

TRUE STORY



Fruitland

Steven Kurutz

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Some years back, an unusual and astonishing album began circulating among record collectors and fans of lo-fi music. Will Louviere was one of the first to hear it. A Bay Area vinyl dealer, Louviere is an authority on private-press LPs from the 1960s and 1970s—records that were self-produced and released by amateur musicians and destined, in most cases, for the bins of thrift stores and flea markets. In a year, Louviere and his fellow collectors across the country might buy one thousand of these obscure albums between them. Of those, maybe ten would be artistically interesting. Maybe one would astonish.

This record had been sent to Louviere by a collector, but still, his expectations weren't high. The group was a duo, Donnie and Joe Emerson. The cover featured a studio portrait of them: teenagers with feathered brown hair, faces dappled with acne, sincere eyes meeting the camera.

They were posed against the swirly blue backdrop you'd see in a school photo, with the album's title—*Dreamin' Wild*—written above them in red bubble script. Both boys were dressed flamboyantly in matching spread-collared white jumpsuits, like the outfit Evel Knievel wore vaulting over Snake River Canyon, though the jumpsuits had name patches on the chest, like a mechanic's work shirt, an odd counter to the attempt at showbiz slickness. Donnie, posed in the front, held a Les Paul and looked a little stoned.

Given the packaging and the era—late seventies, Louviere was certain—he expected teen-idol cheese, a third-rate Osmonds knockoff. What he heard was something else entirely.

The opening track, “Good Time,” was a burst of power pop, with a catchy fuzz-guitar riff over crashing drums and a jittery vocal mocking a selfish lover. “Give Me the Chance” followed it—a funk jam, this time with soulful singing interrupted by wavy blasts of echo distortion coming out of nowhere like acid flashbacks. The other songs included an orchestral-disco instrumental; an R&B groove that recalled the Temptations in their *Psychedelic Shack* period; an earnest, David Gatesian piano ballad. Layered throughout were assured musical nods to Fleetwood Mac, Hall and Oates, and the Brothers Johnson.

Louviere checked the back credits. Of the eight tracks on *Dreamin' Wild*, young Donnie wrote or cowrote all of them. He also played lead and rhythm guitars, bass, piano, and synthesizer and handled all the lead and harmony vocals. Joe drummed, and he often fell behind the beat or

flubbed his fills. But instead of detracting from the music, Joe's drumming added to its appeal. It gave the songs an amateur charm, and created thrilling near-chaos as if the music might collapse on itself.

It was clear to Louviere that Donnie and Joe hadn't worked with a professional studio engineer or producer. Songs went on too long, had unorthodox structures, faded out rather than ended. But he loved the muffled, homemade sound and heard serious ambition and talent. Teenage Donnie's voice was especially compelling—"so stony and hazy," Louviere told me, as if he sang from some private interior room.

Donnie's voice reached new levels of stoniness on "Baby," the standout track. Simply defined, it's blue-eyed soul. But its effect on listeners isn't simple. The first time I heard "Baby" I broke out in goose bumps and felt a ghost had come in the room. The music is gestural and fades in: soft, pulsing piano, one guitar playing a repeated five-note pattern, rim hits on the snare. Sung in a reverb-soaked near-falsetto, the lyrics are mostly indecipherable—the chorus sounds like "Baby, you're so baby." It hardly matters. The song's power is 90 percent atmosphere. You hear this magic quality in old country-blues recordings or some of the early rock 'n' roll stuff—say, "I Only Have Eyes for You" by the Flamingos. Beyond the instruments, what really got put on tape was a *vibe*, some molecular thing in the room that got baked into the recording. With "Baby," as with much of *Dreamin' Wild*, that subatomic thing, incredibly, is the emotional intensity—all the yearning

and heartache—of being a teenager.

As Louviere told me, “It was hard to believe what I was hearing.”

Intrigued, he contacted the collector who had sent him the album, Jack Fleischer. Where had *Dreamin’ Wild* come from? Who were the Emersons? It turned out Fleischer had chanced upon the album in 2008 as a twenty-two-year-old anthropology student at the University of Montana, who had advanced in his listening from mainstream art rock to rarer psychedelic stuff to what he called “the big ocean” of private-press music underneath. “Once you find the passageway down there,” he warned me when we first spoke, “you can really lose your mind.”

Fleischer admired the way Louviere and others were unearthing records only a handful of people had heard before, and distributing them through small labels they ran. Wild music like *Crystal*, which Louviere released through his Companion Records—an album of sludgy stoner rock that a middle-aged keyboardist and poet named Stan Hubbs recorded in his hand-built cabin in Northern California in 1982. Hubbs was rumored to have driven a van with a portrait of Ernest Hemingway airbrushed on its side and to have smoked enough weed to die from an overdose.

Fleischer saw what the collectors were doing as a form of anthropology. He was determined to find his own precious lost thing, and on a record-hunting trip to Spokane, Washington, he did: in a junk shop he spotted a sealed copy of *Dreamin’ Wild* behind the counter, priced at five bucks. Fleischer was won over by the cover

photo's comic bizarreness—the way Joe is posed so his body is hidden behind Donnie's and his head grows out of Donnie's left shoulder, suggesting rock's first conjoined twins. Fleischer recalled, “The look in those kids' eyes—there was no way I wasn't going to give it a shot.”

Private-press collectors often track down the artists, to see if additional copies are available and to hear the creation story. Fleischer was so taken by *Dreamin' Wild* that he went to the Missoula Public Library and searched the Spokane phone book. He found a listing for Don Emerson Sr.—Donnie and Joe's father.

Don Sr. still had stacks of LPs gathering dust in his house, in an outlying community called Fruitland. He wanted fifteen dollars per “vinyl.” Fleischer bought ten copies and sent them to Louviere and other collectors. They made copies. Word spread. The lo-fi kids down in Los Angeles got hipped, including Ariel Pink, the indie singer-songwriter. Fleischer celebrated the album on his music blog, *Out of the Bubbling Dusk*. In 2010, the website Soul Sides wrote about the record, bringing it to the wider attention of DJs, who loved the break on “Give Me the Chance.” Soon Louviere was calling Don Sr. directly to get more copies. “I don't know that I've had as strong a response to a record,” or sold more, Louviere said. The albums arrived from Fruitland packed in egg cartons as if from a farm.

