

[00:00:00] **John Moe:** Hey, before we get started, just a quick reminder that this show exists because people support it financially. If you've already donated to *Depresh Mode*, thank you. You are making something that is going out into the world, and it is helping people. If you have not yet donated, don't worry about it. It's easy to do. Just go to MaximumFun.org/join, and then select a level that works for you. Find a level that you're comfortable giving at, and then select *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows, and you are then one of the people making this show possible. I appreciate your time, and I appreciate your contributions.

A note to our listeners: this episode contains mentions of suicide.

It's Depeche Mode. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here. Yes, I said Depeche Mode!

[00:00:48] **Music:** “Blasphemous Rumors” from the album *Some Great Reward* by Depeche Mode.

I don't want to start any blasphemous rumors

But I think that God's got a sick sense of humor

And when I die, I expect to find him laughing

(Music fades out.)

[00:01:05] **John Moe:** “Blasphemous Rumors”. You die and God laughs at you because of his sick sense of humor. Well, that's depressing. But is it on our list of great depressing music? That's on the show today. It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here. Optimistic Rhett Miller music!

[00:01:23] **Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

[00:01:30] **John Moe:** We're taking a tour of some achingly depressing songs today, and we have three top music experts to guide us through. So, grab a hanky and possibly your dancing shoes. It's gonna be a weird episode. Steven Hyden is a culture critic for *UPROXX* and the author of six books about popular music. We reached out to him for his picks.

[00:01:50] **Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

[00:01:56] **John Moe:** Steven Hyden, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

[00:01:58] **Steven Hyden:** Thank you for having me. It's great to be here.

[00:02:00] **John Moe:** We have given you an assignment to find, in your vast musical knowledge, the most depressing song or songs. And I'm bracing myself, but what's on your list?

[00:02:12] **Steven Hyden:** Well, before we get into it, I want to make a distinction quick between sad songs and depressing songs.

(John thanks him.)

I do think there's a difference. I don't use them synonymously. Like, like for me, a great song can be a sad song, but all bad songs are depressing songs.

(John laughs.)

And what I mean by that is, to me a bad song is a song that doesn't make you feel anything—which to me is what depression is. It's a feeling of numbness. It's a feeling of being dead inside. That's how I experience it. Whereas a sad song, to me, is the opposite of that. It makes you feel something intensely. And if it's a really effective sad song, it'll actually make you cry. And what happens when a person cries? Well, afterward, they feel better. You know, there's a catharsis that happens. And the things that are inside of you get let out. And in some way, you could say that the song is a form of therapy when people listen to it.

And that is why I think people are drawn to sad songs. It's something that allows them to activate a part of themselves that maybe can't be activated any way else. So, that to me is the difference between a sad song and a depressing song. So, the songs I picked are sad, because I think they're great. But they're not depressing to me necessarily.

[00:03:36] **John Moe:** So, depressing would be like, mid-career Starship kind of thing.

[00:03:41] **Steven Hyden:** *(Laughs.)* Exactly. You're in an airport bar by yourself, and the song from *Mannequin* comes on.

[00:03:49] **Music:** “Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now” from the album *No Protection* by Starship.

And we can build this dream together

Standing strong forever

Nothing’s gonna stop us now

And if this world...

(Music fades out.)

[00:04:01] **Steven Hyden:** That, to me, is depressing. You know, listening to Elliott Smith or something to me is sad. You know, that's the difference there.

[00:04:11] **John Moe:** Okay. Well, let's talk about these emotionally potent sad songs then. Where did you go with this assignment?

[00:04:19] **Steven Hyden:** I picked two songs. And the first song, to me, it's the saddest song I've ever heard. And that is "Tecumseh Valley" by Townes Van Zandt. I don't know if you're familiar with this song.

(John confirms with a chuckle.)

[00:04:33] **Music:** "Tecumseh Valley" from the album *For the Sake of the Song* by Townes Van Zandt.

Well, the name she gave was Caroline

The daughter of a miner

And her ways were free

And it seemed to me

The sunshine walked beside her

(Music fades out.)

[00:04:59] **Steven Hyden:** I could have picked like a dozen songs by Townes Van Zandt.

(John agrees.)

But this song in particular—well, this is the plot of this song. There's a woman named Caroline who is described as this beautiful free spirit. And she decides she's gonna move to this small coal mining town to get a job. I think it's to support her father. And she ends up getting a job in a bar, and things are going okay for a while. And then her father dies, and this shatters the woman. And she ends up being a sex worker on the streets. And in the last verse of the song, they find her body beneath the stairs leading to the bar, and she has a note in her hand that says, "Fare thee well, Tecumseh Valley."

So, it's implied that she has taken her own life. Or perhaps she's been murdered. Either one of those might have been what befell her. So, yeah, not exactly a toe-tapper of a song here.

[00:06:14] **John Moe:** Not exactly a prom theme.

[00:06:14] **Steven Hyden:** Yeah, it's an extremely grim song. But to circle back to what I was saying before—it is a song that, when I listen to it, it does get an emotional reaction from me. One, because of the power of the storytelling coming from Townes Van Zandt. And two, because of the beauty of the song. It's a beautiful song. And there is something about songs that depict these bleak situations where it can be elevated into something else that isn't just a literal sort of retelling of the story. Even in this terrible situation, Townes Van Zandt is able to find something profound, something luminous in this woman's horrible tragedy.

