

"I HATE MY GENERATION": CANADIAN MALE IDENTITY IN SLOAN'S *TWICE
REMOVED*

by

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DEDICATION PAGE

This thesis is dedicated to my Mom for all of her support through many stressful phone calls and epiphanies I have had, my Dad for giving me this thirst for knowledge and terrible sense of humour and knowing he'd be proud to see me here today, and Dr. Jacqueline Warwick for pushing me to be the best I can be, for helping me through the difficult parts, for the many excellent conversations on everything from pop culture to politics, and for being there for me for the past four years. Also, to Sloan, who have brought many hours of joy, frustration, and relief over that last two and a half years.

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ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s, a Halifax band named Sloan broke into the alternative rock scene with their debut album *Smear* (1993), released by Geffen Records, which received critical and commercial success in both Canada and the United States. Their sophomore album, *Twice Removed* (1994), was a drastic sonic shift from their first record, causing Sloan to be dropped by Geffen and receiving little attention in the States afterwards. However, *Twice Removed* garnered both critical and commercial success within Canada, cementing the band's important stature in the Canadian music scene. This thesis aims to examine ways in which Sloan's success in Canada, and lack thereof in the States, is largely due to the band representing an identity that connects to young, white, Canadian males through their use of nostalgia, humour and egalitarianism.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

Alt-rock	alternative rock
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
DGC	David Geffen Company
DJ	disc jockey
EP	extended play
LP	long play
MTV	Music Television
NHL	National Hockey League
Prog-rock	progressive rock
TV	television
US	United States
UK	United Kingdom
VJ	video jockey

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

As ironic as it may seem, considering popular clichés of Canadians tendency to apologize, Sloan do not apologize for being Canadian. The four rock-pop musicians from Halifax, Nova Scotia, are often considered the poster children for the Halifax, and Canadian, alt-rock scene, since their explosion into the public eye with the release of 1992's *Peppermint* EP and the full-length follow up, *Smear'd* (1993). It wasn't until the release of Sloan's second album, *Twice Removed* (1994), however, that Sloan's status as a truly Canadian band was cemented; the album landed at the top of *Chart* magazine's "Top 50 Canadian Albums of All Time" only a year after it was released.¹

Through their music and the ways that they presented themselves publicly, the members of Sloan became models of young, white, Canadian, urban manhood in the 1990s. How did Sloan manage to do this? What was it about their music, and the music of *Twice Removed* in particular, that seemed Canadian? Why did Sloan stand out from other Canadian rock outfits, as well as their American cousins? Through examining the music of Sloan's *Twice Removed*, in terms of both musical attributes and lyrical content, as well as their image during the period of the album's release, I will investigate ways in which Sloan present models of young, white, urban Canadian masculinity in the 1990s, and how this particular version of masculinity differs from and complements others.

¹ Michael Barclay, Ian A.D. Jack, and Jason Schneider, "The Importance Of Being Sloan," *Have Not Been The Same: The CanRock Renaissance 1985-1995* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2011), 421.

The story of Sloan is not necessarily a smooth one, and it definitely problematizes clichés of Haligonian and Canadian male identity. The most consistently used cliché of Canadian masculinity is that of the polite, kind, modest, self-deprecating, and straight, white person. The stereotypical Canadian male follows these standards, but also loves hockey, works in the outdoors, and drinks beer (see: Bob and Doug McKenzie, parodistic characters created on the 1976-1984 sketch comedy tv show *SCTV*). Halifax, and Atlantic Canada as a whole, was included in these fond clichés, as well as more specific regional stereotypes, such as the friendly fishermen from out east.

Haligonians also endure negative stereotypes, such as being lazy, backwards, and overly fond of alcohol. These negative stereotypes were especially concerning in the 1990s due to the collapse of the Northern cod fishery.² This collapse was devastating in the region, but garnered very little reaction from the rest of the country, being overshadowed by other national events such as the Quebec referendum and the low Canadian dollar. The perceived national indifference to the cod crisis reinforced a sense of isolation for Haligonians and others in the region; not only was Nova Scotia a “have-not” province, but also one that was routinely overlooked, nationally and internationally. This sense of being overlooked and left out became part of stereotypical performances of Nova Scotian identity.

