederacy of Dunces*, since that was one work, but valuable nonetheless, and now with music, we have James Selway. It casts a romantic shadow over the work, the tortured genius, unrecognized at the time of his death, but from what I've gleaned of his life, he struggled. You wouldn't wish the things that happened to him on anyone.

3. ANDREW ROBESON, CHILDHOOD FRIEND

I think it was around '91 or '92. We were both 14, hanging out in suburban Jersey, smoking weed, jerking off, dreaming of getting laid, and Grunge hit, and we were like, "Wow!" You know? Something that speaks to us. Nirvana was the first band we became obsessed with, kind of cultish. And then it was STP and Alice in Chains. I convinced my dad to buy me a guitar and get me lessons, because we were richer than the Selways, but Jim, he had a paper route, saved up for a guitar too, and learned from a book. I was like, "Fucker!" Here I am, the lessons are kicking my ass, and he's playing the solos from Pearl Jam's *Ten* by ear. Still, I hung in there, and I had good rhythm, got the chords down, and we formed a band. No drums or bass, just Jim and me.

You know how people call certain nights "the best night of my life?" Well, this one night we took a boombox radio, remember those? And we popped in a 90-minute cassette and hit record. We handed the guitar back and forth like passing a doob, and the rule was we had to improvise until the tape ran out. Play. Sing. Go. And that's how we learned to write songs. Most of it was pretty bad, but we kept going, and I'm telling you, we laughed our asses off. It was like Freudian, stream-of-consciousness. Our real selves bubbling to the surface.

Two years went by with us sort of honing our skills, and this being Jersey, people were still rocking out to Bon Jovi and big hair bands, and we had trouble finding a drummer. Jim was washing dishes in a diner, and he saves again and buys a kit, learns

to play it in like 3 weeks. And I mean he learns to play it better than dudes who've been playing for years. It was sick. Later he could do that with any instrument he chose, violin, cello, flute, bassoon, but the first time, I was staggered by it. And since he bought the drum set, I convinced my dad to buy us a Tascam 4-track so we wouldn't have to use the boombox for our demo, and our songs were getting good.

We thought we were headed toward the big time, that we were like Lennon and McCartney and we were gonna be in the biggest band of all time. We made a good team too. I could write a better pop song, the hooks just popped into my head, and James did more of the complex arrangements. I was all verse-chorus-verse-chorus and maybe a bridge, but he was talking about... shit, I still don't know the language. The best way I can put it is this: my favorite Nirvana song was "Territorial Pissings." His was "Milk It." Now, if you don't know "Milk It," it starts off with two guitars picking out individual notes, only it sounds like they're both playing in different rooms, fiddling around like it's the first time they touched a guitar, real grating, dissonant. They use the bass and drums to hold the song together, and it feels like it's always on the verge of falling apart. That's how Jim liked his music, even back then.

4. RAINER LICHTENSTEIN, AVANT-GARDE COMPOSER

The quality that makes Mr. Selway's music so remarkable, on the surface, is its mixture of classical elements with a modernist sensibility. From what I've been told, he was self-schooled, and if so, one can discern that he schooled himself well. At moments, his arpeggios have the mathematical precision of Bach, and yet somehow, he can shift gears to the simplest melodic line like Mozart or Beethoven. This, for the most part, is what I believe appeals to listeners of popular music, this grounding in the cannon. But undercutting this is an understanding of minimalism, the influence of Phillip Glass combined with electronic soundscapes utilized effectively by Brian Eno in his solo work and Berlin-period Bowie. Add this to post-*Bitches Brew* Miles Davis and a mixture of urban hip hop beats, and one can see that Selway combined disparate elements to create compositions that transformed from peaceful and contented to disruptive or even terrifying at the drop of a dime. In his recordings, one can hear a man who has experienced both great happiness and deep grief, and in the end, decided the later outweighs the former to a disproportionate degree. His music is universal, the music of everyman.

