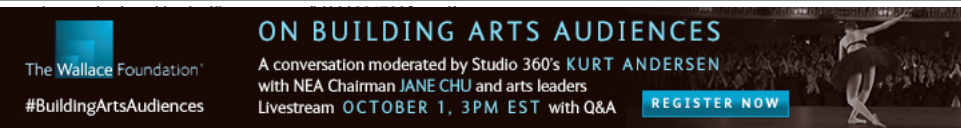


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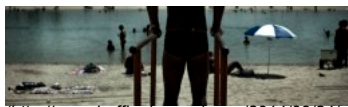
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On and Off the Record with Graham Nash (In Conversation with Mr. Fish)

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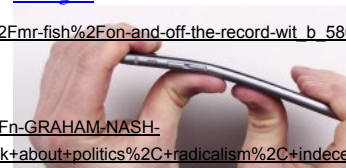
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In the end we shall have had enough of cynicism, skepticism and humbug, and we shall want to live more musically.

-Vincent Van Gogh

It took me three years to finally drip all the way out of college and I doubt that I would've been able to do it without headphones. That's me on the D bus at Rutgers University with hair in my face, filthy black horn-rimmed glasses and a Walkman clamped onto my head like forceps tasked with the dubious job of pulling me from the supercilious hole of cynicism that I'd been gestating in ever since leaving high school. I'm listening to an unreleased Beatles song called *Watching Rainbows*. John Lennon is singing, "Shoot me! Shoot me! Whatever you do you gotta kill somebody to get what you want, you gotta shoot me! You gotta shoot me! Please shoot me!" and I'm deliberately *not* standing up to get off at my stop to go to my Tuesday afternoon class on expository writing where I'd be forced to remove my headphones and listen to a middle aged woman in sensible shoes lecture me on how to bow at the waist and square dance politely with her syllabus. Or that's me *not* getting off the G bus to learn about third-person thesis construction because I'm listening to CSNY sing *Blackbird* at the Fillmore East in 1970, or that's me *not* getting off the L bus to make tree-rubbings and collaborative scrap paper collages with girls in top-siders and digital watches because Bob Dylan is telling me how, "Disillusioned words like bullets bark as human gods aim for their marks, make everything from toy guns that sparks to flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark, it's easy to see without looking too far that not much is really sacred."

I was like a lot of other kids unsuited to the minty austerity of a traditional classroom education, having graduated 12th grade with an 'A' in art and a long line of solid 'D's in *Don't give a flying fuck about anything else*. Unless the information was unmanicured and told to me internally by my own voice, preferably with a cocked eyebrow and a shit-eating grin, I wasn't learning anything. Graham Nash, according to his omnibus autobiography, *Wild Tales*, out now in paperback, suffered the same impatience for gratuitous conformity and refused to accept the conventional spectatorship of life. "Once rock 'n' roll got under my skin, it was all over for me," he explains in his book. "Instead of listening to my lessons at school, I began doodling... Daydreams took over, and I pulled myself toward those dreams. No matter what they tried to teach me, I knew where I was headed. Nothing was going to derail my dreams." His was a life saved by saying *fuck you* to those least likely to comprehend the concept of deliberate and uncompromising self-preservation. Even as a child, Nash, knew enough about the existential toxicity of straight society's relentless demand for total acquiescence *not* to stand up and to lift the needle off the Everly Brothers 45 spinning inside his beloved Philips record player, for to do so would've resulted in him succumbing to the common trajectory of all the similarly fated lads around him: an abbreviated lifetime spent toiling in the Salford cotton mills or the coalmines of Manchester, his only reward for following the rules and coloring within the lines being a pitying Jesus on weekends, the demented satisfaction of an early death and scarcely a pot to piss in.

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I recently met with the artist on a rooftop terrace bar overlooking New York City to talk about politics, radicalism, indecency, hicks and critics, Yoko Ono and what Joni Mitchell might remember about one of the most significant moments of his life. Here is a portion of our conversation.

FISH: Let's begin with your book, *Wild Tales [A Rock & Roll Life]*. I want to talk about how the book begins and how it ends.

