

**THE
MEAT
PUPPETS**

**AND THE LYRICS OF
CURT KIRKWOOD
FROM *MEAT PUPPETS II*
TO *NO JOKE!***

MATTHEW SMITH-LAHRMAN

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For Meatheads

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Lyrics of Curt Kirkwood

In this book I analyze and interpret the lyrics of Curt Kirkwood as they appear in the liner notes of the albums of the original lineup of the Meat Puppets. Formed in 1980, the original Meat Puppets consisted of Curt Kirkwood and his slightly younger brother Cris, both of whom grew up in Sunnyslope, a not so good area of Phoenix. Derrick Bostrom lived in Paradise Valley, a more upscale area of the city. They came together over a love of pot, psychedelic rock, and Derrick's membership in the Unitarian Church's Liberal Religious Youth, an organization that not only fostered the liberal hippie ideals that the three future Puppets had but also gave them access to a practice space. Over the next fifteen years, as the Meat Puppets, Curt, Cris, and Derrick, would cement their place in punk/indie/alternative rock lore, releasing two EPs and six LPs with the seminal indie label SST Records and three more with major label London Records. This version of the band released their last record of original material, *No Joke!*, in October 1995 and played their final gig that New Year's Eve.

THE RESEARCH

In the spring of 2003, during the break between spring and summer semesters as a sociology professor at Dixie State College of Utah, I sat down to journal every day to see whether I could come up with a long-term research/writing project. My wife and I had a three-year-old son and as a committed father, I wasn't going to engage in some sort of time-intensive fieldwork project; I needed something I could do at home in my "spare" time. I stumbled across

the idea to analyze/interpret the lyrics of my favorite writer, Curt Kirkwood, from my favorite band, the Meat Puppets. It was a perfect project, as I could do all the research and writing from my computers at home and school.

Over the next five years, mainly during summer breaks, I read the lyrics of, listened to, and free wrote about every song of the original Meat Puppets written by Curt Kirkwood (eighty-eight in all), the results of which serve as the body of this book. I then spent some amount of time analyzing the lyrics, using what sociologists call a grounded theory approach—coding, rereading, recoding, and organizing the original field notes into a coherent set of writings.

In 2003, when I embarked upon this project, it had been eight years since the original lineup of the Meat Puppets had broken up. Cris's personal troubles were escalating. Derrick, tired of waiting around for Curt to get things going again, found a straight job working IT for Whole Foods Market. Curt had first moved to California and then to Austin, Texas, where he put together a band he originally called The Royal Neanderthal Orchestra and then, because of contractual obligations, the Meat Puppets. In 2000 he released a record, *Golden Lies*, with this group. In 2002 Curt formed a band with Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic and Sublime drummer Bud Gaugh called Eyes Adrift. They released a self-titled record in that same year. There was no reason to believe that the Meat Puppets would play again. Therefore, I bounded my lyrical research to the fifteen years of the original Meat Puppets. Specifically, I focused on the songs for which Curt had written the lyrics: *Meat Puppets II* (1983) through *No Joke!* (1995). I have not attempted a systematic interpretation of any Meat Puppets songs from before or after this period.

CURT'S LYRICS

Curt says that the meaning behind his lyrics is “on the listener”—the meaning of a song is whatever the listener makes of it. He refers to his lyric writing as an “oblique approach.” He purposefully writes songs that can be interpreted in countless ways. Even Curt acknowledges that he isn't sure what a song is about until he listens to the finished product.

I started to see stuff there that, even though I didn't intend it, like “Split Myself in Two,” I saw how I wrote that and then I had twins and I was like “Wow!” I mean, obviously I'm not pre-cognizant or anything like that, so I'm not taking it that way. I focused on writing these little story book tale sounding lyrics that, when it was done, I could relate it to my own circumstances. Even though I was the writer I could have a subjective audience viewpoint of it. I don't think it was conscious. I just was trying to make stuff that sounds cool.

Regardless of my attempts to pin down the meanings of Curt's lyrics, he and his band mates claim that his songs are more about lyrical feel and flow than content. Says Derrick,

Curt never would cop to meaning anything in his material. We used to have jokes on what the song might be about. And usually they weren't really about anything so much as just very basic imagery. He was very into Shakespeare. What he got off of Shakespeare was the notion that language could stand on itself with or without meaning, that it could have a lyricism apart from a concrete meaning, and obviously he was liberated by that. He was able to apply the things that he was thinking about in a non-formulaic way through his focus on lyricism. So he might come up with a basic thing that he would write about but then he would change the words to fit his ear and not feel like the words had to be about anything. His main focus was the plastic aspect of the words themselves.

