

ANU OVERCAST



OVERCAST







FOR MY FATHER, WHO INTRODUCED ME TO THE GUITAR AND SCIENCE FICTION



I RESIGNED





2 THE SIGNAL



3 THE DISTANT FUTURE



4 1,000,001



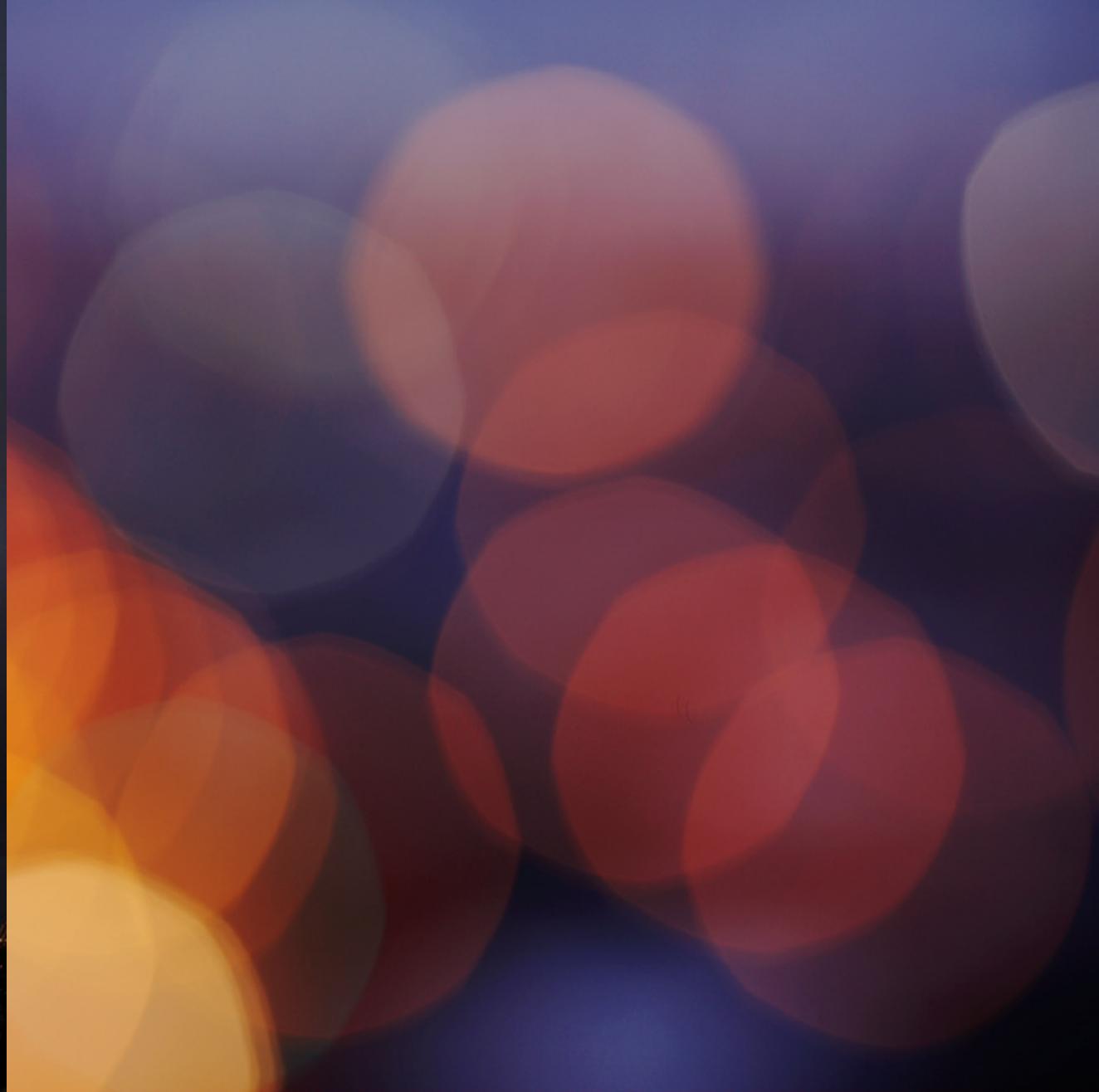
5 IN MORPHEUS STATION



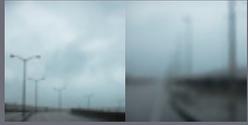


6 AFTER THE REVOLUTION

8 | I REMEMBER L.A.







1 RESIGNED

One day you awaken in a different place
Where the names may have changed but you're sure you know the face
The company accepted the letter you had signed
But they own your precious skills and the knowledge in your mind

You'd resigned yourself believing it will always be the same
You had your fill of wet work and the playing of the game
The secret rules in hidden layers of authority
No accountability or responsibility

There's no way out of this
You know they're coming for you

The weather is pleasant like they want you to be
All the buildings are empty like the sky and the sea
Nothing is provided and nothing is free
There are wheels slowly turning driving things you cannot see

There must be some way out of this
You know they'll try to get you

You feel the lies behind the truth and you see right through the lies
You hear Big Ben chiming underneath Miami's skies
From Langley to Moscow you begin to realize
No one's a civilian, everyone's a spy

In the rubble of the buildings and the wreckage of the planes
A search for clues and evidence, a meaning to explain
Machines will analyze and computers will decode
But there aren't any answers, that's just the way it goes

There is one way out of this
You know they're going to get you



2 THE SIGNAL

You can hear it just below the blowing wind
Feel it in the nerves beneath your skin
Catch a glimpse as you drift away at night
But you can't decode the meaning inside

Distant shrieking sets your teeth on edge
The doctors say it's all in your head
Flickering in the pixels of your screen
See it in the sunset as the sky is flashing green

The signal is coming through
The signal is coming for you

Raindrops drum against the window pane
Drawing familiar shapes you can't explain
On the wires and the airwaves you can't get away
And you can't figure out what the signal conveys

The signal is coming through
The signal is coming for you
Do you hear it?
Do you feel it?



