That’s the Spirit: A Tribute to Fletch and a Love Letter to Music

June 7, 2022 By Shawn Decker

I had what I thought was the perfect set. Two days before my last show as Synthetic Division I woke up, put on my vintage Depeche Mode t-shirt and headed to the Infectious Disease Clinic for my bi-annual appointment with my HIV doc. I didn’t eat before I went, like Charlie Brown kicking a football I was going to get my fasting cholesterol test as part of my labs... since around 2008 or so, my cholesterol has been sky high, a result of my HIV medications.

A few years ago when I started seeing a new primary care doctor, he implored me that the biggest threat to my health as someone in my 40s was my alarmingly high cholesterol levels. I tried a small dose of a statin to curb it, which worked, but my liver enzymes skyrocketed. The same result occurred about a decade earlier. So I stopped taking it and, sure enough, the cholesterol quickly bloated back up.

Me, Jason Elliott and Alethea Leventhal (Ships in the Night) backstage after my last Synthetic Division set.

Like all of my appointments with my HIV doc, Dr. Greg, we shared some laughs over a “NO DEMOGORGONS ALLOWED” flyer I’d snuck up on the wall. I gave him the scoops ahoy on my last show because we take a moment to update each other on what’s happening in life. I share fun stuff about 90% of the time, ain’t afraid to share the stressors, he’s a great doc. When I got home Gwenn gave me the “terrible news” that Andrew Fletcher, a founding member of my favorite band Depeche Mode, had passed suddenly and unexpectedly at age 60.

I am thankful for Fletch’s influence and talents in keeping Depeche Mode going. The band had a tumultuous start, after a hit song “Just Can’t Get Enough” and a debut album, their lead songwriter left and songwriting duties fell on Fletch’s childhood friend, Martin Gore’s, shoulders. Without Fletch’s consistent and supportive presence, Depeche Mode isn’t so big that their new-fangled take on music reaches a place like Waynesboro… at least not pre-internet. If that doesn’t happen, my life isn’t enriched the way it was. I am not provided with a psychological escape route (becoming a rockstar someday!) from AIDS.

Also, I heard quite a few people opine about Depeche Mode’s sexual orientation when I was a teenager. Their European electronica stylings were not the bombastic balls-forward approach that most teens in Waynesboro preferred in their rockstars. I actually thought they were gay, or at least half the band. Martin Gore fancied bondage-wear in the mid-80s and heavy make-up days. And he certainly made for quite an attractive chap with his fearless stage-wear. Dave Gahan once said that the rest of the band never had an idea about what Martin would wear after his move to Berlin. My heterosexuality wasn’t threatened by the pics I put up on my wall, I was impressed with his fashion-forward bravery and willingness to do and wear what he wanted at that time.

My cover album and tribute to Depeche Mode, 2015, celebrating 25 years since the Wish.

The band was so talented and their music pulled my heartstrings during those tough, early post-HIV-diagnosis years. Maybe a kid who thinks he has more time figures that a band like Depeche Mode might result in relentless teasing, and just says Metallica is his favorite band to make life easier? I'm not sure. What I do know is that the mystery about their sexual orientation actually helped me feel like part of the broader AIDS community, as strange as that sounds. There was a lot of "AIDS is not a gay disease!" counter-messaging in the late 80s and early 90s, but I knew that the earliest communities affected were gay men and people who rely on blood product treatments. So whether anyone else perceived HIV/AIDS as a gay disease, I felt a kinship with that community because I knew personally what being blindsided by HIV felt like, and that discrimination on some level is something that everyone with HIV at the time dealt with.

Not to say that doesn't happen today, it does. Some people are still ignorant and fearful of HIV/AIDS. The great thing about these times is that help in dealing with discrimination is accessible if you're lucky enough to have access to the internet.

Depeche Mode's style and sound, inadvertantly, guided me toward the much healthier feeling of companionship, as opposed to how a lot of young straight people respond to contracting HIV, which is to immediately go on the "I'm not gay!" defensive.

My freshman year of high school I had the opportunity to meet Depeche Mode through the Make-A-Wish Foundation. After Ryan White passed, my mom got worried about how much time I had left. My t-cells were precarious at times. She wasn't out of line and, though the offer was grim, I jumped at it because I knew exactly who I wanted to meet. My parents say that I had an extra bounce in my step after that. I kept that picture in my locker, and a blown up version of it on my wall. By the way, that huge 30x20 inch foamcore picture- signed by me 32 years to the day of the Wish meeting- is part of my Synthetic Division Oddities Sale now through Sunday, featuring some old issues of POZ, as is the Depeche Mode tribute album.

