

SCOTT SPILLANE

AND HIS TUBA OVER THE SEA

by Sachio Goodie

At first glance, Scott Spillane doesn't stand out sitting in Sips Espresso Cafe off Prince Avenue. However, his discography is deeply influential to the Athens music scene, and his music is globally renowned. Neutral Milk Hotel's brass player and co-songwriter, Spillane began his road to indie-rock fame at the KLPI radio station in Ruston, Louisiana as a Louisiana Tech student in the late 1980's.

It was there that he would meet founding members of the Elephant 6 Collective Robert Schneider, Will Cullen Hart and Jeff Mangum, who Spillane would eventually join in Neutral Milk Hotel. The others grew up together in Ruston, and worked with the radio station since high school, with Hart beginning as early as the 11th grade.

"We just batted around records and that kind of stuff, and everybody's love for music at the time solidified," said Spillane. From there, the group's musical influences continued to form informing the compositional style now seen in various Elephant 6 projects.

Spillane says that KLPI served as an escape to mainstream popular music surrounding the town.

"You can go to Rolling Stone and look through those charts, what everybody was playing, and it will be stuff like your weird, college radio stuff all around," said Spillane. KLPI went a different direction and began playing music from small, independent record labels such as 50 Scadillion Watts Records. They also played small indie bands such as Beat Happening and Sebadoh.

As those bands went on tour, Ruston was conveniently located between Jackson, Mississippi and Dallas Texas, two cities that many touring bands play in, earning around \$50 for gas and a place to sleep. The Funnel Mat was a popular venue, an unlikely hybrid of a laundromat, bar and concert venue.

"It was easy to get a band that was touring. They weren't huge bands then, so they would stop in Ruston and we would give them enough money to just play a house show or the bar across the street," Spillane said.

Spillane and the future members of NMH began to play opening sets opening for those bands, but they were mostly a cover band, with very few if any original songs. They also began to play shows at small venues in Monroe, Louisiana.

"We could play Galaxie 500, or Sebadoh or these other bands and everyone would think it was original music, so people gave us more credit than we deserved," Spillane said.

This routine didn't last long, and eventually, Spillane moved to San Francisco, California. With an improperly registered van, the expensive price tag that comes with living in the city and a moving girl-

The cover of In the Aeroplane Over the Sea (1998) was created by R.E.M. designer Chris Bilheimer and Jeff Mangum. The two used a vintage European postcard with a drum cropped over a woman's head.





Scott Spillane plays at the Coachella Music Festival in 2014. The band began a reunion tour beginning in the October of 2013. NMH urged fans on this tour to resist the urge to record their set on their phones. Photo provided by Scott Spillane

friend (now wife), living on the west coast became impractical. With that, he followed his girlfriend to Austin, Texas.

Around this same time, Jeff Mangum's project, dubbed Neutral Milk Hotel had just released its debut album, *On Avery Island*. At the time, Neutral Milk Hotel was largely a solo project-- a continuation of the tape recordings the Ruston group would create and share with each other.

With the production assistance of Schneider, Mangum created an album far more developed than his previous original songs that he only shared with his close friends. His new music felt so personally refined, he decided to promote the project through shows and interviews.

Following *On Avery Island*, Julian Koster (bass, singing saw)

and Jeremy Barnes (drums) joined the project to help showcase Mangum's writing and continue to create new music.

On the way to New York to play shows with Neutral Milk Hotel, Mangum stopped in Austin to visit his mother -- and his old friend Spillane, who was now working at Gumby's Pizza when Mangum visited to say goodbye.

"Just as we were hanging out, at 2 o'clock, you know if you've ever worked in a pizza joint, everybody gets out of the bars and they're hungry," said Spillane. He was working his shift alone and asked for Mangum's help to manage the rush.

"I said, 'Hey I've got these orders, you want to help me make these pizzas?' So he came back there, sloppin' sauce on the

pizzas, and we worked through the rush.”

Once the restaurant closed, Mangum asked Spillane to join Neutral Milk Hotel as the guitarist.

Spillane put in his two weeks notice the next day, worked the remainder of his two weeks at Gumbly's, then soon took a bus to New York to meet with the rest of the band.

Neutral Milk Hotel was not a large act at the time, and staying in New York City was as unrealistic as it was expensive.

“Julian’s grandmother lived in New York, and she had a basement and basically said that we could set up in her basement to practice,” said Spillane.

