

## **Liner Notes for Peter Stampfel/ Dook of the Beatniks**

By 1957, a spirit of rebellion, often referred to as non-conformism, was rising throughout the US. Jean Shepherd was a radio personality who railed against what he called creeping meatballism, as decent a phrase as any to describe the prevailing attitude of the 1950s. Shepherd was one of many who had a powerful compulsion to put on the straights, or as he put it, strike a blow against creeping meatballism. His method of attack was to ask his listeners to go to their local bookstore--an odd place to launch such an attack, when you think about it--and ask for a non-existent book, I, Libertine, by Frederick R. Ewing. Thousands of his listeners did, so many that the book was listed in The New York Times Book Review as 'soon to be released'. An editor at Ballantine Books, recognizing an opportunity, contracted my favorite science fiction writer of the 50s, Theodore Sturgeon, to ghost a book with that title. A doctored photo of Jean Shepherd as Frederick R. Ewing, wearing ahead-of-their-time granny glasses, was featured on the back cover. Written as an 18th-century picaresque novel, the book was issued only as a paperback, and featured on its cover a period gentleman ogling a woman with a modestly plunging neckline (this was the 50s) and a choice line from the book: "Gadzooks," quoth I, "but there's a saucy bawd!" It was actually a very enjoyable book. As a writer, Sturgeon, who back in the 50s owned a customized pickup truck as well as a 12-string guitar, could do no wrong. My point is that "beatnik" became a catch-all label for something that was too complex and nuanced to be described so simply. As an example, when I moved to New York City in late 1959, I got a job packing foreign car parts in the shipping department off Hoffman Motors, and one day my girl friend came to meet me after work. The other guys there had decided I was a beatnik, and my girlfriend Marlene, who had long, straight hair, used no makeup, and wore a Navy surplus peacoat, was obviously a "beat chick". The next day I was approached, singly, by several of the guys at work, who asked to sleep with my girl friend, because, they explained, I was a beatnik, and she was a beat chick, and beatniks let their friends sleep with their beat chicks, and weren't they my friends?\_Ay yi yi.

### **Big Slop Buckets/ Peter Stampfel**

In the 60s I read a William Burroughs book in which he ranted about dumb American desires, including "love love love in big slop buckets." Now there, I thought, is a song. Antonia and I tried writing it in the 60s, but it ended up a throwaway. Took me about three decades to get it right. The sounds at the end come from a hog calling contest. Mark Bingham, who produced, arranged, and recorded this album, remembered he had it on tape, and thought it would fit perfectly. As usual, he was right.

### **Ooma Looma Messy Dessy/ Peter and Zoe Stampfel**

Our family was in Antigua, staying with relatives of Genney, our nanny. Some of the cousins showed our daughters, Zoe and Lily, a hand-clapping rhyme called "Ooma Looma Messy Dessy." Now there, I thought, is a song. The rhyme itself, with some

variations at the end, made a perfect chorus. Zoe helped me with one of the verses. Later on I found out that this rhyme/game was also common in many parts of the eastern US.

### **Our Lady of Oklahoma/ Peter Stampfel**

My Catholic upbringing shows up here. It keeps on keeping on, like the Energizer Easter Bunny. The phrase “our lady of Oklahoma” popped into my head one day as I was looking at a shop window on Bedford Street in the Village. Popping up immediately after was, Oklahoma? But Oklahoma felt OK. Just taken as a word, it’s a fine word, as most state names are. And Oklahoma has a good beat as well. A lot of states have good names, but not so many have a good beat. Generally speaking, a word has to have at least four syllables to get a beat going, although four or more syllables does not guarantee a good beat. No disparagement intended. I have a lot of friends from Oklahoma. Maybe my subconscious was reacting to the fact that Oklahoma has had more than its share of hard luck over the years. “Bites the bag” was a short-lived late 60s expression meaning it’s really bad. The song is a combination rant and prayer. Rants are fun to write every once in a while. Feels better to write prayers, though. I wrote a really cool tune to Hail Mary, which except for Now I Lay Me was the only prayer from my childhood that tugged at my heart. I also liked that it was shorter than the other prayers.

