Screenplay: Karaoke King

Karaoke King is a fictional musical documentary that reveals the life story of an incredibly talented albeit, undiscovered singer-songwriter, John Nickles. Dejected by his lack of success he abandons his art and can only truly express himself through Karaoke. This story is told through cinema verite style interviews with therapists, varied people, ex-girlfriends, former close friends and music historians who have through various means encountered him and his music and have been forever changed by his influence. Interspersed with the story are scenes of an entertainer preparing for a concert level performance as if it were Carnegie Hall when in reality it is just karaoke at a local pub. We finally see the deified myth we’ve been hearing about the entire film at the end of the film performing a song which should bring down the house and convince the audience that what they’ve just seen is real.

CAST

THERAPIST #1

Rock Writer

Music Historian

Critic

Close Friend Jay Stetson

Former Band Mate #1 Shea-former bassist & life-Long close friend

Former Band Mate #2 Drummer-Louis, crazy-eyed, long curly hair

Former Band Mate #3 Bassist-Edwood

Former Band Mate #4

Former Band Mate #5

Former Band Mate #6

Former Band Mate #7

Ex Girlfriend #1

Ex-Girlfriend #2

Co-worker (Amara)

FADE IN

Manhattan skyline as seen from Brooklyn at sunset deepening to dusk while credits appear flushed in diagonal corners.

SONG ‘What Would You Do?’ plays over credits.

What Would You Do?

Maybe someday we’ll both be closer, we’ll both be older,

There’ll be some time that we should cling to, like an idea,

You are mine and I could finally bring you home.

What would you do, if we’re in love?

Now that it’s true, sometimes it’s tough

We’ll get it right, give it a try, That’s all I’m asking from you,

What would you do?

Maybe someday we’ll both be closer, wish me closer,

There’ll be some time that we should cling to, like an idea,

You are mine and I could finally bring you home.

Through the open door, You’ve come back for more

Now you know what’s in store, I could always make you sure.

Cause you understand, The world’s in our hands

As long as we live, It’s all up for grabs

We got the dibs, Let’s take a stand

That’s all I’m asking from you, That’s all I’m asking from you,

That’s all I’m asking, What would you do?

CUT

(Slow pan across water as camera settles on to trees and dissolves and Therapist begins.)

(Show Baby Picture.)

Therapist #1: (Salt and Pepper hair, in doctor’s whites, overlooking a chart on a clipboard. Glasses hang on edge of her nose as she flips over the top page after a quick review. British Accent) He was born in Brooklyn in 1970. His mother was 19, his father was 21, (Worried shoulder shrug) they were just children themselves, I’m not sure they had, in fact, I’m quite sure they hadn’t, developed the tools necessary for raising a child at that time. (a look that says ‘don’t you agree?’) I mean, ‘who would?’ it’s simply not possible. It’s not surprising that he sought *some* escape. By the time he was six, his parents were split up and his mother sent him to parochial school for a catholic education. He hated religion, which would in turn lead to his being beaten routinely and sadistically by savage nuns. It’s interesting to note that his parents didn’t get divorced right away. This dragged the experience out. His mother was a catholic and didn’t believe in divorce so their ‘separation’ would last many, many years until the nuns of the church granted her an annulment, the same nuns that taught him at school. He was beaten by the nuns at school, and due to her own frustration with her lack of control of her precious child, whose intellect was growing at an astounding rate, (aside) when I tested him, his IQ came in over 160, his mother beat him at home with large metal spoons. His father was also *in absentia* and for a child of age 14, 15? and this left no safe harbor. He needed an outlet so, what would you do? he created one. He took to expressing himself through music, and mostly taught himself to play guitar at age 15.

(Show teenage era guitarist photos)

Former Bassist & Life-Long Close Friend (Shea, relaxed, snacking on unshelled pistachios, so he’s really working on freeing the nuts from their shell the entire time and focusing more on that than the interview): We started doing covers. I think everyone starts that way, mimicing the great. It was typical stuff; U2, Guns N Roses. In the basement, oh yeah. (laughs) He would want to take the song a million times, he was a workhorse, he wouldn’t stop to eat, he would just keep working. He really wanted to get it right. He used to say ‘practice makes permanent.’ It was on the verge of maniacal. I was starving during those rehearsals. We were playing out by the time we were 18 or so, CB’s, the Continental. I remember he didn’t want to book our fist gig, he thought we needed more rehearsal. He was probably right, we were messy, and he was frustrated. At least he channeled that into the music. He was on fire. If we had listened to him, we would have been pros before we even started but me and Tim just wanted to get in the game and I think he did too.

Former Band Mate #1 (Drummer-Tim, White guy with greying afro now in Hindi robes, large belly, sitting in front of window, a bead curtain can be seen off to the side.) It was a fairly quick evolution. We just stepped into the liquid of playing together and we had a gift. It was as if we could channel the universe through our music. We were churning out completely original music almost immediately, moving through genres at a break neck pace. We would take an entire genre, a whole movement, and break it, reinvent it, make it our own, take what we wanted from it and leave it for dead, or honor it, only to have it reborn into our own material. It was…supernatural.

(Show pictures of band onstage)

Rock Writer: (Disheveled apartment, in front of disorganized bookcases. A cat jumps from a pile to his left onto the floor taking some of the top most books with it.) These guys were way ahead of their time, I mean, it was the lower East side in the late 80’s and early 90’s man, post punk was big. New wave was dead and bands like De-generation and the Feelies were huge then. There was a lot of black leather and heroin, it was heavy man, and these guys hit the stage in like, 3 piece suits, I remember seeing record executives walk out of shows because they were uncomfortable that they weren’t the smartest dressed guys in the room. I think they felt like they had been one-upped!’ And the music they were playing, the very definition of power pop and punk-pop and just the hookiest, sing-along stuff. It blew people’s minds. I mean totally radio ready, million seller hits. They were Nirvana before there was Nirvana. I don’t think people were looking for music that would help transform them. They were too…hopeful and the music community wasn’t ready for hope. In a way, I feel like the community was really alienated and perhaps disappointed by their buoyancy. I think there was a feeling in the air of wanting to wallow in the mire, the status quo. And in the end, we let them down by failing to embrace what they offered us…growth.

