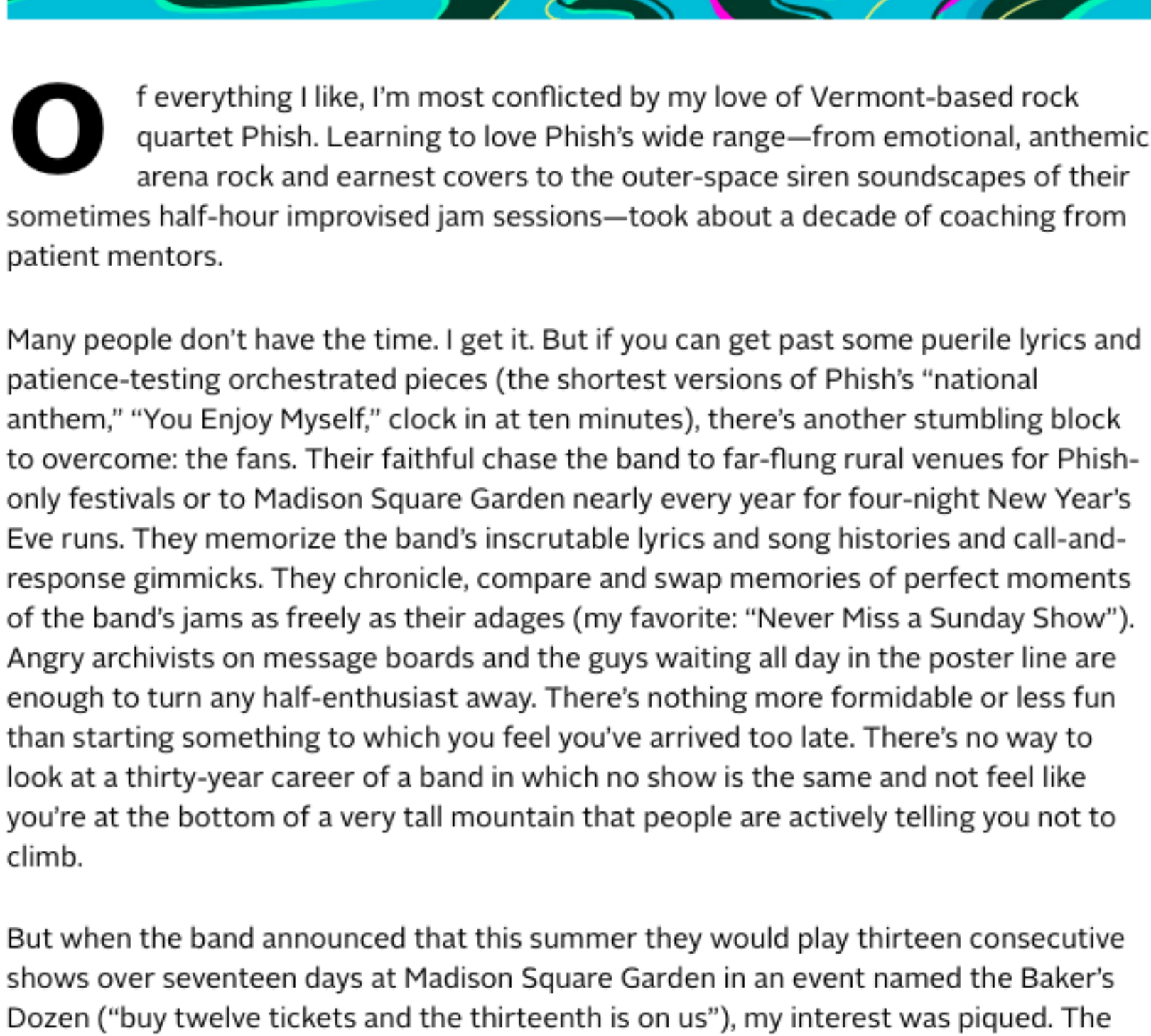


I Went to 13 Straight Phish Shows, Lost My Mind and Found Myself

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Of everything I like, I'm most conflicted by my love of Vermont-based rock quartet Phish. Learning to love Phish's wide range—from emotional, anthemic arena rock and earnest covers to the outer-space siren soundscapes of their sometimes half-hour improvised jam sessions—took about a decade of coaching from patient mentors.