Finally, at a listening party at a music producer's house in Los Angeles, *Dreamin' Wild* reached the person who would give Donnie and Joe a second shot. Matt Sullivan is

a co-owner of Light in the Attic, a reissue label that's had success putting out records overlooked in their time—in the parlance, “buried treasures.” The label reissued *Cold Fact*, the 1970 debut by the singer-songwriter Rodriguez, whose life story was the focus of the Oscar-winning documentary *Searching for Sugar Man*. When the music producer dropped the needle on his copy of *Dreamin' Wild*, Sullivan was floored. “I was expecting the Partridge Family, that vibe,” he recalled. “Nothing that would have the depth and sincerity and beauty this album possesses.”

He wanted to reissue *Dreamin' Wild* on his label. He began tracking the album back to its source, eventually speaking to Don Sr., then Joe, and finally the elusive Donnie. The album's creation story, he discovered, was as remarkable as the music.

The Emersons were loggers and farmers in rural eastern Washington. During the sixties and seventies, Don Sr. grew hay, wheat, and alfalfa and cut a good bit of timber. Donnie and Joe, the oldest sons among the five Emerson children, were farm boys. Before school, after school, during summer breaks, they worked like grown men. They fixed fences. Changed irrigation pipes. Operated heavy equipment at fourteen years old.

From an early age, Donnie showed an interest in music. He took flutophone and clarinet lessons in school, and taught himself piano and guitar in his teens. He played with a facility that amazed and startled. His was the freaky raw talent that befuddles family members. Don Sr., a

third-generation logger, could only shake his head at his son writing a song, or two songs, a day. Still, he knew the grinding hard work of the farm, and wanted to save his sons from it. And he believed in supporting his children's interests, though "support" seems an insubstantial word for what he did.

In 1977, when Donnie was fifteen and Joe was seventeen, Don Sr. built them a log cabin studio on the farm. The boys named it the Practice Place. Then he went to a bank, borrowed against his land, and, with guidance from the school music teacher, stocked the cabin with pro audio gear: Gibson guitars, Fender amps, an eight-piece Rogers drum kit, a Fender Rhodes stage piano. He bought the boys a Polymoog synthesizer that alone cost \$12,000. To record their tunes, Donnie and Joe had a TEAC 80-8, the same reel-to-reel tape machine the Eagles used to record basic tracks.

To self-record and release an album today requires only making the effort to download GarageBand to your MacBook Pro and post some tunes to SoundCloud. To do it in the late seventies, before digital technology became available, demanded tremendous commitment. You had to rent a studio or build your own. You had to hire people to master the tapes, press the vinyl, print the sleeves, distribute the product. It's why collectors love private-press records—the artists invested their money and hopes into moon shots. Don Sr. wasn't on a Joseph Jackson trip. He had no ambitions for himself in the music business. But he believed in his sons' talent and applied practical farmer

logic to an impractical endeavor: Donnie and Joe would be successful not by covering other people's material but by making an album of their own songs. They still had to do their chores. But essentially, Don Sr. was saying to his sons: "Here are all the tools. Go be artists."

Between buying the gear and recording and pressing *Dreamin' Wild* in 1979, the Emersons spent close to \$100,000 at the time.

What happened next? Nothing. The Emersons had an album of songs, but no contacts in the music industry, no manager or booking agent, no clue how to get their music heard. Donnie and Joe played a handful of gigs at fairs in nearby farm towns, but even locally, *Dreamin' Wild* was met with indifference. Probably only a few dozen copies of the album ever made it off the farm, one of them, miraculously, the copy that Fleischer found in the junk shop in Spokane.

In 2012, Sullivan drove to the farm with a filmmaker to make a short documentary. On camera, Donnie reflected on the music's initial failure to find an audience. "When you do an album like that—'Oh, wow, I just did an *album*, and everyone is going to be amazed with this *album*,'" he said, laughing at his naiveté. "You see? And they weren't. . . . We just thought, 'I suppose they're going to call us.' And it never happened."

In the short film, which you can see on YouTube, Donnie and Joe are sitting inside the Practice Place, in the "control room"—a wood-paneled time capsule of analog equipment the size of a walk-in closet. They both look

amused and slightly puzzled to be talking about music they recorded half a lifetime ago. Donnie, especially, has a dazed expression, as if a chance encounter has brought the past rushing back.

Joe still has the matching jumpsuits at his house, he shows the camera. The white fabric is virginal. “The good old days,” he says, wistfully.

While shooting the film, Sullivan stayed on the Emersons’ farm, with Donnie and Joe’s parents, Don Sr. and Salina. To hear him describe it, he’d entered a place untouched by the shallow, hurried quality of modern life and met the last sincere people in a cynical land. “It was one of the most moving and emotional experiences I’ve ever had,” he told me.

Place mattered deeply to the music, the brothers make clear repeatedly. Whatever was special about *Dreamin’ Wild* had to do with where it was created. As Donnie tells Sullivan in the film, the farm and the Practice Place were a creative Eden. He lost himself writing and recording. “I was so engulfed in what I was doing—the tones, setting the equalizers and everything. I could just do anything I wanted to do. Without anybody bothering me.”

His eyes are closed and his head sways as he speaks. He’s traveling back there.

To get out to Fruitland from Spokane, you drive west on US Route 2, past the city airport and Fairchild Air Force Base and the suburb called Airway Heights, with its Walmart-anchored shopping center. Very quickly you’re

in farmland. This part of Washington doesn't match the typical image of the Pacific Northwest—it's not rainforest green but heartland brown, with rolling wheat fields stretching to the horizon. I'm tempted to say it feels like a John Mellencamp song, but actually it feels pre-Reagan, before the VCR-digital-electronics age. A better reference would be Steve Miller, how hearing one of his radio songs can put you in a tank-solid Chevelle somewhere out in flyover country, in the last days of cheap gas and good-paying factory jobs.

After a turn north, the two-lane gets windier, the hills bigger, and the land emptier. The scenic highlight is crossing the Spokane River at Fort Spokane, the old US Army fortification built to protect settlers against Native tribes. Now it's a recreation area in a beautiful river valley. A sad little casino and gas station on the other side mark Spokane Indian Reservation land, which borders this whole area. From here you crest a hill and drive a few miles before dropping into a wide, harvest-gold valley like something out of a Technicolor western.