And there's something about the alchemy of the beauty and the ugliness of that song that I think is very moving. I would also say too, just to add another layer of sadness to this song, I'm a fan of the version from the *Live at the Old Quarter* live album. If you're not familiar with that album, it was recorded in the early '70s, and it sounds like Townes Van Zandt is playing in front of like 12 people in this bar. Like, you can hear bottles clanking, you hear people coughing, and it just seems like this genius is playing these beautiful songs in front of an audience who does not care at all about what he's doing.

And I think with a lot of sad songs, it's about the content that is being, you know, performed in the song. But I think people also connect with sad people who are singing these songs. And there's something about Townes Van Zandt, just as a person—especially if you picture him in this bar where no one cares about what he's doing.

(Music fades back in.)

And he's just pouring his heart out. It just adds another layer of sadness that, to me, isn't depressing, because he still perseveres, you know? He's still expressing something beautiful, even in a situation where a lot of people might just feel like, “What's the use?”

[00:08:28] **Music:** “Tecumseh Valley” by Townes Van Zandt.

Well, they found her down beneath the stairs

That led to Gypsy Sally's

And in her hand when she died

Was a note that cried

“Fare thee well, Tecumseh Valley”

(Music fades out.)

[00:08:56] **John Moe:** It's an unpeeling onion of layers of sadness that's going on here. Do you find that it—when something is that poignant and sad and beautiful—that it has the ability to kind of pull one out of a depression? The type of depression where you feel nothing?

[00:09:16] **Steven Hyden:** Yeah, I think so. Because again—you know, like when I think about depression, I picture being lost at sea and not being able to see the shore. You know, so you're wet, you're lost, and you feel as though it's always going to be like this. You know, like that is how I've felt in times of my life where I was depressed. Whereas sadness to me is you're lost at sea, but there's something on the horizon where you know like if I just weather this, I will eventually be on a beach, and I'll be okay. And those are two different states of mind. And I think there is something about a song that—just acknowledging that there's sadness in the world, and you hear someone else's sad story.

And even a song like “Tecumseh Valley”, which is so unbelievably bleak that in a way you can say like, “Well, however bad my life is right now, at least I'm not the woman in this song. Like, this is like the worst-case scenario of my life.” But it’s just—

[00:10:17] **John Moe:** It's the stairs that always gets me in that song.

[00:10:20] **Steven Hyden:** The stairs, absolutely!

[00:10:23] **John Moe:** Just—under the stairs. Ugh! It’s a blow.

[00:10:25] **Steven Hyden:** I know. It's not—it's like he couldn't have just let her live working on the streets. No, she has to end up dead under the stairs. It's brutal. But you know, just having a good cry over a song I think is like so—it's such a gift, you know? There are certain songs that I can play that I know will make me cry every single time. And it's an amazing thing, because there's like specific moments in songs that I know are just triggers for me. And just to know that you can be touched in that way by art I think is a gift. I think it feels good to cry to songs. It's not a bad thing. It's something that I think people really need sometimes.

If they can't get that release in any other way, you can get it from a song. You know? Like, and that's a very—I think that's like a service, I think, that songs can provide for people.

[00:11:28] **John Moe:** And Townes comes through on that one for sure. So, that's “Tecumseh Valley”. You said there was another song that made your list.

[00:11:34] **Steven Hyden:** Well, yeah, this is a modern tearjerker classic. I would actually call this the top tearjerker of the 21st century so far, at least for me. And that's “Elephant” by Jason Isbell.

[00:11:47] **Music:** “Elephant” from the album *Southeastern* by Jason Isbell.

She said, “Andy, you're better than your past”

Winked at me and drained her glass

Cross-legged on a barstool, like nobody sits anymore

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:12:04] **Steven Hyden:** It's funny, I was talking about how there's certain songs that make me cry every time, and I even know the moment when they're gonna trigger me. In “Elephant”, it's a weird line. And I don't know if this is just me or if it works for other people, but the line in the song where Jason Isbell sings—can I swear on this show?

(John confirms.)

Okay, he sings, “If I'd fucked her before she got sick, I'd never hear the end of it.”

[00:12:30] **Music:** “Elephant” by Jason Isbell.

I had fucked her before she got sick, I'd never hear the end of it

She don't have the spirit for that, now

We just drink hard drinks and laugh out loud

And bitch about the weekend crowd

And try to ignore the elephant, somehow

Somehow

(Music fades out.)

[00:13:03] **John Moe:** This is a song about Jason—or the voice in the song—observing a friend of his who's dying of cancer.

[00:13:12] **Steven Hyden:** Yes. And I think the thing about that line is that is very specific about how people process the experience of being around someone who's dying. This song has special resonance for me this year, because you know, this summer my dog died, which was a horrible experience for me. And then my mother-in-law died like six weeks later.

