Chasing the Light

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The Cloud Cult Story

Mark Allister

Foreword by Mark Wheat

MINNESOTA

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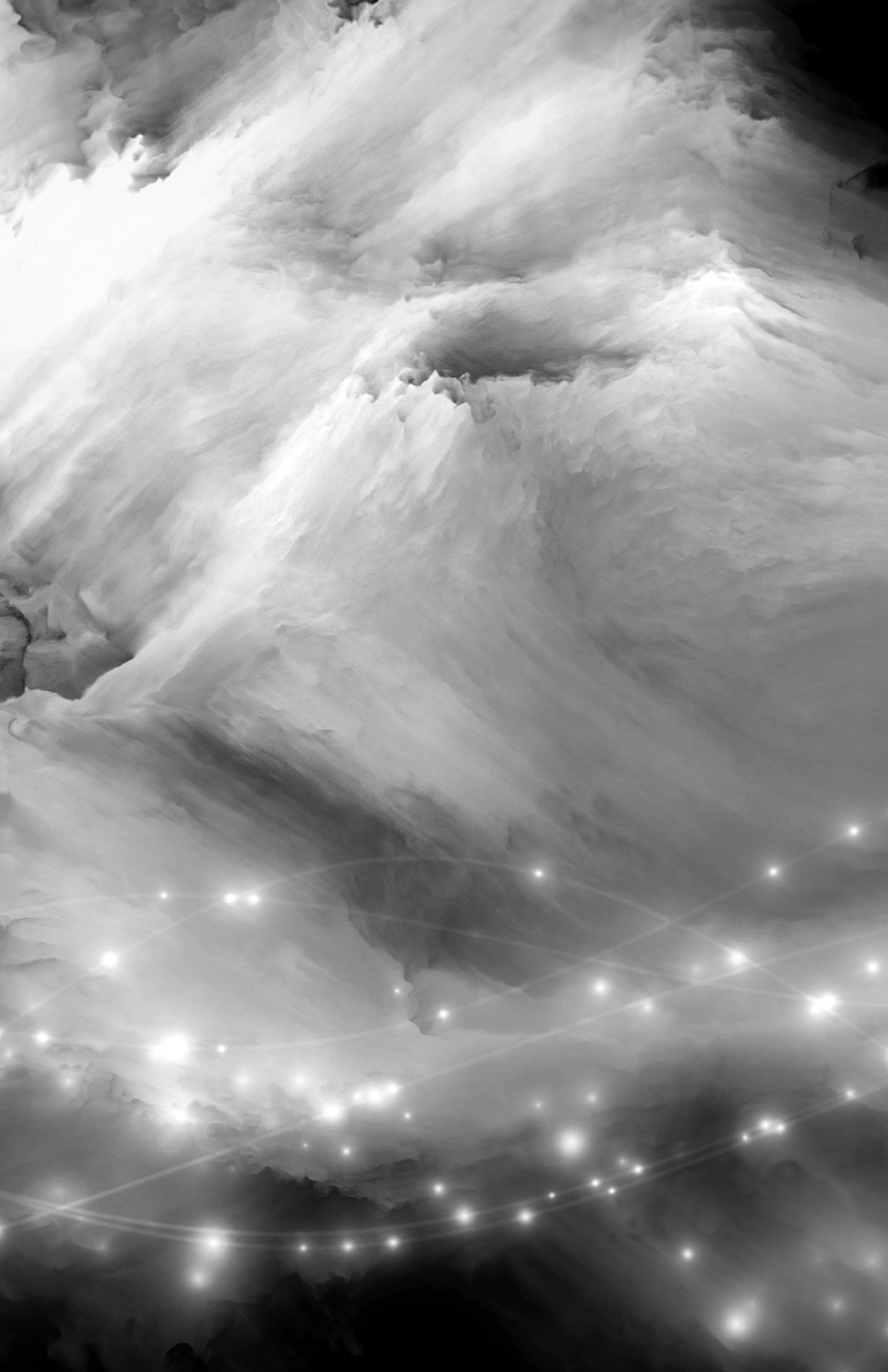
For Meredith Coole Allister, partner extraordinaire

When your life is finished burning down,
You'll be all that's left standing there.
You'll become a baby cumulus,
And fly up to the firmament.

No one gets to know the purpose,
We need to learn to live without knowing.
But all we are saying is
Step forward, step forward.

We can only see a small part of
Everything and nothing.
When you finally know you can't know,
Step forward, step forward.

—Cloud Cult, "Step Forward"



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From Tragedy, Art

Although Craig and Connie enjoyed living in Duluth, in fall 2001 they began looking at rural property, wanting to buy a small farm for several enterprises that they would call Earthology Institute. They would grow organic herbs and cash crops for farmers markets; the institute would be a rural learning center with classes on sustainability and farming; they would build a recording studio, hoping to pull in bands from the Twin Cities and Duluth for recording. They found a farm they liked near Sandstone, Minnesota. The property wasn't the classic midwestern farm of cornfields, rolling pasture, a stock pond, and a red barn, but the farm suited the Minowas. The farmhouse was old but could be remodeled; the small number of tillable acres would be adequate for the organic farming they had in mind. They decided to make an offer.

In February 2002, Kaidin, their two-year-old much-loved son, died suddenly from unknown causes. With the death, says Craig, "everything totally fell apart." Adding confusion to loss, Connie and Craig had their offer on the Sandstone farm accepted the day that Kaidin died. Their first thought was they couldn't move, but Clarice Richardson urged them to follow through with their original plans, which were made with reflection and care. Grieving deeply, the Minowas moved to the farm.

The old farmhouse needed updating, and Craig and Connie decided to do everything as environmentally purposeful as

they could, even if the initial costs were higher. They installed geothermal heating. In the basement, Craig built a music studio out of all recycled or reused materials: he padded his walls with pieces of an old chicken coop and an old toolshed and with old egg cartons; the boards were made out of recycled newspapers; the thickest padding was layers and layers of discarded carpets. The studio, Craig says, was "literally made out of garbage." The Minowas had hoped that buying the farm and growing Earthology into more than a record label would be a new chapter in their lives. But though they tried to throw their energies into plans for the future and tried to make a home without Kaidin, they couldn't manage as a couple.

Grieving differently, the Minowas split up. Connie went off to northern Minnesota to isolate herself in nature. Living in the woods in an off-the-grid, solar-powered cabin, she studied, painted, and wrote. "Like Craig," she recalls, "I tried desperately to find meaning in life. I spent a great deal of time connecting with 'energies that be' and nature." Craig holed himself up in his studio.

Minowa recalls sitting there for days and nights, listening over and over to tapes he had made of Kaidin, and plunking on the piano while he listened: "You know, in there I was totally with him. It was like there was no separation. And I had no desire to go out into the real world where there was a separation." During the next months, Minowa wrote over a hundred songs that expressed the pain of his loss. In his studio writing and recording songs, he had control and could escape. But, he acknowledges now, the obsession became severe. "I was completely insane," he says. "There was no reality outside of the music." Friends and family became worried about him, thinking he might become suicidal.

