

El Heno de la Muerte 2006 Song Notes (Continued)

Palisades 3:48: Central Oregon is a unique and otherworldly place. Filled with badlands, ancient ice-age lake beds, lava tube caves, strangely eroded rock formations, and beautiful snow capped mountains, it is undeniably gorgeous country. Out there, at times, you feel like you’re in another part of the world—and the song Palisades was named after the place that inspired that feeling.

I bounced around a pretty wide swath of Central Oregon in the few years I lived there, guiding myself with a Gazetteer and a decent sense of direction before smart-phones and GPS were ubiquitous. On one of those trips, a location northeast of Bend lured me in with its name and topographical lines on the map. The location and views didn’t disappoint, and as I sat on top of this beautiful basalt and sandstone rock cliff overlooking a long stretch of high desert, I felt like I was somewhere in North Africa or the eastern Mediterranean. When I got home, I picked up my banjo, and Palisades was what manifested.

When I initially tracked this song, I had the idea to try to recreate the sound of the wind that was gently blowing around me when I had visited the Palisades. After some experimenting, I ended up putting a microphone out on my apartment patio on a rainy afternoon, and recorded the sound of cars driving by on the wet pavement of Bond Street. With enough reverb, the audio illusion came together for the song’s intro. Cisco’s slide-work on this track really nailed the desert blues vibe I was going for, and this is one of my favorites off the E.P. [Matthew R. Sayles, Norma five string banjo, Francisco Mirabent, American Stratocaster, through a late seventies Fender Twin Reverb.]

WWJB 2:04: This was originally a hidden track on the E.P., though with the advent of streaming services, now serves as the unofficial last track of *El Heno De La Muerte*. I wrote this in the early days of Bush the younger’s disastrous Iraq war, at a time when I was seeing a bunch of “What Would Jesus Do” stickers all over the place, and felt sickened by the never ending polygamous marriage of the military industrial complex, American Evangelism, and right-wing christo-fascism. [Matthew R. Sayles, 2000 Taylor 415 Jumbo, vocals]

El Heno de la Muerte 3:37: After a spring and summer of working on the horse ranch, it was hay season, and Tracy enlisted the whole crew to dive into baling hay for the winter. It’s tiring, itchy, and dusty work—but oddly satisfying as you buck hay up into lofts and see the space fill neatly in. If you’ve ever done it, you’ll know that the hay has a way of getting into every crevice of your body--mercilessly. Raul and Sinnovio were attempting to teach me Spanish, when I heard them mutter something akin to “Pinche Los Pacas.” I repeated it, and they found it hilarious, so my clumsy way of saying “fuck the bales”became a refrain for the hay season—and by the end of it, my poorly worded refrain of “el heno de la muerte” became another line that made them laugh.

I went kind of gonzo for this track, and looped in the sound of me banging a boot knife on a glass bottle and an old rusty bucket for the rhythm (to emulate the sound of the hay baler driving through the fields), and then added the trombone and banjo as a gag, to represent the exhausted slap happy stupidity we all had throughout the hay season. Cisco added some psychedelic effects on his electric, and this end track of the album seemed to also be an appropriate title for the E.P. [Matthew R. Sayles, Norma five string banjo, trombone, boot knife, bottle, bucket, vocals, Francisco Mirabent, American Stratocaster, through a late seventies Fender Twin Reverb.]



Phil Pearce & Matthew R. Sayles 2017

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From *Frostbitten Grass* 2002:

County Line Pickin’ 1:37: I wrote this song while living about halfway between Grand Marais, Michigan, and Seney, Michigan (on the Alger/Luce County Line), in an old tar-paper cabin on the side of Highway 77 near Tester’s saw mill. That summer I was working to help protect Piping Plover habitat in Grand Marais, and had a lot of spare time to teach myself how to flat pick guitar and write songs. This recording on County Line Pickin’ was done at the Hartman family deer camp in Grayling, Michigan, on our off time on a short tour in 2001. It was recorded outdoors (you can hear cicadas and crickets in the background if you listen carefully), and I used a recessed corner of Hartman’s cabin like a band-shell to coral the sound around a single large diaphragm microphone. [Bob Guidebeck on a mid 1950’s Kay up-right bass, Brian Hartman Gibson RB4 Mastertone banjo, Ryan Olthouse Alvarez F-style mandolin, Matthew R. Sayles 2000 Taylor 415 Jumbo.]