NASH: All right.

FISH: It begins with the sentence, "It always comes down to the music," and it ends with, "It *all* comes down to the music," which are two different sentiments. Phonetically, both sentences serve beautifully as bookends, but when you consider the content, one communicates a conceptual idea and the other a literal observation.

NASH: You're the only person I've spoken with who noticed that.

FISH: Well, I think it's a lovely detail. You begin by introducing an idea that, if left alone, could be interpreted as trite and so broad that it's sentimental, and you end with a nod to the weightiness of your narrative about what music is and why somebody's life might come down to it. Was that intentional?

NASH: Most of the things we do as human beings are intentional, so, to answer your question, yes. I also love to have things unfold, which happens in music all the time. You can listen to a piece of music for months and suddenly say, "Holy shit! I didn't notice that before!" *Life* is like that.

FISH: Life is like that, but music and art are different. With life, you give yourself the opportunity to eventually notice things that have eluded you before because life is all around you. [Life is] inescapable and happens everyday, relentlessly, but art needs to be sufficiently interesting for you to *want* to look at it again and again, or, with music, to listen to it again and again, because it is escapable and will only become 'all around you' if [it's] shared by enough people.

NASH: Unless you're creating it yourself - *then* it's all around you, fuck everybody else, it doesn't matter what anybody thinks.

FISH: Point taken.

NASH: Have you seen the Sigmar Polke exhibition at MoMA?

FISH: No.

NASH: Go see the Sigmar Polke exhibition at MoMA. It'll blow your mind, the amount of work he produced, the range. As a new painter, myself, it absolutely blew my mind.

FISH: New painter? I feel like I've read about your artwork before - I know your photography.

NASH: Well I did two paintings when I was with Joni [Mitchell], but that was forty-odd years ago and I never did anything since- except that book I started in '74, which was just me drawing to save my own sanity. But painting, in large scale? The ones I did with Joni were little.

FISH: A reflection of how big the place was in Laurel Canyon where you painted them-

NASH: More a reflection of how big my mind was at the time.

FISH: How committed are you to these new, large scale paintings? Are you losing yourself in the process in a similar way to how you create your music and photographs?

NASH: Absolutely, but it's different. With music, apart from the writing, I'm involved with other people, whether I'm making a record or doing something live, there are always other people involved. With painting there's nobody there but me and I don't give a fuck about what other people might think about it. I don't even know what I'm doing half the time, but I'm having a great time. And there's a certain focus that I get into when I paint that is unlike anything else. I can lose myself completely and it's a wonderful feeling. I love to be invisible - I don't want to stick out. I don't want to be [David] Crosby who can't walk 10 feet without being recognized.

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FISH: That's what's so sacred about being a poet, isn't it? As a poet, whether we're talking broadly or specifically, you feel an obligation to avoid disturbing the moment that you're trying to write about and to remain invisible and not influence the emotional physics of what's happening around you. It's about being a witness and not an instigator. Plus, you let your guard down when you're inside your own head - there's less bullshit when you're your only audience and it's easier to tell ugly truths.

NASH: Right.

FISH: I'd argue that that's where most protest songs come from, from allowing that private moment of real outrage to inspire the creation of a piece of art that can then be shared with the public. Do you find that with a song like [Almost Gone] The Ballad of Bradley Manning, for instance, that when you perform it live and people walk out that they are reacting out of some obligation to not publically shame the United States government, where if you played the same song to them in private they'd more likely agree with your opinion about the injustice [of Manning's torture and imprisonment]?

NASH: I'd really like to talk to the people who walked out on us during our 2006 [CSNY Freedom of Speech] tour because we criticized George Bush and we sang that song *Let's Impeach the President*. I'd like to know what they think now - "What the fuck do you think about the Bush Administration and Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld and all those fuckers now, who lied us into the war and killed over a million people; what the fuck do you think about them now?" And, with all due respect, if you buy a ticket to a CSNY concert, what the fuck do you expect?

FISH: They were expecting a nostalgia show. [They] were not expecting you to behave just as you always have: as a relevant group dealing with contemporary issues.

