

SLAP

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Let It Ride: Skateboarding & the Music of Dinosaur Jr

by Guy Gray with interview assistance by Mark Whiteley

No band has had more of an impact on the skateboarding world than Dinosaur Jr. Their music and the solo work of J Mascis, the band's guitarist and vocalist, has regularly popped up in skateboard videos since the late 1980s. Throughout all that time, the music has proven itself to be timeless, because its energy has never waned. People simply get amped when they see a part with a Dinosaur Jr song in it.

Dinosaur Jr was a Massachusetts-based power trio that played a particularly guitar heavy form of music that was equal parts hardcore and folk rock. Bands like The Stooges, Black Sabbath, Sonic Youth, and Neil Young and Crazy Horse all left their mark on Dinosaur Jr, but it was Mascis, bassist-vocalist Lou Barlow, and drummer Emmett "Murph" Jefferson that created music that—even to this day—is completely unique. They were signed to Black Flag's SST label, which was punk rock ground zero in the '80s due to a roster full of influential bands such as The Minutemen, Hüsker Dü, The Meat Puppets, Bad Brains, Sonic Youth, and many more.

Musically, Dinosaur Jr was important for a lot of reasons, but chief among them was Mascis' elevation of the guitar's place in indie rock. With it, he put the music into what is indie rock. He played louder than anyone, coated everything in feedback (probably sowing the seeds for the whole "shoegazer" movement), and cranked out incredibly expressive guitar solos, completely ignoring the underground's unspoken eschewal of them. The band's song writing was complex and emotional. Their multi-part songs featured virtuoso playing from all three members, and Mascis' delivery of his odd lyrics that attempted to cope with and make sense of difficult

personal situations made for the most hopeful sounding melancholy. Like Neil Young, he seemed comfortable with his flawed voice, which not only made it all the more sincere but completely inspiring as well. The band put out three influential albums during the '80s, then broke up due to internal tensions. Barlow went on to do Sebadoh (whose songs have also shown up in a few skate videos), while Mascis continued Dinosaur Jr into the '90s as, more or less, a glorified solo project.

The first appearance of Dinosaur Jr in a skate video was Ohio Skateout, a contest video from the late '80s. The song "Sludgefeast" got used but it basically went under the radar, much like that video. The band's next video appearance was probably where they made their greatest impact, in Santa Cruz Speed Wheels' Speed Freaks. According to Mascis, it was Neil Blender's idea. "He came to a show in LA in '88," Mascis said. "I think he wanted to use it in some wheel company video first, and then more got used from there."

In fact, four songs got used in that video, including the anthemic "Freak Scene," the song that sealed the deal for most skaters at the time, including ex-Blind and Girl pro Rudy Johnson. "You know how Mike Valley had 'Freak Scene' in his part? It just gave you the biggest inspiration to go out and shred like him," Johnson said. "I think that's where it all stems from. At least for me it did." It did for many. And Valley, who is still a Dinosaur Jr fan to this day, attests to this. "What's really funny is that throughout the years I've had countless people credit me for turning them onto Dinosaur Jr," Valley recalled. "Well, the same goes for me; through that video part I turned myself on to Dinosaur Jr. I had never heard of them before I saw that video. I didn't pick the song for my part. I don't think anyone actually picked his song in that video. But after seeing it I was a fan." The part and the music are just perfect for each other—ripping skating and an equally ripping song.

Getting the rights to use a song in a video today is a serious legal issue

for record labels, but little do they realize how much promotion a skate video can do for a band. Undoubtedly, thousands of kids ran out and bought Dinosaur Jr music, and in turn, discovered other obscure bands in the process. Without exaggeration, Valley agrees. "My Speed Wheels video part with the Dinosaur Jr song is easily a moment in time you can point to where visually and sonically the relationship between skateboarding and music hit home," he said. "I think that's why so many people remember that part and credit it not only for turning them onto Dinosaur Jr, but to independent music as well, and in turn, turning them onto themselves. That's skateboarding and music at its best."

