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THE NATIONAL  
BOXER



**BOXER**  
by **Ryan Pinkard**

B L O O M S B U R Y



## BOXER

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Ryan Pinkard

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# Contents

<i>Author's Note</i>	vii
<i>Cast of Characters</i>	viii
Introduction	1
1 Twenty-Nine Years	3
2 Underline Everything	15
3 Kitty Gets a Scratch	25
4 The Band in the Sidebar	35
5 The English Are Waiting	43
6 Clap Your Hands Say No	51
7 Don't Get Stuck in a Corner	61
8 Apartment Story	69
9 Bob Dylan Shat in My Room	77
10 Eeyore on Nyquil	91
11 Circling the Vortex	105
12 Waiting for Winter to Leave	113
13 Stay Down, Champion, Stay Down	121
14 Let Them All Have Your Neck	135

## CONTENTS

15	Signs of Hope and Change	151
16	That Same Desperate Struggle	163
	<i>Epilogue</i>	171
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	174
	<i>Notes</i>	176

## Author's Note

In presenting this book, I'd like to make a few things clear.

First, this telling is informed by over 30 hours of first-hand interviews with over 20 people. When trying to reconstruct the history of something that happened more than 15 years ago, you realize just how unreliable and conflicting memory can be. While I've worked tirelessly to corroborate the truest portrayal of what happened, this book inevitably contains some half-truths.

Second, when interviewing people, you learn that even the most eloquent speakers don't always make sense when their words are transcribed directly to text. For the sake of the reader and the speaker, the quotes contained within have been edited for clarity.

Finally, when writing about rock and roll, it's only natural to speak about a band as if it were a monolith, when in fact it's a conglomerate of individuals with different experiences. While I frequently characterize the mindset or feelings of The National in this fashion, keep in mind that "the band" in this story is something of a narrative construction based on my own interpretations.

## Cast of Characters

### THE NATIONAL

**Aaron Dessner**

**Bryce Dessner**

**Scott Devendorf**

**Bryan Devendorf**

**Matt Berninger**

### THE NATION

**Peter Katis:** producer, engineer, amateur hockey player; co-produced *Boxer* with the band

**Carin Besser:** Matt's wife and writing partner; co-wrote three tracks on *Boxer*

**Padma Newsome:** composer, arranger, and violist; Clogs leader; orchestration on *Boxer*

**Thomas Bartlett:** alias "Doveman;" longtime collaborator; keyboards and accordion on *Boxer*

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Sufjan Stevens\***: acclaimed singer-songwriter; piano on “Racing Like a Pro” and “Ada”

**Alec Hanley Bemis** writer and friend; co-founder and head of Brassland Records

**Brandon Reid**: live engineer, tour manager, and friend; “home recordings” on *Boxer*

**Roger Trust**: veteran A&R man and tobacco enthusiast; Label Head at Beggars Banquet

**Mathieu Saura\***: alias “Vincent Moon;” photographer and filmmaker; directed *A Skin, A Night*

**Hope Hall**: filmmaker and Obama campaign staffer; director of “Signs of Hope & Change”

**Abbey Drucker**: fine art and fashion photographer; shot *Boxer* album cover

**Lizzy Goodman**: journalist and indie rock historian; author of *Meet Me in the Bathroom*

**Stephen M. Deusner**: music critic and author; reviewed *Boxer* for *Pitchfork*

**Brandon Stosuy**: writer, thinker, and friend; reviewed early National records

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Matt Harmon:** President at Beggars Group; head of marketing at the time of *Boxer*

**Sonya Kolowrat:** Director of Catalog at Beggars Group; publicist for *Boxer*

**Miwa Okumura:** Senior VP at Beggars Group; product manager on *Boxer*

\*declined to be interviewed

## Introduction

*Boxer* occupies a keystone slot in The National's story. Released in 2007, the band's fourth album was the first National record that many people heard, and within their beloved output it remains a cherished fan favorite.

A near flawless exhibit of the indie rock renaissance that blossomed out of Brooklyn in the mid-2000s, it's a puzzlingly smooth rendering of wide-ranging tracks that create harmony out of delicate songwriting, despondent post-punk, and lush classical arrangements.

Lyricaly, it's a timeless meditation on love, depression, and adulthood that simultaneously articulates the hopelessness of George W. Bush's second term and foreshadows the hope and change of Barack Obama's meteoric rise.

For those reasons and more, *Boxer* is The National's easiest album to love, but it was anything but easy to bring into this world. Best embodied by its title—that great American allegory of the bruised and battered underdog who fights his way to the top—it represents a years-long struggle against popular indifference and mounting debt.

For onlookers *Boxer's* ultimate success cemented The National's transformation into one of the most critically-

## BOXER

acclaimed bands of their time. For the band it was where their fantasy of being a real rock band became a reality.

