



# *Misty* MOUNTAIN HOP

IF FATHER JOHN MISTY'S LIFE WAS A HOLLYWOOD MOVIE, it would be a metaphysical jail-break thriller about a wrongly convicted man escaping the prison of belief thanks to the liberating power of rock 'n' roll and psychedelic drugs. MAGNET goes to the mountain to help write the script.

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# FATHER JOHN MISTY

lives in a red-clay adobe pueblo on top of a low mountain in Echo Park. Good luck trying to find it without GPS and a helicopter. Down below the cloud line, the hazy glittering grid of Greater Los Angeles recedes into the infinite. From the vantage point of this fairly Olympian perch, the City of Angels looks like flecks of diamond embedded in a filthy sidewalk. Like most wise men atop mountains, Father John Misty's possessions are few: his beard, his acoustic guitar, his vinyl copy of *On The Beach* and a mason jar filled to the brim with psilocybin mushroom caps. There's no internet access, cellular service is intermittent at best, and in Father John Misty's world there is no such thing as TV—just Richard Brautigan novels. There is a black 1972 Cadillac Hearse parked out front that he literally bought for a song. His sole companion, besides his thoughts and psychoactive fungi, is Emma, his gorgeous twentysomething gal pal, currently a grad student at UCLA film school, and last seen in the “Nancy From Now On” video in a black bustier and garter belt, slapping Tillman around and forcibly shaving off his beard, Delilah-like, in a room at the Chateau Marmont. She makes a helluva kale smoothie.

Father John Misty is the *nom de soft rock* of one Joshua Tillman, a.k.a. J. Tillman, ex-drummer for Fleet Foxes and author of eight largely ignored and invariably joyless solo albums of pious folk rectitude. These were the songs of innocence, the whispery bedroom folk he made on the sly between globe-trotting tours wherein the Fleet Foxes charmed the pants off the world, but could barely stand the sight of each other. Those albums remain a well-kept secret.

And then one day in 2010, he blew up his life. Killed off J. Tillman, quit the Fleet Foxes, let his raging id off the short leash it had been kept on since his tormented childhood trapped in a fundamentalist Christian house of pain. Instead of muting his wicked sense of humor and bottomless appetite for the absurd, he turned it up to 11. He changed his stage name to Father John Misty. Threw his guitar and a family-size sack of magic mushrooms into the van, and set the controls for the heart of Babylon.

Look out Hollywood, here I come.

*Fear Fun* (Sub Pop), Father John Misty's debut, came out a year ago, and after 12 months of trippin'-balls touring, four cinematic high-concept videos (in his latest, he dances to “Funtimes In Babylon” amid the ruins of a 747 crashed into a suburban subdivision, a set piece left over from Steven Spielberg's *War Of The Worlds*), inclusion on innumerable year-end best-of lists and a lot of swooning word of mouth on social media, the album has become the sleeper hit of the year. This despite a very public gloves-off Twitter war with *Pitchfork*. But more than any of those things, the reason *Fear Fun* has legs is because it's front-loaded with earworms dressed up in stoned-in-the-Canyon harmonies, scuffed-denim twang and acid-witted Nilsson-ian soft-rock pastiches. And, most importantly, The Voice. Dude sings like an angel wrapped in velvet and smothered in honey. His voice is characterized by something extremely rare in modern music: the unstrained quality of mercy. To quote the Bard, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven. Or, as Tillman puts it, he can sing like a motherfucker.

**IT IS SHORTLY AFTER** 10 a.m. on yet another glorious, sun-kissed day in Babylon when I show up at Tillman's compound high atop Misty Mountain. His publicist assured me via text when I deplaned that he was awake and eagerly awaiting my arrival, but he seems surprised and unprepared when I get to his front door. For one thing, he is completely naked. “Sorry,” he says sheepishly after pulling on some pants. “I'm sure you've seen worse.” I tell him it will make for a colorful opening scene for the story. Shirtless and shoeless, wild-haired and sporting one of those Old Testament beards, he escorts me back down the stairs to a small room adjoining the pueblo. Ordinarily, this serves as the studio where he works on his paintings, but for the next couple days it will serve as my guest quarters and locus of more than eight hours of intensive on-the-record conversation.

