

June 13, 2017 - Gregg Turkington is best known for his "anti-comedy" character, Neil Hamburger. The Australian actor co-stars in the film review web series "On Cinema at the Cinema" with Tim Heidecker and is the co-writer and co-star of the Adult Swim series, *Decker*. He had a part in the 2015 film *Ant-Man*, and that same year, starred in *Entertainment*, a drama he co-wrote. In the 1990s, he ran the music label, Amarillo Records, and played in bands like Caroliner, Zip Code Rapists, Faxed Head, and has released a number of albums as Neil Hamburger, mostly on the Chicago independent music label, Drag City. He contributed artwork and live recordings to Flipper's *Public Flipper Limited Live 1980-1985*.



As told to Charlie Sextro, 2383 words.

Tags: Culture, Music, Comedy, Inspiration, Beginnings, Independence.

Gregg Turkington on what he learned from punk rock

I'm interested to hear how your fascination with showmanship began. As a kid, how interested were you in entertainment?

Super interested. Initially really with music, and then I got more into movies. I was a complete obsessive about all the things I liked. I grew up in Tempe, Arizona. I was really into Phil Ochs. He was my absolute idol. I was really into the Bee Gees and The Who. Then I got really into a revival, repertoire theater, The Valley Art. It was like \$2 or something and I would pretty much go to any movie that was playing, to see what was going on. Then when I saw something that interested me, I would go over to the campus at ASU. They didn't seem to care that I would just go in, start pouring through microfiche, reading through old *New York Times* or whatever...

It was great. It's so much fun to research. I was really into art that had some sort of mystery that I was trying to crack, like, "What was the motivation here?" Or, "How was this made?" Or, "What else did these people do?" And so I really just enjoyed the research aspects of it.

Pre-internet, everything was kind of a mystery. So you take somebody like Phil Ochs, who I totally idolized, one day a biography appears and you think, "Finally." I knew he committed suicide. I knew that he had the most beautiful voice I had ever heard, and his really funny but despairing lyrics, but I didn't know that much about him. And then finally, this book comes out and in retrospect, it's not the greatest biography ever written, but I read the book and there are suddenly 100 more questions I have, based on things in the book. So it's 100 more things to research.

What drew you initially to those artists early in your life?

Initially I got into the Bee Gees and the Beatles when I was a kid. I think they're just great songwriters and great singers and great performers. And then, I think I got into the political aspects of people like Phil Ochs, and I got into The Who. I think you're dealing with garden variety teenage depression and alienation... These artists would speak to that, you know?

Then I got into punk rock through seeing a movie, *The Decline of Western Civilization*. Being into The Who and stuff, you'd go see these people play at a stadium with 30,000 people. I saw the *Decline* movie and I got the soundtrack, and I started buying the records by these bands. I saw that they would be playing in Phoenix. I would go see them. I could not believe that at a club with 100 people you could see these people that you idolize; that means so much to you in such an intimate setting. And so I got super into punk rock, and then very quickly realized that it was, like a lot of things, co-opted by fashion. I don't want to sound like a jerk, but yeah, it just became really stale, really fast.

I got really into the band Flipper, which may be the biggest artistic influence on me of all. Where punk rock was getting faster, their songs were getting slower. Where the songs were getting shorter, their songs were getting longer. When I first saw them, they did an hour long set, where they did maybe five songs. And everybody was furious at them. And so whereas punk rock, I thought, was interesting initially for people that didn't fit in, Flipper was for people that didn't even fit in with punk rock.

And they didn't give a shit. I mean they were great, hilarious showmen, and they had really philosophical lyrics, but they're also very, very funny and kind of confrontational. They really didn't care if the audience liked them or not. And I really liked that, because I did like them. I think that's where I really got into the concept of—you know... it's not that you don't care. It's not that you're not doing this for somebody, but you want to reach the people that will like it, and you're prepared for that to be a tiny minority. If there's two people out of 100 that like it, and they really like it, that's a beautiful thing. And you don't need the other 98. You actually don't care. Fuck 'em. Who cares? And so I got super, super into Flipper.

Do you remember seeing them for the first time?

Yeah, I saw them in Phoenix in 1983. It was this place Madison Square Garden, which was a Mexican wrestling ring, that the punk rock promoter, Tony Victor, would rent out and put on these punk rock shows on the days when they weren't having wrestling. So the bands actually played in a wrestling ring with ropes, and if you were a super fan like me, you could stand on the edge of the ropes and watch the show. And then they put in a chain link fence in front of it. I don't know if it was because wrestlers were getting thrown into the audience, or punk rock kids were jumping into the audience, but they put up that chain link fence.

I moved to San Francisco, because my parents were divorced. My dad lived in San Francisco, and that's where Flipper was. I ended up moving out there for the last two years of high school, and befriending those guys, hanging out with them, going to all their shows. They were so nice. These guys had serious drug problems and were real fuck ups, but they were really nice and supportive to me. They got me a job at Subterranean Records, which was the label that put out their stuff. Will Shatter, who was one of the singers of Flipper, set me up in a band. He knew some older musicians that were looking for a singer, and he's like, "This kid would be good." I'm like 15, never performed, totally shy, never took acting classes or sang or anything, and Will was like, "I think this guy would be good." And so suddenly, I'm performing in this band.

I had a fanzine that started out almost exclusively with interviews of Flipper. It was 10-page, photocopied. I would hand write these marathon interviews with each of the members of Flipper. It was preposterous. And then I started interviewing other bands. But at first, it was just these endless, endless interviews with these guys. I would go out with Will Shatter dumpster diving at three in the morning and hang out at his home, which was like a storefront on Skid Row in San Francisco, and it was kind of a shooting gallery. There were other people coming in there, shooting up. I'm like 15 or 16 and just in awe of Will, but then also confused and disturbed by the fact that there's just these really nefarious characters hanging around all hours. This is literally the worst block in San Francisco at the time. Like dangerous. I'd get punched in the face by random people.

