PLAY LOUD

A little zine about Bob Mould,
by Walter Biggins

for the kind folks of Avid Bookshop, Athens, GA

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Bob Mould saves my life, again
written in Nov. 2016, tweaked a bit in Sept. 2017

It could’ve been a bust.

An hour before the show, I had met Bob Mould, shaken his hand, followed him up to the Georgia Theatre’s green room, and we had talked. I was writing a book about his album Workbook, and was exhausted by the prospect of meeting a hero of mine; even though our 15-minute conversation was pleasant, I was nerve-wracked. He seemed weary, having been on the road all day to get to Athens and then required to put on the razzle-dazzle again. He was 56, I was 40, and we both felt our age.

Bob had come to Athens’s Georgia Theatre on a Thursday night with his crackerjack rhythm section—Jon Wurster on drums, Jason Narducy on bass—and nobody showed up. Well, not nobody. But the Georgia Theatre can hold roughly a thousand folks, and only about 150 attended this gig. So, it was considerably undersold. We were mostly achy graybeards and thin-hairs, with my friend (at age 31) being among the youngest there by a good decade. The night was chilly, the air thick with the campfire smoke that seemed good until we realized and kept realizing that the smoke came from continual wildfires blooming and raging an hour north of us in the mountains near western North Carolina. Those of us who shuffled into the venue were melancholy, shell-shocked, numb with fear. Donald Trump had been elected president two days prior, and the whole room felt wearied with anguish. The balcony section was curtained off entirely, and the floor never looked completely packed, even by mid-set.

Bob & Co., though, didn’t give a shit. At 9:40pm, they strode onstage fast—the house lights were still on—and slung their instruments into their hands and took one quick look into each other’s eyes and Wurster clacked his drumsticks one, two, three, and off they went on a
70-minute roar into the stratosphere. Tight, fast, loud, and focused, Mould and Narducy
swirled across the stage during instrumental breaks, Narducy high-kicking on occasion, and
Mould bearing down on his axe while lurching purposely. Wurster mouthed the words as he
pounded away on the drums.

As usual, Bob thought of the show in terms of themed packets, starting with a one-two-
three punch of Hüsker Dü classics—“Flip Your Wig,” “Hate Paper Doll,” and “I Apologize”—
and then vaulted headlong into two Sugar songs (“A Good Idea” and “Changes,” which come
back-to-back on 1992’s *Copper Blue*). The band didn’t pause for breath (or applause) between
songs, or even slow down during the whole set, so the effect was like being in a melodic wind
tunnel, one song blurring into the next. I liked the effect, as it allowed for a sonic continuity
between tunes that were sometimes written and recorded 20 years apart from each other. The
band played songs from Bob’s most recent three records—*Patch the Sky* (2016), *Beauty &
Ruin* (2014), and the astonishing *Silver Age* (2012)—as well as from Beaster (“Come Around,”
from 1992). A lot of Hüsker Dü songs got airplay, sure, but so did *Patch the Sky*. Though the
band rarely veered into Bob’s late-1990s/early-2000s electronica period, all other aspects of
the man’s career surged through the house. They didn’t play anything from *Workbook*. Its
delicate intimacy didn’t feel right for that night; that wasn’t what we needed. The whole set
felt of a single piece, in a way that wouldn’t have been true if I had listened to the studio
versions, in a Spotify playlist. It all made sense together.

But of course I’d think that, being a Bob Mould fan for more than half my life. During
“You Say You” (from *Patch the Sky*), I wondered what someone relatively unfamiliar with
Mould might think of this concert. And there was my friend, who to my knowledge does not
own a Bob Mould record and has heard Hüsker Dü mostly on YouTube, and she was flailing
away, headbanging and pumping fists into the air, probably imagining Donald Trump on the
receiving end. I felt better. Bob probably imagined the Orange One getting pummeled, too,
which might be why there were no ballads on this set, and why “In a Free Land” got played but
not “New Day Rising” or “See A Little Light,” why the only song that Bob introduced properly
was *Patch the Sky’s* “Hold On,” why we all sang along during a ferocious rendition of
the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s theme (“We’re gonna make it after allllll!!!!!!!”) instead of the
Hüskers’ “Divide and Conquer.” The mood in the house could have been somber, given
everything and given that Mould’s songs are rarely exactly sunny, but the man was smiling
throughout, bounding around the stage like a drunken monkey. His joy is contagious,
cathartic, and Lord did we need it.
Tinnitus