The room is rustic and airy. A gentle breeze climbs up the green mountain and funnels through the windows and open door like a peaceful, easy feeling. There is a small choir of crickets sounding off in the corner, and the occasional lizard scampers past my feet. They are adorable, just like pocket-size dinosaurs. There are a half-dozen canvasses leaning against the walls, all brightly colored, lurid and childlike in their primitivism. None has a title except the one he calls *Mona Lisa 2*. Tillman excuses himself and returns with two steaming mugs of java and a peace pipe. Time to wake and bake, it would seem.

Well, when in Rome ...

**DESPITE THE FACT THAT**, by his own admission, Tillman got a shitty education, constantly shuffled from one barely accredited Christian school to another for acting out or asking too many questions, the good Lord blessed him with a beautiful mind. He is witty, well-spoken and well-read, not to mention a preternaturally gifted prose stylist.

We sit cross-legged on the floor and pass the peace pipe before launching into an intense and expansive conversation about art and God and ghosts and all the crucial events that lead up to us sitting here: his profoundly unhappy fundamentalist upbringing in the exurbs of Washington, D.C.; his nervous breakdown at a Christian college in upstate New York; his narrow escape from the prison of belief; his desper-



ate exodus to Seattle; his joyless tenure in Fleet Foxes; his forays into psychedelia, including a visit to a shaman in the Cascade Mountains who squeegeed away the crusted ego that was blinding his third eye and fed him Ayahuasca until he realized, to quote Bill Hicks, “that all matter is merely energy condensed to a slow vibration, that we are all one consciousness experiencing itself subjectively, there is no such thing as death, life is only a dream, and we are the imagination of ourselves”; the murder of J. Tillman, the birth of Father John Misty and all the fun times in Babylon that ensued.

All of which he is nakedly honest about, sometimes painfully so. He is eager, he says, to answer the many, many questions nobody has bothered to ask him. The result is one part dictated memoir, one part sinner's confessional and one part talk therapy.

**JOSHUA MICHAEL TILLMAN** is largely estranged from his family. He has contact with his parents about once a year, if at all, and it's been that way since he left home at 18. He just turned 32, and there's no sign of that changing any time soon, if ever. Up until he turned 18, and as far back as he can remember, he chafed under the heavy yoke of evangelical Christianity his parents forced upon him.

“My situation at home was troubled,” he says. “I don't really want to talk ... I just never ... I've left this out. I'm very careful to leave this out of the narrative of the music thing because it's like, how much do you want to bring into the public square? But my situation at home was really troubled; it was a very unhappy situation underneath the suburban gleam.”

Most of his schooling was at religious institutions where the histrionics of belief were stressed

“I was told I was possessed by demons and that the demons had to be extracted. So, I'm walking around as, like, a fifth grader, thinking that I am possessed by demons, and I'm like, ‘What did I do? How did this happen?’”

over basic academics. “I have a really poor education,” he says. “I went to a Pentecostal Messianic Jewish Day School that had 30 kids, K-8. There were two people in my eighth grade class. They believe in the ‘gifts of the spirit’ as they appear in the Book of Acts: speaking in other tongues, speaking languages you don't know, healing people, prophecy, all that shit. They are like, that is still happening, everyone can do that, all you have to do is get baptized in fire, which is what they did to me the first day of school. Everyone in the school gathered around me and, like, put hands on me and started praying in their prayer language, which is like—if you've seen *Jesus Camp*, you know what I'm talking about. People are like [*makes gibberish sounds*], speaking in tongues. And that went on until I made up some gibberish sounds, which is what everyone else was doing. There was a lot of ‘slaying of the spirit,’ with kids praying over other kids, and then they would fall backwards and other kids would catch them, and they'd just be like having a seizure, which probably some of them were, like, having anxiety attacks because it was so intense.