3 THE DISTANT FUTURE

You would have thought by now
I'd be more concerned about
More important things
Like the cash in the accounts
Or which woman in which town
Or which car to take out
Instead of rust on the strings
And the leaks in the house

Alarm sounds reveille
Fade out the dreams
A slave to the machines that should be working for me

Do you have one more hit?
Can we try it again?
The distant future's closer now than it's ever been

It doesn't sound fresh
"Too something"
I guess
The pessimist
The point of it
Is dull
and it's not over yet

The kids are telling me that they're selling me
There's a brand new style that's much too tough to take

Another melancholy song
Tomorrow's finally gone
The distant future passing by and today is done



4 1,000,001

A million drops of rain
One sun behind the clouds
A million stars in the milky way
One moon is shining down

A million notes I've scribbled
One sings in my ears
A million sounds surround me
One that I cannot hear

One zero zero zero zero zero one

A million bytes on the internet
One more page to read
A million dollars in the bank
One more is all I need

A million miles to go
One on the 101
A million cars all burning gas
One atmosphere above

One zero zero zero zero zero one

A million things to think about
One comes to mind
A million possible universes
Only one of them is mine

A million subway faces
I'm looking for the one
A million things to do and say
Time's up, I'm done



5 IN MORPHEUS STATION

Down the steps and into the dark
Leave the kingdom above
In my traveling suit, dressed for the part
I took the mask and the drugs

This could be the only escape
From the overcast gray
At the end, the sun awaits
And time slips away

Waiting for the train
In Morpheus Station
They know your destination
And they know your name

The connection must be late
So few hours remain
Afraid I'm being betrayed

Machines hum and whir
Reality blurs
Just fragments and flashes
of heroes and ashes

Waiting for the train
In Morpheus station
Above is radiation
And black rain



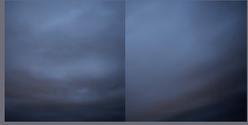
6 AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Well I woke in a cold sweat from a dreamless sleep
The winds were blowing papers through the empty streets
And the voices on the radio all saying we were free
Welcome to the new regime in 2013
This is what they call democracy in 2013

Sitting in the apartment tower watching the news at 10
Justice would be shown on TV
They didn't tell us when
I was thinking about you and thinking of my friends
The slogans ringing in my head
I was wondering what they meant

Fires burning by the empty cars in the underpass
I heard boots stepping through the plaza over broken glass
I saw the helicopters circling in the sky above, overcast
Hunting for the stragglers
Rounding up the last

Well, I'll be laying low here for a while
Keep my head down
I'll try to get a message to you or get out of town
They say good times are coming
Well I have my doubts
And I can't help thinking this is all my fault



7 THE BLUE SEA

Stayed under too long
I guess I lost track of time
Didn't anyone think to check
If I was alright?

There's not too much sun left
Through the overcast
I've got some strength left but
I don't believe you're coming back

Floating here
In the deep blue sea
I'm at peace
Everything's so clear

All the things I thought would protect
Every one let me drown
So much weight around my neck
Slowly pulling me down

Sinking here
In the deep blue sea
Down below me
Lurk mysterious fears

Drowning here
In the deep blue sea
Cold and deep
And it tastes of tears

Full fathom five you'll find me
Grown all rich and strange
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
These rusting notes remain



8 I REMEMBER L.A.

I remember sunshine
I remember you
I remember laughing
Do you remember
I do

I remember driving
I remember the night
I remember drinking
Do you remember
I might

Concrete and the palm trees
Hazy in the heat
Traffic on the freeways
No one on the streets

Lying on the sofa
In the setting sun
Waking in the darkness
Waking on my own

All of it is done now
They've all gone away
I remember leaving
I remember L.A.

Written, Performed, and Recorded by Anu
In Blue Moscow
February 2009

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“In Morpheus Station” contains excerpts from
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Photography by James Carrière
Book Design by Iran Narges

Special Thanks to Thomas Muer, Sean Murphy, and Iran Narges, whose
feedback and support were essential to the completion of this record.

HARDWARE

Dean Markley Blue Steel strings (.10)
Dell 2407WPF widescreen display
Dunlop Tortex plectrum (10mm custom)
Event 20/20 bas monitors
JoeMeek SixQ microphone preamplifier
Heet Sound EBow
Line 6 PodXT
Logitech MX518 Gaming-grade mouse
Mackie 1604-VLZ mixer
Mark of the Unicorn Traveler audio interface
Microsoft Natural Ergonomic 4000 keyboard
Optima Gold strings (.10)
ProCo Vintage Rat
RØDE NT-1 microphone
Sony MDR-7506 headphones
Spectral Harmonics Kremlin-class computer

SOFTWARE

Audio Damage Automaton buffer effect
Audio Damage Discord 2 pitch shifter
Audio Damage Fluid chorus
Audio Damage Kombinat distortion
Audio Damage Liquid flanger
Audio Damage Replicant buffer slicer
Audio Damage Rough Rider compressor
Audio Damage Vapor diffusion chorus
Digitalfishphones Blockfish compressor
Digitalfishphones Floorfish expander/gate
iZotope Ozone 3 mastering suite
Kjaerhus Classic Auto-Filter
Kjaerhus Classic Compressor
Kjaerhus Classic Delay
mda Combo distortion
Native Instruments Battery 3 drum sampler
Native Instruments Reaktor 5 effects
Sonalksis TBK1 Creative Filter
Sonalksis TBK3 Über Compressor
Soniccouture Konkrete Drums 2
Smartelectronix KTGranulator delay line granulator
Smartelectronix SupaPhaser
Steinberg Cubase 4.5
Steinberg Wavelab 3

INSTRUMENTS

Tom Anderson Guitarworks Pro Am electric guitar
Mad Dog “The Lonesome” electric guitar
Kubicki Key Factor 5 electric bass guitar
Yamaha FG-403S acoustic guitar



THE ELECTRIC GUITAR

The electric guitar is the perfect modern instrument. It is a hybrid, a product of both the traditional and technological worlds. The guitar combines one of simplest methods of generating sound — a vibrating string — with the science of electromagnetism.

