

Transcript from Artist Talk/Performance given in the School of Art at the University of Washington in November of 2011.

In October of 1985 The Replacements released their fifth album *Tim*. It was released on Sire Records a subdivision of Warner Bros. This was their debut release with Sire after having spent the previous four years with Twin/Tone Records a small label based in their hometown of Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The Replacements had released four albums with Twin/Tone as well as two singles and one live recording. After having released such great songs as "Gary's Got a Boner", "Fuck School", "God Damn Job", and "I Hate Music" The Replacements had earned a loyal fan base and had garnered the attention of a larger label. The move to Sire was seen by many as a step forward. *Tim* was recorded over two months and produced by Tommy Erdelyi (better known as Tommy Ramone the original drummer for the seminal punk rock band the Ramones). However, after the album's release it received only moderate success and when The Replacements were told to make a music video they replied by creating this. When questioned about it by the label they kindly pointed out that their contract had not explicitly stated that they needed to make an appearance in the video.

For a band that had just signed with a larger label this type of gesture could be interpreted as an act of thankless aggression. Essentially, a fuck you to their new bosses. But, the video is also indicative of the litany of contradictions that made up The Replacements. A band that struggled to define success in terms of failure, irony, and barely meeting expectations.

The Replacements were formed in 1979 by Bob Stinson and his 11 year old brother Tommy Stinson, mainly as a way to keep Tommy out of trouble. Chris Mars was enlisted as a drummer and they later invited Paul Westerberg to serve on vocals and rhythm guitar. Initially they referred to themselves as The Impediments, but after being kicked off stage halfway through their first show they decided to change their name to The Replacements. In reference to this name change Chris Mars has stated:

"...maybe the main act doesn't show, and instead the crowd has to settle for an earful of us dirtbags. [...] It seemed to sit just right with us, accurately describing our collective 'secondary' social esteem."

After some practice they handed a demo tape to Peter Jespersen (the founder of Twin/Tone Records) they were signed and released their first album, *Sorry Ma, Forgot To Take Out The Trash*, in August of 1981. The album featured 18 songs and came in just under 37 minutes. Roughly two minutes per song. The album featured a fast-paced earnest style but they contradicted this effort with the liner notes that accompanied the album.

Otto – "We ain't crazy about it either. Also this song is proof that Chris Mars is one of the best drummers we could find at the time."

Shiftless When Idle – "Tittle – good. Song – kinda."

Don't Ask Why – "Stole a mess of these words from a guy who's never gonna listen to this record."

The liner notes paint a bleak picture of a band that seems intent on discrediting themselves before they've even begun. Nevertheless, The Replacements continued to create music. They followed *Sorry Ma*, with *Stink* in June of 1982, and *Hootenanny* in April of 1983.

The Replacements carried their attitude of indifference into their live performances as well. They became notorious for performing drunk, sometimes to the point of being totally incapable of playing. They would rarely finish songs and often resorted to improvised covers. Occasionally, they would perform well but never when you expected them to. The unpredictability of their live performances eventually became a hallmark of the band.

Bob Stinson in particular became famous (well, famous isn't really the right word) for his on-stage antics. He often appeared on stage wearing a tutu, or a dress, or nothing at all. Supposedly, one night after a crowd-member tossed a garbage can onto the stage, Bob

proceed to stand it upright, climb into it, and perform the rest of the evening waist deep in trash.

October of 1984 saw the release of their fourth, and final, album with Twin/Tone Records, *Let It Be*. This, in and of itself is a ridiculous idea, The Replacements were not four wildly famous British musicians. They were four, essentially anonymous midwesterners. The album doesn't even have a song titled *Let it Be* on it. Rumor has it that the band was riding around in a car and decided to title the album after the next song to play on the radio. Rumor also has it that they decided to title the album *Let It Be* because they fully intended on breaking up after its release, much like the Beatles had.

The album still featured the same reckless approach to song writing in tracks like "Gary's Got A Boner" and "Tommy Gets His Tonsils Out", but also included beautifully executed and cleverly written songs such as "I Will Dare" and "Sixteen Blue". The album displayed a more mature sound for The Replacements and a range of diversity that, up to this point, had only been hinted at in a few songs on prior records.

The success of *Let It Be* is largely what attracted Sire Records to The Replacements, but prior to changing labels The Replacements put out one more release on Twin/Tone, *The Shit Hits The Fans*. *The Shit Hits The Fans* was released on audio cassette only and was a live recording of their performance at The Bowery in Oklahoma City on November 11, 1984. The recording was done by an audience member who had situated himself in back of the crowd with a tape recorder. One of The Replacements roadies caught him and confiscated the tape. After listening to it, they decided to release it on Twin/Tone. The liner notes for this release are just as entertaining as the ones on *Sorry Ma*.

