

BOTHERING THE COFFEE DRINKERS by Doug Hoekstra (7/2005, Puremusic.com)

Johnny Q was bothering the coffee drinkers again, a ritual he thought he'd left on the shoulder of his past, before his career had risen to that indefinable next level. It was something he'd sworn off, and yet, like a junkie who is lost without a good methadone clinic, Johnny Q had backslid into an old bad habit.

So, there he stood in the corner, one knee gently moving to a self-imposed beat, playing a song from his latest album, a song he had performed on National Public Radio, a song that was favorably reviewed in *Billboard* magazine, a song he'd played in front of crowds in clubs from L.A. to New York, and even across the pond in Paris, a song that had wound up in an independent film that played on the Sundance Channel from time to time—it starred that chick who used to date that guy in the White Stripes.

But, the patrons in front of him were oblivious to this song's short yet storied history; to them, it was another song played by another man with a guitar. There were always guys and girls with guitars on Sunday afternoon, and maybe some coffee drinkers would come up to him afterwards and tell him about the songs *they* wrote and how they'd once had a band before they decided to start their software company.

Although it had been a couple years since he swore off these types of shows, thinking they were behind him, everything quickly came back to Johnny Q. It was always the same, the little café in the corner of the bookstore, with the scattered tables and comfy sofa, the battered P.A. that got wheeled out of the backroom by the clerk at the counter, who also brought forth milk crates full of tangled cords. Once Johnny Q set the thing up, no mean trick because the bookstore clerk never had a clue and would always leave him on his own, the P.A. would hum and click and sometimes pick up police calls from passing CB radios. Johnny Q always positioned the two speakers on either side of his makeshift stage, positioning them on high chairs normally reserved for toddlers.

As Johnny Q began playing, he saw an all-too-familiar cast of characters trickling through the front door of the bookstore. Soon there would be a little girl in pigtails about five years old dancing in the front, smiling and running back to her mom who sat nearby, reading a copy of *Redbook* and generally ignoring both the child and the music. Next to her at the table would be her husband, face buried in a *Something for Dummies* book, rocking the two-year-old sibling, who was sitting in a stroller with pacifier stuffed into the mouth. They looked permanently distracted, these parents, and much too tired to clap.

Behind them, there would be a table or two of college kids, reading books and magazines they didn't want to buy, talking amongst themselves, sometimes louder than the performer, oblivious to where one song ended and another began. Despite their propensity to save money by not buying books or records, they always seemed to be sipping expensive triple lattes and double espressos and, between that and the conversation, were always too self-focused and wound up too clap.

Scattered here and there would be a couple 50-something men with gray in their beards and yellow in their sweaters, reading sports magazines, aimlessly licking their index fingers, turning pages, occasionally looking up with a startled reminder that there was music in front of them, finally awakening to their surroundings by the time the next song began, and, as such, they were usually too late to clap. These gentlemen were also the most likely to come up to him between sets and tell him about the bluegrass band they'd seen at some festival, mighty good pickers, they were.

There was always a single mom in shorts, looking tired but happy with a small child in lap, sitting together on the comfy sofa in the back. She'd read softly to the drooling offspring, glancing up occasionally for a weak nod or smile in the direction of the stage directly ahead. Her hands were full with book and child, and, as such, she usually just kept reading, occasionally quickly slapping a palm against the thigh in a vain attempt to clap, which was courteous, he must admit.

There was always a gaggle of customers of all ages by the magazine stands beyond the single mom, outside of the café area, leafing through this and that, pretending not to listen at all, polishing their cool, it seemed. They were definitely drawn by the music, though, because they would generally stand there the entire set before leaving, sometimes putting down a magazine long enough to throw out a few golf claps.

Finally there was always an elderly man or woman who would sit up front, with a hardcover book, usually something classic. Johnny Q would read the titles during the instrumental breaks in his songs, and more often than not, this person would put down Fitzgerald or Hemingway, make solid eye contact with him, eyes faded in color yet gracious in their manner. Invariably, these people always clapped the loudest.