Joe had told me on the phone to watch for a sign advertising firewood for sale, and to turn in there. I followed a dirt driveway past a workshop and some logging trucks and a field of ancient cars, trucks, and farm machinery rotting in high grass under the sun. At the end of the road sat a house made of Doug fir, with a white stone facade and a broad low metal roof that gave it a winged aspect. It was Joe's house; he'd never left the family farm.

He and Don Sr. were standing outside, waiting for my

arrival. Joe was bald on top, with cropped light-brown sides and a moustache. He wore a blue T-shirt tucked into blue jeans and sneakers. Don Sr. had washed up after working all morning and was dressed in a short-sleeved sport shirt. Even at eighty-one, with glasses, he looked big and hale. What hair was left was white, including his sideburns, which he wore in the boxy, short-trimmed style of sixties NFL players.

Joe invited me inside, into a large kitchen/living room dominated by a pine breakfast bar and a pool table. He lived alone—you knew that from the cavernous stillness. He spoke in a gentle, friendly voice with a slight twang. He laid out rolls and individual Tupperware containers with ham, turkey, lettuce, tomatoes, and cheese and got us cold beers to wash down the sandwiches.

“So you live in New York City?” he said, and his eyes genuinely twinkled, like someone coming from New York to Fruitland was astounding.

It was August 2012, a few months after Sullivan’s visit. Light in the Attic had reissued *Dreamin’ Wild* in June, and so many astounding things had happened since then, you would have thought Joe might have grown used to surprises. Pitchfork awarded the album an eight out of ten, with the reviewer calling it “a godlike symphony to teenhood.” The extensive press coverage that followed was equally gushing. Ariel Pink was quoted as saying he put “Baby” on every mixtape he gave to friends, and he recorded a new version with Dâm-Funk that became a minor sensation, creating an unlikely Donnie and Joe fan

base among hipster millennials. One music writer put “Baby” in company with “Stand by Me” as a soul classic. It was used in the film *Celeste and Jesse Forever* and would soon appear in another, *The Spectacular Now*, as audiovisual code for aching young love. To illustrate just how weird things were getting, Jimmy Fallon would soon appear on Bravo’s *Watch What Happens Live* and discuss with host Andy Cohen their shared love of “the baby song.”

Joe seemed happy with the attention; it brought excitement to his life and rare visitors to Fruitland. “It’s pretty neat” was how he put it. But everything that was happening hadn’t upended his brain or affected his day-to-day at fifty-three, which so far as I could tell pretty much resembled his life at nineteen. At one point as we talked, I noticed a little cabin set off in a grove of ponderosa pines. I knew instantly it was the Practice Place. It wasn’t fifty yards from Joe’s house.

I visited Fruitland twice over three years, spending several days on the farm. That first time, I was sent by the *New York Times* to write about the hoopla surrounding the reissue. Like any good celebrity, Donnie would be arriving last—he lived with his wife and two kids in Spokane, and was driving up the next day—so Don Sr. offered to show me around in his blue Taurus.

On the way out, we passed the field of dead machines and Joe said, “One of these cars he drove from New York, a ’49 Oldsmobile, didn’t you, Dad?”

“Yep,” Don Sr. said. “When I got out of the military, I bought it in New Jersey, in Perth Amboy. Actually, I

wanted a Packard. They had the best motors, a big V-8. See, I'm a mechanic, and if you know anything about cars, it had enormous bearings. Great balance and power in the motor. Packard, back then, was above a Cadillac."

At the highway, Joe pointed across to the small white farmhouse where his parents lived, the same house he and Donnie were raised in. Just down the road was the community Grange Hall, where they'd held their first rehearsals. Joe and his younger brother Dave currently worked with Don Sr. in the logging yard behind us. Joe's house and the Practice Place were beyond it. All the compass points, right there, within comforting distance.

Down the highway a few miles, a sign announced FRUITLAND and we passed a gas station that doubled as a grocery store and post office. I searched for more buildings, streets. Joe laughed. "That's the town."

I asked Joe, "What did you do on Saturday nights as a teenager?"

"I think I can remember going to a fair dance in Davenport"—a town forty miles south. "They had fairs in these small towns like Colville or Davenport," he went on. "I ended up going to the evening dance. Shoot, I might've only gone two or three times in my whole lifetime."

I was curious about the boys' exposure to live music. Had they driven down to Spokane to see rock concerts?

"I didn't go to concerts," Joe said. "Maybe because I hadn't been exposed to it, I didn't miss it. I didn't know the excitement of it." If he and Donnie heard live music, he explained, it would've been at a farm over in Fruitland

Valley. “The neighbors up there”—the McLeans—“were friends of ours. They would get together and have little beer parties.” Jim McLean played drums, his brother Lawton guitar. Someone nicknamed the place the Hilton.

They wanted to show me Hunters, a town ten miles north, where Donnie and Joe, and before them Don Sr., had attended school. On the way, Don Sr. kept pointing off to all the woodland spots he’d logged, and showed me Emerson Road, the dirt lane where he’d been raised. Hunters had a theater, a bank, two creameries, a barbershop, a doctor’s office, and a Catholic church, but they existed only in memory. What was there now was a café, a bar, and a little grocery, buildings and houses spread across a gulley and up a hillside. Compared to Fruitland, a metropolis.

The school—one long, low building, k through twelve—rested on a scenic plateau above town. The hallways had that unnatural drowsy quality schools get in summertime. Framed class portraits going back to the 1920s ringed the walls in the half-size gym. Joe pointed to his class of ’77. Sixteen kids. The class of ’79, Donnie’s class, had fourteen graduates. I wondered about the current students, what their lives were like out here so far from the shopping centers and reliable 4G. Were these the last kids in America spared the Internet?

By now, I’d been in Fruitland for an hour or so, but I’d understood in the first ten minutes what Matt Sullivan was talking about. Living in early twenty-first-century America, let’s say there’s a cynicism that sets in. Also an

incessant, self-alienating noise. If you live in a major coastal media city, as Sullivan and I both do, it's only noisier. You talk enough about the latest celebrity Twitter feud or the newest bougie food trend and you start thinking that stuff actually matters. Fruitland was a return to the real. I know, I know, but this wasn't rural romanticizing, not without merit, anyway. Being there, I found myself thinking about my grandparents on my father's side, and the community where they'd lived. It was one of these places in America that's no more than a cluster of houses and families along a rural highway, a zip code. Whatever was happening out in the rest of the country or the world barely touched down there. We used to sit out on the porch swing after supper, and the air was so heavy and still, you could hear a car coming half a mile off. Fruitland had that same elemental, out-of-time quality. I hadn't thought about that part of my life in years. Fruitland made me realize how much I missed it.

