



"I'm thinking about writing a piece about urban decay." That's how this project began over beers with friends. I had no idea just how quickly it would grow. Originally intended as a self-contained work, it quickly grew to three, then five, movements as I researched the subject. Delving deeper and deeper, I kept coming up with new topics to explore in what would become the final version of the piece: seven movements that trace the rise and fall of a city in the American Rust Belt.

As a Michigan native, this subject resonates on a personal level. My high school was across the street from a now defunct GM plant, and a number of my friends' and classmates' parents worked for the automobile industry or the manufacturing plants that supplied them. Cities like Detroit, Kalamazoo, and Flint weren't simply abstract places on a map; they were the homes of family and friends, places I had visited and knew well. I had walked their streets, visited their museums, and played gigs in their bars...

And I had watched them die.

It's no secret that Michigan's economy is tied to the automobile industry, but what many people don't understand is the scope of the relationship. In addition to the assembly line jobs, there are jobs manufacturing various engine parts as well: glass, steel and the other materials used to build cars. There are jobs shipping parts from place to place, and town to town. There are jobs maintaining the

roads used to transport parts and finished cars throughout the state, the same roads used every day by people driving to and from work. Then there are the jobs that support the people working in the automobile industry and their families: teachers, restaurateurs, grocers, doctors, lawyers, cleaners... All are built on the foundation of the automobile industry.

And if the foundation cracks, the house falls.

Any number of factors contributed to the decline of the automobile industry in the run up to the 2007 Great Recession. The increase in automation on the assembly line led to fewer workers, as did companies that left the US for countries with lower wage workers. Term limits and other political reforms led to a death of the career politician and to the rise of hyper partisans who made themselves unaccountable to voters by gerrymandering districts. Successive weakening of the once-powerful unions and instituting tax policies favoring corporations and the wealthy shifted more financial burdens onto what remained of the middle class. And through it all, media soundbites touted progress.

Things quickly got worse after 2007's economic implosion. As jobs disappeared, people moved out of the Rust Belt in greater and greater numbers. Homes with unaffordable mortgages were seized by banks or simply abandoned. Cities that had promised their workers pensions were unable to pay them. And successive generations of politicians kept cutting taxes in order to "stimulate the economy," while simultaneously raiding state education coffers to make up for the loss in revenues for basic governmental services.

The situation came to a head with the suspension of local democracy through the imposition of emergency financial managers appointed to "turn around" cities that had been bled dry. If anything, they made things worse and further accelerated the decay.

Given the power to overrule local governments, the emergency managers did just that. Union contracts were voided, creditors were paid at the expense of pensioners, and city services were all but eliminated in some areas. But the worst of these abuses was the unilateral decision to switch the water supply of Flint, Michigan to the notoriously polluted Flint River without adding corrosion inhibitors. The highly corrosive water and antiquated pipe system of the town led to an estimated 12,000 children being exposed to water with dangerously high levels of lead. False reassurances and cover-ups further prevented residents from accessing clean water, and many have since reported hair loss, skin lesions, and an increase in Legionnaires' Disease, to say nothing of the long-term costs of lead exposure to children.

As of the completion of this piece, replacing a single lead water line in the city of Flint costs an estimated \$7,500. Michigan Governor Rick Snyder's daily legal bills related to the Flint Water Crisis are \$6,500. The median income for a household in Flint is \$28,015.

And yet, despite all of this hardship, some areas of the Rust Belt are experiencing a resurgence through an old, but popular product: beer.

States like Michigan and Wisconsin have embraced the craft brewing movement, as home brewers have expanded into local favorites and even national players. The success of breweries such as Bell's

and Founders has helped reinvigorate and expand consumer demand for quality beer. And while breweries are a relatively recent development, they have nevertheless had a positive effect on their hometowns' economies, providing jobs and helping turn around local economies.

This is the story I am telling in *Concrete Oasis*.

Framed by a prelude and a postlude, *Concrete Oasis* is a sonic imagining of the rise and fall of a city in the Rust Belt in three sections. Though inspired by my home state of Michigan and specifically referencing events that have happened there, many other places in the country have similar histories. I like to think that this piece is inspired by them all.

