

Wrong again. Troubled teens do shoot up schools, yes, but far more common and less remarked upon are those instances when a young person simply says or does something that makes authorities nervous, and thereby earns not involuntary enrollment in “military school” but rather a more serious extended stay in what might be called—to borrow a phrase that is printed on the cover of *All Hail West Texas*—“a locked treatment facility for adolescent boys.” Those aren’t the words Jeff’s people would use, of course: they’d just say that he went to a “hospital.” Which explains that oddball third contender in the running for the duo’s band name.

We have to piece this together on our own, because at this point we have all the information that Darnielle’s going to give us. He’s known all along what we’re just figuring out: that we haven’t really been listening, that what we heard through the scrim of tape hiss as wry humor was actually rage, that almost every line in this song is a trap set for our ungenerous assumptions. “The Best Ever Death Metal Band in Denton” has identified its enemies—parental authoritarianism, religious paranoia—but its enemies, which cannot be resisted in an indie rock song, are not its targets. Its targets are us, people who listen to Mountain Goats records: independent sophisticates, educated and citified, given to observation and commentary but not inclined to engage or commit. Us, whose reflex response to dumb kids like these is a superior chuckle, maybe with an inward wince of recognition, instead of a proper measure of sympathy and respect. We like to believe we oppose the coercive forces of small-mindedness as a matter of personal politics, when in fact we’ve probably just fled them; others, meanwhile, are in that fight up to their ears. Here, as elsewhere, Darnielle’s angry, earnest, defiantly uncool project is to reclaim for awkward adolescence—which has no escape route, no better option than to stand its ground and reject what would assimilate it—the moral authority that is its rightful due.

Darnielle finishes by switching out of the narrative past tense into the future: “When you punish a person for dreaming his dream,” he sings, “don’t expect him to thank or forgive you. The best-ever death metal band out of Denton will in time both outpace and outlive you.” The real story has slipped by in our blind spots. Darnielle’s parting promise is all we’re left with, which is probably more than we’ve earned.

—Martin Seay

SONG

“THE NEVER ENDING HAPPENING”

BY BILL FAY

CENTRAL QUESTION: *If the human condition is a work of art, how good is it?*

Partial list of record labels on which Fay has released music: Wooden Hill, Coptic Cat, Dead Oceans; Other evocative song titles from *Life Is People*: “This World,” “Big Painter,” “The Healing Day,” “Jesus, Etc.,” “The Coast No Man Can Tell”; Number of tour dates scheduled in promotion of *Life Is People*: zero; Proviso on contact page of billfay.co.uk: “the one and only website dedicated to British singer and songwriter Bill Fay”: “NO FAN FICTION THOUGH, I REPEAT NO BLOODY FAN FICTION.”

Even in his youth, Bill Fay never composed songs an older, wiser man wouldn’t have written. He already sounds seasoned on 1970’s “Garden Song,” begging to be buried among potatoes and parsley—a humble resting place for a lyricist equally preoccupied with the cosmic and the epic. Identifying with the ingredients of a peasant’s supper, looking “for lasting relations / with a greenfly, spider, or maggot,” he sings of bonding with the natural world, beginning with the bottom rung.

“The Never Ending Happening,” the standout track from 2012’s *Life Is People*, Fay’s first studio album in four decades, feels like a sequel broadened in scope. It consists of a simple circular piano progression, with a burst of grainy cello toward the end. Fay’s low voice, quavering yet resonant as a kindly senator’s, pores over not only the inevitable marriage of man and earth—in a word, death—but also the lot of man while on Earth:

*The never ending happening
of what’s to be and what has been.
Just to be a part of it
is astonishing to me.*

The theme that life is a divinely constructed be-in, a

piece of collaborative performance art that never concludes, echoes throughout *Life Is People*. Individuals, as small as greenflies and maggots in the grand scheme of things, are brushstrokes, instruments contributing to the magnificent swell of life governed by an omnipotent force. Fay plays himself, the observer in the twilight of life, still awestruck:

*Souls arriving constantly
from the shores of eternity.
Birds and bees and butterflies
parade before my eyes.*

He also takes care to emphasize the non-uniformity of the happening's participants: some are crippled by circumstance, others are emboldened by privilege. Likewise, he sings of the beauty the world possesses—"Nightfall stars sun rise again / birdsong before the day begins"—but also of its capacity for destruction, even without the meddling of its inhabitants. Awesome and treacherous, the "waves crashing against the cliffs" are beautiful in the way that unrelenting natural phenomena usually are, the way they can carve shapes into slabs of rock but also swallow humanity in salty gulps.

As gentle brimstone suffuses "The Never Ending Happening," we find Fay considering the ultimate conductor, impresario, and artist of the whole happening, "yearning for the day to be / when God'll roll his stone away." As the piano progression loops, Fay surveys from the ground up, a bit player in the be-in, but he also circles from above, contemplating the tumult from a perch on the shoulder of a deity who probably agonizes over His masterpiece in the same way everyday folk mull over the trajectory of their greenfly-like lives. For Fay's God cannot be heartened by all He sees: He is a tortured artist who wonders if the worst of human possibility has overwhelmed the best—the "happening" overextending its galactic engagement, the whole experiment perhaps destined to be flicked wearily into the trash like a flawed sketch.

If Fay were younger and more famous, his speculation about a higher power might feel trite. But Fay is not young. He is humble and very mortal. Entranced with humanity in all its perfection and imperfection, he knows his time observing the happening from his God-given vantage

point has mostly passed. So he spends a few sweetly melancholy bars in the heavens, wondering how it would feel to be in the position of debating whether to watch it spin on forever.

—Andrew Simmons

SONG

"PROOF OF LIFE"

BY MARNIE STERN

CENTRAL QUESTION: *How do we get in touch with our core desires when all else fails?*

Duration of song: 3:42; **Number of discrete lyrical lines therein:** twelve; **Number of those lines that are repeated two or more times:** ten; **Stern's label:** Kill Rock Stars; **Stern's age when signed to Kill Rock Stars:** thirty; **Stern's current age:** thirty-seven; **Number of Google search results for "Marnie Stern shredding":** approximately 30,500; **Stern's home:** a rent-controlled apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan; **Other occupants of Stern's home:** one Yorkie-Maltese mix; **Name of Yorkie-Maltese mix:** Fig

"All my life is based on fantasy," Marnie Stern announces at the start of "Proof of Life," and it sounds like she might have a point. Here is a woman whose songs usually erupt into firestorms of guitar, whose vocals are always pitch-shifted to sound like a chorus of angry fairies; a woman who, indeed, tends to rely on the partial fantasies of (among others) virtuosic musicianship and electronic signal processing. In this song, however, Stern sings in her natural voice, accompanied primarily by a piano; in the flow of her last album, *The Chronicles of Marnia*, the quiet arrives so jarringly that you know the circumstances are heavy before she says even a word. The din pared down, her voice unvarnished and raw, Stern begins sorting through some serious doubts about her creative work and the life it props up.

At first she is directionless, paralyzed by the notion that her goals and values are illusory. "All the gods, they've