

R. STEVIE MOORE

by DAVID SHRIGLEY



“Aficionados of fertile pop imagination, resourceful home studio technique, and more stylistic diversity than most record stores can offer are highly recommended to get with [R. Stevie Moore]. . . ‘Unsung hero’ only touches on the injustice of obscurity for this wry, heartfelt artist. . . . Why no major label has ever signed him remains one of the modern era’s mysteries.”

—*The Trouser Press Guide to '90s Rock*

R. Stevie Moore is famous, among the musicians and critics who love his work, for not being famous. A hyperprolific do-it-yourself pioneer, Moore began making solo recordings as a teen in Nashville in the '60s and has, to date, recorded over 400 albums. All are

available through his cavernous website (www.rsteviemoore.com), a pun-studded evolution of the mail-order cassette club he launched in 1981 in his New Jersey home studio.

BOMB's first encounter with Moore was true to the DIY legend: We ordered Shrigley Field, one of Moore's 2007 albums, in May. Inside the mailed package, which Moore had bolstered with a scrap of Kashi cereal-box cardboard and the center tube from a roll of toilet paper, we were surprised to find a Sharpie-marked CD-R, hand-labeled by the man himself.

But on to the music: R. Stevie Moore is a sonic acrobat. Keywords include pop, punk, country, kiddie, rock, roll, funk, folk, and spoken word. On Phonography (1976),

Moore's first proper release, the catchy tune "She Don't Know What To Do With Herself" is followed by "The Lariat Wressed Posing Hour," a hilarious meta-fictional interview between a nervous talk show host and one "Rodert Lampley," a man from Georgia pretending to be a Wisconsin congressman. All of these characters are played by Moore.

BOMB was thrilled when the artist David Shrigley—whose 2005 book Worried Noodles inspired Moore to record Shrigley Field—agreed to conduct the following email interview, and also draw a portrait of Moore (below!).

Moore's gleeful response—a Sharpie portrait of Shrigley—can be seen on page 10.

—BRIAN McMULLEN

DAVID SHRIGLEY

Do people call you Stevie?

R. STEVIE MOORE

Sometimes. Usually. Often. Of course. But if you instead mean, How do you wish to be called? R., R. Stevie, Stevie, Steve, Mister Moore?, my stock answer—to be difficult—has always been: “All three words. You are required to address me as R. Stevie Moore every time. . . . So the show’s gonna run a little long!”

DS Okay, R. Stevie Moore it is. The other day, a friend posted one of your tracks to a Scottish music site I use. I think his understanding of you matches my own: “Do it yourself until you bleed’ is [R. Stevie Moore’s] motto. Oddball genius and one-man recording industry who has recorded hundreds—247 and counting—cassettes, at least, of albums. He started as a session player in the '60s and plays an incredible array of styles. On first listen, the music is like synthetic studio Muzak, but then you *get it*. Very unhinged stuff. It’s that incremental shift, one degree off the center of normality, that makes it *great*.”

I was thinking that perhaps one reason you have remained anonymous is that what you do is so close to musical normality (for want of a better term) that it gets seen as such and is overlooked. It took me a couple of listens to see the “incremental shift” that makes your music truly interesting. I wish everyone would listen to it twice the first time. Are you aware of your incremental shift?

RSM I’m not positive I understand the term. If you mean that there exists something in my “style” or “sound” that might go unnoticed the first time but that strongly reveals itself after relistens, then yes. That’s a good thing, I’d think, in that much more

lies beneath the surface. Not sure what causes this phenomenon though: “one degree off.” Maybe it’s a disadvantage in my case. (God, I just looked up the term—incremental shift—and can’t locate anything that clearly defines it. It would make for a good album or song title!)

BOMB Hi guys. This is your friendly BOMB editor interrupting. Tell me a bit about your collaboration. How did you two get together and make this album, *Shrigley Field*?



OPPOSITE: R. STEVIE MOORE IN HIS HOME STUDIO, 2007. VISIBLE BEHIND MOORE ARE COPIES OF SOME OF THE ALBUMS HE OFFERS THROUGH HIS WEBSITE. PHOTO: ARIC MAYER. RIGHT: PORTRAIT OF R. STEVIE MOORE BY DAVID SHRIGLEY FOR BOMB, 2007.