“That never worked on me, and I was told it was because I was possessed by demons and that the demons had to be extracted. So, I'm walking around as, like, a fifth grader, thinking that I am possessed by demons, and I'm like, ‘What did I do? How did this happen?’ Eventually, that turns into resentment, and for me it was like, ‘Fuck you, I'm full of demons—what the fuck are you talking about?’”

At the end of his eighth grade year, Tillman was cordially invited to never return. He got that a lot as he was growing up. His parents took him to a Christian therapist. “He diagnosed me with seasonal affective disorder and prescribed that I sit



in front of a light box and read the bible for an hour every day,” he says.

When Tillman turned 11, he found a constructive way to channel his existentialist angst. “My teachers came to my parents and said, ‘Your son is hyperactive. He won’t stop tapping,’” he says. “I was constantly tapping on my desk and just running around and whatever. They’re like, ‘Maybe you need some extracurricular outlet for all this fucking energy.’ They said, ‘If we buy you a drum set, will you stop tapping at school?’”

Secular pop-culture artifacts were forbidden in the Tillman household. “It really was the McCarthy era in our house,” he says. “I didn’t see any movies that weren’t Christian, and my dad had a sign up by the TV that said ... it’s like a King David quote, and it said, ‘May my eyes only behold that which is holy and pure,’ or something to that effect.”

Likewise, non-Christian rock was verboten, which of course had the effect of amplifying its allure. In addition to drums, Tillman began teaching himself to play the guitar, and pecked away at the family piano, but this too was fraught with peril. “We had a piano in our living room, and I would sit at the piano and play a G chord and then a D chord, and then my mom would come tearing around the corner and accuse me of playing ‘Hey Jude,’” he says. Still, he found ways to access the forbidden. At night, he soaked up the latest alternative rock like a sponge, with the proverbial transistor radio turned low and pressed against his ear under the blankets. He befriended schoolmates he didn’t really like and mutely endured their company while availing himself of their excellent record collections.

To hear Tillman tell it, his father was Ned Flanders with a Pentagon clearance. He’s currently in the business of selling telecom systems to repressive regimes around the globe, the kind that can be used as an internet killswitch or to pinpoint the location of dissidents for arrest and god knows what else. “He would meet with, like, generals and shit,” says Tillman. “(Tracing the location of dissidents) isn’t what it’s intended for, but it does get used for that. So, you get a lot of bang for your buck when you put in a telecommunications for the people of your country all the while ... just to be clear, that’s just my synopsis of it. I’m sure he would not want me to reveal that, and I’m sure it’s more complex than I am making it seem.”

His mother was the daughter of missionaries, and she spent most of her formative years in Ethiopia. She was a stay-at-home mom given to wild mood swings and sometimes scary outbursts. “This was like a severely manic parent who can’t be reasoned with, an unbelievably angry person,” he says. “And the religion thing was like putting all that anger on steroids. She was prone to really irrational outbursts—pushing and provoking me, throwing juice in my face. Having said that, she is a really fascinating person to me the further I get from it. I very much identify with her, the pain

and the despair; a lot of it I chalk up to despair on her part.”

**MAGNET: Despair from what?**

**Tillman:** Not being loved.

**MAGNET: Was your father like that?**

**Tillman:** No, my father had kind of a different take on despair—he really wanted all of this stuff to just not be the case.

**MAGNET: What stuff?**

**Tillman:** The family stuff, travelling around the world and then coming home to the nightmare.

**MAGNET: Your father was kind of like a passive guy?**

**Tillman:** Yeah, but I remember him intervening one time, and it was like *boom!* Picking said person up by the neck and throwing her in another room. Talk about a primal scene, like I am being defended from my mom. Crazy.

**MAGNET: And about how old were you when that happened?**

**Tillman:** That was the morning of my birthday in fifth grade, so I must have been turning ... how old do people turn in fifth grade? Like 10 or 11 or something? Yeah. These things always had this really intense trajectory where it was, like, crazy anger with all the trimmings, and then intense, like, ‘I love you, I’m sorry!’ This constant kind of crazy. By the time I was in high school, I had fully emotionally disconnected from them.