Something about the place—and, really, I mean the Emersons—rewired your jaded heart, put you back in touch with basic goodness. You shook hands with Joe and Don Sr. and instantly felt you'd known them forever; they were that kind of welcoming, unaffected people. The sincerity that you heard in the music was manifest in them. They radiated it. Don Sr. had a remarkable even-keeled mellowness. A reporter had flown in from New York and was sitting shotgun in his car asking him questions, and he didn't bat an eye. Neither had he shown any surprise when Jack Fleischer called out of the blue, or at any point after.

He took it as it came. If a UFO crash-landed on the farm, you could imagine him looking up and observing, “There are little green men in the lower field,” then going back to work.

Driving back, we got to talking about the unlikely second life of *Dreamin’ Wild*. Had the Emersons thought about it in the years before Jack Fleischer called?

“It was almost forgotten,” Joe said.

“It was in our basement all right,” said Don Sr.

“Donnie was still writing songs, collaborating with artists,” Joe said. “We just didn’t think of it.” The liner notes of the reissue mentioned that Donnie’s music career had continued after *Dreamin’ Wild*. He’d lived in LA and recorded an album down there. Was another lost masterpiece gathering dust in Don Sr.’s basement?

Back in downtown Fruitland, Joe instructed Don Sr. to turn onto a side road. We headed deeper into the heat-singed countryside. After two miles or so, Joe said, “Now, Dad, if we come up to this hill, can we stop at the top?” We idled on the empty road. Far off stood an abandoned farmhouse and beside it a few leaning outbuildings, weathered and sunbaked. This had been the Hilton.

“Still the same as it was back then,” Joe said. “There was beer drinking and pot smoking going on. We didn’t do none of the pot smoking.”

Joe mentioned one of the Hilton regulars, Bill Alex. Dead now from brain cancer, but once so strong he could pick up the back end of a Chrysler. Joe said, “Bill used to

ride his horse from over here in Fruitland Valley to our farm, to visit my younger sister Rose. That's a four-, five-mile ride."

Donnie and Joe made *Dreamin' Wild* as teens in the seventies, but they didn't really live through what we collectively think of as that decade—Watergate and disco and punk rock. The world they experienced in the seventies was a quieter, more agrarian one, in the way rural communities can feel decades behind. Moreover, I had the sense that the Fruitland I was seeing now was essentially unchanged from Joe and Donnie's childhood. That the distance between 1979 and the present was mere months.

I looked up at the Hilton. You could almost see the blond farm kids laughing with their beers and hear Bachman-Turner Overdrive echo across the valley.

Later, after Don Sr. dropped us off and drove home, Joe showed me around his house. There was a lot of Western-style furniture and dark wood throughout and, to a degree I hadn't noticed earlier, Catholic imagery. Everywhere I looked a Blessed Virgin refrigerator magnet or votive candle bearing a portrait of Christ on the cross stared back. Each time I visited I was put in mind of the silent, solitary quarters of a priest.

Upstairs, however, was an unfinished open room with a bar and amplifiers and a drum kit on a plywood riser. Joe had since switched to guitar and led an instrumental power trio, Emerson, Smith, and Bischoff, which rehearsed here on Monday nights and performed sporadically. Joe plugged his Joe Satriani-model Ibanez into an amp and turned

on the overdrive. He wailed in my direction for twenty minutes, wildly jerking the whammy bar. Watching the soft-spoken, devoutly religious man shredding made me smile.

There was a deck off the jam room. Sitting out there, Joe told me the story of his house. He'd designed and built it himself, he said. He'd planned to live there with a woman he fell in love with from the reservation. He broke ground in 1993, so he would've been thirty-four. Lonna was twenty-two. She was a single mom with two young kids. "She was real bad into drugs," Joe said. "I tried to help her. She got tied up with some bad people."

Lonna was arrested on drug charges at one point, Joe said, and served time near Seattle. "Never thought I'd be doing something like that," Joe said about visiting her in jail. Their relationship had ended long ago, and Joe had never married. Lonna had died the year before, at forty. Joe had written a song for her called "Freesia," after the flower.

As I was leaving to drive back to Spokane for the night, Joe showed me a spare room downstairs, empty except for a standing metal cabinet. Boxes of recording tape from the *Dreamin' Wild* sessions were stacked inside, along with rehearsal footage shot on an early camcorder. In a separate box were copies of a 45 the teens recorded at a Spokane studio before the Practice Place. It amounted to a Donnie and Joe archive, which Joe had preserved for years, and which had suddenly, with the success of the reissue, acquired value.

“It’s quite amazing, Donnie’s ability back then, for such a young artist and such a secluded area,” Joe said. “It’s a sense of genius, truthfully.”

I asked Joe how much credit he gave himself for their sound.

“I was just doing the drums. Just doing the drums. Donnie would really give me freedom. Basically, he wanted me to keep the tempo and not slack.” He chuckled. “Well, there was slack in there.”

In a way, Joe had reversed the big brother role: he supported his gifted younger sibling, becoming half of Donnie and Joe, but more crucially, he looked up to Donnie as his number-one fan.

“I had this thought,” Joe said, closing the cabinet. “I’d like to get together with Don and do some new recordings. Kind of a new *Dreamin’ Wild*. An album with what’s going on in my head and what’s going on in his head.”

Which made you wonder: What *was* going on in Donnie’s head?

The next morning, Donnie picked me up outside my hotel in downtown Spokane in his white Chevrolet Starcraft van, a massive, plush-carpeted road machine you could pretty much move into if you suddenly became homeless. We’d barely gassed up the beast when he started telling me about being raised Catholic and hearing the priest sing at a church on the reservation.

“*Really sing,*” Donnie stressed. “Half of these guys can’t sing. You go to all kinds of churches, and they suck.” He

stopped and took my measure. “Am I being too crude? I’m a little different than my brother, bro.” He laughed. “I love him. But just so you can handle me.”

