

# Game Theory, or, Not Exactly the Boy of My Own Dreams

*An awkward essay about a deeply  
ambivalent band with a very unpromising  
name, including notes on nerd camp, fear  
of sex, Northern California area codes,  
and autobiographical digressions, with a  
book review near the end*

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## 1. Silent Football

The term “gifted children” dates back to the 1920s, to the unsavory, sometimes racist world of early IQ tests, but it took fifty years to find its niche: “gifted and talented” summer camps became widespread and self-sustaining during the 1970s. The Center for Talented Youth (CTY), sponsored by Johns Hopkins University, opened its doors in 1979: about 9,000 students, aged twelve to sixteen, now attend CTY on six campuses each summer. According to its official website, those students discover “challenging educational opportunities,” in Latin, mathematics, neuroscience, and so on. According to [www.realcty.org](http://www.realcty.org), maintained by alumni, they learn an argot (“flying squirrel,” “CTY-S”) and a set of diversions found nowhere else, such as “Silent Football,” “a complex game involving an invisible football, hallucinations, and tattling... One CTY-er solved a Rubik’s cube on stage while reciting the first 200 digits of pi.”

Also in 1979, Alternate Learning, a band formed by the teenage Scott Miller, of Sacramento, released its first and only single. Miller went on to attend UC-Davis, where he started the band Game Theory in 1981. Ten years after that, Game Theory took over my brain, declaring themselves the secret second soundtrack to almost everything I write; their records have remained in that position ever since. Miller’s bands, Game Theory and its 1990s successor the Loud Family, did not make the music that brought nerdy kids together (that would be They Might Be Giants, or Yes, or maybe Glenn Gould). Instead, they made songs that described what those kids could do, and could not do, as they grew up; songs that asked whether their lives of intelligent, gleeful, not quite asexual in-jokes could continue, and whether they would fail at whatever came next. With their dictionary words and coinages (“efficacious, B-follows-acious”), their synthesizers less than or equal to their ringing guitars,

Miller's songs begin from a kind of nerd home turf, and sometimes they stay there; more often they feel about to outgrow it.

This is an essay about that feeling, an attempt to describe it in my own life, with personal anecdotes stuck here and there below. If you (like many literary readers) began in a mental world dominated by mathematics, or by science fiction, but did not wholly remain there, it may be a feeling you've had too. But it is also an essay in appreciation: an unavoidably awkward attempt to describe some unavoidably awkward pop music, an attempt to pursue that feeling through Scott Miller's music, as it informed Miller's whole career, and therefore to recommend some of that music to you. Mostly, for better or worse, I'll stay with that music, and try to describe a part of my life as refracted through art made earlier, by somebody else: it is, for better or worse, what critics do.

It's a feeling I find in the music itself, sans or pre-words, in its arrangements, its hooks, its ambivalence about clean, clear, synthetic pop and about the dirty charge of rock and roll. But the same feeling can drive Miller's lyrics as well. "I've Tried Subtlety," from *The Big Shot Chronicles* (1986), follows a party run by "MIT-grad alleycats with time on their hands," at the Victoria Hotel (a real hotel in Berkeley) to which "all the kids from 916" (Sacramento and Davis) show up; Miller has joined them, but can't seem to join in their fun—he may be too old, or too lovelorn, or too self-conscious. "Gifted children link your arms in rhyme," the last verse implores, as the big guitar rises beneath it: "better make this world while still it gives you time." Pounding along, for a while, like any teen anthem, "I've Tried Subtlety" works so memorably as a song because it fails as a call to arms: each verse, each break, goes on a measure longer than we expect, as if to accommodate second thoughts.

"I've Tried Subtlety" follows a fragile promise, or a premise, not unique to nerds: that the gang of kids with whom you might belong, who share your tastes and habits, can make whatever you like stay with you for good. That promise—that nerds' special powers and codes can lead to social and sexual success, that Silent Football

can empower adulthood—becomes the subtext to Miller’s whole glorious, brittle, melodious body of work, beginning with the aptly named *Alternate Learning*, and ending (the end seems implicit in how it began) without a big hit, amid a cultish Internet following, in a book about music other people made.

