

WHEN BASEBALL STRIKES A CHORD

THE NATIONAL PASTIME INSPIRED JOHN FOGERTY TO WRITE THE SPORT'S EPOCHAL ANTHEM, BUT HE'S NOT THE ONLY ROCK 'N' ROLLER TO BE MOVED BY THE GRAND OLD GAME'S ENDURING INFLUENCE

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

It's a song about hope.

It's a song about excitement, anticipation and rebirth. About awe and respect for what has come before and belief in what might happen next. It's a song about confidence, readiness and wanting to participate and make a difference, not just be a spectator.

It's a song about baseball, but really it's a song about life itself.

"Put me in coach! I'm ready to play!"

The song is "Centerfield" by John Fogerty — a fixture at every ballpark in the land, played at T-ball games and World Series tilts alike. The song turned 25 years old this year, which is a long time for anything to hold its position at the nexus of two of America's greatest cultural contributions to the world — baseball and rock 'n' roll.

A quarter-century after its debut, the song sounds as crisp and contemporary as it did the first time you heard it — like the promise of a newly mowed and manicured field and a fresh set of 27 outs.

It seemed only fitting then, that at this year's Hall of Fame induction ceremony — before the baseball gods welcomed Whitey Herzog, Andre Dawson and umpire Doug Harvey to their numbers — they also paid tribute to "Centerfield" and to Fogerty, who performed the song that for years has been the informal signal for the day's proceedings to begin.

"'Put me in, coach.' That's been the universal signal for 50-plus Hall of Famers to take their place onstage," said Brad Horn, the Hall of Fame's senior director for communications and education. "It's been a regular part of the ceremony for about a dozen years."

To have Fogerty there to play the song live was "a great honor for the song and a wonderful connection to all of the Hall of Famers onstage and the thousands of fans in attendance," Horn said, noting that the Hall's tribute to "Centerfield" is unprecedented.

"In terms of the honor being tied together with the induction ceremony, it's a first.

Technically, the song can't be inducted. Only players, managers and executives can call themselves Hall of Famers. But we wanted to recognize it as a seminal moment — as being part of the canon of baseball and American culture."

BECOMING A FAN

Fogerty, born in 1945, was raised in Berkeley, Calif., in the years before Major League Baseball moved to the West Coast in 1958. But the game still captured his imagination.

"I started hearing about baseball probably at the age of 3 or 4 years old," Fogerty said. "My older brothers and my dad really liked baseball. My older brother Jim was a batboy for the Oakland Oaks, a minor league team in the Bay Area. In fact, the team moved away and became the Vancouver Mounties, and he was the Oaks' last batboy.

"So I would hear him talk about games, and my dad would take us to see the Oaks and also the San Francisco Seals. And of course, I was hearing little snippets about people like Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio. When people talked about them, their eyes would get really big. I somehow picked up on the idea that they were talking about hallowed, heroic, legendary people."

With no local major league team to root for, Fogerty latched on to the New York Yankees. "It seemed like that was the biggest of the big shows," he said.

Even back then his attention was focused on the man in the middle of the outfield — not surprising in an era graced by center fielders Willie Mays (Giants), Mickey Mantle



Removed from his Sunday night analyst duties for one day, Hall of Fame second baseman Joe Morgan could comfortably settle into the role of second fiddle behind 'Centerfielder' John Fogerty at the Hall's induction ceremony.

(Yankees), Duke Snider (Dodgers) and Larry Doby (Indians). "The center fielder seemed to be the big poppa on the team," he said. "He seemed to be the one that was hitting all the home runs and getting all the glory. I'm probably overstating it, but to a boy who was getting limited information about the game, that's the way it seemed to me."

Fogerty maintained his interest in baseball – he eventually became a fan of both the San Francisco Giants and Oakland A's, and he claims the latter as his primary team today – even as his daily life was given over to rock 'n' roll. After service in the Army Reserve, his band Creedence Clearwater Revival – formed with his older brother, Tom, and friends Doug Clifford and Stu Cook – released its self-titled debut album in 1968. It was the first of seven studio albums and two live releases that produced a cache of hit singles, including "Proud Mary," "Bad Moon Rising," "Lookin' Out My Back Door" and "Have You Ever Seen the Rain?" before the band broke up acrimoniously in 1972.

Fogerty went on to a brief solo career before retiring prematurely, in part because of an onerous contract with his record company.

He remained silent for a dozen years before "Centerfield" and a set of other new songs brought him back to life creatively.

