



ROBERT FISHER of WILLARD GRANT CONSPIRACY Interview:

It is very rare that an opportunity arises to pen a personal piece in the course of music reportage. But, when you have the good fortune to shoot the breeze with a man like Robert Fisher, where there is certainly little concern for dull copy, it is likely that you can tap into something well beyond a ‘normal’ journalist / musician interface.

He is about the perfect interviewee, piecing together responses with great deliberation, attacking them from different angles at once. He gives you tons to work with. Of great intelligence, openness and warmth, he will go to lengths to ensure you understand his exact stance or nuance. He is also a compelling storyteller. Anyone familiar with his compassionate American Gothic lyrical prowess will know this. To this end, he is fortunate to be blessed with (even a speaking) voice that demands you listen. And he has big history, littered with troubles and adventure. Whatever you want to touch on with Robert Fisher, there is the probability that his eventful life will colour it.

Finally, despite the interview as promotional tool, it seems he will happily talk about anything. Just as well, considering I breezed into the Bayswater hostelry rendezvous with absolutely no intention of talking about his new record – as such: “*As I’d expect of ‘Comes with a Smile,’*” he said with a grin, as I sat down to talk to him about death.

Willard Grant Conspiracy’s latest album is a career high, universally lauded as a stately work of great beauty and depth. *Time Out* hailed it ‘a masterpiece’, whilst *The Times* went as far as to consider Robert as sounding like ‘a messenger from God’. That its subject matter is (another) examination of life’s single inevitability makes that all the more satisfying. Thousands of songs have been written about death, from the standpoint of mourning and loss to the murder ballad, from the rock ‘n’ roll kitsch of *Leader of The Pack*, to the overblown melodrama of *Where The Wild Roses Grow*, ad infinitum. It’s a great subject, because our demise is the greatest fascination to our species beyond sex, love, infinity and violence. To issue an entire collection of contemplations on the nothingness ahead for us all is a bold commercial move, and you have to know what you’re doing in order to make it work. Robert Fisher knows what he’s doing, so *Regard The End* most certainly works. Although not a similarly totally dedicated project, the most obvious comparison in recent years would have to be *Automatic For The People*. Yes, it’s that good.

The clue is in the title. Think about the fact that there’s no getting out of it, that your time

will come, as it will to everyone. Listen to Wayne Coyne: *Do you realize, that everyone you know, one day, will die?* In cold light, that is a massive, awesome thought. You, reading this, are going to die. So, what are you going to do until then? Are you content to waste your time, or make a mark? Would you rather spend your span idle and gorging, or active and sharing? Isn't it rather obvious?

To get a handle on where *Regard The End* may have come from, I thought I'd keep it simple:

Robert, I recall my first experience of death as if it was yesterday. When I was four or five, I found a dying chick – probably a starling – and secreted it away overnight, sneaking out to give it bread soaked in milk, which I thought would help. Naturally, it didn't last long, leaving me devastated and confused. It's still something that haunts me today. Can you recall your first experience like this, and explain the impact it's had on you?

Well, it's interesting, because I grew up in California and, you know, California is wild. When I was really young, my parents had kennels, and they bred a dog called the Japanese Akita, and at any one time we had between 10 and 30 animals. And when you have that many animals, you learn pretty quickly that things go wrong. So, my earliest dealings with those kinds of emotions would be around that. I remember that there was one particular dog that was kind of 'my' dog. When that dog passed, that was definitely a traumatic moment. It was like, you know, because that dog – as most dogs are – was a friend where there are no friends. But then it was all around me, too – in the desert. I'd go out into the middle of the desert hunting rattlesnakes and find decaying animals of all varieties; watch hawks taking apart rabbits. In the natural cycle of life and death, there was always something that was prevalent, anyway. So, I guess my earliest memories of that kind were... I used to keep lizards and fish and snakes, and you feed snakes other animals. So, it's not that you become insensitive to it, but you just learn that unless you invest emotion in something, then death is just part of life – and it still is, even if you do invest emotion in it. When 'my' dog died, I think I was about six, and I think that's the first time I'd felt like that. Yeah, I think so.

Obviously – suicide aside – none of us can choose our way of passing, but if we could, is there a way would you choose to die?

Hmmm...I haven't really given that a whole lot of thought! (Long pause) Well, in my drinking days, I used to have plenty of ways of doing it. But, I guess I'd like to go as old as possible, and still alert. I can't think of a specific way to go, but I'd like to do it without being ill, er...

Robert looks at me quizzically, and rightly so under the cosh of such a question. I'd asked because it is as relevant and common a pub question as to how one would spend the lottery – at least in my locale. I've asked it many times, and had many varied, often brilliant

answers. The most popular usually involve Cameron Diaz. As it is apparently (not reportedly) a euphoric exit, my particularly choice, I venture, is drowning.

Really? That's terrifying to me. Well, when I was a kid, I spent a lot of time at the beach, and I've been at the bottom of the ocean when there wasn't a whole lot of clues that I'd be getting back up again. I mean, that's panic! When I was drinking and riding motorcycles, I guess I used to think that that was the way to do it – to smash into the side of a mountain as fast as I possibly can. That would be a good way! I no longer think in those James Dean kinda ways, but that would have been one of my earlier thoughts, I guess!

