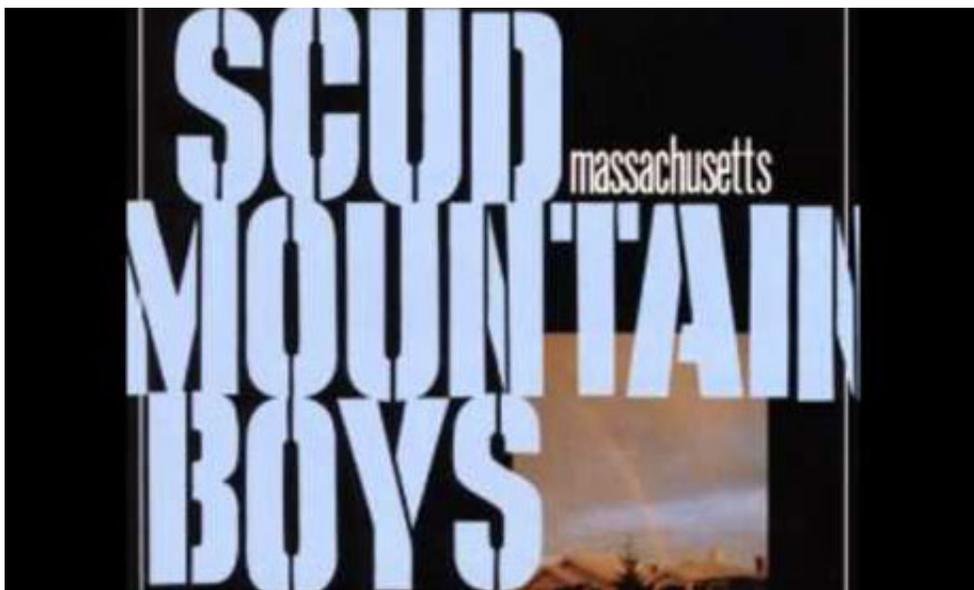


Hidden treasures: Scud Mountain Boys – Massachusetts

Don't be fooled by the gorgeous harmonies – Joe Pernice's early band traded in loneliness and none-more-black humour

Michael Hann

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'The music of the slow drive in a black car' ... Massachusetts by Scud Mountain Boys

It's hard work keeping up with Joe Pernice. His [website's discography](#) lists 12 studio albums. Confusingly, though, you can't just search under "Pernice" in the record shop or online store. That will bring up several albums by the Pernice Brothers, and one as Joe Pernice. It will ignore the outings as Chappaquidick Skyline and Big Tobacco, and the three albums by his first musical project, Scud Mountain Boys.

Massachusetts was the third of those, and the first to draw anything resembling attention to Pernice's songwriting (the first two, tiny releases that crept out in 1995, were later wittily repackaged as *The Early Year*, with a drawing of the photo of the second album's cover on its front – a [plaid-shirted man in a coffin](#)). It also gave us the first exposure to Pernice's signature song, one he's since revisited with Pernice Brothers,

and to his genius for song titles.

The song is narrated by a lonely, forgotten lover, stoned and desperate, who calls his ex to see if there's any chance of a night of comfort, even if it means sleeping on the floor, no touching allowed, though that's not what he wants. "I would give anything to make it with you, just one more time," Pernice sings for the song's chorus. "I'd give you everything I owned." Yeah, yeah, yeah: we've heard that song before. Most of us have been that sad sack making the pathetic call. Except that's not the whole story – the protagonist isn't just lonely. He's vicious and cruel and destructive. He wants not just to improve his own life but to ruin his ex's, and we only know that from the song's title: Grudge ****. (Other favourite Pernice titles? How about Second Semester Lesbian? Or The Ballad of Björn Borg? Maybe Theme to an Endless Bummer?)