So, this summer was a lot of grief going on. The thing is like when you're around someone who's dying is all of the horrible things—all the obviously horrible things about that whole process—you know, going to the hospital or being in hospice care or just seeing the physical transformation or deterioration of someone as they're slipping away, those things all get normalized like in the moment. Like, you just get used to it. I think it's something your brain does to help keep you sane.

It's the moments of levity that happen in those times that I think are more affecting. Like, someone makes a joke, or you see a flash of the person the way they used to be. They have a certain—they laugh, or they tell a joke, or whatever it is. It's those moments that are almost more affecting, because it breaks the illusion of normalcy. You know like you see the way they used to be, and then you notice again just how screwed up everything else is. And I think that that is what that moment in that song is about for me. Like, it isn't so obviously heavy in that song. So, it kind of becomes the line that is more poignant for that reason.

[00:14:54] **John Moe:** Yeah, “cross-legged on a bar stool like nobody sits anymore” is right in that same grouping, I think.

[00:15:00] **Steven Hyden:** Right. Yeah. Just that thing of like, “Oh, I'm remembering what they were before this.” And it's those memories in the midst of just grieving someone. Like, that's the stuff that really kills you, I think, sometimes.

[00:15:17] **John Moe:** Yeah, there's a lot of carryover, I think, between Townes Van Zandt and Jason Isbell. There's some commonality between those two.

[00:15:23] **Steven Hyden:** Definitely in the songwriting style. Luckily for Jason Isbell, he seems to have steered out of the personal tragedy.

(John agrees.)

Yeah, you know, like Townes unfortunately wasn't able to steer out of that. And Jason, he doesn't seem like he's on the path to, you know, having the tragic ending anymore like he did for a long time. Which is a great thing, and we can look forward, hopefully, to many more great Jason Isbell songs. But yeah, I mean, you know—I mean, personal biography I think always gets wrapped up in these things, for better or worse. You know, there's so many great artists that, you know, they pass away before their time, and then there's baggage that gets affixed to their songs for that reason. There's also something just about singer-songwriters in general.

I know you're talking to other people for this episode. I imagine that a lot of people are probably suggesting singer-songwriter type music to this.

[00:16:19] **John Moe:** It keeps coming up, yeah. *(Chuckles.)* Yeah. We're noticing a real trend towards, you know, person sounding lonely with a guitar.

[00:16:27] **Steven Hyden:** Yeah. There is something about that kind of music. Well, for one thing, it's very lyrics-oriented, so it's easy to attach to a story when it's just one person singing to you. But I also think that, you know, people form passionate what they call parasocial relationships with these types of artists, because there is that illusion of intimacy with someone who's seemingly singing directly to you. And they don't have a band with them. You know, there's not any kind of larger apparatus going on. It's really easy, especially when you're feeling sad or depressed, when you reach out to an artist or a record to feel like, oh, this is something that is just being communicated to me. This song exists for me and no one else.

[00:17:24] **Music:** “Elephant” by Jason Isbell.

I've buried her a thousand times

Given up my place in line

But I don't give a damn about that now

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:17:37] **John Moe:** Well, Steven Hyden, thank you for contributing to the playlist. And I really appreciate your time.

[00:17:41] **Steven Hyden:** Thank you. Hope I didn't make it too sad.

[00:17:48] **John Moe:** Alright, we got Townes Van Zandt and Jason Isbell on our playlist. Good start. Where will we go next? Well, we'll go to Craig Jenkins from Vulture.com for more picks.

[00:17:59] **Music:**

We just try to ignore the elephant, somehow

Somehow, somehow

(Music ends.)

[00:18:23] **Transition:** Somber acoustic guitar.

[00:18:26] **John Moe:** Our bleak American Bandstand continues now on *Depresh Mode*. Craig Jenkins is a music critic for Vulture.com and *New York Magazine*.

Craig Jenkins, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

[00:18:37] **Craig Jenkins:** Thanks for having me on.

[00:18:39] **John Moe:** The subject is depressing songs, which there's no shortage of in popular music. You only had to choose from, I guess, most popular songs?

[00:18:52] **Craig Jenkins:** I think about this subject a lot. Yeah, because—you know, it's not just that the big folky stuff is really sad, but like big pop songs are often the culprit. *(Chuckles.)* Yeah, you're right.

[00:19:03] **John Moe:** Right, right, even—I mean, Britney Spears, “My loneliness is killing me.” There's despair hidden in even the most pop of music, I would think.

[00:19:12] **Craig Jenkins:** I think that big Miley Cyrus song, “Flowers”, is really depressing.

[00:19:17] **John Moe:** Yeah! Yeah. Well, I assigned you to come up with some of your favorite depressing music, and what have you brought to our bleak jukebox?

[00:19:31] **Craig Jenkins:** This was unfortunately not difficult, because definitely a good decade of my life was dedicated to that stuff. But the first thing that I'm thinking about today is the song “Sometimes I Don't Know What To Feel” by Todd Rundgren off of his 1973 album *A Wizard, A True Star*.

[00:19:49] **Music:** “Sometimes I Don't Know What to Feel” from the album *A Wizard, A True Star* by Todd Rundgren.

Sometimes I don't know (woah)

Sometimes I don't know

Sometimes I don't know what to feel

(I just don't know what to feel)

Sometimes I don't know

Sometimes I don't know what to feel

(Music fades out.)

