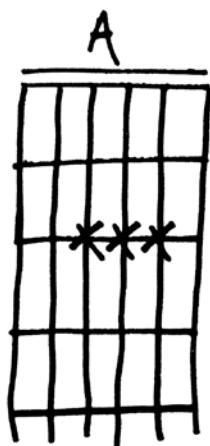
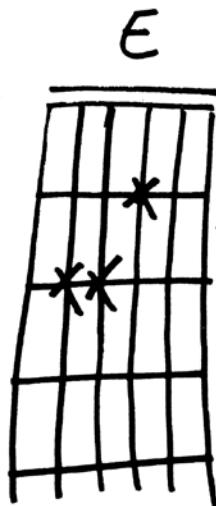


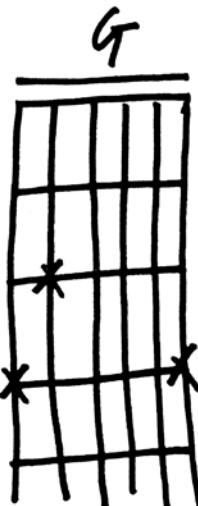
PLAY'IN IN THE BAND...FIRST AND LAST IN A SERIES.....



THIS IS A CHORD



THIS IS ANOTHER



This IS A THIRD

NOW FORM A BAND

Cover image: Drawing from an issue of the Stranglers fanzine
Sideburns (1976), as reproduced in Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming*
(London: Faber & Faber, 1991)

(INTRO)

There's a secret language of dreams ... you hear people speaking it while nestled under their covers in the dead of night. It uses just one letter —“Z”—and sounds something like “Zzzzzz.”

Z is the end of the alphabet, the edge of sounds and of reason. It rubs provocatively against the unknown and attempts to barge into the next dimension. “Zzzzzz” is a bid for escape into pure, primordial meaninglessness. The sleeping person fancies him or herself a surrealist crusader, but each is equipped with a safety that resists their desire to penetrate the unknown. It leashes them to “reality.” Otherwise, they would bring their dream logic into waking life. The results would be unpredictable and perhaps dangerous. They might drift away forever.

The sleeper is a strange breed, characterized by immobility, stubbornness, and a kind of idiocy. Sleepers want to be “free,” not only from the rules governing society, but from the natural laws of gravity, time, space, et cetera. Einstein supposedly said, “doing the same action again and again and expecting different results is insane.” Sleepers want to be insane; they go to bed every night expecting different dreams and visions, but they never achieve true insanity; they just flirt with it until they are awoken. Then they recount a few half-remembered dreams, immediately forget everything, have a coffee, and enter the hum-drum world of the awake. They are sellouts, assimilationists. And they are a growing force, as sleep medicines are prescribed more often and late night television is less compelling.

The sleepers’ poseur pretensions compromise their credibility. A sleeper is like a yuppie “slumming,” a marine at a punk show, or a tourist in an exotic land. The sleeper’s brand of crazy is generally tedious. In fact, when something is banal or boring, people often mimic the sleeper’s “Zzzzzz” as a repudiation. But there are other languages that more effectively approach madness. There is the language of love and pleasure, for example, spoken entirely in vowels—“Aaaaaa,” “Uuuuuu,” and “Oooooo”—which is closely related to the language of fear and horror —“EEeeeeeeE!!!”—and also to the language of harmonic music.

(VERSE)

Music is in the same language group as dreams, pleasure, love, and fear, and is characterized by letters E, A, D, G, B, F, C, B#, and so on, which denote both chords and individual notes.

Like the language of sleep and dreams, music is an attempt to transport the listener to a place where normal logic doesn't apply. (Voltaire's observation that "Anything too stupid to be said is sung," could be slightly reworked to read: "If it doesn't make sense, it can be a song.") Songs defy logic, sense, proper storytelling. The modern music group is typically a bundle of inanity onstage. They rarely induce dancing and are often loathe to "perform" in any way that would be thought of as entertaining in a traditional sense. Country music, a format which usually insists on a narrative arc for its song-stories, is therefore considered corny, kitsch, out-of-date, ridiculous. Groups with a coherent "show," who attempt to communicate with an audience, are similarly dismissed as old-fashioned. Audiences now want the surreal, the scary, the "insane." They want to enter into a dream world where groups either stomp about under strange light displays wearing outlandish costumes or affect ridiculous, nonchalant understatement whilst muttering non-sequitur absurdities.

Songs are used in shopping malls, on the campaign trail during political elections, on the battlefield during war, and for mind control purposes when "courting" would-be paramours. In all these situations, good sense, sobriety, and logic are the sworn enemies of the one utilizing the tunes. Does music "tame the wild beast" through calm and reason? No: music is simply more deranged, nonsensical, and "wild" than whatever it's being compared to.