### **Wisconsin Honeymoon/ Peter Stampfel**

Some songs have a chord change where the bridge starts three half steps above the major. In this song, which is in G, the bridge goes to Bb. I first figured out this change from a couple of Jerome Kern songs (“Long Ago and Far Away” and “All Through the Day”). It also comes up in my fave Elton John song, “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road.” This song was originally an instrumental I made up just to work this structure trick, which I eventually employed in “Big Slop Buckets” as well as the last song on this album, “Holy Terror.” After I got the chords down I thought, now it needs words. I wanted to write about something really great, to fit the really great melody and chords. The first thing that came to mind was the honeymoon Betsy and I had in Wisconsin in the summer of 1982. They really were the most delicious mashed potatoes in the world—the further north you go, the longer the sun shines in the summer, which I believe enhances the crops’ sugar level. We drove on two lane blacktops for almost all of the 1,500 miles we put on the rental car. In northern Wisconsin, we didn’t see any foreign cars at all, just like 1950. Every day was perfect (except when Betsy got a speeding ticket). The circus museum in Baraboo had some amazing instruments, like these different-sized bells at the end of bent steel bars maybe five feet long. You’d pull the bar and let it go. The harder you pulled, the longer it would ring. It had a range of an octave and a half.

### **New Adam in the Garden/ Antonia and Peter Stampfel**

Here is another traditional song we force to submit to our twisted ways. Antonia did most of the words, and had the new chord ideas.

### **Black Leather Swamp Nazi/ Antonia and Peter Stampfel**

Antonia and I came up with this title in the mid 60s, and the song followed about a year later. Black leather had a scarier image back then.

### **Beware the Chupacabra/ Peter Stampfel**

A chupacabra is a mythical Latin American beast that sucks goats' blood. In the 90s I was approached by a guy who was doing a sleazy movie about chupacabras that shape-shifted into bimbos. He wanted a movie song. The movie never happened, I don't think. Anyway, he never paid me anything, and dropped out of touch. Delighted he forced me to write this swell song, though.

### **Dook of the Beatniks/ Peter Stampfel**

For years I had this rant, which basically went, "There are no beatniks! Never were!" The whole idea, I had been told by someone in San Francisco in April of 1958, started when a bunch of what were then called bohemians were sitting around and decided to invent a fake movement for the purpose of putting on straight people. But the bohemians had allies, most of whom were unaware of each other. There was the jazz-oriented hipsters, the folk/lefty crowd, the Harry Smith-influenced bunch, who thought the music was more important than the politics, and, hell, gays and motorcycle gangs. Then there were the young members of a growing cohort of kids like myself, who were profoundly influenced by Harvey Kurtzman's Mad comics.

### **Pass That Peace Pipe/ Roger Edens, Hugh Martin & Ralph Blane**

This wonderful song was a hit in 1947/48 and I never forgot it, although everyone else did. Note Mark's cool I-don't-need-to-know-the-stinking-chords guitar part.

### **Big River/ Johnny Cash**

This was the B side of Johnny's 1957 hit, and maybe my least favorite Cash song, Ballad of a Teenage Queen. Big River was as good a song as he ever wrote. Big River is as good a song as anyone ever wrote.

### **Laura the Horse/ Antonia and Peter Stampfel**

Antonia wrote the words in 1967, but we couldn't think up appropriate music for them. Over the years, a couple people tried, but no one nailed it. In the early 90s, They Might Be Giants had a label that released ten five-song CDs by different musicians, and they asked me to do one. I thought I had probably learned enough at that point to write proper music. It took me about five minutes. Hell of a good song.

