"Up From Pedro"

by Alan Licht for _the Wire_ edition 512 • October 2026

"I'm curious about your musical journey, guitar man, what's your earliest musical memory?" That was the first question Mike Watt asked me on his long-running radio show, *The Watt From Pedro Show*, back in 2021. It's also the first question he asks every guest on every episode, as he goes on to probe their musical development over the remainder of the show. A 68 year old bass man, to use his own parlance, who's been touring and recording since the late 1970s, Watt's own musical journey is still ongoing, both figuratively and literally. "I'm just about to do my 74th tour, only 74 more," he laughs, over a Discord call. "If it's more than a month I call it a tour. Music is a trip because I got into it to be with my friend, and then the big coincidence is the Movement."

His friend was fellow teenager D Boon, who along with their schoolmate George Hurley formed Minutemen in San Pedro, California, where Watt still lives, and the Movement is Watt's own term for the original DIY/punk explosion of the mid to late 1970s and beyond to the present day. He and Boon would drive up to see bands in Hollywood ("The first one we saw was The Bags, and then The Dils, The Germs, The Screamers, Nervous Gender, Alley Cats, crazy ass shit"), after being primed by reading about the scenes in New York or London in magazines.

Punk music wasn't necessarily as radical as punk culture looked: "Punk at first was pictures, right, we didn't know what it sounded like, and then when I heard [The Damned's debut single] "New Rose", it was guitar music like [The Who's] "I Can't Explain"."

Perhaps as a result, the two had an openness to experimentation that would set them apart from other incipient hardcore punk bands. "When we bought records, we would wait till we had a weekend off," recalls Watt, "and then we'd eat L[SD] and we'd have no idea what it was gonna sound like and it would blow our minds. I remember hearing that Cabaret Voltaire album, *Mix-Up*, and *Prayers On Fire*, The Birthday Party."

Before punk, they "hung out, we played, his [Boon's] mama put me on bass, I didn't even know what it was. The first gig we saw was T Rex. This is the thing about arena rock, I didn't even know bass had bigger strings. 'Cause you're so far away, Marc Bolan was about this tall," he snickers. "We had never gone to a club until the Movement, and there's Lorna Doom [of The Germs], she's got big strings for the bass. I had figured it out by then, but I played a guitar with four strings for the first couple of years, I just didn't know."

Possessing a musical breadth that made them something of an anomaly within the often homogeneous hardcore punk scene, Minutemen picked up where Wire and The Pop Group left off. Many of their breakneck-paced songs dispensed with rhymes, verses and choruses while clocking in at a minute or less, à la Wire's *Pink Flag*, and sported jagged funk and jazz inflections with scratchy guitar as The Pop Group did. One of the first bands that Black Flag brought aboard their SST label, Minutemen released a slew of EPs and albums in short order before peaking with their magnum opus, 1984's *Double Nickels On The Dime*, 45 songs spread over two LPs, an instant classic long considered a high point of hardcore and 80s music in general, but their run ended prematurely when Boon was killed in a van accident in late 1985.

The trio format has proved durable for Watt though, as subsequent bands like fIREHOSE (with Hurley and Ed Crawford), The Pair Of Pliers (Tom Watson and Vince Meghrouni), The Black Gang

(Nels Cline and Stephen Hodges), The Secondmen (Pete Mazich and Jerry Trebotic), The Missingmen (Watson and Raul Morales), mssv (Mike Baggetta and Hodges), and many others have all been threesomes. I ask Watt what the appeal of a trio might be. "Well, more room in the van," he cracks. "It might have something to do with bass. For me, it's sort of like Django Reinhardt – he started off playing in other people's bands, but when he got his own bands, he didn't have horns. They didn't have amps, and the horns were louder – if you weren't a horn, you were in the rhythm section, everybody, piano, guitar, 'cause they were so fuckin' loud. So, I think trio is about that, in a way.

"When I met D Boon he only knew Creedence [Clearwater Revival], and I couldn't hear the bass on them records! And then on AM radio, Motown with [in-house bassist] James Jamerson – you could hear the bass parts! Even out of them little speakers! That's what I figured out about bass, part of it was the composition. I will say, a lot of the overseas stuff, Geezer Butler, Andy Fraser, Chas Chandler, Peter Quaife – English guys would put the bass up in the mix, I could hear those guys and I could hear the parts. Physics-wise, the guitar and the singer are going to rule the midrange, but if you got the parts... and with punk, man, you could hear bass on punk records. I think part of it was, everybody's learning how to play, so everybody's equal."

