

mine. I'm not suggesting that meaning is unimportant, but words like these on the fringe of meaning can spark the imagination.

The only thing that separates a mess of seemingly disparate observations and a song is a moment of excessive confidence. As time goes on words and ideas begin to catch and gather around the original suspiciously arbitrary seeds of inspiration. There are times when I must admit that all the verse has in common with the chorus is that they both came out of my imagination, but isn't that enough?

The thing that's unprecedented about "Oh No" — at least for me is that the chorus actually happens *three times*. I've always had a block against repeating myself. Repetition is one of the basic tenets of pop music and I've gone from deploring it to seeing it as a great virtue. There's this tension between the restless, early-jazz-obsessed 22-year-old I once was and my present self, who finds writing a simple and direct song infinitely challenging. I think that's why I respond to Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young. They were improvising not in a linear, searching way but with the goal of finding a new melody and then, god forbid, repeating themselves.

The recording process begs you to deconstruct a song and piece it back together track by track. The result, though, is often more straight or conventional than how I make music on stage with loops, which morph with every layer. As I keep layering I tend to stray farther from the tonic or the "conventional notes," but in an intuitive way. That's why arranging my music for orchestra feels like a potential drag. What I love about this process is that I never know what's going to come out of me.

Tracking can be incredibly exhausting. I can't seem to record in a sane, methodical way. Right now, I'm a wreck. My adrenal glands have been wrung dry. It doesn't have to be this way, but this is how it has always felt to make a record. I have to pull myself back together each morning to start the day with vocals. For some reason my voice is more chesty and boomy in the morning. It's a mix of grogginess and caffeine-inspired confidence, before I remember how to be neurotic.

I rely on very obvious signs to know when I should quit for the day, such as tripping on a cable and causing my violin to fall and break in two, which actually happened. I was so focused on the part I was about to play I put aside my broken, priceless instrument and told Mark to keep recording and cued up the pre-disaster loop I had made and filtered the mass of strings through the "blister-agent" effect, which turns everything into pleasantly mind-numbing fuzz. I only regret the crash of the violin was not recorded as it would have been the perfect punctuation for the song.

Now I need to get my fiddle fixed.



Andrew Bird is a Chicago-based singer, songwriter, violinist, guitarist and whistler. He has released 10 albums, including "Weather Systems" (2003), "The Mysterious Production of Eggs" (2005) and most recently, "Armchair Apocrypha" (2007). In March, he won the Plug Independent Music Award for Male Artist of the Year and is currently at work on his next album. His Web site is <u>andrewbird.net</u>.

A SHARE

Comments are no longer being accepted.

Will April 9, 2008 · 2:02 am Fixing that fiddle should be no problem for Dr. Stringz.

Blake April 9, 2008 · 2:32 am Oh no! Not the fiddle.

I really enjoy reading your entries. I'm glad I stumbled upon the second one tonight as I sit up putting pen to paper in the hopes of some magical bit of lyricism escaping the confines of this mess of thoughts that fight for supremacy. It's both interesting and inspiring to read about your writing process.

Mike April 9, 2008 · 5:44 am

Can't wait for the new disc to drop;the mysterious production.... is my favorite album of the last couple of years. Although Beck's The Information has been in my car cd changer for almost 2 yrs straight. I do that reinterpretation/misrepresentation of the lyrics you talked of, and those types of songs lyrically, while misinterpreted, are more personally meaningful. Look forward to the new one!

Mike

david mallett April 9, 2008 · 7:33 am

Andrew Your comment ," The only thing that separates a mess of seemingly disparate observations and a song is a moment of excessive confidence. " is the most concise comment about music , art , performance and life in general lve ever heard . thanks Pretty sharp for such a young man. david mallett

Lauren Hoffman April 9, 2008 · 7:33 am

Andrew and I haven't met, but we work with the same label in France, Fargo. It's lovely to hear about his recording process as I am currently in the midst of recording my next album, in Israel (of all random and unexpected places). The record-making process certainly is like an altered-state of consciousness, and it's never the same twice. I find myself constantly teetering on the balance between intention and compulsion – half the time being methodical and following a plan, the other half being

led by some emotional, unexplainable impulse. I suppose that now, having made several records, I trust that the process doesn't always makes sense, but somehow it always works out in the end...

I especially appreciated Andrew's comments about the live versus recorded presentation of the same material. There is always the temptation to try and give an album a 'live' feel, while there is simultaneously a temptation to make a live performance sound 'like the record'. Perhaps accepting the very different natures of those two beasts is a saner and more effective approach. Rock on, Andrew, I've enjoyed very much your work in the past and I look forward to being inspired and delighted by your newest creation.