Curt thinks of his lyrics as having meaning beyond anything he may have meant for the words and lines he pens. He enjoys the distinct possibility that listeners find meaning in his songs that may be far from any he intended. Indeed, as Derrick remembers it, Curt would purposefully mix his lyrics around so as to have no, and thus multiple, obvious meanings.

Here's what he used to tell me. He would write things that meant something to him and then change the words around so that his original meaning would be obscured. He will change the words around and they will retain their meanings. Sometimes it was enough for him to obscure some of his meanings, and just experiment with words. Sometimes the theme becomes word play.

Curt doesn't disagree with Derrick's assessment of his writing. Indeed, Curt credits his oblique style to certain musical and literary influences.

That's the Eno side coming in, oblique strategies. I'm sure that's where I got that, and also William Burroughs and cut-ups, intentional cut-ups. I wasn't letting it fall to the luck of the draw. The ability to take sentences apart and still have them be the same.

A cutup, in Curt's style, is the practice of taking seemingly unrelated words and phrases and pasting them together in grammatically correct ways, arming them with meaning where none may exist.

Not all of Curt's lyrics are oblique though, as he'll admit when pressed. I asked him, for instance, about "That's How it Goes," a song from the 1991 album *Forbidden Places*, which seems to be a pretty straightforward song about a broken relationship.

M: So sometimes you do write songs that seem pretty obvious.

C: Yeah. I imagine I do. They happen now and then.

Curt talks of his writing style as one in which he has put up walls for himself, walls that confine and/or focus his writing in certain ways. One such wall, for instance, has to do with the use of profanity. In response to my suggestion that some of the songs on *Up on the Sun* could pass as children's songs, he said:

It's one of the reasons why I made a conscious decision not to use too much foul language back when punk rockers were doing it and then when rap came into style. I never really liked it. It felt like shooting fish in a barrel. "Let's say, 'Fuck.' That'll get attention."

So Curt made a conscious decision to put up a strategic wall barring him from using profanity in his lyrics. Indeed, he doesn't write a song with the word "fuck" in it until 2011 on "The Spider and the Spaceship" from *Lollipop*. (That line is "Your friends are all fuckers.")

Along the lines of avoiding the use of profanity is another songwriting wall Curt put up for himself, this one dealing with the use of accessible rather than "lofty" language. He likes the idea of writing in a simple style, one that anyone can "get" while still having grand images appear in his lyrics.

Somebody like Rimbaud where it's like, "Okay, this is beautiful but might not be for kids." But he can write in that style and dialect that anybody can get and understand; take out some of the loftier stuff, the fancier words. I could probably use a lot more words but I think that's one of the walls that I've always put up. I'm not going to go out of my way trying to find flowery ways to say this. (personal interview)

There are, then, by Curt's own account, a number of cultural influences upon his lyrical style. First and foremost among these is Walt Disney, the man, the company, and the stories they created. It's the pure good and evil from Disney that shows up most obviously in Curt's lyrics. Fantasy demons and monsters abound alongside good fairies and princesses. The normal worlds of Curt's songs, as with the fantasy worlds of Disney, are rife with good and evil, the better of which depends upon one's perspective.

Another important and early influence upon Curt, as mentioned above, is William Shakespeare. From him Curt adopted a love of wordplay. As often as not in Curt's songs, the rhythm and rhyme of the words are as or more important than the substantive content they may or may not convey. It's important to remember that Curt wrote these lyrics for a rock band. They are, in the end, meant to be sung rather than read. In the end, Shakespeare's lines were meant to be performed, not read. Like Shakespeare, Curt enjoys the act

of singing his lyrics; reading of them without music doesn't interest him as much.

A third influence upon Curt's lyrical style is the nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud. His ability to portray the thoughts and desires of ordinary people in sparse and direct language, avoiding the overly complex, is evident in Curt's focus on smaller rather than larger words in his songs; he makes a conscious effort to write in a style that is accessible to and reflects the vocabulary of a wide range of people. Another apparent influence of Rimbaud upon Kirkwood (an influence that, of course, can be found as a core thematic code of rock music in general) is revelry in the libertine. Curt, though less direct than Rimbaud, does not shy away from writing about deviant behavior in a way that suggests those who engage in it are no less human than those who don't.