Valley's part may have turned kids onto Dinosaur Jr, but Blender is the skater most closely associated with the band. He's friends with J, and he even did the cover art for the Without a Sound album. His part in Speed Freaks features the song "Let It Ride," and you can clearly see a Dinosaur Jr sticker on his board as he walks up to his ramp. Blender's influence also got Dinosaur Jr used in his other sponsors' videos, G & S's Footage, and later on, Alien Workshop's Memory Screen. With Footage, Mascis gave Blender an alternate version of the song "The Wagon" to use for Duane Pitre and Rob Dyrdek's part, two up and coming amateurs at the time. "I didn't actually pick the song," said Pitre, "but they [Sarge Carter and Mike Hill, G & S team managers at the time] knew I was a big Dinosaur fan, so it was a no-brainer for them. Neil actually got The Wagon like a year before it came out on the record Green Mind. I think

Footage came out 10 months before Green Mind. We were able to use it because the backing vocals were slightly different than the album version. You'd have to know to hear it, and even then it would be hard." Pitre's and Dyrdek's part was phenomenal and it helped inject new energy into the company. Carter and Hill saw the opportunity this provided and decided to start their own company, bringing G & S riders Pitre, Dyrdek, Blender, and Steve Claar along for the ride. In 1991, Alien Workshop put out their first video, Memory Screen. It was a revelation to the entire skate world. Some complained that all the blinking screens, odd camera work, Super 8 stuff, and non-skating footage were too "arty," while free thinkers embraced the vastly different approach and saw it for what it was—genius. Dinosaur Jr became the soundtrack to Alien's vision; it was the perfect audio counterpart. Several songs made their way into Memory Screen, and the company even touted that the video featured "A Little Ethnic Song," a new song by J Mascis, in the ads for the video.

"We just liked their attitude and sound," Hill said, filling us in as to why they continued to use Dinosaur Jr. "Their music has tension that builds throughout their songs, which seems to lend itself to editing/skating. The early songs charged ahead, reaching and releasing. It was inspiring editing to music you like and we felt that it represented the feeling of the Workshop."

"The music always had a sound and created a mood that we could relate to; a tone that matched our own and that we would eventually project via the Workshop," added Carter.

Indeed, Alien Workshop used the music of Dinosaur Jr to establish a visual/sonic relationship, which they practically own and still effects their companies to this day. Any doubters need only watch Habitat's most recent video, Mosaic, which features a Dinosaur Jr song from the first record and several unreleased J Mascis solo recordings. Joe Castrucci, Habitat team manager/filmer/art director, explains how this came to be. "I went to a Mascis show in Cincinnati and Tony Heitz (Alien team manager) and I approached him about doing some custom

stuff for Mosaic. He was into it and gave me his email. I sent him a few emails explaining the video and he sent a CD and never replied to another email again. I think his music and Dinosaur Jr have done so much to give feeling to skate videos. Imagine Dyrdek's part in Memory Screen without Dinosaur Jr. The music is timeless, you can't really label it with an era or genre," said Castrucci.

Dinosaur Jr was also included in another landmark video that came out at almost the same time, Blind's Video Days. Rudy Johnson chose it for his part. "It was just that song Just Like Heaven, by The Cure" he said. "It didn't matter if you were into other genres of music, that song had something that grabbed your ear and made you just feel good. To me, from a musician's point of view, it was just a sick-ass melody. Then when I heard the Dinosaur Jr version all heavy and distorted, I was like, 'I'm going to use this for my part!'"

Since then, Dinosaur Jr appearances in skate videos have been more sporadic. East Coast video makers Dan Wolfe and Josh Stewart have used Dinosaur Jr songs multiple times.

Explaining why, "Maybe it's because their first four to five albums were so raw. The tunes were so perfect and beautiful while somehow maintaining this edge that sounded like it could've been recorded in J Mascis' basement or garage or something," Stewart said. "And I think that 'rawness' connects so well to the raw and unpolished nature of street skating. When I hear their music I picture skating in shitty parking lots, double-sided curbs and crappy manual pads. And that's so good! They've got this real East Coast vibe to their music and it's always been something skaters have identified with. From an editing standpoint, their songs have always maintained a good storyline. There are lots of change-ups, a proper beginning, middle, and end, and amazing intros that you can build a part around. Overall, I think they've made the most consistently editable music out of anyone. Some of their songs are so perfect that I'd never edit to them, because once you edit to a song you end up getting totally over it. And I'd hate to do that to their best music and to myself."