Wednesday, 12 October 2005, Seattle, about 10 a.m.: My neck’s been killing me all morning. My voice is hoarse. My ears are ringing. Taking the bus to King Street Station, I can barely turn my head to face Dan Couch as I chat with him. Tilting my head means enduring stiffness and a dull ache for ten seconds at a time. Waiting at the station for my Portland-bound train, I wince as I look at the clock. I can’t figure it out. I slept well last night, on a comfy couch, with plenty of pillows. I had my morning mug of coffee. What on earth is causing all this? I sit on the train, headed to Portland, and, just before we pull out of the Seattle station, I figure it out. “Goddamnit, Bob Mould,” I say, “it’s all your fault.” But I’m smiling.

Wednesday, 12 October 2005, Seattle, 12:30 a.m.: I’m yelling my brains out. Oh sweet Jesus. A minute ago, Bob Mould and his band ended a sweltering, green-fire-on-dried-wood concert with “Man on the Moon,” a song that pulses through the blood even at the quietest of volumes—and, tonight, it was loud, loud, loud. The song ends with the line, “the man on the moon, saying goodnight to you.” What better way to end a set? A guy comes up to me, cupping his hand to his ear, and says, “What did you think of the show?” I reply, “Fucking loved it! I like tinnitus!” The guy laughs. I laugh, too, and notice that I’m hoarse, probably from singing along at the top of my lungs and yelling “God bless you, Bob!” at key moments—i.e., the start of every song I recognized. And my ears really are ringing.

The crowd stumbles out of Nuomo’s in a daze. Dan, his girlfriend Colae, and I walk back to our car, talking in mad blurts about how much we loved the show. Colae hadn’t known what she was getting into, but Dan and I owe our survival through high school largely to Mould’s songwriting, singing, and guitar work. Coale laughs at us as we replay the show: “Can you believe they played ‘Hardly Getting Over It?’” “I know, I know! And he played almost everything from Copper Blue?!” “I know, I know, I know! And that song, ‘I Apologize,’ I know
that’s a Hüsker Dü song, and I was singing along to it, so I must have known it, but what the hell album’s it from?” “Good call on ‘Hoover Dam.’” “Hell with that—you told me they’d play ‘See A Little Light’ and ‘Celebrated Summer,’ but I didn’t believe you! I just couldn’t believe you!”

It’s like we’re sixteen years old all over again. Dan says, “They went on that stage with one purpose and one purpose only—to kick our asses! No stage banter, no pauses, just an hour and a half of full-on attack.” I nod. We huddle together against the chilly Seattle night, giddy and trembling with equal parts exhaustion and elation.

**Wednesday, 12 October 2005, Seattle, 12:15 a.m.:** Bob Mould is making jokes. At the end of his biggest commercial hit, “If I Can’t Change Your Mind,” he runs quickly through the scales on his guitar. At least, that’s what he does on the recorded version. Tonight, he decides to play the run with his mouth instead, “do-be-do-be-do” style. He winks to the audience. I decide right here that it’s his playfulness that’s most invigorating about tonight. Mould looks, and sounds, terrific. He’s smiling more than I expected, and breaks into laughs during the millisecond or two between songs. His joyful demeanor is a counterpoint to his songs of wounded relationships, emotional trauma, and loss. It’s nice to see the music is just as cathartic for him as it is for us. The mood is infectious—the band members are clearly happy to be onstage. They run mercilessly through songs from every part of Mould’s 25-year songwriting career, including good songs from his new *Body of Song*, and it all sounds brand new.

**Tuesday night, 11 October 2005, Seattle, about 11:30 p.m.:** The band is roaring through “Chartered Trips,” possibly my favorite Hüsker Dü song, from what is easily its most ambitious album (*Zen Arcade*). It’s not a song I expected to hear tonight. A snatch of an album liner note, by Greg Kot, comes to me. The comment is about Sugar, but it might as well be about every band Mould’s been in:

> First thing you notice about Sugar in concert is the look—and I don’t mean their fashion sense. It’s a look that says, ‘Your wake-up call has arrived.’ Sugar do not take requests. Sugar do not banter with their audience. Sugar are not cute. Bob Mould, David Barbe, and Malcolm Travis are a glowering juggernaut, and they take their mission each night personally—that for the next 90 minutes or so, they will be the best rock band in the world.