RSM Well that's an extremely interesting point, because Surprise! Actually David and I have barely even met via email. So we never did "get together" (yet). This relationship is all brand-spanking new, starting with my 2006 discovery of David's book *Worried Noodles* [a book in the form of a record album, with "lyrics" and drawings, but without music], from which I took a favorite lyric—"The disabled lad wants you to buy him a wheelchair with the money that you won at the horse race"—and turned it into a song specifically for a German record label, Tomlab. They plan to issue a *Worried Noodles* double-album of 39 songs in September by various musicians, all based on lyrics in the original book. Tomlab requested a single song submission, but suddenly I became so inspired with these many different lyric pages that I kept recording more, and I myself created a totally different entire full-length tribute project, *Shrigley Field*. I sent copies to Europe, and then naturally, I was thrilled when both Tomlab and David contacted me with their extremely positive reactions. So that's where we stand presently. A blind date!

DS Jan Lankisch from Tomlab introduced me to your music last year. After we asked you to make a song, I was pretty shocked that you produced a whole album for *Worried Noodles*. It's a shame they're using only one track. I guess it's amazing that you managed it, given that you spend so much time distributing your music. Would it be fair to say that you make music because you are compelled to do so, even more than because you love doing it? This seems to be the only reason for making so much of it. The more you make, the more distribution you have to do, so is your

making so much music in effect destroying your ability to make more?

RSM I really don't think about it. It's wrong of me to analyze my purpose, my intent, my methodology. It's all just happened this way, y'know? I do it without constantly thinking that I love or need to do it, so therefore I must continue. Compelled? Yes indeed. Compelled with compulsion? Not really consciously, no.

For decades there have always been shifts of my active work ethic, peaks and valleys. Highly concentrated periods of unstoppable artistic fury followed by long breathers where I decide to rest, whether because of sheer fatigue or self-pitying bitterness with overwhelming public indifference. Or both.

Only recently have I caught myself being unable to resume writing and recording, simply because of the increased workload of trying to fill and ship orders.

BOMB How has your process of making music and promoting yourself changed over the years? There's that great up-tempo rock song "I Like To Stay Home" on your 1986 album *Glad Music*. I found it on YouTube, and I love the video. Do you still "like to stay home"?

RSM **It's a one-man organization, highly disorganized. It's me in my room doing it all, one at a time. One new song at a time, one new CD album at a time, one made-to-order customer sale at a time. Current purchasing volume has increased to the point of near panic; I desperately need a full staff. The SoLo R-tist is overworked and underpaid. So I'm reduced to begging for charity!**

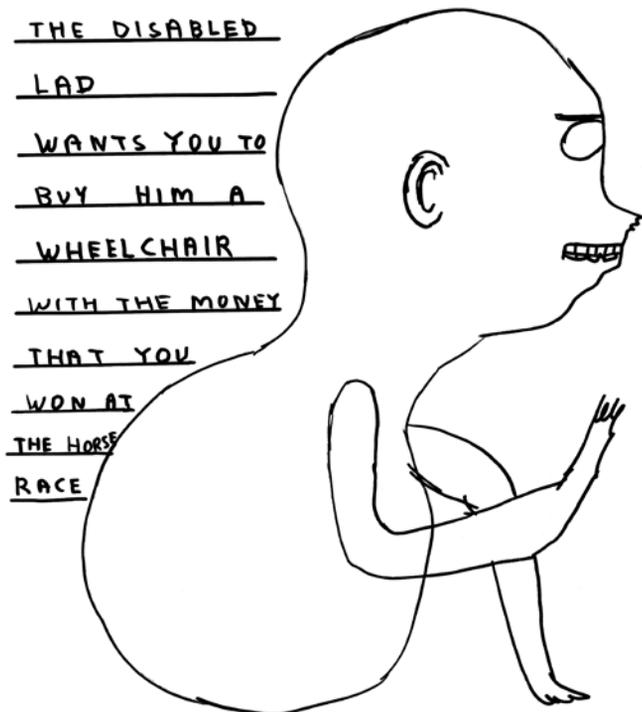
For me, it's a CD-R and DVD-R world. My catalog includes over 400 orderable items from 40 years of work, so my factory modus operandi is simply . . . one at a time. True DIY in every essence of the concept, but not a very good business model.

I stay home whether I like to or not. I stay home so much that I am now permanently trapped and chronically addicted to The Great Indoors. It's extremely hard to relate anymore to the outside world and its alarming de-evolution & mediocre lapses into the pits of ignorance.