And, sure enough, as Johnny Q looked out on the small crowd, while picking the tune that was receiving all the praise in consciousnesses beyond those of the coffee drinkers he was bothering, this is what he saw. He tried desperately to concentrate on the music he was playing. Because if he didn't, he'd start wondering why he'd agreed to do this show, and then the negativity would seep through his fingers, cause his hands to stumble and his mind to forget words to songs he'd sung a thousand times. It's difficult to play off a crowd that isn't there; it's worse than hecklers, he thought. At least a heckler gives you something to work with. But he wiped the thought from his mind, too. As he finished the song, blasts of espresso machine followed, and car engines revved in the parking lot behind the corner of glass behind him.

The parking lot behind him belonged to Greensboro, North Carolina, just across the interstate from Winston-Salem, an old tobacco town that used to be, and somewhere between laid-back Asheville and the booming Research Triangle, where he was playing the next night. It was a Sunday afternoon, and these factors combined to form the reason why he was there. Sundays were typically tough days to fill, and he'd decided, in a moment of foolishness, that any money would be better than no money. So, it was all because of routing, the Justification of the Week. After Chapel Hill on Monday, it was Richmond on Tuesday, Washington on Wednesday, and

then to New York. Johnny Q told his manager, as they planned the shows, that he'd rather be playing than not playing, and after all, it was a new market.

"Yeah, the first time through is great," said his manager, "and so is the eighth. It's the six times in-between that kill you."

After the first set, Johnny Q grabbed a magazine and then snuck off to the CD department to spend his gift certificate, which he received on top of his small guarantee. Johnny Q searched in vain for the counter display of his new release, which the store had promised to set up at least one week before the show. He handed his items to the clerk, a young man with crew cut and a piercing just above his right eyebrow.

"Sounded pretty good," the clerk said, scanning Johnny's purchases.

"You could hear it over here?" Johnny Q asked.

"They pipe it in," the clerk said. "Do you know Silas Henderson?"

"No I don't." Silas was a peer, another singer-songwriter in the game. They'd shared a bill once, some little club in Birmingham, spent a few minutes talking about guitar strings between sets.

"He was here Friday night," the clerk added. "The place was *packed out*."

The past few days, Johnny Q noticed they'd been doing practically the same circuit. Every town he came to, Silas had just been there.

Johnny Q thanked the clerk and headed to the men's room to open up the CDs he'd purchased and read the liner notes. As he sat down, he was distracted by a copy of *Tobacco Scene*, the area's free arts weekly, which was neatly folded on top of the toilet paper dispenser. He quickly turned to the music section to see if anyone reviewed him—doubtful, since he hadn't gotten any calls for interviews. When he got there, the centerpiece was filled with a full-page article on Silas Henderson, complete with a photo of the man looking appropriately rugged with cowboy hat and 5 o'clock shadow. Johnny Q didn't read it, he turned the page and happened upon a small three paragraph review of *his* new CD, four stars, which took about two seconds to get through, as the writer mainly regurgitated the promotional sheet his publicist had crafted. But he added an original thought or two at the end and then plugged Johnny Q's gig, although the starting time was wrong, late by half an hour. On the opposite page, there was a half-page advertisement for Silas Henderson's new CD, *Dusty Roads and Roaring Engines*. Disgusted, Johnny Q finished his business and headed back to the café, where he ordered an ice latte and surveyed the crowd he'd be playing to for the afternoon's second set.

Normally, at this point, Johnny Q would've gone around the tables, talked to folks, said hello, maybe moved some product. But, he just wasn't up for it. He still had a couple minutes, so he walked over to the stage area, to fiddle with his guitar and pretend like he was doing something. Three college students closest to the mike stand were engrossed in some sort of passionate

conversation, but as he passed, one of them, a girl with shy eyes and full lips stopped him.

“Do you have a minute?” she asked.

“Sure,” he answered.