During this time Minowa continued as best he could his work for the Organic Consumers Association, which he could do

from home. Plans for the Earthology Institute fell by the wayside. Minowa recorded a couple of musical acts but realized he didn't enjoy it. He held some public meetings to discuss the possibility of turning the farm into a sustainable community living area, and a few people got involved and started working the land, but Minowa became aware that he was spending his time in the basement music studio. "I discovered," he says, "that I was way too much of a hermit to want to live in a community setting." The farm became largely a hideout. One person who Minowa didn't try to hide from was his old friend Scott West, who was living in Milwaukee and working as the creative director for an apparel company. West began driving nearly every weekend to the new farm, which Minowa was now living on by himself.

"Craig was someone else after Kaidin's passing," West recalls. "He even looked different. I spent a lot of time going back and forth because I was concerned about his well-being." During 2002, when Minowa was writing all the songs, he'd share them with West when they were together. Sometimes Minowa would play the piano, and West would play the guitar or drums, and they'd just beat things around. "At that time," West says, "Craig didn't think he was going to make an album. That's not what he was doing—he was just writing a bunch of songs. He'd share them with me, perhaps as a reality check. And the music was insane and beautiful all at once. He took all that grief and anger and incomprehension and turned it into art, into amazing songs that were bitter and funny and beautiful. He just kept writing song after song. It was like an addiction of writing and recording."

Sarah Young, Minowa's old bandmate from Fable, came to the farm and recorded cello parts on some of the songs, and Minowa got Dan Greenwood, a high-school friend, to visit and play drums on various tracks. West pushed Minowa to take the songs, all those outpourings of emotions, and shape them into

an album. "I could hear," West says, "that the music was everything that he needed to heal and to grow. . . . And the music was absolutely brilliant and totally crazy. It's a great picture of exactly what was going on at that point." Young remembers going up to the farm, sitting outside, and hearing the set of songs straight through that would become *They Live on the Sun.* "It was incredible," she says. "But listening to these songs, one after another, I was thinking 'oh my god, he's going crazy.'"

Leaving behind his persona in *Who Killed Puck?* of the artist as environmentalist prophet, Minowa wrote songs in response to Kaidin's death that demonstrate how personal tragedy can send a person into solipsistic despair so deep and terrifying that the world's environmental issues such as unsafe drinking water or climate change simply don't matter. Singing in "Toys in the Attic" that he's now alone and no one would believe that he once was married and had a baby, he asks directly, "Hey God . . . / Have I gone crazy?" Gone in *They Live on the Sun* are the principled environmental, anticonsumerism themes. Here, instead, are angry exclamations, short outbursts, songs that fuse a poetics of compression and dream imagery with a music at times tender and pretty but more often dissonant and loud. "Yeah, Craig was crazy," says Greenwood, "but I think that's why that album was so good."

The first song, "On the Sun," begins with a high-pitched synthesizer beeping, which is soon joined by an acoustic guitar and a computerized voice saying something unintelligible. A cello then introduces the song's main melody, and to this backdrop Minowa sings, "We're all made of galaxies and weeds." With no particular story or situation, the song's lyric of only six lines evokes rather than describes. Galaxies, we might say, are beautiful in large part because they are infinite and incomprehensible; weeds are the wild things we don't want in our gardens or yards.

Humans might be made up of both of these, but Minowa doesn't explain how or why. Saying that his grandparents left "this world" to live "somewhere on the sun," he concludes with the lines "I want to leave this world together / And you and I will live up on the sun." Perhaps the "you" is Connie, but it's easy to hear this song as a longing for death, for his joining Kaidin. The music here fuses the two-worlds dichotomy, with the earthbound cello layered under the space-like noises, both being driven forward by drums and acoustic guitar.

The song "Radio Fodder" at one level simply critiques how songs are created in order to get them on the radio. Written for an unknown you, the song starts, Minowa says, "soft and sweet." Later, he sings that the song has gotten quieter, sings that he's gotten mellow in the third verse in order to build to the final chorus. "You like it," he says, "This is our song," and his send-up of pop conventions could be just witty and humorous. But singing "You just want me to sound like every goddamn man on the radio," he almost yells his reaction to this kind of song: "I hate it, I can't breathe / I can't write / I can't live my life like this." His assertion that his life isn't a pop song, either in lyric or construction of verse and chorus, ends with his yelling four times "this is my song" and three times saying "walk" before the song ends in midyell. Bitter and angry he breaks off, as if this is the only appropriate response to life at this moment.

The album's songs have few verse and chorus constructions, nor are the songs catchy tunes with anything resembling a hook. Some are angry outbursts of noise, barely comprehensible, nearly unlistenable. In the ultrafast and dissonant "Turtle Shell," Minowa articulates how he's getting through each day ("This is my turtle shell / I wear it to protect / You cannot hurt me that way") but screams out "turtle shell" repeatedly in a way that is deeply unsettling, suggesting that he needs more and thicker

psychological armor. Minowa shapes the classic children's song "Shortenin' Bread" with its upbeat words and melody into something off-tune and a bit sinister, the lyric changing to "Somewhere in the deer herd the Unicorn is waking / Licking off its wounds and lifting its head." In the song "Fairy Tale" he twists together numerous famous stories in a bizarre way, with the usual fairy tale ending turned here into a moment of loss and despair.

The songs on the whole are wildly imagistic, confounding if intellectually interesting, evocative even if elusive at the level of intentional meaning. In "Love Will Live Forever," Minowa sings in one verse that the "you" is made of river driftwood, made of water vapor in a second, only to say that underneath your skin are two feathered wings. He concludes his lyric by saying you change like a volcano and your body is just a moment. In "Moon's Thoughts," the narrator says that his insides fell out, and he was surprised at what he saw: "A little boy with dolphin fins, a bucket of Legos and gin / An atomic bomb, the Dali Lama." At times, this bombardment of images leads toward overtly religious references, as in "Moon's Thoughts" when Minowa follows the line "We are Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus Christ," with "But if we want to fly, we've got to leave our shit on the ground / Or is that too much to sacrifice." Likewise, in "It," the images build toward a questioning of and anger about faith and religion. On this album he works out his grieving before our ears.

When Kaidin was alive, Minowa had discovered while playing music in his basement studio that Kaidin was drawn to the microphone. Minowa had recorded his toddler son talking and singing, and during his time of acute grieving he would play the recordings he had made of Kaidin and feel his son's presence. "I would just sit here and play him," he says, "for days and nights." Some of *They Live on the Sun's* strongest songs, more shapely in lyric and music—and the ones where he seems not to be simply

venting but processing his grieving—occur near the end of the album when Minowa splices Kaidin into the song. In "Took You for Granted," for example, the arrangement features acoustic guitar, a simple drumbeat, a cello line, and Kaidin talking, which Minowa inserts into the verse breaks. He sings, "I could see all the Universe inside you / You had eyes made of candles / And your body was a medicine bag / That all the world could heal from." He took his son for granted, he says, and in the middle of the song he all but breaks down, crying "I miss you" again and again. But near the end, the cello comes in making the song prettier, and Kaidin is heard singing, and Minowa says, "you were singing" and sounds happy.

