

Pop Talk: Musician's painful divorce paid artistic dividends

by *George_Varga*

What becomes of the brokenhearted?

Some never recover, some bounce right back. Others join the ranks of the walking wounded for months or years, or until love blooms anew. For former Nickel Creek mandolinist and singer Chris Thile, enduring the painful aftermath of his failed marriage proved more wrenching - and, later on, artistically productive - than he could have ever imagined.

PUNCH BROTHERS - 'There's a level of music compatibility that I'm not sure I've encountered before,' says Chris Thile, right, of his edgy new band, The Punch Brothers. CNS Photo courtesy of Autumn de Wilde. What he describes as "the harrowing experience that was my divorce" in 2004 led to a profound crisis of faith that turned Thile's world inside out. The Grammy Award-winning maverick soon found himself questioning his very existence and the deeply held spiritual beliefs that had provided his moral compass since he was a child.

Thile ultimately emerged stronger, if less innocent and naive about the ways of love and life. The soul-searching inspired by his whirlwind, 18-month marriage to Jessie Meighan, a budding fashion designer, resulted in "The Blind Leaving the Blind," the 40-minute, four-part opus that forms the musical and emotional centerpiece of "Punch," the edgy, often dazzling debut album by Thile's genre-leaping new band, The Punch Brothers.

"It was a process of transposing my feelings into music," he said recently from Vermont, the morning after the first date on The Punch's Brothers' national concert tour.

"Writing and recording was definitely something to take my mind off what was going on and to take a musical picture of it. It was tough, but very romantic, a kind of youthful melodrama."

Thile's loss of innocence fuels "The Blind's" unabashedly personal lyrics. In one couplet, he sings: The sweet young man goes walking down the street / Wiping blood off his hands. In another: Let's drink 'til our hearts break open ... let's drink to my indiscretions.

And in "Blind's" climactic fourth movement, he laments: Lord, I don't know why / You'd give me so much life / To live resigned to dying.

"It's by no means saying what the characters in the songs are doing is the right way to go," Thile said. "But it is trying to be brutally honest about the questioning of one's beliefs and the hopefully harmless rabble-rousing. ..."

"My life had gone so storybook well up to (the divorce) that I almost welcomed a little drama. So, in a way, the album is not just cathartic but a celebration of youth and passion. It's also about how, when something like this happens to you, you feel like you're the only one who it's ever happened to."

There have been a number of classic albums that vividly chronicled the end of a marriage or an affair, most

famously Bob Dylan's epic "Blood on the Tracks" in 1975.

Then, there's Roseanne Cash's "Interiors," Marvin Gaye's "Here, My Dear," Bruce Springsteen's "Tunnel of Love" and Beck's "Sea Change." Each demonstrates how a well-crafted album of pain and loss can turn heartbreak into transcendent art.

"Interestingly enough, 'Sea Change' was kind of my breakup record," said Oceanside, Calif., native Thile, 27.

"It came out at the tail end of my marriage and I listened to it a lot. And 'Blood on the Tracks' is, of course, one of the greatest records of all time. I don't think 'Sea Change' affected 'Punch' that much, except that I really appreciated that it was a breakup record and a chance to have a dialogue with good musicians about it."

Thile accurately describes The Punch Brothers as "amazing." The band's members also accompanied him on his fifth solo album, 2006's "How to Grow a Woman From the Ground Up," which he made before Nickel Creek's members parted company last fall.

"We were together 18 years and it was just time to do something new," Thile said of his Nickel Creek bandmates, Sean and Sara Watkins. "They are still two of my dearest friends and I think they always will be."

The Punch Brothers was not officially launched until last year. Named after an 1882 Mark Twain short story ("Punch, Brothers, Punch!"), the band features guitarist Chris Eldridge, banjo player Noam Pikelny, bassist Greg Garrison and violinist Gabe Witcher, a longtime friend of Thile who has recorded with Beck, Lyle Lovett, Puddle of Mudd and Nickel Creek's Sean Watkins.

"Chris' lyrics on 'The Blind Leaving the Blind' are really important," Eldridge, 25, said. "Especially in the first movement, where it breaks down and he's talking about San Francisco's Nob Hill and his wife going to church. The lyrics are pastoral and sad, and we tried to reflect that musically."

The interaction worked both ways.

"I got to check lyrics with the guys in the band," Thile said, "I'd ask: 'Hey, is this too much information?' They were always real honest with me about it."

Thile and Eldridge readily acknowledge that "Punch" is anything but easy listening, lyrically or musically.

Equal parts folk, bluegrass, jazz and contemporary classical, it's a brave and daring work, especially in an era of ring-tone-length attention spans and lowest-common-denominator pop music.

Listen to "Punch" once and you may be puzzled. But the music unfolds over time to reveal a rich tapestry of styles and sounds that require - and reward - attentive listening.

"That is exactly what we're trying to do," Thile said. "The music is meant to engage, to ask questions. The listening process needs to go both ways. The only music I ever really like is music that involves me, that needs me to get in there and listen to it multiple times and come to terms with it.

"I just wanted to really challenge myself as a composer. And I'd never tried to write a long-form composition that held together, hopefully, thematically and sort of told a story on a more grand scale. In writing this, I wanted to make sure these musicians, who are so creative, had a vehicle to express themselves. The whole point of this tour is to find people who want to have that two-way relationship with music."

One man's musical passions

"As a listener, I get frustrated by music that doesn't need me and just happens to me," said former Nickel Creek mainstay Chris Thile, now on tour with his even more eclectic new band, The Punch Brothers.

Here are three key artists Thile credits with making music that requires active engagement from each listener:

BELA BARTOK

Backstory: Hungary's greatest and most influential composer, Bartok (1881-1945) was instrumental in incorporating traditional Hungarian folk music elements into a formal classical setting. His later work was inspired by such edgy composers as Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schonberg, but Bartok's instantly identifiable music sounds like no other.

Thile: "I am absolutely crazy right now about Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra and the album of that with Fritz Reiner conducting the Chicago Symphony. He considered himself to be just as much a musicologist as a composer, and that rings loudly and clearly for me."

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Backstory: One of France's most acclaimed and innovative composers, Debussy (1862-1918) drew from many influences to create an intensely impressionistic style. "The primary aim of French music is to give pleasure," he once wrote, and the beauty of his compositions overshadowed just how creative they were.

Thile: "I really like Debussy's only string quartet. You couldn't find a more skilled Western harmonist than him, but he was unconcerned with observing the customs of Western harmony. As a result, he almost single-handedly developed the jazz harmony language."

RADIOHEAD

Backstory: The most important and successful art-rock band of the past 15 years - and the most consistently daring and original. Thile is such a fan that he recorded an as-yet unreleased version of "Morning Bell" (from Radiohead's 2000 "Kid A" album), which he and The Punch Brothers often perform in concert.

Thile: "I love the whole catalog of Radiohead. I think Thom Yorke, in conjunction with his band members, is doing some incredible work and I'm really into it."

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