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33\(\frac{1}{3}\)

Eric Weisbard

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Welcome to the season of the blockbuster. On August 13, 1991, Metallica released *Metallica*, their Bob Rock—produced sell-in, with “Enter Sandman” detonating the MTV Video Music Awards. On November 26, Michael Jackson bought number one for *Dangerous* with the soon circumcised final section of the “Black or White” video. In-between, a scad of once and future giants of pop music released albums in time for Christmas. Pearl Jam’s *Ten* (August 27) and Nirvana’s *Nevermind* (September 24) portended grunge. Garth Brooks’s *Ropin’ the Wind* (September 10) proved, thanks to the newly installed SoundScan, which measured actual sales rather than the rock-weighted guesses of store clerks, that country music was its own behemoth. MC Hammer’s pop-rap *Too Legit to Quit* (October 21), successor to the ten million—selling *Please Hammer Don’t Hurt ’Em*, sold a quick three million and then not a copy more after people actually heard it. Mariah Carey’s *Emotions* (September 17) was indifferent for her (three million at first, five in all), huge for anyone else. And U2 cemented their status as the most endurably beloved band of rock’s second generation with an album whose title seemed like a media stunt: *Achtung Baby*.

But the weirdest blockbuster of them all that fall was Guns N’ Roses’ *Use Your Illusion I* and *II*, released on September 17, a pair of 75-minute CDs with virtually the same cover sold separately in an act of almost colossal arrogance. GN’R had a right, though. Their first album, 1987’s *Appetite for Destruction*, had been certified eight times platinum in 1991, on its way to an eventual fifteen. Rock was still the biggest musical genre, hard rock was still the biggest kind of rock, and GN’R were the biggest hard rock band of their day. The first single from *Use*, “You Could Be Mine,” appeared first on the *Terminator 2* soundtrack, and the video featured the movie’s unstoppable machine men. Consumers were supposed to be equally unable to avoid *Use Your Illusion*, which like all post-*Thriller* blockbusters of that time was planned to play out over several years, relived in multiple single releases and videos, tours, spinoff products, and press provocations. And on one level, it worked: the albums instantly claimed the top two chart positions, ultimately sold seven million copies apiece in the US alone,
and spawned videos as leviathan as “November Rain.”

Still, *Use Your Illusion* was also a disaster, the epitome of the rock bloat that alternative was about to come and try to slay, the album that fifteen years later Axl Rose is still struggling to follow up, the end of Guns N’ Roses, heavy metal on the Sunset Strip, and the entire 1980s model of blockbuster pop/rock promotion. Look back on the artists of that holiday season now: Kurt Cobain killed himself; Michael Jackson was shamed out of the spotlight; Garth Brooks retired from releasing new albums; Metallica went into therapy; Pearl Jam recast themselves as a jam band; Hammer is a semi-recurrent VH1 episode; Mariah Carey’s ambitions gave her a nervous breakdown on *Total Request Live*. Only U2 have kept the missionary rock dream alive, first by seeming to scorn it (and embrace anti-rock sounds and stances) with *Achtung*, then self-consciously reclaiming it with *All That You Can’t Leave Behind* and Bono’s global campaign to end third-world debt. The luck of the Irish!

For a time, gigantic albums still materialized as accidental novelties: the *Titanic* and *Bodyguard* soundtracks, Hootie, Alanis. Country music, conservative by nature, held on longest: Shania Twain, the Dixie Chicks. Hip-hop lived large, but rappers couldn’t hit the same numbers: that genre never became the overwhelmingly dominant force in the industry that rock had been. Celine Dion gets her own book in this series, so let’s leave consideration of her rare ability to interpose a global pop model on the domestic American market to Carl Wilson. The general rule still holds. An era had passed. The idolatry required to sustain albums on a 1970s or 1980s scale could no longer be met by a popular culture whose niche markets were collectively far more valuable than its consensus heroes. Television has *American Idol*, neatly detaching the mass audience from the album making process altogether. It isn’t clear how much longer CDs will be sold in stores.

*Use Your Illusion*, then, arguably marked the end of rock in the weird shape it had taken when the sixties ended: mass culture masquerading as oppositional culture, with the bully’s swagger to prove it. All these years later, Axl Rose is still caught in artistic limbo. Yes, he has been grappling with a specific album, *Chinese Democracy*, but it goes beyond that. He doesn’t have a format anymore. To steal a comparison that may be commonplace, but never so geographically accurate, he has become rock’s Norma Desmond, the silent film star trapped on Sunset Boulevard in Billy Wilder’s 1950 Hollywood apotheosis. “I am big.” you can imagine him saying. “It’s the music that got small.”

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When *Use Your Illusion* was first released, however, the archetype still held. If anything, it seemed then, the pollution was just getting worse. Rose and Guns represented the liberatory dream of the counterculture subverted into fascistic right wing entertainment. *Terminator* rock.

Joe Queenan, a humorist gifted at encapsulating baby boomer sentiments, cinched this view of the band in an article he wrote for *Time* upon UYI’s unveiling. Here are some extended excerpts:

For the original cover of their monstrously successful 1987 debut album *Appetite for Destruction*, Guns N’ Roses selected a painting of a sinister robotic figure towering over a ravished female with her undergarments around her knees. The album, whose leitmotifs were violent sex, drug abuse, alcoholism and insanity, featured lyrics like “Tied up, tied down, up against the wall / Be my rubbermade baby / An’ we can do it all.” The record sold 14 million copies.

Buoyed by this success, the Gunners in 1988 exhumed some archival material and released a stopgap, extended-play album with such lyrics as “I used to love her / But I had to kill her”; “Police and niggers, that’s right, get out of my way”; and “Immigrants and faggots … come to our country and think they’ll do as they please / Like start a mini-Iran, or spread some f—disease.” The record sold 6 million copies.

Buoyed by this success, the Gunners have now made rock-’n’-roll history by simultaneously releasing two completely different albums with virtually identical covers: *Use Your Illusion I* and *Use Your Illusion II*. This time out, the Gunners, while clinging to their trademark bitch-slapping posturing, have also introduced such engaging new subjects as bondage, the lure of homicide and the pleasures of drug-induced comas. They offer a song called “Pretty Tied Up,” accompanied by a drawing in the lyric sheet of a naked, bound and blindfolded woman. They also graphically invite the editor and publisher of *Spin* magazine, Bob Guccione Jr., to perform oral sex on the Guns N’ Roses’ irrepressible lead singer, W. Axl Rose.

The two albums (price: $15.98 apiece on CD) went on sale at midnight last Monday, and many large stores stayed open to accommodate sometimes raucous crowds of buyers who had milled about for hours. Nationwide, the albums sold an estimated 500,000 copies within two hours of going on sale, and 1.5 million copies within three days. With 7.3 million records already shipped to dealers around the world, the record company, Geffen Records, has encouraged wild talk that the album could be as big as Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*, the top-selling
record of all time (more than 40 million copies sold worldwide).

To those like Queenan who had grown up associating rock and roll with progressive ideals, GN’R was the latest example of a phenomenon that had begun with Grand Funk Railroad and Led Zeppelin at the turn of the 1970s. The hopes of a Woodstock Festival, or even its tragic counterpart Altamont, had seemingly degenerated into a mammothly profitable set of routinized concerts held in baseball stadiums, where young white multimillionaires acted out politically retrograde aggression in carefully packaged spectacles. It was bad enough for sixties types when arena rock emerged during the first Nixon administration: you could read it as a backlash and still imagine your own culture winning. By 1991, more than a decade into the Reagan—Bush era, arena rock had calcified like the Republican majority.

Steve Waksman, a popular music studies academic with immensely long hair and serious guitar chops, has probably spent more time analyzing this arena rock paradigm than anyone else, both for his book on the electric guitar, Instruments of Desire, and his forthcoming This Ain’t the Summer of Love: Rock Music and the Metal/Punk Continuum. For Waksman, whose analysis is echoed in Queenan’s rhetoric (returning compulsively, as it does, to the massive following for GN’R’s excesses), the arena rock bands were the first to have their vast audience appeal waved in the face of hip and progressive types as a kind of populist fuck you. I think it was broader than that: for instance, Merle Haggard’s success with “Okie from Muskogee” registered back then as a Silent Majority coming-out party, while Isaac Hayes’s gold chains and platinum albums were read in part as a Black Power repudiation of the New Left coalition. The collegiate, white, suburban-reared, baby boom audience, which laid constant claim to being the largest generation in American history, was constantly confronted with evidence of its relative smallness once people the same age, but with different backgrounds, were allowed to pick their own heroes.

Still, the tension between arena rock and an earlier notion of rock and roll was particularly familial—a betrayal of collectivity. The French Revolution produced Napoleon. The rock revolution produced the likes of Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler, who (as Waksman notices) recounts, in the band memoir Walk This Way, a trip to sound check at Madison Square Garden during an early Zep tour. “When I got there, the road crew and the union people were all eating and the band hadn’t arrived. The stage was empty and so were the 19,000 seats. The silence was deafening. I walked out to the stage and lay down, with my head hanging backward off the edge. I was overwhelmed by instant delusions of rock and roll
grandeur, imagining that I was roaming the land, raping and pillaging, disguised as an ambassador of rock. And I said to myself, *Someday a band of mine is gonna fill this fuckin’ place*.

Maybe, however, the longing to stand out from the hordes was as democratic as the urge to be subsumed into a common cause. One could easily argue that the very dream of being raised up into the spotlight retained, even unto Axl, its Elvis-the-truck-driver and Hollywood-starlet-discovered-at-the-lunch-counter edge. Waksman concludes of the arena rockers: “their very ordinariness made them powerful representatives of the people for whom they performed. … The 1960s were over, and a new young audience had found a reason to raise its collective voice.”

So which was it? Terminator rock or further proof of pop’s status as the most egalitarian of art forms, affording aspirants from every level of society and every psychological disposition the power to sing through the amplifier of the gods? That question will be running throughout this book. It’s why I think I personally fixated on, and have chosen to write about, *Use Your Illusion* rather than its almost universally revered predecessor, *Appetite for Destruction*. Accounting for a particular great work is one thing. Healthy. I want to linger on something danker, a spot of cultural quicksand.

Assume that none of us, then and especially now, are so naïve as to believe uncritically rock’s loud claim to have thwarted the music industry’s desire to treat its products as commodified, processed, assembly-line ear candy. Concede that Guns N’ Roses, even in their heyday, satisfied most of their fandom by giving new life to a tired formula, not by breaking any molds. The critique of “rockism” has increased exponentially as rock itself has withered in impact, retracting the genre’s claims for significance to little more than a karaoke simulacrum of its former self. I read with no surprise that a member of the hipster band Clap Your Hands Say Yeah had to put his Guns N’ Roses tribute outfit on hiatus after his legitimate career took off. GN’R might have been a threat, once, to Kurt Cobain at least. At this point, they are basically a joke, a memory to shudder at or ironically cherish.

But if you write off Guns N’ Roses, please be honest and also write off the presumptions of alternative rock, too. (Can you even remember them?) “Write off the intellectual arrogance of rock criticism, if you can still find it apart from blogs, and denounce as pleasureless and proseless the field of popular music studies, with its horrible, never used acronym. Write off every instance of pulp formula wanting to be more than that—a more nuanced distinction than the
notion of rock transcending pop. Because that’s the crux of the matter: whether commercial culture should stick to the script. Commodified pop is as acceptable to a certain kind of newish highbrow as folk culture used to be in those 1950s mass culture debates. From that perspective, the quality that makes certain pop products ugly and middlebrow is their delusions of grandeur. This isn’t a book about Appetite for Destruction, an album that succeeded by every definition in rampaging and pillaging the way Steven Tyler had dreamed he could. That’s fine. It’s a book about the void that was summoned up when Axl Rose decided that he was entitled to sit at his new piano and make beautiful music.

Of course it’s more complicated than that. Axl Rose was a supreme asshole, afforded an endlessly long leash by an industry that had long since figured out that the rebellious image of rock made for good business. But rather than simply sniff “hip capitalism” and walk away, I want us to think more, you know, dialectically about a time when, for example, tens of thousands of people paid exactly the same price for their arena tickets, not the inflated sums that a few winners up in front can afford today. I want us to recognize, by lingering over the ways that Rose’s image has changed over the years, that part of what has disappeared along with his good name is cheerleading for the idea that rock’s vitality needs preserving. And, to be honest, I want to indulge myself, in a manner that journalism has rendered beyond the pale. This is probably a good time to announce that, while I will rehash fading memories of a period when I had UYI on my stereo borderline obsessively, I don’t intend to listen to it again until the very last chapter of this book. Maybe I won’t even like it anymore.

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Return to the scene of the crime. GN’R’s achievement, if you wanted to call it that, was to rival Led Zeppelin as dark lords of authoritarian spectacle. The group sold more copies right out of the box with Appetite for Destruction, their debut album, than Bruce Springsteen had when Born in the U.S.A. maxed out the enormous good will he had been generating since the early 1970s. Cultural studies types were as offended by this as mainstream media. Fred Pfeil, in the book White Guys, explicitly contrasts Springsteen and GN’R, talking about the Boss’s “Rosalita” as an “intimate regional” concert moment, in contrast to “the massive anonymous crowds of GN’R’s first full-length performance video, ‘Paradise City.’” Pfeil sees the group as hired hands, signed just nine months after they formed by an A&R guy at Geffen brought in from Elektra with the explicit directive of finding a new Motley Crüe. If Springsteen’s blue-jeans
authenticity was an obvious construct, commodified everyman casualness, this was even worse, a model where “the only possibility for authenticity involves flaunting just how unapologetically dirty you are.” Andrew Goodwin, in Dancing in the Distraction Factory, the first book on music videos, talks about that “Paradise City” clip as sheer “cultural manipulation,” the kind that frightened cold war intellectuals had typically ascribed to mass entertainment but which postmodernists were supposed to discount. The video, shot at Giants Stadium in front of tens of thousands of fans, suggested that GN’R were bigger than they actually were; at the time it was filmed, they were merely the opening act for Aerosmith.

Really, though. GN’R were selling so many records on that tour that their popularity indeed did upstage Aerosmith’s. And it was hardly record company manipulation that built them a following in the LA club scene, or caused the instant viewer response that forced MTV to air “Welcome to the Jungle” more than it had intended to. To claim that Guns N’ Roses became megastars by gaming the system, or simply appealing to the worst in people, is to stand in the embarrassing tradition of publishing company ASCAP engineering the radio DJ “payola” scandal in the 1950s because too many songs by its rival, BMI, were charting, or of Allan Bloom’s Closing of the American Mind, which came out the same year as Appetite for Destruction. Bloom, famously, wrote anti-rock diatribes about: “a pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms, whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth by imitating the drag-queen who makes the music.” That GN’R could provoke a similar response in hipster leftist academics speaks to the extent of the arena populism perplex.

The tense reception that GN’R received also had to do with another set of kindred rivals: metal and punk. Punk and new wave emerged from club scenes in New York, London, Los Angeles, and dozens of other smaller cities in the late 1970s as a self-styled grassroots challenge to arena rock notions of the mass. The extent to which punks were working class or art students, a Catholic counter-reformation of garage-rock idealists or a Protestant reformation of rock destroyers, anti-stars or wannabe stars, has been debated ever since. It’s easy to lay out the terms of these battles, and worth taking seriously how strongly felt they could be, so long as one remembers that there are no true cultural absolutes and that most musicians had more concrete things to worry about. In broad strokes, punk happened after arena rock like Jimmy Carter happened after Watergate: there was enough revulsion to momentarily contemplate an alternative, but then the underlying conservative dynamic reasserted itself. The
The Decline of Western Civilization, Penelope Spheeris’s 1981 documentary about punk bands in Southern California, was succeeded by the 1988 The Decline of Western Civilization Part II: The Metal Years. This time, Spheeris wasn’t exactly joking with her title.

MTV had arrived in 1981, and while it initially seemed like a rebuke to arena rock, with its new wave bands and Michael Jackson videos, by the late 1980s, when Appetite for Destruction was making its impact, the channel had decisively endorsed metal. Punk’s legacy, “alternative,” got feature space only on 120 Minutes, aired at the pointedly arcane hour of midnight Sundays. Yo! MTV Raps was more prominent, but only somewhat more. Rawk stuff—Van Halen, Mötley Crüe, Poison, Def Leppard, Warrant, Ratt, Twisted Sister, Skid Row, Great White, White Snake, White Lion (is there a trend here?)—served as the channel’s default setting, the maned musicians pictured hanging out by the same California watering holes that rappers would splash down in by the 1990s. With hip-hop, at least, there would be a sense of cultural movement. The hair metal bands, by pretending that punk had never happened, bankrupted all of rock’s cultural capital: it was impossible to see them as artistically or socially progressive, or even urbane. Basically, as Perry Farrell (trying to fight his way out of Hollywood at the time with Jane’s Addiction) might have said, they made good pets.

Guns N’ Roses were a little different: Axl’s hair started as dandelioned as anybody else’s, but quickly flattened out. Like Metallica, GN’R made a point of acknowledging punk, particularly the glammier and snottier strands: their later covers album, “The Spaghetti Incident?” included songs by the New York Dolls, Dead Boys, Stooges, Damned, Misfits, Runaways, Fear, UK Subs, etc. The controversy-courtong cover art for Appetite for Destruction was by Robert Williams, a comix artist with a venerable underground pedigree. “Welcome to the Jungle” was great rock by any standard: the riffage as good as the Stones or Zeppelin. As for the singer, well, as Robert Christgau, a critic who hated them, put it: “not only does Axl cruise where other ‘hard rock’ singers strive, but he has a knack for believability, which in this genre is the most technical matter of all.” “Paradise City” and “Sweet Child O’ Mine” were slow ones as good as the fast ones—powerballads. But the pull quote remained the lyrics, which seemed to be written with Tipper Gore and the Parental Music Resource Council in mind. “Turn around bitch I got a use for you” was cited invariably by those publications that allowed such language. “One in a Million,” from Lies, which attacked “niggers,” “faggots,” and “immigrants” from the perspective of a “small town white boy” festering in Los Angeles, sealed the deal. Punks had attacked
corporations and the media; GN’R attacked liberals. Both claimed to be upholding rock values. “Nice boys don’t play rock and roll,” Axl and his gangbang team insisted. But where did that leave the nice boys and girls who listened to them?

* * *

If Joe Queenan represented the conventional 1991 wisdom on Guns N’ Roses as way-too-popular beasts, proof of rock’s decline into right wing populism and a libertinism of absurdly depressing misanthropy, consider the band instead now from the perspective of a different dinosaur. When Use Your Illusion came out the record chain Musicland, America’s largest, alone pre-ordered 500,000 copies. The chain, founded in Minneapolis in 1956, had grown big alongside rock and roll. Its 48 stores were merged into Pickwick International in 1968. In 1977, highwater moment of corporate rock and punk backlash, the 230 Musicland stores were incorporated as the Musicland Group, Inc., under the control of American Can (later Primerica). Sam Goody, a separate network of music and electronic vendors, was folded in a year later. Jack Eugster, who managed Musicland, introduced Retail Inventory Management in the early 1980s, the barcode scanning technique that would set the stage for SoundScan. In 1988, Musicland was taken private as Musicland Stores Corporation, part of a $410 million leveraged buyout. Musicland then faltered, like the industry as a whole, in the recession that followed the first Gulf War. But in late 1991, helped in no small part by Use Your Illusion, fortunes at the chain turned around again. A surge in sales prompted a successful IPO offering in February 1992, and Musicland sales that year topped $1 billion, a figure that recordings as a whole had only managed in the late 1960s. It was part of an overall trend that saw a rebounding industry climb over $9 billion in music and video sales, up $1.2 billion from 1991.