**IN HIS MID-TEENS,** Tillman started planning his escape. When he turned 18 and was legally emancipated, he would open the front door, walk the one mile to the train station and never look back. But upon graduating high school, his parents strong-armed him into enrolling at the Christian Nyack College in upstate New York.

“That was when I just really lost it,” he says. “I didn’t go to class, I slept all day and walked the streets chain-smoking all night and just didn’t see anyone. It culminated in this sort of sleep-deprived, two-day crying thing where I couldn’t stop crying and I was just thinking, like, ‘I have to get the fuck out of here. All I want to do is play music. I will move to Seattle and go fail at that.’”

And so he did.

**IN SEATTLE,** Tillman befriended Damien Jurado, whose CDs, with their Christian subtext, had gotten past the gatekeepers at home. Jurado encouraged Tillman to pursue his music, and eventually took him on tour.

“As a teenager, I fell deeply in love with folk music—the simplicity of it, the humanity of it, the emotion,” says Tillman. “But to me, it was this old form that nobody bothered with anymore. Hearing that first or second Damien record, I was like, ‘People are still doing this?’” Working construction and living in the basement of

a friend’s brother, Tillman threw himself into singing, songwriting and recording. Soon he was performing and releasing music under the name J. Tillman.

“I didn’t like the name Joshua,” he says. “I was named very symbolically. I was named after Joshua the bible character, and was told that my name is about leadership and courage and obedience to God and all that stuff. I was already at a point where I was like, ‘Fuck that, I don’t want to embody that. I don’t want to stand for that.’ Names take on a lot of significance when you are in, like, a spiritually minded household, so I am not surprised that that was the first thing to go.”

Taken as a whole, the seven records he released under the J. Tillman moniker are the sound of a man engaging the fallen angels of his youth in spiritual warfare. His voice was his sword; his guitar, his shield. “The music is very dark, and about death and betrayal and spirituality, man’s relationship to God, my relationship to God,” he says. “I think the reason those records are so humorless is because a lot of my childhood I was told that all of my humor was inappropriate and ungodly. But as I got older, I found the sting of that sort of thing lessening exponentially.”

After six politely reviewed, modest-selling albums on micro-indies, Tillman had a small-yet-devoted following. But the prospect of him ever being able to quit his day job remained remote at best. And then, a dramatic reversal of fortune. By the tail end of the aughts, Tillman was dating Aja Pecknold, sister of Robin Pecknold, frontman and primary songwriter of Seattle’s Fleet Foxes. In 2008, the band released its breakout self-titled debut. During the first tour in support of the album, friction between Pecknold and the band’s drummer came to a head, resulting in said drummer being fired at the end of the tour. Now Fleet Foxes needed somebody who could not only keep a beat, but also help recreate the album’s sunbeam harmonies.

“They knew me, and knew that I sing like a motherfucker and I play drums and even had a beard,” says Tillman. “It’s like I was genetically engineered to be in that band.”

When Tillman auditioned, he didn’t even own a drum kit. “I think I overestimated my interest in being the drummer in somebody else’s band when I said I’d join,” he says. “You have to understand, I was doing construction, and I was pretty beaten down by the grind by that point. I worked with 50- and 60-year-old dudes every day, getting on the bus every morning when it was still dark, and I felt like a 50- or 60-year-old dude. I had been making these records that no one gave a shit about and touring my ass off. I was like, ‘Fuck this constant songwriter misery. I can do that.’”

Although the Foxes welcomed him with open arms, Tillman felt conflicted in that he had played no constructive role in their burgeoning stardom. For the longest time, when fans would approach him after shows and ask him to sign their copy of *Fleet Foxes*, he refused. “I would just say, ‘Sorry,

I didn’t play on that,’” he says. “And (my bandmates) would say, ‘Come on, you are *in* the band.’”

**HIS FIRST YEAR** as a Fleet Fox was a stone-cold gas: rave reviews, adoring crowds, more money than he’d ever seen in his life. His initial pay check from the Fleet Foxes was for \$13,000, which is a fuckload of money for a guy who, three months prior, could barely make his rent. But two years of touring and living in each other’s back pocket soon took their toll on interpersonal relationships within the band.