My little home-based "promotional" machine hasn't really changed much over the years, only the technology. The RSM career has always been mail-order mayhem, from early reel-to-reel and cassette tapes up to today's iTunes data. Mail order is old-school quaint in double-O seven. The Internet has surely exploded my ability to more rapidly build up intimate fans, and now YouTube videos have exposed RSM's easy marketability even more.

DS How often do you play live these days?

RSM Seldom. It's really harder than ever for me to travel without some sort of supporting chauffeur or helping entourage. Otherwise, I still dig doing it, when it's right. But not for long, that is, after the same public indifference sets me straight and I ultimately decide once again it's not worth all the trouble for a room of 10 to 20 people.



- DS I was watching the DVD of you live at Tonic NYC in 2006 and it was a great show; I hope I get the chance to see you play sometime. It seems that your live performances link all the facets of your work together really well, probably because your personality is so much a part of it. In an ideal world would you play more shows (or make more DVDs of shows)?
- RSM **Only in an ideal world. Which doesn't exist. So then, prolly not! And nearly all the many dozens of shows I have done over the years were videotaped, therefore are forever available on cheap DVDs. The Tonic '06 gig was one of the most involved RSM filmings ever, using multiple cameras and tons of post-production and excessive special effects, all expertly overseen by director Mitch Friedman. Alas, no future performances are planned at this time.**
- DS What kind of music do you listen to these days?
- RSM **There's that question again. As has been the case for my entire life, it's everything all the time. Back to back. Freeform radio in my head. I thought most intelligent beings' tastes were also like this, but I guess I'm wrong. I've *never* locked into any set band or format or genre. Every day is different. Heck, every quarter-day. I have thousands of LPs and 45s, so that tells you something right there. A to Z. All eras, all extremes, in small doses. It's really no big deal. Lately? Mahler. Of Montreal. Bowie's Berlin trilogy. Speed-death metal. Tea for the Tillerman. Bethlehem & Contemporary labels 1950s West Coast jazz. Half Japanese. James Brown ad infinitum. Sing along with Mitch Miller. Crispy Ambulance and all things Factory/Hannett. Hookfoot. Jack Nitzsche's *St. Giles Cripplegate*. Porter Wagoner. The Shins. Lord Buckley. Moody Blues. The Fall. Piaf. Beatlegs. Tom and Jerry kiddie records. PiL. Ventures vs Shadows. Sparks and Roxy. Flatt 'n Scruggs.**
- How can any serious music lover *not* aim for variety like this??? That's why this entire last decade has reeked of el stinko to me, pure tunnel-vision mindset mindlessness, anything *but* genuine embrace for the history of authentic real music; target marketing for the mindless youth *again*. . . . Destiny's Child? Who? Justin? Lil' Bow Wow? Fall Out Boy??? *Ha!* Man, I don't even wanna know about these modern "acts" anymore. Such disposable ice cream flavors of the week. Who's buying it?
- I'm also embarrassed by my inner turmoil about all of this. I really need to get over it and remove all concern about mainstream pop.
- DS To me your music is like an overgrown garden, where most everything is included and allowed to have a place: all styles, all forms, all ideas. It seems you are happy to show everything and let people make sense of it themselves, rather than presenting yourself in a particular way. Do you have an editorial process? Do you discard many of the songs you write?
- RSM **No editorial process, no. Never did have one. (See above rant!) I'm told I need an editor. Someone**
- apparently knows a secret that I don't. I avoid condescending authoritative sorts like the plague. And I do not discard songs. There is no good vs. bad criteria for me. There's a place for everything, even embarrassing missteps. Current society places far too much emphasis on quality *ranking*. . . . did I drop from the sky onto the wrong planet? Repeating, I agonizingly urge all world citizens to please open their minds full-on, yo! Let it all in, and absorb when necessary. It's so easy and it doesn't hurt a bit. So much phenomenal art and culture: find your preferences yourself.
- DS What is the longest time you've spent making an album or song?
- RSM **Haven't measured it. Songs can take minutes or months or years. I can't think of any specific examples for each, but both have happened countless times; it's not that unusual for any composer to experience both extremes. Albums can take a mere afternoon session or a full season cycle. I usually don't muck about too long on *any* project. Leave it be and move onto the next thing. Which can explain why a single unfinished song may stretch out over an extended time.**
- DS Are you part of a community of musicians? Do you feel like you are part of something in the place where you live or beyond?
- RSM **Not really, no. Very set apart from the norm, especially "community." For decades I've tried to expand my work ethic to encourage and welcome others to join my creative frolic, but it's almost always particularly ungratifying and I return back to the womb. There just ain't enough "idea" people in rock 'n' roll. So I play follow the leader by myself.**
- Certainly there have been exceptions to this, mainly in my recent global collaborations via mp3 sharing and such, as with my working with Jad Fair, Lane Steinberg, Phoaming Edison, Terry Burrows, and others.
- DS Do you feel you make better music now than when you were younger?
- RSM **I can't compare them, it's truly apples and oranges. Both fresh fruit. Forever I've accepted that the original Nashville era of home taping (1973-78) was pure unadulterated superior inspiration, many facets of which have been regrettably lost after I moved to New York City to get rich and famous. And how ironic that years of experience have not made me necessarily a better player, producer, writer, arranger, etc. I do so much, and have so many different styles and methods, that I honestly have no clue which is better to whose ears and when!**
- DS Have you done a lot of crappy jobs in your life to make money?
- RSM **Yessiree. Well, maybe not a lot, but a few jobs that remained over many years. Retail record stores are pretty much all I've ever done. Which explains why I've never ever been able to earn much money at all. I don't even know what "yearly salary" means.**
- DS In a way, the fact that you have never been much in