5. CHRISTINE WORTHINGTON, LIBRARIAN

He was in here every day. Quiet, but sweet too. Talked low, but he was generous with the compliments. He liked my hair let down. Or Suzy's glasses, he said they were very becoming. It actually made Suzy feel better that day because she had lost her contact lenses and felt insecure about her glasses. But he was handsome. I thought so, at least. That's probably why I paid so much attention to him. He was on the thin side, but handsome too.

How did he look?

I'm not very good with descriptions.

Rugged. Always a growth of beard. Dark hair. I think his eyes changed color like a mood ring. Some days they were hazel, others green, others gray. But this isn't what you're here for. You asked me what he read, what he checked out?

Everything under the sun. He worked as a night watchman in an office building. So he had lots of time to read. He stayed here during the day and read different stuff. Not the books he checked out. Those were different. And I don't think he slept much, if he worked at night and spent his days here.

But yes, I was impressed. I'm a reader myself, and I was impressed. He read literature, of course. Most of Jane Austen and Dickens, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald. He even tackled Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and Thomas Pynchon, which isn't easy. Aside from that, he read philosophy. The Greeks. The Germans. The French. He read Adam Smith and Marx and Darwin. And then he read scientists like Einstein and Stephen Hawking. History too. Everyone's talking about the great music that died with him, but a wealth of knowledge disappeared as well. He was a kind man, wise probably, beyond his years. That's what his eyes told me. And all that wisdom went too. It's a shame. He probably could have used someone to take better care of him.

No, I don't mind you asking.

I would have gone out with him if he was interested. I wouldn't have had to be his girlfriend, I would have cooked for him. A man like that was a catch.

6. LIONEL BRYANT, CORNER GROCER

So the librarian told you he was skinny? Damn right. His clothes didn't fit, looked like they were going to fall right off him. But she's right. He was a nice guy. Kleptomaniac, though. I never told no one that. He paid for enough, but he stole some too. And I let him. Don't know why. Some people you don't like the look of. You'd call the cops, ring the alarm if they so much as sneezed in the wrong direction.

Not that guy. I'd catch him putting a small bottle of juice in his bag in the mirror, or one time, he took a loaf of bread, but I let it go. I ain't starving. But he might have been. Like I said, he paid me mostly, and now he's gone, so young, God rest his soul, I'm glad I let him slide.

7. RAINER LICHTENSTEIN, AVANT-GARDE COMPOSER

What one finds most interesting, perhaps, is Mr. Selway's use of organic sound in his music, not only instruments, but the natural world. For someone secluded, living alone outside New York City, he has a profound understanding of the communion between man and Mother Earth. He records the wind or the rain with amazing precision for someone using lo-fidelity equipment. A desktop recording program? It boggles the mind. Mr. Selway must have been a wizard.

His compositions are untitled, but numbered. Thus, I'll refer to them numerically, and one can hear the best illustration of organic sound in composition 72. During the coda, two notes, D and C are held in unison for approximately 14 seconds, creating unease, but this unease is compounded by the subtle screech of a dying mouse, caught in a mousetrap, struggling for life. It's barely audible, almost subconscious. I have yet to confirm this with definitive proof, but an analysis of the sound would lead one to believe he placed a microphone near a mouse trap, and with infinite patience, waited for the inevitable release.

One feels the pain that mouse is experiencing. One empathizes.

8. RICHARD WALTON, LANDLORD

Yeah, we had a mouse problem. Quite a few roaches too. What do you expect? This isn't Buckingham Palace. I tried to have the exterminator in every few months, but you know how mice breed. You're not killing them so much as beating back the tide. One time I bought those pellets you put behind the refrigerator, and they worked pretty well, but James didn't like the pellets. He said he didn't want to have poison around the apartment, so I went out and bought the classic snap trap. How was I supposed to know what he was doing with them?