² Kenneth T. Frank, Brian Petrie, Jae S. Choi, William C. Leggett (2005). "Trophic Cascades in a Formerly Cod-Dominated Ecosystem". *Science* 308 (5728): 1621–1623.

Sloan both complicated and reinforced these stereotypes, seeing as they self-deprecating, straight, white guys from the middle class, who often present the “nice guy” image of being passive and overly polite.³ However, Sloan also presented alternatives to other aspects of the Canadian and Haligonian identities. Chris Murphy, for example, has always been presented as the boisterous, confident, “rockstar” of the group, but he also practiced a “straight-edge” philosophy of abstaining from drinking, smoking, and drugs, three activities connected to the negative image of the Haligonian. Sloan even problematized the image of the band being from Halifax, with the only member of Sloan to come from Halifax proper is Jay Ferguson. Ferguson began his career in the Halifax music industry as a twelve-year-old record store clerk at Ol’ Dan’s Records.⁴ Murphy was born in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, and moved to Halifax in his early teens after living in Virginia and Scarborough, Ontario for a brief time.⁵ Both Murphy and Ferguson had a love for the classic rock band Kiss in their younger days, being introduced to the band on the Paul Lynne Halloween special in 1976. Andrew Scott, originally from Ottawa, moved to Dartmouth, Halifax’s sister city, with his family when he was six.⁶ Patrick Pentland made the biggest

³ In recent feminist analysis, the image of the “nice guy” has taken on a rather sinister tone, a side of the identity that Sloan also presents. I discuss this more in my analysis of the song “Bells On”.

⁴ Barclay, et al., 422.

⁵ Ian A.D. Jack, “Sloan: Never Hear the End of It,” *Exclaim*, May 2011, http://exclaim.ca/Features/Timeline/sloan-never_hear_end_of_it_2 (accessed July 4, 2014).

⁶ *Ibid.*

move of any member of the band; his family was originally from Ireland and came to Sackville, Nova Scotia when he was eight.⁷

Music was an important part of every member of Sloan's life, and after a few fits and starts in several other bands, Sloan was born in 1991. Murphy already had history playing with both Ferguson and Scott (though without significant success), and Murphy's other major band, the Celtic inspired folk-rock group Black Pool, soon dissolved as well, leaving Murphy to focus all his energies on Sloan. The band called themselves after their friend Jason Larson's nickname, "Slow One" that, uttered with a French accent, became that historical title Sloan.⁸ It's rather fitting that a band so invested in Canadian identity would choose such a self-deprecating moniker.

One of the major challenges of my thesis project has involved navigating the large body of journalistic work on Sloan within Canada, and striving to provide an original analysis that goes beyond merely reporting the facts. Though a timeline is certainly important in setting the context of these songs, and the band's image, the real focus of my thesis is an exploration of the music and the musical personae of Sloan created a model for young, white, Canadian male identity, and the ways in which this identity is distinct from male identity in similar places, such as the US and UK. Sloan works well as a model for this specific identity because of their connection to beta male identity and their manipulation of ideals of authenticity.

⁷ Barclay, et al., 430.

⁸ Ibid, 431.

Male identity is not a simple static idea, and even breaking it into two categories, such as alpha and beta, becomes problematic as these two identities differ, but are not in exact opposition. Michael Kimmel, a masculine studies scholar, presents male identity and manhood in a more contemporary light,

“Putting manhood in historical context presents it [...] as a constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with our world. Manhood is neither static nor timeless. Manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence; it’s socially constructed”⁹.

As society changes, so does our understanding of what gender is. Alpha males have been seen as the static state of manliness and manhood for sometime, from “big man” systems in Southeast Asia¹⁰ to the modern day “Jock” character in popular culture.¹¹ This image of male identity has shifted in society, to allow room for other identities and images around masculinity. The beta male is only one alternative to conventional masculinity, an identity that is heteronormatively masculine and manly, but prioritizes nostalgia, self-deprecation, and emotionalism.