For a chain like Musicland, or a major label like GN’R’s Geffen, blockbuster albums weren’t just an aspect of the music industry: they were the music industry. “The superstar is the giant bonanza. The big hit is to develop superstar careers. That is the biggest win you can have,” a Columbia executive told the New York Times in the 1980s. (These and the next couple of anecdotes come from Marc Eliot’s sour but evocative Rockonomics.) In the classic days of record company excess, the Led Zeppelin days, “There were limousines to take you to the bathroom,” one publicist testified. “The company rule was ‘Whatever it takes, you do it to keep everyone happy.’” In an anecdote about Zeppelin at
Seattle’s Edgewater Hotel much more charming than the oft-told “shark incident,” the same anonymous publicist recalls a representative of the band giving one of that hotel’s managers extra money, so he too could experience the catharsis of trashing a suite.

The lessons taught by the 1970s and 1980s were apparently simple: nothing could be so debased by hype as to lose its aura. Al Teller, the Columbia Records general manager who marketed Born in the U.S.A., told Fred Goodman: “We used to literally have debates about whether it was smart for the same artist to come back and play dates to an additional two thousand people in the same market in the same year. Fearing overexposure. Now we want thirty spins a week on the video.” The model, again, was Thriller, which like Born boasted no less than seven hit singles. Teller said, “What we focused on pretty rapidly [with Thriller] was trying to pull all of these elements together to try and create an extended mega-explosion. It wasn’t just a question of going many singles deep, but coming up with visual images to go with those singles from a video perspective and keeping an act touring and touring and touring and touring. Just creating a vibe and intensity and a desire for a particular record in as many ways as possible. It turned out to be a very potent combination. That was the game.”

Teller promised Springsteen manager Jon Landau that Born in the U.S.A. would sell ten million copies domestically—the fabled diamond category, beyond gold or platinum. “It’s too easy to say to yourself, ‘We sold three million or four million records’ and just pat yourself on the back and whatever it’s going to sell after that is from a catalog perspective. We aggressively marketed that record for a solid two-year period. It never stopped being a marketing priority or a promotion priority. We were always coming up with new programs for the field guys to take to accounts, and this record was handled as a new release for two years. All the marketing meetings specifically designed to come up with the next phase of the Springsteen campaign were done with that in mind. And I kept saying ‘Remember, folks, we’ve got to sell ten million copies of this record in this country. And we’re going to continue to march toward that objective.” A 155-show world tour, with 28 American and Canadian stadium dates, $117 million in ticket sales, and $30 million in merchandising all followed. At least 20 million albums were sold worldwide.

It was all funny money in the 1970s; by the 1980s it had become serious money. In 1986, propelled by Thriller and Born in the U.S.A., Columbia Records earned $192 million in profits on $1.5 billion in sales, an estimated 45 percent of all profits earned that year by the CBS octopus. Among the images of the
corporatizing of pop in the 1970s were the moving of offices by Motown from Detroit to Los Angeles and Rolling Stone magazine from San Francisco to New York. Those events paled next to the 1987 sale of Columbia to the Japanese electronics corporation Sony for a beyond-issues-of-cool $2 billion, or PolyGram acquiring A&M for $460 million and Island for $272 million.

The career of David Geffen is particularly instructive. In 1990, just a year prior to the release of UYI, Geffen sold his eponymous company to MCA for 100 million stock shares. In contrast, he had packed up his first label, Asylum, to Warner Bros, for a rip-off $7 million in 1972. Geffen’s roster of platinum talent was his principal asset. In the Asylum days, when he was “the first mogul who was artist-oriented,” to quote his adversarial chronicler Fred Goodman, that was the Eagles. For Geffen Records, it was Guns N’ Roses. As Goodman concludes, in his book on corporate rock excess, The Mansion on the Hill, “those born of the underground had found the massive financial rewards of their commercial success overwhelming and misspent the better part of the music’s artistic currency. That failure of nerve had simply and tragically reduced rock’s practical power to the power of the business. Within that context, David Geffen was rock’s greatest success.” Geffen is quoted as saying: “I started the 1980s worth $30 million. In one decade I turned it into a billion dollars. The world is presenting itself for people who have cash.” We can argue about Goodman’s naïveté: surely, rock and roll has always been about getting paid, hippies included. But many shared his sentiments, and this too fed into the revulsion with which a certain kind of 1960s-identified music fan greeted the release of Use Your Illusion.

In retrospect, the idea of rock as an anchor for bigshot capitalism seems almost quaint now. Geffen, who was at least as happy to produce the atrocious musical Cats, survived this transition with no trouble at all. Musicland, rock, and Axl Rose didn’t. From the perspective of a chain of record stores back in 1991, customers who were drawn into the shop already prepared to pay CD-era prices for two new albums were also likely to pick up a few more in the same visit. It didn’t hurt either that Wal-Mart and Kmart wouldn’t stock the Use Your Illusion albums, due to the warning stickers that the band had customized to read: “This album contains language which some listeners may find objectionable. They can F?!* OFF and buy something from the New Age section.”

David Geffen didn’t need this sort of language. In 1988, he volunteered his charges, Guns N’ Roses, to play at an AIDS benefit for Gay Men’s Health Crisis, having no idea, apparently, that the group had recorded a song that explicitly used the word “faggots.” That didn’t work out too well. Next, he was pressured
to drop from his label the Houston rappers the Geto Boys and shock comedian Andrew Dice Clay. He said at the time, “I’m not saying the artist hasn’t got a right to make these records. I have a right to say I won’t make money selling these messages. I’m not going to make money off records that talk about mutilating women and cutting off their tits and fucking their dead bodies.” Guns N’ Roses, however, pretty much made music about the same stuff, only they were too big to drop. So Geffen sold the record label with his name on it and started touting a new venture, DreamWorks, founded in conjunction with Steven Spielberg and a Microsoft mogul and much more about movies than music. Just in time: by 1991, as _UYI_ was released, the Geto Boys were first entering the top 30. By later in the decade, their rapper Scarface would have number one albums. Geffen himself had long since started listening to classical music.

Call 1991, then, the last great moment for tyrannosaurus rock. Hip-hop would never be the center of the pop universe, the way rock had. For that matter, music was no long the center of the youth universe. The old equations stopped applying. The Musicland stores were all renamed Sam Goody by 1995, in an effort to shift focus away from music exclusively; the chain was then acquired in 2000 by the big-box retailer Best Buy, notorious for undercutting record chains with album promotions that used the low prices as loss leaders to entice customers to come in and contemplate far pricier fare. Who cared about selling albums anymore? Best Buy sold off stores, then sold the whole chain in 2003, which led to more stores being jettisoned. Musicland filed for bankruptcy in 2006 after seeing its market share plummet from 10 percent in 2000 to 3.5 percent in 2005. Tower Records, from whose Hollywood flagship GN’R watched their fans buy _UYI_ copies that first glorious midnight, was sold for parts in October 2006. And Axl Rose continued to mull over _Chinese Democracy_.

* * *

If you wrote a history of pop in the late 20th century that only focused on diamond albums (more than ten million US copies), and in particular studio sets of new material, it would look like this. The Beatles and Led Zeppelin, the only artists from the 1960s, brought music to the mountaintop. In the 1970s, they and a few other Olympians reveled from up on high: the Eagles, Pink Floyd, Fleetwood Mac, Boston, Elton John, Billy Joel, Carole King, Stevie Wonder, and, uh, Meat Loaf. The 1980s added Michael Jackson, AC/DC, Guns, Bruce Springsteen, Prince, Whitney Houston, Madonna, ZZ Top, U2, Van Halen, Def Leppard, Bon Jovi, George Michael, Lionel Richie, and Phil Collins, which is to say Bruce carrying the 70s over and then a mix of MTV blockbuster pop types,
metalheads, and bigger than ever MOR (middle of the road) acts.

Then in the 1990s things got crazy: Shania Twain, Garth Brooks, Hootie and the Blowfish, Alanis Morissette, Santana, Metallica, Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys, Pearl Jam, Dixie Chicks, Matchbox 20, Boyz II Men, Kenny G, Jewel, Creed, TLC, Celine Dion, Kid Rock, *NSYNC, Notorious B.I.G., Mariah Carey, M.C. Hammer, Nirvana, No Doubt, and Green Day all made the grade. The 1960s-70s pop/rock middle, which the 1980s had blown up into a billion-dollar corporate asset, had to jostle with country, alternative rock, teenpop, R&B and at least a smidgen of rap in a multigenre free-for-all. The result was the most diversified Top 40 since the early 1960s—but there was nowhere you could hear all of it at the same time.

Even if record sales were better than ever overall, the tall trees never exactly amounted to a forest. The situation has only gotten worse this decade, with Norah Jones, Linkin Park, and Outkast the only newcomers to the diamond list thus far. Why do so few of the best-selling groups who succeeded GN’R retain their impact? Certainly, Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Notorious B.I.G., 2Pac, and Eminem are a full house of 1990s path breakers revered in exactly the old-school rock manner, but three are dead and none have sold more than Guns N’ Roses, who essentially took the last fifteen years off.

In the season of the blockbuster, CDs still came in “long boxes”: tall rectangles, shaped like skyscrapers, and meant to prevent shoplifting, fit record store bins, and provide at least a hint of the visual majesty that LP covers had offered. Unlike vinyl, however, once you bought a CD and ripped the long box open the effect was instantly gone. A couple of years later, the industry stopped faking consumers; the aura of the LP—democratized symphonic pretensions—had been replaced by the profit margin of the CD.

We need to defy packaging and time and hear *Use Your Illusion I* and *II* with the long boxes still intact, those twin towers of September 1991. Filter back in the audience they summoned and expected to speak for. Acknowledge, as a triple helix, arena metal’s amplitude, punk’s subcultural excess, and MTV’s inflated close-up. Consider, the way a working megamusician might need to, the capitalist spectacle that the record stores and record labels, merged up and touching more people than they ever would again, were then dedicated to constantly enacting. A theater piece of sorts, performance art, wherein those who conquered rock became the biggest stars on earth.

Norma Desmond: “They took the idols and smashed them. The Fairbankses, the Gilbersts, the Valentinos, and who we’ve got now? Some nobodies.”
I repeat. It’s the music that got small.
Chapter Two
UYI and I

“Welcome to the season of the blockbuster.” The words that start this book also closed out the first paragraph of an extended essay I wrote about blockbuster albums for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* at the end of 1991. Let me get a lot more personal, then, since this book is not intended as reportorial: it’s a reflection upon a reflection. I still don’t know much of anything about Guns N’ Roses, and wouldn’t want to spoil my fog by reading books and articles about them just yet. The next step is to tell you how I came to meet them, as it were. By the way, when I treated myself at the end of Chapter One by watching *Sunset Boulevard* again for the first time in a while, I found that I share a birthday with William Holden’s character, who narrates the film from face down in a swimming pool. That’s just creepy.

The article on blockbusters got me regular work at the *Guardian*, and soon led to another think piece, this time on Garth Brooks. It was an interesting transition for me. I had been a college radio DJ from 1984 to 1988, the highwater era of Hüsker Dü (probably the only time in this book that umlauts will not hang over the name of a metal band), the Feelies, the Mekons, and Velvet Underground revivalism. Indie rock created an anthropology of the obscure that nonetheless felt like a grand enterprise: rewriting the entire history of rock so that album sales didn’t count. In many ways it was also a social club. After college, I lived in a shared apartment off of Berkeley’s Telegraph Avenue that I got because one of my new roommates had been to the same concert the previous night: the Chills, whose emergence on the Flying Nun record label had sparked an Amerindie-wide romance with the post-punk-pop of New Zealand.

Still, the Chevy Nova I had gotten from Grandma Cele only received AM radio, and driving around Northern California I started listening regularly to one of the “hot new country” stations that had made Garth Brooks a star. The mainstream music that I had once dismissed without a second thought, the way I still would a chain restaurant, started to give me more of the feeling of being on cultural safari than another crop of Yo La Tengo, Teenage Fanclub, and assorted Sub Pop.
Oops. When Nirvana’s *Nevermind* came out in the fall of 1991, I was oblivious, and I still kick myself for not pushing to attend their concert opening for Sonic Youth at the Warfield. But the truth is, as Nirvana rose and Guns N’ Roses went nowhere they hadn’t paid for, I was more intrigued by the stuff you could rummage for inside 150 minutes of *Use Your Illusion* than what felt to me like another tour of the same parched soundscape. Kurt Cobain was good, no doubt, but how many times could I hear music in the vein of Scratch Acid becoming the Jesus Lizard? Cobain was reviving a yawp that I had listened to as deeply as I needed to go.

Guns N’ Roses, on the other hand, were from a place I had barely known well enough to run away from. I grew up in New York, with no older siblings or bad influences; the kids in Queens who wore the jean jackets with hard rock album covers painted on back were tracked into less “gifted” classes. As I have written once before, it was awfully cool to know about the Beatles when I was in fifth grade; it was also 1975. Starting in seventh grade I commuted by bus and trains to a six-year Manhattan magnet program that didn’t even have a football team. The random LPs that I got for my Bar Mitzvah and out of the Columbia Record House intro deals had chaotic aesthetic effects: I became a Bob Dylan folkie with the subsidiary Judy Collins to prove it; heard and memorized Styx, Kansas, and Yes without caring deeply; gained a lifelong affinity for Lynyrd Skynyrd thanks to a bogus album (*First… and Last*); but otherwise gagged at hard rock so fully that I can remember bouncing the needle around Aerosmith’s *Toys in the Attic*, trying to escape the crudeness. In 1983, my summer of new wave, I saw R.E.M. at Shea Stadium, opening for the Police, waiting hours to stand twenty feet away, loved both bands to death—and stuck fingers in my ears during Joan Jett and the Blackhearts. “I love rock and roll, so put another coin in the jukebox, baby”—how dumb!

As I became a college radio recordworm, the person in my life who claimed heavy metal was my sister Amy—the heavy metal queen from Queens. She was three years and four grades younger than me, hitting high school as I did college, and experiencing an actual adolescence—there was one notorious party where a guest returned, smashed a window in the den, and stole my vacationing parents’ VCR. Amy and I obliterated suburbia in just slightly different ways. The walls of my bedroom were a riot of late communist agitprop, stuff that I had collected with campy appreciation during a high school trip to the Soviet Union. Her pink-floored girls room turned into a shrine to hair metal, fan magazine pullouts removing all evidence of wallpaper. She had an electric guitar that she never quite learned to play and a best friend named Tina who wound up at the
management company Sanctuary, working at times with Axl Rose. At Amy’s wedding, I gave a toast that joked about the heavy metal side she now kept in the closet, and waved around a Ratt bandana as visual evidence. No one could quite believe it: she had long since started working as a kindergarten teacher, just like my mom.

So the tensions that I talked about, last chapter, dividing metal and punk were right there in my own family. The truth is, though, that my own experience supports Steve’s argument that it was largely a continuum, not a rift. The tape I made for Amy of hardcore bands with a sense of humor (“Obnoxious,” I wrote on one side; “Rocks,” I wrote on the other), groups like the Descendents, Black Flag, and the Replacements, made as much sense to her as, based on “The Spaghetti Incident?” they did to Axl Rose—she played that cassette to death. By 1991, it was my turn to be influenced. I read Chuck Eddy’s book on heavy metal, Stairway to Hell, bought a whole bunch of vinyl used to catch up on what I had missed, then told Amy that it was past time for her to make me a tape of her own. Sad to say, neither the cassette (Hanoi Rocks?) nor Chuck’s stray favorites (Kix?) really grabbed me. Still, I was more than ready to give myself over to a hard rock fantasia. It was the inversion of an inversion: a refusal of indie rock on the same terms that indie rock had been a refusal of classic rock.

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The Use Your Illusion albums were uneven affairs but perfect for the CD era, because you could program them to taste. Gradually, though, I made an older style homage: a 90 minute tape, 45 minutes for each disc. The first cassette side in this sequence, if I recall it correctly, and I am deliberately working from memory and some internet info only, to see what stuck, started with “Right Next Door to Hell.” Axl star-sobbed about “too many eyes are on me.” The band sounded like the studio version of a stadium band appearing in a tiny club for a lark, like monsters of rock trying to make psychotronic Misfits punk—concepts of big and small becoming impossible to fully distinguish in a confusion of ideals. As in this case, the failures of the album from an “objective” critical perspective were often exactly what kept me mesmerized.

From that, if you skipped, as I soon did, co-songwriter Izzy Stradlin’s subservience to the Rolling Stones (“Dust N’ Bones”), or Axl’s need to cover Paul McCartney (“Live and Let Die”), the opener’s flop sweat soon turned sweetly sick. “Don’t Cry (Original),” the first power ballad single, was not a songwriting marvel like “Sweet Child O’ Mine” but a forced attempt at the
requisite cigarette lighter moment that seemed as anonymous as the title (which had already been used by everyone from Percy Faith to Neil Young) and would have rung completely hollow had it not appeared twice on the album, proof of how much energy had been expended trying to coax flame out of befungused timber. Was Rose parodying such songs and feelings or desperately trying to achieve them? Both, and the result was a passion piece that never slipped its formulaic bonds. In my version of the albums, “Right Next Door to Hell” and “Don’t Cry” were an opening overture in what could only be a tragic opera: attractive precisely because they were instantly outmoded, as Nirvana left “progressive” rock and stadium pretensions suddenly unwelcome in the popular culture.

Bypassing “Perfect Crime,” “You Ain’t the First,” and “Bad Obsession,” which is to say asserting that any validation of Guns N’ Roses as an Aerosmith—or Rolling Stones—type band was irrelevant, my mix then moved directly to the crux of it all: “Back Off Bitch.” This one, my now-wife Ann and I would blast for people who came to visit us in Oakland, where we lived right next door not to hell but to an older couple of faded roses: Fay and Marlene. Ann speculated that Marlene worked in a non-dancing capacity at a topless joint, based on the babes who knocked looking for her one day when she took sick. Her husband might have bet the races for decades. He would fall to the floor sometimes, naked under a bathrobe, and his wife would ask us to help him stand up. I wonder if they heard “Back Off Bitch” through the walls when we played it for our guests. Not a complicated song: Axl laughed about it at the end. But fully realized and fully meant. I sang it quite a bit, then.

Maybe I thought that a song that raised basic questions about the singer’s humanity was more challenging than Kurt Cobain, from a distance, creating a character like the rapist singing to “Polly.” And maybe a part of me just identified with the anger. I was reading Black Lizard’s Jim Thompson reissues, 1950s noirs by a former Works Progress Administration writer that were to the proletarian realism of Depression fiction something like what the Manson-loving GN’R were to hippies: a substitution of turmoil for utopianism. They featured as protagonists self-aware lowlifes with rot in their gut, watching the curtain come down. Then too, I had seen “F ____ tha Police,” by the kings of back-off bitch rhetoric, N.W.A, cause police officers to charge into a street protest in Berkeley. There was power in releasing these feelings, letting them take in air and swell up, and after all, was rock and roll supposed to frighten my parents or frighten me?

