

Jason Pierce in Conversation with Lenny Kaye: The Unedited Conversation

JASON: Did you ever feel like, 'How the fuck did I arrive here'?

LENNY: Oh, all the time. Especially for one as untrained as I am as a musician. I always loved rock and roll - played in bands as a kid and everything. But to still be doing what we do 50 years later – and for something as off the beaten path as Patti...? She and I never thought we would have a rock and roll band when we started, in fact we didn't know what we were doing, we just had something that created a fascination in those who came to see us, even though they didn't quite know why... And us - we're figuring it out too. How to take this poetics, and kind of rudimentary rhythms, and make it... *something*, you know, whatever that something is. And we never tried to steer it. I think that's really the success of whatever it is we've done, you know, since our first reading in Feb of 1971, a half century ago.

JASON: Wow, was it that early?

LENNY: Yeah. and then we didn't do anything for another two and a half years. It was not really meant to be a band. Even when we kind of restarted, played once a month at these kind of poetry things we did, we didn't really have a direction. But by the time we added JD as our drummer in '75, we had a band that sounded like us. And that really is important.

And of course, Patti is one of the world's great, great charismatic performers, totally in the moment. I like to say that I've stood stage left with her for all these years and I've never, ever seen her sing a false note, you know, or go on cruise control. She engages with the audience, she has something to say, and she wants to say it. And she wants to empower and illuminate our shows. She speaks directly to the people there. She gauges the audience; she works with them. We all want to get to the same place, which is this kind of ecstasy. She's just very powerful and all I try to do is get to the door and open it before she hurtles through, and it's a great thing.

We've been together a long time. We've just played in Amsterdam, her singing and me playing acoustic guitar. And she's every bit as *there* as when we have the full band. So, it's a great thing to watch, and to grow old with it. It's been a long haul. Several tangents and roundabouts but we're still here. I would've learned to read music if I'd known I'd still be playing it a half century later!

JASON: - But do you think you would? Because you talk in the book about that kind of, rock and roll essential spirit - almost - you don't say ineptitude but I think rock and roll should be kind of inept and slightly stupid –

LENNY: - I kind of like overreaching though, especially when the overreach doesn't quite make it, so you kind of topple into a whole new area. I think music can seem very simplistic, but it's often deceptive. It's not as simple as it looks. There's always new tricks and ways to play it. I mean, The Ramones are always held up as a simplistic band, and yet, if you play 'Beat on the Brat' or 'Rockaway Beach', there's so many weird twists and turns - emphases here then all of a sudden it goes there. It's a skill to be able to make the complex look simple.

I know with the bands on the Nuggets compilation, the Garage bands - three chords and you're off. But when you play those songs, as I have in various guises over the years – you see that unexpected things are happening. They're not just dumbed down. I like to think of myself as a smart guy, but on the other hand I think of our piano player Richard Sohl when he was alive. When he first came to audition for us - 'what do you want, Rachmaninoff? Okay' \*Lenny mimes some expert piano playing\*, 'Tchaikovsky, okay, okay!', you know? But when we play something like 'Land' or 'Gloria', he knew that he didn't have to show off what he knew. He just sat there, pounded out the chords hypnotically. And that's a real talent. I don't like when things are showy for the sake of being showy although I do like when the note that you play suits the moment of emotion you're trying to reach. Sometimes that's fewer notes. I can remember some guitar solos I've played, showing off, ready to make a mistake within seconds. But the two or three that I really remember are when they just come on you and you get at one with the music. And you play something so simple and yet, it communicates. It's hard to say whether that's complexity or simplicity. It's all called for.

When I see Jeff Beck I want to see him play all those notes that I know he knows how to play. And yet, and I know he's going to do something and grab the sway bar and \*Lenny creates a very spot-on sway bar noise\*. Music should serve the needs of the song, as the song should serve the needs of the music.

JASON: I like that you say something in the book - you add an 'and roll', like rock... and roll. And I'm fascinated with the idea of 'rock and roll' and I don't really know what it is. Do you have an idea of what makes something rock and roll, and not rock?

LENNY: Well you know, it's like... I think of the words rock and roll as almost like taking on a married name. Rock is tough but 'Roollll...' - it softens it and gives it a swing. And so, it's very descriptive of the music.

For a long time in rock's glorious adolescence in the 60s, I knew a disc jockey who used the word rock-and-roll on the air of a progressive rock station, and they called him on it: 'it's only ROCK played here'.

Now I guess rock's kind of come back into vogue, but I believe you need both the rock and the roll. And to me, they just seem like mates, basically. You don't want anything too formalistic. So roll kind of softens it a little bit. So the term is so all embracing. It's like any genre description. I always think of the word 'bebop', sort of describes the music

Or ‘jaaazzz...’ Dixieland, you know, ‘hip hop. They’re very descriptive terms for amorphous musical genres. They seem to describe where the music fits in the great spectrum. But for me, I like it when the borders blur. I’m not really a traditionalist. I like it when things mongrelize. Like rock and roll itself at the beginning. I like when you can’t tell what’s going to happen next - when you can’t predict it.

One of the themes of the book is how these amorphous scenes grow together, and slowly develop their components of style. They become more defined. And in my mind, definitions define limit, as Mayo of the Red Crayola once famously said. When things get like that, they figure themselves out. Punk Rock, when it figures itself out, became kind of an accelerated speedway, but you knew what it was gonna sound like. In the early years at CBGBs, each band had what would be known as kind of a punk sensibility. But in the end, they’re all different ideas. Blondie so different than the Ramones, so different than Talking Heads, so different than Television, so different than us, just to name the top shelf of what came out of there. Were we punk? Was Blondie punk? When it got to England, it got a very definitive musical style. You couldn’t really vary from it without getting a lot of critical approbation. I like things pretty blurry. If you say that something is something, then you know what it’s going to sound like. It’s predictable. I’m always into the initial shock and surprise of something that I’ve never heard before, and that really has yet defined what it is. It’s like a band, a lot of bands – with their first album they’re figuring themselves out, by the third album they’ve defined themselves. So, I would look to the second album, where they’re just like ‘what the hell are we doing?!’