Bob’s Back Porch 4:11: This song was written by Brian Hartman, in part, on Bob’s back porch in Skandia, Michigan at a practice in 2000 or 2001. Brian had written most of the song prior to arriving for practice, and I think we helped out with some arrangement tweaks, but we all loved the song. Hartman hadn’t named it at that point, so we opted to just call it “Bob’s Back Porch” and the name stuck. It was also recorded in the same location and using the same set up as County Line Pickin’, at Hartman’s camp in Grayling in 2001. On the original album from 2002, the song was the last, and I recorded the band hanging around the fire that night, with the crackling and muted conversation fading into a hidden track, Pabst Blue Ribbon, that popped up after a few minutes. [Bob Guidebeck on a mid 1950’s kay up-Right bass, Brian Hartman Gibson RB4 Mastertone banjo, Ryan Olthouse Alvarez F-style mandolin, Matthew R. Sayles 2000 Taylor 415 Jumbo.]

Muddy Water 3:34: This is a basement demo recording I captured with a single large diaphragm mic of the tune Muddy Waters, by Phil Rosenthal of the Seldom Scene. It’s a nice version of the song that Frostbitten Grass performed to win both the local and State of Michigan Country Music Showdown in 2002. Winning those contests landed us our largest gig of our early career, performing on the WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia, which is the second longest running country music radio broadcast in the country (the only competition was the Grand Ole Opry). I always enjoyed that we shared verses on our version, and this is a fun time capsule from the basement of my old place in the Trowbridge neighborhood of Marquette. [Bob Guidebeck on a mid 1950’s Kay up-right bass, Brian Hartman Gibson RB4 Mastertone banjo, Ryan Olthouse Alvarez F-style mandolin, Matthew R. Sayles 2000 Taylor 415 Jumbo.]

Pabst Blue Ribbon 1:09: Ryan Olthouse first introduced this song to me when we were still playing as a duo, mainly as a gag, but the song kind of took on a life of its own. Ryan first heard a version of it on an old motocross/mountain bike VHS tape he had (Olthouse was a former amateur motocross racer), and worked up his version of it as a tribute to the beer we drank to build up liquid courage to start performing at Village Pub open mic in 1999. Two good friends of the band at the time (Joe Wagner and Ross Johnson) loved the tune, and Joe Wagner came up with the tag line “they float better when empty.” Joe also lent me his heirloom mid 60’s red Gibson Hummingbird acoustic to record on a few tunes on the album (his Dad had worked for Gibson in Kalamazoo in the 60’s/70’s and scored the hummingbird off the line as it had a few very mild cosmetic defects). [Bob Guidebeck on a mid 1950’s Kay up-right bass, Brian Hartman Gibson RB4 Mastertone banjo, Ryan Olthouse Alvarez F-style mandolin, Matthew R. Sayles 2000 Taylor 415 Jumbo.]

From *No Shame* 2003:

Cold Frosty Morning 3:15: This traditional fiddle number was the first track I recorded on *No Shame*, and I recall being excited to try out some basic claw-hammer banjo picking on it. This was one of my early attempts to start to more heavily use stereo panning for the individual tracks, as well as reverb and other effects to make the recording more dynamic and less mono-nostalgia focused. [Matthew R. Sayles, 2000 Taylor 415 Jumbo, mid 1970’s Norma five-string banjo]