the limelight suggests that you will never go out of fashion, whereas performers who become famous are often seen as being a bit sad if they continue making music as they get older. They are no longer taken seriously. The fact that you labor in relative obscurity means that, conversely, the longer you continue the more vital you will appear. Does that make sense?

RSM **Bingo. That's a fair assessment. Let's hope at least something happens someday. There's something to be said about enjoying the moment, though. Belated acknowledgment is always a bittersweet folly, as in, "Where were you when I needed you?" Pretty pathetic is the dry concept of a living artist imagining a public celebration of his work after he dies! Which has become quite a common thing these days, or even more specifically, a public "con\$uming" of his posthumous "product."**

It is really starting to feel weird approaching age 60 and still struggling like a teenager. Not a contented feeling at all!

DS How do you see the relationship between your spoken pieces and your songs? Do you do spoken stuff to give your hands a rest from playing? I really like the spoken pieces with minimal accompaniment like "Employees Must Wash Hands."

RSM **They have a very close relationship with each other. I don't feel it's such a major stretch, attempting the two extremes of soft sweet singing and spoken word. There's a deep bond with both approaches, especially as edited and sequenced on my recordings. But in a live context, it usually has nothing whatsoever to do with resting my hands from playing. After all, I can speak while strumming, and conversely, sing a capella. I just arrange them into the setlist for variety's sake. There's no rule to the possibilities or combinations thereof.**

DS How many musical instruments can you play?

RSM **Twenty-two.**

DS How many musical instruments have you got?

RSM **Twelve.**

DS Is there anything you'd like to learn to play that you haven't gotten around to yet?

RSM **Not me, no. I've had my fill of it all, I guess. I can't play trumpet and sax, but why bother?**

I understand the emphasis on this question less and less every year. It's really now become rather extremely common for modern musicians of any genre to be able to become semi-efficient on most basic stringed instruments, keyboard instruments and even drums and percussion. There's your one-man band right there. Anything else (such as horns and reeds, wind instruments) is merely adornment. In the '70s it was more of a new thing, and I shared my early versatility with those current like McCartney, Stevie Wonder, Roy Wood, Todd [Rundgren], Emitt Rhodes, and so forth. In the '00s practically every kid who plays guitar also easily tackles the rudiments of synthesizers, and vice versa. And drummers' true purpose these days has vastly expanded from mere flashy, razor-sharp

tightness professionalism all the way to tribal minimalist simplicity and even amateur, sincere indie-style sloppiness . . . so anybody is a great drummer to my ears! (And that says a lot about my eternal confusion of what truly makes a hit record or a successful act, when it's really not always talent or experience. It's 100 percent fate.)

DS According to the Internet, your father [Bob Moore] played bass with Elvis. Is this true? Has music always been part of your life? Did you ever want to do anything else?