Indeed, Donnie showed none of the slowness of the farm. His mind was amped, naturally. Conversation topics ping-ponged. Scattered thoughts were relayed in the *bro-* and *man-*inflected speech of a veteran gigging musician. The stillness you felt about Joe’s life wasn’t there with Donnie. It seemed the opposite, like a lot had gone down since 1979. As Donnie explained rapid-fire while we drove, he’d played all over—Nashville, Denver, Detroit Lakes, Minnesota. For a few years in the eighties he’d lived in Las Vegas, where he and his wife, Nancy, a city girl, a California girl, a dancer he’d met on a blind date, performed as a duo at the Rio. They’d moved back to the Spokane area and formed a local band. Donnie had done—still did—all the things you have to as a full-time musician scratching a living in a small market. He’d played weddings, written radio jingles for car dealerships, sung cover tunes at the casino over in Coeur D’Alene. He’d met and befriended incredible players. He mentioned Stanley Clarke, the jazz bass virtuoso.

Donnie was clearly tripped out by the album’s rediscovery, by all the attention his early music had received and the portal to the lost past it’d opened up. He’d yearned for fame and artistic recognition, and now it had come in this strange way, thirty years late. He had trouble articulating his feelings. “It’s weird . . . it’s kind of surreal,” he stumbled. “It’s hard for me to talk about. I feel like my life is all upside down.”

When fans like Louviere and Sullivan had called up asking about the vocal sound on “Baby,” he was dumbfounded. “At first I didn’t know what to say. Until the person on the other end of the line said, ‘How did you make that?’ It opened me up.” He added, emoting, “All my life I’ve been struggling to find out who I really am. I got out of there and I went into the world and I got convoluted. Am I making sense? So when I talked to them on the phone, it was almost like I was talking to a therapist. Isn’t that strange?”

One of the difficult things for him to reconcile, Donnie said, was being thrown back together with Joe. They hadn’t made music together in decades. They were different people, with very different lives. They didn’t even *look* like brothers. Donnie’s olive skin and hair color—coal black—gave him a Mediterranean appearance. But fans of *Dreamin’ Wild* saw them as a duo, a brother act. Donnie was torn. He wanted to be loyal to Joe, but he found it hard to play with him. Musically, there were rooms he couldn’t enter with Joe on drums. “It doesn’t mean it’s his fault or my fault,” Donnie said with the resignation of age. “It’s just circumstance, it’s what it is.”

We turned north toward Fruitland. I asked about his influences, the music he’d loved as a kid. I expected the usual tales of playing a record until the grooves were worn. But Donnie said he didn’t have a stereo growing up, much less records.

“Not even a little Fisher-Price hi-fi and a couple of Beatles 45s?”

Donnie shook his head. “I had none of that.”

Astonishingly, *Dreamin’ Wild* was created in a near-total pop-culture vacuum.

“You’re going to laugh at me—it’s kind of corny,” Donnie said. “But as a kid I watched *The Lawrence Welk Show*.”

I myself grew up in the East, in a remote rural community. In such places, I said, seeing a musician on TV, whoever it is, takes on greater meaning.

“It does!” Donnie exclaimed.

What changed Donnie’s life was a tractor—a Case Agri King that Don Sr. bought around 1977. The tractor had an enclosed cab, with a radio. “KJRB, out of Spokane,” Donnie remembered. “Back then they had all genres of music out of one station. I could listen to Smokey Robinson. I could listen to Hall and Oates. I could listen to Brothers Johnson. In fact, sometimes I could even hear some country music on there.” He’d spend eight, ten hours in the tractor, tilling the earth, soaking up sounds. “I felt everything I did was from that dial. Like hearing Smokey on the radio—I could see him in my mind. I could connect to him.”

He absorbed what he heard on the radio and spent hours in the Practice Place—and in his head. “I would daydream and transpose things on my mind down on the piano,” Donnie said. “I would daydream all the time.”

I asked Donnie the question I’d asked Joe: Had he thought about *Dreamin’ Wild* in the years before Jack Fleischer called?

“Oh, I often did,” he said. “I play the ‘Baby’ tune live. That comes from a real innocent time in my life. I was really connected to my first girlfriend. I knew her since second grade. It was a way of expressing myself.”

I mentioned my favorite song on the album, “Don’t Go Lovin’ Nobody Else.” Even more than “Baby,” the vocals destroy. Teenage Donnie repeats the title phrase over and over, his adolescent voice cracking in the most heartbreaking way. Hearing it, I think of myself at sixteen, alone in my room, obsessing over a girl who broke up with me before senior year, wanting so badly for it not to be over, the pain of that.

Donnie didn’t respond for a long time. When he did, his voice was thick with emotion. He said some of the songs he’d written not about himself but about Joe, from his viewpoint.

“My brother had really bad acne,” Donnie said. “It was so bad that at an early age I swore to myself I would never, *ever* let a child go through that when I had kids. My brother had it all over his face. *Everywhere*, man. It bothered me so much—” Donnie began to cry. “I’m sorry,” he said. “That’s weird.”

There were times when I couldn’t listen to *Dreamin’ Wild*. The music was too emotional. Its power lay in its pure expression of teenage naiveté and yearning, but it’s not always easy to go back there. And it wasn’t even my adolescence we were revisiting.

We crossed the wide river at Fort Spokane, the home stretch. Donnie collected himself. “This has brought back

many feelings I suppressed that I didn't realize," he said. "But the world will do that to you."

Contact with a private-press artist can be unpredictable, even confrontational. Fleischer told me about another musician whom collectors consider a lost genius, a Minnesota native named Tom Nehls. In 1973, he self-recorded a trippy folk album titled, wonderfully, *I Always Catch the Third Second of a Yellow Light*. Fleischer found Nehls' music "incredibly tender." But when Fleischer called him about re-issuing the record on a label, Nehls was incredulous and didn't want any part of it. Others, Fleischer has found, remain sensitive decades later about the music they made for an uncaring world. "Some people can't even begin to talk about their music. Its lack of success and the amount of energy they put into it was so painful to them."

He added: "You just never know until someone picks up the other end of the phone. It could be anything from somebody who's too excited and you go, 'Look, I'm happy that we connected, but you're not the next Tom Petty.' Or it can be people who are openly hostile. I had one guy where I had to talk to a couple of his family members to get his number. He was so hostile that I'd bothered his family. This was in the context of me telling him how much I loved his record and wanted to get it out to people."

Sullivan, who has had similar run-ins, told me, "You're bringing ghosts out of the closet. Sometimes they're just like, 'Sorry, I don't want to go there.'"