9. ANDREW ROBESON, CHILDHOOD FRIEND

You're kidding me. He really did that? Yeah, I heard it in the music. I have a pretty good ear, but I thought it was artificial. Something he did with synthesizers. Man, that's some demented *Spinal Tap* shit. If he was alive, PETA would have his ass. It doesn't surprise me though. He could be twisted. He had a strange imagination. Always had his head in a book, always experimenting with sound.

While we were recording our first album on the Tascam, he got an extension cord and ran it out to the pond near his house, and at night, when the songwriting wasn't going well, we'd head out there. Jim would play with the levels, fuck with the knobs, really I never understood how any of that shit worked, and he'd mic anything, the gentle shush of the thistles, frogs croaking, his own gassy intestines rumbling. I didn't mind. We were smoked up, and it seemed really cool. I mean, a lot of things seem cool when you smoke pot, and then you sober up, and you're like, what the fuck was I thinking, but with Jim, the recording was never like that. He took it dead serious. It was the way he expressed himself, the only way he could express himself, since he couldn't do it at home. Just wasn't the kind of household that was receptive to artistic temperament. I'm not tooting my own horn, but I'd like to believe he appreciated having a friend like me. I didn't always understand him, but I always tried to understand him. And that's important in friendship.

10. CHRISTINE WORTHINGTON, LIBRARIAN

I don't believe it for a second. He wouldn't hurt a soul. Much less torture a defenseless mouse. That sound has to be artificial. You can do all sorts of things with computers nowadays.

11. LIONEL BRYANT, CORNER GROCER

I sold him the traps myself, but he might've stole some too.

12. SHEILA SOMMERS, MUSIC BLOGGER

Okay, but that's beside the point now, isn't it? James isn't here to chastise, and no one's bringing those mice back. The dying mice are an element of his work, not what make it so engaging as a whole. These are the kind of details people focus on to

distract from what's important, and that's 'How do we process such beautiful music?' Do we simply enjoy it on its own merits or do we take it as a picture of life's possibilities? What was James telling us?

Another example of how ridiculous people become about posthumous works is Richard Walton's battle over who holds the copyright, since Selway has no estate and the will was scribbled on a piece of notebook paper and never officially notarized. And while it's good in a way for us bloggers, seeing as we don't have the RIAA breathing down our necks when we post Selway's compositions, it demeans the artistry.

Take Bob Marley, for example. I love the man's music, but I hate his fans. On the one hand, you have a great musician, a humanitarian, who recorded wonderful albums and was involved in politics, and on the other, you have a bunch of white suburban stoners buying T-shirts and posters with his image on it. And where do the proceeds go? I guess the Marley family gets some, but don't you think Bob would be spinning in his grave if he saw this happening? Someone driven, motivated, talented being adopted by corporations and lazy potheads as justification for indolence. It makes me sick to my stomach thinking about it.

13. RICHARD WALTON, LANDLORD

He left his computer to me in writing, and the handwriting experts verified that the will was in his hand. As I mentioned, I don't know why he did it. But leaving the computer to me, what's on it belongs to me too. Who else should it belong to? Without me, the world wouldn't have his music. I could have erased it, and any idea of James Selway would have gone with it. I saved him from obscurity. Alive, he might have been no one, but now he's world famous. You hear his music on car commercials. You hear it in movies. You hear it on the radio. There are orchestral performances of it. And that's all because of me. He might have made the music, but I made him, and I deserve a cut. That's all I have to say. You know who James Selway is because of Richard Walton. I don't have time for anyone who argues otherwise.

14. RAINER LICHTENSTEIN, AVANT-GARDE COMPOSER

His music, barring the appearance of an illegitimate child, belongs in the public domain. Without an estate, no one should reap a direct profit from these compositions. Of course, isn't that the way with artists? We do 100% of the work, and companies, or someone who doesn't deserve it, get a minimum of 90% of the profits. Perhaps the world is justified in writing us off as fools and dreamers. Richard Walton? He's a scoundrel.

15. CHRISTINE WORTHINGTON, LIBRARIAN

I think it's a sin. When I see Mr. Walton on the street, I don't wave, even though I've known him for years. I just look away. I think he's greedy, trying to profit off something he had nothing to do with. But my grandmother always said, 'If you don't have something nice to say about someone'... well, you know the rest.