These hallmarks of beta male identity are used in the image of Sloan as both men and Canadians, but defining Canadian identity, specifically male identity in Canada, is not so simple. Canada not only has a broad, diverse population, but it is also a geographically broad country, and both of these factors

⁹ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 5.

¹⁰ Marshall D. Sahlins, *Social Stratification in Polynesia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958). Sahlins notes the position of the “big man” in some Southeast Asian tribes, a member of the tribe with no formal authority, but seen as an important figure through physical and social abilities.

¹¹ Characters who are stereotypically arrogant, handsome, aggressive, and popular such as A.C. Slater from the 90s teen sitcom *Saved by the Bell*.

influence how identity is conceived and performed. Sloan, as a band with a fluid identity from album to album, can give us snapshots of image and identity from specific times. Sloan works well as a model not because their sound and image remain static, but because they have managed to present themselves as authentic while also changing and shifting their image. My investigation will focus on the era of *Twice Removed*: the recording, release and subsequent touring of the album that came to present a model for young, white, urban, Canadian men.

It started for Sloan with their track on the DTK Records compilation *Hear and Now*. After winning a “battle-of-the-bands”, Sloan were given the opportunity to record a session with local producer Terry Pulliam. To make the most of this, Murphy and Ferguson invested their own money to record enough material for what would become the 6-track *Peppermint* EP. Particularly due to the popular slacker anthem “Underwhelmed,” this release not only propelled Sloan into the spotlight, but it also earned the band’s hometown a reputation as the “next Seattle”, sending record labels such as Sub Pop and Nirvana’s own Geffen Records to Halifax to scour for the next big hit. Signing with Los Angeles-based Geffen, Nirvana’s label, Sloan seemed on the way to international stardom, poised as the next grunge band to follow in the footsteps of their Seattle counterparts.

The excitement generated by Sloan’s success also marked the beginning of the “Halifax Pop Explosion”, an annual festival through which the east coast music scene redefined its identity, distancing itself from artists such as Rita

MacNeil, Anne Murray, and the Rankin family, to a more rock-based character. Sloan became the first commercially-successful rock group out of Nova Scotia since April Wine in the 1970s.

Instead of following up *Smeared* with more of the same, however, Sloan looked to the past for inspiration in *Twice Removed*, penning tunes that, in Michael Barclay's words, "hopscoched over the popular music palette like a K-Tel compilation record from the 70s. This certainly was not Nirvana."¹² This moment in the band's career is the central topic of this thesis (when Sloan scrapped highly popular and marketable grunge and shoegaze aesthetics in favor of retro-pop styles). The band's sound was virtually unrecognizable, presenting great challenges for continuing fans. Sloan had traded in the fuzzy, distorted grunge tones and mumbled incoherent vocal styles found within the music of Nirvana and Pearl Jam, and filled the album with fun guitar and vocal hooks found in 1960s pop music, close Beach Boy-esque harmonies, and -- most antithetical to grunge aesthetics -- clean guitar tone, a style more associated with the Beatles than any of Sloan's contemporaries. Geffen wanted nothing to do with this record, and felt slighted by the band, which the label had been marketing as the next Nirvana. Despite pressure from Geffen, Sloan refused to re-record their album, a stance that was only strengthened by their manager Chip Sutherland. Sutherland is quoted as having said the following right before talking to then Geffen president Eddie Rosenblatt,

¹² Barclay, et al., 420.

Boys, I'm going to meet Eddie Rosenblatt in half an hour and he's going to ask us to re-record the album...I think you should tell them to go fuck themselves...It will be the end of your career at Geffen, but you made a good record and you know it. If you start trying to make records for record companies, then you're fucked.¹³

Sticking with this record became an act of defiance, causing a rupture between Sloan and Geffen Records. I consider that it also was a crucial step in Sloan's solidifying their image as specifically Canadian men, by actively stepping away from the mainstream grunge scene and beginning the transition to the retro-tinged power pop they are now known for.

