

Gregorio, in Memory

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本論文ではアメリカ人ミュージシャンのシドラウスキ・グレッグ(1968-2016)の生涯および創作活動について、厳選した歌詞に付した解説とともに論じる。

The present essay discusses the life and creative endeavors of the American musician, Greg Schidlowski, 1968-2016, with comments on select lyrics.

Like me, Gregory Joseph Schidlowski had a Polish family name, but nothing was made of it. It was never mentioned. There wasn't a lot of chumminess between us during the few years we performed in the same rock band. There wasn't any particular discord, either, in a friendship that would last decades. It was the first of its kind for both of us; one fed and in some ways confined by our involvement in a single project. With our fellow sophomore classmate, Erik Walter, we formed a band at Theodore Roosevelt High School, in Kent, Ohio (U.S.A), which could be glossed flamboyantly as alma mater to three members of the innovative pop group Devo. Greg was gregarious, but he wouldn't push small talk. Didn't ask about the family. About girlfriends he'd say the minimal, like when he discreetly acknowledged that he'd coaxed from my side the Dutch foreign exchange student I'd been dating. There were only a few musical artists that we both liked, or perhaps we had simply never bothered to identify others. Our creating music together from the get-go made establishing shared tastes or other common rituals of friendship seem less important than they would have seemed otherwise. As long as there was music to be made, filling gaps or smoothing rough edges in our relationship didn't seem to be worth the trouble. The songs and shows we played were the substance of our relationship. Within those confines, complicity grew. It became its own being and stood apart from other, normal relations. It was both intense—stressful, exacting—and joyously self-affirming.

Greg would show up to practice, belt his parts out then speed off to other matters. He had to meet someone or get something done. The compact gray car he darted around in looked undersized and overmatched. To watch Greg tear around the corners of suburban Kent was to observe a man impatient to escape the tedium of a safe, evenly paced, coordinated world. That was the restive part of Greg that through a new type of complicity in my life I felt I understood. In a band, you could be impatient and intense around others while making little storms of sound that you would bottle into discrete units, naming them, listing them, laughing with them or at them; analyzing and reworking them, ordering and reordering, and in some cases abandoning or turning against them. With your band mates, you became giddy, rowdy, uncouth

parents giving rapid birth to ill-formed children constantly clamoring for your attention. Assuming things were going well.

Greg and I got acquainted the first day on which he came to rehearse in the basement of Erik Walter's house, where the band would practice regularly for years. Greg brought a desultory Chemistry-class notebook and a few loose sheets of paper on which were written all sorts of lyrics in his distinct hand. Cupping his left writing hand over the top of the letters as he traced them led to an idiosyncratic mix of cursive, block, and shorthand writing. He had scratched out lyrics during or after classes in cascading pen strokes. The diverse song ideas consisted of two or three suggestive verses. I recall going through the lyric sheets with Erik after Greg had gone home. We tried to determine which ideas could be put to music. There was an anti-gun control piece that didn't inspire and a head scratcher about a mystical figure from the Asian Steppe. Despite the fact that we didn't know Greg well and failed to fit music to any part of his first batch of lyrics, his attitude and effort gave us something to work with. There was a new creative force in the group. Idle schemes would soon be put into motion.

Greg's demeanor was of a man on a mission. His physical movements were sharp and swift. He liked a good, long laugh. He seemed to be filled with high aspirations, but the exact nature of his ambitions was not something you could summarize and not something that I fully understood. He must have felt, as I did, that being in an original band was one way to escape the programmatic nature of life as a high school student. Becoming a rock musician was hardly his professed goal. He didn't seem overly concerned with advancing the interests of the group; didn't seek out show opportunities or strategize over public appeal. There was no talk about what if we became famous. Singing in the band seemed like a role that Greg played for personal, privately held reasons. Perhaps it was for the love of music, but Greg wasn't into score reading or discussing the maintenance of instruments. Music as a sort of club activity would have bored him. Music as form and structure wasn't his thing, either. Most of what motivated Greg remained hidden or unspoken, but he was clearly driven to be creative.

