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### Serenading the World into Shape

In sharing educational and progressive perspectives on current issues, Flobots, a revolutionary band, keeps us aware. Jamie Laurie (a.k.a. Jonny 5), Brer Rabbit, Andy Rok, Kenny O, Jesse Walker, Mackenzie Gault, and session member Joe Ferrone form this rap/alternative group, which rocks the stage with conscious messages and alternative views. Their aim is to raise awareness and encourage social action. Their hit release song “Handlebars,” on the album *Fight With Tools*, combines bold lyrics and an enticing sound, which together express an explosive message: for individuals to maintain integrity and sound moral judgment when interacting with one’s own abilities and power. The band Flobots is dedicated to “creating positive change by harnessing the power of music and those who love it” (DJ Coffman).

The pizzicato beginning lures you gently into the music. The finger picking, with the tune rising and falling, is not as soft as a lullaby, but instead portrays intent, inviting the listener’s curiosity. Jonny 5 joins in, his voice sounding somewhat muted or distant. He speaks more than he sings, “I can ride my bike with no handle bars,” repeating this several times in a mellow fashion. Then his voice comes in strong and clear with the drums kicking in, adding a steady rhythm that his words seem to dance on. The viola continues to fill the air with the sweet plucking, providing a layer of innocence. “Look at me, look at me,” he sings in rhyme, and begins to describe the joys of discovering new things. This beginning is expressed like a child wanting to show off their new abilities, portraying pride and accomplishment. Deep staccato

strums on the electric guitar join in, which add depth to Jonny 5's words as he discusses technology. A trumpet fills in with a jazzy sound at the ends of the verses, accompanied by the drums and viola now played arco. Together this creates an emotional eddy, which pulls you into the message, encouraging you to pause and consider your own direction. After the words move through more adult considerations such as designing an engine or opening up a thrift store, we reach the first crescendo in the song, which brings us into the more serious topic of our ability to "split the atom of a molecule." Wow. "Handlebars" jumps from the innocent joys of "tying a knot in a cherry stem" to our nuclear capabilities. Now that these larger considerations have been approached, the emotional trumpet begins to sway you back and forth into an interlude, indicating that there is much more about to be revealed with the upcoming words. The viola is pizzicato again here, walking with a more serious step as it mingles on the low notes with the bass. When the words join back in, the drum's beat creates an escalating intensity, halting the music at the end of lines with a crash symbol or top hat. The viola transitions back to being played arco. The lyrics dig deeper and deeper, speaking about the power behind handing out vaccinations vs. the choice to let the sick die, and the power to send someone to jail "just because I don't like 'em." The instruments become louder and more full, and this is when the song approaches its second and final peak. The tension continues to build with more and more words voicing atrocious possibilities, until Jonny 5 is literally screaming the lyrics, "And I can end the planet in a holocaust, in a holocaust, in a holocaust!" After each "holocaust" there is a subtle roar that sounds like a crowd of people, adding to the shock of the words being sung. The emotional climax is outrageous, flying the mind into the harsh reality of the most horrific devastation that we could encounter in our lifetimes. Finally, the song comes back down, all of the instruments falling away except for the pizzicato viola and the electric guitar, and the beginning is repeated,

“I can ride my bike with no handlebars, no handlebars, no handlebars.” The repetition rotates us back around to the memory of innocent times, teeter tottering between an eerie feeling of defeat and the hope of conscious choice. As Jonny 5 and Flobots relax back into the original line of the song, you reflect on your positive potential by accenting something so small and innocent as the joy of riding your bike with your hands in the air.

We, as humans, have the potential to do so many wonderful things. We begin discovering our abilities in the womb, with the first light that we see and sounds that we hear. We are constantly using our reasoning abilities to invent innovative technologies, while we are also developing personal morals and values, which guide us in deciding how to use our newfound treasures. When does the amazement and awe that we experience as children turn into potentially destructive ideals? It is this raw potential that makes us equally amazing and dangerous.