SONG: ‘More’

More

I’ve

had

enough,

Had

enough

of this.

I’ve

had

enough,

Had

enough

of this.

I can’t take no,

I can’t take no,

I can’t take no more.

CUT

(Show more band photos)

Narrator: They seemed to be making progress. The band had a foothold on the college radio scene with 2 CD’s charting in the top 30 at over 30 stations and gaining airplay at over 150 stations nationwide. (Start wipe showing magazine covers and reviews spinning into focus) In May 2000, CMJ New Music Report chose them as the A&R pick in a May 2000 issue, saying “impressive in both quantity and quality with solid songwriting…(the) songs display and unusually easy compatibility with the FM dial.” After heavy rotation and favorable reviews the Major record labels all asked for demos but a deal was not forthcoming with Sony, MCA or Grand Royal records.

CUT

Therapist #1: I think he was unable to promote himself in any capacity because he was somewhat damaged. Where he should have had a healthy, well-adjusted, self-esteem, he had a vat, just a vat of never ending self-hatred, he could simply not evacuate. He was deaf to compliments. Any positive reinforcement would immediately be dissolved in this enormous vat of self loathing. He sensed it too, but I don’t think he understood himself to have it as bad off as he did. As an artist, he really longed for the praise and acceptance of the music community but he was unable to ask for it in any concrete way, it was too far out his reach.

OS: Why do you think that was?

Therapist #1: (stunned look as she’s just explained why she thought that was, she now senses she’s dealing with an idiot, takes a breath to gather her resources) For most people, when they lack a healthy self esteem, they tend to become attention seekers and in extreme cases, Narcissists. John was too gentle for that and he didn’t feel comfortable saying to everyone, ‘look at me, look at me.’ and that was difficult for him because he did have this authentic talent, which might have been better served if he had done so.

CUT

(Show photos of band on stage at different shows with different drummers playing)

Narrator: After a host of drummers and creative differences, Mint unofficially dissolved and John embarked on a solo career. By the time the music scene had come around to signing intimate home-spun acts, John was already deeply interred in the home recording element, adding layer upon layer of complex arrangements.

Former Band Mate #2 (Drummer-Louis, crazy-eyed, long curly hair): A ‘sketch’ he would call it, it was literally, like 30 tracks to get across a single idea. I mean Four Track? Forget it! This guy needed a hundred track!

Critic: He has a gift. Where it comes from, I don’t know, I only know that not everyone has it and he certainly has it as evidenced by his profoundly nuanced approach to harmonies and melody and vocal constructions, and guitar interplay, not to mention the intimate subject matter and the emotional complexity of the work. The remaining recordings we have are a real treasure.

SONG: ‘Intro’ from ‘kit and caboodle’ (mostly Instrumental, only vocal line is a gentle. ‘ahhhh….’ In the background )

CUT

Best Friend (Jay Stetson-kind of flaming, wearing a scarf. He has a slight lisp and is a little too full of himself): He. is. a. genius. And I know that because, well, it takes one to know one. It’s all around us. This film is genius. The genius is a creative spirit that lives in all of us. I’m a Genius. The Romans used to say that genius was a spirit that lives in the air and one would summon it and commune with it to create what they called works of genius. He had a way of commune-icating (stresses ‘commune’) with that part of the spirit world and bringing that to our world. It’s Genius.

CUT

Former Band Mate #3 (Bassist-Edwood): He was such an asshole. I asked him to join the band with my drummer for fun, we used to get high together, I thought he was cool and then the motherfucker kicks me out of my own band. Him and the drummer conspired against me because they thought I was too loose with my arrangements, I wouldn’t get to ‘rehearsal’, that’s what he called it ‘rehearsal’! (grudgingly) it’s fucking practice man. I wouldn’t get there on time because I’d go and pick up a few beers before hand and one time he actually took me out into the hallway and told me that I was being unprofessional. What a douche bag! (Incredulously) I’m drinking a beer man! Lay off. What, are you my fucking dad? I’m glad he never made it. He’s a fucking asshole.

Off Screen: Could he write?

Former Band Mate #3: (Resentfully) Yeah, he could write. He could write the doors off a barn, man.

Off Screen: How was he to work with?

Former Band Mate #3: (Remorseful, Defiant, eyes getting wet-Looks straight at the camera) He was amazing to work with. (swigs a beer)

CUT

Ex-Girlfriend #1: (English accent, super hot, stacked blonde, in a ski sweater. She is somewhat exhausted, has been well travelled but hasn’t gotten very far and is bouncing a distracted child on her lap. The child has burgundy corduroy suspenders on and is wearing a tan, heathered mac.) He was like a bundle of nerves. Sometimes he’d be up and sometimes he was down. When you get close to someone like that it’s like a moth to a flame, really. The closer you get to the fire, the more you get burned, or someone said that, but I rather like getting burned, used to anyway, some like it hot!(giggle) I like getting properly fired up, and even though he may have hurt me and I’ve had a few regrets (looks at child) but not being with him, no, that was the only time in my life that I felt fully alive. Now my life is shite. (bounces child)

Off Screen: Why?

Ex-Girlfriend #1: I made some bad decisions, and I didn’t have him to help me, to help guide me. He was really good for me. He was good to me and he was just and enormous influence in my really tiny life. I had a lot of voids I was trying to fill and he helped me see my own infinity instead of my finite-ness which, I had become addicted to.

Off Screen: Can you talk a little bit about how he hurt you, or what led you to break up?

Ex-Girlfriend #1: Why did we break up? It was a sort of a mutual letting go on both our parts. It was like we graduated to our next level. He once told me, and I thought we would be together forever, and I told him that. He said ‘No Starlight’. He used to call me Starlight. He said ‘No, I’m only supposed to be here for part of the time. Only part of the journey on your road, you have your own path to go on and we won’t always be on the same path. Don’t worry. There will be others like me.’ I was devastated when he told me that, but it seemed to make sense, and on some level it was comforting know that I had met someone like him in the first place.

Off Screen: Were there others like him like he said there would be?