In the months after Kaidin's death, having given up on "any kind of God altogether," Minowa delved deep into science and quantum physics, hoping that hard science and rationality might serve him as an antidote to philosophy, religion, or psychology—or even just to feeling too much. "I found magic," he says about his science studies at the time, "in the idea that all living things are made of carbon. There's only one place in the universe that carbon is made, and that is in the belly of a star. So we're all born of a sun, and we are all made of a sun, and our lives are sustained by what the sun feeds us. Our current Sun is in its midlife, but in five billion years, it will begin to expand into a red giant. It will actually swallow the entire Earth and eventually collapse back into itself and become a very dense and small object. So everything on this planet will be back in the belly of the sun. Point being, my philosophy adhered very close to astronomical physics, and I felt comfort in thinking about how Kaidin and I (and all my other loved ones) would be in one place together again." When such big ideas are constructed into art, they can lead eventually to new understanding, as in the song "Your Love Will Live Forever," which Minowa has described as the album's

big breakthrough, focusing as it does on "the idea encapsulated in the first law of thermodynamics, which states that energy created cannot be destroyed. So all the love Kaidin had and all of the energy of his every moment continues to resonate in the universe in some way."

Minowa is very smart and well read, and his intellectual nature often serves him well, but at this point in his life rational, intellectual thinking could serve him only temporarily and not deeply. Perhaps he felt comfort in believing that he and all his loved ones would be together, but since that event will take place in billions of years, the comfort is mostly metaphorical. That doesn't mean the comfort isn't occasionally real, but the song that expresses the album's tone and themes most vividly comes not from intellectual explorations in science but from personal grappling with unimaginable heartbreak. In the deeply moving "Sleeping Days, P. II," Minowa sings the following lyric in a deeply vulnerable and often cracking voice over his solo piano, which seems slightly out of tune:

I hope you awoke to fireworks in the arms of a grass-stained wizard.
Because I can't bear to think that you are gone.
And somewhere in my belly my little boy is running,
With unicorns and Elmo and one of Daddy's songs.

Good morning, Baby. Why are you still sleeping?
You're a plastic boy on a plastic bed. Why didn't they take me instead?
And I like to think you're sleeping in a safe little bluebird's nest.
And I'll protect your memories with the dragons in my chest.

> **Good night, Baby. Daddy's going crazy.**
> **I'm choking on my sleeping pills, and hanging from a window sill.**
> **And I like to think you're dressed up in the beads that Momma made.**
> **Will you be there waiting when they take my skin away?**
>
> **I'm awake for sleeping days. I'm awake for sleeping days.**

When Minowa sings "Good morning, Baby. Why are you still sleeping?" we recognize, if we know his story, an autobiographical moment of horror, his discovery of his dead son. The song, alternating between moments of artistry and moments of desperation, is an outburst of sorrow coming from deep depression.

They Live on the Sun was obviously not made for commercial radio, which is dominated by the connections and money of the big labels, who pay to have their music on commercial radio stations. Commercial radio works something like this: big-budget labels, shrunk by 2003 through mergers and consolidations to the "Big 5" (EMI, Sony Music, BMG Music, Warner Music Group, and Universal Music Group), pay "independent music producers" to get airtime for their label's artists on radio stations owned by only a few corporations, Clear Channel being the largest. On those stations disc jockeys are told what to play, because commercial radio's goal is to create narrow demographics to help advertisers know to whom they are pitching their wares. A very small sample of music being made is ever played on commercial stations, so if you're an obscure band on an unknown label, you don't even bother trying to play that game.

With only a tiny promotional budget, Minowa hired the Planetary Group, a boutique artist development firm, founded by Chris Davis and Adam Lewis, that is willing to create specific radio campaigns for a new band. *They Live on the Sun* went out to nearly four hundred college radio stations. "We did college radio for Cloud Cult," recalls Lewis. "And the band just really struck a chord from day one when we sent it out. The songs were incredibly strong." The role of college radio stations for bands with little money cannot be overestimated. For an unknown band, time and effort can replace money as the sole reason for getting played. After the initial mailing went out from the Planetary Group with the CD and promotional materials, Minowa made numerous calls to music directors at the college stations, first, to ask if they had received the CD, and then, in a follow-up call, whether they had listened to it and were adding the album to their station's playlist.

These calls to music directors were necessary. Getting the CD added to a station's collection means that the individual deejays will listen and decide if they want to spin the record. At that point, the music itself, not the business of the music industry, becomes crucial, because if the deejays like the album and play it, and listeners call in and request songs, the album will get spins, which the station records. And each station, each week, sends its top thirty songs to the *College Music Journal,* commonly called *CMJ.*

The subheading for *CMJ* is "New Music First," and as a music events/publishing company, *CMJ* is greatly influential. They host the CMJ Music Marathon every fall in New York, which showcases new bands on the rise, and their website is filled with reviews, interviews, and announcements of tours. But perhaps their most important task is gathering, tabulating, and then reporting what songs are actually being played on college and noncommercial radio—*CMJ* publishes the "Top 200" charts for

each week. If a band is slowly building a fan base among young people, that rise will be noticed on the *CMJ* charts.

College radio stations, of course, don't play music only by obscure bands or minor labels. College radio helped break the careers of R.E.M. and U2 in the 1980s, when they were signed by major labels but weren't getting the push to land them consistently on commercial radio. And undoubtedly college students frequently play Dylan or the Beatles, as well as jazz, songs from musicals, and the like. But they do attempt to play the music that the industry has disregarded. Carleton College, in Minnesota, has a station that exemplifies this position. KRLX always makes the top ten lists of college radio stations, and two of their music directors, Karl Snyder and Keagon Voyce, say that they "strive to be the antithesis of commercial radio." Not only does every CD that comes to them get heard, but a staff member writes several sentences about the album, recommends a few songs to play, and then uploads the music to the station's computer. The student deejays, no matter the theme or musical genres of their show, have to play at least one song off the week's "new" list for every hour they're on the air. It's possible that for some of these shows only a dozen or so people may be listening, but at least someone is hearing the band's music, and if this is happening in college stations across the country, a fan base can be built slowly if people like what they are hearing.

With Minowa acting as his own obsessive publicist, asking college radio station music directors to take note of his album, pushing the label's environmental principles, *They Live on the Sun* charted on *CMJ*'s Top 200 list. In the documentary *No One Said It Would Be Easy,* Minowa tells the story of getting a phone call from the music radio director at an Alaskan university, who asked him if he was sitting down. When Minowa asked why, the director said, "because your album just went to number one on our sta-

tion." Other stations called: the album had gone to number two in Denver, and number one at Radio K, the station of the University of Minnesota.

