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**WORKBOOK**  
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B L O O M S B U R Y

## Influence

Dear Walter,

Do you remember? It was the end of lunch, and we were getting ready to head back to class. You passed me a mixtape with Hüsker Dü's live album *The Living End* on one side and Sugar's *Copper Blue* on the other. Your measured nonchalance is something I've learned to account for in the decades since, but at the time, the gesture left me hugely unprepared for what I was about to hear.

The Hüsker Dü live show starts with "New Day Rising," and it certainly was one for me. Up to that point, I paid attention to music in only the most cursory ways, and to the degree that I did, it belonged to a more juvenile world I was eager to leave behind. From your tape, I charted two paths of departure and traveled both at once. The first headed to the past and into the Hüsker Dü back catalogue. The second led me to the present to finally listen to the music of my generation. Sugar, sure, but I also sought out anyone who claimed Hüsker Dü as an influence. Band led on to band, and soon I was on a road that had less to do with Bob Mould and more to do with my own journey of discovery.

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You may not realize this, but I credit that day—you, the tape, our resulting friendship—as one of the most influential of my life. Part of why I moved to Austin after high school was because Bob Mould, this paragon of cool in my mind, lived *there* when he could be living anywhere. I took a job at a record store because after all of my listening, I felt more qualified to do that than anything else. More importantly though, music helped me sort and solidify my relationships. Making mixtapes, playing in bands, going to shows: all of these things became the ways I connected with the people in my life.

As formative as Bob's music was for me, I realized the other day that my review of his newest album, *Beauty & Ruin*, was the first time I've found occasion to write about him. I confess that while I followed his second solo career for a while, I eventually lost track. It wasn't until *Silver Age* and its laudatory reviews promising a return to form<sup>1</sup> that I began to pay attention again. Still, the album's context initially made me as wary as I was hopeful. It came out the same year as the *Copper Blue* reissue. Bob had also recently released his autobiography and was funding a DVD concert tribute to his legacy through Kickstarter. *Silver Age* felt like part of a sudden spate of nostalgia, and I held back despite my desire to give in and swoon. After such a prolonged absence from my life, I wasn't sure how I felt about Bob's return, either for me or for him.

I recently joined the Popular Culture Association and started receiving their quarterly journal. In one of the back issues they sent, Melissa Ames writes about the role of absent fathers on the TV series *Lost*.<sup>2</sup> She invokes several scholars to make the case that an absent father figure propels narratives (not just in *Lost*) and character

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development. Essentially, for the protagonist to assume the role of the hero, children have to step into the role of father, an assumption which only works if that role is conspicuously vacant.<sup>3</sup> I'd argue the restlessness of Bob's career has been the result of his shuffling into and out of his role as the father of alternative rock, stepping out when the influence he held started to create expectations and restrictions, stepping back in after he successfully transgressed them.<sup>4</sup>

The first such step away came when Bob left Hüsker Dü at the height of its popularity, when the American underground that Michael Azerrad chronicles in *Our Band Could Be Your Life* was on the verge of breaking into the mainstream. In Bob's absence, the bands that grew up admiring Hüsker Dü or playing alongside them (or both) stepped forward to fill the void and introduced the larger world to the music he helped pioneer. It's the debt the Posies acknowledge on their 1996 song "Grant Hart" when they sing, "Nervous children making millions, you owe it all to them."<sup>5</sup>

After two solo albums that saw him working in new modes and with new colors, Bob formed Sugar and returned with another power trio to a musical landscape where alternative rock was no longer, as the cliché goes, an alternative. *Copper Blue* is a triumph, but Ames's assertion helps illustrate why Sugar, for all its success, chafed against the expectations that accompanied Bob's return. He wasn't returning in the role of father; he was returning in the role of protagonist. He wasn't ready to be the Neil Young to alternative's Pearl Jam, a fashionable influence whose best music was behind him. Remember, he was just thirty-two, more of a contemporary than the popular



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narrative around his former band allowed. On Sugar's next full-length, he resisted the cultural marginalization that can come from being a legend with a parry rather than a thrust. The album, *File Under: Easy Listening*, begins with a track that's undeniably "hard," but Bob mostly withheld the tightly-wound punk songs his fans expected and instead offered bland pop songs and acoustic sprawl.<sup>6</sup>

By the time Sugar disbanded, Bob was all but done with the alternative genre he helped create. His first solo album post-Sugar featured a track called, subtly, "I Hate Alternative Rock." On "Egøveride" and "Art Crisis," reportedly about his public outing by *SPIN* magazine,<sup>7</sup> he sounds similarly wrung out by the attendant demands of being held up as an icon. Listening to the album all these years later reminds me of John Cheever's description of Ned Merrill in "The Swimmer." Ned was a man who had a "vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure,"<sup>8</sup> but he "had swum too long, he had been immersed too long, and his nose and his throat were sore from the water."<sup>9</sup> To put it in Bob's terms at the time, "This is genius, this is genuine, this is bullshit." It's no wonder that he was out of music completely only a couple of years later.

I was genuinely curious, then, how *Beauty & Ruin* might respond to the praise for *Silver Age* and the new generation of critics wooing him to take the place at the table they'd set for him in the pantheon of rock history. To put it in the context of the Ames again, I wanted to know if he would allow himself to be read as an influence to others or continue his own story as an artist, and in doing so, continue to challenge his fans. The answer, as it turns out, was both.