Ex-Girlfriend #1: No. There is no one and no one will ever be like him. There have been other people in my life who have helped me to guide me and were almost like ‘ambassadors’, that was his word, into other levels of my own existence but John was alone in his quality. He was unique and I still love him to this day. (Camera pans off to see current boyfriend, probably father of the bouncing child sitting on sofa staring at TV)

CUT

Fan (college age girl): (pale faced-with a brunette Mohawk and a spiked necklace, she is excitedly shaking her hands, it’s night and the light from the camera is glaring) His music isn’t like anything else. Nobody sings like him. Not even Elvis sings like him. I remember the first time I saw him sing, I was struck by his voice, it was like an angel. Or you know, like a visitation. And the songs he wrote. They were like standards, it was as if you had heard them all before, they felt so familiar. He’s very serious, he doesn’t play around. When I listen, I feel comfortable in his hands. I know he will thoughtfully lead me in to the heart and it’s going to be an enjoyable ride.

CUT

(Show still photos, Black & White of in music studio rehearsals)

Song: ‘Renegade’

Renegade

Some whisper secrets

Our love is Renegade

Our love is deepest

When is it only play?

That’s what you say

It’s only play

And then one day

You throw it away

So much for secrets

Our love is blinded by the day

Our love’s defeated

Just make it go away

That’s what you say

It’s only play

And then one day

You throw it away.

Narrator: By 1989 more Alternative rock acts like the Pixies and Primus were starting to break big and melodic, hooky, rock wouldn’t rule the mainstream airwaves until a few years later with Nirvana’s ‘Nevermind’ & Smashing Pumpkins’ ’Gish’. He did, however, develop a small buzz around the city music scene and would have a few wildly devoted fans. They would show up with flowers wearing hand-made T-shirts with the band’s name on it. Throughout all of this, he managed to keep a day job, or was forced to keep a day job to pay the bills.

CUT

Co-worker (Amara): (Beautiful, Indian girl in low cut floral print dress, standing outside taking a cigarette break, shifting from one heel to the other) What one word comes to mind when I think of him? Hmm…’hard’. He was hard to get along with for some people and he was very determined and deliberate in his actions. And I think it was hard for him too…

Off Screen: What was hard?

Co-Worker: I think living in this world was hard for him.

Off Screen: Why?

Co-Worker: Well, when you work with someone you really get to know them and I think he had really high standards. Basically, what would happen is, he would make a point of proving to you that you weren’t living authentically and that could piss a lot of people off, especially because they would *agree* with him and then they couldn’t handle that so they would reject him. It was a lot of ‘ya know, you’re right, but….’

Off Screen: Were you aware of his singing?

Co-Worker: (Confused) He sings? I guess. I think he said he was in a band once. I don’t know.

Off Screen: Tell me more about working with him.

Co-Worker: (shifting weight to other heel) I do know he worked *really* hard when he was here. He was *amazing* and our job was like, maddeningly hard. It was super stressful but he seemed to thrive on it and really it was way too easy for him. He seemed to be able to create a whole other world that was open to him aside from living in this one. He took care of his ‘mundanities’ he would call them that, basically ‘the day job’, and he did it so fast that he was able to create a lot of extra time and space at the job. I think he wrote a novel, at his desk, on the clock. I know he started a design company, and he made that software program. And yes, I had a little crush on him. (broad smile) I think he was aware.

CUT

SONG: Walk Alone

Walk Alone

I walk alone my hands are empty

A little cold, I'll be alright

It's awful quiet and I wonder

What you'll do, to my mind

You're at home and thinking of me

Maybe you'll write a letter too

I gave you a picture to remind you

You gave me a photocopy of you

And I do,

think of you

And I will,

hold you ‘til

I won't have to walk,

alone

Walk alone my hands are empty

Little cold, I'll be alright

It's awful quiet and I wonder

What you'll do, to my mind

You're at home and thinking of me

Maybe you'll write a letter too

I gave you a picture to remind you

Of how I look when I look at you

And I do,

think of you

And I will,

hold you ‘til

I won't have to walk,

alone

CUT

Therapist #2: He sought control, and he could be very controlling. I think many artists are like that, in that, since they can’t control the world around them, they seek to control the world or, a world, or worlds, they create. It’s a god-like self empowerment that some artists struggle with but he was very comfortable with that. On more than one occasion, he mentioned this Robert Plant line from a Led Zeppelin song, ‘It’s all a battle for control, from the day that you begin.’ and I think he could really relate to that as he didn’t have a lot of control over his life growing up and that can be very debilitating to anyone and we all crave some sense of stability. As much as there are wars and chaos, our societies are based on stability and the fact that we will need to eat a meal tomorrow by a certain time, or that the crops will be ready at a certain time of season, leads to a certain system of organization and stability. We depend on that and not in the very least in the home. So not having that early on, led him to really crave it as he got older and could actually take control of his life.

Curator: You can't look at him as a solo artist or a solo anything really. He brought so much more to his work. You see, some artists decide on a path or they figure out their little device and stick to it like a one trick pony like, let's say Serra. See, here's an artist that has one medium, Mass. He may use charcoals, he may use Oil stick, or Core-Ten steel plates as a way of (imitating in a gruff way, tough-guy, elbow swings) recreating his relationship with his father but at the end of the day it's still just one idea. Mass over Light. And this idea, while interesting, some might say is boring and very profound, well thought or fulfilling. It's like he's working in a vacuum with no awareness of the outside world or even a desire to interact with the outside world or should I say, the energies of the world. There’s an insular quality to his work that leaves one wanting more of a conversation.

OS: Do you like his work?

Curator: Yes I like his work. I even consider him one of the great albeit minor artists of the Twentieth century, but I don't think he should be elevated to the level of a god among men, the position the arts intelligencia currently holds for him. I just think there’s a tendency in our contemporary culture to celebrate mediocrity, and I’m not sure if that will pass, or if that’s human nature, but our willingness to celebrate someone who gets huge sheets of steel rolled for them at a factory in Germany, as a huge mind of our society, is sadly disappointing. That's to say, how many retrospectives at the Tate have you been to where the work was good? Just good, and not great. Just good, see? (makes a level plain in front of himself with both hands) Not good enough, I’d say. I'm afraid the whole of our society needs to raise their level of acceptable standards. And his, is someone whose work did that. He was aware, not only of whatever point he was trying to make at that time in his career or how his work at the time he was making it related to his entire body of work, he was aware of us. He was aware of posterity and he was extremely thoughtful on our behalf. I honestly feel cared for by his work. When I hear his voice, I feel loved.

