

Punkademics

The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower

Edited by Zack Furness
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ZACK FURNESS AND MILO J. AUKERMAN

MILO WENT TO COLLEGE: AN INTERVIEW WITH A DESCENDENT

DON'T WORRY ABOUT AN IMAGE
DON'T GOT NO ATTITUDE
I KNOW I WON'T GET LAID
IF I WON'T BE LIKE YOU
DON'T GOT NO BICEPS
DON'T GOT NO PECS
BUT I'LL READ YOU UNDER THE TABLE
WITH MY THICK SPECS!

-DESCENDENTS, "MASS NERDER"

FOR ANY PUNK who came of age in the 1980s or 1990s, Milo Aukerman hardly needs an introduction. As the singer and front man for the influential U.S. punk band, the Descendents, Aukerman's clever wit and catchy vocals helped the band carve out a musical niche that lay somewhere between the aggressive hardcore musicianship of Black Flag, the toilet humor of a moody 15-year old Ramones fan, and the pop sensibilities of 60s rock bands that long permeated the Southern California beach town culture from which the band emerged. It is the unique interpretation of such elements that, in hindsight, has arguably most defined the Descendents legacy as hundreds of bands routinely cite their angsty, love-scorned, caffeine-fueled melodies as part of the bedrock upon which the genre of 'pop punk' was built. However, of equal significance is Milo himself, whose unpretentious demeanor and heart-on-the-sleeve

lyrical forays became part of a persona that was as equally defined by his notoriously bookish looks. Yet unlike the self-consciously ‘outsider’ image cultivated by imitators of Elvis Costello and DEVO, one could tell early on that Milo’s tussled hair and thick black glasses were not part of ‘a look,’ rather, it was simply how he looked. It is for this very reason – i.e. the most honest expression of not giving a shit – that Milo almost singlehandedly, if not unintentionally, forged the “geek chic” mold for punk rockers years before Rivers Cuomo (Weezer) and droves of thick-rimmed hipsters learned to wear their inner nerd like a badge of honor. One could argue that too much has been made of Milo’s role as the “gangly bespectacled” front man, or for being, as one interviewer boldly put it, the “nerd king of punk rock.”¹ Then again, not every punk band documents their singer’s scholastic pursuits in the title of their first LP (*Milo Goes to College*) or actively promotes a cartoon image of his likeness – replete with boxy spectacles, a dress shirt and tie – as their enduring visual icon. And most certainly, not every punk vocalist spends his time between records and touring – over a 30-year span, no less – in pursuit of a Microbiology PhD and, eventually, a career as a research scientist.

As a torchbearer for nerdy rockers and a pioneer of the PhD/punk juggling act that few musicians in the scene have attempted to pull off, Dr. Milo J. Aukerman is the godfather of punkademics. Indeed, when I first kicked around the idea for this book some years ago, it was partly as a response to the fact that I was singing in a band, working on my PhD, and would periodically find myself in conversations – typically outside of shows – where small talk about my job inevitably lead to someone making a Milo reference. On one occasion, I remember a guy introducing me to his friend as the “PhD punk” who was “doing the Milo thing.” Recently, I got the chance to ask Milo some questions about how his ‘thing’ is done.²

ZACK FURNESS: *As I was reading through some of the interviews you’ve given over the last 10-15 years, I noticed a trend whereby the interviewer asks you a token question about your PhD, but he or she never wants to get into the nitty-gritty of it all. This always bothered me because science and education are obviously big parts of your life, and they have also defined the persona of the Descendents, to some extent. In addition, I’m a nerd and am largely fascinated by the endeavors of other nerds, especially when the person in question happens to front a legendary punk band. So I guess the best place to start is by asking: what kind of work do you do as a biochemist, and how did you first get interested in the field?*

MILO AUKERMAN: I work on plant genes, trying to identify genes that help plants be more tolerant to drought or nutrient deficiency. On a day-to-day basis, I work a lot with DNA (plant or bacterial), which suits me just fine...that's how I got interested in this area. I was doing an oral report in high school and chose to talk about DNA, and got hooked on the subject. In fact, that was right about when I was getting into punk rock, so the two passions of my life competed with each other from the very beginning!

ZF: *Who are your scientific heroes?*

MA: My scientific heroes are Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of DNA, and Sydney Brenner, the co-discoverer of the genetic code.

ZF: *It seems like you were the first well-known punk to earn a PhD. To your knowledge, were there others who blazed the punkademic trail before you? And were there also punks that gave you shit for it?*

MA: The closest thing to a predecessor I can think of is DEVO, who I liked (not ashamed to admit it...this was before I discovered Black Flag and the Germs). Although they were not academics per se, DEVO were clearly nerds and even mentioned DNA in a song or two, so that was good enough for me! I can't say they inspired me to get an education, but they made it okay to be a nerd and like new wave/punk rock. I never got any shit for the school thing, probably because it seemed like such a natural transition for me...Bill (Stevenson, the drummer) pretty much knew all along I was going to do college, for example.