What were these college students hearing and then responding to? Why were they playing an album difficult to listen to by a band they had never heard of? There's no radio tracking of particular songs, as there is with commercial radio and *Billboard* charts, and so it's not known which songs were getting played. But a possible answer emerges from comments by Ian Anderson, who founded the indie label Afternoon Records when he was eighteen. Head of the Minneapolis band Aneuretical, Anderson recalls hearing *They Live on the Sun* and reading about Minowa's personal life: "I thought, here's the real emo. The music being peddled then as emo where someone's sad because their girlfriend split and they can't find a job, that just seemed trivial compared to what we were hearing from Cloud Cult."

If the college stations were playing his record, someone was listening, which, Minowa says, made him happy to know. But the most important listener, it turned out, was Minowa himself. "I remember getting in the car one day," he says, "and hearing a song from the album on the radio for the first time. . . . It was like an extreme reality of being in this horrible dark space, and working through all this grieving, and all of a sudden hearing a song on the radio with Kaidin's voice in it. And I realized that he's going up through the radio waves right now." And then came the big realization: "Every moment that we lived together was energy and light that goes through the universe. . . . His going through the radio waves and being all over out there made it all sink in, made me feel that I wanted him all over the universe, I wanted him alive everywhere. . . . It was a way of bringing him back to life in the real world. I knew he was alive here in the studio, because I was with him all the time, could have his spirit come and be with

me in this space, but out there I couldn't, and then all of a sudden I could, like he's there!"

After Kaidin's death, Minowa did not follow Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's "stage-model" formulation of how people move through profound loss, from denial to acceptance along a path of anger, depression, panic, guilt, and worry. Nor, of course, did Minowa follow a "medical model" of mourning, which sees grief as a group of symptoms that at some point disappears, aided, perhaps, by antidepressants or an exercise program. Listening to *They Live on the Sun,* many people, including therapists would likely believe that Minowa was mired in nonacceptance of death. His statements about Kaidin being present in the studio with him and Kaidin being alive going through the airways would suggest to many that he was simply in deep denial. But perhaps not.

At this point in his life, rethinking all his philosophies and beliefs, oftentimes feeling depressed and sometimes near self-admitted insanity, Minowa began a long search that would lead him eventually to believe that there's a material world and a spirit world that are permeable. What we call a human death is a passing into another realm. Perhaps something extraordinary has to happen for a person to see or even sense the spirit world, but that is no reason to deny its existence, Minowa came to believe. He has said that during this time he was feeling strongly that he didn't need an excuse to say there's an afterlife, not an afterlife such as the Islamic paradise or the Christian heaven but rather one right here, on earth. "I just refused," he said, "to accept the fact that I would never be with him [Kaidin] again."

Because of his belief that through music Kaidin could be out there in the world, Minowa came to feel the concert experience as something very spiritual: "I felt like I could bring him back and be with him and that I could share that sort of energy with the audience, too." Minowa's acute stage fright, with him

for ten years no matter what band he had been in, was suddenly lessened. He wanted now to play his music live in order to bring Kaidin's spirit back. Minowa got Dan Greenwood and Sarah Young together, and they rehearsed and played a few gigs. *They Live on the Sun* is an exceptionally layered album, full of ambient noise, multiple odd instruments, and strange shifts in time and key—a trio of guitar, cello, and drums wasn't going to capture the album's sound. But in a sense, the success or failure of those concerts was immaterial. Minowa had survived, and he had a band. Cloud Cult as we now know it had begun.

The psychoanalyst John Bowlby, who wrote a monumental study of attachment, separation, and loss, has insights into the mourning process that are useful to understand Minowa's grieving and what happened to him after making *They Live on the Sun.* After an initial reaction to the loss, Bowlby says, a person usually undergoes a phase when numbness is mixed with moments of outburst and anger, which then often turns into a yearning and searching for the lost person. The next phase, Bowlby suggests in *Loss: Sadness and Depression,* is a period of despair that comes from the griever's sense that the present and future life has become unscripted. Moving to eventual acceptance of the loss will come only with a reimagining of one's role and life, and, indeed, Minowa reconsidered his life because of the album—he became the songwriter, singer, and front man for an indie rock band, which he wanted to keep going rather than to break up.

Minowa showed his aspirations by building a website for Cloud Cult specifically, separate from Earthology, one that would focus on the band's activities (minimal as they were). The website went public on December 13, 2003, and included a web store. Using the strategies he had devised earlier for building environmental advocacy campaigns online, Minowa tried to make the Cloud Cult website personal and interactive. He took an open

source OS Commerce system and tailored it to his needs, which included releasing MP3 downloads that most bands were telling their fans to go to iTunes for. "The blessing of PHP programming," he recalls, "was that I could create a system where there could be a specific product that would have a specific e-mail response upon purchase, and in that e-mail response, I could create a link to a zip file, and let the web server take care of the rest. And we would keep 100 percent of profits. My biggest problem was server load problems, just because most servers at that time couldn't handle a flow of people coming to download something."

In January 2004, six months after the release of *They Live on the Sun,* Minowa put out a new Cloud Cult album, *Aurora Borealis.* When he hadn't been phoning college radio station managers, he was in his studio writing and recording new songs, trying still to grapple with the meanings of Kaidin's death and his own purposes. The new songs begin to point toward a way through the disabling moments of grieving, but the states of being that Minowa explores are no less transitory. On many of the songs, the "I" is divided or alone, still trying to understand the relation between self and others, self and the world. In the opening song, "Breakfast with My Shadow," Minowa's discussion with his shadow self, an alter ego, leads to an important question: "Can you fall in love with the things you only know / The things you may never touch?" The speaker is less interested in providing answers than asking questions, and he concludes with a second important question, one coming from a dinner conversation with his shadow: "If I truly believe that things can change / Will I wake up to something different?" Philosophers have argued for centuries about the role of the mind in shaping one's reality, and anyone deeply grieving has at some moment wished to assert his or

her will and say “enough.” But if the mind does have some shaping role so that we aren’t passive victims of our circumstances, people mourning know how a hard-won version of reality can easily come undone.

“Breakfast with My Shadow” ends with Minowa asking, “will I wake up to something different?” and the next song, “Alone at a Party in a Ghost Town,” suggests that he won’t. In a repeated refrain, he says that he’s alone at a party in a ghost town, a striking image of someone grieving, particularly because he also sings that “we will get, we will get / what we’re deserving.” The line could mean that the future holds promise, but in the context of this song where the speaker is alone and alienated, he seems to have gotten what he was deserving, and it isn’t good. As an environmental scientist, Minowa intellectually understands life and death in relation to an ecosystem’s sustainability, understands that *Homo sapiens* is just one species among many, and so he can write the rather strange line, “There is hope in the worms and the maggots / ’Cause they’re breaking it down.” But the song’s very title and his near-desperate singing, which sounds close to wailing, suggest his raw emotions; worms and maggots contributing to the cycle of life isn’t going to be emotionally helpful to the question he sings several times, “Are you there, are you there, anybody?” The song is very fast—hyperkinetic, even—with its whoops and its slamming fuzzed-out guitar that sounds more like Superchunk than Cloud Cult.