“We were all being standoffish and short and just sort of unhappy,” says Tillman. “I was very confused. I was like, ‘How did we not make this work? How are we not all having a great time? This seems like it should be so easy.’ Instead, it turned into, ‘Touring sucks, promo sucks, being in a band sucks, the isolation that I feel sucks.’ Like, everything about this sucks. And then the relationships in the band became very strained, and no one could talk to each other. It’s like, no one ever hung out. It was just very isolated, and I mean, you really need some camaraderie when you’re stuck with five people and that’s your whole world. It started feeling like a fraud to me. You know, here we are playing this kind, gentle, positive, shiny, smiley music about the sun and mountains and families and happy shit, juxtaposed with the weird, weird misery happening inside the organization itself.”

When it came time to make a follow-up to the first album, Fleet Foxes were running on fumes both creatively and interpersonally. Basically, they went into the studio with no songs.

**MAGNET: Zero songs written?**

**Tillman:** There were some songs written, but no one had played them before. We tried for six months to get together in a room and, you know, write music together, and just nobody could stand to be in a room together for very long, and Robin definitely exacerbated it. And then apathy set in. Like, we’re wasting so much money sitting around these studios and then doing things in these half-assed ways. Like, you’ve got this huge budget to make this, and everyone keeps talking about what an amazing record it’s going to be, and then we’re recording in our practice space with the bus going by, so none of the tracks can be used.

And it’s just like, we have all these resources at our disposal and all this dough, and we can make this amazing thing. There was all this pie-in-the-sky talk: “We’re going to go to Iceland and record onto water,” or “We’re gonna, like, tune the mountains and play those and it’s gonna be mind-blowing—it’ll be like *Astral Weeks*, but better.” And six months later, we’re back in the practice space trying to piece something together with Pro Tools. Like, “OK, grab that middle part,” you know? So, that whole thing about scrapping [*a completed version of the record and starting over, as was widely reported at the time*] was bullshit.

“I couldn’t stop crying and I was just thinking, like, ‘I have to get the fuck out of here. All I want to do is play music. I will move to Seattle and go fail at that.’”

We limped our way into this first version of the record. There was barely any *there* there.

Then there was more pie in the sky, where it was like, “Oh, we’re gonna go mix it at Sear Sound and they have an old-school analog board and it’s gonna sound amazing!” We get there and it’s like, nothing in the studio works. They spent a month (at Sears Sound) banging their head against the wall because the basic tracks sounded so shitty. We were just kind of limping through the whole thing, and it wasn’t very inspiring. But the hardness of making the album to me wasn’t so much wrapped up in the search for perfection so much as, “Does anybody want to do this? Does anyone want to be in this band or make this record and try and do this thing?”

**MAGNET: I didn’t like the second record nearly as much as the first one.**

**Tillman:** I didn’t either. I joined this band because I was like, “Man, this is so refreshing. This music is guileless and catchy and fun to play and fun to sing.” But by that point, it’s just not much of a band. People’s idea of Fleet Foxes was that it’s these five guys in a room all singing together, you know, and harmonizing in the studio, but nobody sang on those records other than Robin.

**MAGNET: Really?**

**Tillman:** I mean, there are like three spots of (group) harmony on the second record, but so much of the stuff that we did, Robin would go back and erase it and then do it all himself, and we’d have spent like days trying to get these vocal things the way they’re supposed to be, and then, without telling anyone, they just get scratched and re-recorded. We’d listen back and be like, “What did you do? Like, what are you doing?” And it got to a point where I didn’t even want to lay anything down. He’s either not going to like it or it’s going to get replaced. When that record came out, I refused to do any press because if anyone asked me, I was going to tell the truth, and that would be a lot different than the bullshit story

that was being sold to the public and the press.

