# Synthetic Division: The Times of the Sign (1992-2022)

Music and HIV are entwined for me, having landed in my lap around the same time. Here's why I'm closing a beloved chapter in that life link.

May 23, 2022 By Shawn Decker

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This Saturday I am playing my final Synthetic Division show. It's a continuation of a series of themed shows that Gwenn and I put on with our friends, where 80s music is spun, stranger live electronic music is performed... decorations of the weird and whacky world of Stranger Things adorn the venue. It's just a fun night. The first one we did was for Season 2 in 2017. Then again in 2019 for Season 3...

For those two shows I dressed up as Dr. Martin Brenner, who is masterfully played by Matthew Modine. Who I got to meet in person the fall before Covid would change all of our lives. We discussed that most people think that Dr. Brenner died. I knew differently. Matt didn't say he was in the upcoming season, he's been playfully engaging with fans on Twitter ever since his character was written off at the end Season 1.

Photo by Andre Mags

Well, Brenner is in the trailer for Season 4, and now that he’s back I’m dressing up as an employee of Scoops Ahoy, the beloved fictional mall ice cream shop. This is where the characters Steve (Joe Keery) and Robin (Maya Hawke) work. Spoiler Alert: The Season 3 story arc of Steve and Robin’s relationship is one of the best things in Stranger Things, as is the story behind the story. A flirty friendship between the characters that was originally written to culminate when Steve professes his love for Robin and they are finally together instead ends in a more compelling way when Robin tells Steve that she is gay.

Their conversation, and the heart behind it, makes your forget about the science fiction and peril that surrounds them. It’s just two humans, sharing their truths and sorting out what that

information reveals. It’s beautiful, and the actors had a hand in what would ultimately end up on screen. I had to fanboy out over their guts to suggest a better ending, and for the creators to run with the vast improvement. My  admiration for the Scoops Ahoy duo, combined with Modine’s return as Brenner, made my costume choice an easy one. MY SHOW SPOILER ALERT: Plus my friend, Jason Elliott, has agreed to be a sexy demogorgon intent and is highly favorited on all betting apps to end Synthetic Division once and for all!

Oh, and another easy choice?

Making this show my last.

It is the closing of a door on one of my longest continuous journeys- from discovering the perfect band name in Algebra I pt. 2: Electric Boogaloo in Waynesboro High School to all of the great times I’ve had performing in front of the neon sign. The story of what I’ve called myself musically- Synthetic Division- runs from 1992 until 2022.

I’ll do my best to elaborate on why such a definitive decision like this feels right...

My love of music, puberty and being diagnosed with HIV all landed around the same time for me. My original “HIV meds” were the alternative nation therapy of discovering and listening to my favorite bands- Depeche Mode and the Cure among the most recognizable. In 1990, I got to meet Depeche Mode through the Make-A-Wish Foundation, and standing in the presence of what I deemed to be all-powerful wizards left quite an impression. I put the picture of myself with the band up in my locker, where it remained through my entire high school saga. In my darkest moments post-diagnosis, music helped me have the conversations with myself that I could not yet have with others... (“Until there’s a cure... there’s The Cure.” - Garth Harkness McMurray)

Meeting Depeche Mode with my best friend during the two hardest years of my life, and Demonic Doves bandmate, Mark Roys.

As far as songwriting magic goes, over time I got more comfortable around my own synths. I started meeting and becoming friends with musicians- wizards conjuring their own gems, using a combination of raw emotion and intricate technique.

I played my first live show as Synthetic Division in 1994, at The Nsect Club in Norfolk. I wasn't singing yet, I just hammered folks with some experimental looping. Performances like mine could be why the club closed down after 20 months. But I was thrilled afterward- it was a huge step for me at the time, and I was proud to have taken the leap.

In comparison to that leap, my life took a long distance jumper's Olympic medal-winning effort when I opened up about HIV two years later. That all took off in a way that I'd only dreamt about happening with my music, which was of course far from ready for the magazine cover and appearances on MTV HIV educational programming that my advocacy had landed for me.

As a result of the response to how I choose to tell my story, music took a bit of a backseat. I threw myself into writing- a love I never knew I had until I disclosed my status publicly. Blogging, making other friends online who were living with the virus and speaking up about my experiences living with HIV was where it was at, baby!

That was the best decision I've ever made- to open up about something I thought would always be a private matter. I always say it wasn't really a decision. The harder thing at age 20 would have been to remain silent. My head and heart were in sync, and I listened to that.

When I circled back to my synthesizers things were a little bit different. My instrumental electronic jams were more cohesive. Less experimental. There was an ease to songwriting that hadn't been there before, even though things were still a bit choppy. And soon enough, I wasn't as fearful of the mic. Just dial up that reverb and I was good to go.

With my new attitude about HIV, I wasn't afraid to let some of that enter the safe space that was my music. When Gwenn and I first met, I actually sang one of my new songs for her in my music room. Awkward, yes. But I was being brave once again. Doing something I never thought I would or could do.

Even though Synthetic Division's official start is the band name in 1992 and a CD I did in 1993 called

Monument- my senior class project- things really got cookin’ in 1999. I’d just moved to Charlottesville, Gwenn and I were official… and I was ready to pursue music for real, figuring that if I could tell my life story in front of people then I could sing my stupid songs in front of them, too.
Using the wide lens on things can really help sometimes, you know?

When DMB played their first hometown show since mega-stardom, I booked one on the same night at Tokyo Rose. These flyers were posted around town. (I got squashed like a grape but received a Purple Heart Award from C-VILLE in their post-DMB show issue.)