At 14 my mind was blown by being in the presence of such musical gods. Anything seemed possible after that, even a few more years of living than I could ever have imagined before being in the same fucking room as Depeche Mode how does life ever get better than that? I already possessed a healthy imagination before the Wish, but after that the goal posts were certainly shifted in my favor. And if I were to die soon- a fear that I did my best to not engage- I thought: "Well at least I got to meet the Mode, baby." At that point in my life, that experience shaved off some of the anxiety I had.

The profile picture on Depeche Mode's Facebook page one day in the year of 2017.

Later in my life, there were reunions with Depeche Mode in my 20s, 30s and again here in my 40s. When POZ sent their management a letter informing them of that Make-A-Wish Kid's role at the magazine as a writer and educator, I was invited to go backstage at a show in Los Angeles, where I got three of four signatures due to Alan Wilder's exit from the band five years earlier. Through wonderful timing, I got Alan to sign it in 2011 when he was on my side of the pond with a two-date tour for his solo project and I was on a East Coast, two-week Synthetic Division tour. Just crazy timing, Gwenn took a train up with the picture and Alan completed it. In 2017, I was dealing with some depression and headed to visit a friend with my synths, where I planned to isolate and just focus on music…

Right before the trip I got an email informing me that I'd been chosen for Depeche Mode's

promotion of their new album, Spirit. A fan a day took over their Facebook page to tell their DM love story. It was a cool idea centered around engagement and not relying on the typical media sources to promote the album. I'd forgotten that I'd submitted something for consideration. So the news came as quite a shock. "Oh my God, Gwenn- look at this!"

The lovable scamps of Depeche Mock, celebrating the Mode and Halloween in 2016, Charlottesville, VA. (Christina Fleming as Fletch, Alethea Leventhal as Martin Gore, me as Dave Gahan and Ethan Lipscomb as Alan Wilder)

Being able to share things like me and my friends Depeche Mode cover set the year before, my Make-A-Wish meeting, and destigmatizing HIV was a great way to spend a day. And I just had a really nice day interacting with fellow fans. The whole experience got me out of a huge funk, it was dose of magic that I didn't know I needed. I felt really thankful for that little push- I knew it was a temporary fix and, thankfully, I'd go on to make mental health more of a routine and priority at doctor's appointments.

In big moments music can offer unexpected solace. But I know and respect how music gives me a little bit of magic every day. It reminds me of the important things in life, which is IMHO remaining in touch with my emotions. Being compassionate. My heart serves more of a purpose to me, I recognize it as more than an intricate highway system designed to keep my life force pumping through my body and my organs organning. The tempo that music provides works really well with my brain chemistry, my best writing ideas happen when I'm listening to a great song.

Making music provides a different type of oxygen and satisfaction, which is why Gwenn was a bit worried when I decided to let Synthetic Division rest: "I'll keep making music! If I want to do 80s covers sets, I'll do them," I said, adding. "Synthetic Division has always been ridiculous. If I want to do more live shows in the future- if I feel I really need that- I'll say the band got together and decided on a reunion tour."

My friend, Alan Siegler, working his magic to make the Depeche Mode Tribute album sound it’s best.

I was surely inspired by the jokester bands of my youth, including They Might Be Giants, that made music look fun, too. Heck, even The Cure cut up in their music videos. And The Police. In my youth, before I was capable of writing a decent tune, I was so dead serious about music. Practicing, playing riffs from favorite songs, recording myself and listening back hoping to hear something other than what I’d recorded. I think when my confidence in performing rose, my defenses lowered. Each year of shows and new tunes helped me indulge in the goofier side of things. The underground scene in Charlottesville, VA, The Dawning, was so supportive. Those playful goths accepted the new kid in town, openly singing and talking about having HIV. Just as Depeche Mode made me unafraid of homosexuality, The Cure made me unafraid of goths.

The best music is the music that teaches us how to be the best representatives of the human race that we can be, and that sweet spot happens when kind people and artistic talent intersect. As I said, I didn’t know Andrew Fletcher personally. He was kind to me the two or three times we shared a brief chat. But I do know the impact that the band he held together during rough times and the band he dedicated his life to has enriched my journey.

And for that, I am thankful to Fletch for every remaining day that I get to have on this journey myself.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

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