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TRANSIT BYZANTIUM

WITH HIS AMAZING TALENT FOR POP HOOKS
AND HEARTBREAKING, SEPIA-TONED SONGS,
WHY DID BILL FOX STOP PLAYING MUSIC?

DISCUSSED: *Bob Dylan, The Everly Brothers, Big Star, The Grand Cooley Dam, Woody Guthrie, Elliott Smith, M. Ward, Cleveland, The Mice, Guided By Voices, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ronald Reagan, KCRW, Reggae on Public Radio, McGruff the Crime Dog, The Beachland Ballroom, The Revelers, Dirt, North Olmsted, Big Chuck and Little John, The Book of Revelations, Seymour Stein, Aztec Archaeology*

Can beauty cause cardiac arrest? “That’s what it felt like to me,” my wife says. “Cardiac arrest or maybe a lightning bolt to the sternum.”

This is how it started: She worked in town but lived in the country, requiring a long, solitary drive home that gave her time enough to wonder why she was spending her twenties alone in a Vermont farmhouse. Disquieted, reaching no good answer, she hit SCAN on her radio. A change in frequency, a change in thought. And there he was: One man and one guitar. A circular melody, a high, lonesome voice, lyrics of plaintive confession.



*Hold the bell
I carry news that I have got to tell
Hold your head out and you can hear the
sound
Of my baby crying
Peter and Paul*

*Stare at the sky and wait for Jesus to fall
The only sound that they can hear
Is my baby crying*

Her lungs filled with words. Her breath stopped. Who was this? The blue of the sky and the yellow flash of passing fields were now tuned to this sweet and sandy voice. Was everyone within broadcast range in the same paralytic awe? Was she, perhaps, not alone? An anonymous

bard, plucked from a pile of CDs by a university student in nearby Burlington, sang through her '88 Toyota Camry and broke her heart for three and a half minutes. It was the only sound she could hear.

My baby crying
My baby crying...

She pulled over, waiting for the DJ to identify the singer: Bill Fox.

That was 1998. We met a year later and she introduced me to Bill Fox's two albums. The music slowly overtook me, like water rising in a room. Here were familiar accents and phrasings borrowed from Bob Dylan and the Everly Brothers, Big Star and Woody Guthrie, antique references to "tender Ophelia," a "brown-skinned lover in Santa Fe," and the Grand Cooley Dam. But in the cottony aura of low-fidelity tape, Fox smudged familiarity into something intimate and modern. You could hear a TV set playing behind his exquisite homemade finger picking. Harmonica, piano, his own overdubbed harmonies, all stitched to this dusky voice that strained with emotion. Later it became clear to me why musicians like Elliott Smith and M. Ward were so influenced by him, why they pursued the same hermetic, sepia-toned sound.

Bill Fox is now barely locatable among the hordes of Google-able Bill Foxes: the insurance adjuster, the law enforcer, the financial executive. He doesn't have a website. He isn't listed in the phone book. No record label has his number. He disappeared. Vanished—*poof*. A trou-

badour and rocker from Cleveland, Ohio, a leftist, artist, and idealist—information I'd surmised from the lyrics and a nine-year-old bio on the internet. I know he once fronted the Cleveland power pop band the Mice, who rocked the clubs of Akron and Kent in the late 1980s. His fifteen-year-old brother, Tommy, played drums with the savage intensity of Keith Moon. Their records heavily influenced Robert Pollard, the Dayton schoolteacher and beer-fueled front man for Guided By Voices, who frequently praised the Mice after they broke up in 1988. A decade later, Fox quietly reemerged with two albums, *Shelter from the Smoke* (1997) and *Transit Byzantium* (1998). After *CMJ*, the college-rock magazine that set the alternative music agenda in the late 1990s, called Fox "one of the most important artists of our day," he evaporated from the public record.