Moving past another total Izzy song (“Double Talking Jive”), things
ballooned in an entirely different fashion with “November Rain.” If “Right Next Door to Hell” and “Don’t Cry” were formula pieces, like required elements in a gymnastics or skating competition, “Back Off Bitch” and “November Rain” revisited the same fast-and-slow dichotomy with competitive hyperbolae. In light of “One in a Million,” “Back Off Bitch” came off here as a refusal to back down and stop performing white male rage. “November Rain” was the almost more gauche flipside: that same protagonist daring multireel dreams. It went on forever, piano music for a bodice-ripper, that 1970s romance novel genre about women swept into an essentially heavy metal life style. But more than any song on either disc it simply worked—and survives as recurrent pop to this day. The indulgences turned out to be refulgences. Musically, its extra chambers retained their charm too. Guns N’ Roses had at least one thing in common with the Velvet Underground, their polar opposites in cultural versus financial capital: a fondness for codas that took songs in unexpected directions. “November Rain” was like that—suddenly the orchestra that Axl had employed like Jay Gatsby trying to impress Daisy starts getting fierce. The video, with images of the young bride turned into a corpse, only added to the gothic aura of “November Rain.”

“Garden of Eden” was a throwaway speedburner but a tonic after “November Rain,” with Axl’s ability to diva-dance vocally thrown into relief and the “lost in the garden of Eden” theme important to this superstar’s seminar. What lasts for me is an ambiguity. “The fire is burning and it’s out of control,” Rose sang on an album released at the start of a school year that would end with Rodney King’s beating and the biggest LA conflagration since the 1960s. “It’s not a problem you can stop, it’s rock n’ roll.” Welcome back to the jungle. These aren’t concepts worth delving into: Guns weren’t remotely worthy of another band, punk laureates the Mekons, who were also gargling with that hallowed RN’R concept around that time, tasting it as conflagrational consumerism and trying to decide if they should spit. But GN’R’s self-contradicting half-thoughts, harangues at their own genre, and use of the despotic demotic made the music messier—inchoately groovy.

Again, it’s a difference of observing beasts and being one. In “Don’t Damn Me,” the closest thing that volume one of Use Your Illusion has to a manifesto, Rose preached what I remember as “don’t damn me / when I speak my piece of mind / ‘cause silence isn’t golden when I’m holding it inside,” as the group motored around him. The ruefully titled “Dead Horse” turned this same marginal literacy to magical effect, as the tortured diction reinforced the offroad quality of Axl’s artistic flow: “sick of this life /not like you’d care / I’m not the only one / With whom these feelings I share.” No room for the psychedelic pseudo-rap
“The Garden” or another Izzy special, “Bad Apples.” Rounding out the first cassette side: the in-and-out-of-body “Coma,” another megalomanic extreme, on a par with Michael Jackson wailing “Give in to Me.” The pressures of having to carry multinational capitalism on one’s back and generate nine-digit profits had to be bloating the songcraft, but it was like a science experiment performed in zero gravity: the cost of just getting there left the results utterly singular.

Flip the tape. My version of II started, as in reality, with “Civil War,” the closest Guns N’ Roses ever came to writing a Lost Cause populist anthem, one of those Lynyrd Skynyrd types that had once been my only way of connecting hard rock with my folkie streak. “I don’t need your civil war / it feeds the rich while it buries the poor / [words I can’t remember] in a human grocery store / Ain’t that fresh!” Still vivid in my head is the way he cackled that last little bit out, electrocution more than elocution, funhouse microphones, but with some late Elvis too, meaning you could almost imagine Axl drawing suhhhhn—the one-time arriviste as newfound patriarch. He was now the Southern prison warden as much as the prisoner in the Paul Newman film Cool Hand Luke, whose most famous line is sampled to begin the track: “what we’ve got here, is a failure to communicate.” Was Rose out of his depth? No more than Garth Brooks, equally prone to drop a JFK reference like “Civil War’s” “my first memory is when they shot Kennedy.” Born at the end of the baby boom, resolute middle-Americanists, Garth and Axl were compelled to pontificate. It nauseated certain listeners, but I was glad for the pretension. Where Cobain, though similar to Rose in his sense of marginality growing up and in his desire for rock stardom (only revealed much later in his journals), was cultivated enough to mask such tendencies, these others got in the ring, motherfucker, a song we will turn to presently.

Well before that on the tape, though, came “Yesterdays,” which snuck up on me at some point in my endless listening. It was the exception on UYI: a small triumph. Axl sang it like the postindustrial soul man he could be—the croaks, hoots, and shrieks (“PIC-tures that I’ll AL-ways see”) might have been individually punched in by audio engineers, taking Robert Plant’s vocalist-as-electric-guitar effect into the digital era. But when the pointillism faded away what remained was gorgeous and partways old-fashioned. Nostalgia has been central to American pop since at least Stephen Foster (Yesterdays is also the title of Charles Hamm’s history of American popular music, the greatest academic study to come out of the prerock generation), familiar in a migrant’s country of ship passages, canals, railroads, and cars on the highway. But the GN’R “Yesterdays” feared nostalgia as much as it indulged it; it was a song about an
odious past that would suck you in if you thought about it too much. In *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, which came into the world years later but memories blur, John Cameron Mitchell’s lead character, a drag act, reminisces from a dive bar while his clean-cut protégé (Tommy Gnosis, rhymes with Guns N’ Roses) can be heard clear across the river from the New Jersey arenas. Hedwig’s sidekick, Yitzhak, played by a woman naturally, seems to have been directly modeled on Axl Rose: long greasy hair under a *schmatte*. Yitzhak, listening to Hedwig rant every night about gay American sergeants at the Berlin Wall and Greek mythologies of bisected gender, could be forgiven for muttering to himself “yesterday’s got *nothing* for me.”

“You Could Be Mine” was what would be coming across the river at Hedwig, all boast, from the music—ZZ Top motor boogie with severe German design—to a lyric for the karaoke bars about “your bitch slap rappin’ and your cocaine tongue” which I was and am too innocent to understand. There was no place to go in this song that wore diamond sales like a diamond necklace, except maybe back to the false solace of “Don’t Cry (Alt. Lyrics)”—cowritten, like “You Could Be Mine,” by Stradlin, ever the hard-rock formalist. These were the two songs that ended my tape with a tug, insisting that GN’R get back to big business. It wasn’t believable, though, because of the bleeding middle of this second volume. Here, the relevant pair were Rose’s songs “Breakdown” and “Estranged,” which actually gave off empathy—“everybody warms themselves to a different fire,” “talkin’ to yourself / and nobody’s home.” These songs had a hint of folk music, like the Dylan cover that Axl turned into an arena singalong, “Knocking on Heaven’s Door,” which would have replaced “Don’t Cry” as number two in my ultimate 90-minute edit if the goal of the listening experience were pleasure rather than obsession.

My edit also left out more Izzy, “14 Years” and his solo songwriting standout here, “Pretty Tied Up,” the Slash showcase “Locomotive,” and “So Fine,” a tribute to New York punk pioneer Johnny Thunders by bassist Duff McKagan, the one Gunner who had actually spent a little time in a band that college radio types found cool, the Fastbacks. I also deleted a couple of Rose compositions, “Shotgun Blues” and the just unlistenable “My World.” But clearly I related to Axl’s mounting dissolution, his manic depressive swings between the humane, bullying, bombastic, and straitjacketed, far more than I could to the competing fantasy of GN’R as a collection of legitimate rock and roll animals with talent to burn.

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The “Don’t Damn Me” of II, the track that insisted that paranoid schizophrenia could be catchy, was “Get in the Ring,” whose lyrics I will now derive not from memory but the too bounteous internet:

And that goes for all you punks in the press
That want to start shit by printin’ lies instead of the things we said
That means you
Andy Secher at Hit Parader
Circus Magazine
Mick Wall at Kerrang
Bob Guccione Jr. at Spin,
What you pissed off cuz your dad gets more pussy than you?
Fuck you
Suck my fuckin’ dick
You be rippin’ off the fuckin’ kids
While they be payin’ their hard earned money to read about the bands
They want to know about
Printin’ lies startin’ controversy
You wanta antagonize me
Antagonize me motherfucker
Get in the ring motherfucker
And I’ll kick your bitchy little ass
PUNK

Bob Guccione Jr. provided my first office job, as a senior editor at Spin, which I began in the summer of 1995. I might have preferred Guns N’ Roses at first, but Nirvana made me a media professional; the obituary I wrote for Kurt Cobain in the San Francisco Weekly was reprinted in Spin, which led to an offer to edit an “alternative” record guide for them that Vintage published, with no entry for Guns N’ Roses, naturally. And then the gig that took me from the Bay Area to New York, editing the record reviews. For a time at least, the once “new” journalistic idea of writers mulling over the relationship between mainstream and oppositional culture seemed commercially viable again, as Spin flourished in its competition with the forever 1960s-identified Rolling Stone. The
Gooch, alternately courtly and brutal, kind of an Axl figure himself when you got down to it, did his best to befriend Kurt and Courtney but really got along best with John Mellencamp, thought the perfect feature story was logorheic novelist William Vollmann freeing a Thai sex slave, and generally acted as if annual crops of ambitious rock and roll kids could sustain the world forever. Craig Marks, his number two and my good friend, loved New York media on its own terms and rock as both art and commerce, editing day to day (when Bob didn’t swoop in) with a more sensible but also more conventional sense of what a smart, stylish magazine should be.

I jump ahead because Spin is all but gone now, sold off by Guccione for a nice profit when alternative rock still seemed important, then just recently sold again, for a pittance this time, after years of trying to get by as a niche publication in the shadow of its step-parent publication, the hip-hop and R&B—focused Vibe. Craig has moved onto Blender, which takes pains to be at least as pop as it is rock and to not assume the persona of critical garrulousness that Spin could never resist. And so we are well past the myth of Nirvana slaying Guns N’ Roses and hair metal, which felt all too vivid in 1994, when I reviewed “The Spaghetti Incident?” for Spin and wondered about a world where GN’R, who weren’t human beings at all, could steal “Human Being” from the New York Dolls, who, for all that their makeup had inspired Kiss, had never been rock stars at all.

These developments have been a long time coming. Even as Craig was so frustrated trying to land a Pearl Jam interview that Eddie Vedder started showing up in his dreams, there was an article published by Spin whose success with readers dwarfed any grunge profile. “Back on the Bus” told the story of hair metal bands who had lost their ability to sell millions of albums once flannel replaced spandex, a trend that the music industry elites, far more likely to have been indie rock types themselves than the general population, enforced way beyond any dictate of the marketplace. To metal acts and their fans it seemed like a conspiracy—class war. And they were right, in a way. Within a couple of years, metal was back, as Limp Bizkit and Linkin Park fused it with enough hip-hop to make it seem fresh again. A couple of years after that, Spin hired a new writer, who quickly became more popular than any in the magazine’s history. Chuck Klosterman made it a point to eat at chain restaurants. He was the author of Fargo Rock City: A Heavy Metal Odyssey in Rural North Dakota. His favorite bands were Kiss and Guns N’ Roses. But he knew that those weren’t necessarily the best bands, and that split was his favorite topic to ponder. The delusions that true believers assigned to rock mattered more to him than anybody’s underground or the notion of rock culture as oppositional culture. He called
people like me Ironic Contrarian Hipsters, a tidy term.

When Klosterman first emerged, he drew on his hinterland experience to make the still maverick case that Axl Rose had as much to offer as Kurt Cobain. In *Fargo Rock City*, he japed: “Rose slowly evolved into the first artist of my generation who showed glimpses of an (ahem) ‘alternative’ to the larger-than-life fairy tale of poofy-haired metal that was the template for all my favorite bands (including Guns N’ Roses—at least initially). In a few years, flannel-clad grungers would turn that alternative into an art form, and Rose would subsequently become a ridiculous recluse. Nobody got fucked by the Age of Irony as much as Axl.” Both Cobain and Rose, he argues, appealed “to lost kids with inexplicable rage. Axl did this first, and his tools were hostility and confusion. Cobain came a few years later, and he used personal angst and sexual tolerance.” Klosterman doesn’t deny that the latter is more virtuous than the former, but it’s *Appetite for Destruction* which he can sing you from start to finish, and anyway, Axl’s ethical failings don’t detract from the artistic pull of “sadness and evil.”

Still, the Age of Irony proved to be as quashable as the age of Riki Rachtman, and eventually Klosterman found himself writing about all rock as a funeral culture, or at least rock writing. In *Killing Yourself to Live*, a book he researched in the summer of 2003, he putatively visits the graves of dead stars, but the subtext is the fading of *Spin*, where “it is always the spring of 1996 … It will be the spring of 1996 forever,” and everybody looks like they played in Pavement or dated someone who did. He also notes that “people who do this for a living tend to have a peculiar self-image; the relative worth of rock criticism is their core existential crisis.” And of the genre that made all rock into something of a ghost genre, he confesses: “I’m not sure why exceptionally good hip-hop singles make me want to commit suicide, but they often do.” By 2006, the editor-in-chief who assigned Klosterman his initial story, Sia Michel, had been fired, and much of the staff departed.

I worked in the *Spin* offices exactly during Klosterman’s not-quite-sarcastically hallowed spring of 1996, before taking off at year’s end to become music editor at the *Village Voice*. News of *Spin*’s collapse arrived virtually in tandem with the firing of Chuck Eddy, who had replaced me as *Voice* music editor in 1999. Chuck was fired by the leaders of an alternative weekly chain, *New Times*, that had hated the *Voice* with limitless passion for years before acquiring it. His music section, Chuck was told, was “too academic.” Those in the know had to laugh. As with his earlier book on metal, Chuck E, like Chuck K, had always used his bully pulpit, whether as an editor or as a writer, to mount
a systematic attack on the kneejerk collegiate assumptions of most rock critics. Yet both men did so from within rock criticism. Now, it appeared, simply to intellectualize about music at all was suspect.

So we have all become Axl Rose, those of us caught being too ambitious in our hopes for rock music, regardless of our original perspective. As a 25-year-old in 1991, eager to publish overweening criticism of a kind that my talents couldn’t possibly get on the page in any clear fashion, what I responded to so deeply in *Use Your Illusion* was not the knots that Izzy Stradlin tied his girlfriend up in but the knots that Axl Rose tied himself up in. That is only echoed returning to the same subject as a 40-year-old in 2006, pondering the distance between what the music meant to me then and now, in what passes in rock years for autumn.

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In April 1991, a few months before *Use Your Illusion* came out, novelist Nicholson Baker published an extremely strange book, *U and I*, which chronicled his obsession with author John Updike but refused to look at a single page of Updike in the process, relying on hazy recollection and autobiography, or what Baker called “memory criticism.” Memory criticism! One step more improbable than rock criticism! Even back then I thought that it would be interesting to do something similar with *Use Your Illusion*, a kind of “UYI and I” experiment to see how an album designed to not fully wear out its welcome for years actually affected me over time as a listener, subsequent to its various videos, singles, tours, and media controversies. I would write it to appear just before the next studio album was released.

Well, good luck to that: too much time has gone by. In 1992, Ann and I went to see Guns N’ Roses and Metallica rocked the baseball stadium in Oakland. Metallica played forever and then there was a break that seemed almost as long. Fans started reaching under the tarp that covered the field, pulling up grass, and throwing it at each other, causing considerable damage to the Athletics. Finally, GN’R came on. All I really remember is the *Godfather* theme, played by Slash, forever undead behind hat, mane, and cigarette, who Mekons leader and anti-iconographer Jon Langford once caricatured on two levels by drawing a cartoon that demonstrated how easy it was to caricature Slash. From that point forward, I stuck to Mekons shows and generally confined my experience of metal to my imagination.

There is an entire subgenre now of “guilty pleasure” accounts by former metal
fans, documenting their indulgences in a scene that apparently made *Spinal Tap* look like a documentary. I share very little with these people. The periods of my life in which I have felt the most at loose ends about who I am and where I am going are the periods in which I have related the most strongly to *Use Your Illusion*. I experience it not as Sunset metal but as an earlier Hollywood genre: noir. Or, if that is too precious, let’s say that I achieve an intensely depressive, couch potato media hallucination from what very well may have originated as a manic, on the road, cocaine hallucination.

What connects these modes is that even more than another 1991 album with no sequel, My Bloody Valentine’s *Loveless*, *Use Your Illusion* exemplifies what it means to get so caught up in the quest for pop totality that there is no way back. That is an abyss I would hope readers willing to contemplate an entire book about one album can relate to. There has always been a fundamental inferiority complex to our championing the importance of pop music, a sense that it is a bastard art form: too crude and too pretentious at the same time. The insatiable insecurities of a mass artist like Axl Rose are one form this jitteriness can take, and make him a kindred spirit on some level. *Use Your Illusion* was lame crap in the subculture that I grew up with as a college radio DJ and post-punk fan. Yet by 1991, as my taste group was about to briefly take over rock, I heard in *Use Your Illusion* something more unsettled, harder to grasp, than anything in *Nevermind*. In 2006, with “alternative” as dated a term as hair metal, *Use Your Illusion* remains emblematic of the baroque fancies that musical obsession can inspire.

Part of the mythology of rock and roll is that it opened genteel culture up to new outside voices: African Americans, working class southerners, and Brits. But the story as I have experienced or consumed it is a lot dicier. For what about those, their numbers pumped by affluence, education, and sheltered young adulthood, who fell in the ignoble gap between elite and exotic? Yes, there was Elvis. But there was also Exley, Frederick Exley, son of a lineman for the county and author of *A Fan’s Notes*, who left USC with a serious Frank Gifford fixation and dreamed, back in the same 1950s when the football Giants played up in the Bronx, that where Edmund Wilson had read “systematically through the literature of socialism, as he must have done to make his *To the Finland Station* … I was going to read through the literature of football and write my *To the Yankee Stadium*.”

Nicholson Baker was more polished than Exley, a writer writing about another writer, a rival from an earlier generation with a similar background. He is 32 when he begins his book, cursing to himself that Updike had gone further
already by age 25. But he isn’t an aspiring writer; he has published in *The New Yorker* himself and his Updike piece is being crafted with the assurance of a contract his agent negotiated with *The Atlantic*. Still, Baker tells us that he refused the chance to have the magazine publish an editor’s 13,000-word condensation of his 45,000-word ramble, because “seamless though his version was, most of the things that had made the essay seem worth writing were now gone or uncomfortably contiguous.” Earlier, he let us know that in reading prose, “The only thing I *like* are the clogs—and when, late in most novels, there are no more in the pipeline to slow things down, I get that fidgety feeling.” He has gone on to write in defense of scribblings on card catalogs, and hard copies of old newspapers. He is a preservationist of stray literacy. More than anything, his battles revolve around his need to craft sentences like the 125-word one following: “The outriggers of Updike’s admirably quilled eyebrows would alter their tangential angles under the subdermal bunch of a frown of momentary consideration, and the eyes that have flown low over so many thousands of miles of print would finish skimming once over my words, and then a reply—wise, sensible, mildly amused, with a single burst of irritation perhaps to demonstrate out of kindness to me that my contortions had indeed received his undivided attention (like the burst in Nabokov’s reply to Updike’s ‘stylish’ paragraph of praise in *Tri-Quarterly*, where Nabokov thanked Updike for liking the sad prostitute in *Lolita* but was infuriated that Updike thought that Ada was ‘in a dimension or two’ Nabokov’s own wife, Vera)—would wing its way to *The Atlantic*."