Dinosaur Jr inspires that kind of devotion in people. A lot of it might have to do with nostalgia, but there's no denying that powerful music simply has a powerful effect on people. Duane Pitre, for instance, would later go on to quit

professional skateboarding in order to play music. He says that Dinosaur Jr means a lot of things to him. "Youth and exploring music that is fresh to your ears. A Choice. Learning that there is music outside of a manufactured idea. Dinosaur Jr is the reason that I listen to and play the music that I do today," he explained.

Considering that skateboarding teaches the same lessons—principles of individuality and the questioning of mainstream society—it's no surprise that Dinosaur Jr meshes with skateboarding as well as it does.

Considering that, you can't fault Pitre for being nostalgic. Like many of us, he can't see any other band meaning as much as Dinosaur Jr does. "Not to be negative whatsoever, but I think the days of bands like Dinosaur Jr are over," said Pitre. "That realm of music is too popular now. 'Indie rock' is a term on MTV now, so that's it, it's over. It's no longer an alternative option; it's the popular option and that's the one major thing that made it special then. But hopefully there are kids out there that hold other bands as special to them as I do Dinosaur Jr. And when they are my age and they listen to those bands it will make them smile and remember the good ol' days. Dinosaur Jr is those days to me."

Below is a list of all the Dinosaur Jr and J Mascis songs used in skate videos, organized by artist and album:

Dinosaur Jr.

Dinosaur

"Forget the Swan"--Anthony Pappalardo--Habitat Mosaic

You're Living All Over Me

"Little Fury Things"--Reese Forbes--Element World Tour
"Kracked"--Intro--Toy Machine Good and Evil
"Sludgefeast"--Ohio Skateout
"The Lung"--Rob Dyrdek--Alien Workshop Memory Screen
"In a Jar"--1984 Let It Bleed

Bug

"Freak Scene"--Mike Vallely--Speed Wheels Speed Freaks
"They Always Come"--David Nielson--Speed Wheels Speed Freaks
"Yeah We Know"--Brian Anderson--Toy Machine "Jump Off a Building"
"Let It Ride"--Neil Blender--Speed Wheels Speed Freaks
"Pond Song"--Brian Brannon--Speed Wheels Speed Freaks
"Budge"--Duane Pitre--Alien Workshop Memory Screen
"The Post"--Tod Swank--Speed Wheels Speed Freaks

Just Like Heaven

"Just Like Heaven"--Rudy Johnson--Blind Video Days

Green Mind

"The Wagon"--Duane Pitre, Rob Dyrdek, Steve

Claar--G & S Footage

"Puke & Cry"--Paul Zitzer--Static

Whatever's Cool With Me

"Not You Again"--Montage with Ed Selego, Allen

Russell and Jeff Lenoce--Cigar City

Where you Been?

"On the Way"--Tampa Section--Static

Without a Sound

"On the Brink"--Donny Barley--Eastern Exposure 3 Underachievers

Hand It Over

"Alone"--Car on Fire section--Alien Workshop Time Code

Time Between: A Tribute to the Byrds Compilation

"Feel a Whole Lot Better"(Byrds Cover)--Steve Claar--Alien Workshop Memory Screen

J Mascis solo

More Light

"Back Before You Go"--Team Section--Adio One Step Beyond

"Ammaring"--Tosh Townend--Transworld Sight Unseen

"I'm Not Fine"--London Demo Section--Transworld Video Radio

Guitarists Compilation

"A Little Ethnic Song"--intro--Alien Workshop Memory Screen

Unreleased

unknown--Ed Selego--Habitat Mosaic

unknown acoustic--Anthony Pappalardo Slow Mo--Habitat Mosaic

[While this article was being written, the three original members of Dinosaur Jr reformed the group and played tour dates both stateside and in Europe to support Merge Records' re-release of the first three albums. We can safely say that the audiences contained older skateboarders reminiscing about their early days of skateboarding. Additionally, we sincerely hope that a new generation was in attendance too, and that the music will inspire their skateboarding as well.]