By now, I'm accustomed to instant knowledge. I Google and get, reflexively unearthing mysteries. It's



a modern rhythm: question, click, answer. Absent new information on Fox, I started feeling like a pre-internet teenager again, continually studying liner notes for clues to imagine what the singer must be doing now. Without an update in nearly a decade, I was left to study the blurry living-room photo on the cover of *Transit Byzantium*, the hypnotic pattern of its red velvet couch. Fox leans forward, stares off camera, his left thumb in his right fist—vulnerable, even anxious. In an old press photo for the Mice, I notice the idiosyncratic details that peg them as hopelessly provincial: the square-jawed Tommy sports a Love and Rockets mullet, but also boat shoes; Fox wears a sweater pulled over an oxford, hands crossed in front of him like a choirboy being photographed for the yearbook. With the leather-clad bass player, they stand in front of a tall marble statue of a cherub playing a violin. I realize they're in an art museum, probably the Cleveland Museum of Art. *They believe in art!* Of course they do: Ronald Reagan is in office and the Mice are teenage romantics who sing a charging pop anthem called "Not Proud of the USA."

The photo triggers a strange nostalgia, as if I had once been a part of his life in Cleveland and just remembered it after years of denial. I can smell the antiseptic hallways of his high school and imagine the dirty jokes his friends told. I wasn't there, but I lived in rural Ohio in the early 1980s for four miserable years, starting at age ten. I got beat up a lot in Ohio. I went to Cleve-

land on a sixth-grade field trip, visiting Sea World and the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, where we saw the newspapers rolling off the presses. I moved in 1984, the year the Mice formed. If I had stayed, no doubt I would have heard them. I would have connected with their yearning, tear-your-heart-out choruses drenched in garage guitars. When I hear Fox's later folk songs, I imagine the shape of a life that I escaped—the feeling of isolation and longing I knew years ago but left for Bill Fox to keep feeling, the same one my wife felt in the car that day. It's as if he's my eyes and ears in another life.

*Here in the flats there's a cattle call
Of drunks out in the night
Girls dressed up so fancy and all
Their boyfriends they just want
to fight*

—“Lonesome Pine”

Last summer, searching deep in the folds of the internet for signs of Bill Fox, I discover the Holy Grail: an appearance on L.A. radio station KCRW from 1998. He sounds giddy, his speaking voice more high-pitched and boyish than I'd imagined. He pronounces his album “*Transit Byzantium*,” flattening the *-ant* with a Midwestern accent. He says he bought a 4-track recorder from his boss for a hundred dollars and just started recording in his living room. He plays “My Baby Crying.” Then host Nic Harcourt asks him about his days in the Mice. “We played basically in the Ohio region,” says

Fox, “with a couple of occasions back in '88, we broke out and we went to Kansas City and Cincinnati and we went up to Toronto and then we disbanded.”

HARCOURT: What were you doing in the ten years after the Mice broke up?

FOX: Just hanging out. Writing songs. Working, trying to pay the bills.

At the time of the interview, Fox had been on tour for three weeks. Los Angeles is the farthest from Ohio he's ever traveled. “I'm ready to go home, ready to roll on back home to Cleveland,” says Fox. “Cleveland, Oh.”

Then he clears his throat and starts making big, clanging chords on his guitar. His boyish talking voice expands and levitates as if an entirely new person had taken over, winging strange new words like magical incantations. It's a song without a title, one he never put out: the last recorded sounds of Bill Fox.

Last year, M. Ward, the indie

singer-songwriter from Portland, Oregon, tried to contact Fox. A friend had once pressed *Transit Byzantium* on Ward, and the Yeats allusion hooked him. After hearing Fox's pop version of the early American folk ballad “Mary of the Wild Moor” and his urgent folk-rock “Bonded to You,” Ward “fell for it,” he told me in an email.

i had a u.s. tour planned last year and wanted to ask musicians who i didnt necessarily know but whose music had been an inspiration to share the stage with me: freakwater, mike watt and victoria williams responded but we never got a response from bill fox... i figured he didn't like what i was doing, or he didnt like what he was doing... anyway, wherever you are bill thanks for the music.

I first contacted Bill's brother, Tommy, in the fall of 2006. At thirty-seven he's a reggae DJ on a public radio station in Cleveland and plays percussion in a reggae band. He's cheerful and friendly, but he also levels with me straightaway about his brother. “Not to sound like a party pooper, but I can guarantee you right now, Bill's not interested,” he says. “He's dropped out of music and shuns his musical past.”