The day Greg came to practice with the band transformed it. In a spirited, unselfconscious way, he carried in purpose and gravity. The toughness of his voice energized the music. It made a meager arrangement feel convincing. In the first couple of years, we'd switch roles and instruments from song to song, not yet sure where everyone's strong points lay. Greg played the tenor sax and electric bass as if he were carrying out a heated argument with them. He'd punch away at the bass strings with a flat pick. His sax was the natural extension of his shrieking, emphatic voice. To the lulling sound of lawnmowers humming all around us on summer days we now had a few answers.

Greg joined the group at an opportune moment. Erik had written, "Would I Be a Man If I

Ate Dirt?,” the first song idea he’d ever shared with me, a few weeks earlier, not long after I had heard *Ramones* and *Never Mind the Bullocks* for the first time. My head was buzzing with the rawness of those albums, which seemed to be calling directly, asking us by all but name for some kind of response. The world of music seemed to have exploded overhead. The few cinders that fell back to earth burned at our heels. This was skeletal music that could be knocked out by elementary players. Swipe your clasped left hand up or down the guitar neck, and it almost sounded like the Pistols’ Steve Jones and his devastating Les Paul. Playing harmonics through a delay pedal for the first time could seem to conjure from the grill cloth of your amp the shimmering hologram-like presence of U2’s the Edge. Hi-flying techno-spirituality was now a mood you could bring into your bedroom. Simply moving from power chord to power chord seemed to dope us with creativity. When Greg showed up with a sax and his lay-it-all-out lyric sheets, the determination grew to no longer discard song ideas or leave them undeveloped. Our goal was now to create as many playable, singable ideas from whatever combination of instruments or players they had emerged. It was decided early on that we would start rehearsals by jamming—pure improvisation—or by debuting new ideas from band members, as opposed to playing cover songs or songs we had already rehearsed. The approach suited me, since I didn’t know how to play any cover songs.

Our first invitation to play out fell into our laps. It turned out that a co-worker at Denny’s on the East Side, where I was employed as a dishwasher for a few months, was the girlfriend of John Teagle, the guitarist for the oldies rock ’n’ roll band The Walking Clamptets and manager of JB’s Down, the best venue in town for local or touring rock bands. Teagle heard from her that I had spent my Denny’s take-home on a Telecaster and he wanted to give us a shot. He might also have wanted to look at my guitar. I recall feeling that we were not ready to perform and that we should accept the invitation only after another six months of practice, maybe more; but the opportunity to play downtown started a momentum that couldn’t be stopped. When Erik and I met Teagle at JB’s Down to discuss the show, we hadn’t yet decided what to call the band. Our songs could be counted on a single hand. We weren’t of legal age. We were not ready, in fact, to play publicly, but we got permission, with conditions, and got ready.

“Happy People” was the first song that the group wrote together. It consisted of two Ramones-like power-chord riffs played in alternation. With Erik playing bass and me on guitar, Greg barked up a chorus of ragged, wide-angle cynicism: “All these happy people/All these smiling faces/So content with nothing/Same thoughts, same looks, same places.”¹ In the few

¹ All lyrics by The TwistOffs (Greg Schidlowski, Erik Walter, Philip Adamek), quoted with permission from the authors.

terse verses that followed, the anti-conformist attitude was cast in what was to us a more familiar, suburban context. “You look in the mirror and shave your face/The smell of Brute all over the place/ Step in your shoes, walk out the door/ Off to the factory that you adore” (“Happy People”). The reference to “the factory” doesn’t sound as if it could have been anyone’s real concern at that point in our lives; it was more likely an image borrowed from a Clash song. Although the song concept also seems derivative, specifically of the Clash song “London’s Burning,” in which our punk idols complain about Londoners “sittin’ ‘round, watchin’ television,” it did respond to feelings about growing up in sleepy, elderly neighborhoods where, in winter, the frigid air kept everyone indoors, while, in summer, light aircraft buzzing overhead and tireless lawn mowers constituted virtually all appreciable human enterprise. Erik, Greg, and I had started to observe these surroundings through the idiom of urbanite punk artists, most of them British. If we were going to develop as songwriters, we had to turn our attention to something other than anti-Thatcherism and distant incidents of civil unrest. Yard work, Cessna planes, and TV programs weren’t likely to provide much song material, either.