My reasoning for focusing on this moment in Sloan's career is actually twofold. First, Sloan's identity at this moment was "twice removed": as Canadians in the predominantly American grunge scene, and as Haligonians in the Canadian music scene. Both of these facets of Sloan's identity come up often in discussion of the band, and I will present a more detailed analysis in Chapter Two. Second, in albums after *Twice Removed*, the idea of Sloan as a Haligonian band becomes problematized. After the confrontation with Geffen about *Twice Removed*, resulting in little promotion in the United States and a lack of tour support, Sloan went on hiatus, and Andrew Scott relocated to Toronto. After the recording of their reunion album *One Chord to Another* (1996), the rest of the band moved up to Toronto, maintaining a presence in Halifax with their label Murderecords supporting local talent. Many Haligonian bands make the trek westward eventually (my own band included), but the image of young white

¹³ Barclay, et al., 420.

males in early 1990s Canada forged in *Twice Removed* had a profound and lasting legacy.

My argument is an inward-out strategy, focusing on the members of Sloan as young men and working my way outwardly, through the Halifax scene and then Canada. In the next chapter I will look into how Sloan present themselves as young men and how the music from *Twice Removed* contributes to this image and identity, informed by Phil Auslander's notion of "musical personae". In Chapter Three I will consider how Sloan influenced the Halifax scene in the 1990s, the so-called "Halifax Pop Explosion", and how the scene influenced Sloan, while looking to Sara Cohen's study of the indie rock scene in Liverpool, UK, in the 1990s. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I will show how Sloan fits into the Canadian music scene and where they fall into the history of Canadian popular music.

CHAPTER TWO SLOAN AS BETA MALES

While their first two releases were wholeheartedly in the grunge style, Sloan took a very different approach to their second full-length album, *Twice Removed* (1994). The band ditched the fuzzy vocals and distorted guitars for cleaner production values and aesthetics, such as close harmony singing found in music from the Beach Boys and the Beatles, jangly guitar tones with less use of distortion and cleaner tone, as well as giddy hooks in both the instruments and the vocals. The vocal hook from “People of the Sky,” for example, closely resembles the vocal hook in the Turtles’ hit “So Happy Together” (1967), a song associated with the carefree, free-loving 1960s. As I noted in the introduction, this dramatic change in sound was not met with enthusiasm from their then-record label Geffen Records. Given the choice either to re-record the entire album or leave, the members of Sloan opted to leave the label and strike out on their own.

Twice Removed was a major success for Sloan in Canada, both critically and commercially, selling over 50 000 copies, reaching Gold record status, and reaching the top of the *Chart* magazine Best Canadian Album of All Time a year after its release. Ten years later, the album returned to the top of that poll, and since 2010 the group has been doing concert tours with material exclusively from *Twice Removed*, performing in towns across Canada.¹⁴ At this point in their career, it would be hard to find a rock musician who grew up in the early 1990s who doesn’t know at least one Sloan song, a claim bolstered by the immediate

¹⁴ James Covey, “HPX Spotlight: Sloan performs *Twice Removed*,” *The Coast*, October 21, 2010.

selling out of *Twice Removed's* re-release in 2011. Nevertheless, this immense and lasting success in Canada did not carry across into the United States; in the same year that *Twice Removed* first topped Canadian music polls, it landed on *Spin* magazine's "Top Ten Albums You Didn't Hear".¹⁵ *Spin's* list of "20 Best Albums of '94" present a very different picture of popular rock music in the states, with Hole topping the list with spots going to the hard, industrial sounds of Nine Inch Nails, the wild folk-hip hop of Beck and the last gasps of grunge from Soundgarden.¹⁶

How can we account for the discrepancy between Sloan's reception in Canada and the United States? It is true that the only Canadian act of the 90s to maintain real success after their initial reception was Alanis Morissette, but no other act from that scene was given as much importance as Sloan. After the successes of the *Peppermint* EP and the *Smear* LP, Sloan was positioned to take on the American grunge scene with a vengeance. I consider that their failure to do so is rooted in the image constructed on *Twice Removed*, embracing a beta male identity; a non-conventional masculinity characterized by introversion, self-deprecation, emotionally-driven narratives, and a great value placed on nostalgia and the mundane. Canadian identity has always taken an inferior position to American identity in a global view. So even though the masculinity associated with Canadian identity is conventional for Canada, in a broader sense it contrasts with conventional American alpha male identity.