But 1999 is when my health started to really fail. The alternative music therapy and my newfound

confidence in my music was no longer a match for HIV. I started on HIV meds and was drastically underweight. The first show I booked in town at Tokyo Rose was in the infamous basement- and I was too weak to carry my keyboard in its heavy case down the steps safely, so Gwenn did. About thirty minutes before my set, I threw up- a combination of nerves about singing and the side effects of HIV meds, which were a bit harsher back then.

I was nervous as hell, but loved playing. I didn't feel weak or sickly once I was onstage. I credit my confidence in other areas of my life for that, because my songs were better but not quite there yet. And boy, would there be more shows, especially after I'd joked about a dream of having a neon sign with my band name on it became a reality when Gwenn got me one for Christmas.

Just as I'd made friends online with HIV, I was making new friends in the alternative/gothic/electronic music scene. I was surrounded by such a welcoming and loving presence in that red basement, where my sign would cast a natural and fitting tone. No one cared that I had HIV, or said anything insensitive or stupid. Years later, in fact, when someone local tested positive, I heard from a couple different people who thought I could help out since the person knew about Synthetic Division from the local music scene.

Over the years my performances and songs got better, even though a majority of my time was spent zipping around the country with Gwenn educating about HIV. My health had improved so quickly and dramatically that it afforded me the energy and desire to get out there as much as possible. For every Synthetic Division show I did, I probably spoke with Gwenn about 20 or 30 times in between. I know that those experiences helped provide me with a comfort onstage that would only help my next show and I began to marry those two worlds by using shows as opportunities for fundraisers- at one CD release party I even had custom condoms made up!

I've met so many people through music, and I've written the kinds of songs that I turned as a teenager, back when I thought the only way to do so was to secretly sign some dark contract with the devil in your own blood. I've worked with friends, and I've been the beneficiary of their talents, from recording and engineering albums to co-writing songs. A lot of my best songs have come from arranging friends' instrumental demos around the vocal melodies they inspired in me.

Oh, before I go on, I'll make it clear: I'm not done as a songwriter. I feel like I'm just getting started, and some kind of reboot is in order. I'm not sure what shape it will take, exactly, but I'm extremely excited about the prospect of starting fresh. Of having a cohesive sound. This is just a MIDI Life Crisis of sorts, it's not a Code Red situation. Actually, it's very calming- my heart and my head are in alignment in the same way they were that night that I realized HIV shouldn't be a secret anymore. And to hell with anyone that had a problem with me because of a medical condition.

Speaking of that- life post Covid pandemic has made playing shows a bit more difficult. Last year, for instance, we had a show cancelled in Richmond two days before due to low ticket sales. Six, to be exact. Concerns about delta were rising and I was actually relieved when the plug was pulled. I felt thankful that I'd had three weeks of practicing with friends after that first, strange year where we all grappled with the implications of a new pandemic and the toll it was taking.

Well, two months later things had shifted, and I played my first ever sold out show, a themed show for Halloween which sells itself, not to sell myself short of course. But I love those shows, in the same way I loved the anonymity of Gwenn and I speaking on a campus- entering as strangers, but leaving as much more than that.

What was telling about that sold out show was that after my set I felt like I'd stunk out the joint. Intellectually, I knew that was false. I just didn't feel good about it, which was something I hadn't felt after a gig for at least a decade or so… as we tried to book the next show with my 80s cover band, Film on Girls, I felt really overwhelmed about organizing all of that. So Synthetic Division got the nod because I can just put on headphones at home and practice away by my lonesome.

As I got my feet under me visualizing this Saturday's show, I thought, "I wonder if Mike is available to play this one with me." Then I remembered my friend Scott asking a bit ago if we ever needed a bass

player for Film on Girls he'd be glad to step in. "Hey, Scott, it's not a cover band... but I'd love for you to consider this!"

On a hilarious side note, last Saturday at rehearsal I informed Mike (who has played a handful of shows with me over the years) and Scott (first show together) that this would be my last Synthetic Division show. After doing my best to explain all of the above in about 45 seconds Scott, who is a high school teacher, said: "Ya know, I've always wanted to see if I could borrow that neon sign when I'm teaching synthetic division..."

The thought of a class learning math with the coolest teacher imaginable and my bright ass neon sign glowing in the room is a full circle moment, considering where and when I got the band name from.

In closing, I just want to say thank you to everyone that has been a part of this part of my journey. There are more adventures ahead, more songs to write, more life to suss out if I am lucky. Thirty years of Synthetic Division has been a joy.

And if you want to come out on Saturday to help me say goodbye, I'd love that. Plus, the neon sign AND my senior class project CD (which I've never revealed publicly) will be for sale in our makeshift Starcourt Mall. At Damn Goody. (No joke!) The sign and the rare CD are both a steal at $30,000 and $10, respectively.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

PS... the sign, like my signed Personal Jesus record of which I was once made an offer for, is of course not really for sale. It- like the memories it literally illuminates- is priceless.

Shawn's last show is an An 80s Dance Party Inspired By Stranger Things. With live performances by SHIPS IN THE NIGHT, SYNTHETIC DIVISION (Final performance!) and DJ CADYBUG spinning her favorites gems of the 80s. Dress Up and Get Upside at an unforgettable DREAM Night event that will turn Charlottesville's Jefferson Theater into a other-worldly homage to the weird and wonderful world of Stranger Things! Get Ticket Information here! Shawn goes on first, so get there by 9 pm if you want to see him in his Scoops Ahoy outfit onstage.

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