

Nick Barrows: Semantikon Retrospective Essay

I am not sure where to start on this. First and foremost, it should go on record that I have a bad memory. A very bad memory. So it should go without saying that you truly cannot trust the narrator in this piece. I had/have eight pieces with two audio recordings of Radio and Pantomime Green as well as a beautiful broadside of Radio on Semantikon beginning in October 2007. I know I was living in Over-the-Rhine at the time, I know I was sending out a great deal of submissions (for me anyway), and I know I was burning at both ends. I had a 9-5 job but still managed to stay out way past when a person with a 9-5 should stay out to be ready to meet that job the next day. I was in the first year of a relationship that (knocks on wood) I'm still in today. Looking back, I still had the stings of a few bad encounters that made me the type of person that was almost unbearable to be around at times. I bring this up because one of the reasons I am where I am physically and creatively is because of that relationship. When I decided to print my own chapbook called *Rockets on Bibles*, she helped edit and was very supportive.

Three other relationships that were so very important during this time, and still are, were with Mark Flanigan, Jay Reynolds, and Jack Rininger. I had done a reading at VOLK, but I did not know Mark very well yet. I did find an email about trying to do a reading together (did I read at one of his Inktank open mics?) and I am sure it's the reason I came to know of Semantikon. I lived with Jay in the 90's and would guest spot with his amazing band 4 Track All-Stars. Jack, who I have known since high school, and I would jam together with me playing on a new instrument I picked up, the concertina. Why is all this vital to this story? Because with Mark, Jay, and Jack I would go on to write a very awesome book and form the best bands in the world: The book is called *Versus* and the bands are Eagle to Squirrel Variety Hour and Jack Burton Overdrive. Now are they really the best book or bands in the world? Not really. But to me they are because they are the most creative endeavors that I have ever been a part of. True expressions of myself collaborating without restriction. These guys are my brothers in every sense of the word. I am very proud of that. Connecting with Mark gets me connected to Semantikon; pieces in my chapbook become songs for Eagle to Squirrel. *Crash*, for example, becomes *WERK*. *Crash* was one of the pieces that would be on Semantikon. Connection.

So, 2007 in OTR was different than the hustle and bustle that it is now. It was in a downturn at that time. The activity of bars, coffeehouses, dance clubs, and galleries that seemed to be at full throttle in the late 90's were at low hum by the mid to late 2000's to say the least. No streetcar, no multimillion-dollar condos and apartments, no restaurant or bar at every corner, and certainly no high-rise grocery store. It was, at times, a gaggle of people coming out like it was some type of lost forbidden place where they might catch a donkey show or something. For me, I loved living in OTR on and off from 97-08 and would still, most likely, be there but the place was prime for "renovation." Well, I wasn't rich, and I can't put a hammer to a nail to save my life. So, to other pastures I would eventually go and roam. Now this is where the memory thing becomes a problem – I don't remember specific readings or a big run of poetry events. I think Inktank was doing some open mics and maybe another place or two like Publico but I never got to read there. I spent a lot more time in bars during that period than I should have. MPMF would really bring the area to life in Septembers so that would get me going and steered me in the direction of music. I do remember being hungry to do something. Something that would smash my poetry and music together. Something different, direct, and hopefully new.

I can only find a few emails from back then about being published in Semantikon. From the end of September to the second week of October I had a few direct messages with Lance. I remember it being

one of the most beautiful sites I had seen at the time. It was focused and gave purpose and respect to the pieces on the site. It was also multimedia, so the idea to have a recording of my poems on the site really got me excited. I think I had a phone call as well with Lance, again not too sure but we must have because we got to the idea of several pieces, two audio recordings, and a broadsheet of the poem *Radio*. The broadsheet was brilliant, the 700 WLW tower and a transparent map of downtown Cincinnati with my words on top. Semantikón was trying to do more than just put artists online. That would be one- or two-dimensional thinking and Semantikón is/was never just that. I feel they wanted to show you every side, angle, and curve of the artist. The different speeds, movements, and frequencies could be shown, seeing every aspect. A fuller picture indeed. It made me feel that I was a part of something unique and I liked it very much.

Most of my pieces that are on Semantikón ended up in my *Rockets on Bibles* chapbook. Looking back on those pieces, I see the birth of Eagle to Squirrel. I see the transition between a twenty-something spitting at the poetry and person that is trying to write poetry. It's okay, there is some good stuff in there, just a lot of anger and lack of focus, but I am getting off track. I am not sure how to wrap this up or if this is something that helps anyone understand the time, but for me it represents a creative reemergence that has continued to this day. I was beginning to see how I could better my poetry with music and better my music with poetry. I didn't have to separate them, I wanted that so much and that both loves of mine could be better for it. I am glad Semantikón was a part of that time with me. It felt like an online safe harbor giving a place for artists to be angry, sad, happy, silly, rude, wild, and to simply experiment. It is hard to find that now, especially online but that is another story. That's all I have, and I hope it gives you a little insight into the time. I'll just say that I think most of what you read is true, but who knows?