## 2. Rational Records

Game Theory released seven EPs and LPs, changing lineups with almost every one. They stayed in northern California while Miller’s early allies moved to L.A.; found national college radio attention around 1985, and broke up after a fractious national tour in 1989. High tenor vocals and big clear guitars linked the band to Big Star (whom they covered) and to 1980s college radio acts like the dBs; proliferating melodies and all too cerebral words set them apart. “We were fairly close to both the R.E.M. jangle camp and the L.A. psychedelic revival camp,” Miller recalled, “but the dealbreaker in both cases was that we had prominent synthesizer. And of course we weren’t within a country mile of synthesizer music that was actually selling, like New Order.”

No, they weren’t: The synth lines weren’t the kind you can dance to, and the people the songs portrayed found it hard to dance. They are, almost all the time, songs about overthinking it, anthems for people who think they think too much and try too hard, who feel at home (if they ever do) only among like-mindedly wordy souls. The tension in Miller’s songs—it’s never resolved—between guitar-driven pop and keyboard-based New Wave is like the tension between heart and mind, between a nerdy identity never fully embraced and a fear of something more.

Most of the characters in Game Theory songs meet the criteria Ben Nugent in *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (the best of several recent books on the subject) sets out: they are “passionate about some technically sophisticated activity,” using “language unusually similar to written Standard English,” averse to overt

aggression and confrontation, “favoring logic and rational communication over nonverbal, nonrational forms” (Miller called his own label Rational Records), and interested in new machines. Miller put all those qualities on display, along with “self-loathing” (another of Nugent’s ways to spot a nerd). He wrote on his own website, “I definitely sound like a nerd when I read my own writing... I’ve also got mild techie geek tendencies.” When a fan asked “Where does your fascination with oddball noises and offbeat sounds stem from?” Miller answered, “Being socially inept as a teenager, maybe. There certainly wasn’t much social cachet in making field recordings of random noises at school, but I remember skulking around doing that... I just wanted the sound of a drain pipe or something.”

Miller’s songs never sounded like drain pipes—they were eclectic, but never avant-garde. Nor did they sound like pipe dreams. If most pop hits are either uppers or downers, Miller explored self-conscious mixed feelings instead: “I wish that I had two minds,” he sang on the midtempo signature track “24”: “Is it because I’m 23 not 24?” He gives an appropriately light touch to what we now call, alas, a quarter-life crisis, but he also knows its sources are real: having felt so at home while he was in school, he doesn’t know where he fits, or to how to live on his own, in a post-collegiate milieu.

When I was thirteen, and again at fourteen, and again at fifteen, I attended Exploration Summer Program, a nerd camp on the campus of Wellesley College, obviously modeled on CTY. The program still exists: “an Exploration classroom is lively and active,” its website declares. “Physics principles might be illustrated by riding large hovercrafts around a hockey rink, or firing five-foot-tall trebuchets on a playing field.” In the first week of my third year there I met T. in morning assembly; within hours I had decided that I was in love with her rapid speech patterns, with her lustrous brown hair, with her softball player’s body in T-shirts and jeans. We spent most of the next three weeks together, speaking very rapidly to each other about the science fiction we had read, and playing Othello and Scrabble (she usually won). T. presented herself as working class, and her

hometown of Lafayette, California, as a tough place, though its median household income, as of 2010, runs well over six figures. Other campers assumed we were dating.

When I finally asked if we were, in fact, dating, T. explained patiently that she was gay. She added that, given the rough time she had in high school, she wanted to grow up to be a police officer, protecting gay teens and showing them that they were not alone. And then we went back to talking about science fiction, in a language so dense with acronyms and in-jokes as to be almost incomprehensible unless you already shared it.

T. and I may have been inventing an argot, but we were doing so in familiar ways; we already belonged to something you might call an ethnic group. In Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon* the male lead guides his love interest through a video arcade, where "a wiry teenager in tight black jeans and a black t-shirt prowls among the tables with the provocative confidence of a pool hustler, a long skinny cardboard box slung over his shoulder like a rifle. 'These are my ethnic group,' he explains in response to the look on her face." Game Theory's songs all respond to the look on her face.