**BY THE END** of the *Helplessness Blues* session, Tillman had amicably split with Pecknold’s sister, who was now managing the band. Eager to get out of Seattle and put some distance between himself and the double bummer that the Foxes had become, Tillman bought a used van (the same van he loads his gal pal Aubrey Plaza into at the end of the “Hollywood Forever Cemetery” video), packed up his belongings and began winding his way down the West Coast. He stopped in at Big Sur and was pretty much living out of his van when a friend called to tell him about some musician buddies who had an awesome place in Laurel Canyon and were looking for a roommate.

“I was confusing Laurel Canyon with Topanga Canyon, and so I agreed to move into this place sight unseen,” he says. “And so I’m following the GPS driving through L.A., and I look up and I’m like, ‘I’m in fucking Hollywood right now! I live in Hollywood! This is fucking great!’ I was just so open to that sort of thing at that juncture. I was just like, ‘Yes, just give me something fucking weird.’”

**MAGNET: It was just an accident that you wound up in the same place that Neil Young and Joni Mitchell and Jim Morrison and the Mamas And The Papas and the Byrds and the Flying Burrito Brothers lived and loved back in the day? There was no walking-in-the-shoes-of-giants kind of thing?**

**Tillman:** No, I don’t really like that shit. I had to constantly answer the question did I like Crosby, Stills And Nash when I was in Fleet Foxes, and I was like, “No. I mean, I like Neil Young. But to answer your question, no.” It’s too airtight that I would just move down here and be like, “Yeah, visions of the canyon, man.” It’s just not my thing. And even if I wanted that, that hippie version of Laurel Canyon does not fucking exist. It’s just rich people with small dogs screaming at each other. That is what Laurel Canyon is. I would be out on the front porch—a white guy in Laurel Canyon, with long hair, playing acoustic guitar and singing—and someone from down the street would be like, “*Shut the fuck up! Go back to where you came from!*”

**AT THE RIPE** old age of 27, Joshua Tillman discovered psychedelic drugs, and it was a match made in heaven. Soon he was taking “heroic doses.” Three mugfuls of mushroom tea and 20 minutes later, you’re the piper at the gates of dawn. Tripping, he says, afforded him life-changing insights into his troubled psyche.

“I went on this big hike, and I was walking up this mountain, and along the way I kept taking off articles of clothing,” says Tillman. “By the time I got to the top, I was naked, so I climbed up into this tree and I’m sitting naked on a branch contemplating my own absurdity and impermanence. I had what I perceived to be like a really critical encounter with my absurdity and my



childhood, where I realized that I had attempted to perform electroshock therapy on myself or something, where I had attempted throughout my 20s to eliminate this history. I had to try to become a person of my own fashioning. I just realized that there are all these things that I can do and that I haven’t been doing. It’s like, ‘You’re funny. You have a kind of a bizarre outlook. You can talk. Like, all these things are good things. Why do you feel such self-loathing about those things?’ That for me was unbelievably liberating. And it really was in a single moment, and it was this big realization where everything changed. And that’s part of the reason why I can’t play the J. Tillman songs anymore.”

And then he did what anybody else in his shoes would have done: He climbed down from the tree, put on his clothes, walked down the mountain and wrote a novel.

Mostly  
Hypothetical  
Mountains  
  
by  
Father  
John Misty

**THE LAST TIME** Tillman did “heroic doses” was a month ago. He and Emma drove out to Joshua Tree, checked into the Gram Parsons death suite at the Inn and then tripped their brains out in the desert. “It was fucking great,” says Tillman. “It’s tough to describe. You know, metaphysical experiences lose value every time you talk about them, or try to talk about them. They become more attached to language. William James talks about that in his metaphysics book. Every time you talk about them, they become a little more corrupted, a little less profound. But while it’s happening, it heightens my communicative faculties. It gives me access to a lot of my ideas. My head is full of crazy imagery. When I’m on mushrooms, I feel like I’m at home.”

Tillman was tripping his tits off for every show on the first leg of the *Fear Fun* tour.