One of the more unexpected roots that Watt put down in Minutemen is improvisation, which has marked many of his recent projects: a 2024 tour and self-titled album by an all-improv trio with Chris Corsano and Joe Baiza, which also has an upcoming double LP; an off-the-cuff album with the synth/drums duo Galecstasy (Raquel Bell and Jared Marshall) that came out in January; and two as yet unreleased sessions from this past spring, one with Mike Pride and Brandon Seabrook, the other

with Kid Millions and Jon Irabagon. "This is kind of a new thing; I did some of this stuff in the old days, in fact Minutemen gigs would have two or three, sometimes four or five even, titles that had no songs, were just for us to make noise, improvise, for a minute. One of them we did in the Mojave Desert came out on *The Politics Of Time*, we called it "Tune For Wind God", and maybe there was "Tune For Sun God", so we were into this improvisation thing. For us, it's Georgie, going to the Lighthouse [in Hermosa Beach] when he was 16, 17 years old to see Max Roach, he's actually the first jazz component of the Minutemen, and Raymond [Pettibon] taking me to these gigs up in Hollywood."

The free jazz fandom of proto-punks like The Velvet Underground, The Stooges and The MC5, the later New York groups like Television, Patti Smith and The Voidoids, and some of the no wave bands has been documented in punk histories, while any influence on the West Coast scene has been more obscure, but it seeps into Minutemen's 1983 *Buzz Or Howl Under The Influence Of Heat* EP, namely its augmentations of free-wheeling trumpet and recorder on tracks like "Dreams Are Free, Motherfucker!", "The Toe Jam" and "The Product".

Watt starts every radio show with a John Coltrane track, and with Pettibon he "saw Pharoah [Sanders] like five times, Elvin [Jones] like eight times, Cecil McBee, Sam Rivers, all these cats. The first time I heard John Coltrane was Raymond playing *Ascension* after a Germs gig, I thought he was an older punk artist, I didn't know he was dead, I didn't know anything about him! See, D Boon would pick up on stuff that I liked, he'd see me get into things, and then bring these ideas into the band, for me. D Boon was really kind that way. So, when he saw me going to these instrumental gigs with Raymond, let's bring some of this into our sets. Minutemen are doing instrumentals at hardcore gigs, with people slam-dancing and shit."

Watt points out that this would've been hard to detect, as the band constructed shows to be "like one song, so you can't tell [an instrumental is] its own song, you think it might be part of the song in front of it. But if you hear live tapes, you'll hear these little jams. I just heard one thing where there's three or four of them, and Spotsky [Spot, SST producer] plays clarinet on one." Spot also plays clarinet on another *Politics Of Time* instrumental cut, "Joy Jam".

Watt cites guesting on Baiza's former band Saccharine Trust's totally improvised *Worldbroken* album back in 1985 as another precursor to his recent improv activities. "I did a whole West Coast tour [in 2024] with Baiza and Corsano, 17 gigs with not one fuckin' song," he marvels. "Even though I've done all this stuff, I've not done that shit. Man, I was so scared, but Stephen Hodges told me something once about being scared when I was making my first solo album [1995's *Ball-Hog Or Tugboat?*], he said being a little bit scared is like being a little bit excited, it's OK. But I couldn't believe it, I was like, what are we going to do, what are we going to pull out of our ass?

"But Chris Corsano, he's been doing this, so what I did was, I got real close on him, right up by the ride cymbal. I had Chris play through me, literally, like a sock puppet [laughs]. The way I was taught jamming, as a teenager, was you set up some riff, and then someone noodles over it. The Chris Corsano way is, you change, and you change the change, and you change the change, it's perpetual. What's that thing Isaac Newton came up with? The calculus, the interval – that's the way he is. [Drummer] Mike Pride studied with Milford Graves, and Chris Corsano talked about him, he says that's a thing from Africa, it's not really fixed loops, it's more like the wind or the tide."

I guess, correctly, that the two shows Watt played with Jandek in 2011 and 2013 meant improvising too. A similar lack of advance

prep was also intimidating for Watt. "The first time we were talking for about two hours before the gig, and he didn't mention one thing about what we were gonna do. Actually, he knew a lot about the old days – knew about Germs and stuff, Bad Brains. And finally, maybe five minutes before we're supposed to go on, he shows us this effects box, and says, 'I might use one of these. And, you know, I might put words on a stand.' Then he goes to the drummer [BJ Miller], 'Do you know Cream?' Of course, he's a young guy, from that band HEALTH, Inland Empire band, and he goes, 'Maybe my dad does' [laughs]. And I go, oh, maybe I do Jack Bruce? [Jandek] says, 'Yeah, maybe you do that.' That was it! We go out there, and I said to the drummer, look, do what [Stephen] Perkins does, just keep a beat going, and we'll make it."