In that basement, Spillane snapped the neck off a guitar named ‘Priority’. On the body of the guitar, he wrote ‘May of 1996’. It was around that time that his friend reached out to him to write a song for his short film “The Fool.”

“I had a broken accordion, and I played the guts of the accordion kind of like a harmonica. Then I had this bugle, a two-valve bugle that was in ‘G,’” said Spillane. “I just found a tune that I liked and started playing it, then recorded a four-track version of it and sent it to him to use in his movie.”

Mangum asked Spillane if he could also use the tune on the band’s newest project, *In The Aeroplane Over the Sea*. The marching brass melody stands as the fifth title track on the album, and one of only two songs without any vocals.

Initially, the album did not receive favorable reviews. *Rolling Stone* gave the album three out of five stars. “For those not completely sold on its folk charm, *Aeroplane* is thin-blooded, woolgathering stuff,” Ben Ratliff wrote.

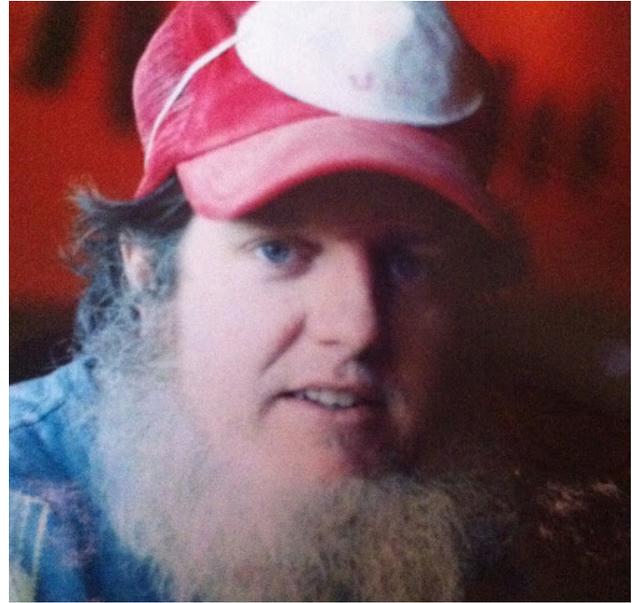
Over time, however, the album gained popularity. The mythology and interpretations of the album elevated it to the cult classic status it holds today, eventually being named *Pitchfork’s* fourth best album of the 1990’s ahead of notable albums including Nirvana’s *Nevermind*. Prominent bands have publicly claimed they were influenced by Neutral Milk Hotel, such as *Arcade Fire*.

While recording, Spillane never expected the album to pick up traction the way it did. The first indication that the album could gain popularity was when the band presented the album to friends in the *Elephant 6 Collective* (a group of friends mostly from Ruston that would record in several bands together) at their album playing party.

“Everybody came over to my house, and we put it up on stereo, and everyone was sitting in the bedroom, maybe fifteen or twenty people. We played the record, and nobody moved basically through the whole thing,” said Spillane.

His friends’ amazement at the album wasn’t shocking to Spillane. The friends would frequently listen to one another’s projects, so Spillane expected everyone to say they liked it.

He realized the cult phenomenon the band had become when he



*Scott Spillane sings and writes music for another band, The Gerbils. The band’s album “Are You Sleepy?” was hailed as an underrated deep cut in Athens music by *Flagpole Magazine*.*

went to the annual LEAF Festival in Black Mountain, North Carolina with his wife and daughter. Spillane set his tent near a large fire pit no one was using after an entire weekend of rain. He then experienced one of the strangest moments of his life.

“One night, I was sitting up and it was probably ten o’clock at night, dark, and I was in a tent with my wife and daughter. Some people came and sat on these benches that were right behind my tent,” said Spillane. “So this guy is playing guitar and singing songs to this girl, I guess trying to woo her.”

It was then that the young girl took the guitar and began playing the NMH song “Goldaline,” an unreleased song, that was only played in full live. A part of the song is featured at the end of “Oh Comely,” the eight minute track famously recorded in one take.

“She took his guitar and started playing ‘Goldaline,’ and she had the strangest, eeriest voice, and I was sitting in this tent, she didn’t know I was there but she was only three or four feet away from me,” Spillane remembers. “It was just so weird that some person was singing one of our songs to someone else at a fire pit at this hippie festival.”

From campfire songs to *Arcade Fire*, Neutral Milk Hotel’s influence can still be heard in popular culture today. As dedicated fans continue to urge for another album, Spillane and other members are content with where they left off.