RSM **Indeed it is true, and widely documented. Dad first joined Elvis in RCA Studio B during June 1958, as they were desperately needing a new batch of songs recorded right after Elvis entered training for the army and weeks before he shipped off to Germany for two years. Presley's original bassist, Bill Black, had departed from the band and Dad took his place in the studio. Then when Elvis returned stateside in March 1960 for the celebrated *Elvis Is Back* LP, Frank Sinatra TV special, and *GI Blues* movie, Dad was his main bass player (with some exceptions) up until 1968. So a whole ten years there together. One of the all-time highlights for me was his playing the live *USS Arizona* benefit concert in 1961. I recall my parents flying to Honolulu during the iconic "Blue Hawaii" period. Elvis and Dad even took karate lessons together. I myself never met him proper, but was in the control room with my family one time while Elvis was out in the booth doing a session.**

Music has always been a major part of my life. If I wasn't born with my father's good business sense or his wise natural drive to push toward success, I was born with his fine-tuned ears. So everything I've heard since babyhood has left a deep impression on my overall musicality. I listen hard. I dream arrangements and chord charts.

Besides music, I otherwise had interest only in graphic arts, drawing all the time since I was a young boy. But I've not been able to make a steady living at either.

DS You have been called "the godfather of home recording." When you started out, home recording was rather more difficult than it is now. Anyone can do it these days. As a musician it's quite an accolade to be the godfather of something. Are you proud?

RSM **Almost too proud, because I've had such an intense, nonstop struggle getting any attention that it amazes me that I must continue relying so much on the godfather tag. Ain't too proud to beg, said the beggar man. How can a godfather remain so unknown by everyone? It must be a lie! A myth!**

I honestly do think I was an important pioneer in early DIY home recording, but let's face it, my music is, was, and shall always be an acquired taste. So what's wrong with that? I'm basically a quirky popster, yet does that make me avant-garde? Why so inaccessible? And I still believe too much emphasis is always placed on my tape decks rather than the unique variety of my repertoire and

R. STEVIE MOORE TAKES A BREAK FROM SHOOTING A MUSIC VIDEO FOR THE SHRIGLEY FIELD SONG "THE DISABLED LAD WANTS YOU TO BUY HIM A WHEELCHAIR WITH THE MONEY THAT YOU WON AT THE HORSE RACE." 2007. PHOTOGRAPH BY -max- of NYC. USED WITH KIND PERMISSION.



sonics. Anybody can and does stack tracks in their apartment. Big effing deal.

Sound-on-sound with reel-to-reels 30-plus years ago, what a trip. Generations of hissy 7 ½ ips overdubbing. It wasn't really more difficult than today's multitrack digital workstations, just a bit more cumbersome. I still marvel, how in the world did I so easily make those early tapes sound like that? It all happened on its own, a wild, creative vision totally out of my control. Extreme divine-intervention magical inspiration.

DS A song and video of yours on YouTube that I like is "Colliding Circles," where you do that little hand-dance, making a circle out of each forefinger and thumb and rhythmically tapping together the finger-circles. I read—somewhere on your website, I think—that this song is based on a rumored title of a nonexistent Beatles song. Someone, as a hoax, spread a rumor that there was a Beatles song called "Colliding Circles," a song that didn't really exist. So then you wrote it! Is that right?

RSM Yes indeed, all true. Long story, that. I recorded that title and that other fauxfabs hoaxsong, "Pink Litmus Paper Shirt," in 1985, both entirely new RSM compositions. The full fascinating 15-years-later Martin Lewis story can be found—do you mind if I pass off a helpful URL to you?—at this hip hyperlink: <http://www.rsteviemooore.com/beatles.html>

DS What has been your experience with record labels? And what has been your experience with radio?

RSM Labels. I've never had much involvement with them, pro nor con. Since I am my own label by default, I don't normally work within those confines. But on the other hand, it is true that I have had numerous releases outside of my own home base. Any other labels, regardless of the size or budgets, have always merely licensed my work. Oddly, I had no negative issues arise by that. Sometimes I get paid, sometimes I just get bulk quantity of product. I'm forever asked what I would do if a major (or minor) label were to approach me with a sizable deal and a binding contract. To this day, that sadly never happens at all. But my response was always, I'll sign anything, gimme gimme, when I know full well that it's a common killer mistake to get sucked up like that. Beware, Stevie. Thankfully, I don't really fit into that ordinary show-biz slot trap. Then I starve then.