Anyway, I had this fanzine, and it started out covering Flipper and Meat Puppets. At some point, as a big record guy who loved collecting records, I found a couple records. One was A Tramp Shining by Richard Harris, and then some Tom Jones records. And I somehow saw that this stuff was the real punk rock. This kind of showmanship and emotional intensity, especially with Richard Harris, when he's doing the Jimmy Webb songs. To me, those lyrics are heavier and more intense and more powerful than anything. And his performance, it sounds like he's sobbing. Richard Harris is an actor, first and foremost, and he put that sort of actor style into his singing.

So I took the fanzine, which I was doing with Lizzy Kate Gray, and we kind of switched it over from a punk rock fanzine into an easy listening, pop vocals fanzine. Suddenly we're interviewing Jimmy Webb and Hal Blaine from the Wrecking Crew, and Tiny Tim, and totally lost interest in punk rock. I felt like, this kind of showmanship and these types of artists, this is intense. I got into Frank Sinatra and realized, "Sorry, punk rock frauds, this is real emotional despair coming out in these songs." And that's when I totally made the switch and went to see all these people in concert: Sinatra, Tom Jones, George Jones, and just all these different characters. I really connected with that type of show.

That's fascinating because your comedic persona could really be said to live somewhere between punk rock and pop vocalist.

Right?

Both of those interests are still very much a part of your performance.

It really is, and it's strange. People ask about influences and things. I was in a record store the other day, buying some records, and I bought some Dionne Warwick singles. And I don't remember what the other record was, but I handed them to the guy and he's going through them and pricing them and he's like, "One of these records doesn't belong." And I said, "No, I disagree. This is what I like. These things do belong together."

And I know at the time, with the fanzine, we really alienated a lot of the readers. But then I also talked to people over the years, while touring as Neil Hamburger, that really got it. Like this guy, Bobby Conn, who's a really great, incredible singer, songwriter, showman from Chicago. He always talks about this fanzine and those articles and how it changed his direction.

What was the biggest way Flipper shaped your perspective? Was it some advice you heard during your long interviews?

I think it was the shows. There was this attitude where the music was just ear splitting, it was slow, it was annoying, it was monotonous. The lyrics that they wrote were very, very smart, philosophical lyrics; not at all what you would expect from what they were doing. Just seeing those guys get into this kind of weird groove. All the songs were very bass heavy. The guitar was almost like a decoration to their sound. It's all bass driven, repetitive. A lot of repetition. But just seeing those guys kind of looking at each other and laughing at just the chaos that they had created. Just the anger in the audience and other people just tripping out of their minds on the ecstasy of the moment, not the drug but just this weird...

The music that they made probably was directly influenced by heroin addiction, you know what I mean? It's

almost like creating this sort of addictive sound and vibe and weird energy in the audience, that you didn't necessarily have to use heroin to get into, but it felt like that. And I would go to every show that they did for years, and record them. I would bring a cassette recorder and just set it up. I have so many of these tapes.

But I know later, when I started performing more, it just always stuck with me, especially with a character like Neil Hamburger, who has the ability to alienate and make people really mad. I would get slots opening for bands, whether it was Tenacious D or Bad Religion, and I would walk off the stage as people were throwing things and booing. People would say, "How can you deal with this? Doesn't this just destroy your ego?" And it didn't. It really didn't, because I was in that same zone that I learned from Flipper. The zone of being like, "I'm putting on the show that I would like to see, and the people that agree with me, and there are a few, they enjoyed it, so I'm happy with it." You know what I mean? This is what I'd like to watch.

Gregg Turkington recommends:

The Love Witch - This Anna Biller movie from last year made me giddy! A one-of-a-kind, totally personal project in which she's combined a peculiar set of interests and tastes into one glorious, hilarious, beautiful masterpiece, shot in a lush 60s Technicolor style, with gorgeous rear-projection driving scenes (that a less confident director might have been talked out of doing), incredibly detailed weird faux-Satanic sets, and square characters who seem to have stepped right out of an episode of "Dragnet '67."

Frederick Michael St. Jude - Here Am I - Short and affecting documentary film about the Florida outsider musician/artist Frederick Michael St. Jude, made by my pal Mike Hickey using a few \$10 bills I slipped him.

The 5th Dimension - The Magic Garden LP - Near-perfect '60s pop concept album from Jimmy Webb, barely out of his teens and yet at the peak of his powers. As with most of his work of that era, from "By The Time I Get To Phoenix" to "MacArthur Park", all the lyrics stem from his disintegrating relationship with a girl named Susan. The words to "Requiem: 820 Latham" are the most intense of them all; like with "MacArthur Park" they may seem impenetrable to the casual listener, but in fact are very clear and specific (right down to the street address in the song title). Billy Davis Jr., as great a vocalist as ever lived, sings them with a deep and reflective despair.

Robert Dayton. Underappreciated Canadian visual and musical artist who has his finger in a million pies (figuratively, and possibly literally). He was half of the pop-vaudeville duo Canned Hamm who were unsavory and perverse and yet 100% accessible to audiences of all ages.

Megan Koester. A great L.A.-based stand-up comic and writer who has described her act as "wholly aggressive, wholly unmarketable." With so many flimsy panderers out there boasting about their "edgy comedy," it's nice to see someone this fearless and this consistently FUNNY, willing to name names and shit all over everything awful.

Name

Gregg Turkington

Vocation

Entertainer, Musician, Neil Hamburger

Fact

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