JASON: You can almost hear bands finding their ideas between their first and second, you can almost hear them learning as they go, and quite often when they get to 3 and 4 they’re kind of just playing through the motions... they’ve learnt the thing that they know how to do, and it’s harder to find a way out. But I like what you say about rock and roll. Because maybe I got too obsessed, or do get too obsessed with trying to say ‘this is rock and roll’ or ‘this isn’t’, and I found myself in the Norwegian bit of your book, thinking ‘this isn’t rock and roll’ and even where they’re quite literally burning down the churches and killing each other, it still wasn’t rock and roll enough for me.

LENNY: We contain multitudes, and you’re dealing with 50 years of styles mutating. And yeah, when you get towards the end of the book, the black metal, it’s like burning down the house, it’s like starting again. And you know, it’s interesting to see how these things interplay as rock and roll gets on. Just because it needs to keep on renewing itself it seems to get more crazy. But maybe it’s always been crazy. I just like this sense of evolution that I found looking into these ten music scenes. And there could’ve been others, a lot of cities have great moments in time. I would have loved to have done a chapter on Kingston, except it probably would have been a book. I don’t have time for that! But, looking back, it’s like the Jurassic age, and the Pleistocene and stuff, you can see that things are happening on an evolutionary scale. Maybe

we're living in the Black Metal times where we're burning down the Church of Earth, and you know, what's going to come next...?

I like when music develops. And at this point, and I'm not sure it's what some people want to hear, I believe that rock has done its lifespan. That doesn't mean that people will stop playing rock, but there'll be great interpreters of the tradition. In the same way there are great blues guitarists cropping up, or there's a great person who can play Bebop jazz great, but the development, the evolution has kind of figured itself out.

So now it's time for a new music to take its place in the 21st Century. Because there's so many different varieties of music. But I'm curious. This book is a rock book, but before that I ranged into the world of the romantic singers of the 1930s. A true obsessive sidebar of my life. So, I could see how music got to rock. And sometimes I range further back. You've got to look for a key to understand the music. It's not as demarcated as even the book would have it. There's a lot of blurry things going on at the same time.

I think of New York. where you have CBGBs up in the Bronx, Kool Herc is inventing Hip Hop, in the Barrios, Fania Records is redefining Salsa. You have all these integrated scenes and sometimes they come together, sometimes they're insular, sometimes they combine. With the metal chapter it was interesting to see when metal blended with hip hop. People like Linkin Park. You can demarcate lines around any of them that you may or may not like but the fact is it's like going to a festival. You know, there's a tent for this one and a tent for this one, but I sometimes like to stand in the middle of these tents and hear what it all sounds like together. And realise that if you take this from that one, and that from this one, you can have something that sounds fresh and new.

JASON: Do you think there's a cultural difference? You said earlier that Rock and Roll is essentially an American thing, but in a way, it was America that fed back from the English bands...

LENNY: Well, I think the route bounded over to England, from its American start and then headed back again. As a kid growing up in Brooklyn, I never heard Muddy Waters. Might've seen his name somewhere, but first time I really heard a Muddy Waters song was when it came out of the Rolling Stones. And then - 'ooh, what is this 'Chicago Blues'?' I found out about it that way.

Country music too - I'm growing up in New York City. Maybe I'd heard a Hank Williams song, but all of a sudden, I realise there's a world there, thanks to great record stores, and the web-o-net, and all that. You can immerse yourself in a way. It's such a cornucopia of music, and this is only talking mainly about English-speaking music. And you get to Africa, and Asia... the human impulse to make music I find so fascinating.

JASON: And also, with just what's available, like, snare drums left over from the war. They were essentially military instruments that they had no use for anymore.

LENNY: Right? New Orleans, they had all those trumpets from the Spanish-American war, you know 'what are we going to do with them?' and then they combined them with African American rhythms and Spanish rhythms, and all of a sudden we have a particular music growing there. I believe a case could be made for New Orleans being the real birthplace of Rock and Roll.

JASON: When I was reading the first chapter, initially I was thinking 'oh no, not the Elvis story again', but it was delivered really beautifully – almost like there was an ADT or slap-back echo on the script and it really put me there. And also, I agree with what you say about the internet. It was the first time I've read a book where everything was available to be heard at the same time.

I'd never heard the Beatles Demos. I'd always heard the story that the guy who turned them down was a fool to have turned them down. When listening to that story, you understand it in hindsight, having heard 'Rubber Soul' and 'Come Together' and 'Get Back' and all those kinds of things. But the actual demos themselves are quite... pedestrian seems the wrong word to describe the Beatles, but they're not stunning. They're not as extraordinary as the Jerry Lee Lewis thing that you turned me onto – where he sings the Lefty Frizzell song, 'Please Don't Stay Away So Long. I mean, he's a *child* but you can hear Jerry Lee Lewis inside that voice! It was amazing to be able to play through.

I thought your connections to New Orleans and Ska were really strange, because it's not just a kind of fiction or an idea. You can play those records, 'Stack-A- Lee' by Archibald for example, or 'The Monkey Speaks His Mind' by David Bartholomew – and many others from that time and place and they are literally Ska music!

LENNY: And you know they were listening to the radio, and that's how it happened. Musical communication in the folk world, they call it oral transmission. You have a folk song that's come over from England on the boat, and ended up in Appalachia, where the descendants of the earlier people from England have settled. And then the songs change because it's an oral tradition. Somebody sings a line, and somebody mishears it, and pretty soon there's an indigenous music.

Now everything is so easily available - I think it's probably great because you're going to get some really wild-card blendings. But I like the fact that sometimes music develops without being able to be accessed. Like the San Francisco bands when I was a kid, they were just hearsay to me. I thought 'I'm an aspiring hippie but I'm too young to go to San Francisco'. So, I just had my Fillmore poster on the wall. I'd never heard the Quicksilver Messenger Service, I'd never heard the Grateful Dead, I'd heard one Jefferson Airplane record, and it's so early that they're still kind of a folk-rock band. I would have wanted to hear the other bands but couldn't. But this

scene in San Francisco, for that year and a half at least, was kind of insular. The bands were interacting with each other, and the music was taking on its own personality.

