

## **Friday, April 11: That's The Life**

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<https://open.spotify.com/track/0MZ03uZyGI4xEoSvQ6uiBB>

This is a Lenten song, right? I'll admit that it's pretty breezy, pretty upbeat—but then again, how many rootsy-rock songs are about how you want to die?

I love this song, and I love Theo Katzman. You may or may not have heard of him; he certainly isn't (yet) a canonical figure in this sort of music, not a Neil Young or a Bruce Springsteen. If you *do* know him, it's almost certainly from the fact that he's a member of the world-historically great and bizarre funk/soul/deeply-silly-but-in-on-the-joke band Vulfpeck, universally acknowledged not only for their musical ability, but for the virtuosic way they play the internet to cultivate their fan base. (One time, they put out an album called *Sleepify*. Every song was titled “ZZZZZZZZZZ”, and each was thirty seconds of silence—the minimum length that counts as a “play” on Spotify, earning a small payment for the artist. Vulfpeck told their fans to put it on repeat while they slept, and the band used the proceeds from Spotify to fund a national tour. For those keeping track at home: Not a Lenten band. But I digress.) What separates Theo's solo output from his music with Vulfpeck, though, is how intensely *earnest* he is. You get the sense of him, in his music as well as in interviews, as a fairly classical sensitive soul: he projects as kind, thoughtful, a good and considerate friend, a little heartbroken at all times, fundamentally positive about both the world and other people, even when (in good folk-rock fashion) he's railing against many of the injustices he sees around him and the grotesque aspects of our society. His spirituality, such as it is, seems pretty standard-issue California woo-woo: lots of good vibes and togetherness—you won't be surprised to learn that we're all connected to one another, and only love will save us.

I'm sorry: I'm being ironic to try to keep this sort of high-proof earnestness at arm's length; but to repeat, I *love* Theo Katzman. I genuinely admire his courage in exposing his deep hopes and deep longings and deep hurts to the world in his songs; I get the feeling of his humanity through them, and listening to them makes *me* feel more human, too. I'm not sure this song is in the top tier of the most profound music I've heard—not a knock against it, not everyone can be Leonard Cohen. It doesn't distinguish itself for its theological insight; by all appearances, God isn't even suggested, and it's a song that's almost wholly incurious about the afterlife. And yet, this song gives voice to something I feel all the way in my bones.

“I wanna be from somewhere/I wanna stand for something/The price of my freedom/You couldn't pay me nothing/I wanna die an old man/in the presence of loved ones/with a special someone/sitting right next to me.” Theo (we haven't met, but his songs are so personal that it feels wrong to call him anything else) is my age to within a few months, both knocking on forty. Part of the song's pathos is that, as far as I can tell, he hasn't found his special someone yet—don't let the jauntiness blind you to the vulnerability of the lyrics here. He's looking at his death, and he's imagining

what kind of life he wants to have lived; he's looking at his life, and seeing where it feels true and where he feels unfulfilled. If I were in an ethics class, I'd say that he's trying to paint a picture for us of what human flourishing looks like, even within lives bounded by death. The hopes and desires he's expressing aren't especially unusual, and that's the point: these are things (he thinks, in writing the song) that *all* of us want, things we can agree are ingredient to a good life and a good death. I can't speak for everybody, but I know that this is what *I* want.

Good. Think of this breezy, upbeat song as a *memento mori*, then—a memorial of our death, that brings into focus how we can best live our lives. *That's* the life you want, the song's title is telling us—go make the requisite changes you need to in order to get there. But there's another aspect here that I don't want to go unmarked, a sensibility I can only describe as “incarnational.” *This place matters*, Theo is saying: this *very* place, the place you've decided is *your* place, or the place you can't escape being from no matter how hard you try. The things that make your life a flourishing life are the things that make you *of* this place: your local coffee shop; the neighbors you don't know that well, but with whom you exchange pleasantries that matter so much more than it would seem like they should; the way you care for the people life brings into your path (make a visit to the tip jar) and the way they care for you outside the capitalist systems of exchange that attempt resolutely to structure all our relations to one another and the world around us. *That's not what your life is about*, Theo is saying: your life is about *these* people, the ones you barely know and the ones who will be gathered around your deathbed; your life is about *these* places, and the breeze that reminds you where you're standing.

Here's what the Church teaches us during Lent: God meets us in our very flesh, flesh which is dust and shall return to it. God meets us in places: Roman Palestine, two thousand years ago, surrounded by sand and date palms and Jordan barbels; but also your home, your church, the bus station that one time a dozen years ago. God meets us in people: Jesus, above all and definitively; but also Mary and the saints, and your Sunday school teacher, and your coworker, and the migrant worker staring out at you through the windows of an ICE detention van. What it means to live a good life in the fullest sense, I firmly believe, is to live a life united to the God who meets us in Jesus Christ—and if that's right, then the places we call home, and the people with whom we share our lives, and the way we see ourselves as bound to one another, and how that affects our action toward one another, all become the ways that God enters into our lives. That's how God works, as we see in the Incarnation, as we see in the Sacraments: God chooses particular places, particular people, particular acts and bits of matter, to communicate God's presence to us.

That's why I like this season's image of dust, its image of ashes. We all return to the dust—but too often, we tend to think of that process as one in which we stay cleanly encased from one another in separate little urns. But of course, that's not how dust really works. It gets everywhere; it gets mixed up together, the boundaries between little piles of it get irreversibly blurred as the wind blows where it will. In that respect, the dust is an image not only of what our lives will be reduced to, but of what they

already are, inseparable from the other piles of dust walking around you and from the dust of the places we share.

What the dust is meant to show you is that your life is mixed up, irrecoverably, in the lives of others; it always was. *That's* the life—the life God has given you.