Many people don't have the time. I get it. But if you can get past some puerile lyrics and patience-testing orchestrated pieces (the shortest versions of Phish's "national anthem," "You Enjoy Myself," clock in at ten minutes), there's another stumbling block to overcome: the fans. Their faithful chase the band to far-flung rural venues for Phish-only festivals or to Madison Square Garden nearly every year for four-night New Year's Eve runs. They memorize the band's inscrutable lyrics and song histories and call-and-response gimmicks. They chronicle, compare and swap memories of perfect moments of the band's jams as freely as their adages (my favorite: "Never Miss a Sunday Show"). Angry archivists on message boards and the guys waiting all day in the poster line are enough to turn any half-enthusiast away. There's nothing more formidable or less fun than starting something to which you feel you've arrived too late. There's no way to look at a thirty-year career of a band in which no show is the same and not feel like you're at the bottom of a very tall mountain that people are actively telling you not to climb.

But when the band announced that this summer they would play thirteen consecutive shows over seventeen days at Madison Square Garden in an event named the Baker's Dozen ("buy twelve tickets and the thirteenth is on us"), my interest was piqued. The residency promised to feature all the lunatic hallmarks that make Phish Phish and a formidable endurance test for the half-in. This could be my conversion moment. I convinced, in swift order, my girlfriend, editor, and then Phish PR to endorse the experiment and a solo ticket to each event. What would happen to me? Would I go broke for \$13 venue beers? Would I even enjoy the seventh, eighth, or ninth shows, or would I start bringing a magazine with me? What could possibly result besides emotional and literal bankruptcy? I already liked Phish exactly how I liked Phish, but after two straight weeks, would I like them more?

Going all-in with Phish is what New England Patriots fandom must be like. Victory is assured; it's just a matter of how you'll win.

"If you're gonna write about Phish, you gotta get on the floor," said my barber over a loud YouTube soundtrack of curated Phish jams called "Spacefunk 3.0."

Floor tickets are highly coveted, for many obvious reasons—you're closer, there's more room to dance, there's a freer-flowing river of joints and unmentionables. He had floors for all thirteen. (We had spent two years as barber and client before either discovered the other liked Phish. This would repeat throughout my marathon as I uncovered more Phish fans lurking in my friendships and acquaintances.)

I told him the tickets I get are the tickets I get. He said that I *couldn't* write about Phish unless he showed me the perfect experience. "You gotta get on the floor. You gotta go camp in Central Park, hang out with the wooks [short for wookie, the scene slang for a serious dirty hippie], wait in line all day to ride the rail [the barricade between the pit and stage—prime territory]."

I told him that I wouldn't, under any circumstances, be camping in Central Park. He'd already bristled at my level of fandom when I told him I'd seen fewer than ten shows. This is a guy who closes shop for weeks to go on summer tour. Again, I said I'd see what I could do.

Despite Phish fans' assurances of high-five, live-and-let-live attitudes, the whole thing never seems as welcoming as they say it is. Debate not over favorite songs but favorite historical instances of songs is a classic Phish-fan pissing contest. When the band plays a deep cut or cover you don't recognize, for example, you don't really want to turn to your neighbor to ask for its title. This is an outsider's fear, but it feels like there are a lot of rules—you can like Phish, but to really like them, you have to commit. What draws the difference between being passionate and obsessed, and where would I land?

My main argument to nonbelievers is: at a Phish show you get to actually dance like nobody's watching.

The first evening I grabbed a quiet beer with a buddy, and happenstance sat me next to that same friend for the concert. Followers will give you various psychedelic reasons that serendipity strikes so often at a Phish show, none of which ever seem truly "wrong," but it quickly became clear that aside from an open mind, "chance" would be my greatest ally for twelve more nights of Phish.

The fan bars that ringed the Garden—Tempest on 31, Stout on 33, American Beauty on 30—offered lively conversation, hoots, hollers, toasts, and furious debate. Phish typically played three- and four-show runs without repeating a song, but was the rumored thirteen shows with no repeats even possible? And if a residency that plays to 20,000+ each night isn't enough of a stunt, each night of the Baker's Dozen featured complimentary donuts to the first 1000 or so entries, a varying flavor that was then that evening's theme. The powdered night-five doughnut could only mean we'd be getting an encore cover of Neil Young's "Powderfinger," at which we roared with recognition and approval. Early into the first weekend, fans online and on the West Side started guessing at potential doughnut covers, trading "strawberry" songs or speculating as to what delights "jam-filled" could offer.