But for many private-press collectors, possessing the music isn't enough. There's a strong desire to speak with or meet the unrecognized artists who created it. Recently, Sullivan and Fleischer teamed up to locate a handsome blond playboy who, while living in LA in the early eighties, recorded an album of delicate acoustic music titled *L'Amour* under the name Lewis. (Light in the Attic reissued the record to acclaim.) After months of searching, on a tip, they flew to Vancouver, British Columbia. They canvassed the city for two days, and found Lewis, now going by Randy, dressed entirely in white and sunning himself outside a Starbucks.

"We pulled out the rereleased album," Fleischer recalled. "We said, 'We want you to sign these royalty contracts.' You could almost see a chill go through him to look at the old album. He didn't want to touch the contracts. He said, 'Those were different times, man. I'm not into coin now. I'm not into coin.'"

For Donnie, and for the Emerson family, there were ghosts. For starters, the recording sessions in LA, in 1981, had been a catastrophe. By then Donnie was a solo act. As sometimes happens, the family had made a decision to focus on the more talented child. Dutifully, Joe stepped aside. To fund Donnie's solo album, Don Sr. further mortgaged the family's land. The studio, in North Hollywood, ran through the money like water. The loan interest rate was punishing. Of the farm's 1,700 acres, the bank repossessed more than 1,500. Whole pastures and hillsides—gone. Don Sr.'s back seized up from the stress. As Donnie recalled on the drive

up, “a void of hopelessness” descended on the farm.

Maria Emerson, the oldest daughter, who was sixteen at the time, said losing most of the farm was traumatic and confusing for the whole family. “You don’t completely understand how much money is being put out,” she told me. She and her siblings didn’t blame Donnie, she stressed, but added, “That was our life, living on the farm. To see pieces of it sold and gone because of that decision was sad.”

When I asked Don Sr., he said, “We wanted Donnie to go forward,” and expressed no regret. But he was quick to add, “I wouldn’t mind having a little of the money back.”

Despite the near bankruptcy and now a second self-produced album that didn’t advance Donnie’s career, the family continued to promote his music, often at their expense. There was a shift into country, a video for a twangy single called “Rocky Start,” a European radio promotional tour.

But the pure creative dream state—and that singular raw soul sound—proved elusive for Donnie in the years after he left the farm. He chased musical trends and listened to other voices instead of his own. At Joe’s house the day before, Joe had played me a couple of tracks off Donnie’s LA album, *Can I See You*. The production was ghastly eighties AOR: bright keyboards, canned metronomic drumming, big, hollow choruses. You heard the strained effort to sound like Christopher Cross. The Donnie of “Baby” was buried under there.

Even now, Donnie is still trying to find his artistic groove, still hoping the world will recognize his

multifaceted talent. He's always loved classical music, and he recently spent two years writing a "wind-chime score," he said, which he hopes to sell to spa chains. He acknowledged some wrong turns taken.

"The only time I didn't make those mistakes is when I was on the farm," Donnie said. "When I was isolated and my parents gave me this time to find myself. And when you get away from that, and start getting into the world, especially the music business ..."

When we got to the farm, Donnie's mood changed. In the van he'd been a little scattered, but funny and talkative. Now he became increasingly quiet, withdrawn. I didn't notice at first.

We gathered at Joe's house with their younger brother Dave, a handsome, easygoing guy who lived in a room over the workshop in the lumberyard. We were kidding around in the driveway and drinking beer on a summer afternoon. (The Emersons, by the way, are the platonic ideal of beer drinkers, believing a hot day calls for a cold beer.) A photographer from the newspaper was there, too. He'd spent the morning touring Fruitland with Joe. The idea was to get portraits of Donnie and Joe on the farm, a then-and-now thing. The Case tractor with the radio was still around, in the field of dead machines. Donnie climbed up for a photo. Dave went back to work. Someone—Joe, I think—suggested we drive over to the Hilton, maybe also check out the Catholic church on the reservation where Donnie heard the priest sing.

As the journey through the past continued, Donnie grew morose. At the little stone church, he darkly hinted that something had happened to him there. He was bodily agitated and wanted to leave. Joe had a fine barometer for his brother's moods, and he tried to fill the strained silence, keep things light and friendly. But by the time we returned to the farm to shoot inside the Practice Place, Donnie looked like someone in the midst of a full-on crisis.

Eventually, when I came to know him better, I understood that in some ways it was Donnie being Donnie. He's an intense guy; the swirling emotions didn't end with his teens. He once told me, "Life is complicated for me, man."

But he really was struggling—and for good reason. Jack Fleischer's record-hunting trip to Spokane had set off a personal earthquake. It had dredged up an intense time in Donnie's life and literally returned him to the farm. It was clear that he didn't drive out here very often, or easily. The distance between Spokane and Fruitland seemed greater, somehow, than seventy miles.

I thought about what Fleischer and Sullivan had said about ghosts resurfacing. For Donnie, it was that, but also something else. Record collectors were calling; talk show hosts were gushing about "Baby"; record label owners and reporters were showing up to Fruitland. As the creative mastermind, Donnie, more than Joe or Don Sr., was the focus of their attention. The success must have seemed, on some level, like a cosmic slipup. Here he was, at fifty, witnessing the overnight fame of

his seventeen-year-old self. What was he supposed to do with it?

Rodriguez, the subject of the Oscar-winning documentary *Searching for Sugar Man*, also experienced this dissonance. He'd released two albums on a small label in the early seventies; both were totally ignored in America. For years, he worked construction jobs in Detroit and led a hand-to-mouth existence. Meanwhile, his music found its way to South Africa, where his songs were adopted as anti-apartheid anthems and the elusive artist (much to his surprise, when he finally found out) was embraced as a rock poet on the level of Bob Dylan. But there was one big difference: Rodriguez was already a mature artist when he made that music. So when *Light in the Attic* reissued it to wide acclaim, he could—and did—strap on a guitar and perform his sly protest song “Crucify Your Mind” on Letterman that same summer at age seventy. What people loved about *Dreamin' Wild*, by contrast, was its innocence, its “accidental greatness,” as *Pitchfork* put it. Matt Sullivan had invited Donnie and Joe to perform at his label's tenth-anniversary party in Seattle later that year. But the brothers couldn't reproduce themselves as sheltered farm boys jamming together. Even if they could, somehow, Donnie didn't want to; he'd honed his chops. And his wife, Nancy, was his musical partner now. The stony, hazy sound he and Joe created, like the years the brothers lived together on the farm, belonged to the past.