Aurora Borealis is fueled by Minowa’s grieving over his separation from Connie as well as the death of his son. “You won’t find you / Unless you lose your mind / And you let go of all the things you cling to,” Minowa sings in “All Together Alone,” a song full of desperate assertions countered by contradictions, an assessment that fits much of the record in general. He asks three times, “Have we gone wrong? Or are we growing?” and he vacil-

lates between being “crushed by all this madness” and “exploding from this beauty.” Writing in “Chandeliers” that “love scares me,” he gives at least a partial reason why: “I’m always dumbing up the smart things / And smarting up the dumb things / And messing up the good things.” The sound here is different than the sound of the angry and alienated songs. “Chandeliers” is slower, with more guitar and less synthesizer. And in this song he reaches for images that contrast sharply with being alone in a ghost town. “Did you see the stars last night?” he asks, and then he calls the stars “Punctuation for a perfect poem.” In the next stanza, echoing the same melody, he asks “Did you see God last night?”

Minowa is deeply spiritual, a religious person who belongs to no church but questions and seeks understandings of the world as well as human life in relation to all this world. God in this song is both those stars shining in the night sky and “an eighty-year-old on a red tricycle.” For Minowa, God is in all things and in the mysteries of our existence. The year he was writing these songs, he recalls in the documentary *No One Said It Would Be Easy,* “there was so much solar activity that almost every night I’d go outside there would be aurora borealis. It just looked like these huge dancing spirits, and I was feeling more and more like I was in touch with Kaidin’s energy.” While Minowa always felt comfort on his farm in growing things that rooted him to earth, living there also pointed him toward the nighttime sky and cosmic philosophizing. “You look up at the stars every night, the aurora borealis, and you know, it’s kind of cliché,” he says, “but you understand that there’s a huge massive unraveling cosmos out there, and that we’re tumbling along inside of it. . . . When I write music, I stare off at the stars, and wait, and what often comes out of that process are the big questions: Why do we die? And what should I do on any given day? And why did I get to wake up this morning?”

The songs “Northern Lights” and “The Sparks and Spaces between Your Cells” serve less as songs—with a verse and chorus—than they do as wordless constructs of sound that might accompany our observations of nature, whether the aurora borealis in a night sky or the ocean floor in a deep-sea dive. “Northern Lights” has eerie noises and Kaidin talking in the background. “The Sparks and Spaces between Your Cells,” which sounds like something the composer Brian Eno might have written, is full of ambient sounds, some that come from a synthesizer but others that might be short samples of noise found on a computer. The sounds draw you in, as if you’re shrinking, diving into your skin, exploring the unseen and unknowable. Minowa doesn’t end the album by leaving us with such ambient sounds—he’s a believer also in the power of words—but he does tie together in an artful way these songs to the others on the album when in “Lights inside My Head” Minowa follows the observation that he’s been seeing lights inside his head with the declaration “I’m not broken.” The arc of the album moves from depression to a less alienated emotional state, and he comes to this different place via these ambient nature songs. Hell is the fear of pain, he sings, and heaven is the faith that things will be OK, and at album’s close he may be only reaching out for, rather than having, that faith. But he is reaching, nevertheless, and in one of the album’s tenderest moments, he sings, “will you love me through these changes?” Having suffered one enormous loss, the death of his son, he doesn’t want a second, the end of his marriage and of life as he has known it.

In *Aurora Borealis* Minowa begins to shape his strong emotions more artistically, rather than just venting them, and we see this in part in a song such as “Princess Bride,” where over his own music he splices dialogue samples from the movie. The samples are some of the most famous lines in the movie, and Minowa is clearly having fun when he sings background harmo-

nies to "Mawwage is what bwings us togever today" and weaves that with "Throw down your arms, I mean it," all against a driving drumbeat and a beautiful cello line. In the clever song "State of the Union," he rearranges bits of dialogue from speeches by President George W. Bush. "Mr. Speaker," the song's lyric begins, "members of Congress, and fellow citizens. Every year by law and by custom we meet here to threaten the world. The American flag stands for corporate scandals, recessions . . ." When Minowa splices together Bush saying, "our first goal is to show utter contempt for the environment," he follows with a loud outburst of applause, just as approximately half of those attending do with every utterance in any president's State of the Union speech. With a strange set of background melodies and ambient noises and off-rhythm beats, Minowa expresses his anger about environmental and political matters in the United States. But it's not anger or sorrow about what has happened in his life. Neither "Princess Bride" nor "State of the Union" has the usual "I" speaking about his emotions or situation.

Just as the satirical songs built of lyrical samples are one measure of change from *They Live on the Sun* to *Aurora Borealis,* so is Minowa's inclusion of more conventional pop songs about love and dreams. The speaker in "As Long As You're Happy" says to the girl he has a crush on, "I had wanted to take you to prom / In my ice cream truck." But if she doesn't remember him, or if he hasn't meant much to her, that will be OK, "As long as you're happy." The song's pop structure is accented by a prominent cello part, a descending and ascending bass line that promotes a cheery vibe, and a driving rhythm guitar. The most beautiful song on *Aurora Borealis* is also the most hopeful. The lyric and sound of "I Guess This Dream Is for Me" are so stripped-down that the singer is fully revealed without any of the coverings that anger or loudness or clever lyrics can bring:

Sometimes you've just got to fall, so you can see the bottom,
Or you'll never know what's holding you up.
And this life feels like a dream to me, it's beautiful and it's twisted,
But for right now, I don't want to wake up.
So I guess this dream is for me.

I'd tell you the truth, but my angle's always changing.
I'd point the right way, but I don't think there's any such thing.
I like to think that it really doesn't matter
Where you're going or where you're from.
The truth is always moving, and it's always where you're standing,
We may disagree but no one's wrong.
So I guess this dream is for me.

Minowa's tender vocals are accompanied by his acoustic guitar played softly: no distortions, ambient sounds, drums, or amplified instruments. Midway through, Sarah Young's cello comes in sweetly, adding harmony to the vocal melody, providing counterpoint to the guitar picking. The listener of this song can only surmise about what has helped Minowa—perhaps simply the passage of time. But perhaps his music and songwriting helped.