"Ever wanted to be popular, the life of the party (just plain liked, even)? Well, we did. And now that that absurd dream seems to be within reach, we've come to the sobering realization that we don't fuckin' know how to pull it off. People come to see us and what do we go and do? What we want—play covers, basically wing it and embarrass a lot of people in the process (a dunce cap never fit so well). For worse or for worser, it's us, and without that stuff we'd die a dull death.

Anyhoo...what you've got here is most of a live show. Our roadie pulled it out of some enterprising young gent's tape recorder toward the end of the night. (Drop us a line, buddy, there's \$3.95 in it for you!) Not a normal set, but were not sure what one is anyway. Last gig of the tour, plenty of poop, but we like it. Se here you go, friends. No backs.

Pray for us,
Paul

p.s. Feel free to write us and shit. Waiting for the mail is the highlight of our day."

And so with that we're back to 1985, the release of *Tim* on Sire Records, and the release of the music video for *Bastards of Young*. The following year on January 18th The Replacements were scheduled to make an appearance on *Saturday Night Live*. Given the history of their drunken antics on stage they were forced to sign an agreement stating that they would not swear during their performances. True to form, The Replacements appeared on stage for their first set drunk, and played *Bastards of Young*; which went fairly well until Paul Westerberg mouthed the word "fuck" toward the audience. He didn't say "fuck" but everyone knew what he didn't say.

For their second set of the evening they decided to switch their clothes and performed "Kiss Me On The Bus" which they sang as "Kiss me on the butt". They also made it a point to thoroughly trash their dressing room. This was the first time they had appeared on national television and hence was the largest amount of media exposure they had ever received. And they responded by getting themselves banned from *Saturday Night Live*.

Here's something interesting. Shortly after the release of *Tim*, Bob Stinson was kicked out of the band. The Replacements, a band that made their reputation on showing up late, drinking all of your beer, playing only half of their set, and trashing the dressing room before running out the back door, kicked Bob Stinson, the tutu wearing lead guitarist out of the band.

If this seems at odds with their image, it is. If this seems at odds with the intentions,

it may not be. One thing you have to understand is The Replacements were not attempting to cultivate a marketable image of apathy. In the early 80's that type of image was not a commodified style. By the 90's it was. This is evident in bands like Nirvana who asked permission to smash their instruments when they made their appearance on Saturday Night Live. But for The Replacements, this wasn't a ploy. In fact, The Replacements eventual break up in 1991 was partially motivated by this realization. In an interview Paul Westerberg stated:

"It got to be a little uglier. Not personality wise but, we took what we were, our reputation, and we lived it we flaunted it. Rather than just being four kinda like wild guys we became four caricatures of wild guys and it was a little dangerous."

But all of this begs the question, why? Why spend time writing songs for a record and then barely attempt to play them live for fans? Why make the transition to a larger label if you don't intend to take advantage of the exposure they can grant you? Why after doing all of the above, would you kick out the one member of the band that seems to be the most on board with this type of approach? All of this seems in direct contradiction to themselves. The only way it seems to make sense is if you consider that The Replacements were really attempting to make a larger statement about music and the only way to do it was within the music industry.

This notion *is* supported by the decision to produce 7 albums, their decision to move to Sire Records, and their decision to eliminate Bob. Despite all their protests and antics they still managed to maintain forward momentum in their career. Their next album on Sire records, *Pleased To Me Meet*, was released on July 1987. With Bob no longer in the band, the entire album was recorded as a three piece with Paul Westerberg playing all of the guitar parts. This may not seem like much, but it shows that Paul really did know what he was doing when it came to playing the guitar and writing songs. It also displayed a change in attitude on their part. The album is more polished than their previous work. There's still some of the attitude from their earlier albums such as the song *I.O.U.* which features Paul Westerberg murmuring a nonsensical chorus that they were too lazy to write words for. The album art also takes some of their attitude with a self-mocking image intended to depict them striking a deal with the record label executives. But, on a whole the album sounds like an honest attempt at making a good record.