The traditional acoustic guitar dates back to the 1800s, and its predecessors thousands of years before that. The electric guitar was developed in the 1930s in California by companies like Rickenbacker and Fender.

These companies weren't traditional music instrument crafters. They were guys with tool-and-die machine shops, used to making car parts. They were kids trying to start businesses.

The electric guitar was designed to be inexpensive, mass-produced, and assembled from easy-to-replace parts. It was decidedly commercial. Rather than the careful lacquers and subtle browns or blacks of traditional classical instruments, the guitars were spray-painted with flashy colors — again, descended from the California car culture.

This willingness to abandon traditional “musical instrument” aesthetics and design helped establish the electric guitar as the instrument of modern music — jazz, rock, and the other defining popular musics of the latter half of the 20th century.

The guitar's ease of production (plus numerous patent violations) and ample opportunities for customization allowed companies to create a wild array of different shapes, colors, and brands. Simple manufacturing helped the instrument to flourish, and today the electric guitar is by far the most popular instrument in the world.

The electric guitar is a visceral instrument. You wear it, holding it close to your body with both hands. When you play it, you feel it vibrate against you. It is a physical, tactile thing. Every note played is slightly different. Adding pitch or volume inflections is easy. You can even literally bend notes on the guitar by moving the neck against the body, causing the entire instrument to flex and the strings to change pitch.

The instrument is typically played by using one hand to press strings against the fretboard and the other hand to strum or pick the strings. But you don't have to fret the strings with one hand — you can play unfretted

or “open” strings, use a mute or capo, or use a wood, metal or glass slide instead of a finger. Each of these techniques changes the sound.

The method of imparting vibration to the strings matters, too. A percussion instrument, guitar is traditionally plucked with fingers, fingernails, or plectrums made in a variety of thicknesses, materials and styles. Each create a different kind of impulse in the string, and provide different mechanical feedback to the player.

Guitar can also be bowed with a violin bow or the Heet Sound EBow. It can be struck like a zither. Held in front of an amplifier, it can even feed back and play itself.

As with other acoustic instruments, physical composition is crucial to its sound. The wood of the body, neck and fretboard all contribute to each guitar’s character. Different gauges of strings produce different sounds, as do the unique alloy formulations used to create the strings.

Where you choose to play the strings affects the sound. Playing close to the bridge end of the guitar produces brighter, thinner, twangier sounds. The middle of the string produces darker, thicker, woodier sounds. This is why guitars have different pickups in different parts of the body, as well. Each pickup hears a different sound.

The strings of the guitar can be tuned in different ways. Most guitar players use the “Spanish” tuning of E-A-D-G-B-E. Changing the tuning can dramatically affect the sound and how one composes and plays.

And you affect the sound. The size and shape of your fingers determine what chords you can play, how far you can reach, and what the notes sound like (I have relatively short, stubby fingers for a guitar player).

Compared to the guitar, playing a synthesizer is like typing.

The guitar is only half of the instrument. The amplifier is the rest. Guitar amplifiers are designed to add substantial coloration to the sound. Combinations of amplifiers and effects create unique sound characteristics for each player.

The electric guitar was created to allow the relatively weak sound of an acoustic guitar to be heard over a regular band. Mechanical resonator guitars produced increased but still insufficient volume. Electrical amplification was the only solution. Guitar players had been overpowered by the band for too long. The electric guitar is their ongoing revenge.

The main drawback to amplification is a desire for ever-louder models.

This makes it challenging to record, and guitarists are unfortunately deservedly known for playing at extremely high volume levels.

Amplifiers are heavy and expensive. Recent years have seen development of hardware amplifier emulators, both analog and digital, real and virtual. These allow recording of an amplifier-esque sound without microphones or disturbing the neighbors, and produce a greater range of tones than a single amplifier can provide.

As with so many other things in the 21st century, the computer is now beginning to devour traditional guitar effects and amplifiers and replace them with digital emulations. Computers provide incredible sound generation and transformation possibilities, opening new realms for guitar players to explore,

Many musicians insist these emulations don’t sound as good as the real thing. Old guitars are better than new. Old amplifiers, too. Despite playing such a young and modern instrument (or perhaps because of it), guitarists tend to be averse to technological change and advancement. “Real” guitar players don’t use computers.

I do. I’ve never been particularly interested in traditional, idiomatic guitar playing. There are plenty of talented players who have that space well covered. And I’m just not that good at it.

I’ve loved the guitar for a long time. One of my earliest childhood memories is my father playing an acoustic guitar and singing. I only recall it happening one or two times, but they were significant events to me.

I had an epiphany when I was 18 and realized that I, too, wanted to play guitar (and not just synthesizer). I didn’t want to stand behind a wall of electronics and type. I wanted to move around, to gesture, to play music.

Initially I took lessons and practiced, learning guitar solos from Metallica records and running scales. I soon realized I was more interested in songwriting, and the guitar became a vehicle for composing and performing. Over the last 21 years I’ve never really stopped playing, and have slowly continued my self-education as a guitar player.

This project was an exciting opportunity to renew my personal relationship with the electric guitar.

THE RPM CHALLENGE

The RPM Challenge: write and record an album during the month of February. That's 10 songs or 35 minutes of music, whichever you get to first. It's not a contest. You can't "win" anything. But it has been one of the most rewarding things I've done. I think my 3 years of participation have done more for me as a creative musician than the previous 10 years of work.

As if creating an album in the shortest month wasn't hard enough, I felt a need to push my creative limits and not fall back on what was easy, known, or reliable. Above all, I didn't want to repeat myself. Last year I made an all-synthesizer-based record. This year, I decided that I would use absolutely no synthesizers at all — aside from voice and drums, every sound source would be either guitar or bass.

This rule would help prevent me from making a record that sounded like the last few I've done, write songs in a different fashion, rely less on the computer to sequence everything, and force me to be more creative overall.