CUT

SONG: Rock n' Roll Will Tear Us Apart

Rock n' Roll Will Tear Us Apart

I like it soft and you like it hard

And I know rock n roll will tear us apart, but for now

I stay at home and you go to the show

hoping that a guitar man will save your soul, don't you know

Guitar gods are all frauds

and rock star seems like a rock star dreams

You live your life like a work of art

Rock n roll is gonna tear us apart

I know rock and roll doesn't care

Only wants to tear us apart

So you take the chopper and I'll take the car

I know rock and roll will never be far from my heart

With all of her looks and all of her hair

I wonder if rock and roll really could care much at all

Guitar gods are all frauds

And rock star seems like a rock star dreams

You live your life like a work of art

Rock n roll is gonna tear us apart

CUT

Critic: You can see even here he’s starting to question his relationship to music as he personified rock n roll as his lover, and really calling into play the farcity of rock gods and guitar heroes. I take this song as a metaphysical divorce from the music industry as a whole. Shortly after he wrote this, he withdrew further from the spotlight of concert performance into the more secure and stable world of home recording and dove head first into the multi layered textures of his own imagination. It was in the Fall of 2006 when John decided to cover Patsy Cline’s ‘She’s Got You’.

Rock Writer: Artists throughout time have chosen to radically rework popular songs as a means of expressing their not only their approach but really, their philosophy to music. The origin of the word ‘Cover’ comes from the Latin ‘Con’ and ‘Aperien’, which means literally ‘with opening’. One could argue that it comes from ‘Con’ ‘Vero’; ‘with truth’ or loosely, ‘with my truth’. I think the best cover versions, transform the original song, make it the performer’s own and on some level, yes, they dig deep inside the song, open it up and bring out the truth of it, from not only inside the song but from inside themselves. I should add, this was a devastating acoustic version.

SONG: She’s Got You (plays in background)

Best Friend (Jay Stetson): (About ‘She’s Got You’.) (Warm glow of love comes over his face.) When I heard him cover that, wow. Now we’re talking. I mean everything about it, it was just the right thing at the right time. I was going through a rough time then and it really kept me a float.

Off Screen: How so?

Best Friend (Jay Stetson): Have you ever felt really loved?

Off Screen: (mumbled) uh…..

Best Friend (Jay Stetson): It was like that. He loved me through his songs even if they were someone else’s. Maybe he loved me even more through that because he could tap into the universal love already in all of those songs.

Critic: The treatment, musically, the delicacy of the arrangement, the way the 2nd verse comes in harder than the 1st, but still really soft? It was just so controlled and supple. It’s a masterwork. The fact the he kept the gender specific pronouns the same, basically turning the song from an ode to a stolen love into his girlfriend leaving him for another woman, well, that unique perspective just opened a whole new world.

Best Friend (Jay Stetson): It changed me. I don’t think I was ever the same after hearing that. (warm laughs) He told me that had actually happened to him. His girlfriend and left him for another woman so it really was his story.

Critic: I mean he was right up there with the greats, Paul Anka, Neil Diamond even Elvis, I think he was better than Elvis, I didn’t go in for that whole hip shaking thing. I like the real heart-felt stuff. And he brought that to the table, or should I say the mic, every time.

Therapist #1: I think he found it easier to express himself through the music of others because there was an emotional distance there. There wasn’t such a vulnerability and that left him free to create without all the baggage that was brought to bear on his own creative process. He was quiet tormented and well not to be stereotypical but was Beethoven happy?

CUT

Critic: (On “Sunshine”) Lets’ start with this. This is his ‘cover’ version, if you want to call it that, of John Denver’s 1973 single, “Sunshine On My Shoulders’

Rock Writer: ‘Sunshine!’ (enthusiastically, with a beaming smile) yeah…

Fan: (panicked) ‘oh my god…incredible.’

Critic: I know his fans have heard this many times but I think this is a good place to start. I think this rendition is a classic example of his recording prowess.

He’s crafted a mantra with a meditative, in-the-row type of cadence bordering on the hypnotic, dare I say rapturous.

Rock Writer: It totally kicks, man.

Critic: It brings to bear a form and content, elegiac metaphor as the plaintive tone is yearning for growth, notice how each line brings in another element, its actually growing before your eyes and ears. A harmony here, a 2nd guitar there and when you consider the layers upon layers that are built up here, it’s really akin to sculpture. Now we are looking at this in terms of music, but I think of his approach as more of a painterly, if not culinary one. The use of repetition creates a ground or a mirepoix, if you will, upon which to mix the rest of his musical colorations.

(turns towards bookcase and presses play on a cd machine.)

(under his breath) ...let’s just hit play here….

(‘….sunshine’s count in is heard through the speakers) from the very moment of conception by including the count in, we are drawn into an immediate intimacy. Its as if we are in the same room. There’s a profound closeness and a oneness that is unique unto his work. There is a spiritual quality here, both a softness and I would say a connective presence that’s in the recording.

So. here we have the 1st vocal line and the opening couplet of the song. ‘sunshine on my shoulder makes me happy,’ and ‘sunshine almost always gets me high’. One could look it that as a call and response system in terms of a religious, church-like call from the pastor followed by the parishioners’ response. Sunlight being the literal light of the world, deific metaphor, also, in that line, is expressed the duality of nature, on the one hand, sunshine on ones’ shoulder, make’s one happy’, it seems fairly certain, however, on the other hand, sunshine *almost* always gets one, proverbially, high, which would connote that sometime’s, sunshine doesn’t always get one high, and by extension, sunshine doesn’t always make one happy. Which would lead to the question, what is happiness? what is our connection to nature and ultimately to god? But for a moment let’s just stick with the techniques. (1:34)

Here’s the guitars. You’ll notice which each additional line of song another element is added, this is classic Nickles, doing what he does best, a slow minimalist simmer so you can really savor each ingredient. With all of the best meals I think what’s left out is as important as what’s chosen to leave in. The remainder of the original song’s lyrics are not present because he wants to really guide our focus on the concepts at hand. I think it’s a very loving treatment and I think John Denver would be pleased. (3:14)

So now we are at a kind of rolling boil, let’s turn down the heat with the classic drop out. (3:34)

He’s a master at this, It’s a complete deconstruction, he’s exploded the vehicle.