### 3. Champions

Nick Lowe made a record called *Pure Pop for Now People*: Game Theory's first LP, *Blaze of Glory* (1981), could have been titled *Pure Pop for Nerd People*, being so true to the wordy awkwardness (anti-sex, anti-body, pro-computer) of the nerd stereotype, and yet true to the visceral power, the sexual charge, in guitar-based Anglo-American pop. The songs, and the people depicted in the songs, attempted to have fun, to act on instinct, but they knew they were too cerebral to make it so, except with like-minded small circles of puzzle-solvers, drainpipe recorders, synthesizer fans (among whom, for a while, all things were possible, if it could only last). "What will you do now/ For fun in bad weather/ Will you be lonely forever and ever/ It's been a bad year, the hardliners say/ For tragic heroes at UCLA"; that

song from *Blaze of Glory* (so I learned in 1992, when I interviewed Miller) would have been called “Bad Year at UC-Davis,” except that such a title would not rhyme or scan. (I should make clear that I make no claims for these lyrics as verse, read off the printed page: I care enough to parse them only because I know them along with their music—if I could, I’d stop and play you that music before you read another line.)

A teen’s sense of social exclusion runs through many of Miller’s early songs, but so does his enthusiasm when (to his surprise) he fits in: “We’re not on the fringe/ We’re dead center,” insists one of his rawest, harshest numbers. These well-educated kids know better than to cast themselves as complete outcasts. Self-knowledge defeats their self-pity, but that defeat does not lead to other victories. It might not even help them get a date, despite desperate measures: “Let’s get out the Twister game and get down on all fours,” suggested “Nine Lives to Rigel Five,” from *Distortion* (1983), though its arrangements are hardly four-on-the-floor. It sounds old-school science-fictional, early-digital, like late Devo, or late Yes. The chorus imagines exile via starship, propelled by what sounds like, not not a drum machine, but electronic drums, the kind with hexagonal heads.

“Yes is one of those bands that are really good,” Miller told one fanzine, “and one day it became effective culture to hold a gun to people’s heads and say, ‘You can’t like them, you have to like punk because it’s unpretentious.’ And the world bowed down; I bowed down, to a limited extent.” So did I, when I was 23 and 24. When I was fifteen I recommended, incessantly and (it must have been) annoyingly, the music of Yes: I painted their Roger Dean–designed logo on a denim jacket I wore every day.

Also when I was fifteen, A. invited me out one Saturday night to a house in Alexandria, Virginia, for a role-playing game called Champions. The game resembled Dungeons and Dragons, with dice and notepads on tabletops, but superheroes rather than chainmail and swords. Everyone else in that house was older than high school age; a few were older than thirty. A’s boyfriend was 24. I went back

to that house about every two weeks for two years. There, I thought, were people who understood me; there were people at once invested in being smart, in solving complicated rule-governed problems, and indifferent to practical rewards (get good grades, get into a good college, earn more). There my new friends could pretend to fly; I could pretend to be a teenage girl who could read other people's minds (and, if necessary, beat them up), and if we spent twenty minutes trying to decide how best to climb a skyscraper or decipher an ancient text, we did it because we liked it, not because it would look good on a report card.

When it is not the name of a rock band, "game theory" denotes a branch of applied mathematics, but also the sometimes obtuse application of that branch to human endeavors—war, politics, sex. It's based (like classical economics) on the idea that people, or states, or companies, are rational actors pursuing their interests in quantifiable ways. It's attractive to nerdy sorts for obvious reasons, and it gives some irony to the band name, since the people in Game Theory songs, on Rational Records, are never rational actors, even if they once pretended they were. Throughout the Game Theory songbook, but especially in *Real Nighttime* (1985) you can hear an anguished concentration on language and its rules ("she'll be a verb when you're a noun"), and on the complementary rules of pop song construction, as if all those rules—once mastered—could help solve problems of love and sex, of friendship and estrangement, of bodies with feelings that have no clear names. (Role-playing games, with their dice and books of rules about super-behavior, offer the same kind of promise, more transparently.)