You may have guessed that Pernice is not generally a celebratory writer. You'd be right in that assumption. Massachusetts's opening number, In a Ditch, begins with the words: "They pulled her from a ditch last night/ Somewhere down on 95/ On the wrong side of the road/ Found a needle and a pipe/ She had hidden by her side." There's a twist to come – the song isn't really about the dead woman in the wrecked car – it's about the man who "used to know the face broken on the steering wheel" and who wonders what she might have been like "if she ever found the ability to feel". I've seen one writer say Massachusetts is about getting wasted. That's only part of it: it's about wasted lives: wasted in their ending, wasted by their misuse and neglect, and wasted in the sense that the easiest way for the protagonists to get from one end of the day to the other is to dull their senses with liquor and drugs.

It got lumped in with the alt-country movement on its release in 1996, probably because of its instrumentation – sparse, acoustic, with colour and shade from the fiddles and steel guitars of country music. It's not really a country record though, so much as one of American music (Grudge **** is a soft rock ballad). But then, alt-country was a broad church, the catch-all term for music that wasn't really rock and wasn't really folk before someone decided Americana worked better. And so, around this time, the Stony rock of the early Wilco albums, the bruised romanticism of Whiskeytown, the arch southern gothic of Palace Brothers could all be designated alt-country with a clear conscience and a straight face. Scud Mountain Boys perhaps had most in common with Lambchop – the same soporific pacing, the same melancholic melodiousness, the same wellspring of different American musical styles at their hearts, though Pernice's worldview is more cynical and disappointed than Kurt Wagner's.

Scud Mountain Boys – and Pernice Brothers, and Chappaquidick Skyline, and Big Tobacco – had their time and place for me, and that was the very end of the last century

and the first few years of this. My first Pernice album was the misleadingly titled *Overcome by Happiness*, the first album by Pernice Brothers, which was a sparkingly exact piece of chamber pop, lushly arranged and strikingly executed, which I bought in Seattle in 1999. And for a few years I tried to keep track of everything Joe Pernice recorded, before finally losing track and shrugging that I probably had enough of his disappointment to keep me going.

I'd like to say his is the kind of disappointment that nestles itself in humour, but I can't: Pernice's humour is so black as to be unsettling rather than comforting (that album with the man in the coffin on the cover? You only realise it's a coffin when you see the title is *Pine Box*). While you might – if you listened only to the music, paying no heed to the words – think it gorgeously melancholic, there's no chance of you ever mistaking it for happy. It's the music of the slow drive in a black car, the one we all take on those awful days when we bid goodbye to someone irreversibly.

There's one little incident that rather encapsulates Pernice's music for me. It is September 2003, and my wife is in labour with our second child. The midwife comments on the beauty of the Chappaquiddick Skyline CD I've just put on, which opens with a rather wonderful arpeggiated guitar line, backed with harmonies. It dips for a moment to acoustic guitars backed by vibes, and the midwife gives me a very quizzical look as Pernice's soft voice starts crooning: "I hate my life. So many compromises ..." Oh, Joe, it's the way you tell 'em.

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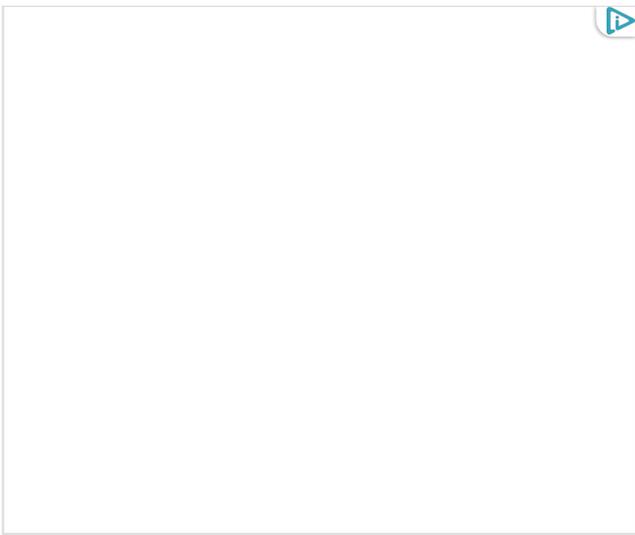
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