Part of the appeal Baker had for me, I think, as I read him to save money in the basement floor of the great Berkeley bookstore Moe’s, was that he approached all brows (high, low, Updike’s) with the self-questioning of a pop culture intellectual. He imagines himself telling an interviewer, “My lasting literary influences? Um—The Tailor of Gloucester, Harold Nicolson, Richard Pryor, Seuss’s *If I Ran the Circus*, Edmund Burke, Nabokov, Boswell, Tintin, Iris Murdoch, Hopkins, Michael Polanyi, Henry and William James, John Candy, you know, the usual crowd.” And that is precisely how Updike ultimately minimized him, in an interview with *Salon*. “I like him. I think he’s an example of a younger writer with a real gift and vocation. And he does have a public. I believe there are people out there who buy Baker’s books—the nerds of the world buy Baker (laughs). But again, you feel sort of sorry for him, because the real climate of book publishing would seem to tolerate a few Bakers but not really to encourage them. It’s an act of character for him to remain true to himself.”
Where there is no sense in which I aspire to be Axl Rose, I was definitely a bit jealous of Nicholson Baker and thought about approaching him when I would see him with his wife and her family around Berkeley at times in the early 1990s. After all, there are nerds and there are rock critics. Nicholson Baker grew up studying music. (Bassoon.) He was trained. (Eastman School.) His stuffiness, his humanism, is so out of fashion that it has even led him to popular culture, where he can recognize kindred amateur scholars perhaps. But his credentialing process was different. When he goes through arabesques of vocabulese to demonstrate how, by contrast, beyond showiness Updike had to be to describe a Madonna song he liked as “catchy,” I think, well, maybe the dude didn’t find Madonna worthy of any greater effort.

Rock leaves its lifers with no such sense of proportion. It’s where you will find a sensitive soul, capable of lovingly itemizing the items only to be found in his grandmother’s house, naming himself Chuck Cleaver, and his band the Ass Ponys, and his band after that Wussy. Around 2000, with the encouragement of a mainstream journalist who I had turned on to the Ass Ponys, I sent an email to the executive editor of The Atlantic. It was made clear from the reply that I had erred in not addressing him as Mr., and that his readership was unlikely to want to think hard about Eminem (by then the new Axl Rose). I was disappointed but not surprised. Recently, the same editor found himself out of a job too when the owner of The Atlantic decided to move the financially troubled publication from Boston to Washington, D.C. No doubt, Boston was “too academic.”

In 2002, when GN’R came around again, I found myself employed by a Seattle museum, Experience Music Project, that mystified all who questioned whether sweaty guys with guitars belonged in a museum at all. The museum founder, Paul Allen, was a Microsoft billionaire who revered Jimi Hendrix. Those of us who took his money, however, were about to proudly open an exhibit devoted to disco. I was the lead curator. Our founder decided the museum was a failure and stopped funding it adequately. Previously that same year, I had staged a “Pop Conference” at EMP designed to bring academics and journalists into a common conversation. The week it took place, the young music editor of one of the Seattle alternative weeklies wrote a piece denouncing the very thought of such an event. Rock wasn’t for thinking about, she said. You felt it in your crotch or you didn’t feel it at all. Naturally, when we arrived to take our seats at GN’R we found ourselves next to her and an equally hard-drinking friend, Ironic Contrarian Hipstering through every possible Zippo moment and metal salute.

I am keeping in these grubby reminiscences to convey why I have chosen to
write about a magnificent failure of an album by an unlovely man who has only become more hideous since, in a manner that will teach that multitude who do actually have a history with Guns N’ Roses nothing new. This, it turns out, is a closeup I have spent a lifetime readying myself for.

I’m still big. The reviews have gotten small.
Chapter Three
Suck on That

In an early book about Guns N’ Roses, Slash takes Kerrang! writer Mick Wall out to a lousy Mexican restaurant in Hollywood, telling him: “We always used to sit here in the corner, right where we are now, because it’s the best spot to get a blow-job under the table without anybody in the room knowing.... We used to bring chicks all the time and get ’em to do that. Or take ’em in the toilets out back.” This is Slash, widely regarded as one of the nicest members of GN’R, whose expulsion from the band led many to give up on them altogether. And this is not one of the most bizarre anecdotes to turn up in my recent bout of actual Gunners research, like the time that Axl thought he could defuse a controversy about a Charles Manson song he had snuck onto “The Spaghetti Incident?” by offering to donate the proceeds to an organization that protected dolphins. It’s just a small example of how far removed the life of a rock band is from the life of a rock critic (Neil Strauss perhaps excepted): in particular, the kind of “classic” rock band that lives on a completely different plane. As any fan site will tell you, Axl Rose is an anagram for oral sex.

Tens of thousands of articles have been written about Guns N’ Roses since Appetite for Destruction came out; in the age of the databased internet quite a large number are readily available. This chapter is built around a fairly intense read through that spectral fish wrap; it’s an attempt to compare my UYIllusions with the perception of GN’FN’R, and Axl Rose in particular, that evolved over time. And my conclusion is this: on a certain basic level it comes down to writers being forced to contemplate, with admiration or disdain, the recipients of untold blow jobs. GN’R embodied reckless consumerism that fit no notion of moderation and every sense of behemoth capitalism underwriting mass trashiness.

More to the point, they were led by an artist with a considerably swollen head up top, too. To Don Mayhew, in the Fresno Bee on January 1, 1989, GN’R were “basically reheated Aerosmith, which 12 years ago was basically reheated Rolling Stones.” That, as it turns out historically, would be the kindest way that most critics would judge the Gunners. At least, such a formulaic approach
constituted a tradition. If you didn’t like that, you didn’t like rock, and no pop critic at the cusp of the 1990s was allowed to take that position. Arguably, a great deal of the exasperation that has been aimed at Axl Rose and his mutating crew of compatriots ever since comes down to: why can’t you just misbehave yourself?

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When *Appetite for Destruction* was released, in 1987, the critical line on GN’R could be summarized in a jibe from the *Richmond News-Dispatch*: “The next big thing? Absolutely. But will they survive it?” A year later, as MTV rather than AOR (album-oriented rock) drove them into the big time, critic Thom Duffy noted: “commercial rock radio hasn’t touched the group’s gut-punching, grungy, obscenity-laced hard rock.” He respected the album’s appeal after hearing it from “the boom box of two teen-agers I passed on the street. The girls were hunched conspiratorially over their tape player, bouncing to the bashing beat of ‘It’s So Easy,’ listening to singer W. Axl Rose wail words they surely knew their parents wouldn’t like.” Then he came to his senses. “It’s still trash.”

*Lies*, the stopgap album that Geffen released to cash in on the appetite for a new *Appetite*, added a new level to the rhetoric: this was white trash, its outrages not entitled to a ghetto pass. The *OC Register*’s Cary Darling, possibly the first critic fully outraged by “One in a Million,” called the song “the most repellant slice of right-wing paranoia ever to be released by a major label.” Barbara O’Dair, in the same publication, made an explicit contrast: “Unlike LA’s current self-styled rebel bands such as Guns N’ Roses (cushy in the bosom of a mainstream record company), N.W.A’s establishment enemy is not Beverly Hills’ landed gentry per se but law-enforcement officials and other authorities.” Chuck D, under assault for the anti-semitism of his band-mate Professor Griff, announced: “We’re still pro-black, pro-black culture and pro-human race. Please direct any further questions to Axl Rose.” When *New York Times* critic Jon Pareles, who is going to be coming up a lot in this chapter, linked PE, GN’R, and comedian Andrew Dice Clay in a piece titled “There’s a New Sound in Pop Music: Bigotry,” no less than Sean Penn wrote in to complain.

Pareles is a liberal cliche in his reference to the “triumphs” of the civil rights movement of the 60’s as a fait accompli. Here he is writing for all us good-hearted white boys. We did our bit in the 60’s, so leave us to our cozy jobs and don’t remind us that the job is not done!
Guns N’ Roses’ song “One in a Million” is like a Capa photo of war. It’s a no-holds-barred reminder that hatred, fear and bigotry are as alive today as they were when the American media called this war of domestic unrest a finished cause.

… “One in a Million” is a brave song. The fear and anger of it are what Pareles condemns.

This was the crux of the debate: Guns N’ Roses might run on hate (David Bowie told Axl that such was his muse, shortly after Rose had punched him and they became friends), but as even Cary Darling had to admit, “there is an air around them that anything can happen. That hasn’t been true of the Stones for years.” Guns N’ Roses’ music was blasted at Manuel Noriegega’s bunker in early 1990. Tipper Gore cited them as a prominent example of the need for labeling record albums. A new term, “baby busters,” appeared in popular discourse, and we were told that “lately, they have taken to head-banging with groups such as Guns N’ Roses.” Slash and Duff swearing live on television at the American Music Awards, or the cops being summoned to Axl’s apartment when he played his music too loud—these kinds of deeds got them brownie points from the rock elite. So too an appearance at Farm Aid IV, where the band slyly covered the UK Subs’ punk tune, “Down on the Farm,” and premiered “Civil War,” an anthem that they then donated to a compilation album benefiting Romanian orphans.

These were Vanilla Ice, Wilson Phillips days. Eternal Los Angeles Times critic Robert Hilburn was running a series with titles like “Is Rock Running on Empty?” and “Will Rock Survive?” Billboard noted, “the once-dominant genre appears to be in the grip of a long-term decline. During the past decade, it has been steadily losing chart share to pop, R&B and dance recordings. Furthermore, those rock artists now enjoying the greatest sales success are overwhelmingly heavy metal or hard-rock bands.” To many who had invested in the word, hard rock beat no rock. Hilburn became one of GN’R’s great champions, where Pareles became a leading adversary. Perhaps it was a New York versus Los Angeles thing: unlike Chuck D, Ice-T declared: “We can educate and learn from each other. Axl isn’t going to use the word ‘nigger’ anymore because he and I had a little talk.” The two were talking about a rock-rap “Welcome to the Jungle” a thousand years before Limp Bizkit and Korn. Rose had lots of supportive friends, like Sebastian Bach of Skid Row, then recently caught wearing a T-shirt in concert that said “AIDS Kills Fags Dead.” “I’m probably the only person in the world who knows what he’s gone through, having people misinterpret you,” said Bach.
In the summer of 1991, just prior to *Use Your Illusion*’s release, Guns N’ Roses toured America—simultaneous with the first Lollapalooza tour, which included Ice-T. At the time, they weren’t seen as all that different: Axl wore N.W.A and Nine Inch Nails merchandise, for instance. Before Nirvana or Pearl Jam were known quantities, Duff McKagan, the GN’R member with the deepest ties to underground rock, told a Seattle newspaper that he had worked with Bruce Pavitt of Sub Pop when they both were cooks at the Lake Union Café, been a close friend of the original grunge martyr, Mother Love Bone’s Andrew Wood, and recently flown up to see his old band the Fastbacks appear at the tiny Off Ramp.

But Rose’s outbursts gave even his supporters pause. The incident at his apartment, which inspired “Right Next Door to Hell,” had at least been amusing. Rose, who had apparently poured wine and swung a bottle at Gabriela Kantor, was mad that she played her music too loud. “It’s really weird,” he was quoted as saying. “She cranks my music all the time.” Later, there was a report in *People* that he had bought a home and regretted it. “This house doesn’t mean anything to me. This is not what I wanted. I didn’t work forever to have this lonely house on the hill that I live in because I’m a rich rock star.” Then he broke all of the windows, shoved a $38,000 piano through the side of the house and destroyed a fireplace. Hilburn declared, “With their tattoos, frizzy hair and rebellious aura, the members of Guns N’ Roses may look at first like yet another hard-rock cliché from ‘This Is Spinal Tap.’ But the Los Angeles-based group’s best music is a provocative and affecting exploration of fast-lane temptations and consequences.” In the summer of 1991, it sure seemed like *Spinal Tap* when Rose refused to play a concert until a ticket given to his limo driver was ripped up in front of him by police. Meanwhile, an arrest warrant was issued in St. Louis for a concert where he had lunged into the crowd to punch a fan with a video camera, then stormed off and refused to play again, prompting rioting.

When *Use Your Illusion* appeared, the initial reviews were respectful. Pareles was measured: “At its ugliest, the band has become a vindictive overdog, lashing out at anyone who dares to puncture its vanity. But now and then—in ‘Garden of Eden,’ ‘Coma,’ ‘Perfect Crime,’ ‘Breakdown’ and ‘Civil War’—Guns ’n’ Roses transcend their grudges and turn their rage on deserving targets. In the meantime, there’s always another great guitar line to make the nastiness sing, and sting.” In *USA Today*, Edna Gunderson said that GN’R “restore a razor edge to rock ’n’ roll.” Chicago daily critic Don McLeese, however, making a distinction that would become ever more common, argued that “the music suffers more when Axl Rose is emptying his head or baring his soul than when he’s venting his spleen.” Taking that position, it should be noted, entailed his hating “November
Rain,” which he compared to “Neil Diamond’s next Vegas engagement.”

Nor did the emergence of Nirvana instantly change people’s minds. For many, the two bands were kindred spirits. Simon Reynolds wrote in the *New York Times*: “Like ‘Use Your Illusion’ I by Guns ’n’ Roses, ‘Nevermind’ shows that good production can actually make punk punkier.” In a sense, the happy message was simply that rock was back. “Cancel that obituary,” cheered Greg Kot. At year’s end, *Nevermind* had SoundScanned an unexpected 1.56 million copies, U2’s *Achtung Baby* 1.44 million, but GN’R’s American sales totals were 2.81 million for the more popular *UYI II* and 2.21 million for *UYI I*. Minneapolis rock writer Jon Bream wrote, “The lead singer of Guns N’ Roses is the most exciting figure in rock at the moment.” A *Houston Chronicle* piece called GN’R “a great rock ‘n’ roll band, maybe the finest and most important mainstream rock band America has ever produced. That the band members might not be the sorts you’d prefer as neighbors only reconfirms rock’s frightening ability to portray a society with conflicting, or eroding, values.” In the *Village Voice* critic’s poll, which *Nevermind* won handily, *Use Your Illusion II* was nonetheless voted eleventh best record of the year, a slot behind GN’R caricaturist Jon Langford’s Mekons, and the 603 total votes received for both albums bettered the tallies of all but Nirvana, Public Enemy, R.E.M., U2, and P.M. Dawn.

As with seemingly every celebrity front person in this period (Kurt Cobain, Garth Brooks, Michael Stipe, Madonna, Bono, Chuck D), the drama of Axl Rose existed on a different plane than the drama of his music. He talked to Hilburn about being in therapy, and then to *Rolling Stone*’s Kim Neely about remembering in therapy that he had been sexually abused by his father. “Homophobic? I think I’ve got a problem, if my dad fucked me in the ass when I was two.” In March 1992, Act Up announced it would protest a Freddie Mercury tribute unless Axl apologized. He didn’t, but appeared with Elton John at the event as an act of diplomacy. A Boston newspaper concluded, “For those who don’t like him, he’s the rocker from hell—a spoiled brat, a homophobic ’90s Neanderthal whose temper tantrums are as jolting as the band’s high-octane sound. But in other eyes, including Rose’s own these days, he’s a sensitive, child-abused victim of fate who’s learning to control his anger and become a power-of-positive-thinking survivor of life’s darker side.”

By summer 1992, Guns N’ Roses had reached their global height. The group played to 130,000 fans in three nights at the Tokyo Dome. In June, the million-dollar “November Rain” video was released, to constant MTV airplay. A GN’R pay-per-view concert, filmed in Paris, aired in 25 countries, 11 live, with an 8 percent buy-in for the US, the largest to date. With the immortal declaration,
“Okay you ex-commie bastards, get ready to rock!” the group serenaded Prague, breaking the Eastern European market open for corporate rock as part of a 21-date, 13-nation tour, with a 200-foot stage and 900-light production. Ticket prices were high from a Czech standpoint, just $7 in US terms; this was a voyage of exploration.

Next up was a stadium tour with Metallica, the other metal act with a foot in punk to hit the big time. The tour never got a name: the bands couldn’t agree on that or anything else. Tickets were only $27.50, which in retrospect seems unbelievable and at the time earned no praise whatsoever. Guns typically took 90 minutes to set up after Metallica finished, and both bands averaged 140-minute sets, a recipe for constant disaster. Kicking off with “Perfect Crime” at Giants Stadium (as perhaps my mix tape should have? I will get to hear eventually), GN’R were the winner of the duel; according to Jon Pareles, an energetic Axl “the image of a man trying to jump out of his own skin.” Forgiving nothing, Rose slammed the critic personally in Hartford and dedicated “Live and Let Die” to him. Then he cancelled several shows, saying his vocal chords had been damaged. A subsequent date in Montreal was infamously and riotously cut short for two reasons, continued throat issues by Axl and—this one people actually believed—a flash fire that seriously burned Metallica singer/guitarist James Hetfield. Many more cancellations followed before the tour picked up again.

And this was arguably the cracking point. At the Video Music Awards in September 1992, Nirvana sent a Michael Jackson impersonator up to collect one of their awards and Axl interjected upon acceptance of his band’s Michael Jackson Video Vanguard award for “November Rain,” “this has nothing to do with Michael Jackson.” (Slash, who had played guitar on the “Black or White” video, should have had something else to say, but then Slash let a lot of things go.) Joined in their antipathy to the King of Pop, Nirvana and GN’R might have made common cause: allies at a time when, despite the previous year’s blockbuster releases, the Wall Street Journal was still counting dollars and declaring “rock is in a coma” (the one on UYI I?), its share down to 36 percent of the pie. To put it mildly, they didn’t. Courtney Love, now virtually a Nirvana member, routinely said “Axl Rose dates models” as a way of showing how great Kurt was in contrast (look who he dated). Backstage, as Cobain later told it:

Courtney and I were with the baby in the eating area backstage, and Axl walked by. So Courtney yelled, “Axl! Axl, come over here!” We just wanted to say hi to him—we think he’s a joke, but we just wanted to say something to him. So I said, “Will you be the godfather of our child?” I don’t know what had happened
before that to piss him off, but he took his aggressions out on us and began screaming bloody murder. These were his words: “You shut your bitch up, or I’m taking you down to the pavement.” [laughs] Everyone around us just burst out into tears of laughter. She wasn’t even saying anything mean, you know? So I turned to Courtney and said, “Shut up, bitch!” And everyone laughed and he left. So I guess I did what he wanted me to do—be a man.

Asked if there was anything about GN’R’s music that he liked, Cobain responded:

I can’t think of a damn thing. I can’t even waste my time on that band, because they’re so obviously pathetic and untalented. I used to think that everything in the mainstream pop world was crap, but now that some underground bands have been signed with majors, I take Guns N’ Roses as more of an offense. I have to look into it more: They’re really talentless people, and they write crap music, and they’re the most popular rock band on the earth right now. I can’t believe it.

Back on the Metallica tour, Rose could be heard denouncing “so-called alternative bands” from onstage. In Houston, the hard rockers appeared on Friday night, to a packed dome of 45,000 people, “frisked like common criminals,” according to a news account, before entering. Lollapalooza was held in a gentler venue the following day, with Pearl Jam and the Red Hot Chili Peppers among the artists on a tour that had sold out all 31 of its dates that summer. With a choice between two successful strands of rock, one collegiate and quasibohemian, the other proletarian and quasifascist, most in the press had no doubt where they stood. Talk of Axl Rose and GN’R as rock saviors, however compromised, disappeared, replaced with uniform scorn. “If the stars are in the proper alignment and if Axl Rose’s psychic, herbalist, masseuse, vocal coach and chiropodist all give him the thumbs up, Guns N’ Roses will perform tomorrow at Foxboro Stadium,” a Boston journalist scoffed.