I also just missed playing guitar. Back in the 20th century, I used to write all of my songs on guitar. Some time a few years ago, I stopped writing on guitar in favor of keyboards.

I did not want to make a "retro" record or a typical guitar album, full of power chords, noodling, and riffs. I wanted to do something modern, different, and interesting. Over the last few years, I had been impressed with records such as "Blemish" by David Sylvian and "Venice" by Fennesz, where the guitar was used as a noise and textural source, played in unusual ways, and manipulated extensively.

I wanted to combine some of those elements with more traditional songwriting and some of the sounds and ideas of other styles I loved — goth, new wave, surf music, metal, and more.

"Overcast" is the result. The drum sounds are samples, but all the programming is original. There's my voice. And then everything else is guitar or bass. Some of it has been heavily processed and is a testament to the power of modern recording technology — but no synthesizers were used on this record. Oddly enough, that same claim used to be made by bands like Queen on classic rock albums when synthesizers were first making inroads into popular music.

Most of my albums have underlying themes or concepts, many of which I establish early on to help guide the songwriting and production. This time, I started with little more than a title and a feeling.

This record reflects the scary and challenging world that we inhabit in 2009. I did not set out to write a dark, apocalyptic album, but that's what I got. In my notes I see "Uncertainty about the future." "Will it rain?" "Is it getting darker or lighter?"

Only time will tell. Thank you for listening.

Anu Kirk
February 25, 2009
San Francisco

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8 9 10 11 12 13 14
15 16 17 18 19 20 21
22 23 24 25 26 27 28

DAY 1

This year I plan to try to record something every day, even if it's just a doodle or an overdub. So before I did anything else, I recorded a little idea — just something simple on guitar with a little bass underneath it.

Then I spent a few hours finishing some basic studio preparations — sorting drum kits, creating file templates, changing strings, tuning.

But I could hear the clock ticking and felt the day slipping away, so I pulled out my lyrics book and started working on the first song idea that felt strong to me.

I wrestled with it for a while — as I suspected, I'm not comfortable writing on guitar or bass these days. So of course, that's what I did. I'm making it even harder by not allowing myself to use the chords and ideas I would normally fall into.

I plan to try to get more unusual timbres from the guitar and bass, but for now I just wanted to get something down. I sketched out a basic idea with a nice drum kit. Not happy with the guitars at all, but at least I could hear it. Then off to the gym.

I hadn't gotten more than a few blocks from the house when I got a new idea for the verse melody. I could tell I'd have to re-track the bass and throw away the guitars. Still no melody for the chorus yet.

Post-gym, I tweaked the drums a bit. Put down the modified bass and whispered a quick guide vocal to check the melody idea. Put down a few ideas for some backing vocals on the chorus.

And then started endless lyric revisions. Not happy with it yet, but it's coming along. Funny how these ideas start to come poking out as I scrape away at the words.

So far, this song is about a former spy (McGoohan/6? Westen? Dad?) and it owes a debt to The Church. Working title is "Resigned".

DAY 3-5

I'm in a familiar state — I am saying "Wow, this is all awful. Maybe I won't finish. Maybe I won't release it."

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I've been unusually tired. Getting up at 6 every day isn't helping, and it's made the idea of staying up late to finish anything a non-starter.

I'm still going over the chorus for "Resigned" — Not sure if the melody is good, not sure if the lyrics are good. I'm going to commit this weekend, no matter what. Or at least get it to a point where I can stop thinking about it. I just want to stop looping it in my head and trying new things. I sort of felt this way about "Daemons" last year and that ended up being one of my favorite tracks.

I've also been doing a little work on the second track, which is tentatively called "The Signal". I wrote some lyrics — enough to sketch out the idea and point in a direction to finish the track.

I've got a bit of guitar down and a beat. I've started experimenting with what David Torn calls "cell guitar", where I'm chopping up bits of parts and/or repeating sections. It's started to sound a little more interesting and I think is a good direction to explore for a few tracks.

That experiment has helped me sketch out a kind of spectrum for the record, where at one end is semi-straight-ahead stuff like The Church and the other end is Fennesz and David Sylvian. If I can have songs all across this spectrum, I think I'll have something interesting.

If nothing else, Air King Sound likes the beats I'm making, which is good news. The Konkrete drums are very different from what I've used in the past. Of course, my initial reaction is to be concerned that it doesn't sound "right", but then I tell myself my objective is to do something different anyhow.

Day 5 brought some much-needed rain to the Bay Area. Work and appointments kept me busy enough that I couldn't go to the gym. By the time I got home I was extremely tired and just listened to the tracks a few times before leaving for a friend's send-off party (6 months in China).

On the way home I started getting a new song idea. Wrote down some words and sang a melody.

My objective for the coming weekend is to finish these first 2 tracks and at least start on a third. Failing that, I'll start a bunch of new ideas (3 at least) and finish them up over the next few weeks.

I forget how hard this can be.

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DAY 7: BREAKTHROUGHS

This year’s record has felt more difficult than the previous years. Perhaps I have excessively high expectations, given how well the other records turned out. Maybe I’ve just made things very difficult for myself. Likely I have forgotten exactly how hard the last 2 years were. Whatever the reasons, I’ve had a tough time getting into a working groove.

Today I managed to get one of the new songs to “kick over” — to get to a point where it actually sounds like it will work and is tolerable. Even my lovely wife said it sounded good, and she’s a tough critic, especially of my computer-involved music.

The track is tentatively called “The Signal”. I took it from being a 1:30 sketch to a reasonably interesting 5:00 track. It still needs some drum touches and final vocals, but I think it’s otherwise nearly done.

Yesterday and today I also moved the lyrics along quite a bit. I’ve got some momentum going now. It always gets easier after the first couple of tracks.

On a more technical note, I’m recording at 24 bit, 88.2 kHz, which is “better” than my previous 24 bit 44.1 kHz settings. I initially tried 24 bit 96 kHz, but it was just too unstable and not as suited for CD conversion. I have to be a bit more careful about plug-in usage with these new settings — it definitely is harder on the CPU.