While it wasn't their first win, nor would it be their biggest, *Boxer* is where The National truly became champions. But to grasp the full weight of that victory, you have to trace the band's rocky journey to get there: understanding their beginnings, their chemistry, their process, their mindset, and the people they added to their corner along the way.

This is the story of *Boxer*.

# 1

## Twenty-Nine Years

When it comes to location, The National's origin story has always been hyphenated. Though the band was born and raised in New York City, all five members of the so-called "Brooklyn-via-Ohio" outfit hail from the hilly suburbs of Cincinnati.

Born in 1976, twin brothers Aaron and Bryce Dessner, grew up on the affluent east side of town, as did brothers Scott (b. 1972) and Bryan Devendorf (b. 1975). Born in 1971, Matt Berninger is the old man, the lone westsider, and the only one without a blood relative in the group.

The Dessners and Devendorfs all started playing music before age 10. Aaron played drums. Bryce got serious about the flute.\* Scott and Bryan both started on the violin before graduating to the hardcore world of church-based handbell

\*Bryce would break out the flute for the first (and last) time on a National record with the *Boxer* track "Racing Like a Pro."

choirs.\* Everyone's worlds began colliding around 1988 when the sporty sixth-grader Dessners met oddball seventh-grader Bryan at the Cincinnati Country Day School.

**Aaron:** Bryan and I had the same middle school adviser. He just was this weird, badass skater kid who didn't say much.

**Bryan:** I was a loner. They were sort of the golden boys: blonde-haired, blue-eyed twins who excelled at sports and academics.

The first thing the three of them played together wasn't music, but basketball, with Bryan positioned at center and the twins as point guards on their school's B-team hoops squad.

Between the Dessners, Bryce was the first to get tired of being the short kid on the bench. Taking a cue from their punk older sister, Jess, who had jumped headfirst into the Cincy rock scene, he started teaching himself electric guitar.<sup>1</sup> Within a year, he joined the local conservatory, which in turn inspired Aaron to pick up the bass.

**Bryce:** Our style of guitar playing comes out of me learning classical guitar and Aaron imitating me.

Meanwhile, as big brother Scott was getting good on guitar, Bryan was taking drum lessons from a guy named Steve Earle (no relation to the Grammy-winning singer-songwriter),

\*In Bryan's case, handbells would prove surprisingly illustrative of his drumming technique.

whose band The Afghan Whigs was just beginning to bring some alt-rock honor to their hometown.\*

When the twins found out Bryan could drum, it was on. In their first band together, Equinox, the trio would jam for hours on end, mostly covering classic rock standards like The Allman Brothers, Neil Young, and especially The Grateful Dead.<sup>2</sup>

**Aaron:** We'd spend long, crazy amounts of time together. We wouldn't even talk much. We'd just be in each other's presence making a ton of music.

Meanwhile, the more misfit Devendorf brothers expended their harder-rocking tendencies together in a string of punk- and grunge-inspired groups that performed at various teenage house parties and contests.

**Bryan:** We had our first taste of success when we advanced to the semi-finals at the biggest battle of the bands in town.

**Scott:** We were eliminated when another band whipped out a grungy, pitch-perfect rendition of "Unchained Melody."

\* \* \*

A certain Matthew Donald Berninger entered the equation in 1991, when, after studying pre-med and sculpture at a liberal

\*Bryan swears Earle looked just like NCIS actor and 1986's "Sexiest Man Alive" Mark Harmon.

arts school, he transferred into the University of Cincinnati's rigorous graphic design program. It was on the first day of drawing fundamentals class that he found himself seated across from Scott.

**Matt:** He laughed at all my stupid jokes so we got along right away. We pretty instantly became best friends in college.

**Scott:** He was always the art director guy who wants to say a bunch of things, but he would be nice and include everyone.

Bonding over long nights and rigid critiques in the studio, Matt and Scott grew close to fellow design students Mike Brewer, Casey Reas, and Jeff Salem. After attending concerts by indie forefathers like Fugazi, The Breeders, Cowboy Junkies, and Paul Westerberg, the gang eventually threw their spare creative energy into a lo-fi garage band they named Nancy, after Matt's mom.

**Matt:** Nancy was this drunken, embarrassed kind of rock, but I consider that a real band.

**Scott:** We only played two shows. One was at a Greek restaurant and one was at a party in Casey's basement.

While Nancy never got past the garage phase, they threw together the songs and money to record an album before graduating in 1996. Then, with diplomas in hand, Matt, Scott, Casey, and Jeff moved to New York City to pursue their preordained careers in design, leaving their rock star fantasies behind them.