Indeed, music is often explicitly insane. The shouts and screams of rock 'n' roll music, the strange repetition of lyrics, the ridiculous, overwrought gymnastics of vocal chords, the outsize emotions, and the surrealism of psychedelia are only appropriate for the stage. If someone were seen behaving like a musician outside of the designated stage-zone, that person would be committed or drugged into oblivion by zealous doctors. The music performer's stage is therefore a miniature insane asylum.

Rock 'n' roll may have begun as pure insanity, with its nonsense words "Wop bop a doo wop," "Be bop a lula," and so on, but its modern model is even more crackers. Whatever melody or cogency once discerned in a Chuck Berry song, for example, is now obliterated. Coherence is thought too typical, too normal, and evermore psychotic effects (fuzz, reverb, delay, compression) are commandeered to obfuscate or completely bury any tune or theme.

Though music is more effective than sleep in approximating the freedom of madness, it is still limited in its war against sanity. The chords and notes music has in its quiver are few, and it must make do by arranging these again and again in the same, scant formations. Music is ubiquitous, and on this count it would seem victorious in its striving for total chaos, but it is locked in pitched combat with a vast array of forces that support the ancient enemy of chaos—"control."

Music's enemies, the "control" group, include schools, parents, teachers, government, grammar, work, police, the armed forces, the DMV, regulatory commissions, grant writers, professional and amateur sports leagues, arts councils, architects, physicists, the space program, and almost everything and everybody else. Though many of these institutions appear even more insane than music, they all fight for some version of a normative ideology. For example, the Army wants to kill, maim, explode, and annihilate. It trains people to dress in green and hunt human beings. Its hierarchy, clothing styles, argot, and self-mythologizing are as strange and terrifying as anything one might witness in a lunatic asylum. And yet, according to the accepted societal framework, the Army is deemed classifiably sane.

Sports games are often likened to combat, as gladiatorial stand-ins for the real battles of war. The rock 'n' roll group also attempts to simulate struggles of blood and iron with their "Battle of the Bands" contests and their hit parade charts casting winners and losers. And as music fights against powerful institutions like football and the Army, it must organize itself accordingly, as if facing a field of combat. Not coincidentally, the tablature for chords on a guitar fretboard resembles a coach's charts for running plays, or strategic battle maps in Army HQ.

(CHORUS)

Seen in this light, the A chord is quite intimidating. It's a traditional phalanx, a defensive posture. All three notes stand in a line guarding the fretboard. Its effect is reserved and pensive; the sound invokes nervous drinking of rationed whisky, popping of amphetamines, and waiting for the command to attack. A protects the "home base" of the headstock, whence all chord attacks originate as they drive down the "field" of the fretboard toward the "sound hole" or pick-ups, depending on whether the instrument is acoustic or electrified.

The E chord is the regiment on a bivouac. Its ringing, open strings convey a sense of breezy confidence. With E, the campaign seems to be going smoothly. It's a "sitzkrieg"; a "cakewalk." E intimates that the squad has just spent time at the officer's drinking hole or given out some chocolate bars to war orphans. They're feeling good about themselves. The E chord is the archetypal rock 'n' roll and blues chord. It's the common, primordial chord. It represents a kind of "status quo." E-minor is the same chord with just a skeleton crew manning the post.

The D chord, meanwhile, is a flanking movement, inching toward some tender flaw in the enemy's bulwark. The chord evokes a victorious commando strike. A-minor is dark and wounded. The position on the fretboard shows a setback from the A defensive position, either a retreat of the unit or lots of wounded and destroyed troops. A-minor is prevalent in gothic music.

And so on. Most rock 'n' roll songs are comprised of three chords arranged as a I–IV–V progression. The song "Louie, Louie," which caused great concern to the control group when it stormed the charts, is configured in this way, and could be played with the chords A–D–Em–D and back to A. This represents a military maneuver starting with the aggressive but conservative A chord—all the troops in position—then "over the top" with the heroic D while Em holds the line, and eventually back through D to guard again at A.

The chords thus configured against the forces of order have been arranged again and again over the years, most often with predictable,

ho-hum results. But occasionally a tiresomely familiar pattern, typically in this 1–4–5 arrangement, will catch the enemy off guard, and bust a hole in the bulwark constructed by the combined forces of boredom, decorum, idiocy, dullness, television, fear, bureaucracy, patriotism, et cetera. Once the defensive position is pierced, the chords and notes of disorder pour forth like an overeager swarm of bacteria in a fresh wound. And order is defeated ... or is it?