I think I’ll have to go back to using the Pod a bit more for amp emulation. Reaktor does a fine, or at least interesting job, but it’s too much CPU for not enough difference. I think I’m better off treating the sounds afterwards. I don’t need the extra flexibility. Either that or I need to print the effects sooner.

Tomorrow I will make some efforts at a David Sylvian/Fennesz-influenced track.

DAY 8: 2 CLOSER

I didn’t get started on a new track today, but I ran “Resigned” and “The Signal” far enough along that the end is in sight.

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No time for the gym either. Happy enough that I got some work done. “Resigned” meant re-doing all the guitars with new tones. Ended up for the best. The process of putting them all down brought up some interesting ideas and I was able to build up a nice flow for the track.

Got vocals down with the best chorus idea so far. It might not be good enough, but at least I have something to think over. Sent it off to a few people to get some feedback.

I put some vocals on “The Signal” and tweaked the mix a bit.

Made some decent mixes of each to evaluate. Not a bad weekend.

DAY 10–11: I REMEMBER L.A.

Unlike past years, I decided to send some rough mixes around to friends to get their thoughts on how things are sounding and whether or not the songs work for them. The good news is the response has been very positive and the feedback has been very helpful. The bad news is now the pressure is on...and all that great feedback translates into more work on the tracks.

I felt that I needed to get something else done, so last night I started working on “I Remember L.A.”, sketching it out pretty quickly. I was going for a David Sylvian/Christian Fennesz type of thing.

I came up with a nice melody, somewhere between a lullabye and a children’s song. Reminds me a little of “On Top of Old Smoky”. I also created a very simple set of chords to accompany it and mapped out some appropriate bass notes.

After creating a minimal, nearly inaudible beat, I recorded the bass.

I recorded 4 individual guitar notes and broke them out to individual tracks, looping them and letting them drift out of sync.

Next I processed each note individually — one getting distortion, one getting a granular delay, and so on. I also recorded a few tracks of noise and hum and processed that as well.

I sung a decent vocal take and started “painting” the guitar parts around the melody, dropping them in and taking them out as I saw fit. I wasn’t sure if it would work, but it ended up sounding very good.

I did a quick mix and called it a night. Getting up today was tough.

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I did my morning exercises and brought the mix up. Vocal was nice, but a touch too simple. It needed some harmony to give it some motion and interest, and to keep it from being too monotonous.

I raced through the vocal a line at a time dropping in harmonies I thought were good and ran a mix off.

While the mic was up I re-ran some of the vocals for “The Signal” and for “Resigned”.

A bit late for work, and the bass was way too loud, but man, “L.A.” sounds good. More or less what I wanted.

Tonight I ran through my mix notes — fixed the bass, tweaked some processing, danced some levels around. I think it’s done, or very close. I then turned my attention to working on “The Signal” to integrate the vocal work I had done today.

Some of the takes aren’t usable — I was too congested or something, and the original takes sound better. But it’s good enough now that I think I can move on.

It’s 11:58 pm and I’m tired but satisfied. 3 songs all but done. 13 minutes down, 22 to go.

DAY 12: TIRED

I listened to the mixes today and made a few notes. I was feeling tired and uninspired by the time I got home.

I sorted through the previous day’s “morning vocals” and was disappointed to note that they sounded bad. Too congested and not warmed up, and the mic position was not good so they sounded muted and distant. A little distortion evens things out a bit but for good or bad, much of what I’m using comes from the first few original takes.

Made a few other minor tweaks to the mixes.

I did what I think are solid final mixes for “Resigned”, “The Signal”, and “I Remember L.A.”. If they’re not final, they’re not more than 1–2 tweaks away from final.

I noodled around for a bit to see if anything caught my ear. Maybe I’ll do a few short interludes. I don’t know. That feels like a cop-out. I think it’s easy to come up with 1–2 minutes of something that doesn’t really go anywhere.

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I also started on an essay about the guitar which will open the book. I’m planning on taking an extra day off during the coming long weekend and need to get some photos underway as well.

The “halfway point” is fast approaching. I need to make some progress this weekend. I’d like to have at least 3 songs or 11 minutes done by Wednesday.

DAY 13: DONE WITH 3 TRACKS?

Friday the 13th. Long day at work. Long night out for a friend’s birthday. All I did today was listen to the nearly-final mixes and realize they’re not quite there.

The 88.2 kHz sampling rate setting definitely means my computer can’t keep up on playback at lower buffer settings. I had to jack the buffer size up until I had about 20 ms of latency. This is OK for playback and recording, but I’m glad I’m not using any software synthesizers or samplers right now — that’s really unacceptable for live playback.

Thomas Muer has been providing great feedback. He noted that this record “sounds very hi-fi” so far. I will attribute that to the 88.2 kHz sampling rate setting, so I guess it’s been worth it.

But “Resigned” still had a messed up bass part on the bridge and a few other minor annoyances. I’m not crazy about the first line of the vocal, but I think it’s good enough for now. I’ll live with it if I have to.

“The Signal” had an issue where some tiny sound was far too loud, so I had to deal with that. And the bass guitar was a little too low on a chorus. I think I might need to do a few mix passes to get the glitch at the start to sound the way I want.

Otherwise, nothing happened today. I’ll check the mixes tomorrow and try to get something new done.

DAY 14: THE BLUE SEA

I find the most important thing for a successful song is starting with a decent idea or concept — What is the song about? What should it feel like?

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Without those ideas, I'm just noodling around and it never turns into anything. When I have an idea it usually comes together quickly.

The last few days I had been concerned about not having any ideas, but a little seed of something started to grow. I knew I wanted a song about the ocean on this record. I don't know why, but that was something in my notes. And over the last few days, a little idea for a beat and mood came into my head.

People have also been responding positively to the atmospheric and ambient "I Remember L.A.". I like it, and find that I'm rather taken with the more extreme guitar manipulations — it's been the most exciting thing about the record so far. I decided to do something more towards that end of the spectrum.