Greg had a knack for improvising lyrics and worked better with mic in hand than with pencil. Like the first lyrics he had written out with no indication for melody, the words Greg developed at the mic came from inspirations unknown and involved topics and characters about which he never spoke. It was as if each song had emerged from a long, spiritual conversation with himself, an inner dialogue held together with a cluster of tough-luck images. He traveled up the tortured ways of imagined trials, found company and humor among gangsters and the homeless, stepping in and out of their shoes with irony. Except for the preacher man of “Holy Water,” the characters of his songs were dislocated males who squandered their existence or were abandoned to criminal perils. There was an incongruous authority in the fact that Greg, a teenager, sang about such things with conviction. In late June, 1984, in the days before our first show, we had come up with a groove-based song that had only a few lyrics, the rest of which we left up to Greg’s improvisation. We didn’t know what he was going to sing that evening, but he delivered a full set of lyrics. The first performance of “Broken Knuckles” was flawless, the emotion unflagging, the lyrics immovable. Greg thought of lyrics that were patently fictional but neither self-conscious nor overplayed.

Animation and fascination,
 Complication and anticipation
 Whatcha gonna do with your life, boy?
 How you gonna play it?
 You lay your cards on the table,

Just to see if you are able to
And when you left me out here all alone,
You're gonna pay your debt, you're gonna pay your debt
(“Broken Knuckles”)

What Greg sang had a ring of legitimacy to it, even more so because his raucous voice matched the images in his head. The song became a constant in the band's shows, sung exactly as Greg had first improvised the part:

And when they get you,
They're gonna break your knuckles
They won't leave no scar
You're on an island all alone,
There's no one to help you
You're in a land far, far from home,
Somebody please throw me your hand now!”
(“Broken Knuckles”)

I regretted to discover recently that Greg had never reheard the performance. All he said about it was, “I do recall being incredibly nervous and coming up with words based on a kind of word picture, which was typical for me.”² That was perhaps his finest moment in the group.

Greg was tough. I never saw him use physical violence, but I would not have wanted to confront him. He wasn't physically imposing, but he won distance and respect with rough-and-ready courage. This was, it turned out, a quality that bands needed to secure in at least one of their members. There was a show we played in Cleveland, Ohio at a former strip club in an under-the-bridge nook of the Flats where we were confronted by a feisty-looking crowd of bikers, hairy men, skinheads and fleshy women in swollen tank tops glaring at us through a haze of tobacco smoke. We were out of our element. The evening would perhaps get ugly. These were the waning years of the punk era, when spitting gobs of phlegm and throwing random objects at performers was received as robust audience participation. I wore a plaid short-sleeved shirt as if I were dressed for geometry class, which I was. A band of four lanky guys made things seem more doubtful for us by seducing the crowd with high-energy guitar pop. As we waited to mount the rail-trimmed runway stage, a feeling of nakedness washed over me. This was just the kind of situation where having Greg at the mic spared us from acting our ages. We were teenagers, but with Greg at the helm we could stop being teenagers if the circumstances seemed to require it. He would shout out the first lines of the first song, look

² Message to me, June 13, 2016.

irate like Mick Jagger, and away we'd go.