NASH: I feel two ways about it. I respect their opinion [and] I don't need for them to agree with us. They have a right to walk out, but to walk out over that song - the song about the President lying? We didn't sing that song until about two and half hours into our show and that's the one that really pissed them off. None of the songs that Neil did about soldiers and how their deaths affect the family and how brave they are to go serve in a war that they might not agree with pissed them off. But to say we should get rid of George W. Bush for lying, they walk out.

FISH: I've always believed that the greatest threat to our survival is our manners and how dedicated we are to being polite.

NASH: I don't think people are polite enough!

FISH: I'm talking about the kind of politeness that prevents people from engaging in conversations about politics and religion because it's somehow inappropriate to challenge political or religious bullshit in certain settings. It's like trying to talk about politics or religion at Thanksgiving dinner. For most people it's never going to happen, because there is a time and a place to talk about Bradley Manning and that isn't it - it would be too impolite.

NASH: (Laughing) Got it.

FISH: Decency, in that case, is utterly indecent because it prevents people from engaging in some very important conversations about who we are and how we behave as a species.

NASH: You're right - maybe those [performance] halls are our Thanksgiving table and maybe we're wrong to say what we say there-

FISH: No! That's the power of art and that's your responsibility as [artists], to provide people with an opportunity to think and feel things that polite society [seeks] to censor.

NASH: At least [those people who walked out on us] felt something, even though I disagree with them. At least they understood the point of what we were trying to say. At least they [had] opinions that they [felt] strongly about, God bless 'em.

FISH: And maybe, at least for some of them, their walking out inspired some conversation later on that went deeper than the kneejerk patriotism that told them to leave. *Why did you walk out?* "Because they said the President lied!" *Well, he did lie.* "Well, gee, I guess he did-" And that's the beginning of contemplation, which, in a way, gets us back to your book.

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There is a lot of emphasis placed on you and others looking for and finding harmonies together and the more [I] read the more [I realized] that your appreciation of harmony had less to do with music and more to do with camaraderie and a humanitarian yearning for how best to live a life. It's a very intimate study of how an artist thinks and feels.

NASH: Sure, [my] work is not just about what goes on at the Thanksgiving table, but also what goes on in the bedroom and it's personal. I can't speak for anybody else. I only know what I can do, or what I try to do. People are always asking me who the new protest singers are, or, more to the point, *where* the new protest singers are and I can't speak to that. Again, I only know my own passion for what I do. I am not responsible for other artists.

FISH: But you are in a position to speak to how art distribution has changed over the years, specifically how art is consumed by the culture. You have a terrific line in your book that addresses how perverse and insidious corporate [infiltration] of the industry has become, like when you compare the first Woodstock [Festival in 1969] with the 1989 version and you say that the later version was all about, "...corporations realizing that half a million people could be customers."

NASH: That's right. When you put half a million kids on a flat piece of concrete and you charge them \$12 for a bottle of water, knowing full well that they'll need to buy it, that's cold.

FISH: Which, I guess, begs the question that so many people ask you about where the new protest singers are. Let me ask it: Where are the new artists, the ones who are being brought up in a world that is trying to normalize this new paradigm of corporate mega-control of everything, who should be inspiring a dissident, radicalized way of approaching the issue?

NASH: That's the point, is it radical? Is saying '*fuck, no!*' to a corporation radical? I don't think it's radical at all. I think it's just common sense.

FISH: I'm glad you said that because I've always thought that the single most important feature of your work, particularly your work with CSNY, is your attempt to subvert the traditional idea of what is and what isn't political.

NASH: Yeah.

FISH: Most people, for reasons that I mentioned before, won't engage in political conversations with strangers, usually because it's considered impolite, but also because most people don't feel smart enough to get involved. It's the same thing with sports. I know the rules of baseball, for instance, and I've played the game before, but I don't follow any particular team and I don't give a shit about stats and I don't have a stake in which team wins over another, but if you and somebody else are engaged in a discussion about the players and why one is better or worse than another based on your team loyalty or statistics or whatever I'm shut out of the conversation. It's the same with people who have party loyalties and talk about politics like it's a sport. Those people are only interesting to their friends and nothing is being debated. You [and Crosby, Stills and Young] make the subject of politics feel safe in other peoples' mouths.