So this morning I took my coffee downstairs into the studio and got started. I pulled up an appropriate drum kit from the *Konkrete 2* collection and started assembling a beat and a sound.

I've often noticed at the beach that much of the sound of the sea has all sorts of phasing going on, so I applied a number of different phasers and other time-based modulators to the kit pieces, honing in on different sounds. I quickly got something that was working.

I had a tiny scrap of a lyric and started singing it a bit, looking for some chords. Not the usual ones, something different.

I've also been interested in the "Greek modes" lately. Reading up on them a lot and wanting to compose with them. Supposedly the Dorian mode is mysterious, slightly sad, and a "water" mode. Plus it's not Aeolian (minor). I built a clearly Dorian chord progression (Gm — Am — Edim — Dm) which was simple but effective.

Using a "swelling" guitar sound, I recorded a few passes at it and broke it out into different tracks. I quickly decided to split the chords onto multiple tracks so each could ring out and sustain for long periods, letting them overlap a bit and create a more vast, murky cloud of sound.

Using Reaktor's Grainstates ensemble, I manipulated another pass into something cinematic and foreboding.

I'm quite pleased with the melody for the chorus — I had initially come up with a very simple descending line, but I wanted to emphasize the Dorian mode more. That meant doing something a little bit more elaborate. I think it's very nice, though.

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I started crafting the chorus lyrics. The metaphor is perhaps a little trite and one I've used before (the sea as depression or sadness or loss) but I don't really care. At least I used a rhyme scheme that I don't normally (ABBA).

Needed a verse. I created a different chord progression (Gm — F — C — Dm) that was compatible and also applied the same sort of guitar techniques to it, deciding that each chord needed its own track for maximum effect.

I got through the first few verses and started thinking about Shakespeare. At some point in my career, I'm going to write my last song and it will likely reference "The Tempest". Today I was thinking about Laurie Anderson's use of a song from "The Tempest" and decided I needed something like that in this track.

So the final verse pulls from that same song in the *Tempest* and also from Prospero's "drown my books" speech. A good accompanying melody and I was close to done. Right?

Being Valentine's Day, I had a few other things I had to do today, including going to the gym and grocery shopping for a romantic dinner at home. I managed to leave my MP3 player in the car and thus couldn't check any of my mixes (or listen to music) while working out.

With my few free hours left, I managed to finish the structure of the song and get a passable guide vocal in place. I think I might sing at least one track super-low Leonard Cohen style.

I also hacked in a bass guitar pretty quickly. I really like this one so far. Great vibe.

Not bad for one day — one more song, 4 more minutes.

DAY 15–16: THE DISTANT FUTURE

I went into the studio and quickly demoed up a new track — "The Distant Future". I tried to imagine what I'd be feeling and thinking in an alternate future, one where my band never broke up. I sketched out some lyrics coupled to a melodic fragment I've had kicking around my head for a few days.

For the track I wanted to do something reminiscent of The Chameleons, a band I liked very much. I hacked it all together and threw

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down a terrible guide vocal. My initial impression was I liked the melody but the track was too pedestrian.

At the gym I listened to all the tracks so far. “The Blue Sea” is great. It’s my favorite by far at this point. I realized it could use a few more tiny touches (some seagull guitar/slide noises and a little “solo” at the end, plus some vocal fixes).

I also decided I needed some secret Russian messages in “Resigned”.

After the gym I decided to jump on a different idea for a while. I figured I’ve been raining and hailing for the last few days. I stuck a microphone out the window and captured several minutes of field recording to use as ambience for a track.

I then built up a nice electronic beat with the rain in the background. Maybe a little too much like Underworld. Then again, that’s not such a bad thing.

Monday morning I tackled all the fixes to the other tracks first — I found a website that would not only translate English to Russian, it would have a voice read it — it’s definitely in “uncanny valley” territory, and that’s a good thing. I recorded it, chopped it up, effected it, and put it where I wanted in “Resigned”.

I spent about 30 minutes trying to get the right kind of solo (more feel than notes) for the ending of “The Blue Sea”. Harder than I thought, but I ended up with something I liked more than I thought I would. Then I put in the seagull noises.

The plumber came by to check out a water leak we seem to have somewhere in the house — probably a shower valve. These mundane things must make it into the songs. Off to the gym again.

While there I listened to the demo I had for “The Distant Future” and decided I needed to do something very different with it. I had already re-done the verse beat to go for something a little more modern and dubstep-derived. I thought it might be interesting to try to revamp the whole track as a dubstep piece.

I took advantage of my wife cooking dinner upstairs to do some vocal fixes without worrying about being overheard — I finished “The Blue Sea” and put down a more polished take for “The Distant Future”.

After dinner, I went back into the studio and started re-working “The Distant Future”. I played individual bass notes and flipped them around

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backwards, doing a few edits. I considered re-playing all the guitars but thought it might be more fun to try to work with the existing tracks.

“Fun” it wasn’t. Lots of wrestling to get something I thought was OK. I added a tiny little bit of a muted part but didn’t really dig it. By 11:30, I was “done” but wasn’t sure if it was any good or not, so I brought back the original mix and finished that up as well, and sent them off to Sean for his thoughts.

Another song done, or close to it. Up around 21 minutes and 5 tracks. I think this leaves me enough margin that I can finish for sure. I know I have at least 2 more solid ideas for songs.

DAY 17: 1,000,001

Caught up on the blogs this morning and took a day off from work. I’ve been at my vacation cap for a while, so it was “use it or lose it”, and I could certainly use it today!

Sean provided great feedback on “The Distant Future” and confirmed that I was going in the right direction. I took a while to get going in the studio this morning, cleaning up stuff and dealing with loose ends.

I was close enough to done with “The Distant Future” that I wanted to move on.

I opened up the Underworld-ish beat I started yesterday. What am I going to do with an electronic dance beat like this? Does it even sound like anything on the record? What was I thinking?