That winter, Guns headed to South America, for a tour I can only imagine through a virulent London Times account. It begins on a personal note:

Nestor Tallarido stared at the television in disgust. Argentina’s national channel was broadcasting the unedifying spectacle of Guns N’ Roses’ lead singer Axl Rose and guitarist Slash laughing as they urinated from the eighth floor of their five-star hotel onto a crowd of fans below.

Tallarido’s jaw dropped as he spotted a familiar face among the teenage girls
shrieking “Come down and take me” at their idols: his only daughter, 16-year-old Cynthia, sporting a copy of Axl’s famous bandana and a Guns N’ Roses T-shirt, screaming at the top of her voice.

When Cynthia got home she was met with two slaps across the face and a stern warning to stay away from the rock band’s weekend concert. “I’ll kill myself if you don’t let me go,” she shouted. Moments later she had done just that, shooting herself in the head with Tallarido’s .38 calibre revolver.

Finding her in a pool of blood, Tallarido turned the gun on himself and died instantly. Friends said that with their defiant anthems of revolt, Guns N’ Roses had been Cynthia’s only way of escaping an unhappy home dominated by a violent and authoritarian father and a mother suffering from schizophrenia.

Then the correspondent pulls back. It’s almost like a Passover seder. Dip your finger in red wine and dab the plate as you count off each of the plagues.

The trouble started before the band set foot in Buenos Aires last Friday. Taking off from Venezuela six hours before the military coup, the group lost half its equipment when the airport was closed. In Colombia, a rain-drenched stage collapsed the day before the show, thousands of fans later clashed with police and the band had to stop playing when torrential rain threatened them with electrocution.

In Chile they were mobbed at the airport by the press and the police searched their hotel rooms for drugs.

By the time they flew into Argentina, Guns N’ Roses’ hysteria was at its height, with Catholic parents fearing for their daughters’ virtue. The band was accused of committing a vile crime by burning the Argentinian flag, regarded as virtually sacred. Axl was quoted as boasting that he was planning to burn his boots after they had been tainted by touching Argentine soil. The singer staged a rare press conference to deny the reports, saying they had been put about by a jealous producer. But the damage had already been done.

Television called for a boycott of the concerts, saying such a violent group would set a terrible example to the nation’s youth. The controversy even percolated through prison walls, as Colonel Mohamed Seineldin, serving a life sentence for masterminding three unsuccessful coup attempts, called for a “patriotic” reaction. Young right wingers hurled firecrackers at the girls holding vigil outside the band’s hotel each night, despite the risk of periodic saturation.

Shocked by the Tallarido tragedy, President Carlos Menem described the
group as “criminals” and said he had been tempted to expel them. If there was any trouble at the first concert, he said, he would cancel the second.

“IT’s just been one thing after another,” said Guns N’ Roses publicity officer Wendy Laister from the band’s latest stopover in Sao Paulo, Brazil. “We’ve been all over the world and we’ve never seen a reaction like this. It’s reached the stage where it’s affecting ticket sales because parents don’t want to let their kids go to the concerts.”

Axl left the country defiant, challenging the press to “get in the ring”. The singer, who has been arrested more than 20 times, was later questioned by police after being photographed throwing a chair from his Sao Paolo hotel window at journalists staking out the building. “It missed everyone by miles,” said Laister.

And returning to Axl and Slash, conquistadores, leaving corpses in their thoughtless wake: “Cynthia Tallarido never got to see her heroes in action. Nobody has bothered to develop the pictures she snapped with a little Instamatic on the last evening of her life, which show, no doubt, Axl and Slash emptying their bladders out of a hotel window.” An additional coda comes to us subsequently from Brazil, where Axl said he had been robbed of three gold watches and a $25,000 gold watch by “these guys with knives who forced me against a wall. It happened in Rio’s main shopping street and there were hundreds of people around. But no one took any notice. I guess they must be used to it.” A few months later, a judge in Buenos Aires dismissed drug and obscenity charges that had been filed against the band, saying the accusations were the result of “anguish and erotic exasperation.”

Drummer Matt Sorum was now calling it “the tour that wouldn’t die.” Since early 1991, GN’R had been on the road in one way or another. “We started the tour the day the Iraq War broke out,” McKagan said. “That’s when we played the Rock in Rio concert. And we won’t end until July 15. We’re going back to Europe soon for the fifth time on the tour—and we’re going to play Moscow and Tel Aviv.” In spring 1993, they returned to the United States for a 26-city tour of small markets, stripping back the stage set. Axl complained a little too nakedly in San Antonio about Spin: “they like all those bands from Seattle, they once thought we were cool.” A punk covers album, confirmed as the next GN’R project, had in reality been talked about since long before Kurt Cobain or Courtney Love were in the picture, but now only made sense in the moment that punk finally broke. Though if the idea of getting smaller—“Skin N’ Bones,” the tour was called—had anything to do with the new alternative rock boom,
perhaps the topless waitresses featured serving drinks to the group during a loungey acoustic segment were not the best idea. Axl did make a point of noting that his new girlfriend was not a model.

“Shalom, motherfuckers!” In Tel Aviv that May of 1993, they covered “Imagine.” Current estimates had Appetite sales at 17 million worldwide and 23 million global copies of the two Use Your Illusion volumes. Still trying to extend the life of the UYI records, which had failed to generate a massive new hit subsequent to “November Rain,” Geffen released “Making the Video” VCR tapes on that song and “Don’t Cry,” sold separately for $14.98 each.

Fall 1993. Guns N’ Roses were off the road and starting to fester. Stephanie Seymour, the love of Axl’s life, had gone, taking with her still more expensive jewelry and, critically, the prospect of properly ending the “Don’t Cry” and “November Rain” videos in the final trilogy installment, “Estranged.” He threatened to sue if she didn’t at least give back the merchandise. Bad move. She retaliated by publicly threatening to show the world a picture of herself with a black eye that he gave her. The climactic fight, apparently, took place on Christmas 1992, after the South American trip, during a party at his Malibu home. He said he was only fending her off while she tried to hit him with furniture and that witnesses would testify.

At virtually the same time, in November, “The Spaghetti Incident?” was released, on the same day as a soundtrack album by noted Axl admirers Beavis and Butt-Head and another by Snoop Doggy Dogg. Casually revealing how much the rules of rock had shifted, a Cleveland Plain-Dealer review concluded: “Guns N’ Roses haters in the burgeoning alternative rock scene are likely to be surprised by the strength of the punk covers, particularly of songs by such alterna-saints as Iggy Pop and the Stooges (‘Raw Power’), the Sex Pistols (‘Black Leather’), The New York Dolls (‘Human Being’), The Damned (‘New Rose’) and Cleveland’s Dead Boys (‘Ain’t It Fun’).” This was, after all, the year that a Subaru ad compared a car to punk rock. Use Your Illusion was suddenly damned by comparison. Baltimore critic J. D. Considine, a longtime GN’R admirer, wrote, “where ‘Appetite for Destruction’ was raucous and wry, and ‘GNR Lies’ was poignant and funny, the music on ‘Use Your Illusion I’ and ‘II’ was ardent, ambitious—and, frankly, a bit of a drag.”

But comments on the punk status of “The Spaghetti Incident?” by musical insiders were quickly supplanted by denunciations of an unlisted track, not available in advance copies, that turned out to be a Charles Manson cover, “Look at Your Game Girl” (which some interpreted as a message to Seymour). David
Geffen was shocked, shocked. Axl said, well exactly, defending the song as others had defended him. “Hearing it shocked me and I thought there might be other people who would like to hear it. The song talks about how the girl is insane and playing a mad game. I felt that it was ironic that such a song was recorded by Charles Manson, someone who should know the inner intricacies of madness.” To such mainstream commentators as the Chicago Sun-Times’s Richard Roeper, later partners with Roger Ebert in the leading middle-of-the-road movie-rating TV show, it was all equally toxic. “Everybody knows Axl Rose is a rock ’n’ roll idiot. That’s his shtick—he’s a skinny runt playing tough guy. Take away his amplifiers and he’s really no different from Madonna, another performer who substitutes various shock-poses for true versatility.”

Geffen Records said it would give royalties from the song to the son of one of Manson’s victims, while Axl, besotted by dolphins of late (they took Seymour’s place in the unwatched “Estranged” video), earmarked funds to an environmental group that protected the creatures. It isn’t clear looking back now if any reparation was ever actually granted. A few months later, Nine Inch Nails released The Downward Spiral, partly recorded in the once-bloody Sharon Tate mansion, and Trent Reznor brokered the public introduction of one Marilyn Manson. Meanwhile, Charles Manson wrote the group a note, saying they should have asked his permission. “It’s like, fuck you!” said Slash. “The Spaghetti Incident?” entered the Billboard charts at number four, selling 190,000 copies in its first week. A punk covers album. To the last days of Kurt Cobain’s life, for all the rhetoric of alternative killing them, GN’R’s mass popularity scarcely dipped at all. UYI’s global totals were up to 27 million.

But that was it, the end, goodnight. Erin Everly decided to attach her support to Stephanie Seymour’s lawsuit against Axl. In March 1994, she alleged that Axl beat her throughout their four-year relationship, spit on her, dragged her by the hair, injected her with heroin and cocaine when she passed out, attempted to force her into sexual acts with him and other women, frightened her with claims of being in communication with aliens and ghosts, and in 1992 had a friend break into her home and steal pictures of her dogs who had died, because Rose claimed he needed the pictures to “transfer” the dead dogs’ souls to living dogs. It was all unbelievably sordid and kooky. Who could still believe in this man? Not his band, apparently; in July, it was announced that Slash (who would go back and forth for the next couple of years), drummer Sorum, and Izzy replacement Gilby Clarke had all left. (I must note, for remaining traditionalists, that in July 1999, Slash would be jailed briefly for beating his girlfriend, too, who he subsequently married and divorced, a year after the same thing happened.
to original GN’R drummer and acknowledged junkie Steven Adler, who Axl claims gave Seymour the drug injections. There are no heroes here.) The final piece of music recorded by the original band nucleus, a cover of “Sympathy for the Devil,” appeared to yawns on the Interview with the Vampire soundtrack. Axl and Duff were supposedly back working on new stuff. “But will anyone care when (or if) it is finished?” asks Steve Hochman in the LA Times.

Slash led what became a tidal wave of Use Your Illusion revisionism. As his new, soon forgotten Snake Pit album was released, he said: “With Guns, it got to be such a huge production—it was almost a cabaret act. Axl and I, we try to work together, and things started leaning over toward these fantastical Axl concepts, and I cruised along. We had horn players, then we did the acoustic set, big budget videos.” Slash claimed he wanted to play club sets after Spaghetti Incident, and Axl wasn’t into it. He was not presenting himself as more “alternative” than Axl, just more rock. “I always used to say that I wished I was born a decade earlier, so I could’ve been a part of the early ’70s,” declared the guitarist, then 29. “Because that’s where all my main musical influences come from.” He concluded, “I’d like to get us out of this whole million-dollar video ballad thing. As much as I love (‘Use Your Illusion’), there was just a little too much thinking going on.”

Let’s move quickly over the rest. In October 1995, Axl’s childhood friend, Shannon Hoon, of Lafayette, Indiana, the backup singer on “Don’t Cry” and then leader of Blind Melon, died of a drug overdose on his tour bus at the age of 28. Was this a hard rock or alt-rock tragedy? No one much distinguished anymore. Now it was Billy Corgan’s Smashing Pumpkins with the double-CD, and criticisms virtually identical to those aimed at UYI: “grows downright annoying over the course of two hours—as do his tales of inner turmoil.” Courtney Love had become a version of her one-time nemesis: “we simply find Love annoying—a Riot Grrrl version of widely despised rock outlaw Axl Rose.” A 1997 think piece concluded, “Maybe we don’t need The Greatest Rock Band in the World anymore. Maybe we don’t even want one.” As electronica crested and dissipated, as Radiohead moved from the massive OK Computer to the composerly Kid A., as rap-rock nü-metal variants just embarrassed the good name of Woodstock, it was hard not to agree. Axl Rose was a theater piece now, a musical by Andy Prieboy of Wall of Voodoo called White Trash Wins Lotto, a dramatic monologue by a gay fan, Seattle’s David Schmader, called “Letter to Axl.”

As a live GN’R album came out in November 1999, a Denver writer made an astute comparison. “Guns N’ Roses are kind of like Led Zeppelin—though not in
the way fans think. It’s not in the music; it’s in how they were treated by the critics. While both bands were making records, the writers bagged on them and accused them of being derivative rip-off artists, more flash than substance, poseurs who were pulling one over on the public. And once they suddenly went away, the critics cried ‘Hey! Where’d you go?” “Axl Rose is frozen in our collective memory at his creative peak,” Marc Spitz wrote in a Spin story—the magazine got no interview, but had long run out of rockers cool and popular enough to put on the cover. “He never got old, he never got lame and he never got fat.”

Then Axl got old, lame, and fat. A song recorded with new musicians, “Oh My God,” came out and made no impact. The Howard Hughes comparisons started to multiply. There was talk of failed hair transplants. Chinese Democracy had to date cost $10 million. In December 2000, Rose appeared at a New Year’s Eve show in Las Vegas, telling the nightclub crowd, “I have traversed a treacherous sea of horrors to be with you here tonight.” A full year later he returned to Vegas and tried it all again. People wanted to like him: “it’s safe to come out as a fan again,” a British paper declared. Hell, the Viper Room in LA had a regular Monday night “Camaro Club” now, where Metal Shop backed the likes of Cinderella and our Duff for audience members from Weezer. But when GN’R were the surprise finale to the 2002 MTV Video Music Awards, a decade after the Nirvana throwdown, Axl appeared visibly winded after just three songs. He took a lot of shit for being 40. “Like a horrible, body-mangling accident, we couldn’t look away. Rubberneckers all,” a British music magazine wrote.

Rose gutted it out, taking the new band on a road tour that started overseas and then daring the US, with a new round of missed concerts. Canada, not a country to his temperament (“He fucked us in ’93, and now he’s doing it again,” one fan says), saw another riot. Fans were frightened away by bad press, so there were half-filled arenas like the Tacoma Dome, where I saw the new GN’R and Axl was inaudible; it was later said that he blew out his vocal chords oversinging into a lame microphone. The songs from Chinese Democracy available in Napster versions were impossible to grasp; sculptures still mainly in the stone. But there was one glory moment, at a venue said to have sold out in 15 minutes. New York was now arguably GN’R’s bastion, though Axl was still denouncing Jon Pareles. (What an echo chamber he must live in.) “I managed to get enough of myself together to do this,” he joked, back in a place UYI relentlessly hyperbolizes: the garden (Madison Square, in this case). Then he canceled the next night and Clear Channel, making no money and thus taking no shit, called off the rest of the tour. “Devastating amounts of plastic surgery. A string of
cringe-inducing performances and heaps of bad publicity. Are we talking about Michael Jackson or Guns N’ Roses’ Axl Rose?” asked *Entertainment Weekly*, comparing “Wacko Jacko” with “Paxil Rose.”

Geffen, or what was left of Geffen after mergers had joined it to Universal, A&M, Interscope, Def Jam, and many others, had by then sunk an estimated $13.5 million into the recording process, all else changing as Axl steadily plugged away, driving down the mountain regularly from Malibu. “His involvement on ‘Chinese Democracy’ has outlasted countless executives, producers and fellow musicians—even the corporate structure that first brought the band to worldwide celebrity,” Jeff Leeds wrote in a landmark *New York Times* investigation. More than 1,000 DAT tapes of *Chinese Democracy* recordings existed. “It was like the Library of Congress in there,” said a former production assistant. For a small return on investment, the label decided to release a GN’R *Greatest Hits* collection, against the band’s wishes. To perhaps everyone’s surprise, it went on to sell three million copies in the US, proving yet again that the GN’R audience survived.

This wasn’t a *Use Your Illusion* audience, or an audience for whatever *Chinese Democracy* might be. It was an *Appetite for Destruction* audience, akin to the one that bought a couple million copies of Velvet Revolver, the band that Slash, Duff, and Matt Sorum formed in partnership with former Stone Temple Pilots lunatic Scott Weiland on lead vocals: “possibly the only man on the planet with a less reliable datebook than Axl’s,” as a Chicago writer put it. “Velvet Revolver kick ass, and are far closer to the spirit of *Appetite For Destruction* than the pathetic shadow Axl keeps pretending is actually Guns ‘n’ Roses,” said a critic in New Zealand. Chants of “fuck Axl Rose” were heard at gigs that ended with a cover of Nirvana’s “Negative Creep.”

My fingers are getting numb taking down notes. But this is good. “In the past decade, lead singer Axl Rose has metamorphosed from one of music’s great front men into the Punxsutawney Phil of rock stars; poking his head out only once a year or so, presumably seeing his shadow and fleeing back to the safety of the studio where he’s said to have been working on the same album for the past 13 years.” In 2006, GN’R are back on tour, finding comfort in the rock festival circuit. Izzy Stradlin has joined the group for a few shows, giving Rose a Lafayette, Indiana, crony again. The album is once again promised for the end-of-year blockbuster season. Perhaps Slash and Duff will come back too. Strange things happen every day.

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And that’s the legend. Let me suggest a purely speculative alternative. Axl Rose grew up in fucked circumstances in Lafayette, Indiana. His tendency to abuse women goes back to his high school girlfriend, who has suggested that the image of him jerking on an electric chair in one of the Guns videos is a lot like how he behaves when his switch gets flipped. But he was also a classic rock and roll bohemian, at least Lafayette style, with a group of similar friends like Izzy and Shannon Hoon who remain as important a groundwire for him in stardom as the Memphis Mafia were for Elvis. In Los Angeles, where everything that had ever been wrong about him became everything right about him, he entered into a relationship with Erin Everly that was built around bondage games, captured in an unreleased video of Everly in such garb for the song “It’s So Easy.” Most of the awful accounts of his behavior with her have to be understood in that context.

When Use Your Illusion was being written, Axl had a piano again for the first time since he had left Indiana. He started writing ballads. “The beautiful music is what really makes me feel like an artist,” he told Rolling Stone in 1989. He mentioned the names of some of these, like “November Rain,” “Breakdown,” and “a song tentatively entitled Without You.” Actually, Axl didn’t say all this to Rolling Stone: he was speaking to Del James, the writer that GN’R had insisted be used if the magazine wanted a cover story—and the magazine wanted a cover story. James was a Rip editor and aspiring fiction writer who bonded permanently with Axl on the Sunset Strip; he was given to tales of porno addicts, incest victims, vampires, and other dark reflections. He also cowrote “Yesterdays” and “The Garden” on UYI. In 1995, a book of his stories, The Language of Fear, came out with an introduction by Axl Rose. Rose talks about their friendship, and about a particular story that James had written, then sent to Axl with the comment “I just wrote your death.” A story called “Without You.”