### **Bamma Lamma/ Peter Stampfel**

I had a dream. In the dream it was 1961, and Little Richard had not quit rock and roll. In fact, he was openly living with Tennessee Williams, and they were collaborating on songs. It was a good dream. So in this dream, I'm listening to their latest album. Two or three of the songs knock me out. The other songs are all good, but not at that level. But when I woke up, the only one I could remember was a B-title, which I confused with an

actual Little Richard song, “Shout Bamalama.” I soon realized it was a new song, and quickly wrote down the words. When I catch a dream song, I seldom remember more than a single line or phrase, but I always know what the song is about, and they hardly ever take more than ten minutes to write.

### **Take a Message to Omie/ Sam Shepard**

Sam wrote this around 1969, when he’d only been playing guitar a short time. He’s not too crazy about it, but I think it’s brilliant and perfect.

### **Once Upon a Long, Long Time Ago/ Peter Stampfel**

I got the basic idea for this song—that the Good Old Days were terrible—in the 70s, but it took almost 20 years and a number of false starts to pull it off.

### **Bad Karma/ Peter Stampfel and Antonia**

In 1968, the Rounders had a gig at the Family Dog opening for Pink Floyd. We had just opened for Ike and Tina Turner in LA. What a roll we were on. Driving up, we picked up a couple of hitchhikers who were twelve or thirteen. They proceeded to go on about local prices, quality, and availability of pot, as a way of presenting their hippie credentials. I had just heard that middle-school kids were shooting up in study halls in Detroit, and was beginning to realize drugs were not the panacea I had assumed them to be. Like many others, I had been making the distinction between “good” drugs (pot and hallucinogens) and “bad” drugs (heroin, speed, downers, alcohol, tobacco). But I instinctively knew that drugs for twelve and thirteen year old kids was a bad idea. Years later, I learned that the brain at that age is still developing, and is particularly susceptible to drugs. It is more easily addicted, which is why many young smokers find it hard to quit after just a few cigarettes. After we dropped the kids off, we talked about this, and decided that something must be done about the situation. Somehow, we decided the appropriate action was getting some Jack Daniel’s for the gig. The locals were outraged at our imbibing the evil alcohol, and stomped around the club tirading that the Rounders had bad karma! Bad karma! So Antonia and I wrote the words when we got back to LA. The music, however, was cliché boogie format. In the 90s I re-did the music. The words held up fine, though.

### **New Keep a Knockin/ old words Little Richard, new words Peter. New music bridge, Peter. Little Richard, revised by Peter Stampfel**

I went on the prowl for good two-chord songs in the early oughties, and I noticed that Little Richard’s “Keep a Knockin” qualified. I recently heard the gospel song that Little Richard based it on WAMU’s Sunday Dick Spottswood show, which I listen to on the internet every week. I made up the new words while watching New Year’s fireworks in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park. I turned one of the original verses into the chorus.

### **Holy Terror/ Peter Stampfel**

Another dream song. In this one Nick (Hickory) Hill was showing me this a gospel song called “Holy Terror,” which was simultaneously the wackest and the most amazing

gospel song I had ever heard. When I woke up, the only line I could remember was "Holy terror gonna blow you up for Jesus." I tried writing more words in this vein, but they didn't work the way they did in the dream. Dream song words are often untenable. The only way I could make it work was to write the rest of the words as straight as I could. Beyond the Bb in the key of G trick, I made this a three-part song. Most standard 20th century songs have an A part and a B part, with the usual format being AABA. But I like songs with a C part. My wife Betsy and I saw the musical Rent when it came to Broadway. Something I really hated about it was a subplot involving a singer-songwriter with AIDS, who was trying to write a last great song before his death, which was expected in about six months. Wow, I thought, that's powerful. So during his last dying six months, he works and works on this song. Finally it's ready. I was dying to hear it, as it were. Unfortunately, it turned out to be this bland piece of hackwork. I was outraged. But the idea - write each song as if it were your last chance - stuck with me. Soon, I started writing a lot of three-part songs, because I love three-part songs. But I quickly realized that making each song three parts was boring, and an occasional lapse into the simple, dumb, and cheesy makes for a greater totality of Art in the long run. And that's what we're all here for.

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