It has the effect of slowing down time. We’ve left the song’s structure behind but are still within it’s, now with an almost microscopic view of the elements.

It’s a lovely contrast from the rest of the song. Just ethereal.

And now back in for the outro, like a passing sun shower. The reference of the seasons harkens back to Vivaldi, Shakespeare, Ecclesiastes…‘to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose.’

CUT

Therapist #1: He was fat. And he thought of himself as a fat person. He turned to food for solace after his parents divorced and just kept gaining weight straight into his teen years. Right around those prime dating years and he missed the opportunities that are, well, a rite of passage amongst the youths of the world. You experiment with your sexuality, your identity. The complete shunning of his peers, left him very disconnected and wounded. I don’t think he ever got over that.

In our sessions, he always referred to himself as ‘the fat kid’, even though he had lost over 7 stone. And it’s no secret, he was a very handsome fellow. He looked a little like a movie star, and with that over-compensatory ego, I’m surprised he didn’t go into films. I think he became resentful when women started noticing him. I think that attention came too late for him and he was closed off, the only route for his expression of intimacy became his music.

Narrator: Nickles set about a rigorous work schedule writing songs, singing & recording at home, Playing drums in a band, teaching drums, working on musicals, working on commercial jingles.

Rock writer: He was on fire. He wrote up to 4 songs a day. He was producing bands, managing his own band, graphic designing flyers, t-shirts, all marketing materials.

He was doing everything you would need an entire creative team, an entire company to be doing for you. I don’t know how he did it. Maybe he was on speed. I know he smoked pot but I thought that was supposed to make you sleepy.

Ex-Girlfriend #2: He would get high and work out. He would do bong hits in between sets on the rowing machine. Who does that? I thought it was hardcore. When he was focused, it was like a laser.

Former Band Mates #4 & #5 (sitting together in MC jackets, one has drum sticks)

#4 (Guitarist): Why did he get high? I know why he got high. Keep the channel open, man. It was like a switch for him. When we used to smoke it would turn on a switch and it was like he was lit up from within. He was an open channel. It was as if he was receiving signal directly from God.

#5 (Drummer): He could play anything he wanted at anytime, and better than me when we were partaking. I would just get sloppy. He would actually tighten up his playing. I dunno, I guess he was talented.

Best Friend (Jay Stetson): He was the touchstone of my sustenance. He would right me when I was wrong, he would push me into my self and force me to face my own shortcomings. He was like a personal trainer, for my soul, that I didn’t know I needed until he showed me the way. He opened my eyes.

Former Band Mate #6 (Bassist): Oh he was good at that. He was always dragging you kicking and screaming into your own greatness, he could see that ability in people and he could tell I they weren’t trying hard enough to nurture it and he would seize on that and make you better. He would sit our own drummers down and teach them parts that were more complicated and just more tasteful than what they could bring to the table. It was the kind of thing that would leave many men resentful. You can imagine, I mean, these were paid professionals. But then, you weren’t really ready for that upgrade in knowledge then, were you? If resentment is all you walked away with.

CUT

Best Friend (Jay Stetson): I just think he held the world to a different standard; a higher standard and the world fell short. I mean, he trusted you and just thought people were decent and honest, or at least we started off that way, I mean, he would leave five dollars on the table and expect it to be there when you came back. I mean, who would take something that wasn’t theirs? I mean it kind of makes sense. He just expected the world, when given a chance, to rise to the occasion. His world was a better world than ours.

Therapist #1: One can see with that type of rigid thinking, how desperately tough that must have been for him to cope with. As the world doesn’t exist the way we think it does, does it? It just is the way it is, and when it’s not the way one expects it to be, well that can be just crushing and utterly disappointing.

Ex-Girlfriend #2: I would come home sometimes and he would just be sitting there silently looking out the window. When I got closer I could see he was crying. Once, when I asked him what was wrong he said, ‘The world. The world is wrong.’ He was crying for the world. Like Jesus or Bouddha.

Best Friend #2: He had a polarizing effect on people. If you'd ask anyone they'd agree. You either loved him or you hated him. And if you loved him you would do anything for him. I saw once, a person lay down on the ground in front of him so he wouldn't step in a puddle. It was quite the symbolic gesture. The person wanted John to literally walk all over him but he wouldn't do that. He would not ask for favors from anyone. He felt that was too much. He didn't want to be beholden to anyone. He would do anything you asked of him unless he felt it was abetting. He would not abet. And well if you hated him. It was usually because of a shortcoming you hated in yourself. I'd say there was a correlation to how much you hated him and how much you were aware of your own lack of self-mastery. If people wanted to kill him, I think it's that part of them selves that they really wanted dead. He made a lot of enemies and I think that was because of people knowing... Let's put it this way, let’s say I'm totally fucked up and no one knows it, and then you come on in and blow my cover. Now everyone knows it. Don't you think that's gonna make me just a little mad? All he did was uncover the truth wherever he went. It was his Dharma. That can make people very uncomfortable.

Rock Writer: So, he went to Nashville. He recorded with all A-list session stars. The producers all thought he would be the next Garth Brooks. He had the songs. He had the dedication. He was ready, willing and able to uproot his life and go on the road. Music is all that mattered to him. They shopped it to all the majors, but again, he was way ahead of his time.

Critic: The Neo-Alt- Country movement out of Brooklyn wouldn’t begin in earnest or be recognized until 6 years later with the likes of Black Label Jacobean, and Salt & Samovar. Oddly enough, you could hear John’s influence in all of their music, and all of the music of that time period. The melodic sense, the phrasing of the arrangements, even the sensibility, all of those bands used to go to his shows, almost like a study class. He was able to throttle the zeitgeist unlike any other artist of his time. He was the voice of his generation.