But the music knows better: it follows problems that words alone can't solve. Sometimes we learn what went wrong, as in the song entitled "I Turned Her Away." But sometimes we can't figure out what the wordy songs mean: Miller's lyrics, however clearly enunciated, can get so complicated that they fail to tell a story, his characters so introverted, or involuted, that we do not know what's up. Yet the overcomplication, the sense that you're thinking so hard



you don't know how to say what you feel (and therefore your new friends have never quite understood you) is also what the songs describe: "efficacious, B-follows-acious," indeed. It's a shock to learn that the song with that coinage, "Here It Is Tomorrow," concerns a young man who learns that he has fathered a child.

Other songs' overt topics stay true to Miller's cerebral innocence. Their context is collegiate, their references literary ("Here Comes Everybody," taken from *Finnegan's Wake*) or mathematical: "Like a girl Jesus, she's undefined." Miller's melisma, sliding four notes into the long "i" in "undefined," gives listeners time to pursue double meanings: (1) the boy doesn't know what the girl is really like (since he worships her), (2) some operations—division by zero, for instance, or his dating her—cannot take place in a given system of rules. Math joins up with physics in "Erica's Word," where "Erica's gone shy, some unknown X behind the why... All is soulless today, mass not conserving in the old way": Erica probably turned some of it into energy.

"Erica's Word" is energetic indeed, the should-have-been breakthrough hit from *The Big Shot Chronicles* (1986), which also contains "I've Tried Subtlety." "Erica's Word" even has a conventional video—the band mimes the song, and Miller tosses his hair. He sounds almost happy to be so frustrated, since it gives him a reason to sing; he sounds even happier to be led, or misled, by the charismatic Erica, whom he says he has known since high school, when they were photographed in her car, going nowhere.

#### **4. Falsetto**

Miller later called his early songs, dismissively, "young adult hurt-feeling-a-thons." *The Big Shot Chronicles* had its share of hurt feelings, but the album also shows emotional range: exultantly happy, regretful, resentful, worshipful, confused, or hurried, or all these at once, as in "Crash Into June," with its sped-up backbeat: "If I answer to a different hunger / Than the one I did when I was younger/

Please remember that it's still just me inside." One emotion is missing: never does Miller sing about anger at anyone besides himself. Nerd passion, instead, becomes nerd passive-aggression, barbed puns and pulled punches, never more so than on "Never Mind," which brings out the tensions in the repeated line: "The things I do for you girl I ... never mind." That is, (a) "I never object inwardly to all the things I do for you," (b) "I never pay attention to what I do for you (serving you has become my second nature)," and (c) "I expect you to pay appropriate attention to what I do for you (but I know you won't, so forget I brought it up)." Can they go on like that forever? Who knows?

Had Game Theory continued to ascend—as R.E.M. did—the career ladder of 1980s alternative rock, *Lolita Nation* (1987) would have been their *Life's Rich Pageant*, their *Unforgettable Fire*, jumping to nearly arena-level success. But *Lolita Nation* was Miller's least accessible, most involuted, most Yes-like album, a double LP full of academic in-jokes and backwards tape loops, the worst possible place to discover the band. It's awkward and eager and overambitious, much like the people depicted in Miller's best songs, who take too long, try too hard, pursue too many ideas: trying too hard becomes part of their personality, part of their point.

Another part is self-hate. "Lord knows that I'm not exactly the boy of my own dreams," Miller croons in the bridge to "The Real Sheila," *Lolita Nation's* best song, before the two-line chorus: "Nobody knows the real Sheila / I do." He seems to be her chaste best friend: he's one move away from the acceptance, sex, romance that he seeks, just as the songs are always one step, one bar, away from resolving into the kind of guitar pop that really could have climbed the charts. "The Real Sheila" makes a good example, with its fifteen sixteenth-note introduction, its stop-just-short chorus, and its high point just before the chorus: "If I were a girl with dreams, I'd have dreams as big as you please." You can hear in that apology, as it breaks into falsetto on the last note, masculinity as an unwanted constraint, as something that gets in the way.