William Burroughs influenced Kirkwood's writing in two ways. First, like Rimbaud, Burroughs celebrates people and behaviors considered beyond the pale of conventional society; people are people—some are good, some are evil, all are human. Curt also borrows from Burroughs's cutup style of writing, taking "random" words and phrases and putting them together in sentence-like structures, allowing meaning to emerge from seemingly nonsensical pairings. As shown, Curt acknowledges using cutups in his writing, though he says the words he uses aren't random. He'll write lyrics and then go back and change the words, replacing the original, more obvious words and sentences with well-chosen but contextually absurd substitutes.

A final important influence upon Curt's writing is Lewis Carroll, author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. More than any of the above mentioned characters, Carroll's nonsensical yet evocative style is clear in Curt's lyrics. It often takes numerous intense studies, and an active imagination, to come to an understanding of Kirkwood's songs, and many are simply beyond meaning, just strings of fascinatingly hollow phrases.

From the world of rock Curt often mentions the lyrics of Brian Eno as a particular influence. Eno, like Shakespeare, Burroughs, and Carroll, offers up sumptuous doses of lyrical phrases and strings of words that can be interpreted in as many ways as there are listeners.

Putting all of these influences together and, of course, his own unique sense of the world, time, and space, Curt refers to his writing style as "oblique." The meaning of the songs is up in the air, amorphous, ephemeral. He is purposively allusive; he does not want the meanings to be obvious. The listener gets to decide. Indeed, Curt gets a certain sense of pleasure out of the meanings others attribute to his work. One example he likes to give is of his album cover art (virtually all Meat Puppets album covers have Curt's original artwork). He likes how his paintings are changed as they move from

canvas originals to album covers, the ways the colors change, for instance. Once he submits his art (paintings, songs) the meanings are out of his hands.

There are a number of cultural themes that run consistently throughout Curt Kirkwood's writing. Salient among these is an existential denial of God or Nature or any other type of guiding force in the lives of men. In the absence of such a guiding force people are free to make of the world what they wish, to see what they want, to make sense of anything, and, thus, the line between conventional and deviant behavior becomes a social construction. The difficulty for Curt's characters is that they live in the realities of conventional people who do, in fact, believe in guiding forces and, thus, believe that the line between good and bad is clear. Curt's characters must constantly negotiate this line, allowing themselves to think and believe in things not considered appropriate by conventional folk; but they must act, in most cases, in conventionally acceptable ways.

A boundary between personal reality and public performance is evidenced in many of Curt's songs. Many of the characters have an internal understanding of things, brought on by mental illness, drug use, or both, that doesn't quite mesh with the expected realities of conventional society. The thrusts of many Meat Puppets songs, then, are descriptions of characters' inner worlds (replete with demons and monsters and time-space continuum warp) and the struggles they have in trying to keep these worlds in check. Along the way Curt touches on deep cultural existential themes, such as people's fears of the dark and nighttime, loss of personal control, and acceptance of one's inability to control one's own fate.

In *Meat Puppets II*, Curt's first full album of lyrics, existentialism takes the form of the search for meaning that we all experience. The songs on the record are filled with the wonder of a young man in a young band realizing that his fate is in his own hands, and that his hands are imperfect. He doesn't know what the future holds in store, but he has made up his mind; he knows his calling. Along the way, Curt includes skepticism of the confidence that traditional Christians have that they know the truth. *The truth*, he suggests, *is fabricated*. *Meat Puppets II* is also one of only three of the original Meat Puppets' records that can be seen as having a concept (foggy as it may be). The record can be read as a Faustian deal with the devil that continues in various guises throughout many of the songs.

On *Up on the Sun*, the Meat Puppets' next record, Curt's concern with what the future might hold turns to confidence. The mind trips that scare the characters on *Meat Puppets II* are now taken with enjoyment. *Up on the Sun* wallows in unadulterated psychedelic escapism. Alternate physical and mental realities are to be pursued, not avoided. On *Up on the Sun* celebrations of the grotesque sit side by side with songs of fatherhood and, as per *Meat Puppets II*, criticisms of conventional Christianity.

