The Blocks Killed the Pittsburgh City Paper so Here Are Some Things I Wrote For It and Its Blog* and Also Some Photos From A Couple of Shows I Went To That Were Posted on Their Blog (2011-2014)

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*I was friends with the music editor but I don't think this was pity publishing

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Nightly Standard

Owen Ashworth becomes Advance Base, comes to town with Concern

September 1, 2011

Just over a year ago, Owen Ashworth announced he was killing his one-man-and-collaborators band, Casiotone for the Painfully Alone. He spent the back half of 2010 playing his last shows under that name — the band's final appearance on Dec. 5, 2010, was the 13th anniversary of its first — and producing half of Serengeti's new album, *Family and Friends*, under his new moniker: Advance Base.

The new name may sound more upbeat, but it's really just more subtle in conveying its isolation.

"The name Advance Base comes from the explorer Richard E. Byrd's memoir, *Alone*," Ashworth writes via email. "Advance Base was the name of [an] outpost in Antarctica where Byrd lived alone for five terrible months in 1934. I'd taken the name Advance Base for my little home studio ever since I moved to Chicago during the winter of 2006." Ashworth's Advance Base is where he recorded most of the songs on Casiotone's 2009 singles-and-rarities compilation on Tomlab, *Advance Base Battery Life*. (Byrd's Advance Base was where he almost died of carbon-monoxide poisoning.)

That studio lends continuity between Ashworth's past and current work, both in name and in sound. Advance Base rehearses in the same apartment where much of Casiotone's later work was recorded, and the apartment's "obvious noise limitations have helped define the arrangements," Ashworth writes. "It's been a refreshing change to play quiet music. I'm taking prettiness into consideration more than I used to."

Though he claims it wasn't a concern, there has always been a beauty to Ashworth's music. The band name Casiotone for the Painfully Alone is like a thesis statement for his early work: lo-fi electronic music whose roughness conveys a personal quality that eases a painful loneliness.

"I've come to realize that there are just certain themes and patterns that I keep returning to," he explains. "And for better or worse, everything I record just winds up sounding like another one of my songs."

Ashworth cuts an imposing figure: a burly, bearded and bespectacled explorer of human loneliness. Judging by appearance alone, you'd expect him to be chopping down trees or selling paper towels (his press photos often involve flannel), rather than crafting short, softly sung and intensely felt vignettes about young folks who are lost and, importantly,

aware of it. A master of the evocative detail, he makes their stories specific and yet relatable. (His economical approach to writing also makes him an excellent Twitterer; you can follow him at @advancebase.)

Written more often than not from the perspective of a character, rather than the songwriter himself, Ashworth's stories are populated with a young America that shares a thematic (though certainly not sonic) continuity with Bruce Springsteen. Usually kids or young adults, his protagonists are looking for a connection and some kind of hope. But Ashworth's youths don't have the dirty-hooded salvation that Springsteen's early music clung to so desperately. They only have Ashworth, their creator, who provides them with sympathy and dignity — whether he's chiding, consoling or commiserating with them.

The Springsteen influence is something Ashworth shares with his younger brother, Gordon, whose solo project, Concern, is part of the current Advance Base tour.

"We were driving around and listening to the radio when 'Streets of Philadelphia' came on," the elder Ashworth recalls. "We both reached for the volume dial to turn the radio up, and we were kind of surprised to know that we both really liked that song. It wasn't something we'd ever really talked about before, but Springsteen was part of our shared musical history. It just sounds like family to me."

The brothers have worked together often in the past, and there's not a hint of sibling rivalry as the elder Ashworth writes about his brother: "Gordon's been in bands since high school, and he remains incredibly prolific with projects like Concern, Oscillating Innards, Knelt Rote, Vile Horrendous Aerial Bombardment and probably a bunch of others that I'm forgetting. I really love his music."

Ashworth's fondness for the music of both Springsteen and his brother led to a Casiotone/Concern collaboration in 2009: a square, 8-inch, vinyl-only release on the label People in a Position to Know. On it, the brothers give "Streets of Philadelphia" and "Born in the USA" the Ashworth electronic treatment. ("Gordon & I thought that recording some Springsteen covers together would be a nice present for our folks," Ashworth explains.) They've followed it up with a 7-inch single of Carter Family covers, recorded for this tour.

Though his current project is named for an isolated Antarctic base full of carbon monoxide, Ashworth's work is built on collaborations with, for and on family and friends. The Advance Base/Concern tour is simply another aspect of that seeming contradiction — a trip around the country that's like home for two brothers.