In *Trauma and Mastery in Life and Art,* Gilbert J. Rose discusses numerous connections between grieving and artistic processes. Art counteracts denial, he writes, because mastery of past trauma comes from continuing attempts of the imagination to split off some parts of the past while elaborating on and reintegrating others. Creative work, Rose says, builds up and melts down, again and again, oscillating between imagination and reality, making something that takes on its own reality. Writing song

after song about his losses and emotions, disguised or direct, Minowa was doing psychological work that could help him reformulate his own life's story.

A measure of the change from one album to the next comes in a comparison of the earlier "Sleeping Days, P. II," to the new album's "Beautiful Boy," songs that are directly about Minowa's intense grieving over Kaidin's passing. Like the earlier song, "Beautiful Boy" features shimmering piano chords and a simple melody underlying Minowa's shaky, vulnerable voice. But whereas Minowa in "Sleeping Days, P. II" seems near-suicidal and the song feels like a call for help, "Beautiful Boy" shows sadness, not depression, and shows not separation and alienation but hope for eventual union.

The version of the song on *Aurora Borealis* is a live performance on Radio K, the University of Minnesota public radio station. Because radio waves penetrate very deeply into space, Minowa felt that the performance was like having the most powerful megaphone in his hands through which he could talk to Kaidin. "I was living alone at the farm then," he recalls, "and I just played recordings of him constantly in the background and wrote this song to him. I stayed up all night just doing it over and over, and then I hit the radio station. When they gave me the microphone and piano, I had a cassette player next to me with a tape of him talking on it, and I put it on and instantly felt like the radio tower was a direct bridge between me and him, and I sang in a way I never had before, and I honestly 100 percent felt like I had him back with me. It was a very clear indicator that if I could do that more frequently, including on stage, I could get in direct contact with him. So that album ended with me having a new 'bridge' to the afterlife that I was very excited about."

The song begins with Kaidin talking and saying "Daddy," and then the piano enters, followed by Minowa singing, "I'm climbing to the sun on a cobweb made of tinkertoys." Minowa

asks three times in the first chorus, “Where did you go?” as he makes his climb. In the next verse, halfway there, he sings, “There are ghosts all around me / And I see your face in the sun.” By the last verse, the speaker has reached the sun, saying to Kaidin, “you are beautiful” and “I’m so tired.” The song closes with Minowa singing again, three times, “Where did you go?” before closing with the line, “Beautiful, beautiful boy.”

Many people are uncomfortable with strong emotions expressed directly, and for listeners who know the story, “Beautiful Boy” might be difficult to hear. This singer/writer simply loved too deeply, and while we’re used to pop music describing grand loves that end between two teenagers or two adults, hearing love of a parent for a child that literally, not figuratively, ends in death is heartbreaking. But it’s not like listening to a singer who you suspect is descending into drug addiction or madness. This is like listening to someone moving past our common cultural ways of understanding the world. In his late-eighteenth-century poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* William Blake wrote, in lines that caught the attention of one Los Angeles band in the 1960s: “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.” Blake and many artists since have emphasized the human imagination’s transformative power, which arises when something powerful happens that shifts the person away from society’s desires for conformity and emphasis on the material. Such trial or suffering leads the mind and the soul—the creative imagination—to an angle unseen by the conformist or the materialist. The art that springs from this creative imagination then teaches other humans how to live intensely, how to feel deeply, how to understand anew.

As with *They Live on the Sun,* Minowa decided to promote *Aurora Borealis* with college radio stations, and it charted even better. College deejays liked “Princess Bride” and “State of the

Union," as well as the more conventional songs. Adam Lewis from the Planetary Group, who was handling promotion, says that Cloud Cult's success has been due in part to its steady stream of releases: "they were able to come back in short order with more great music." Recognition slowly began to roll in. A few music bloggers plugged the album on their sites. The international online magazine of cultural criticism *PopMatters* favorably reviewed the album. The Minnesota Music Awards nominated Cloud Cult (along with Prince and Paul Westerberg) as one of three "Artists of the Year." And Seattle's prestigious independent radio station KEXP and their influential deejay John Richards began promoting the band.

KEXP deejays choose their own music and aren't beholden to major labels; the station has its own live studio and can bring in any touring band they admire; they promote bands on their Internet site and publicize local concerts; in 2000 they were the first station to offer audio on the Internet 24/7. "KEXP has a major impact on bands and their success," Richards says. "We see it all the time. Recently, bands we discovered or championed early have gone on to popularity such as Of Monsters and Men, the Lumineers, and Alabama Shakes . . . and in the past we have helped break bands like Vampire Weekend, The National, M83, and Sigur Ros. Going way back we were the first ever to play Nirvana. A station like ours not only takes chances, but it also has credibility as a tastemaker." Because the station is noncommercial, it reports to, and therefore also has influence on, the *CMJ* music charts.

Richards says that he was first simply attracted to Cloud Cult's "amazing music" and then after to the compelling personal story. Asked about his part in making Cloud Cult known in Seattle, Richards replied that "my role was to play them early and often. Introduce them to a worldwide audience and get behind the songs. We also booked them for live sessions and KEXP events

early to get people to see what a great band live they were. We continue to champion the band in these ways." Adrian Young, Cloud Cult's longtime manager, says that the band was probably more popular in Seattle early on than it was even in Minneapolis, and this was due largely to KEXP. Minowa recalls Seattle as one of the few cities in the early days where there was a consistent, supportive fan base: "In fact, I remember doing 'Transistor Radio' there live for the first time [in 2005], and we were blown away that this packed venue was totally and completely quiet throughout the entire song. Most other venues on that tour, as soon as you started performing something quiet, like that song, people in the bar would see it as a good time to resume their conversations, so you often could barely hear yourself play."

With *Aurora Borealis* Minowa decided to expand the live show and make it bigger than the unamplified three-piece that he had tried in support of *They Live on the Sun,* so he brought in Mara Stemm on bass. He also wanted to involve the audience in various ways, and he invited dancers and videographers to be on stage during songs, though that didn't work out. Having a painter on stage met with more success, developing eventually into a Cloud Cult staple—Connie painted for a concert in Duluth, and Scott West for some regional concerts. With the growing local excitement about the band, Minowa decided to have Cloud Cult do its first national tour, beginning in Texas and then moving through the Southeast.

The impetus to head south came from radio charting and the desire to perform at the South by Southwest (SXSW) music festival in Austin, Texas, which by 2004 had become the place for unknown bands to be discovered by the national press, by influential bloggers, or even by A&R reps from labels. But when Cloud Cult was nearing Austin, they discovered that their SXSW slot wasn't advertised in the program and was a makeshift setup

under a bridge. Unhappy about such a situation, they changed course when a festival organizer who was a fan of the song “State of the Union” asked Cloud Cult to play at a protest planned at President Bush’s ranch in Crawford. On March 20, Cloud Cult performed with black helicopters flying overhead and was followed on stage—which was really just a field—by Ralph Nader. Minowa remembers the band feeling way out of their league.

