

# History Lesson (Part III)



## Mike Watt Spiels with No Age

By Pat McGuire  
Photo by Atiba Jefferson

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Punk may not have been born in Southern California but it would be nearly impossible to imagine one without the other. Starting in the '70s and through the Reagan '80s, kids growing up in and around Los Angeles hopped in shitty vans, hitched rides or borrowed their moms' station wagons to make the trip to Hollywood to see punk bands like The Germs, Black Flag, the Circle Jerks and the Minutemen fill dives, rec centers and house parties with their ferocious new brand of barrier-less, no-bullshit rock and roll. And after hours of sweating along and shooting the shit with the heroes they worshipped, these young fans would float away starry-eyed, newly empowered by not only the pure passion of the gigs but by the logistical feasibility of punk as well, to start their own bands.

Of these early groups, none was more proletarian, incendiary and flat-out different than San Pedro's Minutemen. Started by best friends and outcasts D. Boon and bassist Mike Watt, the band—rounded out by drummer George Hurley—was bound by its members' love of history, politics, and radical DIY punk ethos. Reveling in their own unique identity, language, and take on music, the Minutemen lived an "econo" lifestyle that championed the idea, as Watt wrote in the band's "History Lesson (Part II)," that "our band could be your life."

Even as the idea of punk began to change and take on its many-headed and much maligned new forms, the pilgrimages never ceased. Two decades on, Dean Spunt and Randy Randall of No Age recall countless trips to Hollywood to learn punk rock at famed venues like The Smell, even catching an old master every now and again amongst the new breed. The guitar-and-drums duo is set to release its second record, *Everything In Between*, on Sub Pop Records and, in a true crowning moment for the Los Angeles punk scene, is even playing the Hollywood Bowl this fall with Pavement and Sonic Youth.

The tragic death of D. Boon in an auto accident in 1985 may have ended the Minutemen, but Watt eventually began to enjoy a new life of "working bass" for new generations—forward and back—from the trio FIREHOSE to myriad collaboration jams and solo projects to even a near decade-long stint at present with Iggy Pop and The Stooges. While Randall and Spunt were raised on Watt's music, "spiels" about punk, and econo mantras, the torch, while perhaps not officially "passed," may have at least been shared, in true punk spirit, when the three played together earlier this year at a bookstore gig in Los Angeles.

The trio got together again for an international video spiel via Skype the day after Watt blew out his knee onstage in France with The Stooges and a few weeks prior to the release of No Age's new record. Spunt and Randall huddled together on a couch in Spunt's Eagle Rock apartment and listened as Watt, hard at work on his new solo album—an opera about life as a middle-aged punk rocker—regaled them with tales of the old days and praise for the new, all told in his curious yet passionate Pedro-speak.

**Mike Watt:** Watt here.

**Dean Spunt:** Hey, it's Dean and Randy from No Age here. How you doing?

**Watt:** I'm doing grand. I'm here in Lyon, France. I blew out my fucking knee last night. Lemme try to show you. [*Struggles, holds knee up to camera.*] I slipped on something at the end of "Raw Power," the first song, and my knee went out. It's the size of a Casaba melon now. It's been 20 years since my knee last went out. I ain't in a lot of pain but I can't walk without these crutches. But I'm gonna do the gigs.

**Randy Randall:** Ouch! I have a history of dislocating my shoulders. I did that last year during a show...I wanted to be knocked out.

**Watt:** I didn't want to fuck up the gig so I kept plowing. I had the bass on my right leg and was stompin' with the hurt knee. Kinda stupid. But The Stooges' music is very powerful and it's hard to resist.

So I heard your album and it's really good! They let me have flow from Sub Pop. I was there in March and who was working in the back but Mark Arm!

**Spunt:** Yeah! He sends all the records out from the warehouse. Every Sub Pop record we get in the mail says "From Mark Arm." Pretty cool.

**Watt:** Me and D. Boon had a label called New Alliance Records and we put together a compilation called *Mighty Feeble* and Mark sent in a song. He was in a band called Mr. Epp and the Calculations, before Mudhoney. They were a skinny-tie band in the early '80s.

**Randall:** Speaking of skinny-tie bands, did you ever play with The Nerves?

**Watt:** I saw them a bunch. They were really good. I saw them with The Last at the Whisky; I could see Peter [Case]'s bass strings, you could get close enough. They wrote "Don't leave me hanging on the telephone..."