¹⁵ *Spin Magazine*, "10 Best Albums You Didn't Hear in '94." December, 1994, 80-81.

¹⁶ *Spin Magazine*, "20 Best Albums of '94." December, 1994, 76-78.

Since I am talking about Canada, it seems only fitting to use hockey as an analogy in explaining beta male identity. When one thinks of Canadian masculinity, an obvious connection is to the men of hockey, and in the 1980s and 90s no one man better represented Canadian hockey than Wayne Gretzky. Gretzky was the perfect image of what a Canadian hockey player should be; he was fast and relatively small in size (though quite tall: he is 6'), a finesse player on the ice, rather than a goon or a bruiser. Even off the ice he seemed to represent Canadian values through his humble, self-effacing manner in interviews, and his genuine love of Canada and the game. The most famous instance of this was during the press conference announcing his trade from the Edmonton Oilers to the Los Angeles Kings, during which he wept openly at the prospect of leaving Canada.¹⁷ In 1998, when *The Hockey News* polled writers, broadcasters, coaches, managers, former players and other industry insiders, they selected Gretzky as the top player of all time. Upon hearing this, Gretzky "professed embarrassment at having been chosen...he'd have voted for Orr, or for his hero, Gordie Howe."¹⁸ In this way, Gretzky represents the ideal for Canadian masculinity, which differs from dominant, American-influenced ideals of masculinity. He is both a symbol for conventional masculinity -- strong, proud and

¹⁷ Lyle Fitzsimmons, "How The Wayne Gretzky Trade Rocked My World 25 Years ago," *Bleacher Report*, August 9, 2013, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1731020-how-the-wayne-gretzky-trade-changed-hockey-in-the-united-states> (accessed July 16, 2014).

¹⁸ Cam Cole, "Bobby Orr was The One, not The Great One," *The Calgary Herald*, March 20, 2013. <http://www.calgaryherald.com/sports/hockey/calgary-flames/Bobby+Great/8128247/story.html> (accessed May 17, 2014).

athletic -- but he also presents himself as humble and vulnerable, character traits not readily associated with stereotypical American athletes.

Sloan also has played a role in Canadian hockey culture, with their 1998 song “Money City Maniacs” playing in minor league arenas across the country. Chris Murphy reflects on his own history with the sport, saying: “I played hockey as a kid, but like everyone I liked then and now, I quit around grade seven or eight because it was getting violent and stupid. A friend of mine...got me playing hockey again as an adult promising me it wouldn’t be like the hockey I played as a kid.”¹⁹ Murphy’s penchant for non-violent hockey seems like a page right out of the Book of Gretzky. This turn away from violence by both Murphy and Gretzky connects to the development of a new spectrum of masculinity, one that differs from what Richard Gruneau defines as the “Don Cherry position” for “old Canadian hockey traditions.”²⁰ Gretzky wanted to bring the game to a wider audience, an audience that may have been deterred from watching a sport where “force can dominate skill”.²¹ Gretzky, along with fellow star Mario Lemieux, envisioned a more gentlemanly sport where, as one fan described, “By abolishing fighting, the NHL will sport a new image and flaunt a better product. A product featuring skilled, crafty players playing the game as it should be played.”²² This is

¹⁹ Magnet Magazine, “Sloan’s Chris Murphy Believes In: The Hockey Association of the Arts,” <http://www.magnetmagazine.com/2011/05/19/sloans-chris-murphy-believes-in-the-hockey-association-of-the-arts/> (accessed July 4, 2014).

²⁰ Richard Gruneau and David Witson, “Violence, Fighting, and Masculinity,” *Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities and Cultural Politics*. (Toronto: Garmond Press, 1993), 188.

²¹ Ibid, 186.

²² Ibid, 187.

an image that coincides with Murphy's ideal view of the game, and the shifting identity of young men in Canada.

This image is also coupled with the theme of isolation, both geographically and emotionally, that is explored throughout the album. Is this what makes *Twice Removed* so appealing to Canadians but not to our southern neighbours? Are the male personae crafted in this album connected to distinctively Canadian characteristics? The rest of chapter will illuminate how the themes of nostalgia and isolation in the music and image of Sloan contribute to a distinctively Canadian identity.