I've already heard rumors from a record executive about Fox, the temperamental recluse who never returns phone calls. But the story Tommy tells stuns me. Bill Fox now works as a telemarketer for the National Crime Prevention Council, selling advertising space in McGruff



the Crime Dog brochures.

Tommy tells me that at night Fox hangs out in bars, that he doesn't even own a guitar anymore. He's a diagnosed manic-depressive with a history of hospitalization. Fox told Tommy he voted for George W. Bush in 2004. Tommy paints a portrait of a crabby loner and contrarian who barely makes ends meet and refuses to talk about his music with anyone, especially a reporter. He imitates his brother's response to an interview request in a harsh, tough-guy voice: *I don't want to fucking talk to him. Why the fuck do I want to talk to him for?*

"That's Bill," he says, with a thick-skinned laugh that I feel is oddly unsympathetic. "You've got to, you know, laugh or cry."

"Sounds rough," I say.

"Try being his brother."

Having just started to look for Fox, I wonder: Who am I to try and coax him out of self-imposed exile? Then again, Fox's plight only deepens the call of his music, burnishing it with further mystery and sadness. I'm confused: How can he abandon this amazing gift? How could he make this music and then leave it behind, orphaning people who wanted more, people like me?

I write him a long letter, which Tommy agrees to deliver. It takes me two weeks to write. I tell Fox about my wife hearing "My Baby Crying" on the radio in Vermont. His brother suggests I invite him out for a drink, so I do. I wait a month for a reply. Finally, Tommy tells me he asked Bill about my letter over the holidays in 2006. "Hoping Bill

would be true to expectations, I said to him, 'Yeah, I told this guy that you wouldn't talk to him,'" recounts Tommy. "And in true Bill fashion, he replies, 'Why did you tell him that? What if I want to talk to him?' So, I don't really know. He might get hold of you..."

I'm hopeful, but months pass and Fox doesn't respond. I acquire his number at the telemarketing office and finally get up the nerve to call him one afternoon. I figure he'll say yes or no to an interview, but at least I'll hear his voice. I'm anxious, like I'm calling a girl I'm in love with for the first time. I'm about to bridge these songs to the singer. A man with a deep, gravelly voice picks up the phone. It's his boss, a guy named Jim. "He was in here this morning and then he left for lunch and I don't know if he's coming back," he says. "Bill kind of makes his own rules."

I call back two hours later, hoping Fox has returned. "He came in for about a half hour and he said



he was not interested in talking to you," says Jim, flatly. "Have a very nice day."

Some kind of twist

Is tumbling down

It finds me here in Cleveland Town

And oh far away, far away is my love

—"Song of a Drunken
Nightingale"

From the airplane, Cleveland looks as glum and brown as an overripe banana. The tallest building, the Key Tower, pokes above the city in a way that seems to say, "Eh." It's the lazy beacon of a town that can't be bothered. But down below, somewhere in the gray March drizzle, among the sprawl of row houses, is Bill Fox, the lost bard of Ohio.

Maybe he'll change his mind.

My host is Tim Rossiter, a forty-year-old computer programmer with long hair and John Lennon spectacles who was Bill Fox's manager and his closest friend during the years Fox was making music. It was Tim, I was told, who knew Fox better than anyone and could tell his story, though the two have spoken only rarely since Fox dropped out of music in 1998. Without even knowing me, Tim invited me to stay with him and his wife. We would end up spending the next two days together, two strangers with one connection: we are haunted by Bill Fox.

That night, Tim invites me to the Beachland Ballroom to see the Revelers, a garage-rock band who

were reuniting for a rare club gig after breaking up in 1999. All of Fox's old friends will be there, including brother Tommy, who played drums for the Revelers, and some of Fox's barfly buddies who still see him socially. There's an off chance that Bill Fox might show up.

A reviewer once said that Tommy played drums like he had "a thousand ants crawling on his back." Skinny, bespectacled, and bearded, Tommy is a flurry of arms, a sweat-spraying machine backing two electric guitars and soaring, feel-good choruses that send the drunken crowd roaring with joy. *Shim-sham-shimmy, we're gonna get happy!* The energy spikes. People keep handing me beers.

Ten years ago to the day, the Revelers moved to New York to try and make it in the music business. "That shit beat us down," says the singer, Andrej Cuturic, between songs. Guitarist Joel Kaufman adds, "That's what you get for dreaming."

