Jonathan Coulton

Jonathan Coulton (born December 1, 1970), often called "**JoCo**" by fans, is an American folk/comedy singer-songwriter, known for his songs about geek culture and his use of the Internet to draw fans. Among his most popular songs are "Code Monkey", "Re: Your Brains", "Still Alive" and "Want You Gone" (the last three being featured in games developed by Valve: *Left 4 Dead 2, Portal,* and *Portal 2* respectively). He has been the house musician for NPR weekly puzzle quiz show *Ask Me Another* since 2012.

His album *Artificial Heart* was the first to chart, eventually reaching #1 on *Billboard*'s Top Heatseekers and #125 in the *Billboard* 200.

Contents

Career

Coulton's music tends to fit a folk rock style, with elements of pop and indie rock.

Early career and geek culture

Jonathan Coulton	
Coulton in 2009	
Background information	
Also known as	JoCo
Born	December 1, 1970
Origin	Brooklyn, New York City, United States
Genres	Folk rock, indie rock, art rock, alternative rock, geek rock
Occupation(s)	Singer-songwriter
Instruments	Vocals, guitar, banjo, ukulele, zendrum, accordion, harmonica, mandolin, glockenspiel, analog synthesizers
Years active	2003–present
Associated acts	Paul and Storm, Kristen Shirts, John Hodgman, Molly Lewis, Ellen McLain, Ze

Coulton graduated in 1993 from Yale, where he was a member of the Yale Whiffenpoofs.[1] In the 1990s, Coulton was in a short-lived band, the ironically named SuperGroup, with television producer Eric Salat and best-selling author Darin Strauss.[2] A former computer programmer employed at Cluen, a New York City software company,[3] and self-described geek, Coulton tended to write quirky, witty lyrics about science fiction and technology: a man who thinks in simian terms, a mad scientist who falls in love with one of his captives, and the dangers of bacteria. Rare topical songs include 2005's "W's Duty", which sampled President George W. Bush, and 2006's "Tom Cruise Crazy". Most of Coulton's recordings feature his singing over guitar, bass, and drums; some also feature the various other instruments Coulton plays, including accordion, harmonica, mandolin, banjo, ukulele, zendrum and glockenspiel.[4]

Several early podcasters discovered and made regular use of Coulton's music, notably Adam Curry of the Daily Source Code and The Wizards of Technology.[5] In April 2006, he lent his voice to one such podcast, The Spoilers, in which he and hosts Rick Yaeger and Bill Douthett provided a 2-hour fan commentary for *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.[6][7]

	Frank, They Might Be Giants, John Roderick, Aimee Mann, Andy Bates, Sara Quin
Website	Official website (http://www.jonathancoulton.com/)

Coulton, Paul and Storm, and Molly Lewis performing at Dragon*Con 2011

He was the Contributing Troubadour at *Popular Science* magazine, whose September 2005 issue was accompanied by a five-song set by Coulton called *Our Bodies, Ourselves, Our Cybernetic Arms*.[8] He was also the Musical Director for The Little Gray Book Lectures.[9]

Thing a Week

From September 16, 2005, to September 30, 2006, Coulton ran "Thing a Week", during which he recorded 52 musical pieces in an effort to push his creative envelope via a "forced-march approach to writing and recording"; to prove to himself that he could produce creative output to a deadline; and to see whether a professional artist could use the Internet and distribution via Creative Commons to support himself. In a September 2006 interview, he said of the experiment, "In some parts of the country, I'd be making a decent living".[10] In a February 25, 2008, interview with This Week in Tech, he said that he made more money in 2007 than he did in his last year of working as a programmer, 40% of it from digital downloads and 40% from merchandise and performances.[11]

"Still Alive" and album hiatus

Coulton wrote and performed a song titled "Still Alive" for the ending credits of Valve's 2007 video game *Portal*, with vocals by Ellen McLain. On April 1, 2008, Harmonix made this track available as free downloadable content for the game *Rock Band*.[12] A version with Coulton's vocals was also included on the *Orange Box Original Soundtrack*,[13] in addition to the one heard at the end of the game. "Re: Your Brains" made an appearance as an easter egg in *Left 4 Dead 2*.[14] "Still Alive" has been called "the most influential game music".[15] In 2011, Coulton followed up the success of "Still Alive" with a new song at the end of *Portal 2*, "Want You Gone". He also wrote the song "You Wouldn't Know" for *Lego Dimensions*.

Coulton is also known for original pieces such as "Code Monkey", which was featured on Slashdot[16] on April 23, 2006, and linked from the webcomic *Penny Arcade*.[17] It was also the theme song for an animated show on G4 called *Code Monkeys*.