I think the same thing is true for the CBGBs bands, because when everybody started playing there, say in 1974, you know, there might be 25 people in the audience, most of whom were in the other bands. I mean, everybody hoped, of course, to 'make it' - but really the opportunities presented in this bar in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by flophouses and people lying on the street, was that the music had a lot of time to develop.

With Patti, we played there, with Television, in the spring of '75, for like seven weeks. Every night we were just able to go there and play and begin to understand what it was we were doing. And at the end of the seven weeks, we had a better idea. Not that we knew where it was going or that we were going to be learning again over the next few years.

But I like when things are clustered. I love that phrase of Brian Eno's - 'scenius' - it's not just the bands, it's the people there, it's the mood, it's the culture', it's an ecology of ideas that over a course of time, harden into... harden into... *something*. Whatever that thing is. And after that, then it becomes known and figured out and easily transmissible. And after it *really* gets figured out, and becomes a cliché or a stereotype, then it's time for something new. Usually, it's kind of a reaction. You know. Hair Metal, to Grunge. Progressive Rock to the bare bones of Punk. Punk getting into its own dead-end, and then New Wave coming. 'Ooh, synthesizers, they're so exciting!', and whole new styles of dressing. Things just move forward.

And regardless of how much I celebrate the music of the past, I'm into forward movement. People always come up to me at record fairs, (in which I spend an inordinate amount of time) and say man 'listen to this Garage Rock record'. And I listen to it and say (*underwhelmed*)\*'Yeah, that's a great Garage Rock record.' No, I don't say it like that, I say (*enthusiastically*) 'Yeah, it's a great record!!' But I'm not looking for 'the great garage rock record'. I'm looking for 'the great record'. In every genre, you can find 25 examples that blow your mind, that surpass their genre. And that's the kind of thing I like to look for.

I recently bought 4 crates of dance 12-inches from around the year 2000. Stuff outta Berlin, really cheap. I carted them home, because I knew that I would go through them, and this would be identikit techno, or this would be this or that, or might be good for a late night techno disco. But I was looking for those records where I'd just think, 'yeah'. You know, 'that is an awesome hook', or 'that is a crazy person with that vocal'. Over the course of a couple months, I kind of weeded through it, and had maybe a stack of 30. Should I ever get the chance to really shake people's imaginations up and wonder who the heck I am, I'll go take them to a local club and spin my whacky disco set.

But I love Reggae, and I especially love 70s reggae, and what I would do in the 70s is I'd go out to Brooklyn, and I'd go to the West Indian neighborhood and I'd go to a record store and the guy would play for me all the records. And most of them sounded the same. But the ones that didn't sound the same, that had the beautiful melody or the very strange sound of some Rastafarian going *\*wewoeoweowow\** with the dials - those are the ones I got.

JASON: They still sound extraordinary, don't they? There was a Studio One Outlet in Brooklyn. Those records, even when they're badly pressed or there's hiss or there's crackle -

LENNY: I love hiss and crackle!

JASON: The song still cuts through. It's untouched by the noise.

LENNY: I don't have many 78s because they're too heavy, they break and my 78 player is horrendous, But I put 'em on and I like to hear crackle. Because that to me is part of the sound of records. In 80s glam metal, those drums that sound like they were recorded in the bottom of a cave (*Lenny makes drum sound*), you know, what the drums are playing, that's as much as the guitar tones. I mean. God, you know. I can almost tell by listening to the quality of the fuzz tone that the player uses, what era it's from – like, that's a 60s fuzz tone, that's full of Norwegian metal. Records are little worlds, and the fact that we have records... which we've only had for less than 150 years, maybe. And the earliest rock and roll reference that I could find was in a 1910 cylinder that some guy transcribed for me on a CD - another storage medium. It's by the original male quartet, whatever that is, and uses the words 'rock and roll'.

JASON: Seriously? Before the 1950's in Cleveland and Leo Mintz?

LENNY: Oh yeah. Way before. I think, in my lunacy, I documented some of the earlier ones, there's a male quartet at the Camp Meeting Jubilee, 1910, *Rock and Roll Me in Your Arms*'.

JASON: Is it acapella?

LENNY: Yeah. some guy I met said 'have you ever heard this?' But I don't have a cylinder player - I'm not going that far!

JASON: Have you read *Perfect Sound Forever* by Greg Milner? That talks a lot about cylinders. And how, when they first invented the phonograph, they would have concerts with the 78 playing, and the female voice singing simultaneously. The promoters would go 'this is the band, and this is the gramophone!' And they'd switch between the two. The audience couldn't tell the difference between the real voice and the recording. But, in fact, the singer was having to adjust her voice to capture the exact tone of the cylinder, rather than the reverse. It was a fakery right from the start!

LENNY: Records are fake, records are an illusion. I remember once the group *James*, who I did a record with in the 80s. When they first called me up, they said they wanted to play live in the studio and choose the best track. I said 'well, not exactly sure why you need me there - you know what you sound like!' I believe that playing live in the studio is not the same as playing live

to a throng of people giving you energy. When you're playing at 120 decibels an hour in a sweaty club. You put that in a studio, you can play live as long as you want, but it's not live. A record is an illusion of being live.

Sometimes it'd be nice to just go in there and cut a record and leave three hours later having done it. Being a writer is not as much of a performance as making a record. As a writer I can write a sentence, sit back, smoke a joint, think 'oh, I could use a better word there, maybe this sentence should go here', and you know, move it around, ad infinitum. (Or until I think 'What am I, crazy?! What am I trying to say here?!') But you can do that in the studio now. Pro tools - it's a whole different way of working.