16. ANDREW ROBESON, CHILDHOOD FRIEND

Yeah, that guy's a vulture. Picking at Jim's carcass. But he doesn't know what Jim went through, who he was. I wonder if he'd act different if he did...

We drifted apart, of course. You asked me about that. College, you know? He headed off to New York, and I went to University of Penn, since Columbia wouldn't take me. I wasn't that great in school, but I did well, and my dad was rich, so he bought my way in. Jim and I talked on the phone and wrote each other e-mails, but distance can be a bitch. I met new people, and then the next time I saw him, well, it was, you know... his mom and dad...

Who could have imagined something like that in our neighborhood?

We were all shocked. It was like, perfect tabloid fodder, and Jim, who was always sort of isolated to begin with, turned completely inward.

His dad was never physically violent, not in front of me. But he had the sharpest tongue you could imagine. He always tore Jim down, really ripped Mrs. Selway too. I don't think he drank, some guys are just miserable for the sake of misery. The odd thing is how James only got gentler when his dad went on a tear. Like this was his way to counteract that. And the music too, the music was an outlet, and I was glad to help. He slept over my house often. But then he felt bad leaving his mom alone there. Then, yeah, we went to college, and that was worse because he couldn't look out for her. Then, our junior year, I heard down in Philadelphia. Murder/Suicide. His dad took a shotgun and killed his mom, turned it on himself. I came back right away. I called him, but he didn't call back. I went to the funeral, but we didn't talk much. He was receptive to sitting together, and we sat together in silence. He didn't cry, and I thought that was strange, but then I thought, "That's Jim." He was a brave guy. He could withstand a lot. He channeled it all and put it in his art.

Back at school, I made a few attempts to get in touch, but it wasn't reciprocated. There's only so much effort you can make when someone doesn't make that effort back. But I always thought of him, wondered where he was, what he was getting himself into. A few years after that, I was walking down the street in New York. It was crowded, but I saw him, maybe a hundred feet ahead. Our eyes met, and he

crossed to avoid me. I was ready to throw my arms around him. Hell, kiss him on the cheek, take him out to dinner. And what does he do? He crosses to avoid me. That afternoon, I was hurt, I mean, really, really fucking hurt. I don't want to sound like a bitch, but when I got back to my place, I cried. I thought I had done something, that he hated me. But then, I put myself in his shoes. Would I want to talk about it? Or try to ignore it and pretend nothing happened, which might be worse? I think he stayed away because any time he saw someone from our hometown, it brought back the reality of what happened to his family. And with me, it was twice as bad... ten times as bad, because I was the person who'd meant the most. And I forgave him for crossing, even though he'd never ask me for my forgiveness.

Now when people talk about him killing mice or his seclusion, or bring up weird stuff, when they conjecture, I just think, "Man, listen to what he made." You know? It's like, some people go through that type of shit, they come out the other side, and they're rapists or serial killers. But not Jim. That's what makes him really so exceptional, and I bet he's still exceptional wherever he is. He came out the other side, and he created something transcendent. It might be cliché or whatever, but this world beat him down, and he ended up doing something that made the world a better place. And he left at 32. How many people live full lives, and you can't say anything remotely good about them?

So you ask me what I think about copyright and this Richard Walton thing? Fuck that! Who cares? I just want my friend back. We were like brothers, once upon a time, you know? I loved that fool. But sometimes all the love in the world can't save someone. Especially... an aneurysm. No one could've done shit, even if they were standing next to him...

What's that?

Do I still play?

Hell yeah! Got a Pearl Jam cover band, play down at the *Brick House* every Thursday. It's not much, but I have a day job, and Jim had the real talent. Me? Well, we started out, and he wanted to be a great artist. I wanted to get the girls, and I'm still in it for the girls, you know?

Same as it ever was, man. Same as it ever was...