[00:20:09] **Craig Jenkins:** It's a really crazy story. So, he becomes successful for songs like, you know, "Hello, It's Me" and "I Saw The Light". You know, these like beautiful kind of love songs. But you know, gets really into DMT and LSD and peyote and is like wanting the music that he makes to represent the fractured experiences inside. All this like heady stuff. You know, writes this album that is sort of like an hour of the—you know, the jolting like short songs of the back half of the Beatles', *Abbey Road*. And people—it flops. *(Laughs.)* It doesn't do too well. But, you know, in the long term it makes him—it gets him celebrated as this you know, wizard production guy. Frank Ocean has sampled it. It worked out in time.

But the song "Sometimes I Don't Know What to Feel" is kind of one of my dark night of the soul records, my open-in-case-of-depression records. It's kind of like an approximation of Philly Soul, one of the rare like really longer, fleshed-out songs in that kind of patchwork quilt of a record. But you know, it's just like a long sigh about not really always understanding your purpose and like trying to keep going, you know, in the middle of the worst stuff happening. Like, it has the—on the surface, it has the energy of a drug meltdown. Like, there's ridiculous lines in there like—he's like, "Sometimes I don't feel so alone," but then he's like, "I wonder what I would do with myself if the world was gone." Just like this ridiculous—but like *(chuckles)* it still feels poignant. And it still like, in a moment of uncertainty, really resonates with me.

[00:21:38] **Music:** "Sometimes I Don't Know What to Feel" by Todd Rundgren.

Wonder what I'd do with myself if the world was gone

Something makes me stay on my feet

Don't you dare admit to defeat

And if I tell myself it's alright

I can comfort myself through the night

And watch another day dawn

(I can watch another day dawn)

And everything will be cool

(Music fades out.)

[00:22:04] **John Moe:** Is this a song that—you talk about opening some songs up when depression comes calling for you. Is this one of them for you? Does it have a personal connection?

[00:22:13] **Craig Jenkins:** It's one of the ones. I don't know. I just find myself—it's a good record to like distract yourself from everything that you're thinking about, but then like sort of have it really float back into your face at the last—the songs at the end of *A Wizard, A True Star* are like really I don't understand what the problem with the world is kind of records at the end of this big psychedelic journey. That's not the only—you know, that's not the only thing in my in-case-of case though. Like, there's a lot of stuff in there. *(Laughs.)*

[00:22:42] **John Moe:** Ooh! What else is in your case?

[00:22:44] **Craig Jenkins:** I would say most recently—last year, I think it was that Wilco went out on tour for *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot's* anniversary and just anything on that record.

[00:22:58] **Music:** “Ashes of American Flags” from the album *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* by Wilco.

The cash machine is blue and green

For 100 in 20s and a small service fee

I could spend three dollars and sixty-three cents

On Diet Coca Cola and unlit cigarettes

(Music fades out.)

[00:23:27] **Craig Jenkins:** So, I come home from the show. I get back from the show, and I end up lying, staring at the ceiling on a friend's couch like wondering what's wrong with life. *(Laughs.)* It's just like—well, you know, that landed right, you know, post-9/11 in that sort of doldrums 2002 era when people were—there were less jobs everywhere, and the politics were absolutely awful and typifying kind of, I think, what was in everyone's heads. Songs like “Ashes of American Flags”, where it's just a survey of a dark time in everyone's—a shared dark time in everyone's lives.

But yeah, so revisiting that last year really like knocked me on my face. For a quick like couple of days, I was stressed out about that. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:24:13] **John Moe:** Yeah. Yeah. “All my lies are always wishes. I know I would die if I could come back new.”

[00:24:18] **Craig Jenkins:** It's yeah, rough stuff. (*Laughs.*)

[00:24:22] **John Moe:** It's rough stuff, yeah. I'm interested in this idea that a sad song or a depressing song would make somebody feel better, because it does seem counterintuitive. It seems like it should do the opposite.

[00:24:40] **Craig Jenkins:** That's the relationship that I have with Elliott Smith. For a long time, I listened to his stuff when the worst stuff was happening. But I go to it now in a place of—in a better place, and I have a better relationship with it.

[00:24:51] **Music:** “Alphabet Town” from the album *Elliott Smith* by Elliott Smith.

(*Music continues under the dialogue.*)

[00:25:09] **Craig Jenkins:** Elliott Smith's self-titled songs like “Alphabet Town”. Just like rough stuff like living in New York City and having a bad time and finding the worst aspects of downtown kind of record. You know, I listen to it now, and I just love the harmonica. (*Laughs.*) You know, it's the kind of thing that like whatever I want to get out of it is in it already. Like, there's beautiful melodies in it, there's dark lyrics, there's, you know, involving storytelling. And I can focus on different aspects of it at different times and get different results for myself, I find.

[00:25:42] **Music:** “Alphabet Town” by Elliott Smith.

Alphabet City is haunted

Constantina feels right at home

(*Music fades out.*)

[00:26:08] **John Moe:** How much did the death by suicide of Elliott Smith color your experience listening to that music?