I remember in the early 90s I had to splice a piano part together. So, the engineer says 'just come back in three hours'. Whereas now... *\*Lenny mimes some speedy and efficient cutting and editing\** - 'you want it backwards?' 'You want it this way?'. You lose stuff, you gain stuff. Like most musicians, my sound system is kind of rogue. There's a lot of discussion about digital vs analogue I always make the joke, 'Well, to me, ever since the cylinder, it's been downhill' But then I found out that's it's true. Because, on a flat disk, when you get closer to the inner groove, the fidelity goes. But a cylinder has the same thing all the way through. Of course it's ... *\*Lenny makes a crackly, warbly, cylinder noise\**

JASON: There's a Rudy Van Gelder thing where he says if you don't like the sound in digital, blame the engineer, blame the mastering house but don't blame the medium. There's nothing wrong with the medium – it's just a way of storing information.

LENNY: Oh yeah. It's a funny thing, when the band is out there playing, everything sounds like crap, and everyone's pissed off at each other – until, all of a sudden the band hits that moment - the sound magically gets better. I love great engineers, and I want my guitar to sound as beautiful as I imagine it, (because it doesn't often sound like that coming out of the amp!) But really, if the passion is there, that's what you need – like these old Delta Blues records. They were just recorded in a studio, the guy there just banging away, but you can feel the passion.

JASON: That's something that cuts through the noise as well. And in fact, when they take the noise off those records, they lose some of their beauty, in a way. It's almost like they're competing with this, kind of hiss...

LENNY: It removes them from their time.

J: Do you still buy guitars?

LENNY: I try not to! No, I've actually been thinning the herd, as we like to say. It must have been about 6 months ago, I walked into the place where I get my amps and guitars repaired. And there was a really nice little Guild acoustic hanging there, and I took it down, and was



playing it, and I thought 'this is a really friendly guitar.' I'd like to put this guitar on my couch, and then when I walk by, I can tickle it. And so I bought it. It wasn't expensive. But I came home, and I thought 'What are you *doing*?!' but I still like it. These days I have at least one of every food group, but I don't play them all. And really, live, if you saw me at Royal Albert, I only play one guitar, with my one pick up strap. No fuss, no muss.

JASON: Did you take the other pickups out, just because you didn't play them?

LENNY: Yeah. it was a Banjo, you know. And one day I came in and this guitar tech we had working for us said 'look what I did!' and took them all out. I don't even have a tone knob! It's just a volume knob all the way up and that's the way I play. Point and shoot. But sometimes, I just miss looking at them... I'd like to have the choice! But I'm not that detailed a player. I like to hit the chord. I've got the boxes I use, not even that fancy. Nowadays you can get boxes that do anything. Just got your little distortion push, a tuner of course - thank god they were invented! I just remember that, in the early years of Patti, I'd be there plinking away, I'd *never* be in tune. I'd always secretly think, 'If only I could be in tune, I'd be a better guitar player!'. And then they invented tuners. One of the great inventions of the 20th century. You know, chorus, reverb, and a wacky pedal in case you wanna put the Boss Vibrato-2 on there, or a pedal that you'd never use except if you wanna drive yourself crazy. You play what you know. I mean, I'm not a technical player. I'm certainly not a virtuoso, but what I play... fits Patti. For whatever reason. Our sense of rhythm together, I really recognise that.

JASON: You can hear it on the St Marks recording. I played that recently, because I knew I was coming here. You hear it. I know with a little hindsight, you piece these little things together. But in fact, you can hear it immediately. It's like you're trading off of each other.

LENNY: I always like to say that I breathe with her. And we just did this little thing in Amsterdam. The weekend before she said 'I have this poetry thing, this spoken word thing near Woodstock. Would you drive me?' (Hahaha. Because I'm mostly designated driver too. ) And she said maybe we can do a couple songs. And I put my guitar, my acoustic in the back seat, and we went there. You know, she would read from one of her books, then we'd illustrate it with a song. Pretty much the way we did back then. You know, she would read a poem, and then we'd choose a song to follow it. And she'd improvise on it, and we'd kinda come back to the next thing.

We hadn't done it in a while, and then here we were, in a theatre, 1800 people, and I'm thinking 'where's the band?! I need the band!' but actually, we were able to do things dynamically, loud/soft. And it was just really nice, you know. There's a lot of room to breathe when the number of musicians gets less... I always think, in a weird way, we were at our purest when it was Patti, myself and Richard Sohl. If she was telling a story, we start to slow things down, and then Richard does some kind of riposte, and takes her off into another place, and we

could bring it up and get the volume up. And her voice would rise, and we'd be following her and she'd be following us. It was a really easy way to communicate. And we added Ivan, and JD as our drummer. Now we're able to do other things, but we're also somewhat limited. In the way that when you're anchored to a beat you can't suddenly start slowing down unless the band is in really the same headspace. Which does happen. But usually things become a little more straightforward. And I like them a little straight-backwards myself.

JASON: Were you aware of the stuff going on in Cleveland? Rocket from the Tombs, and...

LENNY: No. I mean that came later. I didn't actually know Rocket from the Tombs that well. But when we started, we were pre - all that anyway. What I knew from Cleveland was The Raspberries, who were a really great group as a matter of fact. Mine and Patti's influences are shared. We both loved free jazz, John Coltrane. We both loved Motown, we both loved doo-wop, we both loved Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones. Pretty acceptable stuff. I lean maybe a little bit more to the San Francisco Bands, you know, that open-ended improvisation of the Grateful Dead.

She probably also accessed female torch singers like Chris Connor, and Bessie Smith, you know... and Richard could play anything, which was amazing. We all brought a lot of stuff, and we wanted to have a band that represented that. I remember there's a 60s album by a group called the Red Crayola, on the same label as 13th Floor Elevators. On the back of the record, the leader singer has a quote - 'definitions define limit'. And so, we didn't want to be defined, because all of a sudden you can't do things. That's what happens when punk gets defined. You can't suddenly do a soft song.