Escanaba Mamma 2:15: I started out my musical career with the Trombone in the 4th grade, and had been itching to try out recording some light hearted Dixieland music for a few years. After a few days of getting weird with my isolation at the cabin in Cadillac, this song came together. I recall messing around with the mix and cracking myself up with the trombones and spoons coming in first, and then slowly fading in the banjo, piano, etc. Everything but the piano was recorded at the cabin in Cadillac, Michigan. [Matthew R. Sayles 1986/1987 King trombone, mid 1970’s Norma five-string banjo, spoons. Melissa Sayles, up-right piano]

Sweet Summertime By and By 2:59: In late spring/early summer of 2003 I was recently single, and was filling my schedule with as many gigs as I could. I hadn’t planned on dating, let alone falling for someone within just a few months of ending a relationship, but intentions don’t often overcome matters of the heart. Jessica Urbis and I had been friends in college at Northern Michigan University (though I’m pretty sure she knew I had a crush on her from the first moment I saw her in 1998). She had also recently just ended a long term relationship, and we were both trying hard to be single but failing at it pretty badly. I wrote this song just a month or so after we fell for each other, and that summer, we shared some really sweet and joyful times together. Jessica came on tour with FBG to a residency we had on Mackinaw Island, and her and I traveled all over the U.P. that summer together—even getting the grand tour of her tiny hometown of Bruce Crossing, Michigan. By early fall, we were still close, but trying to remain single, navigate some drama between shared friends, and figure ourselves out. In late November of 2003, I was back out on the road with FBG and (coincidentally) staying at my family cabin in Cadillac where I had recorded this song just a few months prior. Ryan received a call from Marquette to let us know that Jessica had been killed in a car accident coming back from thanksgiving in Bruce Crossing. She died on November 29th, 2003, exactly a week after her 23rd birthday. She is still dearly missed by everyone who knew her, and I feel incredibly fortunate to have shared the time with her that I had. [Matthew R. Sayles 2000 Taylor 415 Jumbo, 1999 Martin Backpacker guitar, harmonica]

From *Acoustic Beef* 2004:

B.O. 3:59: Ryan wrote this song as a tribute to his Dad, Bruce Olthouse, though many folks (understandably) thought the acronym stood for something else. This was definitely a waypoint in our instrumental efforts as a band, where I recall Ryan coming in with the song almost fully formed, but all of us contributing a bit with arrangements and ideas—and you can really notice Ken Thiemann’s influence on the arrangement as he brought in his prog-rock background into the fold of Frostbitten Grass arrangements. [Bob Guidebeck on a mid 1950’s Kay up-right bass, Ryan Olthouse Alvarez F-style mandolin, Matthew R. Sayles 2000 Taylor 415 Jumbo, Sven Gonstead, Gonstead Guitars custom dobro, Ken Thiemann, early 2000’s Martin mahogany Jumbo.]

John Powers 5:07: In the summer of 1999, I was working in Copper Harbor, Michigan, as a first- person historical interpreter at Fort Wilkins State Park. (“first-person” means I was dressed up in period clothes, and portraying a historical character in the same way an actor would). It was an oddball gig, but an absolute great way to earn a few bucks/college credits over the summer. I completely fell in love with the Keweenaw Peninsula, learned a good amount of the early Copper boom history of the region, and learned even more about the character I was portraying, who was based on the real life lighthouse keeper in Copper Harbor circa 1870: John Power. (I inadvertently added an “s” to his name in writing this song—his last name was actually just “Power.”

John Power was born in County, Cork, Ireland, and emigrated to the U.S. right in the midst of the U.S. civil war. Like many young emigrants from Ireland, he was fleeing the economic devastation that had hit Ireland after the potato famine of the late 1840’s, and was hoping for a better life in the U.S Also like many other emigrants, he was recruited to join the war effort right off the boat—lured in with three meals a day, a uniform, and the possibility of glory in combat. Depending on where you emigrated to (north vs. south), some young men from Ireland and Europe found themselves fighting against other young men from their own country (or even villages) on opposite sides of the war in the U.S.