"I had been out of the music business for some time," he said. "But I started to realize that I was working on music every day and things were getting better and better, and it looked like sometime pretty soon, hey, I'm going to have enough songs to make an album."

Thinking back to his baseball fandom, Fogerty christened his comeback album "Centerfield" even before he wrote the title song. Eventually, the guitar riff came to him, then the drum part and the instantly recognizable hand clap effect that opens the song.

The key, though, was the phrase "Put me in, coach."

"That's a phrase that I've always had in my head," Fogerty said. "I would always say

something like that during a game, especially when the guys I was rooting for seemed to need a big boost. You know, the team is kind of struggling and they've got a young guy who's just up from the farm team, and you've been hearing he's hitting .450 in the minor leagues. And you're saying to the team, "Well, c'mon, put me in, put me in, I'm ready!"

Metaphorically, the song marked Fogerty's own return to the rock 'n' roll game. He was indeed "ready to play" once again. "Centerfield" – the song and the album alike – became enduring hits, and he rose to the top of the charts once again.

"The thing people tell me about the song is just that it makes them feel good," Fogerty said. "They tell me, 'I know when baseball season is coming. I know that it's springtime when I start hearing 'Centerfield.'"

As part of the induction ceremony, Fogerty lent the museum his custom-made guitar in the shape of a baseball bat, which he breaks out exclusively to play "Centerfield." It will be on display, he says, "probably for as long

PLAY 'EM, COACH!

Now that John Fogerty's "Centerfield" has been honored by the Baseball Hall of Fame, which baseball song will be recognized next? It likely won't be any of these, but each of them should be on the playlist of any true fan.

1. STEVE GOODMAN, "A DYING CUB FAN'S LAST REQUEST": Made all the more poignant by the "City of New Orleans" songwriter's own untimely death in 1984, this is the definitive ode to the "doormat of the National League" and the endless futility that continues to play out on Chicago's north side.

2. THE SKELETONS, "TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALLGAME": The classic song, written by Jack Norworth and Albert Von Tilzer, is sung at every ballgame, but never quite like this. The Springfield, Mo., roots-rock band performs it by rushing ahead one beat and leaving the last note hanging in the air like a towering fly ball. Once you hear it, you'll want to sing it that way, too.

3. WARREN ZEVON, "BILL LEE": It's not so much about the on-the-field exploits of pitcher Bill "Spaceman" Lee, but rather his propensity for speaking his mind, regardless of the consequences. Thirty years after the song appeared, Lee once again underlined Zevon's point with his caustic comments on the death of Yankees owner George Steinbrenner.

4. BOB DYLAN, "CATFISH": A rare song about the national pastime by rock's ultimate bard, this tribute to Yankees pitcher Catfish Hunter, who signed baseball's first multi-million dollar contract, first appeared in a 1976 cover version by Texas singer Kinky Friedman. Dylan's own version didn't surface until the 1990s.

5. THE BASEBALL PROJECT, "TED (EXPLETIVE) WILLIAMS": We can't print the full title of this song that makes plain the unabashed swagger and salty language of Teddy Ballgame when it came to referring to himself.

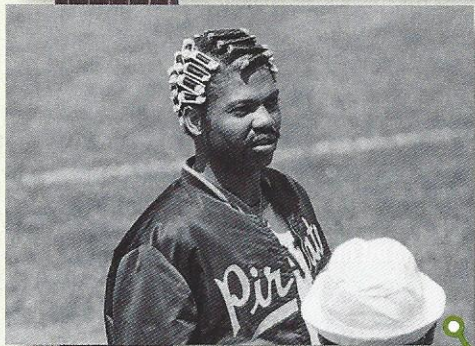
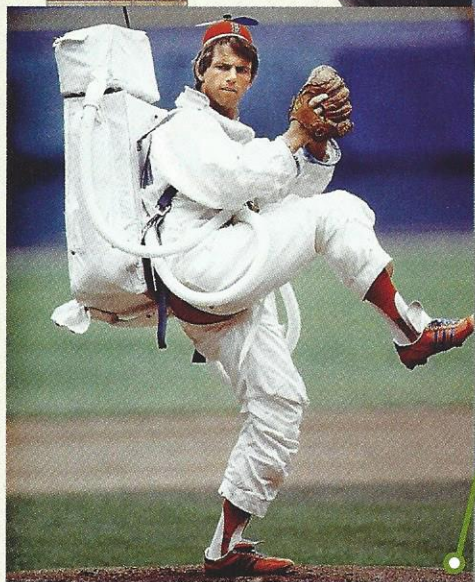
6. THE DROPKICK MURPHYS, "TESSIE": Painful as it is to recall anything about the Red Sox's 2004 World Series win over the Cardinals, part of the credit for the team's exorcism of the Bambino's curse must go to the Murphys, a Celtic-punk band that reworked this vintage team anthem into a modern-day rallying cry.