We wanted the adventurism and the range to do anything. To do a very soft acoustic song, and then have a field of exploratory dissonance like Radio Ethiopia. And I believe that's been a secret to our longevity. We can shapeshift at will. You see Patti live, the set has an arc to it, but on the other hand you don't know what's going to happen next. I don't know what's going to happen next. To have that expansive sound, to not be trapped by your genre. I wouldn't want us to be part of the 'punk rock of the 1970s packet show'. We felt an affinity with all those groups, but we weren't following their 'no more Beatles, Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd'. We wanted and celebrated all those groups, but we also wanted to move the calendar forward. I think of us as a bridge. And now we've bridged out into who knows where. But no matter how different styles change, (and there's a remarkable amount of styles changing in this book) the concerns of song remain the same: 'I want you to love me', 'Do you love me?', 'I love you', 'I'm hungry', 'I need a secure place to be in the world', 'So who am I?' (that's always a good one.) And song itself stays the same. It's like clothes you put on. This year's style is bell-bottoms, or who knows what. I have the same style I've always had, that's why I don't look at pictures of myself and go 'what are those bondage trousers?!'

JASON: I love Patti's idea – that music can be bigger and better than religion. It makes you feel..

I found the Velvet Angels through your book. They just astonished me. Again, like one of those Blues recordings. They really are the records of the moment and time and place, It feels like, if it were for just one accidental thing, they wouldn't be there. But why doo-wop for you? Is it especially the city of Detroit you adore?

LENNY: It was the music of the streets when I grew up. I grew up in Brooklyn, I would see the big kids on the corner going, 'give me an A' (I used to have a falsetto myself... it's gone now.) I really wanted to be that kid in those bands. They would cluster in subways, in bathrooms at high school. It was the music of then. I love that music - the human voice. The songs were so beautiful, romantic, heartfelt. I still, when I hear a great doo-wop song, it just thrills me. There's a certain innocence to it.

I prefer to use the phrase, 'group harmony' instead of doo-wop, which can be a very white, Italian version. There were groups, called doo-wop, who were just mostly black harmony groups. And after that, folk music was happening. Then, I wanted to be that lonely folk singer in the backyard. As soon as I'd learnt my first chords, that's when I saw the Beatles, when the English invasion swamped America. And I'm in the sweet spot of adolescence, just 17, 'you know what I mean'...So I really learnt my trade at school, which was very unexpected.

JASON: Do you remember what else influenced you around that time?

LENNY: We wanted to be the first on campus to do a song right off the radio, so we did The Kinks *You Really Got Me*. There was a real feeling of joy when, at least 50 years later, I was playing a Tibet House benefit concert at Carnegie Hall, and Ray Davies was one of the guest musicians. I got to take the solo on *You Really Got Me*. I just thought man, that is a really nice circle. I really like that.

It's interesting when these moments in time happen and render everything before that obsolete. I'm sure when Elvis ascended, I'm sure there was a whole generation of singers and players and style of music which suddenly seemed yesterday's news. I mean, even Les Paul was washed away in the flood. Vic Damone, Patti Page with 'How much is that Doggy in the Window' – a whole style of music was suddenly rendered obsolete. In the same way that when Grunge came in - all of a sudden the LA Metal Bands were yesterday's news. Every once in a while, there's an upheaval like that. I try to catch that moment when things change. Nothing happens just in these cities, obviously there's a world mood going on. But these sea changes, when suddenly things get switched, I really find fascinating. At this point we're standing a little bit outside the lifeline of rock and roll. In the book, I could actually step back and view the continuum of what the music was, and will always be. It's a great music, and endlessly fascinating once you get deeply within it. I still find records and artists that I've never heard of before. I spent a long time this week in the catalogue of Arctic Records, which was a soul label out of Philadelphia. And yeah, great stuff. I'd never heard of any of it. The Volcanoes. Who are the Volcanoes?!

JASON: With every genre, you keep finding new records. You get a lot of Gospel Music, because gospel was in every Church in America, and every church had someone making a 7-inch recording of whatever was being played and sung. These recordings were sold to the local people, or to the congregation. And they turn up all the time. And northern soul in the UK (which I guess is just called soul in America,) and there seem to just be endless amounts of little known northern soul recordings.

LENNY: The same with Nuggets. I said at the end of it that this is the start of an archeological dig, little did I realise how many garage records were out there. I kind of skimmed the top surface of recordings, many of which were really well-known in America. You know, I got the underside of the top-40. But I realised when the album got to England, no one had ever heard of the 13th Floor Elevators. So the revelation of this music was almost more astonishing.

I just had a new genre revealed to me couple of years ago. I bought this album called 'Brown Acid - Songs from the American Comedown 1969-1972', bands that sounded like Grand Funk Railroad, you know, little bit of Deep Purple and Black Sabbath, and there were some American bands like Dust and Sir Lord Baltimore. Kind of pre-metal heavy bands. I thought 'Brown Acid', now there's a category for a little bin in the record store. It's all out there. And again, we're talking about a music that took over the second half of the 20th century. I know now, since 60,000 songs are uploaded a day to Spotify - there's a lot of stuff out there. And there's gonna be a lot of very, very strange genres happening now.

JASON: Because everything's available. I think you touched on it earlier, that it's just all out there and it's all at the press of a button. I can play the songs that you're writing about, immediately, even as I'm reading it. And that's a rare thing. It made me want to go back to Nick Tosches's book Country and just go through that with the ability to hear the songs. I remember reading various books, like Stanley Booth's Rhythm Oil, and thinking, 'Wow, where are these records? How do I find them?'

LENNY: And sometimes you had to go and really, really look for them. And actually, I like the thrill of the hunt. My idea of a day off when I'm on the road is getting away from the band... escaping... I don't tell anybody where I am. And I find a record store and sit there, hang out or bring back a few weird things, see what serendipity occurs. But it's all out there. The other day, an Algerian singer passed away. And I really love Arabic music, so I turned to the internet - and was confronted with tons of stuff.