[00:26:15] **Craig Jenkins:** To a point. It colored, I guess, my experience to a point, because you go—you know, you always find yourself going back to the music to see what's inside a person's head. But like, you know, knowing a musician that happened to has really sort of shaped my perspective about, you know, thinking that we can surmise what's inside someone's head, you know, based off of what's on the record.

Um, I was friends with Mac Miller, and a lot of people listen to his music thinking that they can glean something from what was, you know, his experience of sadness. But like, anytime that I was in a room with him, that was an upbeat guy. So, you never know. Like, sometimes the music is a place where they can put all that stuff. Sometimes, the music is just a window inside their head. Sometimes, they're just really darkly creative. You never know.

[00:26:59] **John Moe:** You talk about reprogramming yourself to Elliott Smith's music by listening to it in different states of mind. Like, is it as simple as that? If you just—if you go to it when you're in a better place, does that change the music? Or did you have to make some sort of conscious effort to kind of reset yourself?

[00:27:20] **Craig Jenkins:** Making memories with it and changing your impulses to engage with it, I think, go a long way toward, you know, having a different relationship with the saddest stuff that exists. I think, as someone who listens to a lot of that, as someone who is big into Nine Inch Nails lately for the synths and not for the—you know, Trent Reznor's broken-heartedness and, you know, addiction stories kind of thing. Like, I feel like you can zero in on different stuff that's going on in the record. But like, you know, I'm someone who writes about the music, so I'm able to sort of look at it as a series of parts, sometimes, instead of the whole, by training. (*Laughs.*)

[00:27:59] **John Moe:** Yeah, well, I wonder then about being somebody who listens to music and thinks about music and writes about music for a living—as you are. Do you develop a kind of clinical detachment to the music after a while? Because you must encounter a lot of really intense sad music, and how does that not get to you?

[00:28:22] **Craig Jenkins:** If I like it, it sticks. (*Laughs.*) If I don't, then my obligations with it are done, you know, after the assignment comes out. Yeah, like that's just—a lot of I think my favorite records from this year probably on the sad spectrum. The Sufjan Stevens record for sure is one of those ones where someone's going through it and trying to find, you know, the light in that time in their life.

So, my most recent assignment was the Peter Gabriel record, on which he's talking a lot about, you know, what we carry with us from people when they pass and what, you know, work continues after them. Just like some of the darkest stuff, I think. But I found a lightness in that as well. And I think that so did he. And you know, if he doesn't sound like freaked out about it, then I shouldn't.

(*Music fades in.*)

[00:29:15] **John Moe:** Craig Jenkins, thank you so much. And I guess happy listening? Happier?

[00:29:22] **Craig Jenkins:** (*Laughs.*) I will seek out something that does not take me to the darkest depths of the soul.

[00:29:27] **John Moe:** Emotionally resonant listening to you.

[00:29:30] **Craig Jenkins:** (*Laughs.*) You too.

[00:29:33] **John Moe:** You wouldn't want to throw a big celebratory party with songs from this show on the playlist unless you wanted the party to end early, I guess. So, add Todd Rundgren, Wilco, Elliott Smith, Sufjan Stevens, and the new Peter Gabriel album to that list. Just ahead, Ann Powers shares her picks.

[00:29:51] **Music:** “Panopticom (*Bright Side Mix*)” from the album *i/o* by Peter Gabriel.

In the air, the smoke cloud takes its form

(Music fades out.)

[00:30:08] **Transition:** Somber acoustic guitar.

[00:30:10] **John Moe:** We're talking about favorite incredibly depressing music. Ann Powers is a music critic and correspondent for NPR.

Ann Powers, welcome to *Depresh Mode!*

[00:30:21] **Ann Powers:** I'm so excited to be here to talk about the most miserable music we can find.

[00:30:25] **John Moe:** What's the expression everyone uses? You understood the assignment, I think.

[00:30:31] **Ann Powers:** (*Laughs.*) It's not that I, you know, spend hours weeping while listening to my playlist. But okay, maybe minutes—maybe minutes at a time I do that.

[00:30:41] **John Moe:** There is, you know, more than a little bit of misery to choose from in popular songs. So, you had your work cut out for you. But you focused on a couple of songs that we want to talk about here.

[00:30:54] **Ann Powers:** We could talk about so many genres of music where sadness, depression, wallowing are essential. Country music definitely is one. Blues, obviously—although the blues tend to transcend the wallowing. But soul—I think soul, classic soul, is the absolutely best—the high point of musical wallowing. I think it's even better than, you know—

[00:31:23] **John Moe:** The high point of the low point.

[00:31:24] **Ann Powers:** (*Laughs.*) Yeah! Even better than opera, which we could definitely say involves a lot of wallowing, you know. A lot of deathly wallowing happening on stage with operatic heroines.

But soul music, you know—it's a realm in which sadness becomes transcended. It's the connection between soul and gospel, the root of that style of music, and blues kind of running through it too. So, you have these vocal performances that evoke various states of depression or melancholy. But they just go beyond. You know, the singers just go so deep. And they're almost showing off, you know? And that's what I love about the wallowing art of soul.
(Chuckles.)