Canadian culture has always seemed to be obsessed with what it once was, or — perhaps more accurately — what it imagines itself to have been. In canonical Canadian literature, such as the *Anne of Green Gables* series by Lucy Maud Montgomery, Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens* (1956), and Margaret Lawrence's *The Stone Angel* (1964), many of the themes are rooted in nostalgia, a nostalgia created through emphasizing nature and frontier life within the story. Literary critic Northrop Frye connected this to what he called "garrison mentality" in Canadian literature.²³ Texts deemed to demonstrate garrison mentality usually contain characters who are isolated, both physically and emotionally, and who build metaphorical walls to protect themselves from the harsh physical and emotional climates of their settings. The protagonist in Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens*, Jamie, is an excellent example of garrison mentality. A young boy

²³ Northrop Frye, "Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada," *The Bush Garden: Essays on Canadian Imagination*. (Toronto: Anasi, 1975).

whose parents died in a car crash, he spends most of his life in a boarding school before going to live with his only living relative, an Uncle Angus, up north due to the decline in the fur trade. He then befriends a young Cree boy and ends up lost in the barrens on a hunt for deer. Mowat's Jamie is isolated from his parents by death, and then from his original life by being transplanted to the northern country of Canada after spending his life in Toronto. Frye connects this characterization with the fear of the emptiness of the Canadian landscape that some ascribe to Canadian identity, as well as fear of more powerful other nations.

The Canadian landscape is also seen as female in Frye's analysis. As Eva Mackey describes, "Frye...constructs Canada as a devouring, dangerous and alien female...Part of this femaleness is that she is everywhere, unconquerable, and somehow not definite or definable," whereas the United States is seen as, "more 'male,' more definite and phallic."²⁴ Even in discussions of the geography of Canada and the United States, the conventional masculine image and identity are given to the US, while Canada is attached to the more feminine, expressive image that is associated with beta male identity. This unconquerable, wild Canadian landscape can be seen in a number of texts that invoke the garrison mentality, often with protagonists dealing with difficulty and disaster caused by nature and weather. Living in Halifax during the 1980s and 90s enforced a certain cultural isolation, mostly due to geographical constraints, that some larger cities

²⁴ Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 57.

in Canada did not face. For example, the radio picked up only AM stations from the United States, leaving the rest of the dial to be filled by local radio²⁵.

In Canadian musical culture, this mindset was manifest in the influential folk scene of the 1960s and 1970s. In a 1964 performance on CBC's *Quest*, Bob Dylan performed on a set depicting a logging camp cabin somewhere in the Canadian north, when actually the broadcast was produced in Toronto.²⁶ The image was created to meet the ideals of folk music in North America, in a way creating a pseudo-authentic experience by imagining an alternate past where Bob Dylan was just a singing lumberjack. A later artist such as Stan Rogers would conjure up nostalgic images by focusing on these characteristics, adding emphasis by writing songs in styles of earlier time periods. Rogers's famous "Barrett's Privateers," for example, is written in the style of a traditional sea shanty from the eighteenth century, but in actuality was written and recorded in 1976.²⁷ Rogers was not actually from Nova Scotia, but Hamilton, Ontario: he represented an Ersatz East Coaster (a "Faux-va" Scotian?), whose parents were from Nova Scotia, his only direct association with the province was a few summer trips in his youth. This is reminiscent of the earliest stages of Bob Dylan's folk career, in which he famously presented himself as an "Okie" like his idol Woody Guthrie, while actually having grown up playing rock'n'roll in suburban Minnesota.

²⁵ Save for CBC national radio.

²⁶ *Quest*. CBC. Television, March 10th, 1964.

²⁷ Stan Rogers, "Barrett's Privateers," *Fogarty's Cove*, Fogarty's Cove Music (LP), 1976. Rogers' song begins with the narrator/protagonist setting the date as 1778. This date though becomes problematic as all notable Sherbrookes in Canadian History do not pre-date 1778.