Brian B April 9, 2008 · 9:53 am

Thank you for the glimpse into your songwriting and recording process. As a musician myself, I've spent years finding the creative process that best suits my disposition and musical style. When I first started out, I remember being overwhelmed by the process. Having spent years consuming finished recorded products had trained me to expect finished goods, not the painstakingly detailed and often tedious phase of putting the magic together in recorded form. You seem to have struck a good balance between due diligence and inspiration.

I also enjoyed you pointing out the evolution of your perspective on repetition. That a well-trained and talented musician can take a respectable position on both sides of the argument at different times in his life is a wonderful thing. Your thoughts on your process would make good entries on

//www.themusicsnob.com, where they encourage subjective theorizing on music creation...

Mitch Luckett April 9, 2008 · 10:03 am

Thanks Andrew, for adding another terrific piece about the songwriter and/or performer's art. I especially like the part where you said, "but I've come to believe that recording and playing live are two completely different animals. Live shows are adrenaline-fueled and spontaneous: if you want to capture that then you should put out a live show recording." I wanted to capture the adrenaline and spontaneity of a live audience performance on my CD of original songs and storytelling, TALL TALES AND BLUE GRASS, but didn't plan for the "broken fiddle" parts to be included. During one fast ol' timey tune my plan was to do a sort of clever back and forth interplay between banjo and harmonica-the harmonica in a holder, of course. On the second harmonica note I realized I'd put the little ten-hole in upside-down. I suffered through a stanza before my panic subsided and I stopped the awful harmonica playing, continued to strum the banjo, and switched the harmonica around-right side up-while telling the audience how the old time fiddlers and banjo pickers played together at barn dances. I consoled myself that the recording studio mixer could cut out the glaring mistake. He wouldn't do it. He said, "Except fot the second sour note, you adapted to the upsidedown instrument." He insisted the funky spontaneity sound superceded a mixed, edited sound. What could I do: I left it in the finished CD and cringe every time it comes up. The weird thing is, nobody but me seems to notice it as a mistake (or at least they're kind enough to keep quiet about it). I've even questioned people in the audience about the harrowing harmonica switch and they don't remember it happening. Seems I did a slight of hand and slip of lip and nobody noticed. Nobody, except me, of course. The low-budget CD as a whole works-for what it is-but I still cringe at the "broken fiddle" part and suspect other folks do, too.

Mitch Luckett

Jacqueline April 9, 2008 · 10:24 am

"It's a mix of grogginess and caffeine-inspired confidence, before I remember how to be neurotic."

Indeed.

Faith April 9, 2008 · 10:53 am

Loved your comment about having a block against repeating yourself. I realized that most of my early songs had no repeating choruses in them anywhere when I was in an acoustically amazing room with a bunch of really good musicians who harmonized on someone else's chorus and made the rafters ring. It was one of the most incredibly wonderful things I have ever heard in my life. I went hunting through my (at the time, limited) repertoire for something of mine they could harmonize with, and realized I had nothing with a chorus. Nada. Since then, most of the songs I've written have a repeating chorus of some sort in them, in hopes that I might again get an opportunity to sing one of my songs with a bunch of really good musicians in an acoustically interesting room...

Good luck with getting the fiddle fixed, and hope it comes out sounding reasonable once it's repaired!

SpicyNuts April 9, 2008 · 11:12 am

Andrew..please, you need to release a live album. I saw you at Bowery Ballroom in Manhattan in 07 and it was one of the most magical, gripping performances I've ever seen. I love your albums but they don't come close to representing the energy of your live work.

chris April 9, 2008 · 11:17 am

Andrew,

Thank you for sharing the details of your creative process. I can't wait to hear the completed record!

Will you please release the record on vinyl? We're a small audience, those of us who still buy LPs, but a dedicated one.

Justin in San Jose April 9, 2008 · 11:19 am

I used to enjoy the 'in-the-know' feeling of being aware of Andrew and his music. Looks like that club is getting bigger. I'll have to find another way to know something that not everyone does, but great that he is having so much success lately.

Charlie April 9, 2008 · 1:04 pm The beetle room sure is lyrically inspiring in a weird way, isn't it?

Ben April 9, 2008 · 1:09 pm

Nice article Andrew. I look forward to seeing/hearing you at the San Francisco festival this summer.