The title is a reflection on the function of the city as an economic oasis in the American landscape – now reduced to a decaying husk of its former self, yet still pointing to past glory and possible future potential. An allusion to Shelley's *Ozymandias*? Of course, but with a hope for rebirth that's missing from the poem.

Concrete Oasis (2015-2016)

Prelude

1) Mr. Olds Wild Ride

Inspired by Ransom E. Olds' 1897 drive through the streets of Lansing in his first car, the prelude begins with a quotation from the most popular song of that year, *A Hot Time in the Old Town*. The sounds of surprised crowds and horses give way to engines, which move forward in a dream-like haze. A glimpse of the future or a lamentation for what will soon be sacrificed on the altar of progress? It's too soon to tell, and in any event, the dream comes to a stuttering stop as the final refrain dies away.

Part 1 – The Dream

2) Factory Scenes (Pre-War-Post)

The movement begins with the sounds of the regular, and irregular, rhythmic factory work during the buildup of American heavy industry as tied to the rise of the middle class. Balanced with lush chords, we hear the rise of the assembly line and the growth of the factories before the arrival of World War II, as well as the switch to producing weapons and vehicles for the war effort.

After war interrupts, the factory sounds take on a sinister tone, growing harsher in response to the war drums and electric guitar. Echoes of bullets, saws, and rivets fly about the sonic landscape as noise dominates the soundscape.

Returning from the war, the sounds of the factory are as they once were. But a new motive takes hold in the final portion of this movement. Tinged with nostalgia and longing for an escape from the ghosts of the war, the lush strings return as the factory fades from the foreground, falling into dreams of suburbia. And yet the factory sounds remain, reminding the listener that this is only a dream, from which they will eventually awaken.

Part 2 – Broken Glass, Broken Promises

3) Detroit, 1967

The rise of Detroit brought many into the new middle class, but did little to calm racial tensions.

Exacerbated by racial segregation in housing, overt bigotry amongst law-enforcement officers, and white flight to the suburbs, inner city residents were forced into a distinctly separate and unequal state. All that was needed to spark an explosion was a match.

The match was lit on July 23, 1967, when police raided an unlicensed, afterhours bar filled with black patrons celebrating the return of two GI's from the Vietnam War. A crowd gathered as patrons were marched out of the club and forced to wait as the police arranged transportation. Eventually, a bottle was thrown, and the rioting began.

For five days, the city burned as police, the National Guard, and the US Military tried to restore order. 43 people died, 1,189 were injured, 7,231 were arrested, and the economic cost was enormous.

This movement is not an exact representation of this event, but a sonic vignette that attempts to capture a small moment during the five days of the riot.

4) Simple Economics

It amazes me how easy it is for politicians to hide their intent behind slogans. Appeals to emotion play well to a crowd and help to reinforce group identity. But I find it disturbing that so many politician's statements are reminiscent of Orwell's Newspeak - particularly when their decisions can decimate an industry or region and when the Internet allows for easy fact-checking.

Here, the words of various regional and national politicians are presented against a hypnotic background texture, lulling the listener into a compliant and receptive state. Statements filter in and out, as if changing channels, but presenting a unified message: "trust us; we know what's good for you." These are contrasted with clips lifted from local news reports that present the results of these politicians' decisions.

As time passes, the statements become more hostile as attempts to seduce the listener give way to appealing to prejudice when presented with contrary evidence, leaving the listener in a state of cognitive dissonance.

Part 3 – That Which Remains

5) Exploring the Remains of a Giant

Abandoned buildings dot the landscape of the Rust Belt. Some are decrepit barns, others abandoned factories, and still others decaying retail stores. It fascinates me to see these former centers of commerce desolate and forgotten, much like the region around them.

This movement is a sonic exploration of just such an abandoned store. Ill-equipped to adapt in the face of more nimble competition, its carcass is now a playground for scrap metal scavengers and urban explorers. Little remains but the echoes of footsteps and messages still playing over the store stereo system: a memory, or perhaps an idealization, of past glory surrounded by the emptiness of the present.

