

Okkervil River Biography

Seth went to my school in our town of 500 people in New Hampshire. My first encounter with him was sitting next to him on a school bus. He was eating Handi-Snacks and had clear braces, so the artificial cheese was all caught up in there with the crumbly crackers. He and Alex Arcone and Chris Kimball transformed our tiny school into a theater of the surreal. They would crawl across the classroom floor mid-lecture to touch the social studies teacher lightly on the wingtip. "Loose pause!" one of them would say, and the group would collapse limp. "I'd like to tell the other teachers what you're doing, but I don't know what it is you're doing," said one teacher to Seth as he pushed him against the wall in fury.

Post-graduation, kids could either go on to the private high school in town or the public school one town over. My parents taught at the private school, so I went there. All my friends from Junior High went to the public school. Together, my friends and I used to taunt and torment the other kids in our eighth grade class. Wendy Cushman threw a desk at Jeff Slayton in blind rage at his constant taunts. I was just as bad, or worse. The things I did to other kids should never be forgiven. When I was about to make that teary-eyed leap from Mike Licks' house to end it all, I decided not to and to instead escape. It was into Seth's group at the new high school that I escaped.

Everything changed. I was failing out of school, as usual, but I was elated. We irritated our peers and alienated our teachers. Reality, for maybe the one and only time, tore open and took awhile to close. Anything was possible. Anything was probable. The world I saw wrinkled up on each side of the gash that was reality was distorted hilariously. Teachers bobbed their bald heads and blabbed on about "responsibility," while joy was so joyful I thought I would burst and pain was so painful I thought I would drown. I met Zach during Soccer practice. He admitted to Dan MacEacharn that he had never kissed a girl. Born in Texas, he had come from living in Saudi Arabia and carried tapes of the Fine Young Cannibals in funny foreign cases. On long bus rides back and forth from practices and class trips, Zach revealed to us an immense power for storytelling. Friends called him "fashion cut" because of his lackluster clothing, but the most popular concubine of the school athletes loved him with a deep and sincere heart, and once invited him to spend the long weekend in her parentless house. "I was afraid that once I was there all the hockey players would come out of the woodwork and shave my balls," he says. Instead he spent the long weekend chopping wood and made twenty dollars.

I sat in the woods for hours. I listened to nothing but the Incredible String Band for a whole year. I became convinced the world would end in 1995. I became unconvinced of that. It felt like nobody had ever been alive before. Friends around us sank into delirium. My father asked that the school not expel me as a personal favor, while we were making masks and holding secret ceremonies and trying to chase God out from behind the houseplants, beautiful and just as pretentious as we were. And we played music under a thousand different band names. I wrote my first

song; it was promptly laughed at by all my friends behind my back, but, inspired by my efforts, Zach picked up a guitar and became better than me in a five minutes. Our first band was "The False Dmitri" and never had a gig. Later, I formed a punk band called "Nine Men's Morris." We played three gigs. By then I had already become a tremendously arrogant person. Seth went to college in Wisconsin. Zach went back to Texas and, at the University, followed an academic strategy that he described as "Don't go to class. If you do go to class, have forgotten that there was going to be a test that day." I went to Minnesota and attended classes like "The Sociology of Food," "The Mind In Sleep," and "The History of God," while writing songs and having nervous breakdowns that went entirely unnoticed by my girlfriend. Zach and Seth and I reunited in New Hampshire for a few days in the summer and formed a band called "My Wet," that existed for less than twenty-four hours and played one glorious gig at an open mic night.

College droned on. Each of my nervous breakdowns fell away when I made the most important decision of my life: to be a total failure. A professional failure. I relocated to Austin, as did Seth, and Okkervil River was born. The name comes from a story by Tatyana Tolstaya, and it's a real river outside of St. Petersburg. At our first gig, they misspelled our name as "Okkerut River." Later, Electric Lounge advertised us as "Occerville River." The failure had begun. We were elated.

A friend I met working at a video store told me about a guy named Jeff Hoskins who had a studio and could record a demo for us on ADAT for cheap. We met with Jeff and he seemed like a good guy, so we pooled our money and met at his studio to record Our First Major Statement to the world, which was recorded live in three days and which we called *Stars Too Small to Use*. The record struck the earth with such force and precision that it resounded against the surrounding sky like a clapper in a gigantic bell, and we gained one new fan. We promptly added him to the band.