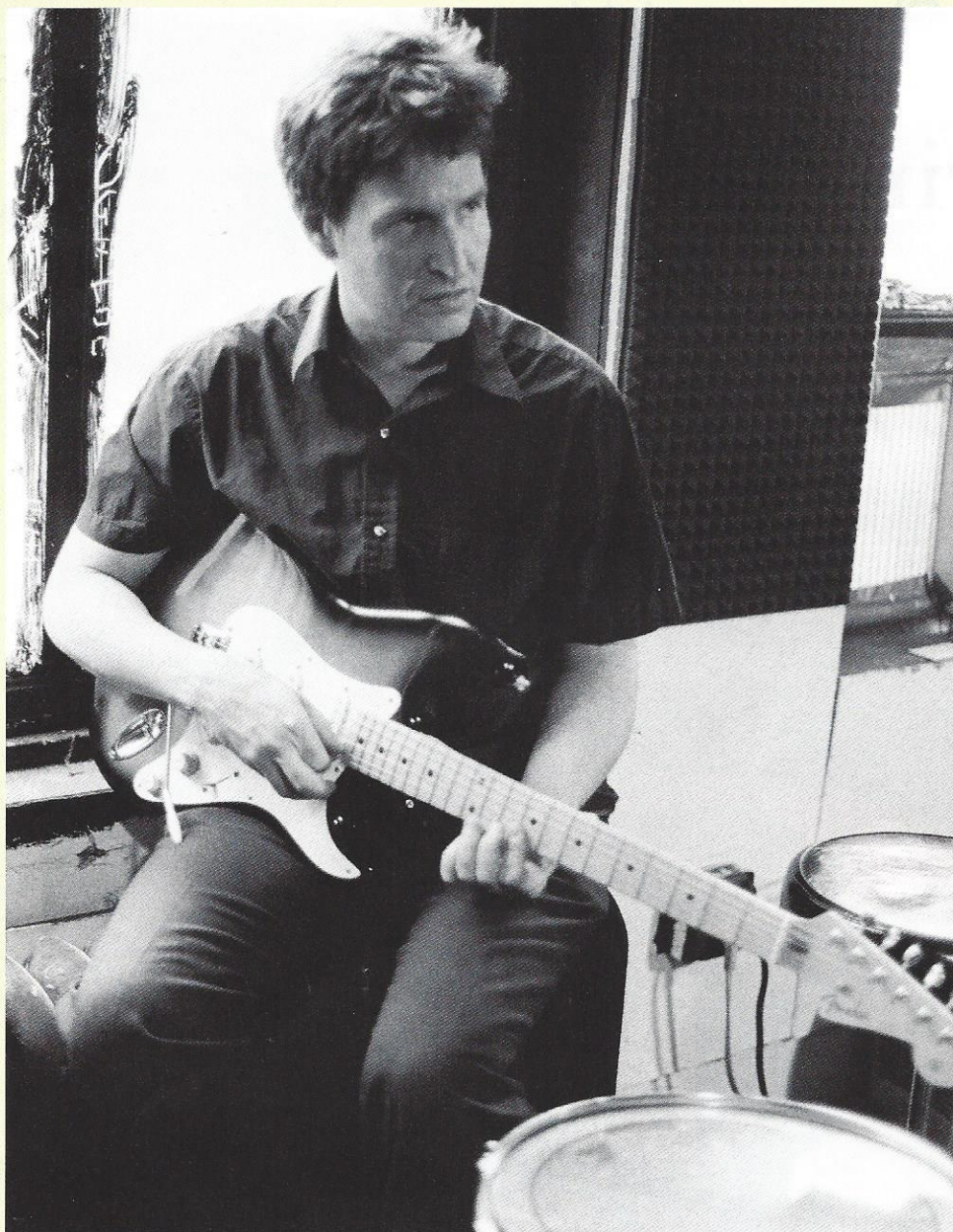
7. DAN BERN, "THE PERFECT-GAME SONG" (aka "Joyce and Galarraga," depending on which YouTube clip you track down): Folk singer Bern didn't take long to immortalize Armando Galarraga's perfecto-that-wasn't – the result of a blown call by umpire Jim Joyce.