[00:32:14] **John Moe:** The wallowing genre.

(Ann agrees with a laugh.)

And tell us about the case of the song that typifies what you're talking about.

[00:32:23] **Ann Powers:** Well, I don't know, John, if you remember this from your youth, but I definitely remember the song “Misty Blue” from my I guess tween years, in the 1970s. This is a song that was originally written by the country songwriter, Bob Montgomery. And Eddy Arnold, for example, recorded a version. Had success on the country charts. But in 1976, “Misty Blue” was recorded by Dorothy Moore, a Mississippi based blues artist. And to me, it is just the apex of quiet storm. You know, the kind of internal, mellow version of disco that got really huge in the '70s.

And what I love about this song is the way Dorothy Moore delivers this lyric about not being able to get over someone. And as we listen, I just want you to focus on the phrase “but I can't”, which she delivers so perfectly in this song.

[00:33:23] **Music:** “Misty Blue” from the album *Misty Blue* by Dorothy Moore.

Oh, it's been such a long, long time.

Look like I'd get you off of my mind

But I can't

Just the thought of you (just the thought of you)

Turns my whole world misty blue (misty blue)

Oh honey...

(Music fades out.)

[00:34:14] **Ann Powers:** I know!

(John “ugh”s emotionally.)

I know. Is your whole world turning misty blue right now? I think it might be.

[00:34:20] **John Moe:** There is a bluish hue to it for sure. Well, this is—I mean, I'm reading through all these lyrics and listening to this song, you know. “Deep in my heart, I know I've lied, I've lied, I've lied. And my whole world turns misty blue.” It's somebody dealing with the weight of heartbreak and not coping—you know, not functioning anyway. Like, so many people have—you know, deal with depression but need to get up and go to work or need to take care of the kids, whatever it is. And this is somebody who's just like—has no choice but to just give into it.

[00:34:59] **Ann Powers:** Just surrender to the flow, you know. Surrender to the flow.

[00:35:02] **John Moe:** Surrender to the deep, murky flow.

[00:35:05] **Ann Powers:** Exactly. And I think the musical arrangement on the song—the intensity of—the lushness of it is what really brings that home. In this song, that kind of deep sadness becomes sensual, enjoyable, you know?

[00:35:20] **John Moe:** Yeah, yeah. What do you attest—? I mean, we know from science—science tells us that people feel better after listening to sad music. Why do you think that is?

[00:35:36] **Ann Powers:** Well, I think there's a few reasons. One is identification, simple identification, right? Like, I have had the experience, maybe. Let's think of me. Why not use me as an example, John? I think I'm a good one.

(John agrees.)

So, you know, when I first heard this song, I was probably like 12/13 years old. I had a very huge, unrequited crush on Paul McCartney. And guess what? He didn't know who I was. He didn't know I existed. What a shock, really. *(Laughs.)* But my crush on Paul McCartney was painful. And I think when I heard this song as a tween, I felt I could identify with this idea that Dorothy Moore's getting across. Sadness fills my whole world, because Paul McCartney will never know who I am, you know?

(John chuckles.)

[00:36:23] **Music:** “Misty Blue” by Dorothy Moore.

Baby, when I say that I'm glad we're through

Deep in my heart I know I've lied

I've lied (just the thought of you)

(Music fades out.)

[00:36:50] **Ann Powers:** So, I think that's one reason. And the other reason I think is what people call entrainment, which is usually used to talk about the connection to rhythm—how music occupies your body. And I feel with a slow, sad song, music just washes into your body. And is that a cleansing? Or maybe it's more like a floating down the river. It relaxes you in a weird way.

[00:37:16] **John Moe:** Mm! Yeah. Yeah. It's a wallowing, like you say, but there's some treading water in it. (*Chuckles.*) There's some floating.

[00:37:25] **Ann Powers:** Yeah. Yeah. And the vocals—you know, the vocals in a song like Dorothy Moore's "Misty Blue" or another great wallowing song, Stevie Wonder's "I Never Dreamed You'd Leave in Summer"—maybe the most wallowing of all wallowing songs. The vocals are so artful that you enjoy the performance, and it kind of can turn maybe your own grief into the subject of a performance? I don't know. It allows for a strange kind of distance as well. Enacting sadness by singing along with a sad song allows you to kind of step outside of it for a moment. Or—is that crazy? I don't know.

[00:38:06] **John Moe:** It's just crazy enough. It's just crazy enough to work.

[00:38:10] **Ann Powers:** (*Laughs.*) That's my theory.

[00:38:11] **John Moe:** Alright. So, we've got Dorothy Moore, and we've got "Misty Blue". And then I understand you have another song that kind of takes a slightly different angle to "I am surrounded by depressing circumstances".

[00:38:26] **Ann Powers:** Yes. I was thinking about the great practice of wallowing in music, and then I wanted to think of anything that might counter that, any song that might counter that. And I think the best example is the 5th Dimension's great hit, "One Less Bell to Answer". This is a Burt Bacharach and Hal David song, those masters of the, you know, gradient emotion—the kind of nuanced and disciplined expression of emotion. So many Dionne Warwick songs capture that.