**THE NIGHT BEFORE** the Fleet Foxes played the Bridge School Benefit back in 2009, the band attended a barbeque at Neil Young’s ranch, along with all the other performers that year: Sheryl Crow, No Doubt, Gavin Rossdale, Chris Martin, Wolfmother, the Monsters Of Folk. At one point, Tillman broke off from the crowd, walked down the hill to the bonfire and sat down on a log, where he could be alone with his thoughts. “Next thing I know, Neil Young is sitting next to me smoking a joint with some old road dog, talking about the good old days,” says Tillman. “Then he turns to me and hands me the joint, and I will never forget the way the fire flickered across his face and all the stars in the sky. Then

he smiled and said, ‘Time to play hostess.’ And walked off.”

**HAVING SORTED** out his past and figured out his future, all that remained was to put the present out of its misery. “I tried to quit (Fleet Foxes) while we were making the album,” he says. “I called the other guys in the band and was like, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore.’ They were like, ‘The album is just a pain in the ass—once we get on tour, it’ll be great.’ And I was like, ‘OK.’ By that point, a tour had already been booked and I didn’t want to fuck everyone over, so I missed my window. I decided I would stick it out until the end of the tour.” The tour ended in Japan. Because communication had more or less broken down within the group, when the time came, Tillman did it with an email he sent to everyone in the band:

I realize this is sort of a bizarre time, seeing as we’re all on tour together right now and very well may all be in the same room as you read this, but on this last break home I had a pretty potent moment of clarity wherein I realized that I need to resign from the band.

This may come off as a touch dramatic, and silly, given that we’re a few weeks away from being done with this record cycle anyway; however, in my mind, it’s a big decision to extract myself emotionally, creatively, etc.

Again, I don’t want to seem presumptuous that I think this is some kind of big deal; I know people are looking forward as opposed to wringing hands over the band right now, but it’s important to me that I let you all know, as part of a larger shift in perspective.

I’ve been a real a son of a bitch to you guys on more than a few occasions, and I’m sorry you all had to bear the brunt of my self-loathing and unhappiness for so long and with such regularity. That said, I’m proud to have been a part of such a great band.

I think you know that ultimately what this is all about, and has been about forever and ever, is the fact that I am an impossibly self-motivated, obsessive narcissist (7 records... Who the hell does that? Someone should have held a creative intervention), who, as long as he isn’t diverting all his energy into his own enterprises, feels constricted, and marginalized, and useless. Which makes them full-blown, wounded-pride, wildly-irrationally resentful creeps.

I’ve hit a fork in the road in terms of how I regard myself, and what liberties I need to give myself to just move forward and be as productive and useful as I can without living in a malaise of mind games. “Mind games” as in, a 4-year emotional steeplechase trying to fend off the depression that sets in anytime I’m not being creative of my

own volition (this sounds dramatic, but is absolutely true) and telling myself I’m an asshole for not being able to just be congenial, content and grateful when I find myself with everything everyone I ever came up playing music with ever wanted (chiefly, respect/salvation from death-work), and worked their asses off for, sitting in my lap. Yet, the dreamer in me persists in being a total ingrate; ornery, petty and mean.

We both know what was going on in my head—internalizing the success of this band as a direct statement on the uselessness and uninspired, boring nature of my own music. My big failure, which is precious above all things to me, and is just about the only thing I’ve ever found to do that felt like it meant anything.

ALL OF WHICH IS INSANE. SO:

I have this choice to either be productive and useful and do what gives me sustainable purpose and allows me to take my mind off all the obvious angst (see: the nature of this entire ridiculous email), even if that means I’m a total misanthropic, selfish monster who can’t get along with others, or to try and maintain the alternative, which it is obvious I fucking suck at. At fucking 30 years old.

On top of all this, I have had, what is in my mind at least, a substantial creative breakthrough, and writing, recording, etc. has taken on a whole new identity and voice, which I believe is my own, and which I don’t think I’ve ever been able to use until now, and I really, really, want to use it.

**ACCORDING TO TILLMAN**, Pecknold responded with a single-sentence email. “It seems like the right call.”

That night, the penultimate night of the tour, Tillman lost it three-quarters of the way through the set. He kicked his drum kit over and started sobbing uncontrollably.