The Practice Place, however, remained. Now Donnie and Joe stood as middle-aged men outside the tiny cabin.

Its heavy door was padlocked. Joe held the key.

If you loved *Dreamin' Wild* and knew its creation story, as I did, you felt the moment. Here was the very room where it had gone down. Where teenage Donnie had spent hours teaching himself to thread tape through the eight-track. Where he and Joe had recorded their beautiful and heartbreaking and soulful record. Imagine, for a moment, you're them at that age. You live on a wheat farm seventy miles northwest of Spokane and three hundred miles from the nearest metropolitan area, Seattle. Not that you ever visit those places. You're geographically and culturally isolated. The radio is practically a foreign concept. But making music is your passion, your brotherly bond, and into your world, against all odds, appears a recording studio.

On nights when they recorded, Joe had told me, he changed out of his farm clothes, got cleaned and dressed up. "It was a special thing to do," he said.

Behind that door, in a very real sense, was Donnie and Joe's boyhood, preserved. Instruments had been left for thirty years, lyric sheets in Donnie's adolescent hand, the rainbow shag carpet used on the walls as soundproofing. The air felt late Carter administration. They sat on a stuffed green couch, clutching poulder cans of Busch Light. Joe listened uneasily as Donnie, in an alcohol-slowed voice, spoke about recording. He used to shave down the drumsticks to get a softer hi-hat sound, he said. But there was none of the warm nostalgia and easy banter seen in Sullivan's short film. That was made before the

reissue and all the attention, when it was still a lark. The brothers sat at opposite ends of the couch. Donnie wore dark sunglasses the entire time—less as eye protection than as a psychic shield.

I was moved by Donnie's anguish and felt complicit in it. He wanted people to hear his new songs, he'd told me in the van, the stuff he'd written as a mature musician. And here I was like everyone else, asking him to show me the spot where he'd sung the "oohs" in "Baby" at sixteen. It was like asking a practiced artist, "Hey, show me your first raw scribbings." And yet, Donnie's first raw scribbings had been brilliant. They'd drawn me and others to Fruitland. So, like it or not, there was an inevitability about the course of the day; the last station of the cross was the Emerson homestead. We drove there.

At the entrance road, a white sign with painted black letters announced CAMP JAMMIN' THE BARN. The sign had been poled into the ground to attract passing motorists. There was indeed a barn down the lane, beside the small white farmhouse, and near it, a wooden ticket booth. During the nineties, in what had been Donnie's country phase, Don Sr. converted this cow barn into a three-hundred-seat concert hall. He'd gotten banquettes from an old café and put them inside. There was an if-you-build-it-they-will-come aspect that defied all logic. When Matt Sullivan first saw Camp Jammin', he found it "mind-boggling," he said. "I asked them, 'Who in the heck did you think was going to drive out here? It's five hours from anywhere.'"

The farmhouse itself was reminiscent of shotgun cabins you see in the rural South—one story, dull white paint, green metal roof. A battered brown Chevy Nova, a farm car, was parked in the dusty driveway. Beside the fence gate hung a wooden sign, with THE EMERSONS carved in cursive letters. The air outside the house was heavy and still; the only sound was the low hum of cicadas. Donnie and Joe entered through a mud porch that led into the small yellow kitchen, where Don Sr. stood. He'd already hauled a load of logs to the sawmill in Colville that morning, waking at five to make the hundred-mile round-trip on winding roads. Now he was cleaned up, in jeans and a fresh shirt, eating a slice of cheese.

The photographer brought his gear into the living room and began setting up. The room was a domestic scene from a bygone America. A *World Book Encyclopedia* set, that mainstay of self-education in rural homes before Google, occupied a bookshelf. The paneled walls were covered with family photos: school portraits of the children with their dated bowl cuts and feathered bangs, more recent shots of the younger generation. A color-tinted wedding picture of Don Sr. and Salina hung by a window. Near it was a hunky head shot of Donnie from around 1986. Even more than in Joe's place there were saintly calendars, Jesus candles, clumps of rosary beads strung on hooks, a Vatican gift shop's worth of Catholic souvenirs. There was a closed-in stuffiness to the room that was not unpleasant.

Salina had fussed over Donnie when he came in, and now she fussed over her guests. A tiny woman with glasses

and blackish-gray hair pulled into a bun, she appeared the temperamental opposite of her husband, nervously expressive and eager for personal connection. She spoke in rapid, heavily accented English, and Joe explained, “Mom is from the island of Malta.”

Without prompting, Salina told the story of how she’d come to Fruitland, beginning with her childhood during the war. With its proximity to Africa in the Mediterranean, Malta had been a strategic island for both the Allies and the Axis forces. The German Luftwaffe had nearly bombed it to rubble in the Siege of Malta. Salina’s family—she’s one of twelve children—lived perilously close to the Allied base. One day her father had an idea, Salina said. He told his family they’d go to a cave in the cliffs above the sea and shelter there until the bombing ended.

“We took some blankets, clothes, not much, a couple of pillows, and we go there. My father says, ‘Nobody will be there.’ Was five hundred people! Hole here, hole here, hole there—each hole had a family.” She went on: “We just live with prayers. Three times a day we took turns saying the rosary.”

Salina and her mother and siblings huddled in the cave, while her father returned to their farm. The bombing lasted more than a year.

Salina met Don Sr. after the war, when he was in the navy and stationed on Malta. She was twenty-two. After he shipped out, he wrote to her. Salina missed her schooling because of the war, so her sister would read his letters to her and write down her spoken replies. They

kept up a correspondence that way, and two years later he returned to marry her.

When the newlyweds came to Fruitland, as a wedding gift a friend of Don Sr.'s gave them part of a house. It was on land back in the woods down Emerson Road. Don Sr. added the front portion and moved the house to where we stood.

As Salina recounted her life story, I listened, slack-jawed. I think that's when I came to love the Emerson family. To paraphrase Whitman, they contained multitudes. Just when you thought you knew them as rural American farmers and unlikely rock stars, you were hearing about Malta and German bombers and sheltering in a sea cave like Saint Paul after his shipwreck. Here, I realized, was the source of Donnie's Mediterranean complexion—and, possibly, his musical gift.