By connecting themselves to early traditions in folk music, Rogers and Dylan used nostalgia as a way to appear “authentic” within their respective music scenes. However, these performances of nostalgia also complicate the image of authenticity. Dylan and Rogers did not truly inhabit the identities they presented, yet they were perceived as more authentic because of their devotion to the image. This speaks to the flexibility of “authenticity,” an idea that Benjamin Filene discusses at length in *Romancing the Folk*, especially in regards to Muddy Waters and his ability to transition his performing identity without losing his “authenticity”.²⁸ Sloan also managed to retain their authentic image while changing their persona from grunge/shoegaze band on *Smear* to power pop quartet on *Twice Removed*.

Because his presentation as Nova Scotian was a performance, Rogers’s folk music is not properly folk music at all, but more a music nostalgic for the folk music of the early 20th century. This parallels the music of Sloan on *Twice Removed* and subsequent releases, with their music calling to that earlier time, drenched rather heavily in nostalgia, the specifics of which I will get to later on in the chapter.

Beyond Canadian music, nostalgia is also prominent in music associated with beta males and beta male identity. My own undergraduate thesis on Weezer, an early 90s American rock band, argues that Cuomo and his bandmates

²⁸ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 77.

specifically fashioned their musical personae to display beta male identity.²⁹

Musical persona, as defined by Philip Auslander, refers to the image that a musician presents while performing music.³⁰ Auslander writes that “The analysis I propose entails thinking of musicians as social beings – not just in the sense that musical performances are interactions among musicians...but also in the larger sense, that to be a musician is to perform an identity in a social realm.”³¹

Members of Sloan are not only performing their music, but also they are performing the role of musician to the audience, and specifically they are performing the identity of young Canadian males within music, an image and identity that is closely linked to the beta male.

In the beta male musician’s persona, nostalgia plays a very influential role in the image and sound of the artist (of which both contribute to the creation of a persona). For example, “In The Garage” (1994), from Weezer’s self-titled debut, presents the image of teenager spending time alone, when in fact Rivers Cuomo, Weezer’s songwriter and front man, wrote it in his mid-20s. The song is filled with nods to Cuomo’s teenage life: Dungeons & Dragons, reading comic books, and listening to KISS. All of these activities take place in the garage, making it a centre of nostalgia for Cuomo. Weezer also performed songs that seemed to hail from another decade, such as “Surf Wax America” (1994), the homage to surf rock and the Beach Boys. Weezer also took influence from the Barbershop quartet style, one of the earliest examples of beta male music; in Gage Averill’s

²⁹ Corey Henderson, 2012.

³⁰ Philip Auslander, “Musical Personae,” *TDR* 50, no. 1, 2006, 101.

³¹ *Ibid.*

study of Barbershop quartets, he found a continual preoccupation with the “good old days”.³² Nostalgia is at once a key component both of the beta male identity and Canadian culture, and the intersection of these identities is where we find Sloan.

By their third album, *One Chord To Another* (1996), Sloan had cemented themselves fully as a “Retro Pop” band, pulling more from the sounds of the 1960s British Invasion than their own contemporaries, as described by the press, “This certainly was not Nirvana. As it was consistently pointed out...this was closer to the Beatles”.³³ The album title itself harks back to that garrison mentality found in Canadian literature, the band being “twice removed,” as Canadians in America and as Haligonians in Canada.³⁴ In the early 90s grunge scene, Sloan was one of the few Canadian groups to make an impact on the scene, positioning Sloan outside of the main American grunge scene from the beginning. The separation was also compounded by how difficult the touring schedule in the early years of the band, travelling from Halifax to Vancouver, with just four gigs in between, all for a showcase with Geffen.³⁵

For Haligonians in Canada, the sense of separation from the rest of the country is in part a geographical experience. Halifax is located twelve hours away from the next biggest musical centre, Montreal. Twelve very long hours across Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Quebec, a mind-numbing distance with nothing

³² Gage Averill, *Four Parts, No Waiting*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 154.

³³ Barclay, et al., 420.

³⁴ Ibid, 439.

