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Q&A: Paul Westerberg on the Replacements

Reunion and Being a Middle-Aged Rocker

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By [Rob Tannenbaum](#)

October 9, 2012 2:49 PM ET



Paul Westerberg of The Replacements.
Michael Buckner/Getty Images

When Paul Westerberg called *Rolling Stone* last week from his home in Minneapolis, the plan was to discuss "[My Road Now](#)" ([right-click to download](#)), a slippery piano ballad he recently released. But Westerberg also had some joyous news – he'd reformed [the Replacements](#), one of the best rock bands of the 1980s, and in late September, recorded four cover songs for an EP. Around the world, crazy-eyed Replacements fans rejoiced.

Westerberg has released only a few songs since his last tour, in 2005, and has been ambivalent about a reunion of his old band. His reunion with Replacements bassist Tommy Stinson (now a member of [Guns N' Roses](#)) came at the urging of Slim Dunlap, the Replacements' guitarist from 1987 to 1991, who had a severe stroke in February.

[The Replacements Reunite for Covers EP](#)

Former Replacements manager Peter Jesperson and Stinson's manager Ben Perlstein, along with singer Dan Baird, are leading an effort to raise money for Dunlap's medical care. Eighteen artists have signed on to record his songs, including [Steve Earle](#), [Lucinda Williams](#), Jakob Dylan and Replacements drummer Chris Mars, who skipped the 'Mats reunion. All recordings will be issued on limited-release vinyl (250 ten-inch EPs for the Replacements) and auctioned online to the highest bidders, with digital downloads also available. Details about release dates and the auction location are still being determined, but Jesperson hopes to begin with the 'Mats record in December, followed by another single every month or so.

"Slim is still slowly recovering," his wife Chrissie Dunlap tells *RS*. "He is still paralyzed on his left side, and still on a feeding tube. Our insurance will not pay for any more rehab, so we are paying out of pocket for his care when he is released from the hospital, probably next week."

[Fans can donate money to Dunlap's care online](#). As of this morning, \$15,853.50 had been raised, towards a goal of \$20,000.

The Replacements were notorious for being chaotic, unpredictable and usually drunk – but the mayhem and sense of imminent disaster was paired with Westerberg's songwriting, which ranged from insightful and poignant to cocky and comedic. Now 52, he told us about the dilemmas faced by middle-aged rockers, his struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorder and the conditions under which he'd agree to an extended Replacements reunion.

Your new song, "My Road Now," is kind of like a card trick. At first, it sounds sympathetic, and then the sentiment switches to nasty.

Misdirection is my path. How many roads must a man walk down before you can call him lost? I'm there, baby.

I wrote it for The Band Perry, a country-pop group, to sing. Which goes back to something like "Sadly Beautiful" [from the 1990 Replacements album *All Shook Down*], which I wrote under the pretext that Marianne Faithfull was going to sing the thing. My tough-guy buddy Jim came over, heard "My Road Now," and shed a tear. And I thought, "Goddamn, this has gotta be released."

I'm getting offers to go on Jimmy Fallon and play it. But I don't know how the hell it goes! (*Laughs*) I write this stuff, it comes out, I have a nervous breakdown, and then a year later, I don't know how I did it.

At this point, what do you like about writing a song on piano, rather than guitar?

The piano makes a better ashtray than the guitar. (*Laughs*) I still write on guitar. You know, Tommy [Stinson] and I went in the studio last week. We strapped on the guitars, not a word was said, and *bang*. We still rock like murder.

Does the new song mean we can expect a full album from you?

An *album*? Do we make albums still? I'm always recording songs and I declared my independence from this technocracy, the whole notion of doing multiple takes and overdubbing vocals and making it sound right. That has turned me off to being a professional musician. I get offers all the time to make records, and I've got plenty of songs.

I mean, after playing with Tommy last week, I was thinking, "All right, let's crank it up and knock out a record like this." Maybe I'll do my own little piano record on the side. The problem with a record is, people expect you to go out and play it [on tour]. I've never played piano live – I don't know if I'd want to subject people to that.

What brought you back together with Tommy Stinson?

The downfall of the slender one. Slim [Dunlap] had a wicked-ass stroke, he's in rough shape. It's difficult to go there: He can't talk very much, he's sort of paralyzed, he can move his leg a little bit. He speaks in a whisper. When I mentioned this [benefit record], it seemed like something he really wanted to happen. "You guys get together," he said in

a whisper. "Go play a song." So I figured, "What the hell?"