The drummer complied, and the show with Jandek went on for a full hundred minutes. "Hank Rollins is in the front row, watching the whole fuckin' thing, it was a pants-shitter, but I dug it. I just listened to what he played, he played the most trippy guitar. It left lots of possibility, you could do all kinds of stuff with it. It wasn't a take it or leave it thing, it was like a springboard. I really liked him, he reminded me of the old days, very unique individuals in the Movement. You can still find them."

Being a springboard is also the way Watt sees composing songs on the bass, then showing them to bandmates without specifying chord changes. "I like using bass as a composition tool, you don't realise the end, 'cause the harmonics are so limited, so you got more of a launchpad for your collaborators. People like Nels Cline love it; other people are like, 'Man, why don't you write out the fuckin' symbols, Watt,'" he laughs. "They want to have it all mapped out, like on a piano. When D Boon showed me his songs, he never wrote me a bassline; I never wrote his guitar line. Sometimes I would write on the guitar, maybe one out of 20 Minutemen songs, like "History Lesson" or something, but most

of them I wrote on the bass, and because we grew up together, a further trip in the greater musical odyssey that takes up his "wack life", as his voluminous "hoot page" website puts it, I realise the figure he most reminds me of is bassist Charlie Haden.

Haden made his name in the late 50s with a maverick jazz group, Ornette Coleman's classic quartet, and his first solo album *Liberation Music Orchestra* (1970) was recorded with an all-star cast of free jazz players playing Spanish Civil War folk songs as well as material by Carla Bley, Coleman and Haden himself. *Ball-Hog Or Tugboat?* features a similar who's who of 90s alternative rockers, with interpretations of songs by Blackbird (a later band of The Dils' Chip and Tony Kinman), Sonic Youth and Funkadelic alongside Watt's own tunes. (Both Liberation Music Orchestra and Minutemen were politically conscious as well.)

Haden favoured duos, as opposed to Watt's beloved trios, and did occasional pop sessions, with Beck, Ringo Starr and Rickie Lee Jones, just as Watt was drafted by former SST label-mate Henry Kaiser for an ensemble playing electric versions of Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* and *Meditations*. As it turns out, in 1984 Haden's then teenage son Josh was a Minutemen fan, which led to Haden hearing the band and joining them onstage at McCabe's for a jammed-out ten minute version of "Little Man With A Gun In His Hand" (still findable on YouTube).

I mention the Haden comparison to Watt, who reminds me that he went on to produce Josh's band Treacherous Jaywalkers for SST and has also worked with Haden's daughter Petra. "And Nels Cline toured with Charlie Haden in Europe. It's trippy how these connections are." Later on the day of our interview I discover it was actually Haden's birthday, and mention the synchronicity in a follow up email to Watt. "Ain't that a trip!" he replies, and goes on to relate a story of getting into a minor traffic accident driving home from Haden's memorial, while listening to KPFK, a "listener

supported station where I first heard experimental music from Carl Stone's show *Imaginary Landscape* in the 70s – I thought music like this was part of the Movement – Throbbing Gristle, correct?! Pre-rules days for the Movement!"

While Watt was driving home, KPFK was playing Don Cherry's *Relativity Suite*, "and damn if Charlie Haden wasn't doing a bass solo when I got hit – not one scratch on the boat. I figure Charlie had protected me with his bass."

Considering their iconoclastic beginnings with Coleman and Minutemen respectively, and their free-ranging ways, maybe classification is beside the point for both Haden and Watt. "When you start to put in genre names it's like a gulag, you start building a prison camp for expression," says Watt. "I remember D Boon telling me, 'Man, we can play whatever we want, people just got to know that it's the Minutemen.' And then later on, when I was starting to play with people I don't know, I didn't grow up with, I still wanted them to somehow know it's Watt they're playing with, the composition part."

Watt can seemingly throw down a memorable bassline off the top of his head and build a song around it. As ever, he sources it all back to the Movement. "The Hollywood bands made us want to start a band, but when we saw Pere Ubu, we were like, wow, you really can do whatever you want – David [Thomas, vocalist] had a hammer, and a railroad spike! Also, The Pop Group, and the idea of putting Parliament-Funkadelic with Captain Beefheart, why not? Why not do that, why don't they go together, if you want 'em to. A lot of the Movement bands, if you want it to happen, do it. If it turns turtle," he smiles, "you know, try again." ●