On the EP *Out My Way*, Curt adds complexity to his by now established oblique writing style. A story structure for his songs appears on this record; beginnings, middles, and ends take shape. Furthermore, the sheer number of words per song jumps significantly on *Out My Way*, a variable that continues on the next record, *Mirage*. A more pronounced emphasis on nighttime and the inevitability of death emerges on this record, as well. Somewhat derivatively for the genre, Curt includes his first blatantly obvious sex song to start off *Out My Way*.

The density of Curt's lyrics continues on the Meat Puppets' next record, early 1987's *Mirage*. Attempts at self-control, both physical and mental, permeate this record, with the characters often just one step ahead of the grotesque in allegories of personal failure and mental chaos. The song structures he'd begun on *Out My Way* are sharpened here, with songs having contextual setups, active bodies where characters pass through life-defining moments, and conclusions in which the characters have changed due to the actions undertaken in the body.

Huevos, the band's second release of 1987, leaves *Mirage*'s studio gimmickry behind in favor of simplistic rocking minimalism, the blues. It's an album full of lyrical cockiness. The singers of the songs have no worries; they are full of masculine gusto. *Huevos* is Curt's sex record. The characters are lustful, lack self-restraint, and throw conventional sexual folkways and mores to the wind. Musically and lyrically, *Huevos* is Meat Puppets on fire.

As the band's final SST Records release, *Monsters* is a mix of Curt's previous lyrical (and musical) styles. There are moments of hellish darkness, in which people are under the control/spell of others who mean them harm, but there are also moments of innocent love combined with observations of the natural world. There is even a song or two of hope and empathy thrown in for good measure.

Forbidden Places marks the Meat Puppets' move to the major labels, and the songs reflect the band's interest in producing a more commercially friendly record. The songs are fully psychedelic, for sure, filled with anthropomorphized creatures, animated natural wonders, and "dollops of dubious doo doo," but they have marketing structure. They are shorter, for one thing, and lyrically more concise. These are songs, so thought the band, producer, and label executives, that could be played on the radio.

Nirvana put an end to any chance of *Forbidden Places* being commercially successful. Everything rock that was released before *Nevermind* was immediately passé; every record label was looking for the next grunge band, London Records included. What came next for the Meat Puppets were a couple years of frustrations. London executives rejected demos from the band left and right, eventually suggesting that they record some of their past songs ("Lake of Fire," "Plateau") acoustically and release a best-of acoustic album. Eventually the label found value in Meat Puppets' version of the

Feederz “Fuck You” and green-lighted the band to make a fully electric hard rock (i.e., grunge) record. The result was *Too High to Die*, a heavy rock record that, ironically, is a lyrical “fuck you” to the major label industry. This and the next record are as close to being concept albums as Curt has made. Song after song on *Too High to Die* has Curt expressing his dismay at the situation the band had gotten themselves into and, sometimes, wishing they could go back to the way things were when they had more control over their product.

The final release by the original Meat Puppets, 1995’s *No Joke!*, is another concept album of sorts. Being their emotionally darkest record, it reads like an ode to drugs and death. Curt and Cris’s mother was dying, Cris’s heroin addiction was out of control, Curt’s band was ending, and Curt lays it all out on the record. Well, it’s laid out as much as Curt ever lays things out. The meanings of the songs are, as always, oblique, but it doesn’t take too much digging to discover the utter existential nihilism that pervades *No Joke!*’s mood.

MY INTERPRETATIONS

It goes without saying that the interpretations of Curt Kirkwood’s songs contained herein are strictly my own. Indeed, the writings contained here surely reflect my own ideas about things more than they do Curt’s. Curt is allusive at best, and downright uncooperative otherwise, concerning the meanings behind his songs. He likes it that way. He enjoys the meanings that others attribute to his work. That said, then, the reader should take my interpretations at face value. Yes, I spent hours (years) analyzing and interpreting the lyrics, and, yes, I’ve spent more hours (years) researching the band and interviewing Curt, Cris, and Derrick than most, but this can only provide context for trying to understand the songs. In the end, the meaning of Curt’s words, the meaning of any piece of art, is strictly your own. There are as many meanings to these songs as there are people to hear them.