ZF: *It's obvious that you were very interested in science classes when you were in college, but what were some of the other courses or writers that you really enjoyed?*

MA: I took a poetry class where I formulated some of my most embarrassing and bombastic lyrics ("Impressions," for example). I also minored in music literature, and got exposed to classical and experimental music. I actually failed a course on Wagner; I couldn't relate to him as a human being. Berg, on the other hand, I loved, especially *Wozzeck*. I also remember reading Herbert Marcuse's *Aesthetic Dimension* and relating to the idea that true art by necessity transcends politics.

ZF: *You've written a number of songs about struggling with growing up, and in reading the lyrics to a song like "Schizophrenia," it's pretty clear that you've*

also had some past difficulty reconciling your passions for music and science. What made you finally decide to pursue the latter on a full-time basis (aside from the obvious fact that punk doesn't exactly pay the bills)?

MA: It was the “long look” – what could I see myself doing in my 50s, 60s, etc. Not very punk, I know. The reality was, I got just as excited about biology as I did about punk rock, but only one of those two you could actually make a career out of, at least in 1982, anyway. What I didn't realize is that the music addiction is hard to shake; I tried hard to leave it behind but always found myself coming back to it.

ZF: *Are you happy with the choices you've made?*

MA: Considering the on-again-off-again nature of my approach to music, I'm surprised it worked out as well as it did. I sometimes regret not having chosen music as a full-time career (after all, the Basemaster General states we should always try to achieve ALL in whatever we do). But I've always thought that as long as I'm doing something creative, it doesn't matter whether it's music or science, or both. So I'm OK with how it all turned out.

ZF: *Most of the punks I've met who were/are grad students or professors are in the humanities or social sciences, though I've also worked outside of a research university for the last four years. Have you met many other punk scientists?*

MA: Greg Graffin (Bad Religion) is a professor of Biology at UCLA. Dexter Holland (Offspring) is another punk scientist, although he never finished his PhD. He got a Masters from USC, and once told me if he ever wanted to go back and get the PhD, he'd just go give the school a huge chunk of money!

ZF: *How do most scientists respond when they find out about your 'other' career, or listen to your band? For example, has anyone ever brandished a Descendents tattoo in front of you at a conference, or have you ever been propositioned to be in an all-scientist punk band?*

MA: When I interviewed for my science job, two funny things happened. First, I had to give a seminar, and afterwards a few employees who were Descendents fans came up to get an autograph, which made me look really good to the hiring committee! Second, I let it slip that I was going to jump on stage with ALL that same night, and so a few members of the

hiring committee actually came to the show. It was like “Part Two” of the job interview! So I feel blessed to be associated with some scientists who have an open mind, and like to rock out. Now, playing with scientists in a band is another matter. The temptation would be to write a magnum opus to DNA, and that is something to be avoided...I mean there’s nerd, and then there’s SUPERnerd, and I can’t go there.

ZF: *Have you ever wanted to be a professor?*

MA: That’s what I went to grad school for, but I found myself in the position to take an industry job, and I went for it. It was totally the right decision for me, and now academia doesn’t sound so appealing. I have no tenure battles, no grants, no teaching to do, only research. In exchange, a loss of some autonomy, but a fair trade in my estimation.

ZF: *I’ve met a lot of really smart people in the punk scene throughout the last 15 years and, on the whole, I tend to think of punks as being more well read and politically aware than their peers, particularly when it comes to young people. At the same, punk hasn’t exactly been considered an “intellectual” affair throughout its history, and there are numerous examples of punk bands that take a certain degree of pride in being anti-intellectual. Have you noticed any changes over the years? Has punk become nerdier?*

MA: Lyrically, the Descendents are probably more anti-intellectual than a lot of other bands; I mean we have multiple songs about farting. Then there’s the Germs, who were one of the more intellectual bands lyrics-wise, but this intelligence was overshadowed by Darby’s excesses. It does seem like lyric matter has become more high-minded of late, especially the political-leaning bands. But as for nerdiness, I think it’s always been a part of punk, not from the cerebral point of view, but more viscerally. When I celebrate the nerd in punk rock, it’s as much for the spastic, outcast nature of a nerd as it is for the intellectual connotations. There’s a danger of thinking too much, when what we really need is to spazz out.

