

PFD

Albert Hoffman, the man who first synthesized LSD and later became the first to learn of its psychoactive properties, wrote, in his later years, a history of these peak career experiences entitled, LSD--My Problem Child. I have not read the book. However, when I asked my old friend Bo Jacobs years ago to suggest a resource that would help me understand the identity-formation processes at work within my high school students he unhesitatingly recommended Hoffman's book. To this day, I don't know if he was joking or not.

I bring this up only by way of mentioning that I have many times in the recording of this album referred to this song as PFD--My Problem Child. That's not to say that writing the song was a trial--far from it, nor that it had anything to do with psychedelics (it does not). This one practically wrote itself one summer day back in 2010 as I drove westward across Nebraska. But if composing the song was a breeze, wrangling PFD into its *recorded* form was an absolute nightmare, far more difficult to arrange, record, edit and mix than any of the other tunes on the album. Marcia suggests that's maybe because the song is so meaningful to me. She may be right, but I'm not sure. She also says that PFD is my most "angular" tune, and maybe that's what made it so difficult to record...but as I'm not sure what is meant by "angular" in this context, I can't say PFD's angularity is what made it hard to record, either. Perhaps a couple of paragraphs from now I'll have reached an understanding on this issue. Until then, I'll try to describing where the piece originated...

PFD, an abbreviation for *Pupils Fixed and Dilated*, was written under the influence of Joan Didion's haunting essay My Year of Magical Thinking in which she shares with great intimacy the personal transformations brought about by the simultaneous unexpected death of her 50-something husband and the two traumatic health crises faced by her adult daughter.

In her essay she describes her husband's sudden heart attack at the dinner table, the ordinariness of the day up to that point, the ordinary night that was supposed to follow, the un-reality of her home suddenly filling with large and well-equipped men possessing serious medical agendas, and the failure of all that experience and technology to avert mortality.

It was only months later while reliving the events for the millionth time that she remembered one of the EMT's using the phrase PFD...as in "He's gone PFD, Phil," or something. Or maybe she found reference to PFD in medical records that were filed in her husband's case. In any event, as a serious journalist accustomed to researching her material, Didion discovered that PFD is short for Pupils Fixed and Dilated, the point when rescue efforts in trauma cases are rendered moot--the brainstem is toast when your pupils no longer respond to light. Game over. Once they've gone PFD, there's no longer a fighting chance of pulling the victim back to life, to reality, to the land of "what shall we do after supper", the land of "one more day".

(At least that's how I remembered it. But now, having just checked my facts, it's actually Didion's *daughter*, lying on the asphalt after having been struck by a car, who is pronounced

FPD (fixed and dilated pupils), that serves to alert Joan to the existence of such a condition. So much for my reportorial credibility, huh? “Preserve your memories, they’re all that’s left you,” seems like mighty poor advice when memory is so completely subjective, so often so flat-out wrong.)

In any event, the acronym I chose to remember, *PFD*, served as a perfect touchstone for a song that would express my feelings about mortality which had recently undergone profound transformations of their own after my Mom’s passing in 2009. After ten hours alone in the westbound car eight months after her death listening to the audio version of Didion’s book, the blarney was running free (as Joan Mitchell would say) and the lyrics were done immediately. (At least that’s how I remember it.) I found it was easy to encapsulate my adaptation of Stoic philosophy into verse once I had the lyric hook in hand. I’m thankful that, as a songwriter, there is always a verse/chorus/bridge-based form in which to fit the poetry, when it comes. Sure makes my job easier.

As the Stoics would say, if this is all there is, if all we leave behind are our loved-ones’ (faulty) memories of our lives and acts and the subjective impressions of others whose lives we’ve touched--if that’s all that’s left, and if it can all be removed from us at a moment’s notice, then surely each moment we live is inherently *incredibly* important. What better motivator to try and stay within the moment, to appreciate every day and every experience, than to know that it will all end, and maybe a lot sooner than we think, and end completely and forever? I know we can’t seize every single moment, even every single day. We are creatures of toothaches and depressions, of lost ballgames and injured children and money troubles. Sometimes, as Mom would say, “life sucks”, no ifs, ands or buts about it. However, in those few, rare moments of clarity, when I’ve temporarily got my head above water, I find it completely reassuring to know this is it--this is all there is and ever will be--and I’d better try hard to appreciate it for all it’s complication and absurdity and imperfection and impermanence and forgettability.

As far as the difficulty I found recording the tune, I’m still stumped--recounting the story behind the song has done nothing to make it easier for me to figure out why I spent roughly as much time working on this one piece as I did on the other twelve recordings combined. I do know that I originally considered recording this one with solo banjo and vocal, one take, no overdubs. The existing drafts of that attempt still sound as crappy as they did in February, 2011 when they were created and immediately abandoned.

The next idea was to start it quiet and have it build to the highly energetic blue-grassy feel I believed it required, and the hours I spent adding instruments and carving up the sonal spectrum to accommodate them all between March 2011 and July 2012 was ridiculous. Instead of a coherent song I created a wild beast, uncontrollable, frankensteinishly stitched together from various approaches, slave to a few nice ideas in one of the four (!) instrumental verses, lacking cohesion and containing way, way, way too much extraneous shit.

A major reorganization of the arrangement came while my Dad was in hospital in July 2012 and after he passed it seemed that I had finally wrangled PFD into submission, but all fall and winter listening back to the tune I became more and more dissatisfied with the mix. More reorganization, more new parts added, still not a successful result.

In April 2013 I started over from scratch but wasn't satisfied with the new slower, quieter approach, so spent May, June and July (until the 29th, that is) wrestling with how to fix the Frankenstein version. It's almost September now and I still have no clue what it's going to sound like when the album is released in less than two months. Learning to live with uncertainty is probably a good thing though, so I'm not going to sweat it. At this point, whatever happens, happens...

And tonight, as I sit polishing up the last of the documents for the website set to launch on Saturday, I can report that it was in mid-September when Marcia was away in New Orleans that I finally figured out the tune should be in the key of E, not the key of G, so I could sing it down a register, so I capo'd up two, dropped down the D on the Dobro and immediately nailed the sucker. It's a very spare arrangement compared to what it had been. Maybe I'll post the goofy Frankenstein version sometime for kicks. In the mean time, I guess I can't fault all the wasted hours. I enjoyed how I spent 'em. I learned to trust my intuition and not settle for less than good enough just because I'd put so many hours in. Oh--and for being a banjo song, there's no banjo on the final version at all. The world works in mysterious ways...