"Touring is how we get to spend any extended period of time together," Ashworth explains. "Tours and Christmas."

Thoughts Upon Seeing Bruce Springsteen for the First Time

October 30, 2012

It's rainy and cold and there are people drinking tallboys around the Fifth Avenue side of Consol Energy Center, spilling out of the TGI Friday's outdoor area and moving down toward the entrances. Apparently a Springsteen show, like a Bloomfield parade or a Steelers game, suspends open-container laws in the immediate vicinity.

I sacrifice a tallboy to my anxiety and my umbrella to the security gods (whose patdowns are much more chill than the TSA) before I'm allowed inside. There are so many people here.

The tallboy isn't doing its job, so I stop at a concession stand to buy a double rum and coke for $15. I make a mental note not to bother checking the, well, I guess it's less a merch table and more one of several souvenir shops. The credit card machine beeps an error and the woman reassures me it is not a problem with my card. "These machines have been on vacation, they're not used to working."

"A lockout will do that to you!" I say. It works. I thank her, take my drink and my card and head for my seat.

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There are a lot of dads here.

I feel like a tourist. (I always look for reasons to feel like a tourist — no club that would have me as a member and all that.) A sea of tour t-shirts, past and present, tucked into jeans wrapped by braided belts. A couple red bandanas — one guy's gone all-out, denim vest and jeans. I'm wearing a western shirt and a down vest that my dad put in his closet in the late 1970s and that I took out around 2003.

Springsteen shows are large — two or three or more hours long, with songs that segue into one another. (The band holds a note, the Boss counts them in and they're off again.) Fans collect live performances of the songs; people can tell you which songs they've seen, which ones they haven't, where and when. I'll be happy with any one of my Holy Trinity of Springsteen songs: "Thunder Road," "Rosalita" or "Sherry, Darling." He doesn't play any of them.

I didn't expect "Thunder Road" once a friend of mine informed me that when tour dates coincide with Obama stumping appearances (like the one earlier in the afternoon at

Soldiers and Sailors), it's usually missing. I don't ask for specific statistics, but I'm sure I could get them. (He's also informed me that, according to an iOS app, Springsteen has never played "A Good Man is Hard to Find (Pittsburgh)" in Pittsburgh.) It's the kind of manic dedication I associate with jam bands and baseball fans. I wonder if a lot of the people in this audience are accountants.

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I'm pretty far from the stage. Not as far as I could be, and (thankfully) not behind it, but most of my experience of the performance comes from watching the three giant monitors suspended over the stage, each displaying well-shot images of the band and the pit. Lots of signs requesting songs or declaring that this is their first E Street Band show. These folks cheer when he asks who is at their first E Street Band show. I am at my first E Street Band show, but I haven't brought a sign and anyway I am up far too high on a far too steep slope and have been drinking far too much to stand and shout.

I have nothing to compare this to, no frame of reference for this arena rock. Springsteen, to me, is a storyteller. When I was becoming conscious of music, he was putting out *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* and that *Jerry Maguire* song (I am about six months older than *Nebraska*). He was a *Born in the USA* LP next to the Osmonds in my mom's record collection, *Live 1975-1985* on cassette in my parents' closet (which you WILL NOT touch, young man!) I had almost an entire decade of anti-Springsteen attitude to undo by the time I started looking for things to connect me to this place, this once-a-working-man's-town (the Springsteen I love comes from the same time as Steel-Curtain-era Steelers, and sports have never been my thing), to the late '70s/early '80s, to my past. I'm not sure massive arena show is conducive to that.

I should have expected some issue, as this is the *Wrecking Ball* tour and I don't really like *Wrecking Ball* all that much. (It's too new, too now – I need the distance of time to appreciate rawness, maybe I've still got a bit of the 1990s in me.) The set is *Darkness on the Edge of Town*-heavy (five songs from that album, only four from *Wrecking Ball*), and most of the set's 27 songs (six of which made up the encore) are from *Born in the USA* (1984) or earlier.

So I guess the inclusion of "Glory Days" in the encore isn't that surprising. I'm pretty sure he shouts "Night of the Living Grusheckys!" before bringing out Joe and his son Johnny. At this point, I think there are like six or seven guitars on stage. Are they all plugged in? I guess you need a lot of instruments to fill up that amount of sound space, and, well, everyone looks like they're having a good time up there.