But this song, just the lyrics are so—(*sighs with great emotion*) oh my god. You know, here's this woman. She no longer has to fry an egg for her lover. She, you know, no longer has to go to the door. That part always confused me, the first line, because why is he ringing the bell? He lives there, right? (*Laughs.*)

[00:39:21] **John Moe:** Right. Is there a Pavlovian thing going on here? Or—?

[00:39:23] **Ann Powers:** Exactly. But you know, it's all these things. One less man to pick up after. She's is working so hard to be okay. And then she just can't.

[00:39:38] **Music:** "One Less Bell to Answer" from the album *Running with Scissors* by the 5th Dimension.

One less bell to answer

One less egg to fry

One less man to pick up after

I should be happy, but all I do is cry

(Cry, cry, no more laughter)

Oh, I should be happy

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:40:17] **Ann Powers:** And the way in which Marilyn McCoo, who sings a lead vocal on this song—you know, she shows us that moment when she can no longer keep it together. You know, she just like hits that big chorus, and you're like, “UGH! Okay, thank goodness I can fall apart.” The song gives you that.

[00:40:37] **Music:**

I still run

I don't know how in the world

To stop thinking of him

'Cause I still love him so

I end each day the way I start out

Crying my heart out

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:41:08] **Ann Powers:** And then she kind of like descends on that and goes back into her state of trying to keep it together. And then she just like, you know, loses it. “You know, why did he leave me? You know, somebody, please, where did he go?” And she's just begging by the end. It becomes like a classic blues or a classic soul song. So, I can see her in her beautiful house dress, just crying in the kitchen.

[00:41:39] **John Moe:** She makes a run for functionality. She makes a run for coping and makes it about halfway through her own song before hitting the wall.

(Music fades out.)

[00:41:48] **Ann Powers:** Yeah, and you know, absolute kudos and all praise to Hal David who wrote the greatest lyrics and, you know, captured that moment in which your mind goes from coping to collapse so beautifully.

You know, you think of so many of his lyrics. “Do You Know the Way to San Jose” or even “Say a Little Prayer”—even the happy songs, you know, there's still like this tension in them. Like, “I'm a little lost. Oh my goodness. I'm a lot more lost than I thought.” That's kind of the message of all these songs.

[00:42:24] **John Moe:** Right, right, the trace of melancholy that goes all the way through it. Yeah.

[00:42:28] **Ann Powers:** That just turns misty blue, John! I don't know what happens!

[00:42:30] **John Moe:** Is making a song sad or depressing—is that almost a way of cheating if you're writing a song?

(Ann laughs.)

Doesn't it seem much easier? I was talking to Jason Isbell one time, and I said, “Do you think you could write a happy song in a minor key?”

And he said, “I don't think I could write a happy song in any key.”

[00:42:56] **Ann Powers:** Oh, that's interesting. I think that the best sad songs are very well modulated, even the wallowing songs, and require the same amount of kind of self-control from a writer. If there's, you know—there's bathos, there's intense sentimentality, but then there are those sad songs that are so precise. And I think “One Less Bell to Answer” is a good example, but like Jason Isbell's song “Elephant”, for example, is so restrained, you know? And it's about such a huge tragedy, but it's also about, you know, how everyone around this woman who is dying of cancer doesn't acknowledge the tragedy. So, he has to be restrained in delivering it.

So, hey, Jason, give yourself a little credit. And I know you can write a happy song, too. I've heard some.

(They laugh.)

[00:43:49] **John Moe:** It's funny, what a lot of these have in common—“Misty Blue” and “One Less Bell to Answer” and even “Elephant”, there's a specificity to them.

(Ann agrees.)

You know, it's not just “I'm sad.” It's “I'm sad, because this happened, and then this happened as a result. And this is where I'm at.”

(Ann agrees enthusiastically.)

And it's—they really—they do their homework.

[00:44:10] **Ann Powers:** Totally. And I mean, another great example of what you're talking about is the song, “My Mom” by Chocolate Genius. Chocolate Genius—MarkAnthony Thompson, one of our great singer-songwriters—released an amazing record called *Black Music* in 1998.

[00:44:28] **Music:** “My Mom” from the album *Black Music* by Chocolate Genius, Inc.

They got five televisions in a house full of three

Look up on that fake fireplace

You know, the buck-toothed boy's me

See that wood panel room?

That's where I learned to drink

You see that hole in the wall?

That was Seagram's, I think

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:44:54] **Ann Powers:** This song was on that record, and I had never heard a song about coping with a parent's descent into dementia before I heard this song. And I've heard few since then. And I think that, again, it's like what makes a sad—what can make a sad song great: finding a subject, finding a story that is so specific and that someone, a listener, can say, “Oh my gosh, that's my experience.” Or you know, “Heaven forbid that become my experience.”

But that song, in which he's detailing going to his mother's home, his family home, and remembering all these things, and then the ripping chorus, the heart-rending chorus where he just says, “And my sweet mom can't remember my name.” I just—I remember the first time I heard it, and I was just completely disassembled. You know? Just the horror of what was going on. And how common is that now, you know?

[00:46:00] **Music:**

My sweet mom

She don't remember my name

My mom

She can't remember my name

My mom

(Music fades out.)