8. SF SEALS, "DOCK ELLIS": The Bay Area band led by Barbara Manning offers a trippy tribute to the Pirates pitcher who hurled a no-hitter in 1970, allegedly in the throes of an LSD experience.

9. THE NIGHTMARES, "BASEBALL ALTAMONT": An obscure punk tune from 1985 that recounts a riot in the Shea Stadium stands during a Mets game a year earlier. It was more recently covered by the band Yo La Tengo.

10. HARRY PARTCH, "WATER CRIERS - THE GAME IS CALLED ON ACCOUNT OF RAIN": This unusual piece by avant-garde composer Partch is not for everyone. In fact, it may try your patience more than watching a game pitched by SLOTH (Seconds to Launch One Throw Home) stat leaders Josh Beckett and Derek Lowe.





as they want,” adding with a laugh, “That’s a guitar that only knows one song.”

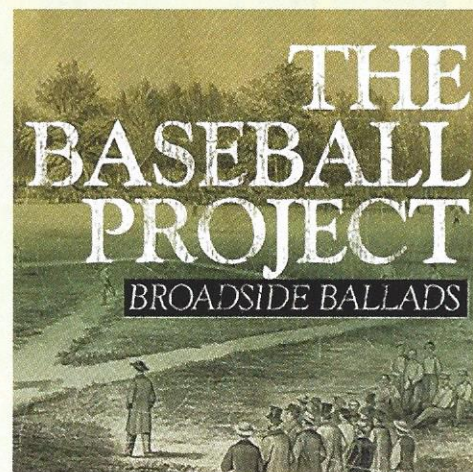
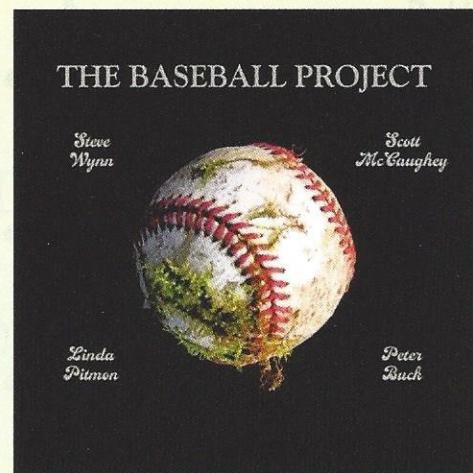
THE LYRICAL TRADITION

Fogerty may have written the most famous baseball song ever – this side of “Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” that is. But he’s far from alone in penning songs dedicated to, or referring in some fashion to, our national pastime.

Among popular music’s earlier hits that paid tribute to heroes of the day were “Joltin’ Joe DiMaggio,” a hit for Les Brown in 1941; “Did You See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball?” penned and recorded by Woodrow (Buddy) Johnson in 1949 and later that year also recorded by Count Basie; and the Treniers’ “Say Hey (The Willie Mays Song),” released

in 1955.

Other songs whose meaning is broader than the game itself have yet incorporated baseball references. The “Brown Eyed Handsome Man” in Chuck Berry’s 1956 song of that name stands for a more general discussion of racial issues; but when Berry’s song has him “rounding third and heading for home” – Fogerty purposely references the phrase in “Centerfield,” incidentally – it has been said Berry’s phrase is referring to Jackie Robinson. The query “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?” in Simon & Garfunkel’s “Mrs. Robinson” is a melancholy acknowledgment of lost innocence. Commenting on the public’s reluctance to relinquish their faith in fallen idols, songwriter Murray Head built “Say It Ain’t So, Joe,” – recorded by the Who’s



Steve Wynn (left) has teamed with several other musicians to form The Baseball Project, a band that hits ‘em in the gaps when it comes to filling a need for subjects on-field and off relating to the grand old game.

Roger Daltrey – around the line uttered by a shattered young fan of Joe Jackson, one of eight White Sox players accused of conspiring with gamblers to throw the 1919 World Series.