His work has been featured on NPR's *All Things Considered*. *Good Morning Silicon Valley* featured a link to a video set to his song "Re: Your Brains".

Coulton accompanied John Hodgman on his "700 Hobo Names" promotional track for Hodgman's book *The Areas of My Expertise* as the guitarist (he was credited as "Jonathan William Coulton, the Colchester Kid"). Coulton also can be heard throughout the audiobook version of the same book, playing the theme song to the book, playing incidental music, and bantering with Hodgman, who reads the audio version of his work. Hodgman has also mentioned Coulton on *The Daily Show*: a Jonathan Coulton of Colchester, Connecticut, was Hodgman's pick to win an essay contest on overpowering Iraqi resistance to American invasion.[18] Coulton wrote and performed "the winning entry", a song about dropping snakes from airplanes. Coulton appeared on the tour for Hodgman's second book, *More Information Than You Require*.

Coulton composed the title music for the show *Mystery Diagnosis*, and also has contributed other songs under "The Little Gray Book Lectures", a series of audio releases from John Hodgman.

In 2006, Coulton began touring with comedy duo Paul and Storm. Coulton initially opened the concerts, but as his popularity grew, he began headlining.

A DVD & CD of a concert performed February 22, 2008, at the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco, entitled *Best. Concert. Ever.* was released in 2009. At the concert, Coulton played "Still Alive" along with guest "musicians" and geek/celebrities Leo Laporte, Merlin Mann and Veronica Belmont.[19]

Coulton opened for They Might Be Giants for a few shows of their March 2010 tour.[20] He toured with them again in February 2012.

The Aftermath and *Artificial Heart*

Coulton had been working on his follow-up to the *Thing a Week* albums, tentatively titled *The Aftermath*. He said the title was an umbrella term for non-album tracks released after *Thing a Week*. On May 25, 2010, Coulton said on his official site that he would work on a new album, to be produced by John Flansburgh of They Might Be Giants,[21] and for the first time ever with a full band, including Marty Beller of They Might Be Giants,[22] in a professional recording studio. The resulting album, *Artificial Heart*, was released on November 8th, 2011.

Solid State, *The SpongeBob Musical* and other projects

In May 2012, Coulton became the house musician for the NPR game show *Ask Me Another*. Coulton performs some of his own songs on the show, as well as covers of other songs related to the trivia and puzzle challenges.[23]

On April 15, 2013, Coulton announced that he was working with comic book writer Greg Pak on a graphic novel based on the characters in his songs, called Code Monkey Save World.[24] The project was funded on Kickstarter, and reached its goal within 12 hours.[25]

On August 31, 2013, it was announced that Coulton would be contributing lyrics to *The SpongeBob Musical*, which premiered in Chicago on June 2016.[26] Coulton composed the opening number "Bikini Bottom Day", which is reprised multiple times throughout the show as SpongeBob's main theme. Coulton

also contributed to additional lyrics for other musical numbers featured in the show. Along with other musical contributors to the show, Coulton won the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding New Score, and was nominated for Best Original Score for the 72nd Tony Awards.

In June 2016, Coulton started doing a one-minute "Previously On" song at the beginning of the CBS TV series *BrainDead*, a summer series with a planned run of 13 episodes.[27]

On April 28th, 2017, Coulton released a new album *Solid State* which is for sale through his website and iTunes as well as being available for streaming on SoundCloud[28]

Coulton co-wrote the songs "Good for Me", "Patient Zero" and "Rollercoaster" with Aimee Mann for her 2017 album "Mental Illness", for which he also contributed acoustic guitar and backing vocals. He joined Mann as opening support act on the European and North American tour of "Mental Illness", contributing additional guitar and vocals to her main set.

On April 15, 2018, *The Good Fight* episode "Day 450" featured a song by Coulton, set to a short Schoolhouse Rock-style animation. The song echoed the episode's plotline around efforts to impeach Donald Trump and was later shared by the show's YouTube channel.[29]

On March 29th, 2019, Coulton released *Some Guys*, a cover album of songs from the 1970s .[30] There's also a weeklong affinity cruise named after him.[31]

Licensing

Coulton releases his songs under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial license, allowing others to use them in their own noncommercial works. As a result, a number of music videos have been created using his songs, including such machinima as the ILL Clan's video for "Code Monkey" and a kinetic typography video for the song "Shop Vac".[32]