I think that's what people are here to see. Old friends having a good time amid that spectacle – that scale. You hope it's more medicine show than snake oil sales pitch, but it's not like this is his first tour where thousands of seats sell for around $100 each. Springsteen's music has always sold redemption. Explicitly in cars and women and music, and later, when his protagonists end up being trapped, too old to run away, there's always a hook or a poetic lyric that aims to make the shittiness easier to bear.

During the last song of the night, "10th Avenue Freeze-Out," he announces "This is the most important part!" before singing "And the Big Man joined the band." After that lyric, the song goes on hold while the video screens show a montage honoring the Big Man, Clarence Clemmons, and other members of the E Street Band and the Bruce Springsteen entertainment complex who have died in recent years. The montage ends, and the band drives through to the end of the song.

I get the feeling that for a lot of the people in the audience, people who are on first-name basis with the members of the band (I get this feeling that by calling him "Springsteen" rather than "Bruce", I'm committing some kind of faux pas, of not allowing myself to get attached in the way others have), are really responding to that emotion.

When I interviewed Owen Ashworth of Advance Base last year about, among other things, his love of Springsteen, he said, "it just sounds like family to me." I think he's onto something there. For some of us, that's a small group of friends and relatives. I guess for some folks, having that family be thousands-strong isn't a source of anxiety, it's a source of strength.

James Jackson Toth wants you to think about the words

May 14, 2014

Last December, NPR's music blog ran an essay titled "That's a Bad Lyric and You Know It." In it, writer James Jackson Toth (who releases music under the name Wooden Wand) calls out songs by several contemporary acts, including Best Coast, Haim and The Black Keys: "I don't know the writers of these songs personally, but I am *positive* they can do better because almost *anybody* could," he writes. He ultimately blames overly permissive music criticism. "I don't believe these lyrics are the products of trivial, impoverished minds," he writes, "but of thoughtful, intelligent people who, fearless of critical castigation, just don't *give* a damn."

"It just sorta bugs me when people don't try," Toth explains via phone, from his current hometown of Lexington, Ky. "Nirvana, Smashing Pumpkins — I still like those bands, [and] they wrote some horrible lyrics. The difference is they were *trying* to write good lyrics. You listen to 'Disarmed' by Smashing Pumpkins; it's not a very strong song lyrically. I feel like there was a sense of profundity that they were reaching for and just failing to grasp."

"I just think at a time where it's really difficult to get people to pay attention to anything, it's sort of important, if you have a mouthpiece to say something of value, to communicate something," he adds. "It doesn't have to be political or especially personal, but say something that's gonna change somebody's day. Or their life."

It's one goal, but not the only one, that Toth aims for in his own songwriting. "Lyrics are really important to me," he says. "I wouldn't say they're more important than anything else. Maybe when I was younger, I believed that, and I think some of the music I made when I was younger suffers as a result."

Wooden Wand songs are evocatively specific in their lyrics and timbre, and their twists repay your attention. He avoids the trap of solipsistic blandness that so much contemporary Americana music falls into — maybe because of the broad range of his own musical tastes.

"I don't sit at home and listen to Townes Van Zandt or Dylan," Toth says. "I love that stuff. It's part of my DNA. But I try to avoid that stuff as much as possible. I try to listen to things that couldn't possibly influence, for lack of a better descriptor, singer-songwriter music."

Wooden Wand's music may turn out folky, like 2014's *Farmer's Corner*, or take the form of a sludgey, psychedelic freakout like 2013's *Wooden Wand and the World War IV*, but there's always nuance. A turn of lyrical or musical phrase, a resigned wink, a reminder: James

Jackson Toth has a sense of humor. He may be ironic, but he's never superior; world-weariness comes from being of the world, not above it.

"I get tired of being described as this real dark dude," he says. "When I have my existential crises I start thinking, 'Maybe I'm just not funny,' because I really am trying, not to sell a joke, but to temper these things with silver linings."

After-Ward

2/26/2026

Like the title page says, I don't think this publication was because I was friends with Andy (who edited these and probably removed plenty of embarrassing things I had written, and who also insisted that I do interviews over the phone rather than via email, unless the interviewee really preferred the written word).

I was probably writing the blog post about the Springsteen show in my head before, during, and after the show because if my brain is going to react like something is unreal I might as well ground it in cause-and-effect, right?

The interviews with Advance Base and JJT (thx Owen and James, who will probably never read this) were definitely, completely, one-hundred-percent me trying to get to talk to two of my favorite songwriters as peers. I doubt they remember the interviews, and I hope I was not too Chris Farley / Paul McCartney SNL skit about it.

Brian

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Some of us will make it through this.