Not quite. Despite the many victories earned by countless hours of recorded music that confuses, bewilders, stuns and stupefies, control still holds the upper hand. Once the victorious chord configuration shoves into fearsomely lame enemy territory, it finds itself ingratiated to the new surroundings. Instead of keeping up the fight, it assimilates. Instead of terrorizing the squares, it is domesticated. “Louie, Louie,” once considered a scourge, is now grazing peacefully at the baseball game. “Anarchy in the UK” is used to sell zit cream and automobile insurance.

In fact, in its victory, music betrays its pledge to wreak insanity. Only when ensconced in basement or garage, or seared onto crusty cassette tapes and musty 45s, does music retain its promise to be the bridge to that other world. As with the barbarian hordes who periodically conquered the Forbidden City, music’s urge is to lay down its banner and take up with the Emperor, and to exploit gain is hardly insane—it is the essence of good sense.

(BRIDGE)

Of course, war is a two-way street. To characterize the conflict as a one-sided affair, with music doing all the pummeling, is unfair, especially to the musicians—those who have been brutalized by reason for so long. And it isn’t only the practitioners who are victims, but music itself. The forces of pragmatism have made many attempts to crush, corral, and employ music for their own ends in sometimes startling ways. Indeed, reaction and control have set up camp deep in music’s territory through institutions such as ASCAP, BMI, Capitol, BMG, WEA, American Bandstand, and Clear Channel. But other challenges to music’s pledged insanity are even more insidious.

One example of the covert war between music and government is the Folk Revival movement (1946–1964) thought up by the U.S. Government as a mission of cultural voyeurism and imperialistic co-optation. Bean-counting Federal song collectors attempted to cull and classify every exotic backwoods jingle, copyright it, and give it a Latin name, like scientists on the HMS Beagle. They even lured real musicians—who came to be called “folkies” or “folkniks”—to participate, unaware of the orderly nature of the project. Folkies mistakenly saw their work as activism, and many folkniks were intimately involved in organizations such as CND and SNCC. They went on “Freedom Rides” down south. Pete Seeger went to prison for communist sympathies after resisting McCarthy’s HUAC investigations, while Paul Robeson traveled on goodwill missions to the USSR, where he was dosed with LSD by the CIA in an attempt to discredit him in front of his Russian comrades.

Folk music became an ideological battleground for the soul of the nation, caught between the competing forces of chaos and control. The folkniks might’ve had the best of intentions, but they merely served to compile all manner of songs into music books to be re-used free-of-charge by mostly English rock stars, who conquered the known music world. Listeners, unaware of the origins of the tunes, understandably assumed that these new troubadours with their long hair and velvet trousers were lunatic savants, armed with limitless imagination, committed to combat against sanity and boringness. Actually, they were pilfering centuries of working class and slave traditions, neatly codified by earnest song collectors like Harry Smith and The Almanac Singers.

When rock ’n’ roll—the commercial, electrified, and typically apolitical appropriation of this music—became popular, some in folk resisted, but most relented and got with the program. After all, rock ’n’ roll was “crazy” in its own way. Obscured by the swishing buttocks in tight trousers, lurking behind the “cool” exterior, the music still seemed to have revolutionary potential to derange the world. In no time at all, in fact, it seemed to make the world go totally bonkers, with its dance “crazes” like the ostrich, bird, frug, shimmy, mashed potato, and hully gully. By the end of the 1960s, however, the forces of bourgeois practicality had reined in rock’s real nature with the stadium trend. People were now sitting around, smoking dope, aping the most tedious members of the straight world.

(FADE)

Beset by these ideologically impure agents of the sane world, rock 'n' roll becomes a less and less dependable source of craziness. Much of its mania is now suspect, and the average group must be treated as a possible infiltrator, like a lone "GI" soldier encountered during the Battle of the Bulge. The typical group's rude gestures against the square world seem half-hearted at best, and, at worst, like attempts to dilute the entire movement with pro-sanity counter-spies and turncoats. The promise of rock 'n' roll, once committed to ending bourgeois banality, now offers faint hope. Many of the faithful have already turned in their membership cards.

Then again, music mustn't be condemned too harshly for its failures. Sanity, as we've seen, is an arbitrary set of standards regarding decorum and values foisted on us by the ruling clique. Although the absorption of music into the mainstream is depressing, we must trust that it still makes its mark. Squares who hum "Louie, Louie" while mowing the lawn don't realize the song is working its spell on them. While it might seem to have lost all its power, some dose of imbalance and nonsense persists.

Just as the barbarian invasions slowly changed the Roman Empire, music's repeated storming of the citadel has worn down good sense and indubitably transformed it. The heroic forays of the modest battalion A, B, C, D, E, F, and G into the tender innards of control have infected and mutated its body. Control is more susceptible than ever to attacks against its propriety and levelheadedness, and music, the weapon of imbalance and derangement, may still triumph.

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