

Rockin' to My Other Life

By Dr Lee Chung Horn, Editorial Board Member



Creators of a new guitar vocabulary, NYC band Sonic Youth updated the noise-rock innovations of Hendix and the Velvet Underground. They had no airs and were very nice to talk to.

Some people have other lives. I'm one of these people, and my other life revolves around music.

No, I'm not a part-time musician, although I play a bit of rather spotty piano, some equally rudimentary guitar, several brass and woodwind instruments, and hauled around a clattery drum as an eight-year old boy in the school band.

No, you won't find me at SSO concerts. I'm not very fond of karaoke either, though friends say my rendition of *By the Time I Get to Phoenix* is very Glen Campbell, and the best they ever heard. (Tip: I suspect people who enjoy karaoke don't often know this song. They much prefer *My Way*, *Green Green Grass of Home*, or *Sometimes When We Touch*.)

Instead, when I'm not attending to patients, and thinking of insulin regimes and blood sugar levels, a substantive part of my time is spent listening to, researching and writing about music, like album and concert reviews, commentaries, editorials and think pieces.

In my other life, I'm a music journalist.

Wait, this gets stranger. I'm a rock music journalist. That's right. My passion is not Beethoven's *Sonata in C Minor* or *Opus 111*. It is R.O.C.K. – as in electric guitars, full-tilt drums, flying hair, Bob Dylan, Aerosmith, The Stones, Grateful Dead, Genesis, David Bowie, Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, Janis Joplin, The Byrds and The Faces.

To normal medical folks who enjoy music, but are not particularly obsessed about it, I would seem eccentric. Rock music? Isn't that a bit rebellious? People who are more youthful, and in step with the times (that is, music that came out in the last five to ten years), may find me quite hip as I seem to share some common musical tastes with them:

Pretenders, Springsteen, Nirvana, Pixies, R.E.M., Stereolab, Elvis Costello, Sonic Youth, Patti Smith, Spiritualized, Prefab Sprout and The Smiths. And this list gets more esoteric, and, er, weirder – Modest Mouse, Hidden Cameras, Tortoise, Manishevitz, Preston School of Industry, Half Man Half Biscuit, Ted Leo and The Pharmacists, Hrvatski, Devendra Banhart, Les Savy Fav, Camera Obscura, Carla Bozulich, The Fall, Califone, Caalexico, Prefuse 73, The Mekons, Keith Fullerton Whitman, Black Dice, RJD2, Black Ox Orkestar, and many more.

Collecting music started in secondary school, and I used to catalogue every new record and file each in its proper place – until the collection got too big, probably about six years ago. There are also tons of very obscure stuff the average music listener would sprint a mile from. These days, I just pray I can find that record by Mountain Goats.

My favourite (very rare) finds on my long and strange journeys, thus far, are records by real acts like Dengue Fever (an LA band that plays Khmer rock), Morphine (low rock, Boston, now defunct), Rumah Sakit (post-rock, San Francisco), This Mortal Coil and Th' Faith Healers (British goth and punk, both disbanded), Clinic and Ambulance (British and NYC, both very hot in 2004!).

As a journalist, I listen to a broad swath of new music. After playing a new record once or more times, I think, contextualise and critique it. Then, I write what I hope is a cogent argument, and it gets published.

For seven years, I wrote for *BigO* magazine. *BigO*, for those of you who don't know or have forgotten, was Singapore's first local rock music monthly. Started by a small posse of forever-young music fans, it championed

About the author:

Dr Lee Chung Horn, MBBS(S), MRCP(UK), FAMS, is a consultant endocrinologist at Gleneagles Medical Centre. He is the Chairman of the Ministry of Health workgroup for clinical practice guidelines on diabetes mellitus. For a sample of his trenchant views on music, read his magazine *Beta* at <http://www.betamusic.com.sg>

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independent music, and was a firm alternative voice to bland radio fodder. *BigO* had no time for Belinda Carlisle, Celine Dion, Boyzone, Sade, Spice Girls, Gloria Estefan or Lionel Richie. Once, it ran a cover story on Phil Collins, and got a mountain of flak for it. *BigO* followed the latest music developments like a bloodhound, sniffed out the new and challenging, and unearthed the good stuff (even if it sounded like an ugly mess to mum).