[00:46:27] **John Moe:** Oh boy, that is a corker of a song.

We were talking with Steven Hyden—the rock critic Steven Hyden. And he drew a distinction between incredibly sad songs and songs that mirror depression itself, which he said in his case means he feels nothing. Are there songs that—*(chuckles)* I brought up like mid-career Starship as possibly an example—

(Ann laughs.)

—of songs that make you feel nothing at all? Is there a type of music or a specific song that makes you feel just dead inside?

[00:47:04] **Ann Powers:** Mm! Wow, that's—you know, John, I love everything. I'm just a happy go lucky—no, I'm not. *(Chuckles.)*

[00:47:07] **John Moe:** Sure. You love music.

[00:47:11] **Ann Powers:** But I mean, I suppose—you know, here's another story about my unrequited love for Paul McCartney. *(Chuckling.)* When I was a child, I became obsessed with the Beatles, and I came to despise the song “Good Day Sunshine”. Now, this isn't something that made me feel nothing at all, but it is a song that wasn't designed to make anyone feel sad. It's one of the—I mean, it literally has the line, “I'm in love, and it's a sunny day.” It's like the happiest song he ever wrote. I felt so distressed that I was an unhappy, unpopular kid. And here's my love, Paul McCartney, happy with Jane Asher or Linda or whoever he was happy with at the time. And that devastated me.

So, I don't think that's what you're—that doesn't mirror depression, but it just shows how, you know, your unhappiness can come unexpectedly when you're listening to music.

[00:48:11] **John Moe:** Right, right. Sad songs can make you feel better, but happy songs can make you feel worse! *(Chuckles.)*

[00:48:15] **Ann Powers:** Absolutely! Especially if, you know, someone else is enjoying something that you wish you could enjoy.

[00:48:23] **John Moe:** Aw, man. Well, Ann Powers, thank you so much for joining us. I really hope you get your whole situation with Paul McCartney straightened out at some point in your life.

[00:48:32] **Ann Powers:** (*Laughs.*) It's okay. I'm over you, Paul. George was better looking anyway.

[00:48:39] **John Moe:** Oh, okay! Bold statement during *Depresh Mode*. Ann Powers, thank you.

[00:48:44] **Ann Powers:** Thanks so much!

[00:48:45] **Music:** “Good Day Sunshine” from the album *Revolver* by the Beatles.

I need to laugh, and when the sun is out

I've got something I can laugh about

I feel good in a special way

I'm in love and it's a sunny day

Good day sunshine

(Music fades out.)

[00:49:06] **John Moe:** I put together a playlist of every song mentioned on today's show. Got a link to that on our show page over at MaximumFun.org. The holidays are very much upon us, and you can shop for *Depresh Mode* merchandise, and merchandise for lots and lots of maximum fun shows over at MaxFunStore.com. We've got *Depresh Mode* mugs and shirts, we've got *Depresh Mode* sweatpants, we've got a lot of things that say “I'm glad you're here” on them, which is a great sentiment whether you're talking about the show or not. That's at MaxFunStore.com. Be sure to hit subscribe, give us five stars, write rave reviews. That gets the show out into the world where it can help more people.

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can be reached in the United States by calling or texting 988. It's free, it's available 24/7. Our Instagram and Twitter are both @DepreshPod. If you're on Facebook, look up our mental health discussion group, Preshies. A lot of good conversation happening over there. This topic of these depressing songs sparked a lot of dialogue and a lot of great suggestions over at the Preshies group on Facebook. Our *Depresh Mode* newsletter is on Substack, search that up. I'm on Twitter @JohnMoe, Instagram @JohnMoe also. Please use our electric mail address to reach us, DepreshMode@maximumfun.org.

Hi, credits listeners. My pick? “Dirt in the Ground” by Tom Waits, off the album *Bone Machine*. Actually, “Cold Cold Ground” off *Frank's Wild Years* is pretty good, too. Tom's got a lot of songs about the ground.

Depresh Mode is made possible by your contributions. Our production team includes Raghu Manavalan, Gabe Mara, Kevin Ferguson, and me. We get booking help from Mara Davis.

Rhett Miller wrote and performed our very uplifting theme song, “Building Wings”. *Depresh Mode* is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I'm John Moe. Bye now!

[00:50:59] **Music:** “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller.

I'm always falling off of cliffs, now

Building wings on the way down

I am figuring things out

Building wings, building wings, building wings

No one knows the reason

Maybe there's no reason

I just keep believing

No one knows the answer

Maybe there's no answer

I just keep on dancing

[00:51:37] **Christina:** I'm Christina from Missouri, and my reminder is that the new year does not require a new you. You are enough as you are.

(Music fades out.)

[00:51:48] **Sound Effect:** Cheerful ukulele chord.

[00:51:50] **Speaker 1:** Maximum Fun.

[00:51:51] **Speaker 2:** A worker-owned network.

[00:51:52] **Speaker 3:** Of artist owned shows.

[00:51:54] **Speaker 4:** Supported—

[00:51:55] **Speaker 5:** —directly—

[00:51:56] **Speaker 6:** —by you!