In the story, Mayne Mann, rock star, has become a shadow figure. “With all the doctors, specialists, therapists, fans, and everyone in his organization trying to help him, he just sank further into his cocoon, alienating himself even more.” Caught fucking a groupie by the love of his life, Elizabeth Ashton, he writes a song about their breakup, “Without You,” that becomes the biggest of his career. Desperate to be with her again, he shows up at her house unannounced and breaks in, finding her dead by her own hand as the song plays. James is not a subtle writer. “Number one with a bullet, the red-speckled note read.” Sinking into drugs and emptiness, Mayne joins Elizabeth, playing the song on the piano “as flames swallow him.”
The song “tentatively titled ‘Without You’” became another song. “I remember calling Del after finishing ‘Estranged’ and going ‘I wrote that song’ Meaning a song that means so much to me, the way ‘Without You’ does to Mayne. I also would end up being haunted by that song as Mayne is,” Rose writes in the intro. James’s story inspired aspects of the “November Rain” and “Don’t Cry” videos. Rose continues, “We were going to try to bring out more of the ‘Without You’ story and elements in ‘Estranged,’ but Stephanie Seymour had other plans so we had to change ours.” Everything is blurry about these connections. “Don’t Cry,” it turns out, goes back to GN’R’s first demo tape, just like “Welcome to the Jungle” and “Back Off Bitch.” Did he even know Erin Everly at that point? She most likely inspired many of the other songs, at least in part. But it’s Seymour, who Rose met when she appeared in the “Don’t Cry” video, who becomes the woman he thought, perhaps, he could love without violence and misogyny.

Albums of the now virtually extinct blockbuster variety aren’t finished products until everything associated with them happens. So *Use Your Illusion*, despite taking up 150 minutes and two discs, became something of an unfinished work. Axl never managed to film “Estranged” as he had intended, completing his sequence and moving on. With all we know about him, it’s easy to mock his desires, personal and artistic. He seems to have understood the live embalming that awaited him as far back as the moment he scripted that intro. It’s a horror story. I had no idea.

In that regard, the coverage I have now read until my eyes ached makes sense. Even as the place of rock moved from the mythological to the semipitiful, the tone of the writing remained much the same: rationalist, normalizing, determined to find a workably democratic standard by which to judge popular culture.

Not much use when you are dealing with a creature of the paranormal.
Chapter Four
WAR Stories

How would the world have reacted if Neil Young had recorded and released “One in a Million”? Now that I am playing GN’R music I can propose that this most radioactive of recordings sounds like him, the skittery acoustic groove and electric overlays and topics resembling the track “Crime in the City” on his album Freedom, which came out in 1989, a year after Lies. Even more than Kurt Cobain, Young writes characters: a cop in the street who gets paid by a ten-year-old drug dealer, a fireman who “got thrown out of Sunday school for throwing bibles at the preacher” and ultimately uses his hose to blast people, a producer who requests a hungry songwriter in the same mouthful that ends, pricelessly, “send me a cheeseburger and a new Rolling Stone.”

Axl Rose, defending “One in a Million,” said on occasion that he too was writing about a character, but it’s an awfully recurrent character, the one he plays in the video to “Welcome to the Jungle,” for instance. The perspective matches accounts he has given of his life: shuttling between Lafayette and Los Angeles, a small-town kid scarred by religious zealotry finding himself in the most urban of settings, attacked at times by black hustlers, molesting homosexuals, and bullying street cops, feeling less native to his surroundings than immigrant store owners, worried about his sanity and way too high way too often. Hungry as that songwriter. But also—and Henry James (I’m thinking the introduction to The Princess Casa-massima) declared this the only kind of street urchin worth writing about—“One in a Million.” Capable of seizing his own story you “radicals and racists.”

So put it this way. The former Billy Bailey writes about the character W. Axl Rose—or gets others to write about him; “Patience” was composed by Izzy Stradlin, but its topic is Rose’s relationship with Erin Everly. And what a character. WAR. A character as fluid as the singer’s vocal tones: schizophrenic, it is often implied. But never the subject of a representation, like some sharecropper in a framed photo or an earnest songwriter’s fantasy. This case study owns his own copyright.

The song is impressively complex. There are two bulky sixteen-line verses
and a third eight-line verse, each carefully doubled: two different groups of people are linked for scorn in each stanza (“cops and niggers,” “immigrants and faggots,” “radicals and racists”), and these portions of the verse are themselves paired with an ongoing narrative about the character/Axl’s past and values. The chorus is equally divided, seemingly sung by one part of Axl/the character to another part, or perhaps the man to the myth. For a song that Axl had to know was going to land him in a lot of trouble, this was no throwaway.

It has often been said that the group never performed it, and that Slash in particular—half black and an immigrant’s son—was offended by it. (Slash, a child of the music biz, whose mom dated David Bowie for a time, could be seen in fact as exactly the kind of diverse Californian whose place in the mix made the Axl persona uncomfortable.) In fact, footage exists of the group performing “One in a Million” in an acoustic set at CBGB on October 30, 1987, long before Lies came out but around when it was recorded. The camera is facing Slash’s back, so there is no way to see his reaction to the song that he is accompanying, but the crowd—thrown by the initial “cops and niggers,” even though Axl builds a reaction into the song; “that’s right,” he sings, as if to say yes, I intended to say that—has caught up by the time he sings “immigrants and faggots,” and giggles appreciatively. It’s the Pussy Galore, Big Black, pigfuck era in post-punk terms. A lot of shit has been said at CB’s; this is just more. Rose has his full uniform on, sunglasses, bandana, soldiering expressionless through the verses, though he smiles at the cheesiness of the “one in a million” sentiment to those singing along.

The lines from the song that aren’t controversial, that actually might have wound up on a Young tune, because they have something of his cadence, go: “it’s been such a long time / Since I knew right from wrong / It’s all just a means to an end / I keep on movin’ along.” You don’t have to love, admire, or even respect Axl Rose to see that “One in a Million” is an incongruity: an oldest school rock and roller with an intensely Christian upbringing and, say, Jerry Lee Lewis’s sense of music as a sin willingly undertaken and thus that much more damnable, who also has it in him to pull back from that position and make corporate decisions with the manicured coldness of a David Geffen then or a Jay-Z now. But who on a third level, to underline this again, is driven by artistic urges he refuses to rein in, wherever they may lead. Ultimately Axl Rose inhabits “the beast in me,” to cite Johnny Cash, who practically became a postage stamp for his American Recordings, which began with a song about shooting Delia and then having a drink, not so unlike the “I used to love her, but I had to kill her” song and dance that GN’R brought us on Lies.
Stay within his terminology. What is right and what is wrong when you are W. Axl Rose, White Trash Wins Lotto?

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Slash hated the song in the GN’R catalog that has become a modern day standard, “Sweet Child O’ Mine,” though his paint-by-numbers opening riff is all the majority remembers of his playing in the band. Axl, and I bet Izzy, knew the value of that sort of pop fodder. Then Rose added a poem he had written about Erin. In one way, it’s as corny as heaven and poorly written: on the McSweeney’s website, emblemizing a certain strand of indie rock urbanity, there is a funny piece by John Moe—notes to Axl from his editor:

*She’s got a smile that, it seems to me*—Why equivocate? You weaken your point by framing this as a mere personal observation instead of a fact.

*Reminds me of childhood memories*—Redundant. You either have a memory or you’re reminded of something. You’re not reminded of a memory. Heavy-metal fans won’t stand for such writing, my friend.

*Where everything was as fresh as a bright blue sky*—I asked around the office and no one is sure a blue sky is “fresh.” You could have a blue sky at the end of a long, sweaty day and there would be nothing fresh about it. And she reminds you of a time when things were fresh? Fond reminiscences of freshness are no foundation for love. Fix.

And so on. It’s an old saw, the illiteracy of pop and pop stars, like correcting Alanis Morissette on the meaning of ironic.

Since Christopher Ricks, who defends Dylan’s flights of fancy, isn’t around for this job, let me take a stab at supporting Axl. That “it seems to me,” even if he just put it in for an easier rhyme and the extra beats, does something: it makes clear that we aren’t hearing a Tin Pan Alley song. There is a rock era singer-songwriter subjectivity at work. But not, as the redundancy in the next line makes clear, a particularly well educated one. And that combination is what makes his appropriation of tropes that go back to the days of song-pluggers so effective.

Here you have a guy whose birth name, William Bailey, echoes one of the
most famous songs we have ever mostly forgotten: “Bill Bailey, Won’t You Come Please Home.” Whose biggest hit has a title, “Sweet Child O’ Mine,” whose O’ gives it an equally antique cadence, like Kipling’s “Mother O’ Mine.” Who seems to vomit American Studies every time he gets drunk on his thoughts, like the way the lines in “Nightrain” (“Well I’m a west coast struttin’ / One bad mother / Got a rattlesnake suitcase / Under my arm”) and “Rocket Queen” (“I’ve got a tongue like a razor”) are not so much Bo Diddley’s “Who Do You Love?” as that first westerner, Davy Crockett, bragging he was half animal. So of course he is drawn to blue skies. Had he heard a great songwriter who couldn’t even play the piano without a machine rigged to help him cheat, Irving Berlin, namely “Blue Skies,” perhaps as sung by Al Jolson? I don’t know, but it found him and got stuck in there too.

Inside the clichés, then, is an accrued history. And inside the smear of subjectivity is a not particularly lettered man who can remember a time when it still seemed like he might make a clean start at things—I think the image of fresh skies works perfectly. He looks at Erin and records a line that Mr. McSweeney’s tells us, I hope 100 percent jokingly, that he hates even more: “Her hair reminds me of a warm safe place where as a child I’d hide.” (“Delete. Fix. Do something. You’d hide in a place that reminded you of hair? Never show me such phrases again.”) Could a lyric do more than that one? Not just the neatly implied image of his burying his face in hers, but the way that the metaphor connects—implicitly or explicitly, no way to be sure—his banal sentimentality and his repellant sadomasochism. Which fused qualities make him pretty fucking singular.

Not that I believe any of this necessarily sold Appetite to 15 million Americans and who knows how many others worldwide. Those cascading Slash 1-2-3-4/1-2-3-4s repeating for 45 opening seconds, those seemingly bland and generous love sentiments, the way that Axl’s metallic vowels coat the guitar notes. At three minutes it feels like the song is done, and there was an edited version the group hated, but the album’s full six minutes moves on to a guitar solo that for once is justified, because it brands arena rock into the perfected pop. Then the mysterious postprandial parting, “Where do we go now?” and the final squeezed vowel inflection: m-i-i-i-i-ne. The even more extended ending of “Don’t Cry” is just a cheap copy, even if, as is more than possible, the elongation happened first when “Don’t Cry” was written.

By the way, this is probably as good a place as any to mention that it is rapidly becoming apparent that the whole enterprise of writing about Use Your Illusion apart from the rest of GN’R stuff, as a different creature altogether, is
problematic. They had enough songs kicking around from their original songwriting sessions that many spilled over into *UYI*. I had “You Could Be Mine” categorized in my head as a post-*Appetite for Destruction* victory lap, then I go and check *AfD* out more closely and the eternal line, “With your bitch slap rappin’ and your cocaine tongue you get nothing done” is printed, between quotation marks, without explanation, in the liner notes.

Still, there is a difference. For an album whose most quoted lyrics include “turn around bitch I got a use for you,” from “It’s So Easy,” this thing is really itching to please. “Welcome to the Jungle,” as great as “Sweet Child O’ Mine,” establishes the Axl persona and the band’s musical Stones/’smith cred in a single song: not just the lost boy turned SM king thing, but the keening, stuttering *serpentine* he unveils like a deus ex machina. Tight, too: 4:30. “It’s So Easy” has a chorus as glossed out as grunge would later get. “Nightrain” is standard-fare overwrought 1980s hard rock, almost Bon Jovial. “Out ta Get Me” borders on filler, but of the Twisted Sister/Slade singalong variety. “Mr. Brown-stone,” the heroin song, has a tight lyrical conceit, with the syncopated beat skipping right into the “I used to do a little but a little wouldn’t do / So the little got more and more” calisthenics. Hard working, compositionally, for a song about lassitude. Then “Paradise City,” with its humongous chorus, Axl multitracking his voice to anticipate the throng and either Duff or another Gunner adding an initial bass part that encourages the question, Oak Ridge Boys? Plus a rave-up conclusion for still more fun N’ games. This is just the first side; I haven’t even mentioned the modern-rock keyboards that some craven soul snuck into “Think About You” in case another format was needed.

Country music and rhythm and blues are often compared to one another as genres that favor straightforwardness and a good story, with fans who stick by artists for years. Heavy metal belongs in this grouping as well: it’s equally aware of its audience in a manner that rock and jazz artistes would consider beneath them. Even while acting out painted libertinism and sonic overkill, metal artistes stop frequently during their shows to pump fans up. *Appetite for Destruction*, an album transitional enough that when it started Axl Rose had big hair, pursues far more of this call-for-response than *Use Your Illusion* would. Even the song “Rocket Queen,” which reputedly includes soundclips of the singer bonking someone in the recording studio (and the lit-major-ready lyric “I’m a sexual innuendo in this burned out paradise”), is basically a crowd please strip tease. The mood that music casts always outweighs lyrical specifics and the mood of *Appetite* is communal. Axl’s tormented streak is balanced by showmanship: he’s something like the Tim Curry ringleader in *Rocky Horror*, an equivalent instance
of the city performed for the suburbs and provinces.

Trying to draw his own line between right and wrong, Bob Christgau, who I have known for many years and been arguing with in my head for even longer, wrote: “Axl is a sucker for dark romantic abstractions—he doesn’t love Night Train, he loves alcoholism. And once that sweet child o’ his proves her devotion by sucking his cock for the portacam, the evil slut is ready for ‘See me hit you you fall down.’” (A line from “It’s So Easy.”) There are at least two problems with this. First of all, the stories that people tell about Guns N’ Roses are no worse than the stories that people tell about Chuck Berry, one of Bob’s all-time favorites—like the shit’n’piss Berry sex video that Lonn Friend, a crony of GN’R’s as editor of Rip magazine, describes sharing with his rock pals. And if you want to separate lyrics from life, I am not convinced that, had Chuck Berry been writing in the 1980s rather than the 1950s, his subject matter wouldn’t have included heroin, streetwalkers, and a girl whose daddy works in porno. Second: the ultimate dark romantic abstraction that Axl Rose loves most is being an unhinged rock star. Care to throw that baby out with the bilgewater? And if so, what’s left?

If in pigfuck New York, “One in a Million” was assumed to be parodic because by definition nothing at CBGB could be redneck, then in the state of Californication “It’s So Easy” passed for an insertion of “realism” into metal: the backstage brought frontstage. What stood out wasn’t what Axl participated in, but that it provoked him enough to embody its allure and squalor. Friend, a former Hustler writer who fell into editing a metal magazine (porn giving him perfect credentials for the job), writes about the late 1980s and early 1990s in his memoir Life on Planet Rock. Steven Tyler, Alice Cooper, Gene Simmons, Metallica, Motorhead, and all the rest love him, golf with him, trade favors, save for Kurt Cobain, who is creeped out, and Axl Rose. “My relationship with Axl was intellectual, professional, and distant,” Friend writes. “I respected him and he knew that. He was a true artist, tormented by demons, driven by the ineffable need to express and channel what was passing through his being. Whether his musical creation was born in Heaven or Hell is irrelevant. It took insight and patience to even attempt a connection with this extraordinary individual.”

“Turn around bitch I’ve got a use for you.” “Take me down to paradise city, where the grass is green and the girls are pretty.” “And when you’re high you never ever want to come down.” “Money burns.” “You’re fuckin’ crazy.” “Be my rubbermaid baby an’ we can do it all.” “I might be a little young but Honey I ain’t naïve.”
Where do we go now?

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Maxing out a skimpy catalog of three original albums, one a double but another really just two EPs, the Gunners and/or their handlers have never stopped flogging that dead horse. Early on, as part of the Use Your Illusion concept drawings, a covers album. Eventually, pulled from their Tokyo Dome set, a double VHS tape that is now a double DVD. Uniting compilers Axl, Slash, and Duff one last time (to date), a live compilation double CD. A video collection; surely they earned that much. And finally, against all their wills, when Geffen was utterly out of patience, a greatest hits album. (And where is the box set? And why do musicians inevitably revere their coffin boxes and hate their greatest hits, urns holding the moments they burned brightest?)

As I stretch out this book, prolong the moment of deciding whether I really do need to actually sit there and tick through track after track of a 30-track album I am nervous doesn’t merit the attention, I can surely empathize with all the recycling. I’m beginning to wade into UYT’s musical ripples, seeing what proved usable. I have heard live versions of some of the songs now. Not nearly as many as you might think, given that only 8 of the 22 songs on the Live discs came from UYI (9 if I can ever track down the cursed Japan- and vinyl-only take on “Coma”), and the Tokyo tapes were not much better. Maybe 14 out of the total 30 have gotten a mention. No “Back Off Bitch” or “Don’t Damn Me.” Whereas in both settings, AJD is virtually covered in its entirety. There is no questioning who the favored son is. Other fans have complained on Amazon about this. I am not alone. The Use Your Illusion stuff is paradoxically both too slick and too experimental compared to Appetite, which shakes its ass and waits for the cash to roll in.

Paul McCartney and Bob Dylan covers bookend the two UYI volumes, while the punk material is relegated to a separate disc altogether. UYI aims to be as classic as rock can be, classic as the decision live to preface big GN’R songs with snippets of kindred stuff by Pink Floyd, Black Sabbath, Alice Cooper, Grand Funk Railroad, and so on. Invariably, I have to look these references up on the internet. They aren’t part of my song-book the way the punk tunes are. Somehow, I lost a piece of myself to the album where Axl Rose followed a conception of rock so binding—so pompous—that it cost him his ability to be punk (as opposed to just spitting out the word punk, which he never lost).
Maybe that’s why, after his Indiana buddy Izzy Stradlin had left Guns N’ Roses, there was no way for Axl to jettison Izzy’s songwriting contributions to UYI, even at the expense of Rose’s own. He needed “Double Talkin’ Jive,” so he could dedicate it to a different adversary each night, and the hard rock family values sentiments of “Pretty Tied Up,” and “Bad Obsession,” which he introduces in Tokyo as “a song that we wrote about one year before ‘Mr. Brownstone,’ with the help of our friend West Arkeen, and some guy who, his name just escapes me.” Notice the way Axl insists, as he would with so much of the Use material, that this was no new direction, no betrayal of his audience, but bedrock GN’R stuff.

But the distance traveled is all too clear. “Move to the City” was a song that had appeared on the group’s bare-bones first EP, Live ?!*@ Like a Suicide, about a girl who is intrigued by the bright lights of the city but winds up working a corner. Standard Axl fodder, although another prominent Indiana native who felt the same pulls, with a brother whose songwriting prowess kept him in pencils, might have called her Sister Carrie. Dreiser: “When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse.” Rose: “You need to get a new what you please. You do what you gotta do for the money. At times you end up on your knees.” Walter Benn Michaels writes, in a pivotal essay on the novel, whose protagonist we should remember is as enticed by Broadway as Rose was by Hollywood, and ended up a theater star in the days before movie or rock stars: “in Sister Carrie, satisfaction itself is never desirable; it is instead the sign of incipient failure, decay, and inevitably death.” Rose: “You gotta move, you gotta move!” And move the song he did. For some fans, hearing this street-teen anthem as a seven-minute arena spectacle with three black female singers adding to the chorus and four horn players chiming in was pure Fat Elvis. I’d say pure Stones, remembering how they took Fred McDowell’s “You Gotta Move” for their shut-in masterwork Exile on Main Street, then threw one mass tour after another. Appetite undiminished, Rose imagined himself at that level. A rocker can’t get no satisfaction, or shouldn’t want any.