Despite shipping off to different universities—Aaron at Columbia, Bryce at Yale, Bryan at Case Western—the Equinox alums figured out a way to play in their second band together: a flowery female-fronted folk rock group called Project Nim, which incidentally featured yet another set of brothers in it.<sup>3</sup> A 1998 campus newspaper article described their sound as “Velocity Girl on Quaaludes” and “a less uppity Ten Thousand Maniacs [sic].”<sup>4</sup>

**Aaron:** It was a pretty terrible band.

**Bryce:** It wasn’t cool, but it was weirdly successful.

We would sell out to 500 people. We didn’t even understand you could get a label, so we would just make our own CDs and sell them at shows. It was the first time we understood that you could make money playing music.

It was a Project Nim show at the Living Room in New York where the Dessners finally met their future frontman, who had come to see them with Scott.

**Aaron:** You could tell Matt was the coolest person.

He had great taste in music, and was interesting and creative. It was like meeting a leading man in a movie.

**Bryce:** He was this handsome, super nice, charismatic guy. We’d joke and call him “Everybody’s Best Man,” because he’d been the best man at like 15 weddings.

**Scott:** He literally was the best man at my wedding.

**Bryce:** I remember Aaron being like, “God, if only that guy could sing.”

\* \* \*

When Project Nim reached its natural conclusion in 1998, Aaron, Bryce, and Bryan were living cheaply in New Haven, Connecticut, where Bryce was finishing his masters in music at Yale. Two hours south in Manhattan, Matt and Scott were working successful design jobs with a front row seat to the rock renaissance that was just beginning to spark on the Lower East Side with bands like Jonathan Fire\*Eater and The Strokes.

**Scott:** Matt and I didn’t really play music for three or four years, but we started to see these really good bands coming up.

**Matt:** I walked to the Mercury Lounge every day after work, and saw the first seven or eight Strokes shows.

**Scott:** We were like, *Wouldn’t it be fun to try it again?*

It was the sweaty summer of ‘99 when Matt and Jeff Salem, later pictured on the back cover of *Sad Songs for Dirty Lovers*,\* moved into a massive loft in Brooklyn. Located at the dead end of Bond Street, backed against the Gowanus Canal, it was a popular spot for people to dump trash and torch abandoned vehicles. While it was far from posh inside, as evidenced by the rats they called roommates, the loft’s

\*Scott’s wife Liz is the face on the front cover.

spaciousness made it perfect for throwing big parties and, as fate would have it, making music.

**Matt:** I think that space was one of the biggest reasons we started a band. It felt like that's what you should do with a space like that.

**Bryan:** That apartment became our headquarters.

Bryce was off studying in Paris when Scott invited Bryan, who invited Aaron, to jam with him and Matt. United by their common affection for bands like Pavement, Silver Jews, Wilco, Yo La Tengo, Sonic Youth, Guided by Voices, Spoon, and Dinosaur Jr., the first jams were largely formless. Aaron was the fastest songwriter, often noodling out melodies on guitar or bass that Bryan and Scott, then acting as lead guitarist, would respond to with some understated magic of their own, as Matt scribbled out lyrics and started singing.

**Scott:** There was no great direction or ambition as to where we were going with it. We were just trying to make something and having fun doing it.

**Bryan:** The early jams were really refreshing: super mellow, easy feels, straight beats, easy to understand songs, and the lyrics were really good. It felt like, *This is different from anything I've done before.*

On top of beer, a key ingredient at those early sessions in Gowanus was the presence of Mike Brewer and Jeff Salem, who engineered the proceedings on Mike's Yamaha MD8, a piece of 1990s digital technology that allowed the band to create primordial multitrack recordings of their fledgling efforts.

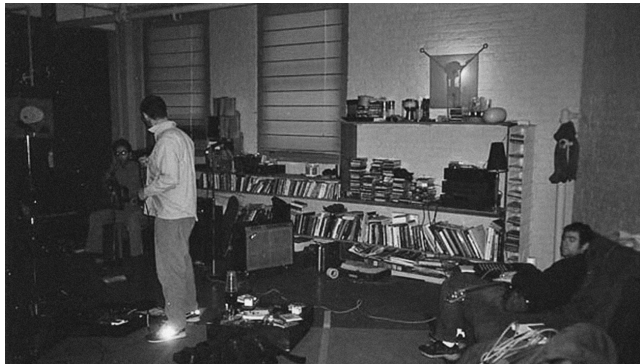
BOXER

**Bryan:** That was a big deal having Mike and Jeff there. We could play and then listen to what we did right away. It was instant feedback.

**Aaron:** We gave everybody a cassette to take home and it was already something where I was like, *Oh, I would listen to this!*

In no time Bryan and Aaron were moving to the city, as the loft sessions turned into an increasingly frequent social club. It was Christmas when Bryce got his first taste of what he was missing out on.

**Bryce:** I came back from France, Aaron had the tapes, and we listened to all of it. It was everything that we had not been able to do in Project Nim.



Early jam at the loft. (Credit: Matt Berninger)