**Randall:** And then Blondie covered it.

**Watt:** Right. Those bands had a big influence on us. In those days, everybody copied things off records—the best guitar player we knew was the guy who played "Black Dog" the best. No one wrote their own songs. We never had this idea—this sounds very naive—that music could be expression. It was more like building models or something. We couldn't imagine playing Long Beach Arena or The Forum.

There was a guy named Nicky Beat from Pedro playing drums for The Weirdos and he told us about this scene where people wrote their own songs! [*All laugh.*] I know that sounds fucking retarded, but this was the mentality of the '70s. I get that kind of feeling from your new album—it's the whole idea, the empowerment of writing your own songs: You have something inside that you want to get out. It wasn't like building models; you like other bands, but you're not trying to go out and learn every Creedence song, you know?

**Randall:** That was a big thing for us, especially in the beginning—there were no real rules to it, it was just sort of going with what felt right. It didn't have to sound like anything.

**Watt:** The whole idea of choice is difficult if you don't know there's choices out there. We didn't know you could write your own songs. These punk people we saw didn't give a shit what people thought, they were gonna sing it anyway. Maybe that's what you mean by "no rules." I think that's a great thing you cats picked up.

**Randall:** I saw you playing solo bass at the first Smell location in North Hollywood when I was 17. Me and a buddy drove out from Pomona, getting to Hollywood was like going to a different country. Seeing you and how everything was set up was really inspiring; there was no stage, you pay your five bucks when you walk in... I left that gig thinking, "Maybe I can do this." Like you were saying, I couldn't get up on a stage with light shows and pyrotechnics, but going to a place like The Smell made it seem very doable. I told my buddy that we had to start a band and go play there. He thought I was crazy: "No way, those guys are too cool." I said, "They're cool but it's not like that. We can do that, it's not about being cool."

**Watt:** That's a trip because when Nicky Beat told us about that punk gig and we went there, the first thing I said to D. Boon was, "We can do this." It's a parallel universe. We all have different journeys to get to where we are, but the time period doesn't matter. In fact, my philosophy: that's circumstance.

**Randall:** I think you pay it forward. Obviously, those experiences helped shape what you did and I think you carry that with you. It would make sense that it would move forward from there and you pass on what you've experienced.

**Watt:** We found out about Woody Guthrie traveling around and playing his guitar for working people and hit upon this idea: "The only thing new is *you!*" You're part of something, but it's your own personal journey.

**Spunt:** That's what hit me hard about Minutemen. It was just

straight to the point, three dudes on their own trip making stuff with no filler. It was just so *punk*—it feels like a revolution.

**Watt:** It was econo. We worked during that whole time. Sometimes I had up to three jobs; I put myself through school. Georgie would write those words while he was working a milling machine. We got the idea of little songs from an England band called Wire; they were really profound to us. There was another England band called Pop Group and they put Captain Beefheart with P-Funk and we thought, "Yeah, why not? You can put anything you want with anything!" We thought certain kinds of things were the rule, but these English guys showed us you can do whatever you want; it's your band. Even the word "punk" was weird. It meant, "a guy who got fucked in jail for cigarettes" in our town, so we could not even believe someone would call their music this.

Me and D. Boon divided the world into two categories: gigs and flyers. Everything that wasn't the gig was a flyer—the album, the spiel, they were to get people to the gig. Because the gig you have the most control over. It seemed a lot of dudes in the audience were also in the bands; they were just taking turns playing for each other. You would see these cats play in The Germs, then you talked to Pat [Smear] and Darby [Crash]. I never knew that in an arena rock gig. Cats came from Olympus or something.

So, your new record seems very personal. You both sing, right?

**Spunt:** No, just me. I do different timbres or something, like an impersonator.

**Watt:** I remember thinking, "Is this a new thing for them, [deep voice] *the low voice...*" Randy, you're doing the dual layers of guitars, how did you record it?

**Randall:** We start with the riff and the drums and I do samples.

**Spunt:** We'll start with a sampler or textured noise loop and write a guitar or drum part to it. Or, there's a riff and I start playing drums and we come up with a vocal line. They all kind of work at the same time.

**Watt:** Do you ever write words first? Or titles?

**Spunt:** Barely ever. Sometimes I have titles or phrases kicking around, but usually only when we start making the song do I start thinking about what it is.

**Watt:** In Minutemen, I needed the title first. Writing on bass, I didn't want it to be the same fucking song all the time so Georgie's or D. Boon's words would help me. I'm really interested in composition. Not a lot of people are inventing new notes, but I don't think that's a problem. If you look at somebody who writes novels, they don't really invent new words but they can make very original stories. This to me is where the originality is: in the voice of the cats. And I like what you're doing on your record. I'm interested in the process. Everybody comes from different places to get where they're at.