After the protest, Cloud Cult headed to New Orleans, through Mississippi, to Atlanta, and then north from there. The tour’s schedule was set largely based on radio charting. *Aurora Borealis* had gone to number one on college radio in Athens, Georgia, and was in the top five in Atlanta and Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Band members believed that if they were getting good college radio play, they would have a good turnout, which turned out not to be the case. “You know,” Minowa recalls, laughing now, “nobody came to the shows.”

A band without a radio hit has to pay its dues, just get out there and be heard, even if by few people. The social media that indie bands now use to get attention was just beginning to emerge: in 2003 Myspace was launched, but Cloud Cult didn’t yet have a site; YouTube was still a year away; Facebook wouldn’t be available for everyone until 2006. All Cloud Cult hoped for on this tour was to have someone attend the concerts, and a night when they sold a couple of CDs helped pay for some gas or food. Dan Greenwood remembers playing in New Orleans “in front of nobody except for my two friends, Adam and Jackson.”

If you’re trying to make money or become known, such touring is frustrating at best. But Sarah Young believes that although it was disappointing that so few people saw the band perform, the band members were “really trying to get the music to do something.” Greenwood actually remembers it as a blast, because there were no expectations. “It was like we were touring

for touring's sake," he says, "not out to prove anything, just out to share our music. I remember playing in Hattiesburg in front of ten people, and it was awesome. You can meet people. You can talk to people, like it was a personal thing." A band with little money needs help, and Cloud Cult often found such help along the road, with people offering to let them sleep on couches or providing a meal. One of the ten people who attended the Hattiesburg concert was Brigette Hutchison, who later contacted them and volunteered to be the merchandise person for the Happy Hippo tour. And on this tour, and ones to come, Cloud Cult had the willing hands of Adrian Young, Sarah's husband.

Adrian began dating Sarah in 2003, and when he found out that she played cello in an indie rock band, he was worried because he was afraid he wouldn't like its music. Adrian exemplifies Minnesota Nice in its best sense, and so perhaps it's a surprise that he could become a successful manager in what is usually thought of as a cutthroat business. Before meeting Sarah, he had no experience with bands or as a manager. He began just by helping with mailings, and helping get CDs ready to sell at shows, and working the merchandise table. "I kept helping out because of Sarah and because it was fun and I believed in the music. And then I helped more, and at some point, right before *The Meaning of 8* came out, I became officially the band's manager, which they hadn't had before." Like others then and to follow, Young saw something in Cloud Cult that went beyond entertainment. Asked why he was willing to put so much time, energy, and money into helping Cloud Cult be successful, he mentions the band's principles: "Cloud Cult had a purpose, dealing with grief and loss, and also getting bands and people to lead a more sustainable lifestyle. I often didn't feel proud about the company I was working for, who gave me a paycheck, but I could feel great about Cloud Cult."

Few people came to the shows, so the live gate didn't pay the bills, but Minowa did learn more about how songs that he wrote for an album could or could not be played in concert. "I had two different recording styles going on from *Aurora Borealis* to *The Meaning of 8,*" he says. "Some of the early songs are just me in the studio doing as much layering as I want to, without any intention of ever doing the song live, and some of the songs are performed and recorded as a four-piece. So during this stage in the live shows, there were a limited number of songs from the albums that we could do live. I was doing guitar and keyboard at the time, so I did a lot of triggering samples to try to bring some of the more electronic elements to the palette on stage, but many of the Cloud Cult songs have so many tracks going at the same time, that even triggering samples here and there didn't fill that electronic space. The overall live show was much more restricted back then, and I often felt like we were performing covers of Cloud Cult songs just because the live product sounded so different from the albums. Having said that, the band was all very talented and dedicated, and we did our best to make things happen on our extremely limited budget."

The opening scenes of John Burgess's Cloud Cult documentary, *No One Said It Would Be Easy,* show the Minowas on their small organic farm, harvesting vegetables. The farm, Minowa says, is a sanctuary where "all the ideas are born, where all the peace comes from, and where we can center ourselves." And it's where he returned after his *Aurora Borealis* tour to write more songs, to record them in his studio, to try to make ends meet with various part-time jobs. Although the tour was discouraging because it demonstrated that Cloud Cult's reputation didn't extend outside the upper Midwest, the tour did not refute the gains that the band had made. Cloud Cult would need to maintain momentum by releasing a new album and touring again.

Fans Write

What I love about Cloud Cult's music is how honest it is. Innocent, bizarre, beautiful, and so childlike. It makes me wish I didn't have to grow up, but shows me that adulthood can be bizarre and beautiful, too. It tells me that I'm not the only one who feels scared and small and alone, who wants to feel safe.

—Justin MacDonald, 16, Newtown Square, Pennsylvania

I met my best friend at the age of two in our preschool classroom, and from that moment onward she was the only person who truly understood me. We grew up more like sisters than friends, our close families celebrating everything together from holidays to our birthdays, which were less than a week apart. And then, in the summer before we were to turn twenty-two, she took her own life.

I was well aware that she had been dealing with manic depression and bipolar disorder for years, but the news of her death and how it happened literally sent me falling to my knees in shock and agony. In the days and weeks and months that followed, my life became an all-consuming flurry of misplaced anger, gut wrenching pain, and endless questions with impossible answers. I asked myself over and over what I could have done differently, what I could have done to save her. I lost myself in grieving and became isolated from everything but the hurt that was what I had instead of her.

During one particularly emotional evening, I went for a drive to try and clear my head. I put my music on shuffle and tried to think about the road, the moon. At some point, my thoughts quieted just long enough for me to hear the words to a song that until then I had barely noticed was playing. I didn't know the song, but it seemed to know me, and suddenly I found myself driving with a bittersweet flood of tears streaming down my face. It was the first time I had felt true understanding for what I lost. It was as though the band, who I would soon learn was Cloud Cult, had somehow found me rather than the other way around.

I bought every other Cloud Cult CD and played them non-stop. I listened, I sang along, I cried, and somewhere along the way I began to heal. Spending time absorbing the lyrics and the messages within them became an incredibly effective form of therapy. It helped me to accept the fact that I will never understand why things happened the way that they did, and to decide that it is important to continue living my own life anyway. It helped me realize that there is energy in everyone, energy that can never be destroyed, and therefore parts of my best friend will always be here even if her physical body isn't. It taught me that pain can be used to create beautiful things that may then find others and help pull them from their own turmoil.

Now, when asked why Cloud Cult is my favorite band, my answer is simple: They helped me understand that the death of my best friend didn't have to kill me, too; and though I may never be fully healed, that's okay. I still have energy in me.

—Stacy Shearer, 26, Los Angeles, California

I tend to get a little tongue-tied in trying to describe how and why I love Cloud Cult so deeply. It might have something to do with the fact that Cloud Cult's music doesn't make me think, it makes

me feel. Listening to them is not an intellectual experience, it's an emotional and spiritual one.