Being a boy, or a man, usually gets in the way. There is, Miller offers with reference to Sheila and Erica, to a girl Jesus, to Carol and Alison in “We Love You Carol and Alison” (a song full of celebratory bells, though in 1987 they cannot be wedding bells) a balance of body and mind, intuition and reason, available in modern teenage life, but it’s available only to or for (or could it be *from*?) women and girls. On an album called *Lolita Nation*, the real Sheila (who has a room, not a house; who spends a great deal of time on the phone) may still be in high school. And the fantasy in that song is the fantasy commonly held by the male best friend of the cutest girl in school: he knows her better than her boyfriends do, because intellectual connections are more important than intuitive ones, because minds are more important than hands and thighs, because what words say matters more than what bodies can do—except that they aren’t, and they aren’t, and they still don’t.

*Two Steps from the Middle Ages* (1988) was Game Theory’s last chance for a national hit: if you own a cut-out copy of *Two Steps*, as I do, it probably came with a big black sticker telling you which songs the DJ should play. Had its three-minute wonders come right after *The Big Shot Chronicles*, could Game Theory have become as big as The Cars, the chart-hit band *Two Steps* most resembles? Probably not: *Two Steps* sounds too sad, too much invested in its own defeat. The people in the songs feel too grown up, too old, too self-conscious, too reflective; they entrap themselves further the harder they try to be, as one song has it, “The Picture of Agreeability” (“get that original,” Miller warbles, “far away from me”). *Two Steps* was only the picture of a hit.

*Two Steps* sounds like The Cars in its textures, though not in the shapes of its songs. It’s also (coincidence?) full of songs about cars: “Rolling with the Moody Girls,” “In a DeLorean,” “You Drive.” Yet the singer never drives, never decides where his friends, or his former friends, go. He sounds more comfortable in school: when you have to instruct people to “make our mistakes young,” as Miller advises with “In a DeLorean,” you are already too old for that advice,

and you might feel as uncool, as outdated, as that high-performance car, now known first and last for its bit part in *Back to the Future*. And if you felt too old, too cerebral, too awkward, at 23 not 24, what do you do with your art once you get past 30? According to *Two Steps* the answer is that you stop making it—but first you show just how much you share with the other grown boys, and maybe a few grown-up girls, who spent their teens overthinking it, just as you did.

## 5. Analogies

It's time to make explicit the SAT-style analogies that have held this essay together (if it has held together) so far: nerd camp is to high school as synthesizer is to electric guitar as teen life is to adult life as being a girl's best guy friend, her real confidante, is to being a proper boyfriend as innocence is to experience (including but not limited to sexual experience) as amateurism is to earning a living as indie-rock, cult, college-chart success is to the kind of success that makes it easy to quit your day job. In each case the first term seems safer and easier, with clearer rules, and we are supposed to aspire to graduate from it and join the second, whether or not we can make it there. Those aspirations, along with resistance to them, stand behind every one of Miller's songs.

The very conditions, the MIT-grad alley-cat skills, that let you record drainpipe sounds, let you have fun at nerd camp, might (the nerd worries, not without reason) unfit you for adult romantic and economic life. And the very conditions that make Miller's songcraft stand out—overthinking it, uncontrolled allusion, melodic excess—are the conditions that prevent his songs (as against, say, R.E.M.'s) from becoming big hits, just as the conditions that made us "gifted" were the same conditions that (according to the story we told about ourselves, the story we have now been told in retrospect) prevent us from becoming popular, except with one another, in the wordy, rickety, sometimes defensive subcultures we could build.

*Two Steps* finds its aesthetic peak, and its emotional low, in its penultimate song, “Throwing the Election” where Miller concludes that all his intellectual work can now get him neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help from pain. It’s simple, compared to his usual fare (you can find the chords on your own piano—I have, and I’m not much of a piano player), because it’s the song where he’s finally come to the end, laying all those odd words down for good, admitting that adult life is less like an MIT-grad alley-cat party, less like a table-top role-playing game, than like a lottery, or perhaps like an election. If you don’t already feel popular, comfortable, confident, if you don’t think you can win, you can’t win: “there won’t even be a fight.”