The answers never matter as much as the mere acts of guessing. The imagined interactivity of the experience—a win-win bingo where the band's hyperactive and sometimes oblique decisions are given unearned providence is central to the experience. Going all-in with Phish is what New England Patriots fandom must be like. Victory is assured; it's just a matter of how you'll win.

With the right coaching, to attend a show is to instantly understand the fuss. The crowds for the first weekend were hot and active, fans sprinting from the opening gun of a marathon, confetti and smoke rising while glowsticks and balloons rained down on the floor, where I was sure my barber was riding the rail with his wookie friends.

When the lights dropped every night, the circus and charade were instantly unified, focused only on our spirit guides on stage, an experiment now not in a scene or being seen, but in joy. My main argument to nonbelievers is: at a Phish show you get to *actually* dance like nobody's watching. A yoga-class promise an instructor once gave me holds true here—everyone is so focused on their own rhythms and bodies, that they don't have time to pay attention to yours.

I began making friends. Everyone at a Phish show gets situated and then introduces themselves like they're roommates on an international flight. I'd become hypnotized already by a large balding man two rows down in a weed-leaf bowling shirt who swayed nonstop for the full show with his arms in his pockets. I called him Metronome Man. When I eventually introduced myself to Metronome Man, who didn't give me his name in return, and told him I'd be in his section for the duration, he said "I look forward to sharing."

The third night and first Sunday Show, my new best friend, Pat from Long Island, and his brother, and his brother's friend, all got me high on one thousand joints. That's an emotional calculation, if not a numeric one. At home, the cumulative high of the first weekend and the one thousand joints glued me to my couch, where I watched CNN on mute for about two hours until my girlfriend, also already exhausted by this "experiment," came out and asked me to bed. It was going splendidly.

Being silly is distinct and braver than being funny, because you can't explain yourself the way you can explain a joke.

As the shows progressed, Serendipity announced itself over and again. One weekday night a grad school professor was seated behind me with her boyfriend, who literally wrote *The Phish Book*. The magnet-pull of MSG also reunited me and an old North Carolina buddy, who was in town and had to catch at least one. Of course we were seated in the same section. He and his wife and their friends, mostly first-timers to the phenomenon, were all in bands themselves. They happened to catch what's now acknowledged as the best night of the Dozen (#4, "jam-filled"). After a surprise thirty-minute version of typically schlocky interlude piece "Lawn Boy" worked the full 20,000 in the room to a frenzy, I saw a recognition from this crew of possibilities at play for their own art they'd maybe so far not considered. As we all clapped and sang in unison to the clapping and singing parts of the jazz-calypto fan favorite "Stash," his wife threw popcorn in astonishment. I acted like an old pro.

The possibility at play for the first-time artist at the Phish show and the main explainer of the chance encounters that keep happening is the same: silliness. It is the variable that most alienates non-fans, and it is not the same thing as funniness or humor. When guitarist Trey Anastasio and bassist Mike Gordon perform choreographed trampoline bounce-dances or drummer John Fishman mouth-solos with a vacuum, there is *no joke*. Being silly is distinct and braver than being funny, because you can't explain yourself the way you can explain a joke. Fishman wears the same muumuu every night. There's no punchline; it's just play. But it creates a space of engagement and community that is, beyond setlist spreadsheet librarianism and fans dropping acid, the anchoring characteristic of the band.

Through five shows I had already resorted to a routine of pizza-slice and venue dinners—the message boards preached the gospel of the spicy chicken sandwich outside section 119; I had about seven of these across the run—and at least a beer or two, sometimes many more. You can't easily sleep after riding the wave for four hours, so I'd find myself bleary-eyed and moving from couch to bedroom at odd hours over the seventeen days. Of course this led to junk-food lunches at work, where I was hungover and unable to do much but scour the Internet for doughnut predictions.

But my barber had put a mix in my ear. I was getting restless in the same seat every night and it was time to bug it up. I had to get down to the floor. Because I would miss the second Saturday show for a wedding (non-negotiable), I had a bargaining chip. At Cash or Trade, a no-scalpers website-slash-trust exercise populated with offers, I found someone willing to take my Friday and Saturday in exchange for their General Admission floor seat for the Friday. Bam! I was in.

As I sat in the bar above MSG, I had new power. I was on the floor! The ticket itself was a beautiful art piece—earned by those who ordered early—a palm-sized laminated doughnut that won't even fit in a wallet. I bought beers for strangers, bragged about my assignment, and got steadily drunk. A flurry of texts to the barber and other potential floor friends yielded no results—I would go it alone.