Historical records show Power enlisting, and then fighting in the battle of Hatcher’s Run in Virginia, before he deserted duty, and briefly went missing. Intriguingly, he shortly thereafter re-enlisted under a false name, and served out his tour honorably all the way through the conclusion of the war where he reached the rank of Sergeant, and was garrisoned at Fort Wilkins in Copper Harbor, Michigan (part of a post civil war Union effort that stationed troops acting as quasi police forces on many parts of the U.S. frontiers).

For some reason (a clear conscience or possibly out of fear of being revealed by someone else) Power confessed to his earlier desertion and admitted to his real name while serving at Fort Wilkins, but due to his record, rank, and apparent good favor with the commanding officers, he was not charged, and finished out his service in Copper Harbor. (Apparently he mixed it up a few times with lower ranking soldiers as they harassed him as a “damn deserter” both during and after his remaining service).

Power opted to stay around the Keweenaw after mustering out of the army, and managed to not only marry the wealthy daughter of the owner of the largest mercantile in Copper Harbor, Lizzie Corgan, he also landed himself the job of the Copper Harbor Lighthouse Keeper. (This is the era I was portraying the character, in the summer of 1870, as he was relatively new to the Lighthouse, had a young family, and was teaching himself law while tending the light through long winters). Power eventually earned a law degree, and ran unsuccessfully twice to be a Michigan State Representative.

Many years after I wrote this song with Ken Thiemann, some documentarians from the Iron Range in Minnesota reached out to me to find out more about the song and the story of John Power. Turns out John Power (obviously an interesting character in and of himself) had a son named Victor who also lived quite a life, and had gone on to be a major figure in the labor, political, and mining history of Hibbing, MN. (the birthplace of Bob Dylan). To date, there is a book being written about Victor Power, a podcast, and now apparently a documentary film effort that’s been underway for a few years.

Ken Thiemann and I wrote this song in the early winter of 2004 while staying at my family’s place in Cadillac, MI. My Aunt Lu Lu (Louise Roney) had left me a really old unopened bottle of Crown Royal after she had passed away a few years prior, and after regaling Ken with tales of John Power and the civil war, we sat down with aged Canadian whiskey in our brains, and wrote this song.

The song focuses in on the possible reason why Power deserted after the battle of Hatcher’s run. We took creative liberty to create a situation where he found himself fighting against a man from his home town in Ireland, who (in the song) saves his life by tying off a bit of his rebel uniform around Power’s leg as a tourniquet. The rest of the song serves as flashbacks of him recalling the war from his vantage point of the lighthouse keeper in Copper Harbor.

The original lyrics we wrote to this song were mostly destroyed by candle wax in Ken’s apartment (approximately a month after writing it), so we had to reconstruct the tune from memory and what survived of the charred scribbling. So the song here is essentially a second draft, as the original was lost to candle wax and too many Belgian beers.

I’m sure spending most of the summer of 1999 in character as John Power led to him having an outsized presence in my mind, but it’s one of those intriguing coincidences of existence to have his story, his family, and this song continue to be relevant to people decades after I first learned of who John Power was. [Ken Thiemann Irish whistle, classical nylon guitar, & vocals. Sven Gonstead, quasi-weissenborn style acoustic guitar, Bob Guidebeck Mid 1950’s Kay up-right bass, Ryan Olthouse Alvarez F-style mandolin.]

From *El Heno de la Muerte* 2006:

Burn Me In the Suburbs 2:57: Like all of the tracks on El Heno de la Muerte, this was recorded in my one bedroom flat above a two car garage off Florida Street, in Bend, Oregon. The ceiling of the apartment was vaulted, and the floor carpeted, with several irregular walls and windows, so the space was actually sonically interesting from an acoustic standpoint. The song itself was inspired by feeling adrift after a moving to a completely different place—and reconciling with a feeling of rootlessness. Like many folks, I discovered that what I was homesick for wasn’t my old neighborhood or haunts—it was the memories and friends that had moved on too. (I also harbored some grief over how my home town had become overbuilt and gentrified into a bunch of oversized stale cookie cutter homes—while recognizing the irony of being part of a wave of newcomers that was doing essentially the same thing to Bend, Oregon). [Matthew R. Sayles 2000 Taylor 415 Jumbo, harmonica with a Leslie tremelo effect, Francisco Mirabent, American Stratocaster, through a late Seventies Fender Twin Reverb.]