This sums up the spiritual condition of Cleveland, of growing up in a town whose name is a national punch line, where people's hopes have been shuttered along with the steel mills. Here they turn the desire to forget into an intense and sweaty three-chord clang. Rock and roll is what they have. "Existence sucks and if you can just eclipse it for forty-five minutes..." says Andrej afterward.

"I love Cleveland, but Cleveland is a loser town," Joel tells me. "That's what's so beautiful about it." He moved to Washington, D.C.,

eight years ago to work at the Library of Congress, digitizing Walt Whitman manuscripts.

That night, I meet the guy everyone calls Dirt, a land surveyor by day, sometime musician, and erstwhile music promoter who has known Bill Fox since grade school. I'm told he's one of Fox's regular drinking buddies. I want to meet somebody who has spoken to him recently. When I tell him I'm doing a story, he says, "Good luck," and takes a big gulp of beer.

"He's not mysterious," he insists. "He's just Bill. He's just this guy we hang out with."

Dirt never returns my calls that week. Fox doesn't show up that night, either. I've flown all the way to Cleveland, Ohio, hoping I'll run into him or have one of his friends tell me everything there is to know. I'd feel like a stalker, except Tommy and Tim both seem happy to see me. And Tommy has already told me much of Bill's story. I'm just here for the rest of it.

The Fox brothers grew up in a middle-class Cleveland suburb called North Olmsted. Their father was a dairy products technician, their mother a schoolteacher who quit work to raise four kids (the other two Fox siblings are sisters). Bill Fox got his first dose of fame at

age fifteen when he appeared on the local TV program *Big Chuck and Little John* to perform "Yankee Doodle Dandy" in amazingly refined hand farts. In 1984, at seventeen, Fox managed to save up enough money working at Burger King to record his first single with the Mice, called "Can You Walk on the Water, Baby?" b/w "Little Creatures." Both were bright, buoyant pop numbers that could have come off the *Yellow Submarine* soundtrack. They had five hundred sleeveless 45s made. Tommy, thirteen, played drums.

That year Fox's parents divorced. Bill moved in to the basement of his father's chemistry lab, and Tommy went to live with his mother and her new husband, whom Bill distrusted. The divorce "really freaked him out," says Tommy. Not that he got along any better with his father. His dad came to the Mice's first concert at a club called the Phantasy and they ended the set with "Not Proud of the U.S.A.," wherein Fox addresses his father directly, singing, "Dad! You're so proud of the U.S.A. / It moves you in many ways," before declaring America an arrogant, dying empire comparable to Rome and Babylon. Fox's dad was a Korean War veteran whose foot was blown off in combat. "For my dad to hear that, he didn't like that," says Tommy.

By nineteen, Fox was wielding an amazing talent for a pop hook. Most of the songs were earnest squalls of love and infatuation, like the melodic bubblegum punk of "Bye Bye Kitty Kat," which Superchunk would cover in the 1990s. But there was also the un-



abashed idealism of “Public Television,” another bristly song aimed at his dad.

*The White House calls it a
communist threat
But Dad ain't seen the last of it yet
Because I got this goddamned
cerebral contraction
I can't get no satisfaction, I need...
public television!*

By 1988, the Mice were rock sensations in Ohio, mainstays of JB's Down Under, a club frequented by students at Kent State. They put out two vinyl LPs and toured the Midwest. But being away from Cleveland made Fox unusually anxious. He often stayed awake for thirty hours at a time while the band was on the road. Tommy would give him pot and beer in hopes that he'd nod off, but when they'd awake in the morning, Bill would still be up, pacing around, restless and bugged out. The morning the Mice were set to go on a tour of the U.S. and Europe, Fox broke up the band. For days, he didn't answer his doorbell or return phone calls. Tommy didn't talk to his brother for two years.

“I was supposed to be a very wealthy man by now,” Tommy says, only half-joking.

The day after the Revelers show, I sit in Tim Rossiter's two-story house on Cleveland's West Side, where he plays me outtakes from some early 1990s studio sessions that Fox recorded with money his father left him after he died of cancer, in 1991. One is called

“Man of War,” a distinctly Dylan-esque polemic with beautiful harmonica and a melancholy refrain.