“Handlebars” does not lay blame when it sings of monumental issues like nuclear war. There are no fingers being pointed, unless you count the first-person commentary as a finger being pointed toward the singer, or at human potential itself. It isn’t some other person that is causing all the strife in the world, but our own selves, each and every one of us capable of being a part of the solution, or of the problem. This is what Jonny 5 was thinking about when he wrote this story, which ultimately weaves us through the journey of growing into our own, unique, complicated selves. He says that the song isn’t addressing one particular event or issue, but is actually focusing on the greater topic of what each of us is *capable* of doing (Laurie). Can the lyrics of the song “Handlebars” be indicating a sort of anti-patriotism?

When speaking out against war, Flobots is sometimes seen as anti-patriotic. In an interview, Jonny 5 told me a story of a guy that got very angry at a concert in 2008 when a song was played that was against war. After the confrontation at the show, the two exchanged e-mails,

and through their correspondence it was discovered that the fellow had just returned from fighting in Iraq, and still had friends who were stationed there. They wrote back and forth maybe twenty times, disagreeing about various aspects of war and other topics that the Flobots sing about, but the discussion was educational for both. The dialog was one of Jonny 5's favorite encounters (Laurie), as he enjoys being real with people by sharing his perspective with them, which then deepens his own understanding.

The words that the song "Handlebars" states are bold, and some might think that the words are directly speaking against valiant efforts by other people to do good, or attempts to maintain homeland security, or promote democracy and freedom. The media plays on our fear everyday by bombarding us with pessimistic rhetoric and images of tragedy, propagating a mindset that makes many feel that they have to support every effort that our country makes for freedom, including war. Some may feel that this song reflects a view that buys into this mass consciousness of fear, or points to a perspective that makes people feel more powerless. More simply put, the song can be seen by some to be very negative, as if it is putting down other's heart-felt efforts. Some may not feel that the message of the song raises positive awareness. In fact, the point of the song could be perceived very unfavorably, seen to draw attention to the "faults" of humanity, or interpreted as criticism of people in power. The song draws attention to issues that we all should consider.

I described the sound as "enticing," partly because I appreciate that the song supports my own views of the world, but also because I personally enjoy the hip-hop/rap beat that gets me moving and grooving. The song's composition, however, does not appeal to everyone. Their fan-base is made up of people who enjoy many different kinds of music, from metal or rock to hip-hop (Stegmeir), but the sound of rap music is extreme and very unappealing to many, and this is

understandable. Rap is usually very angst filled, and often refers to more shallow, superficial, and outward desires, making it less desirable to many. One would have to really listen to the song's meaning to obtain a new appreciation for the sound, if they already associate rap with those sorts of messages. What these *particular* rap lyrics really do is bring awareness to our actions, combining the more direct rhythm and beat to our conscious thought.

The potential negativity of the song is offset by the efforts that the members put forth in their community. The group's non-profit flobots.org has not only set up registration booths at Denver shows (Mansfield), but also formed a music program for troubled youth, many of them who are "In foster care and [have] experienced some sort of abuse or neglect or trauma at an early age..." Flobots.org has also established a community space that can be used for meetings or events (Stegmeir). This involvement and direct action by the band transforms that possible pessimism of the song to show a pro-active, educated, and aware group of individuals shining a light on global issues while assisting real people locally. It is truly patriotic to be active and stand up for what you believe in, especially in *this* country. Our founding fathers gave us this privilege when they freed us from England.

Some people tend to dwell on the negative aspects of life, and it can take focused effort to change those patterns. Thinking about what you are thinking about, or being Meta, is what this song inspires. Let us think about what we are doing, what we are seeing, and relearn how to interact with life. This is what "Handlebars" is trying to get across to its listeners, and this desire is confirmed by those acts of community service and assistance brought forth from the musicians within the band onto the world around them. This is patriotism at its best, for what could be more patriotic than our freedom of speech and direct action?

“Handlebars” takes us on a journey, if we are willing to follow, where each of us may come out with a mission to help human kind. It also maintains innocence throughout its progression, both instrumentally and lyrically, making the message simultaneously gentle and strong. Ultimately, this encourages hope, which can only drive our causes further along on their missions. “Handlebars” lays no blame, only responsibility and awareness of cause and effect, and depending upon the depth of our spiritual slumber it either softly entices us to assess and change our sometimes deep-seeded, habitual living and thinking, or it rattles us to our very cores to shake us awake and encourage participation in this world we claim to esteem.

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