And what about the least appealing shuffle?

In a hospital bed. I've seen that too many times. I lost my grandfather from emphysema and cancer and it was just a horrible, horrible thing. I would 'do something' to take myself out of that.

Suddenly, Robert turns the tables:

But this is something you've faced recently, right? he asks me.

You spent money on this glorious volume to read about inspirational figures, great musicians and their work – not to read about me. However, please indulge me for a short time, as I did indicate that this was a personal piece, and because what I have to say is relevant.

The last fifteen years for me have been splattered with death, including the obliteration by varying forms of cancer of the last few remaining members of my family. I've had a couple of friends die far too young, lost a beloved ex boss, been in a public vehicle that killed an old lady upon impact, and even – a few short years after my bird trauma – witnessed someone killed stone dead in an instant by lightning. I'm kind of used to being around death; I know how it feels to grieve, and have had good practice. With each subsequent passing, I became so hardened to something so normal and yet so fearsome, and so acutely tuned into my sense of mortality that it seemed inevitable that I would be somehow be tested. Two bouts of cancer of my own later, that acuteness is razor sharp, finely honed.

Until you have that brush with death, life can cruise. When you're hooked up to a chemo drugs drip stand, you can learn quite quickly that it is death that makes life so important. After you have conquered it, you move on in only two ways – living in abject fear of the impossibly uncertain nature of when, where and how, or to cram the fuck in as much good and useful as you can until that time. I've chosen the latter path, now careering maniacally towards workaholicism, driven by mantras that are corny, but mine:

“However good life is, you never get out of it alive” from Carla Lane's *Solo*, and *“This is the time and life that I am living, and I face each day with a smile”* from the teachings of Arthur Lee – they have to be my current favourites. I'm sure I hum the Love song to

myself every single day, as I set about it to see what I can do to move forward, constantly, however, *regarding the end.*

“Yes, Robert. It’s an interesting situation to be in, because you have little concept of how serious things really are. There were two or three days when I felt a hundred times more ill than I have ever felt, or could ever conceive of in terms of sickness. On those days, when I couldn’t stand, and had turned grey, I thought ‘This is it; this really is it.’”

“Did you go through a denial phase at all?”

“Not really. I just tried to keep myself as busy as possible from the moment I was diagnosed until the moment I was given the all-clear. And what I had to cope with on a daily basis, I would cope with.”

“One foot in front of another..”

“Yes. Baby steps. So, no denial, really. You constantly tell yourself it could have been so much worse. Much worse. The cancer I had was rare, but curable. It was tough, but I got through it.”

“For me there’s always this...how can I say this? There’s always this kind of fear that I’ll do it accidentally.

Robert suddenly becomes very serious, his voice becoming much quieter.

I have a fear that I may choke in the night, or I’ll do something at the wrong time. I mean, my weight is an issue and, you know, there’s a fear with that. And all my friends are concerned about my physical wellbeing, so that adds to it for me, you know? There’s concern that I’ll do something by mistake. Not that I’d want to, er...er...this is one of the, er...contradictions of being an addict.

At this moment, I am beginning to regret, albeit unwittingly, leading Robert down a path he perhaps does not want to go. But he carries on.

On the one hand, we’re sitting here today, and I can tell you that there is absolutely nothing in my mind that makes me to be considering removing myself from the picture. But, there’s plenty of evidence to the contrary, in that, at times, I seem to be incapable of structuring my life in such a way as to be healthy. So that’s the addicts’ contradiction; on the one hand, self-loathing drives you to hurt yourself; on the other hand...quite often you find in addicts highly intelligent people who seem to be very much in connection with life living, and don’t ever seem like they’re going to give that up. And when they pass, quite often, it’s early – when they were 45 or 32, and people say their epitaph was like ‘Oh, he was in the middle of it!’ I guess for me, one of my big fears is having it described that way, which is why I say at this point that I want to be old, still

functioning and still accomplished when I go!

This underpinned with a sputtered laugh, Robert is now back on track.

I don't like the idea very much of having my friends have to say "I wish he would've lived, because I'm sure the next record would have been amazing, or because the book he was working on was amazing." That's a major thing for me that drives me to work as hard as I do. I know that over the last ten years... twenty years, really... I've sensed time moving, and dealing with what that means... 'Regard The End', really, is about living with the understanding that your time on the earth is temporary and that we try to fill this thing we call life with as much as possible, living as richly as possible – not being afraid of it, and acknowledging that the end is there. So, if I go tomorrow, and I want this (album) to be the last thing that people know, I can't go wrong. It definitely colours the way I conduct my day-to-day.

So, have you ever been in a situation where you thought 'This is it – I'm going to die'?