Game Theory imploded, in part due to drummer Gil Ray’s back problems, in part due to band members’ love lives: singer and keyboard player Donette Thayer, brought in for *Lolita Nation*, left Miller for Steve Kilbey of the Church. “Steve taught me how to groove,” Thayer later recalled; “his objection to Game Theory was that the minute we caught a groove, we would be off on something else (and indeed most Game Theory songs had about sixty zillion chords, forty bridges and two hundred different verses).” She might as well have said that Game Theory were great for conversation, but no good in bed.

I look at the photos in the 1989 Game Theory fan club booklet that prints the words to almost all their songs, and I see what look like photos from nerd camp: Scott on a lawn with high socks and floppy hair, shot from odd angles, and then at a mixing board, and then with sunglasses pushed down over his eyes. (And there is Thayer, all too prominent, eyes right on the camera lens.) Where did they think they were going? At whom is Scott looking? At the mixing board? At the fan club, dispersed, and patient, and long-lasting, as it would become?

The gamers in Alexandria were the first group of people (not just one friend at a time) with whom I thought I had both tastes and interests in common; the first group, too, where tastes and skill and

specialized intellectual proficiency had nothing (so I thought) to do with social class, or with material success in adult life. The second such group (so I thought; so we represented ourselves) comprised college radio DJs and other hangers-on in Boston indie rock, among whom I heard Game Theory for the first time. Both the gamers and the indie-rockers seemed to promise not only devotion to shared interests, but something like independence from the adult economy, from adult hierarchy, what the skeptical sociologist Sarah Thornton calls the “classless autonomy of youth”; in both groups, the supposed independence was partly (but only partly) a crock.

## 6. Family

Game Theory and Miller’s later band the Loud Family weren’t so different—people who care about one always care for the other—but they remain clearly separate, for me, because I encountered Game Theory, in 1991, as a finished body of work; the Loud Family then became a source of new records every few years, each one unavoidably compared to the best of the old. All but the last were too much like Lolita Nation, superb cuts interrupted by digital bells and whistles, redundant moving parts. *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things* (1993) worked as a cyclopedia (19 tracks) of Miller’s stances and modes: the all too self-conscious show of defiance (“Aerodeliria”), the belated display of inward-turned resentment (“Inverness”), the promise to stick around and enjoy adult life (“Give In World”) undermined by an even better song about giving up, called—with unusual bluntness—“Slit My Wrists.”

That song described living in Berkeley and watching other artists, other musicians, succeed: “The more alone I felt the more the celebrations grew/ All the way down Van Ness Avenue... What I need is not cut costs/ What I need is a life where I’ve won all the times that I’ve lost/ What I need is not ways to go on/ What I need is to slit my wrists and be gone.” It doesn’t sound quite like a literal suicide note (though if somebody sent me a letter like that, I’d get

help): it sounds more like a frustrated writer striking back at his unhelpful friends, the ones who have told him and told him, against apparent evidence, that he could still make it big.

Live, the Loud Family had more energy, covering songs without a trace of hipster cred—the last time I saw them it was “The Story in Your Eyes,” by the Moody Blues, played very fast and hard and irony-free. Live shows also brought out the frustration that all the computers on the albums could mute. When you hear the keyboard-driven studio version of “Curse of the Frontier Land,” on *Real Nighttime*, you might believe it’s about California: the pivotal chord change, underneath the line “A year ago we called this a good time,” gets lost in the rush to the chorus. In the Loud Family’s live version, from 1998, later released on *From Ritual to Romance* (2002), the same line becomes a great snarl, and the song turns resentful, even vindictive: the Frontier Land, so long and tough to reach, such a letdown once Miller discovers he got there, must be adulthood itself, the condition in which you’re supposed to make a career and a romance that won’t disappear.