**Spunt:** Thanks Watt. It seems like we're on a similar journey, like we've hit similar things across the way. This was the longest we've ever spent on recording anything and I think we went through a lot to get through this record. A lot of emotions up and down, life changes...it's pretty heavy but the end result's positive.

**Watt:** And there's bass on it?

**Randall:** I kind of snuck some in there. I'd go through when Dean wasn't looking and put in a little bass. Some songs just kind of needed it. But we're performing now with a third member who's doing samples so we can load a lot of sounds into that. It's a new dynamic for us.

**Spunt:** Watt, were you surprised when [Black Flag and SST Records founder] Greg Ginn asked the Minutemen to do a record on SST? Had you thought about recording your music or were you just playing live?

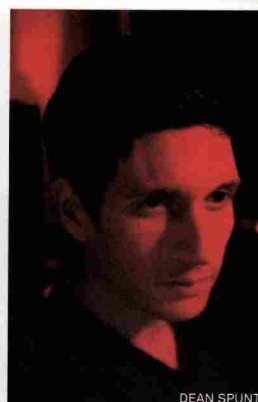
**Watt:** It did surprise us. Punk wasn't just about doing gigs and writing your own songs—that was important, but it was about making your own fanzine, putting on your own gigs, making your own records. It was enabling: doing things and not being a puppet. I mean, you were a clown but you



RANDY RANDALL



MIKE WATT (LEFT) AND THE MINUTEMEN



DEAN SPUNT

were your *own* clown. Every band had their own sound and punk was a state of mind. Punk for us was like taking your whole life and trying to put it into expression.

You've got to understand that punk in those days was really unpopular. Most people hated the fuck out of it. They couldn't see these things that are natural to you cats: "I want to write my own songs. I don't want rules. I want to do what I want to do." You guys picked up on the same things we picked up on: "Hey, anybody can start a band," and that was it. When I heard No Age and saw you guys play, I said, "Yeah, this is beautiful."

**Randall:** Wow, thanks. You were asking us about inspirations—obviously, you've been playing bass for so long and developed your own style and you're an accomplished musician, but how does your inspiration change? Sometimes I almost feel like I want to unlearn all these chords and notes, but I can't help but know them...

**Spunt:** I always get nervous about learning too much.

**Randall:** I don't want to prevent myself from learning more, but does that work?

**Watt:** The place I've got to is: Maybe everybody has something

to teach you. You can't be full of yourself. I'm very curious as to what people are doing—not to copy them, but when somebody teaches you something they're actually teaching you something about yourself. It don't have to be another old-timer, although old-timers can do it, too. *[Laughs.]*

I can't ever have my young days again. My guy's dead, you know? Even if he wasn't, time moved on. I can still be in these days by trying to work bass for people making music in these days. There's a lot of interesting music being made. Politics are trippy: "We look good making you look good." I like those politics.

**Randall:** That's the best thing about collaborations. You can learn these new things about yourself through doing that. It must be good for you with so many different projects.

**Watt:** Look at the situation here: I'm finally the youngest dude in the band. These cats have taught me a lot about the bass even though they come from a whole different scene. Actually, without them there probably wouldn't even be a punk scene. I'm in one of the most interesting classrooms. Iggy's been one of my greatest teachers. It's been seven years; I've been working for Stooges longer than I was a Minuteman. I never in my life thought I would be playing with them. I was hearing their songs as a teenager. God,

most people hated their music; the punk scene was different. You know about L.A.; So Cal is 150 towns. None of us had a lot in common. We all met up in Hollywood—Stooges was the one thing in common. And now I'm working bass for them; it's a trip.

**Spunt:** That's how it felt when we played with you at that bookstore, remember? For us, growing up listening to your stuff...it was cool, man.

**Watt:** Shit, we were sharing the gift of music. It was very special for me. It was not only intimate but full of fucking life. This ain't no sleepwalk, connect-the-dots shit. I want folks to help learn me. I started playing because...1957—Sputnik—I had to be born. After that, fuck it, student for life. So I was in the classroom with No Age and it was a badass thing. When we got done all I thought was, "When can we do this again?" I hope to see you soon in our So Cal.

**Randall:** Much respect, Mr. Watt. We'll set it up soon when we're all in town.

**Watt:** Thanks for having me aboard. Much respect, brothers. *[All bump fists via video.]* **F**

MINUTEMEN PHOTO BY EDWARD COLVER