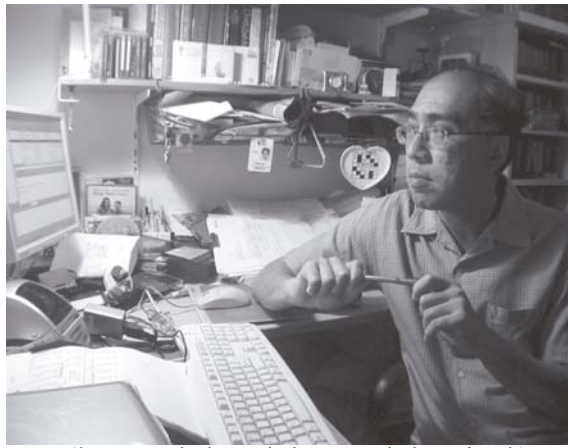
I also got myself tapped into youth culture. I pictured myself a Singaporean Greil Marcus, the granddad of serious rock criticism. I wrote hundreds of letters to record companies, got my name on many publicists' lists, and made numerous industry contacts (later to become fast friends) who still email me to say hello regularly. My mailbox overflowed with the newest (and deliciously unknown) record releases.

After I "outgrew" Singapore's record shops, I took to shopping overseas. Once I carted back forty-nine vinyl records in my shoulder bag, afraid they'd crack if I checked them in the plane's hold. I went to Lollapalooza, and travelled to Chicago and Boston to interview bands. Many of these were eye-opening experiences. Some bands were surprised that someone in Singapore had even heard of them, much less come halfway around the world to watch their show and talk to them. I remember standing on Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge in a light snowstorm, hoping to get tickets for a show. Kristin Hersh was playing, I think. After a long wait, we were told the gig was sold out. But these things happen, since you can't always make the guest list.

Of course, it isn't always easy to do this when you are a busy doctor. But my family has accepted (or given up complaining) that every month, I'd have to scramble to publish *Beta Music*, an online magazine I started six years ago.

It really isn't about money as I don't get paid for this work. Once or twice, I received a small check in the mail for an article, but this hasn't happened for the last three years. The image of the rock journalist as a high-living and chain-smoking hack is a stereotype; most of the writers I know get up in the morning, turn on their laptops, read the rock press diligently, and sweat at their work. But I love music and rock criticism, and hope my writing gets better.

Rock, musicologists and critics believe, is a mirror of the times, from the anti-establishment flower-power culture of the 60s, to the decadent "me-first" mindset of the 70s, to punk's rejection of the 80s' authority structures. In the 90s and henceforth, music has changed to embrace the alienation of post-rock and the cold precision of electronica. Maybe one day, I'll publish a collection of my most beloved pieces. You never know, if Singapore continues to "liberalise" as our political leaders have promised, I might be able to sell two, maybe three hundred copies.



Dr Lee Chung Horn checks out the latest record releases from his email.

These days, I've gotten used to strange looks when I turn up at a local rock gig, where everybody else is half my age, says "like" a lot, sports multi-hued hair, an earring and two tattoos. These kids read my stuff, I console myself, and they'd be beating their way to me for an autograph if they knew who I was. Until that day arrives, stares or not – it's cool. ■

GIVING CHUNG HORN THE THIRD DEGREE

- **How many CDs do you listen to in one year?**
Hard to say, probably about 270 to 320.
- **Any warning for doctors when they browse in music shops?**

Doctors are generally musically conservative or indifferent. They like easy-listening, coffee-table jazz-pop. I'd say Diana Krall is excellent, and newcomer Jamie Cullum has good phrasing. But stay away from Michael Buble; he'd dry up next year like yesterday's rain.

- **What did you spot recently that's particularly bad?**
I was shopping at Borders, and saw a new series of "Chicken Soup for the Soul" music CDs. It's an example of entrepreneurs creating a product for people who don't know better. Buy, and live to regret it.
- **What's your tip for the best, er, rock album of 2004?**

Animal Collective's "Sung Tongs". It's folk psychedelia wired to trippy, left-of-centre electronica from Brooklyn, NY. And yes, that's the correct spelling.