A geography/ornithology student fresh-faced from a Southern Episcopal college and a summer job as an intern for videos on The Nashville Network, Jonathan impressed us by having the clear, strong voice of a choirboy and a working command of many different instruments, as well as musical chops made keen by hours and hours of laboriously practicing David Gilmour solos. He later recounted to me the epiphanic moment when he'd first seen Okkervil River live: "it was the worst thing I'd ever heard, but I could tell you were doing it *on purpose!*" He was a fine electric guitarist, so we handed him an accordion.

The first piece of press we ever got was in the *Austin Chronicle*, and at the time I was convinced we had gotten it because I had snuck over to the offices and surreptitiously affixed a Xeroxed band poster to a telephone pole in their parking lot with packing tape. Brian Beattie – a local producer who'd played in the band Glass Eye and had recorded Daniel Johnston, an Austin idol of mine – read about us in the *Chronicle* article. His grandmother lived in New Hampshire and he had fond childhood memories of the place; when he saw I was from New Hampshire he came to a gig and offered to produce our record. (I later discovered that my grandmother had delivered meals on wheels to his grandmother.)

We recorded our first "real" record, *Don't Fall in Love with Everyone You See*, in Brian's garage. It was tiny and cluttered and dark. A crack ran through the middle of

the floor, throwing the concrete up in wild jagged chunks, through which Brian had routed cables. After we'd finished the record, it took a year and a half to come out. I'd sent demos to every label I knew of, but only one was interested, Jagjaguwar, and they said they couldn't fit it into their schedule for awhile. It was during this time that Seth took leave of Okkervil River's immediate orbit to live in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

After trying a couple different replacements, we ended up choosing Travis Nelsen as our new drummer. Another friend of a guy I worked with at a video store, Travis was a corn-fed Wisconsin kid who'd been playing in punk rock and bar bands since he was 14, he'd started a tiny booking agency and had set up our first tour, the highlight of which was when the venue in Kansas City gave us a free pizza.

The touring became endless. We went to San Francisco to record our next album – *Down the River of Golden Dreams* – in a breathless one-month sprint. A friend I'd worked with at a music website started booking us bigger U.S. tours, and another friend of the label started sending us to Europe. I moved out of my house and since then haven't lived any one place for more than a couple of months. I became more and more of a stranger to the town I had loved. Visits to Austin shrunk down into a show, maybe a burger at Casino beforehand [*note: it is my sad duty to tell you that I can no longer recommend Casino - for one thing, they no longer use fresh-cut fries!*] or a breakfast at Polvo's the next day if I was lucky, and a trip to my storage space to pay my always-delinquent rent in a handful of ones and inhale the odor of my possessions wafting out of the dark boxes. At some point along the seemingly endless routing, Zach stopped touring with us, as he needed to stay home in expectancy of his first child. The grind, the constant playing for no money, and the sleeping on floors was weakening everybody. We recorded half of *Black Sheep Boy* with Zach and the other half with onetime Okkervil bassist Howard Draper – an excellent musician and wonderful fellow who now plays in Shearwater – after which we added bassist Patrick Pestorius, an Austin native and a friend of Travis who had played in numerous rock and roll and garage bands in Austin for years. On our first tour for *Black Sheep Boy*, we also added a coronet player, Scott Brackett, who we'd met when his band opened for us at a tiny show in Redding, California. Scott was working at a funeral home near Redding when we called and was excited for a chance of pace. With the addition of Brian Cassidy, an Austin guitar teacher who introduced himself and offered his services after a show and turned out to be some kind of musical prodigy, we had turned into a six-piece band, fast and close friends, with me as the only original band-member.

Since then it's been touring, recording on the sly, trips to local aviaries when possible, days of laughter, nights of overindulgence, mornings of regret, miles and miles of inexhaustibly breathtaking America whipping past our windows so fast we can't process it, great and terrible meals in such quantity and confusing variety we can't remember them, evenings spent in the beds of pricelined hotels or on floors of cat-litter-strewn linoleum, driving, driving, playing, driving, o blow, ye winds, hi ho.