A&R Guy ‘J.T.’ (pixelated silhouette/mutated voice): I worked at one of the Majors. I had a stable of songwriters. Whenever he was in town, I would send them to the shows, scouts, to reconnoiter, especially my strongest writers because a visit with him could transform them into masters. It was like they were just journeymen before, albeit, million selling journeymen, but this, this was required reading. He was what was happening. He always had new material. He knew how to pace a show. He knew how to run a band onstage and off. He was the full package; an entertainer, a real artist! Not like the garbage we would package and ship out to the masses. He was what we were really trying to do. He created entire genres single-handedly. He could have called it ‘Self-Core’. He knew what he was doing and we could learn, a lot, from him. We hung on every word. I’m not saying we stole actual songs from him. Look. I mean, did he make up the C, A minor, F to G chord progression? No. Now add a G7 and maybe we are getting a little close to the bone. Man, could that guy write.

I sent a drummer to infiltrate his band to get first had knowledge of how he ran his band, that’s right, I don’t need to name name’s here but lets just say he was in the band for a full working cycle of a suite of songs. The drummer blew it. He couldn’t handle the pressure of being a fraud in front of someone so sincere. It was like his light of truth burned away all falseness. It could not stand.

Former Band Mate #7 (Drummer): Yeah man, I ‘broke into’ his band. No, I didn’t break into his band. I was his drummer. And no, I didn’t need the money. I needed the talent. I was at rehearsal in my own band and well, let’s just say, it wasn’t going well. We were just starting and stuck in a rut and I just really wanted us to get to the next level. We had some songs but we didn’t know how to rehearse properly. We didn’t know how to arrange songs properly, or how to even find out what our weak spots were and I had been to a few shows, I had even heard his demos. He worked with someone I was friends with so I had the access and I could just tell he had his stuff together. I knew he could help us but he had his own band going so I was just sitting by the wayside and then I’d heard his drummer quit or got fired, one or the other. I asked my friend to put in a good word for me and I was able to show up at a rehearsal. He was very easy going with me at first, very gentle. He seemed…I don’t know, wounded. Either, I must have done something right or he just took mercy on me, he knew my band was in shambles and he let me join his band. He asked me to come back and we just started rehearsing. After that initial rehearsal is when I really saw the magic.

Off Screen: What magic?

Former Band Mate #7 (Drummer): I mean, he got tough on me right away and opened my eyes to how to really get inside a song and find the rhythm, and how the beat should support the melody. Almost how the beat should have emotion? He was an amazing drummer himself so he really helped me with my drumming technique, I wouldn’t say he gave me lessons, but kind of. Anyhow, we worked on a suite of songs, like 6 or 7 and we were going to get together enough to work on a record. He kept scrapping songs because they would get to a point in their development where he would realize they were flawed in some way. See, some people thought he was working on more abstract things but I think he could just tell that they were flawed so he would abandon them. I mean, I saw him rip up lyrics right in front of me of a song we’d been working on for weeks, he would just start writing a new one there on the spot to replace it. He didn’t think the listeners deserved to be put upon with something inferior. He had a great respect for his listeners. So, because of that we went through a lot of songs before getting an album’s worth. At the same time a producer friend of mine asked me to get songs ideas to him for money and well, I wasn’t doing too well at that time so I met with him an told him I’d get some kind of info for him, I mean, I was the closest to him at that time. Other guys were only able to go to the gigs, which weren’t happening at that time, but I could go directly to the man, the source of all this wonder. But I really was there to learn, not to steal. I respected him too much to steal from him. But I needed the money. It wasn’t a paying gig yet. Be that as it may, I couldn’t handle it, after JT, (looking off camera) we’re calling him JT?

Off Screen: Yeah.

Former Band Mate #7 (Drummer): Yeah JT, started pressuring me for material and one time he stole my rehearsal tape, lets’ just say things got real ugly real quick and I couldn’t stay in the band anymore. It just felt wrong.

Off Screen: Did you learn anything?

Former Band Mate #7 (Drummer): Oh yeah. I didn’t get sings but what I did get was empowerment. He taught me how to fish. He taught me how to control the line, the ebb and flow, self control, how to sing from the gut and sing from the heart, how to play what you live, and how to bring love, how to make love. Being with him was beautiful.

Off Screen: What about JT?

Former Band Mate #7 (Drummer): JT? Didn’t that guy go to jail? (turns to side)

CUT

A&R Guy ‘J.T.’ (pixelated silhouette/mutated voice): Aw man, I don’t even know what I paid that guy for. We did get some really good intel out of that, and wrote some great hits because of that, but I wanted him to stay in for the record, I really wanted to know the inner workings of his recording process. Someone told me they thought he used Vaseline and cardboard tubes? I don’t know. It doesn’t add up. He did talk about ‘running the entire band through a 4 track’ or so my informant told me, which I always thought was interesting. Do you think that’s ‘Message To You’?

SONG: Message to You (live)

Message To You

Moonlight is in your eyes

Sunglasses when you smile

Girl god you drive me wild

Gotta get a message to you.

CUT

Critic: you can hear how coming off his lost weekend in london, that he’s taken on an entirely new tack of compressing the band into a single, massive, juggernaut. a sonic salve, its much more of sonic sculpture at this point with the melody behaving like a vein of marble adding color in its inter-contextual contrast.

Rock writer: I was at that show. People were crying like babies, they weren’t ready for that. I wasn’t ready for that. I am still working on how to express in words what happened that night. It was a conjoining of all of the art of the Human race. It was simply phenomenal and nothing about music, live performance or western culture was ever the same again. It was like seven bucks to get in.

Therapist #2: We were working on going deeper into who he really was, and exorcising a lot of the darker inner parts that were keeping him from his own light. I think he was able to tap deeper into his creativity, and when someone like that can do that well you’d better watch out. The results can be extraordinary.