It’s important to also recognize that the lyrics interpreted here are from songs; they were written to be sung, not read. As the rock music writer Don McLeese once posted on Facebook about Bob Dylan (and I’m paraphrasing here), to separate the lyrics from the songs changes everything. This isn’t poetry; it is rock music. Nonetheless I think that I’ve found value in the analysis and interpretation of Curt’s lyrics outside the songs, but I encourage the reader not to take my word for it; go listen to the songs yourself.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The organization of this book is simple. The songs are interpreted in the order in which they were made available to the public, by album and song. Starting with *Meat Puppets II* and going through *No Joke!*, each chapter deals with a unique album. The reader need not read the book in order from front to back. Start anywhere. Skip straight to specific albums or songs. Feel free to use it more as a reference book than as a logically sequenced story about Curt's lyrics (though it can be read this way, as well).

Finally, unless otherwise noted, all lyrics contained in this book were written by Curt Kirkwood and reprinted with his permission.

Chapter Two

Meat Puppets II

In 1984 SST Records released *Meat Puppets II*,¹ the Meat Puppets' second full-length album. By the time of its recording in 1983, Cris, Curt, and Derrick had quit their day jobs and were living together in west Phoenix with the goal of being a professional rock band. The resulting record is considered by many to be an alt-punk classic. It is a musically coherent set of songs that cover a surprisingly diverse set of rock genres: country, punk, folk, hard rock, and psychedelia all make appearances.

On *Meat Puppets II*, Kirkwood cements perceptions of his writing as weird, strange, funny, and sometimes downright incomprehensible. He was discovering his talent for writing “oblique” lyrics, sets of words strung together that sound good but without specific meanings, except those attached to them by individual listeners. He maintains this style throughout his career. This said, the songs on *Meat Puppets II* don't fit well into the basic lyrical categories that Curt develops in subsequent albums. This is probably because this is the first album in which total lyrical control is his (Derrick wrote most of the lyrics for *Meat Puppets*); Curt is only beginning to hone his craft.

A number of themes on *Meat Puppets II* do continue to appear throughout Curt's songwriting career. One of these is existentialism and the search for meaning. Curt has always written about the meaninglessness of life, of how we humans work hard to make living seem important, when, in fact, it is no more important than anything else. On *Meat Puppets II* we specifically find existentialist thought in “Lost” and “Oh, Me.” “Plataeu” provides a good example of another theme consistent in Curt's writing, the social construction of religion. This also fits with the existentialist theme in that Curt sees religion as just one of a number of ways that people try to create meaning. The realist in Curt forces him to acknowledge the emptiness of religious thought. “We're Here” is a good song for introducing listeners to a number of

lyrical themes that appear throughout Curt's career. Salient among these are the mind games that occur within all of our heads. The song has visual and aural hallucinations, suggestions that others are controlling our actions, and an emphasis on nighttime, a place where much of the attractively scary things in Curt's lyrics occur.

Curt says he doesn't like to write love songs; there are enough of them that he doesn't feel a need to add to the gamut. He does, however, include a relationship song or two on most of his records. On *Meat Puppets II* that song is "Climbing," a song where Singer expounds upon the difficulties that he and a significant other are having keeping a relationship together.

Meat Puppets II does have one theme that is unique to this record compared with others in his career. Beginning with the first track, "Split Myself in Two," there is a story that revolves around a Faustian deal with the devil. The story is followed throughout the record in some of the songs already mentioned as well as in "New Gods," "Lake of Fire," and "The Whistling Song."

THE SONGS

Split Myself in Two

the man laid his hat on the table
 hung his coat up on the wall
 sat down to dinner
 said as soon as I am able
 I'll say something nice to you all

then he took a deck from his pocket
 spread em so I saw em all
 then he turned his back to me
 shuffled em and drew me
 the card that said I never would fall

oh mary lou won't you tell me what to do
 I got a dollar on the corner
 and a lazer in my shoe
 if I don't get an answer
 gonna split myself in two

he spun till a ton was glistening
 turned to me and gave me a smile
 he said I'm leaving now
 but I want what you owe me
 I'll be back in a little while

that was the last time I saw him

hope I never see him again
 I know it sounds funny
 but I owe him some money
 and I really don't want him for a friend

“Split Myself in Two” is a “meet the devil” song. It’s interesting to see Curt, who was twenty-four or twenty-five when he wrote the lyrics for this record, drawing upon classic lyrical traditions in the song. The tradition is that of a musician going to the crossroads, the meeting of two roads. He can take the righteous path or the path to hell. Both roads stretch out before him. He has a choice. He has agency. But the devil is there influencing his decision.