Major life changes are usually swift and without warning. In the words of the band, "the trick was to surrender to the flow."

Oh brother, the floor is better. You get a special lounge, separate entrance, and even a free bottle of water. The genial whooping upstairs is fervid rambunctiousness in the GA line. Everyone is just so damn happy to be here, man. As a floor member, you also get to pick sides: do you wanna watch bassist Gordon "drop bombs" from the righthand side, or do you prefer the dry antics of keyboardist Page McConnell ("Page Side, Rage Side" will be your new catchphrase)? The extravagant light show suddenly makes the most sense from downstairs, as its conductor, "fifth member" of Phish, Chris Kuroda, shares your vantage. "It's my first floor!" I told strangers, who befriended me with beers and delivered high-fives for really any reason at all.

At set break, Serendipity returned; I saw my buddy Barrett across the floor. We shared a hug and the acknowledgment that, yeah, we'd never once talked about Phish, but, hey, here we both are. As a new father, this would be his only night of the thirteen, so we danced through the second set like the blur it deserved to be. As some point during the set Barrett introduced me to his friends. Later, leaving the venue, I heard one ask him, "Wait, do you really know that guy? Like, in real life?"

I'd officially been confused for a random Phish fan. My Instagram account, where I'd simply posted one photo per show, was drawing worried questioning from friends: "What is even happening?" "Is this forever?" In a week I had gone from a happy interloper to confounding superfan with zero explanation. Major life changes are usually swift and without warning. In the words of the band, "the trick was to surrender to the flow."

Halfway through and very beaten down, I decided to *merely* attend shows eight, nine, and ten, and focus on later *enjoying* the final weekend. Hours before the Sunday show I found myself throwing up by the lake in Prospect Park during a run. The pizza-slice diet was announcing itself mightily. That evening, weary after one sad taco in the Penn Station Moe's, I traded my favorite flannel shirt on a bench. My credit card balance was on the ropes from the \$13 souvenir-beer pummeling it had taken. I was overdosing on Phish.

In the real world, my life was steadily collapsing. The center of this doughnut was sure to not hold.

Obsessed with getting back the floor, I scrolled Cash or Trade all day, finally finding someone with tired feet who swap me back in the pit, into which I ventured alone and still couldn't find my barber. The next day at work was an iced-coffee fueled blur. Unassuming, I traded my one good ticket for two worse ones and initiated an unassuming buddy to the team on promises of him hearing "Run Like an Antelope" and "Mike's Song." Stupidly assuming a friend that the band would play two of their most popular songs was a promise probably invented just to lure a little company to the show, but the band played those very two back-to-back. I, briefly, looked and felt like a genius Phish whisperer. My friend, buoyed by these fans and some strangers' marijuana, became a fan.

In the real world, my life was steadily collapsing. The center of this doughnut was sure to not hold. Twenty-plus hours standing on the concrete slab of MSG was swelling my ankles. I hadn't slept more than five hours a night in ten days. I lied to work and my partner about needing to write in order to go wait in a poster line.

It would be easy to say that the Phish fan is addicted to Phish. I was becoming addicted to Phish, though my supply was steady and easy-gotten. I was addicted to trading tickets, addicted to getting back on the floor. But without free tickets and the assignment to pay attention and report on my good times, would passion so easily lead to obsession? Would I follow the set lists in the future? The jams themselves are music I like, but I'm not addicted to the concept of tension-and-release or funk bangers. I even can see, despite my longing for the floor once more, how the partying aspect can get old. I'm not addicted to beer in plastic cups or other peoples' weed. Outside of the novelty bubble of thirteen shows, what was everybody chasing?

Another Internet miracle yielded me a floor ticket for the last Friday, and I finally found my haircutting Virgil not long before the show. He was right up by the front, riding the rail with his crew, who'd all come out around noon to secure their spots, now defended with blankets, hands, and feet splayed across the concrete. I was told I might not be able to stay up there for the show, because people were crazy, and I said that was fine, I just wanted to say hi. I was then told that I could stay, but that when the show started, I'd be given a spot and my job was to "hold the line."

Two men behind me in trucker hats and unbuttoned linen shirts had a minor dust-up with a solo fan who'd snuck his way through the fracas to stand alone. A simple forearm held in his chest got their point across, to which he replied, "I'm a fan, just like you guys," to which they replied, in unison and repetition, "Get the fuck outta here man, get the fuck outta here, man." They were holding the line. Tales were swapped about a girl who'd been thrown over the rail, who the regulars said "had it coming." I was informed that not only was I going to be required to hold the line, but I "better be ready to rage." For the first time, I felt that this might not be the uncomplicated love fest I had thought it was.

