

“Tall Grass”

“I spent a lot of time on my friend’s farm in England the past few years, sometimes with my girlfriend or my friends and sometimes just on my own. I wrote all of these songs there, mostly in August of 2019. The solitude that summer was good for me and eventually I decided to start writing. It was just this huge empty space with me, two dogs, ten to twelve horses, and some sheep. I often didn’t see anybody for days on end. It was especially weird when my girlfriend came to visit and then left again. It felt so jarring to be all alone again after that. I talk about that experience in ‘*Tall Grass*.’ I walked five or six miles every day, just crossing alone over all the hills and fields out there and through a lot of tall grass. Lyrically, the song looks at what it’s like to be alive and confront actual death right in front of you.

It’s a strange thing in this day and age for a city kid like me to be somewhere so isolated like that. Most of the time these days, we know exactly where we are – we literally have GPS on our phones that tells us - but none of that stuff functioned out there. I often found myself out in the woods, miles from home, without any way of knowing exactly where I was. It’s rare to ever be that alone anymore and it wasn’t hard to see the parallels. We always know exactly where we are on a map, but we can’t see where we are or where we’re going in our lives. You find yourself in the middle of the woods without GPS and you start to feel like what you’re walking through is more a metaphor than a moor.

I hadn’t written anything for a few years and getting started was a real struggle for me. I think “The Tall Grass” starts the way it does, very simple and almost dirge-like, because that was all I was capable of at first. I couldn’t write anything more complex than that when I first sat down at the piano. The lyrics follow that mood, very specific and stark in the verses to begin with. It opens up though. The chord sequences shift in the middle, the melodies kind of flower, and it gets very beautiful after that. As things change, it blooms into bigger and more passionate concerns. It’s about what you see in front of you, a piece of grass, some dead corn on the ground, or an animal. And then it’s about much more than that, a world, time spent missing someone you love, the cycles of life and death, love and loss, and how impossible it is to ever really understand all of that. ”

“Elevator Boots”

“As I wrote the end of ‘*The Tall Grass*’, I played these two chords back and forth for a while, just enjoying the way the song ended on that repeated ‘*I don’t know why*’. On a whim, I changed the chords, and found myself singing a different melody. The words just came straight into my head: ‘*Bobby was a kid from ‘round the town/ Kicks pumped up and head held down*’. I realized right away it was the beginning of a different song, but I couldn’t help thinking about how cool it was that it flowed straight out of ‘*The Tall Grass*’ like that. That’s when it occurred to me that I could write a series of different songs that each played seamlessly out of the one before and flowed together like one long song. A suite. Once I thought of that, it was all I wanted to do.

I got really burnt out on the music business at times in my career, and very depressed about what it means to be in it. I felt that way again after a few years of touring on *Somewhere Under Wonderland*. No real specific reason: the music business is simply pretty ugly at times and I get disillusioned. It comes and goes. I thought about that a lot as I started writing this suite because, as much as I hate the music business, I still truly love music and I wanted to write about that from a few different perspectives, specifically in ‘*Elevator Boots*’ and ‘*Bobby and The Rat-Kings*’. ‘*Elevator Boots*’ is a story about a guy in a band and his life moving between different towns and different lovers. It’s about what it means to him to spend his life doing this thing that means everything to him even when parts of it aren’t really ideal. The music came to me really quickly and then I just wandered around the farm singing it to myself with my phone out to take notes. Once I had the music, the rest of it took very little time.”

The recording was interesting because we couldn’t make it work until Millard and Immer switched instruments, Millard taking over the acoustic guitar and Immer playing the bass.

“Angel of 14th St.”

“I love the song. I heard this dance-beat kinda rave-vibe tune by *Bombay Bicycle Club* on the BBC one afternoon and it gave me this idea for a synthesizer melody over an electric guitar line. ‘*Angel of 14th Street*’ is nothing like that original idea but it was very inspired by it. That idea, that feel got stuck in my head, and I couldn’t get it out. I kept thinking about it. I wanted it to be a big city song—almost a mythical portrait of New York City. It’s about the ways life in big cities (and corporations and governments too) crushes some people, tearing them to shreds, absolutely makes others, and mythologizes *all* of them either way. And how it can turn on you, forging you into a larger-than-life figure one day before burning you in effigy the next.

The glue that really holds the song together is the drive of those rhythm tracks, David Immerglück’s acoustic guitar, Millard Power’s bass, and Jim Bogios’ drums. Charlie Gillingham made the song though with all those some crazy ideas he had manipulating his weird mellotron string section so creatively all across the sonic landscape. It’s so different.”

“Bobby and the Rat Kings”

“‘*Bobby...*’ was the last one I wrote when I went back over to England by myself in January 2020. It was pretty cold by then and I brought a bunch of wood inside from some trees we’d cut down a few weeks earlier to make a fire. I was sitting at the piano trying to keep warm and I thought about this melody made of big power chords. I imagined Mott the Hoople and the New York Dolls, all those dramatic punky rock and roll guitars I loved, telling a story about my growing up in San Francisco.

This is the companion piece to ‘*Elevator Boots*’, told from the perspective of a kid who’s a fan. A kid like me, because I spent my whole life as a fan, and then I became a musician too. Before I was a professional musician though, there was this great mysterious magic surrounding music. The way it sweeps you up when you first hear it. The way it becomes the most important thing in your life. There’s a time when you’re young, before it fades, when there’s nothing more important than music. I wanted to capture that time and how much it all means to kids like me, so I created a fictional band on ‘*Elevator Boots*’ that comes back on ‘*Bobby and the Rat Kings*’ to tell those stories.

The middle section is a story based on an experience I had in 1989, after the big earthquake, when a part of the Bay Bridge fell down. For month or so after that, the BART trains 24 hours a day—like the subway in New York—instead of shutting down at midnight. Nobody had to drive back and forth to San Francisco to go out at night that month. Halloween that year fell right in the middle of all that and it was lit. The town stayed open all night—from bars to clubs to house parties—and everyone lost their minds. I lost mine dressed as a bunny. I saw this one group dressed as Dorothy, the Tin Man, Lion, and Scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz* over and over again that night, once on BART heading over, again at a bar a few hours later, and then finally late that night when I stumbled out of a party and almost crashed into Dorothy and the Tin Man having sex in an alley in the Mission and realized Dorothy was a guy. There was something incredibly free and typically San Francisco about that whole night and I never forgot it. The song as a whole reflects on and revels in that feeling of being young and dreaming about all of the magic that takes place in the middle of the night when everything is on the table and there are no rules at all.”