Radio, what does it mean? Grew up on glorious Top 40 AM in Nashville, and 45 years later I rejoice as New York's fabled oldies station WCBS-FM returns to the air after being yanked for two years. And it's fucking amazing programming! Old school radio done right: an eccentric freeform mix of decades of popular singles, with styles all over the map. Just like my personal tastes.

Otherwise, I rarely "listen" to radio. It's a useless audio format for me. I can play one of my old tape compilations if I really wanna sit and listen to a "great show." Like a couch potato. Who has time?



Radio. Worse than television even. No wanna no iPods neither. Stupendously redundant.

How does radio as a concept relate to my music? Not much. Of course, nowadays “radio” means World Wide Web as much as car/home stereo tuner/transistor portable/boombox. So many of the more obscure Internet blogcasts and such spin my songs. I love finding my stuff as part of cyber-mixtape playlists.

It just so happens I was also actually a DJ on WFMU, the legendary New Jersey underground station, from the late '70s to the early '90s—both as a loosely affiliated participant and as a regular participant. I had an important weekly slot for five or six years. I was wonderful. Influential. But very few know or care about that.

DS At least two of your YouTube videos are pre-MTV clips of your appearance on something called *The Uncle Floyd Show*. Can you tell me about that?

RSM Yes, it was a historic local New Jersey cable-access TV show, superb kiddie programming for adults, that began in the mid '70s and ended in the '90s. I appeared on it seven times through the '80s. I'm lucky that it was quite close to where I live. He [show producer and host Floyd Vivino] and I became good friends. Again, I recommend getting more info with a simple online search. So, yeah, the *Uncle Floyd* YouTubes are quite a hoot.

DS Who filmed your videos? It seems like a longtime fan of yours posted them on YouTube. Is that right?

RSM My home videos were filmed by family and friends. In 1988 I grabbed access to a camcorder and shot a ton of new footage by myself, tackling the fun projects of attempting lip syncs to many of my fan-favorite tunes. The recent uploading and posting frenzy on YouTube was actually done by Nuno Monterio, a young new acquaintance in Lisbon, Portugal, of all places. Often he's taken my raw VHS tapes and re-edited the footage into improved proper song clips.

DS I read that *Rolling Stone* once called your 1976 debut album *Phonography* one of the 50 most significant indie records ever. Did that proclamation have any practical effect on your career?

RSM Practical? I haven't really been able to measure its effect. Surely it must have helped somewhat by exposing my name to whomever read it, but perhaps not as much as one would assume. The numbers remain minuscule. You'd think the album woulda suddenly shot through the roof. And to clarify, that statement was printed in *Rolling Stone's Alt-Rock-A-Rama*, a book published in 1996 by Rolling Stone Press, rather than in the magazine itself. Perhaps that fact explains the lack of hype *Phonography* ultimately received?

DS Could you possibly get an intern or two to help you with all that CD-burning and distribution work? It seems like hundreds of young music aficionados would line up for the chance to help you with that kind of stuff.

RSM Hundreds? It's not as easy to find good cheap help as it seems. I don't know nobody! Where does one even start recruiting? Ha, I haven't even started yet (at age 55)!

In an ideal world, that's what's supposed to have transpired already, a mini-corporation of R. Stevie Moore's hobbies galore: a small warehouse with A/V studios, technical duplication gear, helper elves, public relations agents, mail sorters, phone solicitors, the works. Branch offices in Hollywood, London, Paris, and Tokyo. Man, I've only got a couple hundred dollars. Where did I go wrong?

Editors' note: Three hours before we went to press with this BOMB issue, R. Stevie Moore wrote to us, breathless, with extremely exciting news: "Cherry Red, the legendary London punk/reissue label, has slated a 24-track, best of '70s and '80s R. Stevie Moore release! The news is truly breaking as I type. We've got the approval from top brass. Cross your fingers that it all goes according to divine plan. Best love and devoted husband, R. Stevie Moore." Watch for it!

Keep your eyes peeled and your ears unsealed, too, for R. Stevie Moore's track on the Worried Noodles double album, out this September from Tomlab (www.tomlab.de). The project features 39 original songs by 39 contributors—each based on artwork and lyrics by David Shrigley—and comes complete with a gloriously illustrated songbook by Shrigley.

R. STEVIE MOORE IN A NEW JERSEY CEMETERY, 2007.
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