I declined acid, edibles, cocaine, and settled for a vape pen of hash oil as peace offering. I was told "you can't get the full lights experience up here, but you can see Trey's eyes," which was a true enough statement, and when the band came out, I held the line, though peacefully. Serendipity vanished as the obsession raged at the rail. After all this, I was Icarus and I wanted to retreat to the comfort of the shore from which I'd flown—some time in week one before this thing ramped up so considerably.

One night, much earlier in the run, I wanted to enter when the doors opened, to relax before the show and maybe snag a doughnut. I queued up in a crowded cove of anxious, shuffling white men. Being a bad reporter, I didn't ask what all the fuss was for. I also wanted whatever everyone was clearly wanting and couldn't give myself away as the only newbie in the line. We traded jokes and song predictions while staring at our phones. But when the ropes were snapped away and the doors to a long hallway opened, the plaid-shorts, backwards-hat, out-of-shape individual dudes all began a furious sprint to the stairs.

I raced alongside, nearly elbowing a stranger, before beating about half the crowd to the escalators. I was handed my doughnut and ran up, finally asking another guy what the fuss was for. He pointed to his poster tube and said "good luck!"

When I arrived, breathless, at the line for the posters, they were already selling the last one. "No more posters!" yelled a vendor. I went to leave the line, but another guy in line grabbed me. "There's other stuff!" he said.

A nervous, Hobbit-like man with an afro threaded through a visor paced the line "Can I get a statue? Can someone get me a statue? It's my birthday Friday, I'll show you my ID," he pleaded. The survival of the fittest had literally tested his fitness and he'd lost. "Please."

Statue?

"Two statues left!" yelled one of the vendors, and half the line sprinted away in search of some other outlet. I had only learned statues existed and was already immediately disappointed. But it was my turn, and, standing above a case of pins and patches and hats, I saw a small pewter figurine: a fish holding a doughnut.

The lady behind the counter leaned in close, and told me I could buy the display statue. One more left, she whispered. I looked around. Someone behind in line nodded at me. There ya go, he mouthed. It couldn't be that expensive, right? Maybe I'll just give it to Birthday Hobbit. It's a community here, you know? "I'll take it." I blindly handed someone my card, and they presented me a receipt for an astonishing one hundred dollars.

I'd learned the difference between passion and obsession—obsession doesn't discriminate.

It isn't so much just the joyful jam peaks that can keep people, myself included, engaged and in awe for forty hours of live music over a few weeks. If this were the case, we'd all just listen to well-constructed studio orchestrations and save ourselves the stadium beers. But birders could also just Google the birds they haven't seen and stay indoors. Like chasing a statue without knowing you are or spotting a sandpiper, the shared epiphany of a song you've never seen them play (or a jam resolving extraordinarily) is greater than the same experienced alone.

If you want to know how my Baker's Dozen resolved, on the thirteenth night, as with a TV-season's climactic episode, Serendipity made certain I saw metronome man, the brothers of a thousand joints, the girl who traded me my first floor doughnut, and the Phish Book guy one more time. Everybody in the pool.

The entirety of my experience in the hallowed ground of the Garden, and my time with the rock band Phish, are now memorialized in my dumb hundred-dollar four-inch pewter "statue": I was in, over my head, many people would not like it, it was time-consuming, expensive, exhausting, confusing, and I was spurred along and abtayed, educated and welcomed in by a community that values silly over exact, the strange over familiar. The kind of people that would cheer a frayed a capella cover of "Dem Bones" because it pushes us all forward toward an arbitrary goal ("no repeats," which they accomplished after 237 songs!) that no one ever said was required, and who would call a toy a statue, and sprint heedlessly toward it.

On the message boards and in the poster lines and on Cash or Trade and by the rail I'd learned the difference between passion and obsession—obsession doesn't discriminate. Passionate fans never sprint to buy a statue. I was passionate, but I would never be obsessed. (I was also very tired.) With the barber and his crew: did I rage at the rail? Yeah, I raged at the rail. Passionately. I danced my ass off, but the second the show was over, I hopped on the A train back to Brooklyn without as much as a thank-you. The center of the doughnut, I'd found, was a hole, and I walked toward it, through it, and back around to the other side.