JASON: I was talking about that yesterday, you can put in a random search for, not even a recognised genre, just kind of like 'bed time', or...

LENNY: 'chill'!

JASON: Yeah, anything that's even just an adjective, or whatever. And you end up with this whole list of music...

LENNY: That somebody knows a lot about! Look at all the comments - 'no no no, this is not as good as this track!' but it's all there. And sometimes I think it's too much. I have a wall of records, and what do I do when I'm home? Put the radio on.

JASON: I was thinking that about the collection of records I have. I tried one time to just start at one end and finish at the other end. And it's quite extraordinary, because you relate to each record as a moment in time but it's hard to do...

LENNY: I won't live that long! I think 'well, wouldn't it be nice to cull it down to my 500 favourite albums'. I'm not sure I'm ready to do that, especially since I bought two more records while I was over here... It's great that it's there and I believe that the internet is going to change the way we absorb music. Now a scene doesn't have a chance to develop. Do you even need geography? If I could've gone on the internet in 1967 and seen footage of the Grateful Dead at Fillmore...

JASON: Did you make it to San Francisco? I know you were travelling there but...

LENNY: Oh we made it. My mind was fully blown.

I will always remember that moment, walking from where we were staying on Oak St, down a block, up two blocks, and then onto Haight street and it was like walking into a carnival. It was everything I'd hoped. And of course, with everyone else who had come there for the same reasons I had, it was kind of a carnival.

I always think of that as the great amorphous scene that congealed into a sound. In the same way that I'm stood outside CBGB's probably somewhere at the end of '74 or in '75, when it started bubbling a little bit into the British Press, and thinking, hmm.. I don't want to say this to myself, because I don't want to become self-conscious, but this kind of reminds me of the bands that gathered in San Francisco... this is an actual *scene*. And that's what started me thinking of this whole concept of *scenius*. This ecology where you have these things happening.

You know, Seattle is another good example of groups kind of adopting and influencing each other and coming up with a performance style that seem to have similarities. (But when you get into the music, it's actually not that similar) Like everybody, I knew a lot about Nirvana. I think in the book I actually describe when I got their demo tape from Arista records and thought 'they're great.... But they don't need finessing! Don't fuck 'em up!' But Clive never did.

Up till then, I never really had listened hard to Soundgarden, or even Alice in Chains. It's not pretty music. It's very dark, as Seattle was. But getting deeper into the innards of their recorded works, I was floored. Alice in Chains is just an amazing, amazing band. SoundGarden -

Chris Cornell's voice, Kim Thayil's guitar, and Matt Cameron as a drummer, he drums for Pearl Jam now, he's fantastic. What a great band. And of course Pearl Jam are just beautiful standard-bearers for rock as a positive force.

But you go through the book and there's all that. And even the Black Metal chapter, you listen to Mayhem's album 'Under the Freezing Moon', it's a great song, and on the Ace double CD that me and Alec Pelayo put together. I'm happy the little Norwegian section starts with Mayhem and ends with the Japanese group BABYMETAL doing 'Gimme Chocolate!!'

JASON: So, the Ace CD is a kind of accompaniment to the book?

LENNY: Yeah, they suggested it. 'Lenny Kaye Presents Lightning Striking' Alec is a big fan of Nuggets so he was excited to work with me, and I was excited to work with him because he knows how to get weirder tracks. And because we couldn't get some of the Big Guns like the Beatles or Nirvana or Mötley Crüe, I was able to put in weirder tracks. They sent me reference master CDs and every time a new song came up I just thought 'wow, that's great', and then, four songs later you're in a whole different universe again.

I have to say all praise to Lee Brackstone at White Rabbit books, because he's a fount of ideas and encouragement, and he's the one who suggested to Ace that they do a double CD soundtrack. He's a true believer and I can give further full praise to White Rabbit for putting out some great books. It is music-driven, pretty much. But he believes, and that's what you want from people who have the power to put out books.

I was treated so amazingly well by Jac Holzman, when he hired me without really knowing anything about me. Nuggets wasn't an album that he initially conceived – he just handed me an idea about those albums that have only one cool track and get some of those cool tracks together. And I just spun it my way. And the more I spun it, the more he went along with it.

JASON: And how many has it sold? Do you have any idea?

LENNY: I have no idea. It seems to have sold enough to buy me beers all over the world. I don't really know. In the early 80s, when I was getting royalty statements from Warner Bros, they sent me a note saying you're never going to make back your advance, so we're going to stop sending you royalty statements. And then it just keeps on living, you know. Rhino did the box set in the end of the 90s, and it just keeps getting out there. It's become a touchstone but thank God I didn't realise we would still be talking about it 50 years from then, because I would've taken it much too seriously, I wouldn't have put some of the wackier cuts on there. I would've fucked it up. So, I'm just glad it exists. It's a true example of instinct at work. Some of those songs were what, four or five years old at that point? It's like doing a compilation album of songs from 2016.

JASON: It's not long after the event, is it?

LENNY: It's so close to the event, but even then, you could tell that an era, a certain moment in time, had transmuted. Because by then it was a lot of progressive rock, with long and aimless improvisations, (something I've been guilty of many a times - but they're fun!) Of course, rock was changing almost minute by minute in those years. The difference between 1963 and 1967 – those years were rock's grand adolescence, when all of a sudden everything started shimmering.

It was my reaction to the kind of weightiness of Art Rock, and being in an Art Rock band I can't say I'm entirely un-guilty, but it was like let's get back to these two/three minute punch-you-in-the-solar-plexus songs that are full of weird things happening. In terms of definition, you listen to the original Nuggets and those songs are all over the place. Maybe now from this perspective, they have a certain consistency of sound, but the difference between *My World Fell Down* by Sagittarius and The Seeds *Pushing Too Hard* is like two completely different musics. You know, *Farmer John* by the Premiers, *No Time like the Right Time* by The Blues Project, all the ones that made it.

JASON: Nuggets changed our lives. We were in small-town Rugby, introduced to The Electric Prunes, the Seeds, and The Elevators... in one double album, in one single package! It just changed our whole musical world.