*Long as I been free
I wished I could be
As sure as a man of war*

Fox was so upset by the Gulf War he moved to Canada. He lived

in Toronto and busked for money. But he had a hard time making ends meet. He pined for Cleveland and wrote a song called “Up Here in Canada Today,” about how much he missed black people. “I miss that jivin' shit that you talk,” he sings. “Ain't nothin' in Canada I find to compare / Your breath of freedom in the air.”

THE ANTI-LEADING LADY'S NIGHTMARE

It was October. I was between men.

I loved autumn. Sudden cold fronts,
and when I walked, crunching leaves under my feet,
I made a sound like smashing glass.

Then the two men were flanking me.
They were not supposed to meet like this—
on the street, unexplained. We walked
toward the setting sun. I was the wedge between them.

No hard feelings, I said. I didn't steal anyone's anything.

It's hard to walk down a sidewalk between two men,
with all the friction of hips and swinging arms,
and the sun smoldering beautifully
through a haze smog.

I was just hungry, I said. Deal with it. You're men.

We entered a long hall. They held me up;
my legs wouldn't lock or step
as we passed the rows of identical cages
to the room of the serious electricity.

How did we get here? I asked. Is this a metaphor?

One of them put a finger to his lips.
At midnight, for a moment, the lights dimmed.

—Courtney Queeney

In April 1993, Fox was back in Cleveland living with his sister, Molly. One night the neighbors saw him on their doorstep: naked, covered in blood, and raving loudly. They were so terrified they called in the Cleveland SWAT team to apprehend him. “Wounded Man Waves Knife, Shouts about the Antichrist,” went the headline in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* the next day.

The story says Fox “held off police at his West Side home for 2 hours,” although Tim says that was exaggerated. When Fox saw the police approaching the house, “he went into a rage, shouting incomprehensible messages about the antichrist.” Images of Fox looking like a madman were broadcast on the news that night. Fox was released without charges. He had only cut himself, harmed no one else. His family admitted him to a mental hospital.

Nobody seems to know what set Fox off, although a friend says he’d been drinking heavily and reading the book of Revelations. He left the hospital a few weeks later, diagnosed with manic depression, and briefly took lithium to control his moods. He stopped using it because the drugs made him feel like a zombie. Fox was deeply embarrassed. He went out in public less and less. By then, he was already telemarketing to support himself.

Soon after, Fox heard Guided By Voices’ first album, *Vampire on Titus*, which was recorded entirely on a 4-track. He loved it. The concept of home recording was a major epiphany: he could make music

alone, in his own living room, without ever involving another soul.

At a GBV concert in Columbus a few months later, front man Robert Pollard sought Fox out beforehand, proclaiming his love for the Mice. “How do you write songs?” he asked. “How do you do it?” In the middle of the show, he convinced Fox to climb onstage and play the Mice song “Little Rage.”

“Do I want to do a 7-inch?”

Somebody asked me from the
deacon’s bench

And I tell him, “Pick any track,
man, you know that it’s yours”

But I’m thinking of you

—“Thinking of You”

Tim drives me around Cleveland and points out local sites, explaining obscure historical events, like the time Ohio almost went to war with Michigan over Toledo in the early 1800s.

Bill Fox is alive but his ghost is everywhere. Here is where he stood on the cover of *Shelter from the Smoke*, inside the West Side Market, where Slavic immigrants sell fresh produce. And there stands the clock tower seen on the inner sleeve, rising over the market. The cherub statue in the Mice photo is indeed in the Cleveland Museum of Art, five miles away.

We park in front of an apartment building on West 101st Street, where Fox recorded the two solo albums in his living room. It’s a perfect brick box, two gray and brown stories on a nondescript block.

I stare at the closed white curtains in the perfectly square windows. Later that day, I read a 1997 *Chicago Tribune* record review describing the lyrics of Fox’s jangly “Let In the Sun” as painting “a picture of a man so despondent he can barely rouse the energy to open the curtains of his darkened room.”

From 1994 to 1997, Fox wrote and recorded one hundred songs in that room. Tim helped Fox self-release the fifteen-song *Shelter from the Smoke* in 1997 and worked the phones to get publicity for it. One day he called an editor at *CMJ*. “Yeah, we listened to it,” the editor said. “We’re putting it on the cover.” The excited reviewer would urge readers to “pick up a copy of this record and discover for yourself why Fox is one of the most important artists of our day.”