6) A Tale of Two Rivers

In 1969, the Cuyahoga River famously caught fire. At times the most polluted river in America, it was then incapable of sustaining any life but algae. Its burning led to a *Time* article that helped launch the

modern environmental movement, the Clean Water Act, and the Safe Drinking Water Act. Though still polluted, the river is now clean enough to support wildlife and can now be used recreationally.

While it was also cleaned several times as a result of the Clean Water Act, the Flint River still maintains a dangerously high level of industrial pollution and chlorides from road salt that make it extremely corrosive. It is also a popular site to abandon vehicles, which leak oil and battery acid into the water supply. All of this makes the river's role in the Flint Water Crisis unsurprising, given that its corrosive water is flowing untreated through old pipes that leached lead into the city's drinking water.

The two rivers flow throughout the movement, the Cuyahoga on the left channel, and the Flint on the right. As time passes they take on different traits: one burns; the other takes on a sickening, poisoned sheen. One recedes from its highly polluted state; the other continues the same course, never deviating from its path.

Postlude

7) New Beer in Old Buildings

Opening with minor guitar chords that recall past movements, the sonic environment quickly changes to mimic the sounds of a bar on a busy night. But not just the bar... the chattering crowds can be heard from inside a brew tank as well. Bringing back all the motives from the previous movements, the past themes have been transformed, changed by their journey into new ideas that still recall their past; a musical parallel to how the explosion of the craft brewing industry has repurposed old buildings and provided new jobs that help revitalize the Rust Belt. The end of the journey comes by returning to the start, the chorus of *A Hot Time in the Old Town*, and comes full circle to dreams of a better tomorrow that are the same in the past, the present, and in the future.

Other Pieces

8) Study on Morning Religion (2006)

This piece is the result of an accident. As a graduate assistant at Michigan State University, I was privileged to teach an electronic music course. After working late to prepare a fantastic example of the effects of time manipulation on a sample for use in class the next day, I left the drive on my desk the next morning as I went to campus.

I panicked after arriving at my office and realizing that I had left my example at home – especially when I discovered there were only twenty minutes until the beginning of class! Fueled by caffeine and desperation, I hooked up a microphone and sampled the only source I had readily available: my office coffee pot. I played some Gregorian chant fragments (*O Magnum Mysterium*, *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, and *Dies Irae*) on the sampler keyboard using the coffee maker samples and a previously sampled oboe, and began to manipulate the resulting clips' length. A few fades, some panning, and volume automation were all I needed to create the resulting piece, an exploration of structural entropy and dissolution caused by moving sound masses merging and dissolving in space.

9) There Will Come Soft Rains (2012)

This piece is, of course, based on Ray Bradbury's story of the same name. After Bradbury's death in June 2012, I decided to re-read *The Martian Chronicles*, a collection of his short stories that chronicle the colonization of Mars and the subsequent destruction of Earth. This particular story, the

penultimate in Bradbury's book, focuses on the tasks an automated house continues to perform after its inhabitants are destroyed in a nuclear war. Nature and time progress unabated and the story ends with the house's own destruction.

10) Gestalt Variations (2009)

The *Gestalt Variations* are centered around the concepts of variation of similar materials through iterative mutations, contrasted with phased entropy. Over the course of the piece, samples grow and change – sometimes in relation to their original state, and sometimes in different directions – creating a flowing texture of continual evolution, bounded by unedited melodic fragments from the solo guitar. It is essentially an unfolding, an evolution from simplicity into complexity and back, while the listener's mind attempts to reconcile the fragments to form musical ideas. Much of the *Variations* was inspired through my readings in gestalt psychology and evolutionary biology.

11) Reflections in a Gasoline Rainbow (2014)

Reflections in a Gasoline Rainbow is about loss and grief. It begins with solitary, synthesized droplets, leading into a reflective passage for bansuri. As the piece progresses, other instruments are introduced that briefly form contrapuntal lines before fading away. The melodic lines gradually morph and change, becoming more and more blurred, while also forming contrapuntal parts. After a brief period of respite, the droplet sounds return, guiding the piece back to the lonely notes it started on. The title is, in part, from Robert Pinsky's poem *Impossible to Tell*.

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