In Tokyo, Axl remains a street slut from the waist down, switching outfits on top but never losing his formfitting short shorts. “Nightrain” kicks off the set with that proverbial beating on the cowbell, then “Mr. Brownstone” and the Wings cover “Live and Let Die” and Izzy’s “Bad Obsession” and Duff doing his Misfits cover, “Attitude,” then more Izzy (“Pretty Tied Up”), then “Don’t Cry” introduced, here we go again, as “the first song we ever wrote in Guns N’
Roses,” then the oath “Double Talkin’ Jive.” Only now, nine songs in, does Axl finally present his current vision of things. “Civil War” features no fewer than four costume changes, as Rose exchanges Confederate and US flag outfits, then emerges in combat fatigues and finally a Jesus shirt. “Everybody’s fighting for the Promised Land”: we have moved from Appomattox to Hanoi to Beirut. This really is Fat Elvis: the king’s American trilogy, in as close of a copy as any great artist has managed since Neil Diamond. Not long after, it’s “November Rain,” with Axl at the piano in regal trim, tickling the ivory for three minutes and then cueing the potted orchestral effects.

The sequence places “November Rain” at the first tape’s end, altered from the show’s running order to let you take a well-deserved intermission at home. Throughout there is this tension between the songs GN’R perfected as “a glorified garage band,” to quote Slash from one of the tape’s canned featurettes, what we might call the Use material designed to serve the needs of arena rock, like “You Could Be Mine,” which kicks off the second volume, and the Illusion magnifications where Axl permits himself to go out of control. In early 1992, when this was filmed, these contrasts were not yet toxic. But to watch now is to see that only “November Rain” and perhaps “Civil War” have become the pathologically personal parade floats that Axl intended. “Estranged” is the encore, long and beautiful and supposed to cement the deal. It never even entered the US or British charts; has no place on the mercenary Geffen Greatest Hits. “Paradise City,” the final encore here, remains GN’R’s final encore in 2006 as well.

The Tokyo set is a moment frozen. Live Era, which refuses to say exactly where each of its double-CD worth of tracks derives from and which many think has been doctored to smooth out Axl’s voice, comes to us from the proverbial screening room on Sunset Boulevard, though it follows much the arc of the Tokyo set in its beginning and end, repeating the same two first and last cuts. Here, Axl is never hoarse, Slash never plays too long, and the Use Your Illusion world tour cranks on forever.

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But there are alternate endings. “The Spaghetti Incident?” is Guns N’ Roses as Mekons groupies and rock critics might have preferred them, which is to say the album that virtually every one of their fans despise. The specious Charles Manson controversy (still, what was the compulsion that made Axl need to smuggle onto every GN’R record a moment that he knew would make
everybody else cringe, from the girl being fucked inside “Rocket Queen” to “One in a Million” and UYI’s “My World”) matters far less than the olive branch “Ain’t It Fun.” That was a song that punk collectors knew from Peter Laughner, the Rocket from the Tombs and later Pere Ubu guitarist who, as Lester Bangs once wrote, died for wanting too much to be Lou Reed. Rockers from the metal-punk continuum swore by a version that passed from its Tombs cowriter Cheetah Chrome to the Dead Boys, sung there by Stiv Bators, who kind of died for wanting too much to be Jim Morrison. As the money line goes, “Ain’t it fun when your friends despise what you’ve become.” This is one way to remember GN’R—as the group that refused to let dissipation, shamanism bordering on onanism, pass from the rock arena. Improbably, “Ain’t It Fun” got enough rock radio airplay to make it onto Greatest Hits. The latter album is another way to recall Guns, I suppose: the garage band material as trimmed away as the Illusion excesses, and ample cover versions, including “Sympathy for the Devil” and a doo wop standard insisting that it was only rock and roll but we liked it.

And then there is the internet, where every man is a curator. Tomorrow it could all be gone, but on the day I focused on the site, YouTube.com claimed more than 1,700 Guns clips, certainly some duplicates, but still. There was the live version of “Coma,” Axl straining to pull off a Roger Daltrey performance, which is tough when you are also Pete Townshend. There was Stockholm in August of 1991, early days of the neverending tour, Rose looking ready for anything in a shirt that said “Martyr” with a big red slash through it, teasing that his current single went “you could go blind”—as if he were ever obligated to jerk off. And the band again, in Buenos Aires, summer 1993, the very last night of the tour, Axl horribly all but handing Gilby Clarke his walking papers onstage: “it was great working with you, the check is in the mail.” And on and on, every era of a vast stretch itemized and simultaneous: leaving no prisoners to fate in the late 1980s; murkily captured doing the same songs in 2002 and 2006, like a “My Michelle” with Sebastian Bach. A pixilated working version of “It’s So Easy,” the Erin Everly bondage dramatization (if you squint). Fans construct their own videos from foraged B-roll to give a visual complement to half-formed songs that have been played live but never officially released. It’s like, deprived of an encore, they are rushing the stage.

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The ampest GN’R compilation album is Welcome to the Videos, and as the
allusion implies it’s got what you need, even if “You Could Be Mine” was left off for intellectual property reasons (those Terminator men don’t come cheap) and one misses the “Knocking on Heaven’s Door” performance clip, which got countless MTV airplay back when. These short features are more Greatest Investments than Greatest Hits; here, the seven-figure “Estranged” production remains preserved in its own aquatic juices and UYI really is the biggest album that GN’R ever made.

For it’s surprising, given what they could have done, how Guns avoided making big videos the first time around. As it does musically, “Welcome to the Jungle” establishes everything you need to know iconically. Hayseed Axl gets off the bus and is immediately confronted by a hustler and sees a woman adrift, watches a psycho version of himself on TV through a gated shop window, then morphs into the lead singer of this outrageous band we see outgrowing their audience. Interspersed are images of cops cattle-prodding people, models on billboards, and soldiers on patrol, images that take over the song as one of the Axis is strapped down and forced to watch. He is a triangulated personality from the start: smalltown boy, one-in-a million star, and nut job trying to channel the two. But until Use Your Illusion, the rest are essentially performance clips: nods to punk in the T-shirts of the backstage “Sweet Child O’ Mine” (long before even the cast of Friends started wearing them on TV, references to CBGB and the band TSOL resonated); arena-arrival on “Paradise City,” and that’s it until the in-studio “Patience.” No “Nightrain,” “Mr. Brownstone,” or “Rocket Queen.” No wonder Slash and Duff found the turn to megavideos abrasive: part of GN’R’s rough charm was that they kept the arena rock mythicizing of the festival and the backstage pass viable through the MTV dissolve.

“Don’t Cry,” however, immediately marks a break, with its handpainted title and credits, its opening image of Axl as Napoleon in rags, stumbling across the snow in his own personal Russia, and then the Stephanie Seymour stuff. Is it possible that the “Don’t Cry” video is more successful, more distinctive and enduring, than the song? A couple of the sequences are indelible: Slash drives his car over the cliff and then plays his guitar solo over the wreckage; Rose lands another triple Axl—one of himself in a hospital bed, another young and innocent, and the final one giving a confident salute before ducking into a mirror. Ditto for “November Rain,” and it’s interesting how Slash again carves out a space for himself with rock god posturing at a technological level that makes plain the equally godlike financing behind him: that shot of him in the churchyard soloing, taken from either an enormous crane or a helicopter. The wedding scene, as vast a coronation as MTV had ever staged, switches as
quickly as the end section of the song comes out of its main course into another funeral scene, this time not for “W. Axl Rose, 1962–1990,” as in “Don’t Cry,” but the SS character.

Beyond nostalgia and personal reactions, I have no critical language for contemplating what it means for an MTV video to enter the pantheon. In some way, and the key examples included Madonna’s slightly earlier “Like a Prayer,” R.E.M.’s “Losing My Religion,” and Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” the “Don’t Cry”/“November Rain” near-trilogy defined a moment where part of what sealed a song was a set of images that could reward repeat consumption. Since nobody collected these videos at the time, they were an abstraction: an innuendo, let’s say. It wasn’t exactly that rockers were horning in on the movies and insisting that they could be both the director and the star. This was about the celebrity expressionist as elected Rorschach blot; we were presumed to want direct access into not only the commercial products of blockbuster artists but also their subconscious. They were not merely living our dreams, as movie stars had; now they were dreaming our dreams, too.

For GN’R, however, the Illusion ended long before that album’s cycle was supposed to, which leaves many of the clips on the video reel forlorn: unwatched by anybody, relatively speaking. “Yesterdays,” that unlikely humanizing of the falsetto deus ex machina, plays out like an AJD out-take, just the boys in a rehearsal studio, but older now, Axl doing the Axl bob and weave for just a quick frame or two. “The Garden,” actually directed by Del James, the man who dreamed Rose’s dreams and became caretaker of his diminished principality, is a psychedelic horror show—note the billboard for one Tom Sawyer, appearing in a male porn revue. The “Dead Horse” clips of Axl from the neverending UYI tour make the line “sometimes I feel like I’m beating a dead horse” seem all too literal. “Garden of Eden” is entirely filmed from a single lens, positioned as in a Hype Williams video for a bug’s-eye-view of GN’R, well mostly Axl, since this angle makes all but the front of the triangle virtually eye gibberish. They, he, are raving; no one is listening or watching; the fall of the group has actually become the subtext.

And finally “Estranged,” all seven figures of it, the final star turn that Gloria Swanson’s character couldn’t coax out of Mr. DeMille. Is the little boy a stand-in for Stephanie Seymour? Should I even try to watch it at that level? Axl is escorted by the men in white from his hilltop Malibu home. Various images resurrect the “Jungle” video and GN’R’s Sunset Strip days to show a past life that is now fully over: Slash solos in front of the Rainbow Bar & Grill. The words illusion, estranged, and disillusion are defined onscreen. Axl gets off the
boat in the worst way, but ultimately swims with the dolphins instead of sleeping with the fishes. I am pretty sure that I have seen this bust of a blockbuster exactly one time before.

* * *

Since *Use Your Illusion* and “The Spaghetti Incident?” Guns N’ Roses have released two studio songs: a forgettable cover of “Sympathy for the Devil” (at least “Knocking on Heaven’s Door” and “Live and Let Die” felt like clever choices) and the *End of Days* soundtrack non-hit “Oh My God.” The latter reminds me of this image I once saw in I think a *Hellraiser* comic, of a strung-out character sitting fully clothed in a bathtub, covered in flies. There are accounts of Rose and Jimmy Iovine, the record producer turned Interscope mogul who had become the new David Geffen, staying up all night mixing the thing. Well, it’s a neat trick they pulled off: it’s impossible to make your ears focus the buzzing. If the idea is a depiction of absolute self-fragmentation, like something from Paul Bowles, then it succeeds on its own terms. There is a deep-voiced Axl Rose, too, featured at various times on *Use Your Illusion* but not before, an authoritarian parody who comes off as something that only Jello Biafra would find funny and only a heavy metal musician would find avant-garde. By “Oh My God” it seems to have eaten the rest of Axl. Or perhaps the growler is WAR.

Somehow *Use Your Illusion* is the key to all of this, the defining work in the GN’R catalog, dead center between outright triumph and debilitating paralysis. It won’t resolve anything, but time for a listen.
Chapter Five
Get in the Ring

Here is what came out when I finally put the damn thing on. There is no pretext of definitiveness to my conclusions: that has never been the point of this little odyssey. GN’R weren’t definitive. They were a mess. But few musical experiences come so equipped for loosing a swirl of associations as the perfectly titled *Use Your Illusion*, which despite depositing some 30 million copies upon this planet resides permanently in the realm of fads, follies, and delusions. Axl Rose screamed like a crooner and on this album he rocked like a soap star: each song became another turn inside the blockbuster psychodrama. I wrote as fast as I could, then edited some for the sake of kindness. But it stays in bits and pieces, the stuff out of which record reviews are usually assembled into a coherent conclusion. In this case, that would be disrespectful.

For old time’s sake, play the CDs in your stereo as you read along.

*Use Your Illusion I (The Yellow One)*

(1) “Right Next Door to Hell”

I used to hear basslines like the one that leaps off this right at the opening on 1980s stuff put out by the hardcore punk label Dischord. Duff probably did too. A hint of redolence in a context of laying waste. Pre-grunge, no landmarks to position by, they start with thrash (the word grunge buried) rather than boogie woogie glam.

Axl speeding, on the couch, actually invoking Freud, which might be even be crazier than invoking hardcore. And gloriously incomprehensible: “Hell, we don’t even have ourselves to blame.”

(2) “Dust N’ Bones”

A band that was trying to prove something might put a song they were sure about on at the start. Like, for instance, “Welcome to the Jungle” last time. Here,
we go from a blistering opener that ends before it finds a melody to this shuffling Izzy druggy blues. Two throwaways in a row. In the notorious tradition of GN’R live, are they now even showing up late for their own album?

(3) “Live and Let Die”

“This ever changing world in which we live in.” Axl Rose recognizes a fellow master of diction.

Reggae skank at 1:18. Four-second stretching of the word “hell …” from 1:28. All out run through the main riff around 1:34. Break off into tender melody circa 1:47. This Bond movie theme aimed at soundtrack eclecticism back when McCartney’s group teased through the original track. The cover sketches in the studio its eventual arena rock realization. When Rose hocks the phlegm that is as stuck to his vibrato as Dylan’s, and just as useful, imagine him bent over the microphone stand. When the boys work the track’s sirenlike pulsations, imagine him tearing from stage runner to stage runner under some strobes. You gotta move, you gotta move.

(4) “Don’t Cry”

Am I too hard on this song? Like it matters. They wanted a “Dream On,” they waited to release this until they were big enough to actually get one and what fails as memorable melody succeeds as sneakily complex songform. But in the 1980s YouTube club clips this song is freakish, a ballad in a sea of punk and disorderly. Here, it’s a sure shot: “give me a whisper” (whisper sound), “give me sigh” (exhale). Cue guitar solo, faceless when parted from the million-dollar video treatment.

Still, how could I have forgotten the most phallocentric goodbye ever? “Please remember how I felt inside you.” Or phallogocentric, to be deconstructionistically precise: “Please remember that I never lied / And please remember how I felt inside,” as in my orgasms, unlike yours, could not be faked!

(5) “Perfect Crime”

On album, “Right Next Door to Hell” gets priority; live, this speedburning clone of it did, because you can’t exactly scream “too many eyes are on me” to an audience, whereas “it’s a perfect crime, motherfucker” is just Jim Dandy. Note all the tricks to turn stub into song: announcing the exact moment when the song
has 1:09 to go, having a chorus out of “Bohemian Rhapsody” count 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8. And introducing Deep Downer, the bass voice of baseness, aka WAR. “Ostracized but that’s all right.”

“You wanna fuck with me?” Just like the rappers with the Scarface reference—who says his American Studies spongings cut off at hip-hop, multiculturalism, and post-1965 immigration? Harder They Come, too: “Don’t fuck with me.”

(6) “You Ain’t the First”

But “you been the worst.” Lead vocals and solo copyright: Stradlin. As they say all the time, shaking their heads, to one of the doctors on Grey’s Anatomy: Izzy!

On the kind of LP that GN’R grew up with, we would already be done with the first side.

(7) “Bad Obsession”

More paddlin’ Stradlin. That pounding on a cowbell to start a song cliché of theirs makes its first appearance. Piano couplets in just the right Stonesy spot. Exile in GN’Rville?

Those who do not know their roots are condemned to suffer harmonica.

“Punk!” as an already bemansioned Axl says it to end the song here is exactly synonymous with “bitch” in the next one.

(8) “Back Off Bitch”

The guitar chords sound valedictory at the opening. Then the surge, the familiar GN’R surge, “whoa baby, pretty baby.” A near apology for what he’s about to say before the profanities start. Gentle, gentle. Funny. As I recall, originally I heard this song as such a provocation. Now, after checking out the early version on YouTube, this take feels giftwrapped. But maybe that’s why it’s so unusual: instead of a “Perfect Crime” rant, this depositing of turd on the bedsheat of his unloved is a five minute, mid-tempo, no-big-deal rocker, jovial to the point of resembling a country song. Maybe Toby Keith should try it.

“I don’t even want to hear your story,” that was the payoff line. I had completely forgotten.
(9) “Double Talkin’ Jive”

This is why I wasn’t looking forward to listening to UYI so closely. More Izzy prattle, more Deep Downer, Slash doing Spanish guitar tripe. The only redemptive touch is that they just give up on the track in midstream and fade it down, letting nothing but flamenco acoustics take over altogether. Which is to say, goodbye Guns N’ Roses. It’s time for “November Rain.”

(10) “November Rain”

Live, he would sit and play the piano for a spell before the storm noises would come in. Here, that’s done with less than a minute in and he is singing by 1:15. The whole thing takes less than nine minutes. So in a way, this elaborate composition has actually been stripped down for the studio.

Piano and strings start us out; then a sturm und drams counterpart; and an opening verse, each line taking a good while, with “November Rain” a refrain rather than chorus. Next verse, same as the first, with Axl’s unshaven screeches played off against an angel choir. Then a chorus of sorts, leading to a bridge that allows in some power chords and sets up the guitar solo, limpidly carried by the unhurried quality of the changes. And an ending—final verse and refrain. Standard. Except that it doesn’t end: violins pick the pace up, Slash’s falsetto guitar and Deep Downer dance jigs around the fire, and there is an upended, affirming version of the near-chorus: “Everybody needs somebody. You’re not the only one.” A superstar sentiment: antisolipsism.

But that is all just bookkeeping. The main thing that I hear in “November Rain” at this point is completeness. It’s a blessing that the rest of UYI isn’t nearly so accomplished.

(11) “The Garden”

This could be called GN’R psychedelia if the garden wasn’t just another name for the jungle and Del James wasn’t the cowriter. So: psychoticdelia? At least Deep Downer is real for once: Alice Cooper, who recites a line worth retaining: “It’s a crazy man’s utopia.”

And already, after the proceedings were so slow to really start, it’s like I have been listening to this album for days, weeks.

(12) “Garden of Eden”
In just eight seconds, with Deep Downer sneering and Slash snarling and his own synth effects adding flying debris for him to pilot his voice through, Axl sings: “Most organized religions make a mockery of humanity / Our governments are out of control / The Garden of Eden is just another graveyard / Said if they had someone to buy it / Said I’m sure they’d sell my soul.” In the video, the lyrics tumbled across the screen as fast as he somehow sang them—a cyborg effect. In my living room, it seems more clinical.

But maybe Rose is just paying attention, what with GN’R’s music being used to assault Noriega in his bunker and the first Gulf War night bombings looking like a video game on the same media channels that can’t decide if he’s a godsend or devil spawn.

Anyway, one line is clear: “suck on that!”

(13) “Don’t Damn Me”

Axl at his phlegmiest vocally and clearest mentally, finding a quick march pace you can just follow without the lyric sheet to encompass overlong lines that make the abuse victim and cracking-up rock star one entity. Maybe they edited out his breaths, but the effect is still dazzling, not least because he’s making sense. The music pauses just in time for us all to gulp air (“I know you don’t want to hear me crying”), then accelerates again.

This might be the greatest song on either Use Your Illusion to have no existence in the Guns N’ Roses universe today. Did they ever perform it live? Not that I can tell. It’s almost like “The Spaghetti Incident?”: cool to all the wrong people.

(14) “Bad Apples”

More rote glam boogie woogie and Exile copping.

“And when the shit hits the fan” note: When the Shit Hits the Fans is the fabled bootleg of current GN’R member Tommy Stinson’s real band, the Replacements. He’s now a Replacement twice over.