> Travis is crunched over his hi-hat laying down beats with pitiless precision. Barbe is jumping out of his skin wrestling with his bass, while blowing veins in his neck singing harmonies over the din. And Mould tries to reconcile the eloquence and clarity of his lyrics with the distorted, blinding chaos of his guitar playing. Melodies are swallowed up in noise, tunefulness extracted from feedback, beauty torn from violence.

Tonight’s band line-up is different—Brendan Canty (of Fugazi fame) wields the drumsticks; Jason Narducy plays bass, sings harmonies, and sweats through his turtleneck sweater; and Rich Morel plays keyboards and effects—but the feel’s roughly the same. The sound is mixed so loudly that my eyes are watering, but it remains tuneful and oddly gorgeous. Canty’s a better drummer than Travis—he’s just as precise, but allows for more inventive fills and a greater sense of spontaneity. Narducy is fantastic, swooping around the stage like a flying squirrel. So far, Morel’s been entirely unnecessary—there’s an interesting keyboard wash at the start of “Hoover Dam,” but he’s been otherwise inaudible.
**Tuesday night, 11 October 2005, about 11:10 p.m.:** Four songs into the set, and I’m already hoarse and sweaty. The band exploded, launching with the first three songs from *Copper Blue*, the album that introduced me to Mould’s music, so that I couldn’t be happier. I’ve forgotten the cigarette smoke, the fact that I’m awkwardly holding an empty plastic cup, the closeness of the crowd, my regular worries.

**Tuesday night, 11 October 2005, about 10:50 p.m.:** Dan, Colae, and I are standing around in a packed club (Nuomo’s), waiting for the main event. We’ve already endured most of a set by Shiny Toy Guns, a band most notable for their interesting hair and that the three men were dressed in straitjackets. (The slinky female vocalist, of course, wore a dress that looked like a fitted slip.) The drummer played the same hard-driving, vaguely techno beat for every song.

No matter. The club is now filled with about 700 people. We’re sweaty, reeking of cigarette smoke, and anxious for Bob Mould and his band to walk onstage and kick our asses. As I drink my water and look around, I decide that all rock clubs look the same—dingy floors, walls of an indeterminate color, black speakers larger than a sumo wrestler, a low-lit bar tucked away behind nine rows of people. I do my customary “Where’s Waldo” search for other black people—myself included, I count three. Well, at least we’ve got a good view of the stage. I rock on my heels, and wait.

**Natalie Stanco’s fall party, Dallas, circa 1992:** I’m in a small, rundown East Dallas house with lots of kids around, and I’m vaguely uncomfortable. Sure, there’s lots of my friends around, but I’m one of the few black kids there, I can’t dance, and the only hip-hop that the DJ is playing is stuff that I don’t recognize. I’m awkward, uncomfortable, sixteen.

Suddenly, there’s this staccato burst of snare drums, and a four-note guitar squeal that’s immensely appealing. A guy with a vinegar-and-honey voice is singing about how he’s trying, and failing, to communicate with his lover. The lines are fragmented, as if they’re sentences that are being interrupted by the other person in the conversation. The voice is weary but earnest. Everything else—the slurring, energetic guitar, the bouncy bass, the crack-shot drums—is kinetic, poppy, maybe even joyful. Despite the noise, it’s catchy as hell. This might be the first rock other than stuff by the Beatles that I like. I don’t even notice that I’m dancing.

“What is this?” I yell at Nat.

“Oh, come on,” she says, you’ve heard this. “It’s been on the radio a lot. This is ‘Helpless.’”

“That’s the name of the band?”

“No, the band is Sugar.” She shoves the *Copper Blue* cassette into my hands. “Listen,” she says, “you know how most albums have at least a song or two that you always skip over?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“This one isn’t like that. I like every song. Borrow this until you get your own copy. You won’t skip anything.”