Dusty’s Last Ride 3:36: After arriving in Bend in September of 2004, I spent about a year working at furniture shops in town until I got tired of the work, and saw that a horse ranch east of town was looking for a ranch hand/laborer/house cleaner/property manager. I was excited to be working outside, though I quickly found out I was more or less a plug and play personal assistant to the millionaire owner of the ranch—a mercurial and sometimes vindictive recently divorced woman who had me doing everything from cleaning her house, to painting barns, bailing hay, feeding horses, and cleaning her rental properties in town. Like many of my day jobs, it was an odd one—but not by any means all bad. I loved hanging out with the horses and barn cats, and really loved getting to know the crew that really ran the operation—Tracy the ranch manager, and Raul and Sinnovio, the two Mexican brothers from Vera Cruz that found it hilarious that I had to clean a millionaire’s houses and shovel horse shit alongside them.

The best part of the job was when the owner was away, often for several weeks at a time, and I was mercifully given normal ranch work via Tracy (vs. being a cabana boy to the owner who seemed to really enjoy having a twenty something musician cleaning her house, her kids house, or doing other domestic chores she couldn’t be bothered with). The ranch hands were skeptical of me at first, but quickly took pity on my situation with the owner, and we got to be pretty good friends. Cisco and I even played a gig out at the ranch that summer, as the owner enjoyed trotting me out to entertain her wealthy friends and the ranch workers. That gig, and Cisco chatting with some of the crew in Spanish, won over the last remaining unfriendly holdout ranch hands, and I was accepted as a pitiable part time musician man-servant to the owner.

On one of the multi-week sojourns the owner took, I was tasked with changing the oil in several vehicles on the ranch—mostly John Deere Gators, Kawasaki Mules, and a few flat-bed diesel rigs, so I was busy climbing out and under vehicles all day, and didn’t notice that a new hire had arrived, and was getting a tour of the ranch from Tracy. Being a Midwest guy who had spent the last decade in the Upper Peninsula, I definitely wasn’t decked out in cowboy attire when I went to work. Ignoring the fact that the horses at the ranch were for English riding and jumping, even the ranch hands didn’t really go full tilt western gear. It was mostly jeans, denim shirts, ball caps, etc. This wasn’t a dude ranch—it was a pricey operation where the horses often had better living quarters than the staff, and fashion wasn’t anyone’s focus--other than the actual riders and trainers who wore the dandy English riding gear .

This new hire however, was dressed like he was auditioning for Gunsmoke. Hat to spurs, he was a polished cowboy, and stood out like a sore thumb. When I crawled out from underneath a truck he was standing right in front of me, and both of us couldn’t help but laugh at each other. I was in oil stained Carhart bibs with a floppy straw hat that looked like I stole it from a scare crow, and he looked like he had just walked off the display window of a Western Wear shop.

With both of us laughing at each other, he reached out his hand and introduced himself as “Dusty.”

I remember thinking “of course your name is Dusty.” This guy had a twinkle in his eye that screamed bullshitter extraordinaire, and my instincts were right. After less than two weeks working at the ranch, he had told everyone about how much money he had made in the rodeo circuit, how famous he was (everywhere but in Oregon apparently), and how great he was at breaking horses and training. After bullshitting for two weeks and doing as little work as possible, he got his first check, and took off never to be seen again. I thought this guy was such a character, I wrote a song about him. I imagined him pulling this same scam at ranches all over the west, attempting bigger and bigger heists until his hubris finally caught up with him in a glorious finale. So Dusty’s Last Ride is the tale of a modern “cowboy” grifter that goes down in true outlaw fashion. [Matthew R. Sayles 2000 Taylor 415 Jumbo, harmonica, and Santa Rosa Mandolin, Francisco Mirabent, American Stratocaster, through a late Seventies Fender Twin Reverb.]

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