(15) “Dead Horse”

At the beginning and end, Axl sings suicide odes to the accompaniment of some very basic guitar, like he’s making a home demo; you hear what sounds like the
tape disintegrating on him. That tribute to Johnny Thunders falling off the edge of the world is the coherent part. The rest is plundered Americana: girl-group type recitation, stuff about an old cowboy, aw shucks son of a gun talk, pick an archetype. But maybe that’s to their credit. When they looked outside the Aerosmith and Stones metal box, there were no guidelines. And anyway: try and imagine Johnny Thunders on a horse.

(16) “Coma”

Music grinding like Metallica and shooting free like power-pop, Axl comatose yet still claiming to be standing at the crossroads, Deep Downer saying “zap the son of a bitch again.” Listening to the whole record now, it’s scary how much Axl put into the thing, not just “November Rain” but both Gardens and “Don’t Damn Me” and “Dead Horse” and now this minisuite, which if it had gone after America like Green Day’s “Jesus of Suburbia,” rather than Edgar Allan Poeing (you know, telltale heart) the rock star alienation, might have gotten the longform video I can’t quite believe that it didn’t get. Maybe a different group should make it: tribute videos, dramatizing songs that lack them, would have so much more to offer than tribute albums..

Far in, and once again humanity tumbles out of Axl at the strangest moments, like the so-corny-I-love-it finale of “Rocket Queen.” Is he going to ruin this nice end with deep voiced guy again?

No. Good.

Use Your Illusion II (The Blue One)

(1) “Civil War”

Axl Rose’s American Studies continue: after the Cool Hand Luke sample, this starts with a whistled “when Johnny comes marching home.” And then he launches into another national tradition—the jeremiad. No surprise that the topic is violence, resisting which is his life struggle (see “Patience”). Once again, the level of ambition from this supposed sleazeball is remarkable: is he really quoting the writings of a Peruvian Maoist?

But if “One in a Million” was too easily read as redneck racism, “Civil War” shouldn’t be automatically taken as a liberal platitudinous either. More like rock star Peronism (why do you think Madonna was attracted to Evita?): a kind of authoritarian populism that encourages us to put our faith in power chords.
Those are some big ones that launch the line “My hands are tied”—Axl as Bono, only Bono learned to keep that note out of his music. Still, the sentiments are fatalist; his hands are tied. (Loves those bondage metaphors.) And civil war is the perfect topic for a head case.

(2) “14 Years”

This never came off at all and they made it the second track on this volume. The outtakes disc, the way Elvis Costello albums have expanded in reissue form to always include an entire second CD, has become a reissues commonplace, but here it was all just mixed together in the original.

(3) “Yesterdays”

The basic kick drum instantly takes the listener backstage sonically. Then, just before one minute, the big GN’R machine cranks in again and you are faceless in the stands. Wince at every moment like that, or the final whispered “yesterday,” and you will have no choice but to consign virtually all of this band, this man, to oblivion. Drink in the way that the two realities torment each other, however, and you can really go places. Like the couplet from his Bible boyhood, which in a sense, if you buy rock as religion, concerns the same thing: “prayer in my pocket / and no hand in destiny.”

(4) “Knocking on Heaven’s Door”

What was I saying about rock as religion? Dylan would never have milked the song like this, so that, a believer’s willingness to overdo spectacle, becomes GN’R’s main original contribution. This song, like so few here, is still being played by GN’R today. A pledge of allegiance to communion inside the arena, where so many American megachurches base their services today.

(5) “Get in the Ring”

And speaking of arenas … Beginning with a crowd chant, this slice of imperious populism builds the audience into the song from the beginning, ironic since the tune itself was rarely done live. And doubly ironic, since this funny-once sentiment has dancing riffage so damn jaunty and urgent that I never get tired of hearing it. Check out that little bridge about 85 seconds in, too. “We’ll build a world out of anarchy” has never sounded so bubblegum. Count the number of
different sections in what presents itself as a toss-off, and is anything but.

Deep Downer makes his first appearance on *UYI II*. “Pain!”

(6) “Shotgun Blues”

Not really a song, this continuation of “Get in the Ring” is another raving stub of a tune. Funny how these albums are remembered almost always for their piano ballads. As he says, “I know I gotta move.” Then he says it even better: “I’m wired on indignation.”

And then he says, can’t not say, “fucking pussy.”

(7) “Breakdown”

Fifteen years later, “Breakdown” is the song off *UYI* that is just beginning to kick in for me. (Thirty-song messthetics will do that to a listener.) The jumpy chords from “Get in the Ring” are pushing this one along, too, in the early going, and then the piano adds even more, Elton John style. It takes a full three minutes before he gets to the punchline: “Breakdown!”

Deep Downer is all for that, of course. “Let me hear it now.” Axl used to dance with “Mr. Brownstone.” Now he makes heroin addiction seem peachy keen by comparison.

And then he gets scholarly, finding an appropriately schizophrenic slice of Americana to end the song, a long monologue taken out of the hippie film *Vanishing Point*, where a driver takes a bet to drive to California (where else?) in some impossibly short amount of time because he intends to court oblivion. And as he battles traffic cops across the desert West he becomes a kind of folk hero, cheered on by a blind black DJ that Axl now quotes from, whose hectorings can somehow reach the driver’s radio from any place on the continent. Dancing in his head.

(8) “Pretty Tied Up”

In the twisted context of *UYI*, Izzy’s willingness to rhapsodize bondage is actually a straightforward narrative, like a country song about a working woman who likes to drink on Saturday nights taken to a hard rock comfort level.

And still, with the oft-quoted verse about the band that fell apart (“time went by and it became a joke”), the song goes in a wholly other direction. The
blockbuster pop paradigm intrudes into the song in a way that happens all the time. You can’t call it avant-garde since by definition it’s anything but, yet there is always this note of living in a realm that few could hope to reach—unattached hands clutching at you as your basic reality. Maybe this is Izzy’s resignation song, and Axl is the one who isn’t satisfied without some pain.

(9) “Locomotive”

All too rare “Rocket Queen”—type groove N’ Roses. Yet where that song pledged loyalty to the stripper, this lacks any outward perspective—“I know it looks like I’m insane,” he just said, and “gonna watch the big screen in my head.” Another song, like “Estranged,” that wanted to be a big anthem and just didn’t get there. But from the other perspective: he’s harmonizing with himself again, racing out thoughts that virtually nobody has time to parse, cackling because he just can’t stop. It’s a spectacle all its own.

(10) “So Fine”

Dedicated to Johnny Thunders by Duff, commemorating broken men, which is to say Axl too. “Now I see the stars all right, I want to reach up and grab one for you!” And cuing more bad Slash guitar. Somewhere, in the UYI endless tour that this album conjures like a souvenir, Rose is changing his shirt to gear up again.

(11) “Estranged”

Here we go. “Talking to yourself, and nobody’s home.” Might be up there with the beginning of “November Rain,” really this song is just as powerful—or I have pro-pogandized myself into believing that.

An album you play in sequence. Videos and singles come out periodically. What was the final consumer experience of UYI supposed to be? Maybe to just look at the package and feel an echo of how much what was in there and also what was external to there moved you at different times. The album as memory book. Oh wait—

—I’m drifting. The opening section, ending at the second of those unbearable alone!s that Axl always sang live with a sarcastic grimace, is just three minutes. Not an indulgent length. But then a middle passage to another place, a piano section following a guitar section and then full band working together on a theme that has something, not sure what, and this transition has now been going
on for about as long as the original song, like the way that UYI ate up their whole group—

—and finally Axl comes back in on top: “with all the changing seasons of my life. Maybe I’ll get it right next time.” And: “you don’t walk so loud and you don’t talk so proud anymore,” which is “Like a Rolling Stone” translated to the Elton arena as much as “Knocking on Heaven’s Door,” and hey, gimme shelter, “I see the storm is getting closer,” only his Robert Plant voice, my God, was this song supposed to be that other “Heaven” song, are we climbing a stairway?

Not a chance.

“I’ll never find anyone to replace you, guess I’ll have to make it through this time”—

Pause for key words, straight from Del James.

—“Without you.”

So yeah, it isn’t a big hit, like in the story, but it is the story. An unhorrrible song that achieves the horrible fake rock that fiction is always constructing. If a perfected experience of that is what you’re into. (What can I say, I am.)

(12) “You Could Be Mine”

The opening is amazing, another example of what they routinely got away with, more than a minute before Axl sings and all commercial, the “Jungle” thing played out as a sequel with a power upgrade, just like T2 is a sequel. Of course, no story worth mentioning, not like “Jungle.” Just that catchy, enigmatic line. Whereas Arnold was down to “hasta la vista baby.”

And the riff that dances for you solo in the break, around three minutes in, that endures.

Something about you can call my lawyers? The songs never escapes the blockbuster life topic. This one even works up a lineage: the “seen that movie too” bit references a song on the double-LP Goodbye Yellowbrick Road, an earlier era’s version of a monstrously long pop record.

(13) “Don’t Cry”

A failure squared until it is emblematic and not exactly a failure. The pressures of form: the song Rose felt he needed, the stature he felt he deserved, the sense that what had seemed like a joke on her, on all of them, was a joke on him, so
take comfort.

Also, if you hit the same note at the end as you had in the beginning, just more torn and frayed, then nothing has moved forward. Gothic imperatives that have long counterposed Puritan skepticism to the smiley faced motto of American revivalism: “all may be saved.”

(14) “My World”

So let’s see: four endings. “Estranged,” which wasn’t successful enough to become a true encore song. “You Could Be Mine,” which was. “Don’t Cry,” which maybe got there halfway. And finally, the let down. Deep Downer gets the final word. GN’R are his one man band now. For an album on this scale, the finale is all but an unmarked grave.

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There is still a part of me that wants to make the perfect version of Use Your Illusion. It would have to be no more than 80 minutes now, rather than the 90 of my original cassette, to match the maximum length of the CDs that most of us use for home taping now. And since the real purpose would be to fashion a rival to Appetite for Destruction, the only option would be to begin with “November Rain,” the one track that has gone down through time as a rock classic almost on par with “Welcome to the Jungle.” So let me suggest this for posterity: lop off the whole first half of volume one. Go from “November Rain,” track 10, to the end, following the original sequence, minus only the minor “Bad Apples.” New running order: “The Garden” (which, as a Del James cowrite, matters too much to have been left off my original winnow), “Garden of Eden,” “Don’t Damn Me,” “Dead Horse,” and “Coma.” Deep Axl juju.

The two songs conspicuously left out by this arrangement, “Don’t Cry” and “Back Off Bitch,” are holdovers from the early days that are best seen in YouTube clips of GN’R at the Roxy in 1986. The first half of the first volume in general nods backwards and sideways, to Izzy, who wrote or cowrote virtually all of it. At “November Rain,” the new Axl takes over and it is his album that I insist on preserving. Not the other things this album apparently was: a sop, in places, to Slash, Duff, and especially Izzy; a knee-jerk assumption that “really long album has to mean tracks that sound like Exile on Main Street”; and a guilty effort to disguise Axl’s castle inside a faux Appetite for Destruction. Though perhaps we could insert “Bitch” onto Chinese Democracy, since Paul Huge, the
cowriter of the thing and another old Axl Indiana buddy, hijacked those sessions worse than anybody if the rumors are to be believed.

The second half of my new UYI would still begin just like the old one did: “Civil War.” From there, “Yesterdays” and “Breakdown.” Collectively three of Rose’s most impassioned attempts to connect with humanity. “You Could Be Mine,” the album’s other big hit and a very different sentiment (was Izzy Stradlin ever involved in a song that didn’t entail mocking a woman?), would sort of symbolically take us into the encore. Applaud, visit the fridge, come back. And yes, the first encore remains “Estranged,” failure though it was. We aren’t hiding anything. Finally “Get in the Ring,” which even now, a museum piece, strikes me as the most rocking joint on the record because it’s the most ranting, and rocking as ranting is what Axl had to offer here, along with therapy ballads and slippages into utter catatonia.

Twelve songs, just like Appetite, though with an average running time per track of more than six minutes. Of course, this is 2006, so we could also make it a DualDisc. Flip the thing and you would get a DVD section: the live “Knocking on Heaven’s Door” to warm things up, then the resurrected trilogy: “Don’t Cry,” “November Rain,” and a special fan-generated version of an “Estranged” video with clips of Erin Everly, Stephanie Seymour, and Axl Rose getting steadily more grotesque over the past fifteen years to really bring it all home. Or if need be live versions, like Noblesville, Indiana, summer of 1991, where young Axl says: “We should have a record, no wait, that’s two, that’s four records coming out here in the middle of July. Two CDs, and this is my personal little baby from the set, this is something called ‘Estranged.’” Or Oklahoma, 1992, where after “maybe I’ll get it right next time” he says, clearly, “I doubt it,” but where he pulls off the final notes in perfect vocal tone, sealing airtight a virtuosic arena moment, and then gives a tight bow.

But of course Use Your Illusion: The Perfect (Crime) Version will never be finished. I am already doubting my song selection. Not “Locomotive”? Yes, in some ways it’s a second-rate “Rocket Queen,” but that song has turned into my “Yesterdays” of AJD and the “Locomotive” lyrics—for all that I had no memory of them when I was constructing Illusion from memory—are superbly illustrative:

I bought me an illusion
An I put it on the wall
I let it fill my head with dreams
And I had to have them all
But oh the taste is never so sweet
As what you’d believe it is—
   Well I guess it never is
It’s these prejudiced illusions
   That pump the blood
To the heart of the biz

And then later, same song, just to convince us: “I’ve worked too hard for my illusions to throw them all away.” Surely, that’s more complicated stuff than “Dead Horse,” even if I’ll be singing “sick of this life / Not like you’d care” to the grave. And in the end that sense of complexity and churn is what I want from *Use Your Illusion*, what I have wanted from Garth, Kurt, Courtney, Trent, DMX, and every other overblown pop act to cross my circuits.

To listen to the albums now, at the end of my research and writing, is to notice all the ways that Axl Rose was anticipating his decline and fall far in advance of the rest of us. “Well I jumped into the river too many times to make it home / I’m out here on my own, and drifting all alone / If it doesn’t show give it time.” That’s from “Estranged,” a song I don’t remember paying any particular attention to in 1991 that now seems utterly central. For that matter, Rose put himself in the room with the camera and the screen on *Sunset Boulevard* long before I did, in “Coma,” another lyric that hadn’t stuck with me: “But I’m still out here waiting / Watching reruns of my life.” It has often been the case, following the deaths of Cobain, B.I.G., and Shakur, that fans went back and heard foreshadowings in their lyrics, but to predict a kind of living drift? Surely that’s odd.

Pop culture loves a redemption tale, and Axl’s is waiting for him any time that he wants it. It still seems hard to believe that he could go the full Joe Strummer and resist assembling the original GN’R, more or less, for another go ’round. But albums rarely get that kind of second act. As much as the singer, *UYI* remains an album in limbo, asked to do far more than any collection of recordings should. I hope that some new collection of songs by some version of Guns will one day let it at least be restless in peace.

*Was Use Your Illusion* a misunderstood great work of art? No. But what a
collision of elements—and Axl Rose was far from the only casualty in the forces he got swept up in. Like Nixon, his vision of the center seems steadily more leftist as time marches on. Arnold Schwarzenegger is the governor of the state I now live in. My daughter goes to daycare in a federal building named after Ronald Reagan, located just blocks from the intersection where Axl Rose’s protagonist gets off the bus in “One in a Million.” With art galleries poking at homeless encampments, the area has been converting to luxury apartments so quickly that the city recently imposed a moratorium. The music industry is currently selling fewer albums than at any time since 1994. Downloading or no, before long sales may slip behind where they were when there were still seasons of the blockbuster. A recent academic study that pilfered the title Rockonomics from Marc Eliot talked about how the concert market has accepted many fewer overall ticket sales in order to spectacularly raise prices on the best seats for a handful of performers.

In retrospect, “One in a Million” spoke to subjects that continue to polarize America, and the arena rock experience looks different in the rearview mirror than it did hitting commentators in the face. Arguably, rock’s toughest impulse to assimilate is its mixture of crudeness and pretense, the way its reigning star can scream “back off bitch” in one song and “when I look into your eyes I can see a love restrained” in the next. Perhaps that proved he had something still to learn about taste. But perhaps his assessors did too.

If nothing else, Axl Rose can have this: No one in the CD era ever attempted a bigger album. The vogue for a blockbuster approach to rock and pop demanded of performers a level of personal spectacle which strained the compact between artist and fan, leader and bandmate, rock and religion. Axl Rose was a true believer, a competitor, a born loser with what looked like a winning hand, attempting to make albums as monumental in scope as David Geffen’s profits, willing to inflate and even distort his personality accordingly. Just about my age but culturally from another galaxy, wired on indignation, conjuring a crazy man’s utopia, hands tied, the only witness to the nature of his crime. Maybe he’ll get it right next time.
More praise for the 33 1/3 series:

We…aren’t naive enough to think that we’re your only source for reading about music (but if we had our way…watch out). For those of you who really like to know everything there is to know about an album, you’d do well to check out Continuum’s “33 1/3” series of books.—Pitchfork

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Music writing done right—Tape Op magazine

Admirable… 33 1/3 has broken new ground—THES (UK)

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At their best, these Continuum books make rich, thought-provoking arguments for the song collections at hand—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

A really remarkable new series of books—*The Sunday News-Herald*, Michigan

A brilliant idea—*The Times* (London)

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**Meat Is Murder**

My personal favorite of the batch has to be Joe Pernice’s autobiographic-fiction fantasia…Over little more than a hundred pages, he manages a vivid recollection of a teenage New England Catholic school life circa 1985, in all its conflict and alienation, sexual fumblings and misplaced longing—*Tangents*

Pernice’s novella captures these feelings of the despair of possibility, of rushing out to meet the world and the world rushing in to meet you, and the price of that meeting. As sound-tracked by the Smiths—*Drowned in Sound*

Pernice hits his mark. The well-developed sense of character, plot and pacing shows that he has serious promise as a novelist. His emotionally precise imagery can be bluntly, chillingly personal—*The Boston Weekly Dig*

Continuum…knew what they were doing when they asked songwriter Joe Pernice to pay homage to the Smiths’ *Meat Is Murder*—*Austin American-Statesman*

Pernice’s writing style reminded me of Douglas Coupland’s: the embodiment of youthful vitality and innocent cynicism, clever, quickwitted, and aware of the ridiculous cultural symbols of his time—*Stylus Magazine* (University of Winnipeg)

**Forever Changes**

Love fan Andrew Hultkrans obsesses brilliantly on the rock legends’ seminal disc—*Vanity Fair*

**Dusty in Memphis**

Warren is a greatly gifted good heart, and I love him. Read his book, listen to his record, and you will too—Stanley Booth, author of *The True Adventures of the Rolling Stones*

Warren Zanes…is so in love with Dusty Springfield’s great 1969 adventure in tortured Dixie soul that he’s willing to jump off the deep end in writing about it. Artfully blending academic citation, personal memoir and pungent commentary from *Dusty in Memphis* principals such as producer Jerry Wexler, Zanes uses the record as a springboard into the myths and true mysteries of Southern life—*Rolling Stone* (4 star review)
James Brown Live at the Apollo

Masterful—*The Big Takeover*

Exemplary…Most astonishing, however, is Wolk’s conjecture that to avoid recording distortion, the riotous album captured “James Brown holding back”—*Mojo* (UK)

Let It Be (Replacements)

These are solid short-short stories with bona fide epiphanies—that they shed light on Meloy’s past only makes them more engaging—*The Village Voice*

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