A most famous example of this tradition is the story of blues legend Robert Johnson. Johnson was a bad guitarist as a teenager. But he kept trying. He would show up at places where blues musicians played and play during their breaks. He was horrible. Then he disappeared for awhile. When he came back he was the greatest bluesman the South had ever known. The story is that he went down to the crossroads and made a deal with the devil. The devil made Johnson a great bluesman in return for his soul. Indeed, Johnson ends up getting murdered by a jealous husband and, if the story is correct, going to hell.

Curt is telling a similar story in “Split Myself in Two.” The man who lays his hat on the table and hangs his coat on the wall is the devil. In the first stanza we mistake this man to be the father of the house because he is sitting down to dinner. He just came home and has had a bad day; therefore he has nothing nice to say right away, but as soon as he does he will.

The first stanza is the end of the mundane and understandable in the song. If the man is his father, then his father is the devil (Curt and Cris did grow up with an “evil” stepdad or two). From here on it is psychedelic make-a-deal-with-the-devil story time. Stanza two is where the deal takes place. In this story Singer didn’t ask to make the deal. The devil takes a deck (of cards, presumably) and deals the singer “the card that said I never would fall.” That’s the deal. *I, the devil, have given you the greatest card of all. The card for a spectacular life.*

Stanza three offers up the dilemma. Singer is distressed. Should he take the deal? He has a “dollar on the corner,” representing his meager savings in life thus far. It’s only a dollar, but it is his honestly and hard-earned dollar. He also has a laser in his shoe, a laser provided by the devil. Should he take the dollar, thus giving back the laser? Or should he take the laser in return for his soul? “Oh mary lou won’t you tell me what to do”? He’s gonna split himself in two trying to make this decision.

Stanzas four and five suggest that Singer takes the devil’s deal. In stanza four the devil spins a ton (of money?) and then leaves, but not before letting Singer know that he’ll be back to collect what’s his. In stanza five Singer admits that he made the deal, “but I owe him some money.” We know it is

more than money that is owed here. Singer is hoping that maybe, just maybe, the man won't come back to collect. He wasn't a nice man. He was the devil! Singer's life is going fine at this point. Of course it is. He was given the card that says he never will fall. It's been awhile since he saw the man, and he hopes he won't come back to collect . . . *his soul!*

The allusion in stanza four to the Brothers Grimm story "Rumpelstiltskin" cannot be denied. In Rumpelstiltskin a poor miller's daughter is locked in a room and ordered by a king to spin gold out of straw. The daughter, however, doesn't know how to do this. To her delight a little man enters the room and for a price, spins the gold for her. The price for his services rises until when the girl has no more to give, he offers to spin gold in return for her first-born child. She takes the deal. Eventually the king marries the girl, and she gives birth to a beautiful child. Of course the manikin comes to collect his due and of course, the queen is astonished and doesn't want to hand the child over. A new deal is made. If the queen can guess the little man's name in three days time she can keep the baby. If not, she hands the child over. In the end the queen guesses Rumpelstiltskin's name correctly, and to his dismay, she keeps the baby.

The final paragraph of one version of "Rumpelstiltskin" highlights the Faustian nature of the story. It also hints at the title of Kirkwood's song, "Split Myself in Two." What follows is the manikin's response upon the queen's pronouncement of his name:

"The devil has told you that! The devil has told you that," cried the little man, and in his anger he plunged his right foot so deep into the earth that his whole leg went in, and then in rage he pulled at his left leg so hard with both hands that he tore himself in two.

Lost

lost on the freeway again
lookin' for means to an end
nobody knows which way its gonna bend
lost on the freeway again

walkin' the breezeways again
lookin' for something my friend
i've grown tired of living nixon's mess
walkin' the breezeways again

i know there'll come a day
when you say that you don't know me
i know there'll come a time
when there's nothing no one owes me any more

locked in the attic again

out of the shallow and into the deep end
 i've got a wound I know will never mend
 locked in the attic again

The theme of "Lost" is existential wandering. The "freeway" and the "breezeways" are long, winding, seemingly never-ending pathways that if one doesn't have a map, one can easily get lost. Just get on the freeway and start driving. Who knows where you'll end up, who knows what will happen? The freeway system is an interconnected set of streets that will take one anywhere. Breezeways, being hallways, are similar. At outdoor schools, which are common in California, breezeways are hallways between classrooms. One can wander around in these breezeways nonstop. They are all connected; there are no dead ends.