NASH: That's nice.

FISH: It's important! It's important to have an opinion about war, about Bradley Manning, about the NSA, about really substantive issues that should be talked about outside of Sunday morning circle jerks.

NASH: I agree, I agree.

FISH: So, yeah, become a musician, put those politics into songs and make those songs so terrific that people will want to listen to them over and over and over again, be inspired to share them with tons of people and suddenly saying 'fuck you' to the government won't be so controversial.

NASH: That's what we do.

FISH: And speaking of controversial issues, for decades now there's been a famous debate going on between you and [Stephen] Stills about the specifics of where [CSN] first harmonized together. Stephen says that it

happened at Mama Cass's house in Laurel Canyon and you say that it happened at Joni Mitchell's house down the road.

NASH: I know that's where it happened.

FISH: I find it plausible, though, that, according to what I've read, Stills was too intimidated to play and sing anything in front of Joni Mitchell.

NASH: And my answer to that is that when you write a song like *Helplessly Hoping* the first thing you want to do is play it for a beautiful woman because it's fucking brilliant. Why would you not want to play that song, especially if you want to get laid?

FISH: Have you talked to Joni about it? What does she remember about [that night]?

NASH: That's a good question! I've never spoken to Joni about that - maybe I should.

FISH: Call her - call her right now and find out! We could put the whole controversy to bed with one phone call.

(Nash goes through phone contacts and looks for Joni Mitchell's assistant's number. No luck.)

NASH: I'll get an answer to that question and let you know.

FISH: I'd love to find out.

NASH: Yeah, me too! I'd like to know what she remembers!

(A few days later, Graham forwarded an email from a close friend of Mitchell's which stated: 'Well I finally had the opportunity to ask Joni about the first time CSN sang together. She said she thought it was at her house, she remembers that there was a gasp because all of you were so surprised at the remarkable harmony you three created. She said she knows that Stephen thinks it was a Cass's house, but his memory during that time was not always an accurate recollection of what had occurred.')

FISH: Let's talk about the recent release of the 1974 box set, which contains music from [the CSNY] 1974 reunion tour. What I find remarkable about those recordings is how you're able to maintain that intimate Laurel Canyon feel on songs like *Our House* and *Lee Shore* and *Helpless*, despite the fact that you're playing to tens of thousands of people, while other tracks, such as *Chicago* and *Ohio* and *Black Queen*, are absolutely blistering and raw.

NASH: That's why I chose that image for the cover [of the box set]. I showed the image to Neil and told him that this is what I want to see for the cover because for me that sums it all up in a twentieth of a second. And he said, "Nah, absolutely not." And I asked him why not and he said that it looked like we were aggrandizing ourselves, that we are pumping ourselves up too much. And I said, "Okay - so we didn't do that. We didn't do that for 31 shows, we didn't play to 80 thousand people - that's a Photoshop?" And he said, "You have a point."

FISH: The other thing that is captured perfectly by the recordings is - when do you think the 1960s really ended?

NASH: Nineteen-seventy ... four.

FISH: Precisely.

NASH: When Nixon left.

FISH: And the Vietnam War ended, which is what also makes the [1974] recordings historically interesting. Very similar to Dylan's *Rolling Thunder Revue* in '75, your tour in '74 definitely signaled a shift from young idealism into something harder and world weary and ... I wouldn't necessarily say *masculine*-

NASH: It's definitely a coming of age sound and we were ballsy - we were a ballsy band. Take, for instance, the song by Neil, *Goodbye Dick*, which lasts a minute and a half and was only ever done once. Me and David and Stephen never heard it before he did it live in front of us. I had also written a song one morning [during the tour] for Calli Cerami, my girlfriend at the time, that I wanted to do in front of I don't know how many thousands of people and you can hear it on tape. I'm saying, "I wanna sing my song!" And Stephen's yelling, "What are the chords, Willie?!" And I'm saying, "Well, you go from D to B-flat minor, I think, and I don't know what the name of this chord is but it goes like [this]..." and we do the song. Now that's a fucking ballsy band.