“I love that last song you played, I heard it on NPR, that’s why I came, well, why we came,” she laughed, nervously he thought.

“Really?” he said.

“My name is Joy,” she said holding out her hand.

He wrapped his fingers around her rather clammy hand and shook. Johnny Q sat down, figuring he could push his break a little, as there weren’t that many people in the house.

“I’m Brendan,” the boy across the table shot out.

“Alisa,” the girl next to him said.

They shook hands all around, but Brendan went back to talking to Alisa and Johnny Q continued his conversations with Joy.

“Are you going to be playing some more?” Joy asked, gesturing to the P.A., which was buzzing louder in his absence.

“Yes.”

“Oh good, because we only got here for that last song.”

Johnny Q had been wondering how he could’ve missed her. Joy smiled constantly, but there wasn’t anything phony about it, she just seemed like the kind of person who would smile even when she was angry. It made the light dance off her nose ring, he thought.

“I love your style, your melodies are so distinct,” Joy added, “They really pull me in.”

Johnny Q thanked her, raising his voice a little, to be heard over the P.A., which was now buzzing even louder. Startled, she dropped the plastic lid of her latte and bent over to pick it up. The top couple buttons of her shirt were open and she took her time straightening up. Johnny Q suddenly felt better about the gig. Like a drowning man at sea, he’d been thrown a life preserver. And so he scrapped his idea to try out new material in the second set, deciding instead to concentrate on “chestnuts” from the past, as he tried to hook at least one new set of eyes and ears.

After the set, Johnny Q talked to Joy for what seemed like a long time. She wanted to know where he was off to next, and he told her and she thought out loud how exciting it must be to live life on the road. She jokingly asked if she could roadie for him. She also told him a lot about herself, but that was common to his experience, people tend to open up to performers, even at his level. But, unlike most people he met on the road, the more she talked, the more he liked her and wanted to get to know her better. She didn't fit any particular category, and as Johnny Q sipped his fourth iced latte of the afternoon, he learned she came from a large family, had two sisters, was in graduate school, getting her master's in social work, and after that she wanted to do something with at-risk youth. She talked about how getting a good start in life was essential, and so many kids didn't have the advantages she'd had growing up.

"It's not a fair playing field," she said.

Johnny Q felt something inside. Now, he wanted to marry her.

"Can I buy a CD?"

Johnny Q thought about this. If he gave her one, he might get started on a path that would never end, and the next think he knew he'd be an at-risk performer. So he compromised and cut her a deal. She asked him to sign it. He wrote something short and sweet and scrawled his name with a sharpie pen he'd brought along for just such an occasion. The bookstore was growing quieter and Johnny Q heard Silas Henderson's affected Massachusetts-born country twang wafting in from the CD section. Joy's friends were starting to show signs of impatience and restlessness, as they cleaned off the table and returned their rental books and magazines. Johnny Q saw his opportunity slipping away and so he stumbled forth, asking her out to dinner. She demurely thanked him and said she'd love to, but Alisa was the driver and they had to get going because her cousin was visiting from out of town and would be arriving soon and they'd promised to meet her and it was quite far away and they were probably late already. Johnny Q wondered how far anything could be from anywhere in Greensboro and Winston-Salem.

"Can I sign up on the mailing list?" she added, abruptly. "I'd love to see you next time you come to Greensboro to play."

Johnny Q figured that might be never. But he played it cool, handing her his clipboard as he leaned back to watch, one hand on the back of the chair she sat in as she leaned in and wrote down her information. He thanked her and she offered her cheek for him to kiss, which he did. Then he watched her get up and walk past the empty tables and barren magazine racks, through the discount section, out the doors and into the twilight. He packed up, got paid, and did his totals: a hundred bucks to get him to the next place, a CD for the road, a magazine, and thirty-five bucks in CD sales. Oh, and he had an e-mail address and smiley face on the mailing list, from a girl he'd like to marry. Maybe it hadn't been so bad after all. Like his manager said, it would be the six times in-between that would kill him.