LENNY: I never thought the record would come out, personally. It's a miracle it did. So, I just kept asking for the moon - 'I don't like that cover'. I was so full of myself. But I don't know, it really captured a moment in time. I take some credit for figuring it out but I was just going on instinct and the unconscious. I didn't have the long view. I didn't try to make it complete or anything - these songs all seemed to fit together. I was just lucky to be there first. And that Elektra was so open-minded. Just... 'You want a double album? Okay. yeah sure'.

I've got to hand it to Jac Holzman, who really allowed it to happen. Same thing with Hilly Kristal who owned CBGB, I don't think Rock and Roll was his favourite music. He liked Country, Bluegrass and Blues. He liked a good fiddler's convention. But when it happened, he allowed it to happen. He just said, 'You can play here, but you have to play original music.' and the original music became the hallmark of CBGB, which is a remarkable achievement in the dog-eat-club world of night spots.

I went out last night actually, I was in Soho, and since I kinda like pre-Beatles British rock – you know, the Johnny Gentles and the Marty Wildes and the Vince Eagers, Adam Faith, I took a walk to where the Two Eyes club used to be on Old Compton Street. Took my picture in front of it, which was exciting, probably will be an Instagram post one of these days... but I just thought, 'Here is where something happened'. In the same way that when we play the Fillmore I get to stand in the spot where John Cipollina stood. I like these holy sites.

JASON: Have you played the Apollo?

LENNY: We have.

JASON: There's a weird thing on the way up to the stage, a handrail made from the tree that used to grow on the site, where it's worn smooth, like a religious icon, people's thumbs grabbing the rail...

LENNY: And of course, tiny, tiny dressing rooms. You can just imagine 'Sonny Til and the Orioles in this one', 'Billy Ward and the Dominoes in this one', 'oh, here's Clyde McPhatter'. It's a great place. And you got to treasure these places, because they might not be there forever. I love playing the Paradiso in Amsterdam and there's a place in Vienna called the Arena, which we've played many a time. And to play Royal Albert Hall, I mean, *come on..!* I was so disappointed in 2020, we were supposed to play there but then of course nobody played anywhere. And i thought well, i've gotten to play some great places, but maybe if that doesn't happen, too bad. But it did happen and that's great. These are great places, but the kinds i really like are when I'm downtown in the East Village, and my buddy's having some show in an upstairs bar, and I go there and there's an extra guitar there, which I get to bang on and holler, and I don't have to worry about the business of making music, I like to play and I can just sing for pleasure. And doing so, every once in a while, you can enter into the present tense of that moment, which is so beautiful. Music exists in the present. I know I say that in the book, but it's hard to overemphasize - when you're playing, and somebody is listening, you're in the moment. Normally, It's very hard to be in the moment. Usually you're thinking 'I did this, or I didn't do this, dabadoo, dabada', but when you're playing music, and you're *there*, you're concentrating. You're in the moment in the same way as when you're listening to music and it has a movement to it. Painting, yeah, you can stare at it. Or even a book. But a painting - it's not movement. There's a certain kinetic movement to music, that when you're listening to it you're absorbed and following its lifeline. And because, in many ways, it's not as literal as film, you're dealing with musical tones, frequencies.

JASON: In fact, the tone that you hear is exactly the same resonant frequency in your brain. So your brain resonates with it. It's quite amazing that the connection is *that* literal. And I'd like to read your book again, but maybe I'll only return to it once, twice, I don't think I've read a book more than twice. But music - we return time and time again. Even when we know the information that we're going to get, we come back again and again. And the human brain has got this odd way - it forgets so much stuff but it can almost remember, almost fully intact, the details of a song. It's not just the hook, you can remember the bassline, the way the drums enter, the backing singers' voices, everything about it.



LENNY: If I'm learning a new song nowadays, I usually have to have a cheat sheet, or go garble, garble, garble. But I'm amazed that when I listen to music from my youth. I remember the inflection, every word.

JASON: Even the gaps between the tracks, you know, I know exactly when the next one's going to come in.

LENNY: It gets inside you. I don't know how. I think it's the most mysterious of forms. And it's not even confined to Western music. I can hear music from Africa, or Japan where it translates. You can feel the emotion behind it even if you don't know what the lyrics are, even if you aren't really familiar with the scales and the chords and the style, you can hear the certain way that it touches you. I find that mystical and magical and very mysterious. I mean it amazes me that I can sit here so many years after I started as a young'un, buying records in my neighborhood shop, that I've been able to sustain a life of music. I probably would have done something within it, or it would've been my hobby or something. But the fact that I can sing it, and play it, and write about it, and go to that random record fair and come out with 'look what I got!' - it's a great privilege. And I really feel like in my book, I was able to pay tribute to it. I didn't really want to write a memoir. I'm not even that interested in myself, to be honest. But I did experience the music as a participant and as a fan, and as a player. And so, I wanted to kind of reflect that, but I didn't want the focus to be on me-me-me. I wanted it to be about the music. And how it seemed to me, however I was aligned with it in any time, as it went through its lifetime. Which, for luck or fortune or whatever, seems to mirror my lifetime.

JASON: Your connection to that is what makes the book really special.

LENNY: Thanks. It's strange to hold it now. I always like that part when you participate in the making of a record when you stop hearing it as 'here's the bass drum' or 'here's the guitar part'. You stop hearing it as its parts, and all of a sudden you're listening to it as a record.

JASON: And almost as if it's somebody else's record. When you make something and it starts to sound like somebody else's record – it's not that you've copied somebody else, it's just that it seems to have come from somewhere outside of yourself.