Our appearance at a Walsh Jesuit High School social event, in the atrium of the private school, nearly turned into a brawl. A group of 7 or 8 football players I recognized took offense at our presence for one reason or another and gathered in front of the stage to flip the bird at us in unison. They looked to be engaging us in a turf war. Greg's response was to return the favor as he sang vehemently in the direction of the bellicose athletes, pointing at individuals among them as if every line he sang leveled an insult more stinging than the last. That was the only performance of the band that my parents ever went to see. It led to their recommending that the band move on without Greg, which suggestion seemed as sound to me as their advice that we play our next show at McDonald's.

There was also toughness in the words Greg sang. In the lyrics he wrote, he comically berated hard luck characters or bent Biblical language into a high-spirited work of proselytism that, because of its energy, was assumed to be a party song: "By the water, come and see/By the river, that's for you and me!" ("Holy Water"). One song that fell out of the band's repertoire after Greg's departure was to my mind Greg's signature creation, although he recently disavowed the perspective of the lyrics:

Where does he turn, where does he go?
 The sewer's his home even in the snow
 How many days has it been since his last bath?
 It kinda makes me sick, kinda makes me laugh
 Just a skid row bum, torn-up clothes and a stocking cap, oh yeah
 He lays there lurking in the shadows, 'cause he's never,
 He's never in the sun.

("Wino")

In response to my recollecting these early songs, Greg quipped that the songs that the three of us made in high school were "bigger than we were." If so, it was mostly because of him.

Sitting at a Formica table in the kitchen of a Willoughby, Ohio recording studio, Greg and I finished writing the lyrics to "Long Way from Home," trading lines by imagining further steps in the road for the song's freighthopping protagonist. The lyrics emerged in fluid collaboration until we collided over the use of the word "indecision" in the line, "This indecision doesn't mean a thing/Next town, what will it bring?" Greg thought it was bookish. We kept it but not without Greg changing "doesn't" to "don't," which fit the protagonist better. That was the kind of soulfulness that Greg brought to the songs he wrote and played. He distrusted sentimentality and things that sounded classical or schooled. He once complained that one of our guitar phrases was too "scale-y." Finesse was to him an irritant. I remember

suggesting during the recording of “Long Way from Home” that he back off the mic. The first take had looked ferocious. He waited till I was done speaking and turned back to the mic. When the tape started rolling again, he belted out the song with even more volume and intensity, spraying the mic with sibilance, creating a tumult where he stood. When the take was through and we heard his vocals played back against the music, it was clear that he had sung it just as it should have been sung. There was nothing to patch over. It seemed that Greg was cut out to do what he was doing. The power of his voice, and his instincts for how to use it, made him gifted at rock ’n’ roll. It helped, as well, that he had a trusty shout. Even though Greg shouted readily without noticeable strain, his shouting voice packed emotion. “Oh, ow! You’re hurting me! Oh! Oh-o-oh!” (“Indian Giver”). On those lines in particular, and despite their literal meaning, the shout sounded hilarious and gave the song a new dimension.

Some of the older rocker types who had logged years in the bars of Northeast Ohio like Johnny Teagle wanted to give us a chance to succeed. Others wanted to beat us up. Teagle, who’d booked us for our first show, seemed to find us amusing. I was in awe of his pumpkin-orange Gretsch guitars, the wicked clean electric sound he pulled out of them and the winning manners he entertained with everyone. His band would spin a silvery swirl of vintage vibrations over the black-and-white tiled floor of Mother’s Junction and get people to surf the electric sound waves there for hours. I told him I liked the band, and he responded by saying that our group had more going for it because we played originals.

After Greg left the band, Erik and I again went over Greg’s songs in consideration of their fortunes. This time, however, the songs were not mere sketches of lyrical ideas but some of the best numbers that we played. It was daunting to have to sing parts without the same energy and character with which Greg had made them known; but, without Greg, we were compelled to divvy them up and mold them to our own voices. I’d sing “Long Way from Home,” Erik would take “Broken Knuckles,” and some others would fall through the cracks and never be revived. Greg was never replaced. I don’t recall the precise reasons that led Greg to leave the group, but he did on occasion take positions that left little room for compromise. He could be radicalized by a new idea, and his opinions and interests could be transformed over a period of a few weeks. One example is the time when, having become enthralled by distorted guitars and screaming vocals, Greg insisted that we should only perform hardcore. The others balked and waited till Greg’s attitude softened.