I feel like we (humans) often talk above or beneath or around what really is asking to be talked about. We're obsessed with trivialities, likes/dislikes, drowning in opinions, and it all seems to be a massive distraction from what's really going on, namely: Why are we alive? How best to use our time here? Is there a God? How are we to live knowing we're going to die? Why do we suffer? etc. Cloud Cult marches right up into the face of these questions with an unblinking courage that is bracing. The canvas they're painting on (an appropriate metaphor if you've seen them play live) is cosmically huge.

We've done exhaustive research into the misery of the world and what wretched creatures we human beings are, but far less research into the no-less-greater truth of how wonderful, resilient, kind, and loving we can be. Or could be, given a reorientation toward the world and ourselves. Cloud Cult's music is aspirational, in the best sense of the word, without ever being moralizing, fussy, or finger-pointing. Each song, in its own way, functions as a kind of optimist's anthem. And Craig's optimism can be trusted because it has been hard-won.

Listening to Cloud Cult continues to inspire me: the band has set a tone for the kind of art I wish to create. They're a carbon-neutral band in a carbon-saturated world, and a heart-centered band in a heartbroken world. I love them dearly and I'm intensely grateful that Cloud Cult exists.

—Josh Radnor, 38, Los Angeles, California

To me, Cloud Cult embodies empowerment, the interconnectedness of life, and the beauty and complexity of love. I don't consider myself very religious, but every time I've seen the band live,

the experience has been transcendent and made me think about how miniscule and seemingly insignificant we are on this earth, and yet how that makes our existence that much more unique and powerful because we are all we have.

—Alicia Hlebain, 22, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Like Craig and Connie, my wife and I have also suffered through the loss of a child and have been to the brink of what should have been the end of us as a couple. But also like those two, we are somehow stronger today than we were then. We also have since had another beautiful, healthy little boy. Through it all Cloud Cult has been my musical inspiration and foundation. They have gotten me through some very rough storms and have always had that "lighthouse" effect for me. It was quite literally love at first "sound" the first time I heard them.

They are the one band that can run the entire gamut of emotions for me. I can laugh, cry, get anxious, get relief, feel hopeless or feel grateful. The music is not always happy and positive, but as anyone who has started the journey—neither is life. Cloud Cult is also the only band that is universally accepted in my house. My twenty-year-old son, my ten-year-old son, and my wife all love them too. (As will the two-year-old, eventually.) A live Cloud Cult show is like church for me, or at least it is what church ought to be, spiritually and emotionally uplifting. So much so, that my ten-year-old son can say that his very *first* concert was Cloud Cult at Orchestra Hall in 2011. We should all be so lucky.

—Jeff Morin, 39, St. Paul, Minnesota

What does Cloud Cult's music mean to me? Love. Their music is the pure, unadulterated outpouring of love. My entire life I have had trouble figuring out what love was and what it felt like. When I first heard Cloud Cult's music, I was captivated. At long last I was able to define love. Not in words, but in feelings and sounds. All of their songs, in one way or another, feed on this concept of love. The sad songs dealing with loss convey to me the feelings of a heart shattered and the way we cope. The happy songs convey completeness, wonderment, and exaltation. I have no favorite song. They are all a part of a whole and cannot be separated without destroying the delicate equilibrium the band has in their music. Cloud Cult brings me tears of joy and tears of sorrow. This music has changed my life and, more importantly, my soul.

—Metgyre Senzig, 28, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

As I skeptically pushed the CD my sister gave me into my truck's CD player, everything before me suddenly melted away. Up until that point, I was a wishy-washy eighth-grader with an undefined music taste. My music style blended perfectly with the times. But as "No One Said It Would Be Easy" streamed into my ears, the melodies—so perfectly conducted—went straight to my soul. I had never heard music so beautifully clear and yet so courageously raw. It shattered my philosophy of listening to "popular" music. There was a depth like I had never felt before in music.

As the months went by and my love for this unique band grew, they became my standard for music. If music lacked the lyrical depth and musical magnificence of Cloud Cult, then I threw it out. To this day I have never felt so in tune with a band and what they stand for than I am with Cloud Cult.

—Laura Baker, 21, Tyler, Texas

Cloud Cult, to me, has been a savior. Several years ago I went through a horrible depression, and they helped me get out of it. I listened to their lyrics, wrote them down on little note cards, and taped them to the walls all over my apartment. I read them daily as affirmations that life is good and that life is what you make it. I even wrote a thank-you letter to them for all they had unknowingly done for me, and I got a kind and thoughtful response back.

The positive energy and love that is within every note of their music cuts to my core and makes me a better person. You cannot listen to them without feeling some sort of emotion, usually happiness and joy. You get a sense that no matter what is happening in your life, everything will be okay.

When I listen now, I am reminded to be more loving, to be more patient, to be a better friend, daughter, sibling, teacher, and colleague. I use some of their songs on my exercise mix so they keep me motivated. I sing along at great volume on my ride to work. Their live shows are when I worship, and for a diehard atheist that's saying a lot. Their music is the closest thing I have to religion or spirituality. I *do* think that it's a miracle just to be breathing, and I *do* give thanks to my present day, and I *do* choose to turn it into gold. And Cloud Cult is 100 percent responsible for that.

—Shelley Pecha, 44, St. Paul, Minnesota

I first heard Cloud Cult while streaming The Current online at work. I knew I liked them immediately, because I completely stopped what I was doing so I could give the song my full attention. I could go into detail about how interesting and different their sound is: how they rock a three-piece harmony instead of a two-piece harmony, and how they pull off this added layer of complexity with seeming ease and grace. I could talk about how

their lyrics succinctly communicate big, bold, beautiful ideas that enrich and deepen and expand one's view on the world. But what I really want to say about what Cloud Cult's music is that listening to them was like finding a soul mate—someone who simultaneously understands exactly who I am and where I am at in my journey in this world, yet inspires me to do and be more, not out of any archaic notions of what I should be, but in love, telling me what I could be.

I think that's what I love about them the most. No matter what subject they're dealing with, they handle it with love. A sense of love permeates everything about them. Even their darker songs, with subject matters so devastating and crippling that you wonder how they could even create something so beautiful out of it, are just ensconced in love. I think, more than anything, this speaks to their ability to completely embrace the human experience, with all its various hues and flavors.

I know it seems like a long way to get to here (and I don't think Cloud Cult would mind the journey of it), but in summary, the music of Cloud Cult reminds me that I'm human: fragile, weak, strong, full of contradictions and complexity. And it is precisely because I'm human that I am beautiful.

—Alicia Sanchez, 30, Garden Grove, California

June 18, 2012. I was enjoying a picnic with friends at Chicago's Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park. That there was a concert was incidental to our gathering; we were friends finding a pleasant place to spend an evening together. The opening act provided agreeable background music as the sun set behind the city skyline. Once Cloud Cult started, though, the atmosphere changed for me. At the risk of seeming rude to my friends, I twice tore myself away from the conversation and moved into the stands to