Ultimately, they never became famous, none of their albums ever went platinum. In fact, none of their albums ever went gold, which only takes 500,000 records sales. Compare that to Bruce Springsteen's *Born In The USA*, which was the best selling album of 1985, with over ten million copies sold. Enough to get it past gold and platinum, into diamond status. But there's something very poetic about The Replacements. Essentially a band that regarded themselves as failures. And the fact that they went to such great lengths to prove this you have to wonder whether or not their intentions were ever to be famous in the first place. And in fact, perhaps The Replacements were ultimately trying to redefine success in their own terms. And in this case, those terms would seem to be succeeding in failure. And this irony that The Replacements embodied made them more than failures. They were a band that despite their self-deprecating remarks managed to do all the wrong things right.

By performing most of their live shows drunk they created a reputation of unpredictability. The fact that you were never sure if they were going to be sober enough to play became even more reason for wanting to see them. Each show was unique and consequently stories started to evolve. These stories eventually started to build The Replacements up to the level of myth.

It is rumored that at one point after having signed with Sire they decided to steal the master tapes of their previous albums from Twin/Tone Records. Tommy distracted the receptionist, Paul and Chris broke into the offices and stole the tapes, while Slim Dunlap (the guitarist who replaced Bob) waited in the getaway car. After stealing the tapes they drove off to a nearby bridge and threw the tapes into the Mississippi River.

No one really knows if it's true. No one really knows what may have motivated them to do such a thing. One version suggests that The Replacements were owed money by Twin/Tone and after being put off time and time again decided that they would just steal their tapes back so that a label that they were no longer affiliated with couldn't control their music anymore. Another version is that The Replacements decided after releasing *Tim* that they should eliminate all of their previous work. That way fans would only be able to obtain copies

of their most recent music and would have to come to their shows in order to hear older songs. Apparently, they planned on taking this approach with every subsequent album. So every album would essentially be a clean slate.

However, these events actually happened is not important. These events take on more meaning after the fact. The story of Bob Stinson playing in a trash can is a great example of this. The sight of Bob Stinson playing in a trash can to a live audience vs. the idea of Bob Stinson playing in a trash can to a live audience are very different things. One exists in the realm of one-liners and perhaps mild amusement for those who were in attendance. The other exists in the realm of myth and moves beyond the one-liner and into the political. And it's this separation from an isolated event that allows it become such. Bob Stinson playing in a trash can didn't happen in a vacuum. It happened in a music venue, it happened in relation to all their previous antics and albums, and it happened in the 80s. And once it left the music venue in the form of an idea it takes all of this context with it and gains more. And what began as perhaps a drunken intuition, becomes representative of an idea and a movement.

The Replacements stealing the master tapes from Twin/Tone, regardless of whether or not it happened, also works on this level. Who knows what motivated them? To their fans it was a statement regarding control within the music industry. It wasn't about the money, if it was why throw your music in a river? You'd be much better off holding your own music hostage from the label. By destroying (or at least attempting to destroy) your own work you are making a statement that the value of your work does not consist of magnetic tape. That the 'object' isn't the point. And this further supports the notion of The Replacements existing in the realm of ideas. This amusing anecdote points to questions about the very notion of value and where it is placed. The product? The creator? The idea? Perhaps the bands sentiments are best expressed by the chorus from Bastards of Young: "We are the sons of no one, bastards of young."

In closing I'd like to refer back to the music video for Bastards of Young. By the time I saw the music video I had already been introduced to The Replacements and was aware of what the video was. But, I would like to read to you a description, that a friend gave to me of the first time he saw the video.

"I think I saw it on MTV's 120 minutes. I knew they had a video coming out but didn't know what it was yet. When it finally came on I was all excited and was watching it waiting for something to happen. At first I was really let down and couldn't help but think, 'This is it?' And then the more I watched I suddenly realized 'This is it!'"

The video itself is a simple enough gesture. A literal interpretation of the phrase "music video". But it's more than a pun. When watching it, the experience is very much like my friends description. The opening is a slow close shot that slowly starts to zoom out while you wait for something to happen. As you're watching, the thought occurs to you that this might be all the video is. There's a feeling of frustration and disappointment in the video for not meeting your expectations for what a music video is.

After all, the bare minimum for a music video is a loose narrative mixed with shots of the band playing their instruments. Preferably in a non-descript location and if at all possible, without amplifiers. But, the longer it goes on just when you think your worst fears are confirmed something happens. You realize your worst fears are confirmed and that that is all it's going to be. But, at the same time it's not. The video makes you realize and confront your own expectations for what a music video should be. And in that realization you become aware not only of your expectations but also of the systems that have been put in place that have created that expectation. A music video subverting your expectations for it, moves beyond a simple pun and illuminates a system of standards that have been put in place around you and opens them up for inquiry. And that moment of realization is incredibly beautiful.