In 1998, the Revelers, brother Tommy’s band, got signed to spinART, an indie record label in New York. The Revelers’ bass player gave spinART a tape of Bill Fox songs, thinking they might like it. They did—a little too much. Joel Morowitz, the label’s founder, was so blown away he signed Fox and began focusing more on him than on the Revelers. Suddenly, Tommy’s brother was back from his years-long hiatus, eclipsing Tommy’s biggest hope of making it since the disbanding of the Mice.

Fox then attracted the attention of music industry legend Seymour Stein, the head of Sire Records who discovered acts like the Ramones and was immortalized in a Belle & Sebastian song.

Stein bought him an Amtrak ticket to New York so Fox could play a few songs in his office. The performance, by all accounts, was phenomenal. “He was channeling right at him, looking him right in the face,” says Tim. “Just channeling all that animosity about the record industry.”

“Oh my God, he’s wonderful!” said Stein afterward, according to Morowitz. He told Morowitz to develop him for a possible Sire album.

On the train back to Cleveland, Fox played Dylan songs in the lounge car and got everyone singing along, from the café bartender to a fat businessman smoking a cigar.

By then, Fox depended on Tim to handle his business affairs, take care of him on tour, and keep him steady (he was with him in the KCRW studio). But just as things were ramping up, Tim was finding less and less time to take care of his charge. His marriage was falling apart and he was partying heavily. So Fox told him he’d start handling business himself. Things turned sour quickly. At Stein’s suggestion, the record executives had asked Fox to make his third album in a Nashville studio with backup musicians. Fox declined, making it in a Kent studio without accompaniment. SpinART didn’t like the results. “Wow, that is so Dylan, it hurts,” recalls Morowitz. “It was like, maybe we shouldn’t release this. Critics are going to slay it.”

That year Fox was scheduled to headline at the CMJ Music Festival

in New York, along with the Revelers. He didn’t show up. He stopped returning anyone’s phone calls. The record label never heard from Fox again. The third album was never released. They’ve since lost the tapes. When I call Stein, he apologizes and tells me he doesn’t remember Bill Fox.

*I’ll be in the flats, tipping pints with
bureaucrats*

*There’s too many poets, there’s too
many songs*

No voice can erase the wrongs

And oh far away, far away is my love

—“Song of a Drunken
Nightingale”

Tommy and his brother were driving home from their mother’s house after Christmas last year when Bill Fox’s car began smoking and broke down on the side of I-71, the highway that runs through Cleveland. They got out and called a friend to pick them up. Fox never returned for the car, leaving it sitting on the side of the road.

“That’s Bill,” says Tommy.

Why did Bill Fox stop playing music? It’s the question I ask about fifty times in two days. “I wish I knew,” Tommy says. “Fear of failure?”

Tim says the record business was simply too hard on Fox. He didn’t like touring and selling CDs while holding down a day job. “He was not into it, the life of trying to make it in music,” he says. “Scraping by. His dignity was called into question.

“Just because someone has a

talent doesn’t mean they in any way at all have to exploit it,” Tim reasons, although he’s deeply conflicted. While rifling through an old box of promotional material, reviews, and letters, going through pictures of their big New York trip to see Seymour Stein, Tim becomes overwhelmed with emotion, his eyes wet with tears. “This is really difficult for me,” he says. “When I put that stuff on now, I just hear... pain. Maybe it’s because I know Bill, but it’s just obvious to me.”

By now, I’ve spent almost forty-eight hours with Tim, a guy I hardly know. But he feels like a lost friend from an earlier chapter in my life. When we run out of Foxiana, we drink coffee and talk politics. We both admit that we secretly want to “save” Bill Fox, pull him out of seclusion to play again. As we sit in his living room, I imagine that Fox is probably in his own living room right now, just a mile or two away. But Tim is afraid to disclose his phone number, out of respect for Fox’s privacy. I understand—*I’m not a stalker!*—but the clock is ticking and I have to fly home eventually. I convince him to call Fox and let him know I’m in town, in case he changes his mind. Tim is extremely nervous about it. He hasn’t seen Fox since 2000. But he eventually gets up the nerve and dials. Fox doesn’t answer, and Tim leaves a message. Then he insists we sit in his apartment for another hour just in case Fox calls back. He never does.