Friend #3: If I were to describe him, I would say he was a very precise person. Let me specify, he was *the most,* precise person I’ve ever met. If I wanted to build a spaceship, I would want him to be part of the team. If I found myself trapped in a spaceship in the middle of space I would want him on board to help me figure out how the hell to get out of there. If I were to start a civilization, I would want him to lead the race forward. Nothing could get by him and he wouldn’t let anything slide.

Co-worker #2 (Anna): Let me give you an example, if there was a piece of paper on the floor, he would pick it up. If there were a single speck of dust on the desk he would wipe it off. Aside from him being a complete phobic of airborne particles. He was just overly thorough to the point of it being ridiculous. He worked as if there were someone over his shoulder watching him, like the black hand of history was chasing him down. He didn’t have to work that way but I don’t think he knew any other way, and one time I asked him about it, like, why did he work so hard even when no one was around to see it or appreciate his efforts. He said, ‘Work now, work forever.’ (imitated gruffly) just like that. ‘work now, work forever’ like a robot. He thought his work would last forever, well beyond his years. Like, he wasn’t actually working for those around him right then, he was working for the unknown future, he was working for posterity. It was like the Egyptians building the pyramids. He knew that some one in the future would see his work and look back on him and judge him and he wanted to be pass that test. He wanted to be the best.

CUT

Narrator: It’s been a long time since he’s held a mic in his hands as the shake in them shows. His voice quivers and the first line of the Eagle’s song comes out and wafts into the room amidst the clatter of glasses and gentle laughs of lovers in their booths. Don Henley’s message isn’t lost on him and the connection to those listening is immediate. ‘All long at the end of the evening, As the bright lights have faded to blue…’. The day has been his life and the evening is now looking at him in all of his remaining days, and all those yesteryears, all the hopes and dreams, all the could have beens, all the demos in the hands of the right person, and that friend who knew someone at the label, all those days waiting for the call, finally trying to let go but never being able to, not even now, as the twilight sets on the life that passed him by. ‘I was thinking about a woman who

loved me, I never knew.’

Therapist #2: The self that he revealed to me in his most intimate moments was magnificently transcendent. It was stars and tree branches and laughter but it was not his dominant self. The self that dominated him was the self of shame and doubt, loathing, hatred and destruction. He battled with himself constantly and it was an epic battle of attrition. He wore himself down as his powers increased leaving very little for the rest of the world. He didn't have the tools for survival and he couldn't protect himself from the horrors of the world or himself. He's the one patient I feel like I couldn't reach exactly. I could only get as close as he wanted me to and that was at arm's length for the most part. He didn't seem to know, well, I was going to say, he didn't seem to know his own power but that's not really true. He was quite aware of his own power, he just wasn't aware of his own ability to help himself. He could have saved himself. (wistfully, looks off into distance) sorry. I. In hindsight, I really cherish the time we were able to spend together. (Looks off screen as check creases up to eye) Can we cut?

CUT

(Cut to) Mike (Angry Artist, smoking, exhaling slowly and wryly smiling, agitated): Are you kidding me? He couldn't shut his fucking mouth. He didn't know when…look, he didn't know how, to say when. He would go on and on, like he was some kind of fucking expert. I'll tell you what, I would have fucking bashed his face in. Is he dead yet?

Off Screen: He's dying.

Mike: He's dying? You know what? Good for him. That selfish prick. If I'd even see him in a hospital bed, I'd fucking bash his teeth in. That smug piece of shit. Fuck him!

Off Screen: Did he tell you how to correct your art?

Mike: (incensed, on the verge of frothing) What?! Fuck you, ‘correct’ my art. You even sound like him. No one ‘corrects’ my art. Fuck you *and* this shitty project. My work is *my* work. My work is sacred. The world is lucky to have me here to deliver these fucking plebeians from *what, they, know, not.* Fucking pearls to swine, man. Do you know what that's like? Do you have any idea? No. You wouldn't know, walking around with your fucking camera all day asking questions. (mockingly) 'What was he like?'. You wouldn't know what it’s like to have a gift. What it means. What'd you go to school? Picasso went to school. You don’t learn it in school, dipshit. The fucking responsibility having that gift entails. It’s crushing. The power that it wields: to change the earth, to have to answer questions that man hasn't even realized he had yet. To lead the race forward. Past the edge. Way past. Try living with that. It's not for the weak. You asked me what he was like, I’ll tell you what was he like. He was weak. That's what he was like. You think he honored his gift? Yeah, and he had it. He’d like you to think he honored it. I bet that’s what he told you. No, he got you fucking jackasses on board to honor his gift for him. Didn't he? That fucking.....(looks to the sky in frustration) Oh.... I could fucking kill him, that motherfucking…..

Off Screen: Why are you so angry?

Mike: Why am I so angry? Because I’ve spent years honing my craft and my process and then this fucking asshole walks in and tells me what’s wrong with it. *What’s wrong with it!* And he's right. He was right. Fine. There. I said it. Are you getting this? John Nickles helped me be better a better artist and I fucking hate him for it. Ok? The thing that bothered me most was that he, well, we, used to work together, closely, and we would share our work with each other and give each other creative feedback and then one day I thought I was really on to something big, and I was, and he gave me this quick comment, like a correction, what he would call a ‘suggestion’, and it was like a real-time,

Live, sounding board and I just wasn’t ready for that. I mean, I like feedback and I even think it’s necessary but that sort of laser-focused, hyper-aware bullshit can be very disruptive to the creative process in the embryonic state. (Mystically) An artist needs to freely wander through the wilderness of the subconscious and hunt for the deepest game without fear of reprisal. That’s the difference between creation and destruction. I thought he was reckless with me and my work. He could be that way. He almost had a reflex reaction against anything that wasn’t as good as it could be. Imperfection could not be tolerated and his eye was incomparable. He could see things in my work that I couldn’t see. He could see where I was going before I could get there. He was ahead of me. Always.

Off Screen: (mumbled, only last part is heard) Do you do work anymore?

Mike: (resigned, nostalgic) I haven’t painted in 10 years. (inhales cigarette) Who could paint after that? (pauses, exhales while saying) What would be the use? He exposed me to myself, my faulty self.