Greg never played guitar in the group, but the guitar eventually became his instrument of choice. His preferences continued to evolve over the years, as he gravitated to the blue note, to minor keys, 3-chord blues, country rock and open-tuned steel-string acoustic guitar playing. We often spoke of collaborating, and one time we did. The holidays were approaching and I

asked Greg to put down the vocal track for a hokey Christmas song I had just wrapped up for the occasion. I figured the natural edge in his voice would add some heartiness to it. It had been over ten years since we'd played together. Characteristically, Greg showed up at my parents' house in apparent haste and sang the part with gusto. He dropped the original phrasing of the lyrics in a few parts and found an approach that better suited his voice. When I went back to sing the song myself, I sang it the way Greg had. Greg was open to new ideas and capable of giving them an original stamp that improved them. If he saw any merit in that particular recording session, it would have been the fact that it involved a new idea. He preferred doing new material and savored the experience of having been in an original band. "Like you, I will always have those times and memories with you and Erik and others. There were so many life-changing experiences during those years that I just feel incredibly blessed to have been a part of it. How many 15, 16, 17, year olds did what we did?"³ However, he had also been through many phases in life and didn't seem to want to dwell on the past. When I mentioned to him that, with today's DIY recording techniques, we could re-do one of the early songs—finally give it a quality recording—he said he'd be up for it and, writing a couple of days later, came back with, "Maybe we should create something new and fresh?"⁴

I can give a partial recollection of Greg Schidlowski. To many people who knew and loved Greg as a family member, neighbor, co-worker or friend, my perspective might seem narrow. Over the years, I had only occasional glimpses of how he had embraced new phases of life, including most importantly that of being a husband and father. The day I visited Greg's family's home west of Cleveland, Greg interrupted my fireside story with his hand in the air and said he was needed inside. His son had returned from a flag football game for which he was promised a dollar for each flag he could grab, and Greg wanted to know the tally. This reminded me of the one time I met Greg's father and of his manner of comparing Greg to his peers, looking us up and down as we assembled for some school function. Greg's father likely also established goals and dangled carrots. No doubt some of Greg's ambitious demeanor stemmed from his father's expectations.

In recent years, Greg and I exchanged opinions about politics and economics, and the points we had in common were few. Our media sources were different. We respected or distrusted completely different public figures. At one point, Greg made a lucid statement of his conservative principles.

Who doesn't want Utopia, who doesn't recognize injustice when they see it? I

³ Ibid, November 3, 2009.

⁴ Ibid, October 26, 2010.

suppose because of my view of the nature of man, the existence of evil, the realization that we will always have war and the poor will always be with us, (...) a certain approach to the world [follows]. First off, "acknowledgement" of these positions does not mean that there is a resignation or surrender. But adherence to establishment principles is the best way to exist in such turbulence, those principles being: Volition, Marriage, Family, and Nation.⁵

Even though, in rereading this and other messages between us, I was embarrassed by my own vehemence, at no point did I worry that Greg might take offense or write me off. This trust in our capacity to lay out our differences at length without offending one another was likely the fruit of our near-lifelong relation and the particular focus and intensity that had marked it from the beginning. Had I been able to record a new song with Greg, as we had discussed doing several times, I can assume it would have featured my fingerpicking guitar and Greg's bluesy voice. Had we met again in recent years, as we had hoped to do, we would have acted on our plan to hike the Appalachian Trail with friends. One of the friends might have called him by the nickname Gregorio after I'd recalled its being used long ago. We all would have joked about the paths behind us and in one way or another sought new paths ahead.

(Essay received July 1, 2016)

⁵ Ibid, November 30, 2010.