Yes – numerous times. Motorcycles will do that to you. When I was riding motorcycles, there were a number of times when I thought that was it. I remember this one time... it was actually kind of an amazing thing... I was high – really high... I'd been doing speed for about three days and I was on my bike, riding back from work. I worked from four in the morning 'til twelve. I was riding home around noontime across L.A., riding up the Santa Monica Freeway. There's this really amazing transition from the Santa Monica Freeway to the Ventura Freeway and the transition is this really beautiful, long, banked curve. It's the kind of thing that on my motorcycle, I used to love. You hit the whole pocket of the curve in such a way, and downshift and gas it and you just shoot out of there like someone kicked you in the ass. And, as I got into the pocket of the curve and I was getting ready to do the slingshot, all of a sudden I started hallucinating butterflies! Gold and silver butterflies, and they were everywhere. I didn't know it was a hallucination; I thought they were real. I gave it the gas and I couldn't get out of them and I couldn't see. So...

Robert laughs heartily, still disbelieving of the situation.

...I'm on the freeway, and there are butterflies clouding my vision, and part of me knows I'm on the freeway in Los Angeles, accelerating. The bike went sideways, and I went flying off. The only thing that saved me was that I was wearing a helmet, because my head hit a callbox post and it put a dent in the helmet. I actually sent the helmet to the manufacturer with a thank you note! So, that was one of them. And, I remember at the time, not really reflecting that that was a near-death experience. I remember the whole time thinking mechanically, thinking like 'OK, you know, I'm laying the bike down, I'm getting off the bike; doing all the right things, the stuff I need to be doing, but there was never a

moment when I thought 'OK, I'm giving in to this.' Every step of the way, there was always a point where I was trying to do something: When I was off the bike, I was rolling – there was something I was trying to do to avoid it. A very methodical, mechanical process; I don't know what that means! I guess it means that I wasn't giving in.

So despite your lifestyle at that time, did you learn anything from that specific experience?

Well, no – because I just did it all over again later that day and the next night. No, it took a sledgehammer, really, to get me to recognize that I was in trouble. Well, a combination of sledgehammers, really. It was a time I was doing so much drugs that I just felt paper-thin. It was really weird and hard to describe; I just felt like...and at the same time, I had these guys around me who were also doing drugs (and alcohol) and a handful of guys who weren't. And those guys had a 'thing' about them, this kind of eloquence, elegance, peace – you know, something I didn't have, and I didn't know what it was. I didn't realize that it's because they were sober. Slowly, I started to find out about it. One day – just one day – I was hangin' out with one of them – Tony – and we were just talking about something or another. I remember he looked me straight in the eye and said 'Have you thought about getting sober?' I was like 'Why?' you know? But in a matter of fifteen minutes, it went from 'Why?' to 'Why not?' I can't even tell you what happened in that conversation – it was so long ago – but I know that whatever led him to that moment of being there was meant to happen. I don't know where he is now – he might be in Oregon – but, he's an amazing character, and it took him telling me who he was for me to come out of it. It's interesting that you ask me how many times I may have felt close to death - with the drugs and alcohol, maybe a thousand times. I didn't know it, though, you know? But, at some point, somewhere in that fifteen minutes, I realized that I had a choice – continue and die, or clean up. I was like 'I really want to make a difference – I don't want to die!'

I think however humble or modest, any highly creative individual will be sharply aware of the possibility of a legacy, and will consequently self-mythologize to a certain extent - particularly in wondering how you will be viewed when you're gone. How do you think you will be viewed, and how would you care to be remembered?

I don't know how I think I'll be viewed. It depends on who's doing the viewing. I'd like to think that, artistically, I'd be viewed as someone who was trying to get to some universals - someone who wrote songs that were bigger than himself, and somebody who connected a few times with something universal in a way that created a song that affects a whole bunch of people. It's funny because in a different time, the music that we make would be known by millions; that in some alternate universe, millions will know it. But, it's not important to me whether millions identify and know it, or the things that come with that. What's important

is that it connects in that way with a few people. So, I guess, yeah, I'd like to known as someone as who was a craftsman enough to be able to capture the inspiration and make it happen on record. As a person, I'd like to be known as someone who was supportive to his friends, who cared about their wellbeing, who presented not only the people around him, but the community as a whole, an opportunity to succeed... to elevate, illuminate something. It's not enough to want for yourself. You have to be able to give back to people, and I think it's important that in my own small way, I try really hard to make sure that the people I'm connected with have opportunities that I could help them get to that they wouldn't otherwise get to.

I hadn't expected my conversation with Robert to take the course it did. It is plain that he has great regrets that he still struggles with, and that as he continues to learn from his mistakes, that life is indeed a precious and delicate thing that could end at any given moment. I, for one, fully comprehend such emotions, and have the t-shirt.

But, he possesses the wisdom, grace and skill to now educate, to provoke the interested to heed his words, and consider the thoughts laid out in his beautiful music. Some would call it miserable and pessimistic, but I have heard few recordings as joyous this year as *Regard The End*. It's a gift to the human experience and in days when the daily chaos of our planet can so easily numb us to the fragility of our existence, it is a piece of art from which we should maybe draw the inspiration to succeed in any small way we can. Hell, maybe even these words of mine will serve you well in such a respect?

Now get on with it, before it's too late.

THE END

TOM SHERIFF

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