Salina picked up an acoustic guitar. She wanted to play us a folk song she'd written. She sat on a stuffed chair, facing us, and began talk-singing:

Why I should worry

Why I should complain

When I have the sun in the morning and the moon at night

And the stars up above keep shining bright

And I can walk and I can talk and I can hear and I can sing

Salina was singing her words from memory; she had never learned to read or write. She hadn't learned to drive, either. She depended on Don Sr. or Joe to take her to church and elsewhere. The farm was her world.

Donnie, still troubled, disappeared into the kitchen to call his wife. We heard him talking in a hushed voice. Salina stood and went to get something for me. She returned holding a CD. It was another album by Donnie, or Don Emerson. This one, titled *Whatever It Takes*, was recorded in '97, during the country phase. Donnie's hair has that coiffed Randy Travis look in the cover photo. As before, the family formed a private label to release the album, and the youngest sister, Rose, acted as Donnie's publicist. Salina said she carried CDs in her purse to sell to people she met, sometimes going door to door. She showed me a notebook she asked Donnie's fans to sign. I wondered how many attempts had been made, how much of the family's limited resources had been marshaled for the dream.

When Donnie rejoined his family, his dark mood suddenly lifted, though not his shades, which gave him the appearance of a blind musician. The photographer got him smiling and joking around with Joe. A truce with the past, for now.

With all of us in there, the house seemed about to burst. It was hard to believe, I remarked, that seven people once shared these two small rooms.

"It was even smaller then," Donnie said. He pointed to a room behind a door, nothing more than a makeshift nook really, where all five siblings slept when they were little. Don Sr. had built them a platform bed, and they'd shared it. Eventually the girls needed privacy and a wall was built to separate the room. But Donnie, Joe, and Dave continued to share the bed through high school.

It wasn't until that very moment that I fully grasped the miracle of *Dreamin' Wild*. A recording studio had been financed and built by a family that slept five to a bed. Richly layered music had emerged from a household with no stereo. A third-generation logger and farmer and his wife had risked their land so their sons could be musicians. And two isolated farm boys had made a classic soul record. It didn't seem possible.

The Emersons had believed the music was special. They'd been laughed at and ignored and nearly lost everything—but they'd been right. As painful as parts of their story were, there was also triumph, made possible through a second miracle: one of the few copies of *Dreamin' Wild* to get out into the world was rescued from the forgotten dustbin of time. People heard it, and they believed, too. With the royalties and film licensing deals, Don Sr. might recoup a little money. But the point was, he'd lived to see it. So had Salina. So had Joe. So had Donnie, who earlier that day had told me, with something like peace in his voice, "If I died tomorrow, hey, man, someone got it." When you strip away everything else, that's the desire of every artist, lost or found.

Almost a year after my first trip to Fruitland, Matt Sullivan e-mailed me. "I'm having a difficult time comprehending this, but it's true," he wrote. "Next month, I'll be flying out to New York along with Donnie and Joe for their NYC debut."

A woman in Brooklyn wanted to surprise her boyfriend

on their anniversary by having Donnie sing “Baby,” the couple’s song, in person. She’d cover his travel. Sullivan seized on the chance to line up a gig for Donnie and Joe at the Mercury Lounge. The booker, it turned out, loved *Dreamin’ Wild*.

The trip almost didn’t happen. Donnie had scheduling challenges with his wife and two kids. Joe was afraid to fly and wary of the big city. You realized there would never be a Donnie and Joe tour. This might be the only chance to see them live. In the end, they came through. Sullivan arrived a day early. He met Donnie and Joe at the airport. “From the minute they got off the plane it was magical,” he said. “Picking them up and seeing them come down the escalator so giddy and excited. They were like, ‘I can’t believe we’re in New York!’”

Donnie and Joe rode the ferry to Jersey City to be interviewed live on WFMU. They were asked by a reporter from the downtown fashion magazine *Nylon* their view on gay marriage (“I have to follow what my religion teaches,” Joe said). At McSorley’s Old Ale House, they tried to explain to the drunk guys at the next table the improbable path that had brought them there. One night, Sullivan arranged a visit to Dunham Studios, a Brooklyn recording studio owned by Thomas Brenneck, a member of Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings, who also played guitar for Amy Winehouse on her *Back to Black* album and tour. Brenneck, a fan, manned the board while Donnie and Joe improvised songs and recorded late into the night like they were teens back on the farm. Sullivan thought it sounded

so good he wanted to release the recordings as a seven-inch single. Already, his label was planning a follow-up album of songs from later sessions at the Practice Place, *Still Dreamin' Wild*. On Sunday, Joe genuflected inside Saint Patrick's Cathedral, a personal dream.

I met the Emersons one evening and took them and Sullivan to an old-school Italian restaurant. To share a meal with Donnie and Joe in the East Village was like meeting old friends in a foreign country. Walking the streets later, Joe had the skittish eyes of the first deer to dart from the herd. Donnie was in his glory, grinning ear to ear, a gigging musician in New York.

In Brooklyn, the boyfriend walked into the bar to find his girlfriend and all their friends gathered for a celebration. Watching Donnie sing "Baby," the boyfriend wept with joy. And the Mercury Lounge show the next night—absolute magic.

The place was sold out. Jack Fleischer was there. Brenneck and his eight-months-pregnant wife were there. The anniversary couple were there. Every person in the room knew the story of *Dreamin' Wild*, the time and distance Donnie and Joe had traveled to be on stage. This was a once-in-a-lifetime event. We all knew it. Sullivan and I have probably been to a thousand concerts between us, and we agreed we'd never seen anything like it. The goodwill toward Donnie and Joe from the audience was a physical force in the room. As he reflected on it more than two years later, in his label's offices in LA, Sullivan's eyes moistened. "It was hard coming back and trying to

explain it,” he said. “People were like, ‘Oh, it sounds like an awesome show.’ No, it was more than that. To see that type of connection between the audience and musicians—it was like they were one.”

Donnie and Joe rose to the moment. Especially Donnie. The tortured guy I’d seen in Fruitland was replaced by a joyful and charismatic performer, totally at home on a stage. His voice was different, of course, but incredible and moving in new ways. It’s true the drumming could have been more professional. But the magic of the songs—and you could tell deep down Donnie knew this—came from the brotherly union, from all that Donnie and Joe had shared together on the farm, which found its way into the notes they passed between them and directed out to the audience.

They played without a set list. They opened with “Baby.” ⑧

STEVEN KURUTZ

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