
Pavement made some of the finest, most influential slacker noise of the '90s, racking up an almost obscene amount of critical love along the way. Now, a decade after their final show, Stephen Malkmus and his old bandmates are once again about to rock. Chuck Klosterman salutes them

By Chuck Klosterman

Photograph by Melodie McDaniel

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"I SUPPOSE YOU DON'T like sports, do you?" This is what Stephen Malkmus—the enigmatic architect of Pavement—asks me as he sits in a Thai-sandwich restaurant, waiting for his bacon. He is casually pawing at a local Portland alternative newspaper that features Trail Blazer Greg Oden on the cover; it's the day before Thanksgiving, so Oden's patella is still unexploded. Malkmus seems slightly (but unspecifically) annoyed—his wife's parents are in town for the holidays, he's just spent the last ninety minutes at a school party for his 6-year-old daughter, and
now he has to waste two hours with some bozo who probably doesn't know why Greg Oden is interesting. He keeps his head down as he speaks. At this moment, Stephen Malkmus looks so much like Stephen Malkmus that it seems like sarcasm. In fact, he looks like someone playing Stephen Malkmus in an ill-conceived Cameron Crowe movie: He's unshaven, he's wearing Pony high-tops that no longer exist on the open market, and his baseball cap promotes the Silver Jews. His T-shirt features the logo of the Joggers, a Portland band whose greatest claim to fame is being mentioned in a *GQ* story about Stephen Malkmus eating at a Thai-sandwich shop. The restaurant is loud, so I initially mishear his question. He asks it again.

"I said, I suppose you don't like sports." I tell him that I do like sports. I tell him that—honestly—I'm probably more qualified to talk with him about sports than I am to talk with him about Pavement. Immediately, everything changes. He's no longer irritated, except when I suggest that Greg Olden might be no better than Erick Dampier. For the next forty-five minutes, we discuss our respective fantasy teams, pretty much nonstop. I cannot exaggerate the degree to which Malkmus enjoys fantasy sports; he almost seems to like them more than music. His fantasy football team was devastated by the loss of Ronnie Brown to injury, but he's stayed in the playoff hunt by picking up Vikings wide receiver Sidney Rice. ("You could just immediately tell he was going to be Favre's guy.") The most productive player on his NBA team is under-publicized Pacers forward Danny Granger, but he's more satisfied about stealing the Nets' Chris Douglas-Roberts off the waiver wire. Malkmus does not watch the NHL, yet he still participates in a fantasy hockey league. He's that kind of guy. I don't even try to talk with him about rotisserie baseball.

After almost an hour has passed, I realize we need to start talking about music, partially because that's the motive for this story but mostly because Pavement is a band worth talking about. We leave the restaurant and jump in his Audi; he rolls a cigarette with a Dutch brand of tobacco called Samson. I notice that Malkmus does not wear a seat belt, nor does he tell me to wear mine. I am immediately more comfortable.

THE ORIGINAL PLAN was to meet at Malkmus's home and talk about the upcoming Pavement reunion shows, four of which sold out in New York a full twelve months in advance. (The worldwide tour begins this month in New Zealand.) Malkmus meets me at the front door and says, "Okay, here's the new plan. I'm sure you can roll with the new plan. My daughter has this Thanksgiving feast at her school, right? And I'm going to go there for an hour. Do you like coffee? Actually, that doesn't matter. I will meet you at a coffeehouse in an hour." He gives me directions to the coffeehouse, and that is where I go. I get the sense that Malkmus is very accustomed to telling people what to do; he's polite, but he speaks in clear, direct sentences. When he shows up at the coffeehouse a hundred minutes later, the first thing he tells me is that—despite the aforementioned school feast—he's still hungry. "It was potluck," he says. "I don't eat potluck." We drive to the Thai place; he buys a $9 bacon-oriented sandwich.

After we talk about sports, I try to persuade him to take me back to his house. "It's kind of crazy over there right now," he says. "Maybe not today." We decide to go to a park instead. I try to talk about music on the drive over, but Malkmus wants to talk about books. He just returned from a festival in Holland and Belgium that featured both musicians and authors, and he talks about whom he saw—Nick Kent ("My wife really loved his Stones books when she was in college"),
Denis Johnson ("He's got a lot to be proud of"), a slightly drunk Jay McInerney ("He looks exactly like his author photo"). Malkmus is more gossipy than one might expect—he's never cruel, but he likes to talk about how an artist's persona is both detached and irrevocably tied to how his art is consumed. He likes to talk about authors the way Pavement fans like to talk about Pavement.

There's an inherent problem with writing about Pavement: People tend to know nothing or everything about them. To most of the populace, they were a band with a funny name, one minor MTV hit (1994's "Cut Your Hair"), and a lot of abstract credibility among people who get mad at the radio. But to the kind of hyperintellectual, underemployed people who did not find it strange to buy concert tickets a year in advance—and who will buy the band's upcoming greatest-hits release even if they already have all the tracks—Pavement are the apotheosis of indie aesthetics, the "finest rockband of the '90s," according to former Village Voice critic Robert Christgau. They are remembered as the musical center of the lo-fi era, a designation that's spiritually true but technically wrong.¹ Over the span of five albums and nine EPs, Pavement became a decade-defining band, widely regarded as essential and game changing (at least among those who cared). Malkmus is completely aware of this. This being the case, I return to our discussion about Jay McInerney: Since just about everyone now concedes that McInerney's self-perception as a writer was adversely impacted by the avalanche of criticism he received in the years following Bright Lights, Big City, I ask Malkmus if he's had the opposite experience: Does being endlessly told you're a genius make you feel like one? Did having so many people insist that Slanted and Enchanted was brilliant change the way he now thinks about those songs?

"Of course it does, in a way. But no matter how much positive feedback you get, it's never enough," Malkmus says. "I'm not a particularly needy person, but it always seems like every review could be better. With a record like Slanted and Enchanted, that was so much a timing thing, along with the fact that its flaws are a big part of what makes it good. It's not like some Radiohead record, where the whole thing is good. Our records aren't good in that way. Our records are more attitude and style, sort of in a punk way. We're good in the same way the Strokes are good. I think Slanted and Enchanted probably is the best record we made, only because it's less self-conscious and has an unrepeatable energy about it."

¹. Lo-fi is an abbreviation of the term low fidelity, and fidelity means how faithful something sounds when compared with its original source. In truth, albums from bands like the Electric Light Orchestra and Def Leppard have a much lower fidelity than anything Pavement produced, as those recordings have no relationship to what a living, breathing band could sound like live. A better term for Pavement would actually be mid-fi, because their material falls somewhere between amateur authenticity and imaginative construction. But—as always—technical reality rarely matters when discussing pop music. Whenever a normal person says he prefers lo-fi music, it means he prefers bands like Pavement: imperfect sound forevermore.

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