“It was like years of this pent-up unhappiness and going onstage and doing this anesthetized, sterile, fucking show night after night after night, and I was like, ‘I just want something real to happen on the stage.’ You know, like, ‘I’m tired of this fucking ... it’s just bullshit,’” says Tillman. “The curtain came down and Robin went out and did a couple solo songs to keep up appearances, and (multi-instrumentalist) Casey (Wescott) just kind of held me while I wept like a maniac. I was just sort of realizing, like, ‘Man, I put so much into this, and it’s really sad to not have more to show for it.’ You know, like more of a relationship with these people, more of a relationship to this thing, any sense of ownership. You know, I just felt like a fraud. Like I sold everything to do this thing because it sounded like a good thing to do, and that’s not why you’re creative, that’s not why you make art: because it seems like a sustainable, adult way to make a living. That’s not why I make music.”



**TILLMAN WANTS** to go to the Chateau Marmont for dinner. He’s obsessed with the place—he and Emma are semi-regulars—and it’s easy to see why. Looming magisterially over the Sunset Strip from its perch in the Hollywood Hills like a duchess in a whore house, the Chateau Marmont is iconic. It is Hotel California. Errol Flynn swash-buckled here. James Dean brooded handsomely here. Greta Garbo hid here. F. Scott Fitzgerald and Hunter Thompson wrote and drank here. John Belushi OD’d here. Lindsay Lohan is banned from here—she owes or owed the hotel something like \$46,000, according to the gossip rags. It’s where high Babylon goes to dine and be seen, where they stab it with their steely knives, but they just can’t kill the beast. “This is a great place to see Lionel Richie or Steven Tyler eating a Cobb salad,” Tillman deadpans. Last time he was here, he saw Joseph Gordon-Levitt lunching with RZA. Tonight, we spot Katy Perry and the chick who played Donna on *That 70s Show*.

Tillman clearly savors the existential absurdity of celebrity as much as he’s horrified by it. He’s doubling down on the notion of going Hollywood. He is working on a TV pilot with Kyle Flynn, who plays keyboards in the Father John Misty touring band, about a cheesy once-famous country-music duo (think Big & Rich) that has fallen on hard times and has been reduced to making ends meet by mixing up batches of a potent meth/bath-salts hybrid that it sells through the Korean mafia. “It got a real *Big Lebowski* comedy of er-

rors kind of thing happening,” says Tillman, who would play one half of the country duo along with Sean Tillmann from Har Mar Superstar.

Still, even Father John Misty has his limits. He turned down \$75,000 to cover Emerson, Lake & Palmer’s “Lucky Man” for a Volkswagen ad, and politely declined when NBC wanted him as a guest judge for yet another *American Idol* knock-off.

Tillman gets a call from Jonathan Wilson, who co-produced and played on a lot of *Fear Fun*. In addition to an acclaimed solo career, Wilson—who looks like a hippie Christian Bale—has become a very in-demand producer. He’s been out drinking with Lucinda Williams and her beau, and they want to meet us for a drink. Fuck yeah. Last time I checked, she was still the legendary sweetheart of the alt-country rodeo. After dinner, we retire to the bar and join them in a booth. It becomes immediately apparent that the half-empty glass of cabernet sauvignon sitting in front of Lucinda isn’t her first of the night. Earlier tonight, she was at a rehearsal for an autism benefit that Stephen Stills is throwing on Saturday. She’s doing “For What It’s Worth.”

“So, I said to him, ‘Should I call you Stephen or Steve?’” she says. “And David Crosby chimes in: ‘I just call him Fuckhead.’”

Hilarity ensues.

A few more rounds later, we pile into the white van for the moonlit trek back to Misty Mountain. We wind our way through the Hollywood Hills

“Metaphysical experiences lose value every time you talk about them, or try to talk about them. They become more attached to language. Every time you talk about them, they become a little more corrupted, a little less profound.”

on Mulholland Drive, windows down, cool wind in our hair. The warm smell of colitas rises up through the air. There’s a parking ticket flapping under the windshield wiper, and, with all due apologies to Dr. Thompson, it bores us. Ah, fun times in Babylon. **M**