ZF: *While the general public isn’t all that conversant on the subject of plant biochemistry, there is an increasing level of controversy (particularly outside the U.S.) regarding the implications of bioengineering crops...I’m thinking of debates over the development and use of GMO crops, and the patenting of particular forms of plant life. Does your specific work on plant genetics force you to stake out positions on these issues, or ones like them? Is there a particular set of ethics or politics that inform your research?*

MA: I don't work directly on a crop plant, but a weed called *Arabidopsis*. I view my research as more basic in nature, i.e. acquiring knowledge about the organism. Nonetheless, there is an applied angle to everything I do, and this definitely leaves me open to criticism from anti-GMO people. As you implied, GMO plants are currently accepted by a good portion of the American public; does this mean they're OK? All I can say is that breeders have been creating "recombinant plants" for many decades without controversy, using traditional genetics; we are not doing anything radically different from that. And there are definitely checks and balances against creating so-called "monster" plants; the USDA makes sure of that. My feeling is, technological advances in agriculture will be essential in order to boost crop production enough to feed an ever-growing world. No risk means no boost in production and more starving people, and that is a much worse fate.

ZF: *Can biochemistry help us to achieve ALL?*

MA: MUGMUGMUG...of course! Having said that, I'm a firm believer in moderation. Do what you need to get that edge, but don't go over the edge. Too much, and you're only achieving ALL in your head, but not in reality.

ZF: *I assume that the Descendents and Bad Religion have shared the stage more than a few times, and I'm curious about your encounters with fellow punkademic, Greg Graffin. Have the two of you had the opportunity to properly geek out together? Because I have an image in my head of the two of you frenetically discussing the nuances of animal & plant biology on a tattered couch in the backstage of a shitty club, while surrounded by tattooed drunk punks who are either confused, intrigued, or both. Has this scene ever played itself out?*

MA: It's odd, but I don't think I've ever met Greg. He's a great singer and lyricist (I loved *Suffer*), but actually we inhabit two separate biological spheres, so I don't know if we'd be able to geek out too much. I would be interested in hearing how he handled post-PhD life in academia, i.e. whether it met his expectations (I can say for me, it didn't).

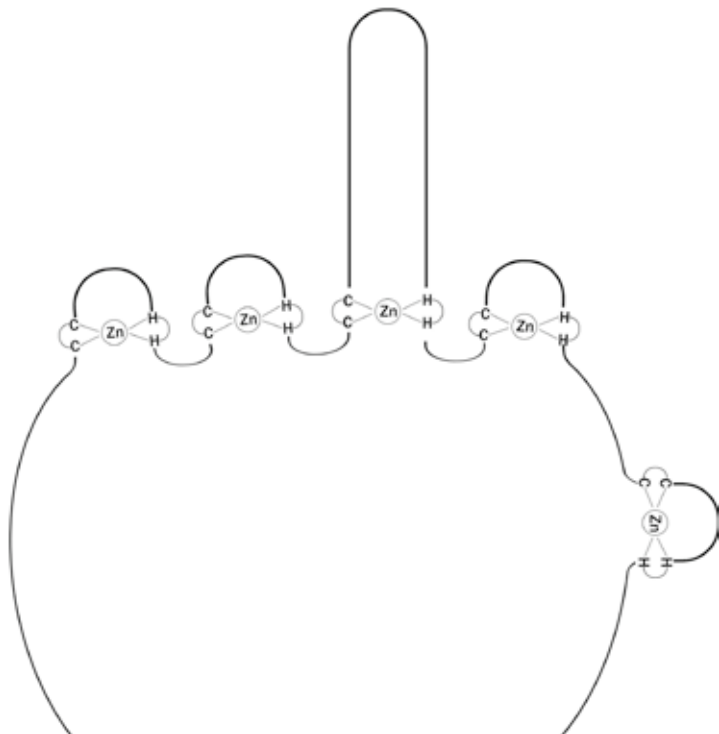
ZF: *Can you name the chemical composition of caffeine off the top of your head?*

MA: I remember making a point of knowing this when I was an undergrad. One night, after too many bonus cups [of coffee] mixed with beers,

I tried to draw out the chemical reaction of caffeine with ethanol (poor man's speedball?)...I think I ended up with putrescine as an end product. Ah, college days.

ZF: *If punk could be isolated as a chemical compound, what would it look like?*

MA: My rendition of the ultimate punk protein is below; I call it the FTW protein. The "zinc finger" is an actual structure found in certain regulatory proteins, and there also exists a related protein structure called a "zinc knuckle." The FTW protein consists of four zinc knuckles and one zinc finger, in a tandem array. The placement of the zinc finger in the middle position is crucial for its function...and, of course, its function is self-explanatory.



NOTES

- 1 Rick Reger, "Descendents Still Playing By Own Rules," *Chicago Tribune*, December 2, 1996; Mike Powsner, "Milo Aukerman: The Nerd King of Punk Rock," *Yo Beat* #8 (Summer, 1998). Online at <http://www.yobeat.com/aukerman.htm>.
- 2 Thanks to Andy Cornell for contributing ideas for questions.