Before I leave, I meet up with Tommy, who calls Tim O’Malley, an old friend of Bill’s. Tough but jovial,

with a salt-and-pepper beard, O'Malley sees Fox fairly regularly in bars. With two hours before my plane takes off, he agrees to meet us at a watering hole near the airport. "If I'm looking to go for a beer, he's on the short list of people I call," explains O'Malley of their relationship. He tells me he tried calling Fox four times that week but hadn't heard back. He's not surprised. "That's Bill," he says.

O'Malley calls Fox again to invite him out for a drink with the reporter. Fox doesn't call back. But O'Malley reveals that my letter to Fox sat on Fox's desk for a month and that the two discussed for an hour whether he should do an interview. *He read my letter.* O'Malley urged him to do it, too, telling him that I seemed "earnest."

Fox's response: "Man, I don't want to be on the internet."

Bill Fox's friends accept that he's through with music, but it isn't because they don't want him to play again. *Everyone* wants him to play again. They just don't hold out any hope—or they try not to hope so maybe one day they'll be surprised. That's Cleveland for you. But once in a rare evening, when Fox is drunk, he can be coaxed to perform a song or two. "He'll just start playing something," O'Malley says. "You don't know if it's Woody Guthrie or something he's working on."

I sit up in my seat. It happened as recently as December, O'Malley says, during a drunken jamboree led by Dirt. Fox was handed the guitar. He sang "My Baby Crying." Afterward, Fox idly told Dirt, the pro-

ducer, "I'd like to go out and play." Everyone was stunned. Recalls O'Malley: "I don't even say a fuck-ing word. Don't scare the bird!"

By now, I'd thought a lot about "My Baby Crying." I'd listened to it hundreds of times and even learned the chords, although I never did figure out how he picked it. At first, I wondered who inspired it. Fox wasn't known for holding down lasting relationships with women. As with everything else, he tended to suddenly pull up stakes for reasons no one could discern. Perhaps his "baby" isn't a woman at all but an expression of his own loneliness, a muse so sensitive the mere exhalation of "trivial facts" can smother it.

*Sometimes I feel like a lover in vain
I fail to protect her from the forces of
pain*

*That so silently pierce her tender
heart...*

After we meet, O'Malley writes me a long, heartfelt email imploring me to protect Fox. When they'd talked about my letter last year, he explains, Fox worried he'd come off as a "circus freak." "Don't make Bill look an ass," says O'Malley. Fox isn't proud of his current life, he explains. He's forty-one years old with a dead-end job and no car. He doesn't own a computer. "We all balance our day-to-days with our long-dark-nights in our own ways," writes O'Malley. "And communicating to a reporter about all that is like... *Okay, somebody's going to publish something about me on the internet or in a magazine that makes me look like I'm disturbed or a loser or some-*

thing. Great. That's what I want. To be summed up and classified."

I feel sick reading this. I reconsider everything. Why am I insisting that Fox tangle with his demons again, suffer for his art, expose his painful private life to the world? For my own personal revelation? Question, click, answer? I recall O'Malley's explanation of why Fox hated performing: "He felt like a monkey being trotted out on a stage to do a calliope show."

But I didn't want the monkey, I wanted the bird.

O'Malley says Fox is an avid reader, fluent in *The Iliad* and Aztec archeology. It's what he talks about over all those beers. "He thinks about things real hard," he says. When Fox told me he wasn't interested in talking, he wasn't being coy or stubborn or strange. He had thought about it. He made a decision. If I'd been honest with myself, it was right there in the songs all along, well before I showed up. It's what he told my wife on a dirt road in Vermont one day in 1998. It was the only sound that she could hear. A field recording of the last singer who ever felt what he sang.

Bring out the shroud

*The rebel prophet just got stoned by
the crowd*

*That walked away and laughed out
loud*

At my baby crying ★

Hear Bill Fox's "My Baby Crying" on the CD included with this issue (track 14). Out of respect for Fox's wishes, this piece will not appear on our website.