FISH: That's the same spontaneity that you had when you played on the BBC *In Concert* series with David [Crosby] in 1970. It's obvious that you guys had smoked a ton of weed and came out with no set list or any idea of what you were going to do and it was brilliant.

NASH: (laughing) You're right, you can tell from the tape that we were completely unrehearsed.

FISH: And, as a result, the immediacy and the ease of the performance could not be better.

NASH: We were very high, that's how it was.

FISH: I'd also argue that the [CSN] *Demos* record that you released in 2009 is among the best music you've ever put out for the same reason, not because you were high when you recorded them, but more because of the spontaneity and the unrehearsed quality of the songs. I think that some of the demos are better than the official versions.

NASH: There's something about demos - you can't beat them. They're usually recorded within an hour of when the song was created and there's something pure about them that can't be duplicated later. Often times there's a syndrome when you're in the studio and you're chasing the sound of the demo and there's a certain point when you say, "Fuck! We can't beat this!" And then you decide that maybe it's time to move your silly little 2-track over and overdub some drums or whatever.

FISH: I know that [John] Lennon was something of a collector of what he called "pirated" Beatle recordings, which were just bootlegs, the sort that Dylan now releases as legitimate music through his *Bootleg Series*. Did you ever get into collecting pirated recordings of your work or anybody else's?

NASH: Me and my friend, Dan Curland - who has a great vinyl record store (Mystic Disc) in Mystic, Connecticut - we do have a huge collection of bootlegs. But do I collect them to listen to? No.

FISH: Are there any plans to release more CSN demos?

NASH: Well, there are a lot more to release for sure, but at the moment, having spent the last four-and-a-half years working on [the 1974 box set], I'm kind of done with CSN music for a while. I'm working on a couple of very interesting albums right now, one with me and Crosby singing with a bunch of other people, plus there are the jazz concerts we did with Wynton Marsalis right here at Lincoln Center.

FISH: How was that experience?

NASH: At one point [while playing with Marsalis] Crosby says, "Hey, we're playing with the grownups!" - and he's seventy-two.

FISH: Wow.

NASH: Yeah, I'll never be able to finish all that I want to do - *hopefully*.

FISH: Having been around for a while now, what kind of perspective can you offer as to how the culture has changed, particularly how the younger generation deals with its role in influencing politics?

NASH: About twenty-years ago I was asked to do a couple speeches at colleges and the first one was at Kent State.

FISH: And when was this exactly?

NASH: This was '85, somewhere around '85. And I asked [the students] about [the Kent State massacre] and none of them knew much about it. So I explained to them that there is a history of political change coming from universities - it came from the Sorbonne in Paris, it came from Berkeley, it came from Columbia, it came from students who were getting fucking pissed off and speaking their minds. And I said, "The fact that you're at Kent State and you don't know what I'm talking about is appalling to me!" It upset me greatly. I could understand if I was at Georgetown University, but this was fucking Kent State!

FISH: I think people at Georgetown are responsible to know what happened at Kent State, too, quite frankly. That said, whose responsibility is it to inform students of events like the shootings at Kent State - specifically of events where innocent life was lost at the hands of state power?

NASH: It's everybody's responsibility! We have to all keep reminding each other of what happened because there's such an incredible rate of forgetfulness in this country. The headlines change everyday and people are expected to care just as much about Justin Bieber's fucking monkey as they do about the missing Malaysian airline - right? There's very little focus on the history of how we got to where we are.

FISH: Is it because the fractured narrative that we're fed [by the media] is preventing us from contemplating our fate and reflecting on yesterday and comprehending who we really are and where we're headed?

NASH: Absolutely - we're too busy with our Google glasses trying to get porn to give a shit about much of anything else.

FISH: Let's take a minute to talk about some of the people who were NOT in your book, starting with Pete Townshend and The Who.