A typical Curt existentialism surfaces immediately in the first stanza: "lookin' for means to an end." He's lost on the freeway trying to find meaning in life. He's looking for a purpose to it all, to life. Not having a map, "nobody knows which way it's gonna bend." Nobody can predict the future. Nobody knows which way life is going to go, just like, without having a map, we don't know where the freeway is going; we're just along for the ride. There are no maps for our lives; we just go with the flow, always searching for meaning.

In the second stanza (the breezeway stanza) Curt (the song's narrator) is "lookin' for something my friend." Again, he's looking for something, anything, that will give life some kind of concrete and real meaning. Additionally, and this is one of the very few times Curt is ever directly political, he is "tired of living nixon's mess." *Meat Puppets II* came out in 1984, and Nixon was done being president in 1974 (ten years earlier). Curt may be using Nixon as a metaphor for the entire seventies. He's suggesting that it is time to move on, to create something new. This is a generational statement. *The music of the seventies was bland, the culture of the seventies was bland, let's create something more exciting, something more meaningful.* He is searching. Or maybe Curt is suggesting that Nixon screwed things up and he's tired of still living in Nixon's mess. He's searching the breezeways and trying to find a way out of Nixon's mess.

The third stanza bridges stanzas one, two, and four:

I know there'll come a day
 When you say that you don't know me
 I know there'll come a time
 When there's nothing no one owes me any more

The premise here is an admission that life is temporary, we all die, all of this wandering and searching will end. *When this time comes, you won't know me and no one will owe me anything.* The thrust of the song thus far is that *I'm searching; I'm looking for meaning on these never-ending freeways and*

breezeways. I don't know what turns life will take. I'll look for meaning as I go along. I'm desperately hoping to find meaning and get out of the crappy meaning of Nixon's seventies. But if I don't find meaning (which I probably won't) I will die, just like you. So whether or not you find (create) the meaning of life, you will die and I will die just the same.

In the fourth and final stanza our hero is “locked in the attic again.” He is locked up rather than moving, as in the first two stanzas. This is death; this is the hereafter. Stanza three introduces us to death, to shuffling off this mortal coil, and stanza four introduces us to the hereafter. He’s “out of the shallow and into the deep end.” The shallow end is life on earth, our mortal life. The deep end, of course, is heaven (or whatever comes next). And, get this, “I’ve got a wound that I know will never mend.” The hereafter is forever and eternal. The searching and wandering is over. But he calls it a wound. This is not something blissful. This is not a happy thing. It is a wound, an injury, a scab. It is something that will never mend. Death is a wound that will never be fixed. It is an attic into which one is locked and can’t leave. Life is at least filled with wonder and wander; death is final. *At least in the shallow end I can get my footing. In the deep end I just sink or tread.* It never ends.

There’s a spiritual theme in “Lost” that pops up throughout Curt’s writing career. *Why? Why are we here? It’s all gonna end anyway. I see no real reason to be here and no real reason for dying, either.*

Plateau

many a hand has scaled the grand old face of the plateau
 some belong to strangers and some to folks you know
 holy ghosts and talk show hosts are planted in the sand
 to beautify the foothills and shake the many hands

there’s nothing on the top but a bucket and a mop
 and an illustrated book about birds
 you see a lot up there but don’t be scared
 who needs action when you got words

when you’re finished with the mop then you can stop
 and look at what you’ve done
 the plateau’s clean, no dirt to be seen
 and the work it took was fun

well the many hands began to scan around for the next plateau
 some said it was in greenland and some in mexico
 some decided it was nowhere except for where they stood
 but they were all just guesses, wouldn’t help you if they could

“Plateau” is a song about the hereafter. The “grand old face of the plateau” is a reference to heaven, or whatever comes after this life. “Many a hand has

scaled the grand old face of the plateau,” meaning everybody dies. Everybody goes up the plateau, strangers as well as people we know. “Holy ghosts and talk show hosts are planted in the sand.” Everyone, from all walks of life, dies; holy ghosts and talk show hosts, being at opposite ends of the moral, ethical, spiritual spectrum, suggests that the best and the worst together must scale the plateau.