A more recent tune, Bruce Springsteen’s “Glory Days,” uses the story of a former high school pitcher’s ancient exploits as a cautionary tale about living in the past. Don Henley’s “The Boys of Summer” borrows its titular phrase from Roger Kahn’s book about the Brooklyn Dodgers; Henley’s tune has a moral similar to Springsteen’s song, but otherwise has no connection with baseball whatsoever. And Trace Adkins’ “Swing” – heard regularly at Busch Stadium these days – incorporates baseball lingo, but it’s really just about picking up girls. And besides, Adkins’ assertion that “Everybody strikes out nine times out of 10” suggests that you’d want Adkins

neither playing on your softball team nor serving as your wingman at the bar.

THE BEAT GOES ON

A relatively new band dubbed "The Baseball Project" is dedicated solely to writing baseball-related songs – though like "Centerfield," many of them are about life outside the foul lines, as well as between them.

The group is actually a side project for all of its participants. Steve Wynn, late of the Dream Syndicate and current leader of his own band, Steve Wynn & the Miracle 3, joined with Scott McCaughey of the Young Fresh Fellows and the Minus 5 (he is also a sideman for R.E.M.), plus R.E.M.'s Peter Buck and the Miracle 3's Linda Pitmon (who is also Wynn's wife) to record the album "Frozen Ropes and Dying Quails," which was released in 2008.

"Scott and I have been friends for a long time," Wynn said. "We met about 20 years ago, but for whatever reason never talked about baseball. When R.E.M. got inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, they had a big blowout party at a restaurant in New York. By 2 a.m. we were the last two standing, and we got into a baseball conversation and that was that. We were off and running."

Each revealed to the other that he had plans to write and record a baseball-themed album. Rather than compete, the pair decided to collaborate and immediately began sending each other songs via e-mail.

Some of the songs are straightforward reminiscences of the game. In "Past Times," the band recounts, somewhat humorously,

When Campy Campaneris played all nine positions in a game

When Pete Rose demolished Ray Fosse he was never the same

31 wins and an album on Capitol for Denny McLain

But other songs go deeper and get into the heads of their subjects, including Ted Williams, Sandy Koufax and Fernando Valenzuela.

There's also a song about former Cardinal Curt Flood, who challenged baseball's reserve clause and in the process gave up the rest of his career.

"It's a great story," Wynn said. "He really did sacrifice his career for something that wasn't accepted at his time, but has come to be commonplace a couple years later. When he died, I remember reading about his funeral and how there were very few baseball

players there. It made me kind of sad. Every player playing today owes gratitude to Curt Flood. He's probably in some ways the most important player in the history of baseball, just because of the impact that he had on the game."

Lately the Baseball Project has been writing timely songs collectively referred to as "The Broadside Ballads" and posting them on ESPN's website for free download. A future installment might be a song that McCaughey is writing about Albert Pujols. It's titled "El Hombre."

When told that Pujols doesn't like that nickname because he doesn't want to disrespect Stan Musial, Wynn pointed out that, as certified baseball geeks, they always do their homework.

"Scott addresses all of that in the song," he said.

Wynn added that he considers baseball an endlessly fascinating subject matter for songwriting, whether the song is really about the game or using the game as a metaphor.

"The thing about baseball, and the reason it's so easy to write songs about it, is that it's a very human game," he said. "More than basketball or football or hockey, where it's more about the team and players are sort of a cog in the machine, baseball is really about players trying to overcome things and deal with their own frustrations and celebrate their own victories. You really get a feel for the individual."

But because baseball and music are entertainment, sometimes comic relief is what's called for. Native St. Louisan and lifelong Cardinals fan Michael "Supe"

Granda – best known as a member of the Ozark Mountain Daredevils and also for his own solo projects, including Supe and the Sandwiches and the Garbonzos – recently released a song to which many families throughout Cardinal Nation can relate.

It's called "I Married a Cubs Fan."

The song is the true story of Granda wooing and winning the hand of his wife, Julie, and the gobsmacked response of his friends: "You WHAT?"

"Some of them were really (ticked) off," Granda said. "They actually said, 'You did WHAT?' But most of them – I'd say 95 percent of them – laughed."

The song is meant to show the friendliness of the Cards-Cubs rivalry rather than the hatred.

"When I started writing the verses, I said, 'Well, the rivalry between the two teams, as well as the two cities, it's not as mean-spirited as the Yankees and the Red Sox or the Dodgers and Giants,' he said. "We just kind of get together and have parties in each other's cities once a month during the summers. It's a song for both camps."

Will any of these other efforts someday be honored by Cooperstown? Probably not. But then, few songs are as down the middle, or swing as hard for the fences, as "Centerfield."

Daniel Durchholz is a free-lance writer based in St. Louis.

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