NASH: I have great respect for Pete. He's an incredibly important member of this musicians' society. He's a man who tries his best to speak truth. I didn't read his autobiography, though I'd like to - I'm a fan! I liked [The Who] back before they were The Who, when they were The High Numbers on Ready, Steady, Go! in England.

FISH: What about Leonard Cohen?

NASH: Obviously, Leonard is a great writer. There's a certain part of us all that writes to get laid, but Leonard is in a class by himself. (Laughs) No, but he is a brilliant poet and a very serious man and I'm happy for the amazing resurgence he's had. He never did play to the Royal Albert Hall and fill it, but he's doing that now and that's fantastic. Fuck, he's older than me!

FISH: You mention Joan Baez [in your book] but you don't talk about her music.

NASH: I've never been a great admirer of Joan. I understand her place in history and I understand her sense of purity in terms of voice, but her voice does nothing for me. I'm probably opposite to a lot of men but she just doesn't make me cry like Aretha does.

FISH: Have you ever heard her version of the Phil Ochs song There But for Fortune?

NASH: No.

FISH: That makes me cry.

NASH: I need to hear that, because I have great respect for her as a musician but her voice doesn't do it for me. Send it to me.

FISH: Brian Wilson.

NASH: I've never met Brian. I have the ultimate respect for him. I think the man is a genius, an absolute fucking genius. I'm sorry that he got waylaid there when he did, but I can understand how a person might collapse under the pressure of being a genius and all your peers knowing that you're a fucking genius. He's written some of the greatest songs in the world, most when he was just a kid.

FISH: You mentioned in your book how, when you first came to New York, you hit a bunch of record stores in the Village and picked up some Lenny Bruce records.

NASH: Yeah.

FISH: Did you ever have any interaction with Bruce?

NASH: Nope.

FISH: Never saw him perform?

NASH: I never saw him perform, no. I think David [Crosby] did, a couple of times. But to be crucified for saying the word 'fuck' and talking about tits and ass and rocking the boat is tragic.

FISH: And assuming that the 1st Amendment had functionality, which he did.

NASH: Justice doesn't really exist.

FISH: Where were you when John Lennon was going through his immigration troubles in the mid-70s? I ask because you became an American citizen without a hassle and Lennon spent years fighting Nixon and the FBI-

NASH: And John Mitchell, right. No, I didn't have any interactions with John when he came to the States. All my dealings with him were in England. He was an interesting guy. He always had this underlying anger and, oddly enough, an underlying insecurity about who he was.

FISH: I know that Crosby spent some time with him during his famous Lost Weekend in LA - did he keep in touch with him? I know that he hated Yoko.

NASH: Well, in many ways, Crosby's stupid. How can you hate Yoko? She saved [Lennon's] life and he really loved her. How can you hate Yoko Ono, that's just a silly thing to do. You can disagree with her and not like her music, but hate? That's way too strong a word. She blew my mind - I saw her about ten years ago. I was at some Grammy event here in New York and she and I were at the same table and she looked over at me and said, "Thanks for the ride."

FISH: What does that mean?

NASH: When [The Beatles] were doing *Sgt. Pepper* John had to stay to do overdubs and she wanted to go home so I drove her home. So when she said 'thanks for the ride' I knew exactly what she was talking about, it was wild! After all that time! (Laughs) *Thanks for the ride.*

FISH: So, just to bring us full circle, let me ask you this. If, like you say, 'It all comes down to the music,' are you confident that we've taught our children well the right chords to play and the right harmonies to share and the right combination of humility and courage to be able to sing together?

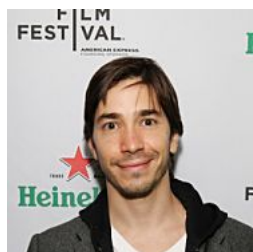
NASH: My son, Jackson, runs a blog called Superforest and in one of the articles that he wrote he talks about something that I'd forgotten about. When he was about 12-years-old I took him to the movies and we went to take a piss right before the movie and the bathroom was just disgusting so I cleaned it. He never forgot that. In other words, the only teaching that we can do is to lead by example.

FISH: And there's lots and lots of shit to clean up - always.

NASH: Right on.

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