Why do they scale the plateau? “To beautify the foothills and shake the many hands,” of course. They are angels, beautifying the foothills. They are making this life of ours better. They give us hope. Here is the theme of bliss or solace. The socially constructed idea is that all these people are dying, scaling the plateau, to beautify the foothills of mortal life. They die to give us hope, to give us bliss. They scale the plateau to “shake the many hands,” to meet up again with deceased loved ones. When we get to heaven we’ll get to meet up with all those who have died before us. What a blissful thought. The plateau is there for us to be happier here on Earth.

In stanza two, however, we find out again (a recurring theme already in Curt’s lyrics) that heaven, the top of the plateau, is not what we had expected. “There’s nothing on the top but a bucket and a mop, and an illustrated book about birds.” It’s mundane. It is not grand. There aren’t all the people up there that we thought we’d meet. Just a bucket and a mop and an illustrated book about birds. What is one supposed to do with these?

Furthermore, “you see a lot up there but don’t be scared, who needs actions when you got words.” There’s a lot to see, since you’re up top, but there isn’t much you can do about it. You’re up there now, the mortals are down there. “Who needs action when you got words,” who needs for anything real to happen when the real purpose of our ideas about heaven exists in our words? Nothing needs to actually happen as long as we believe something will happen. If we perceive it to be real, then it is real in its consequences.

Stanza three is about our spiritual work here on earth. This is what “Plateau” is about. Our spiritual/religious lives are all about scaling the plateau. Some of us believe, here in our mortal lives, that we’ve reached the top of the plateau through our spirituality and religious practices. These are the blissful people, the ones who are confident that they understand the true spiritual and religious purpose of our lives. But back in stanza two Curt tells those of us who haven’t reached this spiritual plateau that it is a sham. It is a self-delusional bucket and mop show. It’s scary because we’ve constructed an idea that this type of spiritual bliss is a door to knowledge about everything. This type of spiritual bliss is a door to God, and to face God is a scary thing, an awesome thing! *Just remember*, writes Curt, *there’s nothing really happening up there*. “Who needs action when you got words.” *Those people up there, the spiritually, religiously blissful people, aren’t doing anything! They are only talking about doing things. But if we perceive it to be real, it is real*

in its consequences. If we think they are doing something, that they are of a different spiritual quality than us normal folk, then we act toward them as if they are of a different spiritual quality.

Stanza three, then, is about the spiritually, religiously blissful people and their actions and beliefs. They look around, after preparing this mortal life for the hereafter with their mop and bucket show and feel good about what they've done. "The plateau's clean, no dirt to be seen." They feel they have effectively prepared this world for the coming of Christ. *We are in the latter days*, feel the spiritually, religiously blissful people, *and it is our mortal duty to prepare this Earth, the plateau, for rapture.* "And the work it took was fun." Stanza three is in the minds of the blissful people. They enjoy cleaning for Christ. This is their lives' work. This is their bliss. They understand what life is all about; they understand what must be done, and they do it, and they enjoy it because they *know*.

Stanza four brings Listener back to reality. The blissful people are constantly looking for new plateaus. Once they've cleaned the plateau they are on now, once they've done all the work for their redemption, they realize that Christ isn't coming just yet. They need to clean another plateau. They haven't done all the preparations yet. It's like when an end-of-the-world religious group sets a date for Christ's second coming and He doesn't show up. They have to come up with a good reason. That reason is that all the work wasn't done, and they realize it now. There must be another plateau to be cleaned. So they start looking for the next plateau. Maybe it's in Greenland, maybe in Mexico. Maybe it is right here under our feet and we didn't even realize it.

"But these were all just guesses, wouldn't help you if they could." This is the rub to the song. *The spiritually and religiously blissful people don't have any more of a clue about the afterlife than you or I. We are all searching. Don't let those people convince you that just because you haven't found a definitive answer about life, they are somehow more worthy than you. They are simply trying to deceive you with their mop and bucket show.*

Religion and spirituality are tools with which some people attempt to gain control of things here on Earth.

We're Here

the night is restless
 but no dream's in sight
 and the sounds have no beginnings or ends
 and that glow is not a light

the walls turn into waterfalls
 with water made of thoughts that call,
 "it's not O.K. to tip the glass