But what? I didn’t really have an idea. I picked up my guitar and started noodling around. I found myself playing some slow E minor-type things and realized it would suit for what I had in mind for a song (“After The Revolution”). I closed out the disco beat and opened up a new project. I threw the chords down and a few other thoughts.

But I wasn’t ready to work on “After The Revolution”. I know what that’s going to sound like and how long it’s going to take to get right. Not for today. I saved my bit of work and went back to the other track.

The beat was good and had an undeniable groove. I had an idea for a song called “1,000,001”. In my old band, I wrote a song called

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“1,000,000” — an anti-love song about two people who don’t meet because the protagonist is too inhibited. It was one of our better songs. As part of thinking about this record, I thought it might be interesting to write a “sequel” to one of my old band’s songs, or at least what we might sound like today.

So “1,000,000” becomes “1,000,001”. I had some lyric fragment ideas about millions of things. But while listening to the beat, this hook crept into my head, singing “ONE zero zero ZERO zero zero ONE”. Solid gold.

I quickly put up the mic and recorded a few passes. Then I sat down to write some lyrics. I quickly decided the essence of the song would be comparing millions of things to one thing. The lyrics came quickly and I managed to get a tip of the hat in to the original song.

Coming up with the verse “melody” was a challenge. The guitar chords I threw down were interesting and atypical for me, but the groove was so good I didn’t really want to sing over it. After doing my 2007 RPM project, I’m comfortable with rapping, but I didn’t want to go that far. I figured something in between (like Underworld would do) would suit. A few passes later and the vocals were done.

No bass on it. Hmm. Prince didn’t need one for “When Doves Cry”, and the track as I have it now has some stuff in the low end from all the kicks and the rain. Maybe it doesn’t need a bass?

I had enough for a break at the gym to check things out.

Sounded good enough, and I had only a few things I wanted to touch up. Turns out the hook vocal takes are distorted as hell, but I’m leaving it for now. I finished up the track, adding some polish and, reluctantly, a bass part. I might want to be Prince, but I’m not that good yet!

“1,000,001” sounds great. To my ears, it’s very different from the other songs on the record so far. I hope the songs don’t sound too disparate. But I suppose after the relatively homogenous nature of my last 2 RPM projects, a little variety isn’t bad.

I also did some touch-ups on “Distant Future”, which is done barring any weird mix issues.

After dinner I started back up on “Revolution”. It’s sounding promising.

6 songs down, and about 25 minutes. That’s likely going to be 2-3 more tracks and 10 minutes for me. No problem!

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DAY 18-19

Wednesday morning I re-did the distorted vocals on “1,000,001” and also fixed the end of “The Distant Future”. I made new mixes of both and headed off to work.

A busy day — had to catch up for the short week. Not much time to do anything, but both of the new songs were very close to final mixes. I got home and made a few changes.

“Future” needed adjustments to the snare drum (too piercing) and some level changes. I also beefed up some guitars with very low doubling.

“1,000,001” needed some minor level adjustments — bass up 1 dB or so, vocals up a little in the verses, chorus lead guitar down a bit. I also got my wife to sing a chorus or two on “1,000,001”, which added some nice texture. I always like having her do something on all of my projects. Sort of like a Hitchcock cameo.

The bass part I added definitely helps the song.

I started playing around with some lyrics and melody ideas for “Revolution” before I shut down for the night.

Thursday morning I uploaded new mixes to check out later and headed off for a very busy day at work. Got home and decided that while “The Distant Future” is basically done, a more “dubsteppy” bass sound might be a good idea, so I did an alternate mix with a little LFO-driven filter instead of the static filter.

I did some photography experiments with my wife for the booklet.

Using some Neil Young lyrics as a template, reference, and inspiration, I wrote what I think are the lyrics for “After The Revolution”. I hope to finish it this weekend.

DAY 20-21: AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Friday was a write-off. I made sure everything I had so far was good, but other than reviewing the mixes and lyrics and updating blog and book stuff, I did very little music. Just preliminary stuff on “After The Revolution”.

Saturday morning I woke up and spent some time talking with my wife

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about music theory, the project, and the book. She took a few photos.

I started in on the melody right away, working it around the words. Came up with some good bits and realized I needed to make the whole song a little faster (going from 100 to 105 beats per minute).

I got the basic chords in place and started roughing in the melody and somehow the Cubase project got corrupted. I rebooted, losing about 20 minutes of work and a little of my cool.

I started up again and got back to it. Another photographer friend wanted some rough mixes and lyrics to listen to while he shot some stuff for the record liner notes. Unfortunately, I had set my FTP program to shut down the PC 10 seconds after finishing a transfer.

I didn't stop it in time, losing another 10 minutes of work and all momentum on the piece. I ate some lunch and went back down to the studio again. I managed to get the track about 70% done before it was gym time.

Post-gym, I put the main vocals down and finalized the arrangement. This necessitated a few more guitar tracks including solos. After dinner I added some nice backing vocals and finished up the first mix candidate.

I had originally planned an ending for the track where various phrases or lines started making chords and gradually moved out of phase until there was just a wash of sound. By the time I got the arrangement clarified, the song was nearly 7 minutes long. Adding more guitar stuff seemed excessive, so I did something similar with the backing vocals instead, which was both easier and shorter.

I think the mix sounds huge. The boomy kick might be a bit excessive and the ending might be a bit too long. But I think the track has a good vibe. There's some nice rude guitar noise in this one and it definitely sounds like what I wanted.

Best of all, I crossed over the 30 minute mark (32 plus!), so one more track and I should be done.

DAY 22: IN MORPHEUS STATION

I usually sleep in on Sundays, but today I woke up at about 6:45 am and couldn't get back to sleep. Iran was awake, too, so we made coffee and started in on our Sunday.

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I didn't get down to the studio until after lunch. I did some final touch-ups on "After The Revolution" (which is awesome).