In May 2011, Coulton was interviewed on NPR's popular economics-related program *Planet Money*. He disclosed that he makes about $500,000 a year from his music despite lacking a record label contract. He expressed gratitude towards his fans for his surprise success, the degree of which he called "absurd". In a broader discussion of whether or not the internet is good for musicians, Coulton answered in the affirmative, while journalist Frannie Kelley described his success as a "fluke," comparing it to the unexpected popularity of the Snuggie.[33] Coulton posted a tongue-in-cheek response on his blog about the comparison, saying "to which I say: snarkity snark snark!"[34]

Glee dispute

One of Coulton's best-known works is his 2005 light-acoustic cover of the Sir Mix-a-Lot hit song "Baby Got Back". Coulton wrote a new melody for the song which was copied without permission (including his original line "Johnny C's in trouble") in 2013 by the American TV series *Glee*.[35][36][37] Like Coulton's other work, he released his cover version of the song under a Creative Commons 3.0 license, which requires users to attribute the work to him, and forbids all commercial use of it.[38] The show's lawyers contended that they were within their legal rights, and that Coulton should be happy for the exposure, though Coulton received no acknowledgement or credit.[39][36] Coulton's own lawyers told him that as he only used a compulsory license to make the cover, it would be difficult to sue for damages using the argument that he retained copyright over his own version.[36]

Instead, Coulton released the single "Baby Got Back (In the Style of Glee)", a "cover of Glee's cover of my cover of Sir Mix-a-Lot's song, which is to say it's EXACTLY THE SAME as my original version". Coulton said he would donate the proceeds from all sales until the end of February 2013 to two *Glee*-related charities: The VH1 Save the Music Foundation, and The It Gets Better Project.[40]

In January 2014, the CBS drama *The Good Wife* based its fifth season episode "Goliath and David" on the incident.[41]

Discography

Studio albums

- *Smoking Monkey* (2003)
- *Thing a Week One* (2006)
- *Thing a Week Two* (2006)
- *Thing a Week Three* (2006)
- *Thing a Week Four* (2006)
- *Artificial Heart* (2011)
- *Solid State* (2017)
- *Some Guys* (2019)

EPs

- *Where Tradition Meets Tomorrow* (2004)
- *Our Bodies, Ourselves, Our Cybernetic Arms* (2005)

Compilations

- *JoCo Looks Back* (2008)
- *Best. Concert. Ever.* (Live album - 2009)
- *Jonathan Coulton's Greatest Hit (Plus 13 Other Songs) (http://www.jonathancoulton.com/wiki/Jonathan_Coulton's_Greatest_Hit_(Plus_13_Other_Songs))* (2012)
- *JoCo Live* (Live album - 2014)

Other releases

- *Other Experiments* (Rarities Collection) (2005)
- *Unplugged* (Live on Second Life) (2006)
- *The Orange Box Original Soundtrack* (2007)
    - 1. "Still Alive" (Sung by Ellen McLain)
    - 19. "Still Alive" (Sung by Jonathan Coulton)
- *The Aftermath* (2009)
- *Many Hands: Family Music for Haiti* (2010)
    - 10. "The Princess Who Saved Herself"
- *Portal 2 Soundtrack: Songs to Test By - Volume 3* (2011)

- 13. "Want You Gone" (Sung by Ellen McLain)
- *One Christmas At a Time* (with John Roderick) (2012)
- *Lego Dimensions* (2015)

  - "You Wouldn't Know" (Sung by Ellen McLain)
- *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical* (2017)

  - "Bikini Bottom Day" (performed by the cast of SpongeBob SquarePants)

Most of Coulton's songs are published on his website as MP3 and FLAC downloads. Some of them are free, and none of them are subject to digital rights management. All of his original songs fall under the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial 3.0 License. "Still Alive", "Want You Gone" and "Wikipedia Chanukah"[42] are the only exceptions to this, as Coulton assigned all rights for the former two songs to Valve and "Wikipedia Chanukah" is under a BY-SA license to comply with Wikipedia's similar license. Along with "Still Alive," Coulton's song "Re: Your Brains" appears in jukeboxes in *Left 4 Dead 2*. "Want You Gone" also features in the end credits of *Portal 2*. All three of these games were designed by Valve.[43]

Other versions and covers

- Pianist Louis Durra recorded an instrumental trio version of "Code Monkey" released on "Mad World EP" and "Arrogant Doormats" (2011).
- Band I Fight Dragons covered "The Future Soon" on their "IFD Super Secret Exclusives" EP (2009).
- The Yale Whiffenpoofs, of which Coulton is a former member, recorded a cover of his "Re: Your Brains" on *The Best Whiffenpoofs Ever*.

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