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Role Models: Green On Red Showed Shawna Virago Where to Go

A Negroni sends the punk-country artist back in time to when she first heard *Gas Food Lodging*...

By [Shawna Virago](#) September 10, 2024



Not long ago, I was sitting around a small table with my pals, The Secret Emchy Society, waiting to perform with them at the Bottom of the Hill in San Francisco. I was playing lead guitar that night; the regular guy had some sort of mysterious business affairs out of town

to take care of. The others were drinking bourbon, but because I have a drop of oppositional-defiant syndrome, I had to choose something else, opting instead for a Negroni. No sooner had I taken a sip than I had the whole relativity of time and space thing happen, where my mind was transported back to my friend Earl's tiny apartment over two decades before in Los Angeles.

There I was in Earl's tiny apartment in the mid-'80s, just a young fledgling queer, invited to one of Earl's listening circles, a monthly get-together where he'd share his latest vinyl finds. The small group that gathered there were record nerds and took these get-togethers seriously. Once the needle dropped on a record, we sat in reverential silence, even when an album was switched to side 2.

I remembered the night I heard Green On Red's *Gas Food Lodging* because Earl, for the first and only time, served Negronis, being influenced by just having seen Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. He was even wearing a thrift store black suit, his low-budget attempt to emulate Marcello Mastroianni — which, of course, was impossible. No one can emulate Marcello.

Earl removed the shrink wrap and gingerly put the album on the turntable. The first song, "That's What Dreams Are For," hooked me instantly with its interplay of two guitars, a blending of garage rock and country. I turned the cover over and saw the album was produced by Paul Cutler, the guitarist of 45 Grave, another great live band. The song set the stage for the highlight of the album: Dan Stuart's gut-punch lyrics, short narratives dealing with myths and archetypes, and sympathetic portrayals of lives caught in the long shadow of hard luck. These people are not caught in downward mobility; it's all they've ever known.

Staring in the eyes of the preacher

Who sold me down the river

Well, I got too much faith for him to deliver

Guess I'll just be poor for the rest of my life

It's better than giving up the fight

Most rock band travel narratives are narcissistic odes to drugs, boozing, mishaps with hairspray, and trashing rooms, blah blah blah — and given the name of the album, you'd think Green On Red might be going down the same old lane. Yes, the long empty miles of the highway are the backdrop, but these melancholic stories are insular worlds of the mind, all roads traveled on only leading to dead ends.

At the time, I was perplexed by the lukewarm reviews and poor record sales that met *Gas Food Lodging* upon its release. It's a miracle the album wasn't quickly forgotten. It was accused of being sloppy and ramshackle, but of course, that was the point. This was a record pushing against the followers of fashion and much like Jeffrey Lee Pierce, it didn't

strive to be likable. It wasn't for you if you had a musical sweet tooth or didn't appreciate romantic masochism.

Also, it was recorded a decade before there was a sizeable audience of alternative twang appreciators. There was no Bloodshot or Lost Highway Records. No Whiskeytown or Uncle Tupelo.

From the first song to the last, the band is outstanding, driven by Stuart's vocal grit and the loose and tasteful weaving of Chuck Prophet's precocious virtuosity on guitar and Chris Cacavas's manic organ.

The song that knocked me out the most was the striking "Sixteen Ways":

*I haven't slept in 14 days
Now it's time to barricade
Myself in these four walls
My 16 kids all are gone*

Some find Americana music via Nashville, Bakersfield, or Austin. I found my way to it in Los Angeles via country-punk: X, the Blasters, Gun Club, Los Lobos, and Green On Red. *Gas Food Lodging*, with its combination of forlorn and economical narratives and roots guitar, has resonated with me since I first heard it and suggested an artistic path forward. Being an admirer of Green On Red meant being in a select group that could hear in longwave radio: while our antennae could pick them up, others couldn't find the frequency.

After I discovered it, *Gas Food Lodging* jolted something awake in me. It was rarely off my turntable and the more I listened to it, the more I discovered underneath the murder ballads, desperate fatalism, and lives caught without alibis, this was a record that jettisoned tradition and instead, was future-facing. It was where I wanted to go.