Now what? With 31:45 done, I needed at least one more song. I flipped through my lyrics book and came across a few scribbled lines about insomnia. I looked at my notes and thought perhaps I should do something goth and reminiscent of Sisters of Mercy.

I started assembling a beat. Picked a kit. Made a beat. Didn't like it. Shuffled through a few more kits. Didn't like them. Made another beat. Not going anywhere, I took a break.

Came back down and started again at a different tempo. Things started to come together, but it was time for the gym. I checked all the mixes, which were sounding very good.

Back home I continued on the new track. I wrote a chorus with a nice (if simple) melody over a more interesting set of chords than I usually use, in a key I don't normally use.

This made writing the verses very tough. By the end of the night I had something together with some verses hacked in.

I really liked how the choral vocals on "Revolution" worked, so rather than playing big chords on the chorus for this new song, I sang the chords instead.

The Tom Anderson was out of tune and I didn't feel like unlocking the nut and dealing with the Floyd Rose vibrato arm, so I picked up my custom "Lonesome" Telecopy and played all the parts with it instead. While I sort of wanted to use a single guitar all the way through, I'm pleased I used Ian's guitar on the record and it sounds beautiful.

Pretty sure the verses were garbage, the snare needed work, and that it was missing a few things (like more than one drum fill...) but at least I had a general shape of a track that, at 4:00, would be enough to finish.

DAY 23: THE FINISH LINE

I am watching the progress bar for a mix of "In Morpheus Station", which is my 8th track and, at 4:02, it pushes me to 36 minutes, which means I'm done.

I touched up a few things after I woke up. I listened to the rough this morning and a few times at work. While the chorus was great, the verses

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absolutely sucked. Fortunately I was able to come up with a much better approach after I got home from the office.

I then spent several hours wrestling with the mix.

I also added some more guitar flourishes, a touch of crunchy metal, and a nice corroded solo line. Not sure about the metal part, so I'm doing mixes with and without.

And for the final touch, I added a subway recording courtesy of Gary Bard and Freesound.org (under a Creative Commons license, no less).

I will need to check the mix tomorrow — my ears have no perspective at this point — but I think it's pretty solid. My main concern is the vocal level. I've been sort of going back and forth on whether the vocals are too loud or too quiet. Sean thinks they're too quiet on some of the songs where I think they're about perfect, but it's frequently a matter of personal preference.

I still have to master the record and create a CD project, but that's only about a 30-minute job, and one I'll tackle tomorrow night.

Even better, however, is that James sent a link to the photos he shot for the cover and liner notes and they are spectacular. Perfect. Beyond anything I could have hoped for.

I can't wait to see how Iran puts it all together in the book.

So just a few more things to wrap up (blog entries, write a few essays, review lyrics, assemble other text for the book) and RPM 2009 can be put to bed.

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EPILOGUE

The alarm wakes me at 6 am. I can hear the sound of rain against the windows. I'm tired.

I finished the challenge. Last night I did final tweaks to the master and have something acceptable. I hope to get Michael Hateley to do a better mastering job for the version 1.1 release.

I can go back to sleep. I'll upload the record later and let everyone know it's done. I turn off the alarm and start to drift off again.

But I should make a promotional video. Everybody does videos now. I could put something together. But I'd have to do it . . . now.

I slide out of bed and pull on the clothes lying on the floor. I start the coffee and quietly descend into the studio. It's the last day.

I am thinking about a mysterious video — how do I convey the essence of the record? Maybe I can use the rain ambience I recorded and just fade in some of James' photos against that? But then people won't know what it sounds like.

I pull in the intros for "After The Revolution" and "The Blue Sea", plus some rain ambience. Edited down, it's just shy of 2 minutes. Perfect.

James' images fit perfectly against the music and it's easy to make nice edits in time with the music. I drop in a blurry self-portrait I took in December at the end. I finish it up with some text against a deep gray background, including Rich's perfect description "a glitch Floyd dystopia". Looks good, I think.

I upload it to YouTube and Facebook and start e-mailing people.

I get to work and send off the CDs to RPM HQ and the planned East Bay Express listening party. I e-mail my co-workers. I listen to it at the gym.

By the end of the day, some feedback is starting to trickle in. People like the video, like the album. It's a good feeling.

I still have a few more tasks ahead. I need to archive all the project files. I need to send the raw mixes off to Mr. Hateley. Iran and I need to finish the liner notes. And I think I might try to make videos for a few of the songs.

WHAT DID I LEARN THIS YEAR?

This is still a challenge. This year I definitely had a few moments of wondering whether or not I would succeed. The early stages were rough and it felt like I had very little time. Stressful, and I really did spend almost every free minute working on the record.

This is still worthwhile. I am thrilled with the results. It's much better than I had hoped in every respect. I will almost certainly give it another try in 2010.

I have low-end issues in the studio. I can't hear bass levels very well. I need to do something about that. Maybe speaker isolators or something.

88.2 kHz sounds better but it means I need a faster computer. It means double the processing power is required, which meant I ran into CPU limits fast. Dealing with glitchy playback and recording was annoying and meant I didn't hear some imperfections until it was very late in the process. Until I upgrade again, I am going to knock back to 44.1.

Persistence pays off. Both for individual tracks and the record as a whole, the single tactic that provided the most benefit was "keep going". Not giving up, working away, grinding on always led to a quality result.

Know when to quit. This year I had more abandoned track ideas than ever. Realizing something wasn't going in the way I wanted or needed it was critical to getting to an idea that actually would work.

Start with an idea. Almost every abandoned track failed because I started playing or writing without an idea of what I wanted to do. I have to know what I want the song to be about or feel like before I start in order for it to get anywhere promising.

Limitations work. First they seem daunting. Then they vanish. Then they help. Choosing to only use guitar and bass instantly gave the record character in many ways. I quickly stopped thinking about it and just picked up the instruments. By the end, I had some default sounds. These similar starting points meant I had already solved a number of issues with equalization and levels, which made the last few tracks move along more quickly.

And I write my final blog entry for RPM 2009. It's done. It's good. Listen to it.



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