LENNY: Or when you're sitting in a random cafe and something you've worked on comes through and you think 'oh, that sounds familiar' and then you suddenly realise, 'Hey!' I recorded a record with Martin Stephenson and The Daintees in the early 90s up in Newcastle. We made a beautiful record called 'The Boy's Heart', which nobody really has heard, but there is a track on it called 'Sunday Halo', which describes Martin sitting in his living room, listening to the sound of the radio in the 50s. And so I bought a radio at a local flea market to get a radio sound on the track, all those weird bleeps and blurbs. I always liked the track and I recently, I

thought 'ah, I want to listen to it'. I pulled it out and played the track. Then I just let the CD return to Track 1 and listened to the whole record. Now, I knew every note, frequency, everything we did, but it was almost like I was listening to a new record. It was just so nice to hear. I just thought 'yep'. I'm hearing it like a real listener. Although I knew it so well that it wasn't any mystery to it, it was just great to hear.

And I sent Martin an email, and we reconnected after 20 years. And then, before we played the Royal Albert Hall the Saturday before, I took a walk in Soho, so I could buy some Peri-Peri sauce at Nando's. I'm walking along, it's raining, and I'm thinking 'I should get back in before I get sick.' I hear someone calling to me, and it turns out to be the drummer of The Daintees. I say 'What are you doing here?' and he says, 'We're playing at The 100 Club tonight'. What! So I went over to the 100 Club after our show, and Martin's up on stage, and I reach up and cheer. It was really sweet to see him, and when he did 'Big Sky New Light', I knew it, so I just jumped on stage and sang the harmony part.

Music can take itself so seriously. It can be like business. I remember in the early 90s when I was producing, hardly playing. Really involved in bands, and tapes - 'Mr Producer'. I go to CBGB's one night and there's this band on stage you know, really trying hard, but not for the people, for the A&R person they hope is out there. And I'm disgruntled. And then I get a call from the guy who's now the bass player with Patti, Tony Shanahan. Tony's from my hometown in New Jersey, New Brunswick. He says 'Hey, every Wednesday we have a kind of gathering at this local bar, the Melody Bar, we call ourselves the Slaves of New Brunswick, wanna come down? We'll have an amp for you. Just bring your guitar, sit in and have a good time.' They're playing and nobody cares who they are, or who I am. We're just the band, like playing at the fraternity party. Kids are out there getting drunk, or picking each other up occasionally, hooting along with the band. And I realise that's what it's really about. It's not about having a hit single, or doing this, or satisfying this. It's just like the fun and enjoyment and real-time of playing. I still try to keep that in mind, wherever we play. Royal Albert Hall or anywhere. You're feeling the music at that moment. And that's a beautiful thing. I just feel lucky that I can access this. It's not easy. You know, sometimes you feel the occasion too much or sometimes you feel the self-consciousness of what it is you do, which is essentially showing off and showing out. I just try to realise yeh, there's a bunch of people out there, we're gonna be there; we're pickin' each other up. It's like that scene in the romcom about Seattle...Singles. Matt Dillon is a loveable lunk, and there's a scene when Alice in Chains is onstage, and we're thinking 'we'll have a lot of close ups of the band - but no. It's mostly the band banging away onstage, and the focus is on Matt trying to put the make on whoever's the gal he's trying to pick up... and I thought yeah, that's what it's like. I spent as much time outside on the sidewalk of CBGB trying to sing harmony with Seymour Stein than going in. You know, I remember the night he discovered the Talking Heads. We're out there trying to pretend we're the Paragons or the Jesters or something, and he hears the opening notes of 'Love Goes to a Building on Fire' and he goes, 'Oh, excuse me - sounds good', and goes in there and signs them. But I spent as much time outside in the Bowery, you know, shooting the breeze, trying to think if that girl over there is gonna look my

way, or maybe I need a beer, or whatever. That's the casual part of these scenes. It's not just the superstars.

JASON: I like the thing you say that it's also *for* entertainment. Jimi setting his guitar on fire at Monterey wasn't a singular event. It wasn't the first time he'd done that - it had happened many times leading up to that moment. Because, essentially, it's entertainment. It looks great and it's a fucking amazing way to end the show.

LENNY: you're show folk!

JASON: It's show business.

LENNY: It is., I've seen Patti rip the strings off her guitar many a time. It always seems to me like she's crazy, and she probably is.

JASON: But it's not rigged, is it?

LENNY: No, she's ripping that! And it's usually the rental guitar. Okay! As long as I don't have to play it! You know - *don't do that with my guitar!* But no, you're putting on a show. But on the other hand, you're putting on a show in your own head too. I always have a little comment 'late show is a great show', because when I'd be doing two sets at CBGBs, when I was doing some solo stuff, I'd be really focused the first set. You know, looking at the audience, interacting with them. Before the second set, go to the dressing room, smoke a joint, then I wouldn't even look at them. I'd be inside me. Two ways to do it. And the best show is really - aside from the joint part - is when you can be inside yourself and also project. That you're not alone up there, but on the other hand, it's not just for the people. It's for you. I want to play something, I want to hit that note in the 'Pissing in a River' solo where I bend it up just so much and then understand that I can ping it just a little bit more. And then hopefully get it back to where it starts and not clam out

JASON: What's the hit rate?

LENNY: Hmmm... 60%. I always judge by how long the tail of feedback is, but since I always walk over to Patti to play it, I'm not perfectly positioned to the amp, and I don't want to go 'oo, I gotta get back to the feedback, woah I'm over here! What am I doing?! I missed the next chord!' So, in the end, it's just fun. I mean it's a really serious business, and that's what music is about. But in the end, it's Spinal Tap: 'have a good time... all the time!'

JASON: Is that from Spinal Tap, 'Have a good time... all the time'?

LENNY: Yeah. In the last bit when they roll the credits, they have that, it's kind of my credo too. My old aphorism used to be 'Every night is New Year's Eve' from... if you want to look up a fun record on Youtube - 'Delicious' by Jim Backus: 'we're gonna have fuuUUUN!' It's one of those laughing records, you know, a guy and a girl are sitting round a table and they're progressively getting drunker: 'WAITER, I EVEN LIKE THE CORK!'. Anyway. You had to be there – and you can be - Jim Backus: Delicious. That's my last recommendation for today.