*Attractive Nuisance* (2003) was the last thing the band owed Alias Records before their contract ran out, and it was understandably billed as a swan song, by a songwriter who had come to specialize in digital nostalgia, vanished futures, all-too-complicated swan songs. It avoided exhaustion by seeking variety, in other band members’ contributions and in Miller’s own songs, from lounge-combo lite-brite to grinding faux-anthems to the kind of midtempo bittersweet tune you hear at the end of an indie date-movie about two young people who can’t quite make it work. “Backward Century,” whose soaring synth line is (like “Rigel Five”) a nod to old science fiction, makes cracks about life in the Bay Area during and after the tech boom: “I look around and see ... the early version of things in redesign; two Stanford student with laptops on the street” create “ten-foot-biocubes” to insulate Miller from any future heartbreak. “Motion of Ariel” (the credits-roll song) surveys Miller’s sense that, having been too young and too analytical, he’s now too old, and too

shy: “I can say what I want to say, I forget what I think is true,” he warbles in the verse, then reaches the crux, behind an agitated electric piano: “I don’t know what the radio wants.” It’s a sign-off and a meta-sign-off, a way of saying (to quote one more Game Theory song) “I’ll drop out; I mean it this time.” And he did; the Loud Family never toured again.

By then, though, the web had made it much easier for Miller’s most serious fans to keep up a cult. That cult turned out to include Sacramento songwriter Anton Barbeau, who collaborated with Miller on *What If It Works?* (2006). It’s Miller’s best album since *Plants*, his sunniest since *Blaze of Glory*, the first where the other songwriter seemed to fit. And it starts by telling us that Miller lacks the visceral, instinctive, partly sexual confidence that stands behind other acts’ hits. It starts, absurdly, by covering the Rolling Stones: “Rocks Off,” a sexy song about sexual deprivation, a decadent, below-the-belt sort of song, introduces “Song About Rocks Off,” a Miller composition whose only certainty (amid rather tangled lyrics) is that he feels too self-conscious to write, though not too self-conscious to sing and play, any song that resembles “Rocks Off.”

Then things lighten up. The title track—co-written with Barbeau—sounds surprisingly optimistic, about its own major-key hooks and about the romance that it seems to describe. So does “Kind of In Love With You,” also co-written; that song relegates the characteristic GT stutter to the drummer and the sinuous over-long riff to the bridge. Childlike adverbs collide, and the words end up not awkward or over-articulate so much as cute: “it’s probably strange but it’s basically true, I’m kind of in love with you”). You can watch both songs on YouTube, in a fan-made video whose footage of gamboling children may depict Miller’s own daughters, Valerie and Julianne. When the gloom resumes, on the Miller-written penultimate track, “Don’t Bother Me While I’m Living Forever,” we hear a literally reverberant bitterness only justified by the facts of his long career: “Oh boy, what a classic show: Someone finally noticed, I know.”



## 7. History

I have no idea where T. is now; if she had a less common name I might be able to Google her. Two of the other girls I got to know at Explo wrote me letters, and I wrote back, for years. One is in touch with me now (our kids play together). The other one became, in succession, a skate punk who hung out in Harvard Square, a volunteer for radical left-wing causes, a professional photographer with a particular line in pictures of food, and a devotee of Ayn Rand.

A. kept on playing Champions after I stopped: she had much more trouble than I did, by then, in getting along with more conventional kids. I lost touch with her for ten years, then put her, just slightly disguised, into the last poem in my first book, *Popular Music*: “Marie is also known as Ariel,/ girl-tamer of horses, unmercifully teased.” She sent an email from suburban Maryland, saying that she heard that I put her into a poem.

To make sense of “I’ve Tried Subtlety” now you need history, though not much of it: Google will do. Davis no longer shares area code 916 with Sacramento, having received its own code, 530, in 1997. Lafayette shared an area code with Berkeley and Oakland until 1998; the affluent town, just east of the Berkeley Hills, now uses the area code 925.

Miller still lives in northern California with his wife and daughters; presumably he still has the software industry job he held in the Loud Family years, when his employers admired his programming skills so much that they let him take months off at a time for tours. Miller wrote in 2008 that while he was still “utterly serious about music, I just respect the buying public’s judgment that it’s not what I should do for a living.” He seems to have stopped recording; his musical interests instead generated, first, a series of columns for the Loud Family website, and then, as he assembled the columns, a book.

