



## South of Mediocre

My dear Michigan friend Matt Watroba, great singer of old songs and writer of new old songs, brought home an artificial Christmas tree in 2008, whereupon his son Brendan looked up and said, "Oh great, we're having a lame-ass Christmas." For this year's tree I brought them six ornaments, each one a balled up newspaper page held together with duct tape, all packed in a Shredded Wheat box. Then I received a surprise in the mail consisting of a scrap of note card with smiling stick figures of the Watroba family. It was their Christmas card, which accompanied a selection of scrappy cardboard ornaments honoring the world's 2009 Christmas hero, Bob Dylan. The best one was a picture of Bob in a Santa hat, around which was glued elbow macaroni.

The Watroba family's grasp of the lame-ass concept hit me where I need to be hit. I'm a tightly wound bloke, very finicky and overly-complicated in my approach to things. But thanks to the Watroba concept, now my sister Susannah and I are e-mailing episodes of an ongoing lame-ass story. We co-write it with no worries about spelling, grammar, story line, anything. No rules, except: No Rules. It is very, very liberating. Terrible to read, but oh what fun.

I have probably written in Whither Zither about how I am fascinated by the particular odd tension in art between the purely representational and the often preferred roughly representational. Isn't it interesting that the big selling points of Photoshop are its filters which can blur and distort and otherwise rip the realism right out of a snapshot? Artists paint with palette knives so they don't get too picky with their realism. They paint drunk and at night and on speed and without their glasses to help crud up the process. In music, distortion is built into guitar amps and effects boxes and electric guitars; people listen stoned and smashed; singers bellow or mumble. As technology advances, it's like there's a counter force pulling it back toward the cheapo fundamentals.

You look back through musical history and marvel about the undercurrent of fascination with raspy instruments and

voices, banjos and hurdy gurdys, bagpipes and bodhrans, cowbells and police whistles, steel drums and kazoos; you look back through art history and marvel about the resurgent love of outsider art, abstract art, cheese sculptures, cave painting, graffiti, minimalism, basket weaving...

So it's no surprise that an entry in last Sunday's **9th Annual Year In Ideas** issue of **The New York Times Magazine**, called **Good Enough is the New Great**, by Robert Mackey, grabbed my eye. Before I sat down to write and tell them that Lame-Ass is the new Good Enough, I looked up the original **Wired** article online.

The **Wired** magazine article by Robert Capps, dated August 24 of '09, has a title that really says it all: **The Good Enough Revolution: When Cheap and Simple is Just Fine**. Capp's primary example is about how the fellows who put out the "Flip Ultra" video camera in 2007 made a bundle. It was a cheap, super simple, low quality camera, much like the point-and-shoot still cameras.

He goes on to talk about how despite everyone having great big high definition television monoliths, folks often prefer to watch YouTube clips on their little computer screens. And in fact, teensy cheap "notebook computers" are flying off the shelves. Phone calls of horrible quality are made over the internet using Skype. And so forth.

Capp talks about the mp3 fad, in which people are perfectly happy with the convenience of mp3s and don't care about their lesser quality when compared to CDs. In a strange twist, young humans have actually been shown to like the mp3 sound **BETTER** than the super high-fidelity of CDs.

"Thanks to the speed and connectivity of the digital age, we've stopped fussing over pixel counts, sample rates, and feature lists. Instead, we're now focused on three things: ease of use, continuous availability, and low price."

Seems like a pattern. The cell phone is introduced, and fancied up over the years with keyboards, cameras, gps devices, "apps", and TracFone comes out with a no nonsense, no monthly payment, simple cell phone. Gradually Trac falls into the same crazy cycle and can't resist putting in a camera, etc. Soon someone will come out with a simple disposable phone that looks like a stick of gum. That'll sell like frisbees and af-

ter a while until they won't be able to stop themselves from adding a camcorder and a bottle opener...

But anyway, this all relates to folk music, at least in my plunky brain. The house concert is a great example of how the least expensive and simplest thing can work the best. In this age of struggling performance halls with million dollar lighting, fog machines, and wireless microphones hidden in hairdos of a hundred dancing singers, the lowly house concert movement is healthier than ever. Now that keyboards can do anything an orchestra can do and then some, the good old ukulele is staging a great comeback. Many believe that unaccompanied singing is more gripping than any other presentation of songs. I often like the sound of a cheap guitar better than the sound of an expensive one (lucky for me).

Everything bubbles up toward the Swiss-Army-Knife, works its way into expensive fancyville, becomes a marvel of ingenuity (as well as a nest of previously unheard of glitches, towering learning curves, and a gilded half hour that fades as soon as the next model bubbles up), while down at ground level, someone rediscovers the single-bladed pocket knife and makes a bundle. But soon, hey! Let's add a screwdriver! And here we go again.

One of the reasons I love folk music is that it seems to have more of a fundamental love of the ground floor. I know I'm clicking this article on a big stupid computer, but then again, I am humming to myself accompanied by a tapping foot (while backing up my text through a wireless router to a Mplaplpr that knows the atomic time and is capable of thought-to-text).

I owe a thanks to the Times for reminding me that Good Enough is good enough, and to the Watrobas for reminding me that you don't even have to stop there on the way down. I wish I could think of a more polite way to say "Lame-Ass" but that would involve googling and consulting synonym finders and so forth, which is a Tight-Ass procedure. Incidentally, if you find this episode of Whither Zither not as cohesively assembled as those of the past, well...

WZ, January 2010

[http://www.wired.com/gadgets/miscellaneous/magazine/17-09\\_ff\\_goodenough?currentPage=all](http://www.wired.com/gadgets/miscellaneous/magazine/17-09_ff_goodenough?currentPage=all)

New York Times Magazine, 11/13/09