Jeff Shattuck April 9, 2008 · 1:20 pm

Love the tune you posted! And your thoughts on lyrics... wow. Truly insightful, and I agree with an above commenter that your notion of art vs. a mess is dead on. In fact, I'm going to use your notion as a foil against which to write my first song ever that doesn't rely on literal lyrics. Thank you! //www.cerebellumblues.com

Doc April 9, 2008 · 2:06 pm

Thanks for your postings. Since songwriting recording is (and likely will be for a very

long time) the equivalent of staring into a blank wall that thumbs its nose at me, it's good to read that there are multiple approaches that will work– sometimes for the same record. Maybe one of them will work for me too. Best of luck recording the new stuff. I can't wait for its release.

Zach Nagle April 9, 2008 · 4:57 pm

Thank you Andrew for another fantastic piece. I don't know how you can top Armchair Apocrypha but I'm excited to hear you try. Good luck with the rest of your time in the studio, can't wait to see you in Minneapolis again this summer.

Eric in Chicago April 9, 2008 · 4:58 pm

...and furthermore, this is why Obama is... is.... ...wait! This column is an intelligent and entertaining meditation on songwriting and music. Or, why it's worth getting up in the morning. What a relief. Good luck on the album, man.

Please Don't Shoot the Songwriter in the Foot April 9, 2008 · 6:08 pm Couldn't you just write your own words instead of absconding with Galway Kinnell's? Poems are poems not lyrics.

Not a column about writing songs. UG.

Martin April 9, 2008 · 6:39 pm

Again you nailed the excitment and the tedium of creativity. I live and collaborate with a songwriter, (E. Christina Herr of Wild Frontier), and find that once the "bolt from the blue" is over the real work begins. Translating that original spark into a commercial recording is incredibly frustrating but always rewarding.

Thanks for sharing the experience.

beth April 9, 2008 · 7:53 pm

I like how you say that you enjoy people "misunderstanding" the lyrics. It reminds me of this thing I read once when I was a kid about Michael Stipe's philosophy towards songwriting early in his career- that it's ok to have vague, weird, "nonsensical" or even just hard to understand lyrics because everyone ends up singing what they believe the lyrics are anyway, and not necessarily the "real" lyrics. It makes every song more personalized to each listener, and its meaning depends on what they bring to it. I adopted this philosophy towards enjoying non-topical music myself, and I'm glad another of my favorite artists seems to believe in a similar idea.

comment #10- aren't the fingerlings albums live albums? Or do you mean a recording of a whole concert

Rebelrouser April 9, 2008 · 9:07 pm

Nice music. But, tell me, how does it benefit the listener not to be able to understand half the words?

Senavifan April 9, 2008 · 10:49 pm

We are fans of some of Andrews work, and especially like a song "Dark Matter". It's creative, fun and thought provoking at the same time, and rocks. "Tore all the spines out from all of these self-help books" Great! But in agreement with the comment above it's work to understand them all...

One phrase in particular:

"Do you wonder where the self resides?" really sounds like: "Do you wonder why the south resigned?" Maybe some civil war thing. Anyway, I know sometime intonation add interest and style to a song, but it can be a shame when just having to work hard to understand the words prevents you from following a good song.

Let's Have Some Actual Lyrics April 10, 2008 · 3:23 am

" It's been a reminder over the years of what to strive for in my lyrics."

How about actually writing a song that has meaning? That might be something to strive for. How about abandoning your penchant for oh-so-clever wordplay and selfabsorption and really saying something for a change? Make some music that resonates with people and doesn't rely on gimmickry. Get out of your navel-gazing middle class indie pop ghetto and try write something that actually speaks to people on a universal level instead of trying to decide whether "calcified arhythmatist" rather than "unemployed ex-physicist" is more clever/meaningless.

Julian Parker-Burns April 10, 2008 · 6:45 am

Dear Andrew and Co.,

Steve Reich traveling with Stephan Grappelli, Clara Rockmore's theremin by way of a whistle down a Ghanaiian street with a subtle Gil/Gerberto Stereolab... Yes, the artist's highest aspiration is not just exorcise their demons and angels but give the listener, viewer, sensor some personal reflection. The Freudian audio slip of mishearing a lyric in conjuction with the hypnosis or spell one comes under while listening to your recordings really does bring oneself closer to a personal truth. The snippet you let us partake in is a lovely form of transport back to our now and here... I'm eagerly craving all the rest. But while you've got that batch cooking I'll take this inspiration you've forked and penned over and feed my week on it 'till the next. Many thanks.

Regards, Julian

ps Have you been listening to all the Ghanaiian street music I sent you?...I can't help but wonder.

T