*Music: What Happened?* gives Miller’s top twenty-odd songs, Nick Hornby-style, for every year from 1957 to 2007, with a paragraph

or so about each. It's partial (not much about hip-hop), sometimes self-mocking, and alarmingly educational, especially early on. Like any good record-collector list, it's got obscurities (Van Dusen! the Marmalade! "Leinst," by Daydream!) but it's also almost comically attentive to the mainstream, to post-Beatles songs that earned their uncool millions. "My Sharona' is a national monument." [100] So is a deep cut from *Les Misérables*. "Shop Around" (1960) by the Miracles is "really the first song that sounds like the sixties.... The verse comes in and pow, suddenly you're in the world of go-go boots and Ford Mustangs." [16] It's just as technical as it has to be: "Tell Me Something Good" (1974) sung by Rufus and written by Stevie Wonder, is "one of the hardest songs for me to count straight through and not get gutterballed onto the off-count by the verse vocal." [76] And it's funny: in "Thunder Road" (1975) by Bruce Springsteen, "the singer is feeding this poor girl such a banquet of self-mythologizing nonsense as to make one weep." [81]

In a way, the book is the culmination of the attitude in Miller's songs: the hypervocal production of a regretful bystander, telling us what he can't, won't, or can no longer do. It's got a surface of sparkling intellect, and a depth of nostalgia shot through with self-contempt. As it moves past Miller's own teen years, you can hear the tone change, the mood sour; he dislikes the 1980s, as such, and he seems less curious about the obscure music of that period (the music he wouldn't have come across without seeking it out) than he is about music before or since. The Ramones' "Bonzo Goes to Bitburg" (1986) "doesn't attempt an airtight indictment of Reagan ... but it's aces at putting across the feeling of being impotently rankled," a feeling you can find in Miller's own songs. Miller takes it personally that not only his own work, but the new work he admired when he was a touring, or full-time, musician, didn't (except for R.E.M.) make it big. In 1981, "nothing was sadder than watching the dB's Swiss-watch-precision sense of the progression of music history get lost on a generation that just wanted to dress like Adam and the Ants." [110] "Every Word Means No" (1983) by Let's Active "was my

idea of a million-selling hit, and its lack of impact on any but indie circles contributed to my realization that I was getting into the music business at a time when I didn't have the slightest idea what people wanted." [117] (Mitch Easter, who ran Let's Active, produced and played on Game Theory's LPs.)

Popularity, success, not just cult or indie success, must have mattered to Miller, in ways that fans younger than Miller (fans raised on indie 7" labels, or on DIY MP3s) might not expect. Miller hoped for big hits; he had dreams as big as you please. The kid who knows he's popular at nerd camp knows that he won't be popular when he gets home, but will he be popular—will people like him, will they want to date him, or have sex with him, or pay him to do what he loves—when he grows up? Or is nerd camp the summit of something, impermanent in itself, the best he can do?

"It was around 1983 that I felt ushered into the music business a bit, and around 2003 that I felt fairly completely ushered out." [201] So Miller writes à propos of "Milkshake" (2003), by Kelis. He sounds disappointed that his music could never become more popular, even though the feeling of belonging in a too-smart-for-your-own-good niche, the feeling that you're never going to be all that popular, informs almost every song Miller ever made. You can't be all that big if you overthink everything, those songs say, but neither will you end up on your own—you'll be very important to a smaller nest, or net, or Net, of people who take your songs to heart: the same people, maybe, who play silent football, who want nerd camp to last all year.

"He is the poet whose poems I would have written had I been the poet he was": so Helen Vendler has written about Wallace Stevens. Game Theory is the act whose songs I would have written had I been the songwriter Miller has been; their flaws, I fear, are the flaws in me. They might also be flaws in this essays, awkward, self-conscious, leaning on works of art by other people in order to talk about me. But the intellectual distance those leanings produce, the awkward and roundabout handling of our own emotions, is one

of the emotions I mean to depict. Another is gratitude: to A., to T., to Miller himself, and to the other, flawed, never-quite-famous, all-too-self-conscious makers of art that showed me what I could not help but become.