Chris [Mars] really didn't want any part of this. I was not surprised, but I was a little disappointed. I'd talked to him, I thought maybe he might come down and play with us. That's fine, he's [totally into painting](#), and doesn't want to return to the skins. All I'll say is, it felt pretty natural. It felt very much like it used to.

After two or three hours, my voice was shot, but we were rocking like murder for a while.

How long had it been since you'd seen Tommy?

Shit. A couple of years – three, maybe more. We are technically the Replacements, he and I.

So it'll be released as a Replacements record?

Yeah, I reckon it would be suitable to use the R word, seeing as it would probably garner a little more coin than if it was just the Tom and Paul Experience.

And what about a Replacements album or tour?

Well, for the first 10 minutes, I thought, "Yeah! I'm *ready*." After a couple of hours, it was like, "*Uchhh*, man, you've got to be kidding." (*Laughs*) It's possible. I'm closer to it now than I was two years ago, let's say that.

People describe you as a recluse. Do you feel like one?

Like a *wreck-loose*? No, I don't. People toss that around when they think of me as a performer who doesn't perform. But I'm just changing hats. The way I look at it, it's taken a long time to go from childish to childlike, and shed a protective shell you need when you go out and perform. I felt pretty naked, and not that confident as a performer. So of course, one falls into substance abuse and all that. I don't [perform] as much as most people do. But I go lots of places in my brain.

Are you worried that if you go back on tour, you'll start drinking again?

That's not the major flaw. I think, "Oh, I'd have to re-learn the songs, sing lyrics from 20, 30 years ago." I talk myself out of it before I'm even there.

And in the same breath, I feel disassociated, like a 15-year-old, in a lot of ways. I want to go back to doing it because it was a form of expression that I could do pretty well. I have a hard time living in the world. I'm a musician. When I'm around guys like me, I feel perfectly fine. When I'm around people who ask, "When are you gonna play again?" I feel uncomfortable.

Are you immune to large offers of money for a Replacements tour?

No, I'm not. I've had offers to play with them, *or* without them, that are becoming stupidly ridiculous, to the point where someone thinks I'm playing hard to get. And it's not like I'm wealthy. I'm getting by.

It was never about making money. If we can have a lot of fun, and make a lot of people happy, *and* make a lot of money – which means making a lot of other people money – then okay, I guess that's spiritually and economically sound.

Can you relate to people who'd be overjoyed to see a Replacements reunion? Is there a reunion you'd like to happen – a band you never saw, or one you did see and really want to see again?

No. (*Laughs*) In a word, *nooo*. Did you happen to see [name of 1960s rock legend redacted] on TV the other night? How could I say this delicately? It was painful for me to watch. If I'm gonna write a new song, I'd need to use a TelePrompTer onstage, to remember the words. Is that rock & roll, using a TelePrompTer? I don't know.

I guess I spent as much time trying to be un-famous as I did trying to be famous. I'd hate to start it all up again. And be crap at it! I'm probably just a gardener who's sick of the dirt.

So what's a typical day for you? For instance, today – what are you doing this afternoon?

Some days are good and some of them are cringingly tedious. I've changed my clothes eight times already today, so there's OCD [obsessive-compulsive disorder] to deal with. I was writing a song this morning, and I'll probably finish that. Not being able to put the song down has always been the problem, not being able to walk away from it. It's a non-stop mantra running through your head.

What's the difference between a good day and a tedious day?

I have no funny reply. A bad day would be spent in a doubtful way, where I'll be directionless. And I'm not drinking now. I certainly know why I used to. I haven't found that nice area where, sober, I can take on the things I used to take on with confidence and a feeling of well-being [when I was drinking]. I vacillate too much these days.

When I stopped breaking guitars, that was my downfall. I've got 25 of these damn things laying around the house, and nothing ever gets done. I need someone to steal all of them except one. You wanna break in to my house? Just leave the brown one.

Have you seen the documentary about Replacements fans, *Color Me Obsessed*?

I did. I recognized most of the people, and some of them I thought, *How dare you, you shameful so and so? Why don't you get a life?* I was embarrassed by it more than anything, I guess. Wouldn't you be, if a movie described every little intricate thing about your life? That thing, the R band, the 'Mats, they don't even really belong to us anymore.

You had an accident in 2006 and hurt your left hand. What happened?

I ran a screwdriver through my hand, cut the artery and the nerve, trying to scrape wax out of a candleholder with a screwdriver. My ring finger on the left hand has no feeling. You're a rock & roll guitar player and your finger doesn't work? So fucking what? Use the other one. My guitar chops are less than they were. But my rhythm is more furious than ever.

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