CUT

Historian: The Greeks had a concept called 'Arete'. This was excellence in all things. Not just your chosen profession, and not for glory. Our word aristocrat comes from this. Arete could be seen everywhere from a well baked loaf of bread to a well laid corner stone and this was not a selfish or lofty pursuit, this was a quest for excellence where excellence was its own reward. Think about that, (bright eyed and awed) striving for absolute excellence! There are absolutes in this world and the Greeks may not have coined the concept but they certainly pursued it and i don't think they were alone in that. Absolutely the best song, the absolute best singer, the most virtuous musician, a virtuoso?(impressed by his own pun) I don't think you need to be an ancient Greek in order to revere excellence. I just wish there was more of that in our society. It's not 'convenient' (finger quotes) to strive for anything nowadays. On some level, we've forgotten how to work.

Coworker #2: He was so organized. I think he may have been the most organized employee in the company. It was shocking and a little OCD. His desk always had three clean stacks of paper, left to right incoming, outgoing and pending. Plus a square of post-it’s. he would go crazy if you took his post-it’s. it was like they were gold to him. He was very particular and he was great but he could be irritating at times.

I’m not so organized. (shaking hands in the air imitating crazy person while simultaneously exposing her own craziness) Ahhh! He tried to help me be organized. He told me his system once and I don’t think I understood it entirely but he said there is a natural system of organization in the universe and I thought he was an atheist. (chuckle) But you know, like small to large, A thru Z, 0 thru 10, white then grey then black, R.O.Y.G.B.I.V. (said like a name, Roy G. Biv) I know he put his books at home in chromatic order. He told me to look at the pyramids and to notice how the bases were wider than the tops. He likened that to the flow of information or, I think he called it ‘the flow of organizational essence’, (laughing) or something like that (aside to cameraman) Right? (gives finger in circular motion sign near head-universal sign of craziness) Small to large, the light is brighter at the top. He seemed to understand the way things go together. He talked in terms of absolutes, like there was a definitive way for something to be arranged but he also allowed room for the duality of life. Like there could be more than one right way to do something and he embraced that….that sense of the other. He respected the differences between things. I mean, you do need chaos to appreciate order. Right?

CUT

Posted to the CD Baby website after the release of Mint’s second record; ‘American Style’

Hey,   
 It's January 24th 2002, I just wanted to give you guys a heads up on what's been going on with the band, so's you can know. First, I want to say thank you to everyone who has purchased the CD and I hope that you enjoy it. We've kind of been taking a break although now were back. Almost. We've done some restructuring.   
  
 I went to London over the summer. I stayed with a friend of mine, Timothy Peter Reeves. He's a wicked talented musician and he plays in a band called Rena and does home 4-track stuff and nice shit with samplers, very inventive and totally serious. Anyway, the guy blew my mind and even rocked me with American shit I had passed over in my obsession with Zeppelin, whatever. When I got back and listened to the first 2 Mint records I was a little embarrassed, and I know this breaks the pro's code of ethics but I'm just being honest and isn't that better than the Hollywood gloss? I know everyone says to ignore the critics but I can't and I was totally crushed by some of the reviews. I don't know if you guys caught all the stuff that went out, I even sent some of the reviews out on a postcard, but they were like: "made me wretch...made my ears bleed...jersey charm...just doesn't have what it takes..."etc. I know everyone’s entitled to their opinions and that's cool but one guy blamed us for not playing the entire version of 2001 and then admitted he didn't know if we had or not. The thing that bugs me is the lyrics. I mean, guys, lighten up. It's a pop song. Does it to have the most profound lyrics ever? Some do and that's great but I have to admit to the listeners out there that sometimes when i write a song or make up lyrics I might not have a rhyme so I just throw some kind of joke in there at the end, usually some kind of double-entendre which kinda comes off sounding like Bon Jovi, which isn't really what I was going for, but a shitload of critics went off on the lyrics and so I apologize if they didn't cut the mustard. I'll try harder.   
  
 Anyway, after I freak out because I think we’re hair metal, I realize I shouldn't try to fight it anymore; I'm a country musician. It's been going on for years. You don't have to be from the south actually to play authentic American country or blues, and it might be based on socio-economic conditions or maybe just levels of serotonin. Whatever, I recorded a bunch of stuff on 4-track, like 30 tunes including some old stuff too that I hadn't mixed before. I made a tape of 10 songs and titled it "John Nickles-In Through The Outtakes". It was hailed by peers as my finest work to date and much better than either Mint record. I gave out about 50 tapes to friends and stuff and I wanted to play some of this 4-track shit with the band, in effect, sending the band through the 4 track. So we tuned down to C, which freaked out Shea. He's like a spooked horse if were not in E. Louis didn't like the new direction and to be honest I don't know where we're going now either. Anyway, just before I freaked, we played with a guitarist, John Charpentier. He's young, talented, and savvy and now he's playing guitar because I'm kind of spooked to play it any more. I'm not sure why. So I'm playing drums now and we’re not playing any of the tunes we've ever played before, probably. Sorry, all new stuff. We've got about 5 songs we’re going to be focusing on for a few weeks and then we'll see where we're at.   
  
 I'm going to get a digital 8 track soon and the plan is to record some electronica folk stuff and kind of trippy dance beats and maybe John's tunes too and we'll call it ‘Mint For You’. I'm thinking we'll shop it to majors and then if no one wants it, we'll send it to mp3.com. So I'd look for that maybe in 6 months, that would

be cool, although I suppose sooner would be better, we'll see. Thanks for

checking in. I'll see you later, [johnnickles29@hotmail.com](mailto:johnnickles29@hotmail.com)

CUT

Off Screen: Why do you think he stopped working?

Former Bassist & Life-Long Close Friend (Shea): I think he got really freaked out by 9/11.

CUT

Best Friend #2: 9/11 definitely.

CUT

Therapist #1: (nodding) 9/11.

CUT

Ex Girlfriend # 2: 9/11 totally fucked him up.

CUT

SONG: For You

For You

I’m waiting for you.

I’m paying you tune.

I want to get through to you.

If you ever listen,

You know what I’m wishing,

To be the best person for you.

I might not be there for you,

But you know I care for you,

I’d go anywhere for you.

CUT