³⁵ Ibid, 435.

to see for miles but vast forests along less than ideal roads. Twelve hours can easily become fourteen or fifteen depending on the weather, which is rarely nice. Making this trek, the distance between the Maritimes and the rest of the country is felt. The writers of *Have Not Been the Same* describe it quite nicely:

Though it is, by default, the musical capital of Canada's East Coast, Halifax has always been isolated from the rest of the country; most bands' concept of a "Canadian tour" meant going no further east than Montreal – an arduous 15 hours away from Halifax. It's often said that the city is only a convenient stop if you're en route to Europe.³⁶

The isolation was not a merely a result the driving distance between the next major rock scene, however; it was a cultural isolation as well, since the foremost icons of Nova Scotian music on the Canadian scene at the time were artists like Anne Murray and the traditional Celtic music associated with the region, represented by the Rankins or Men of the Deep. Thus, young East Coast rock musicians, and aficionados of punk and new wave watching music on television, either on MuchMusic or the CBC, tended to see music scenes dauntingly far from their locations, or music reinforcing a Nova Scotian identity that did not speak to or for them. This distance caused many Halifax bands to strive for a strong local scene, focusing on local music and venues, instead of reaching out to the rest of Canada. I will focus more on the Halifax scene in the next chapter.

"I Hate my Generation," the second track on *Twice Removed*, is sonically the polar opposite to the sound crafted on *Smearred*, and it brings nostalgia to the

³⁶ Ibid, 457.

forefront of the lyrical content. The song begins with singing from Pentland and Murphy, underscored by clean guitar arpeggios and a simple rhythm track from the bass and drums. The vocals in “I Hate my Generation” are sung by two different singers, but this does not convey the impression of a duet. This effect comes from similarity between Pentland and Murphy’s vocal timbres. The choruses speed up the tempo and rhythmic intensity, with doubled vocals from Pentland reminiscent of early Beatles songs such as “Eight Days A Week” and “I Wanna Hold Your Hand”. Written by Ferguson, the song is drenched with nostalgia, and focuses on the disconnect that Sloan felt from their rock counterparts. To start, the protagonist laments that he has nothing in common with some other unnamed person stating, “Other than the colour of your hair”. Sloan is also a band that was disconnected from their music scene, and this lyric really contests the relevance of generational labels.



Figure 1. A disconnect was forming between the identity being put forth by Sloan’s label, Geffen Records, and the sonic identity found on *Twice Removed*.

In Figure 1 we can see the disconnect sung about in “I Hate My Generation,” as Sloan and Nirvana do look very much alike. Sonically, however, they present very different identities, as evidenced in the use of modulations from major to minor

keys in the verse and chorus. The chorus sounds like it actually comes from a different song altogether. Besides the key change, from D minor to D major, and the vocal doubling reminiscent to the Beatles, the drums undergo a shift in style. The verse has the drums switching the emphasis on which the strong beat lays, never truly coming to a comfortable rhythm. On the chorus, the drums change to a straightforward, conventional rock beat, as well as speeding up in tempo and rhythmic intensity.

The chorus also includes a sonic signifier of the 1950s-60s with the use of close harmony vocals, a vocal style reminiscent of many pop acts such as the Beach Boys and the Beatles. This vocal technique is used often on the album, and it can be understood an attempt to align with nostalgia for early 1960s rock and roll themes of happiness and having a good time, in sharp contrast to the angst-ridden rock of the early 90s. In many ways, the musical techniques Sloan use to conjure past eras also evoke a celebration of leisure, as the reference to TV watching sung by Pentland in the chorus.

The reference to TV also brings to mind a wistful image of the family sitting around the TV together after a long day of school and work. The act of watching TV had changed drastically from the 1950s-60s to 1990s, and in his book on Canadian identity, Gerald Friesen touches on this very topic, "They have two TVs, but they are a family. What is the point in being home if three of them watch in the basement, two in the bedroom? They are apart enough...Watching TV might not seem much, but week after week, sharing the same shows and

episodes, they build reference points, they share the same experiences.”³⁷ TV in the 1950s and 1960s also represented something new and exciting, with a steady increase in wealth from the 1950s to the 1970s allowing more households to spend on things like TV, making that generation the first of what Friesen calls the “screen-capitalist age.”³⁸ Friesen describes “screen-capitalism” as consisting of two noteworthy features, “first, the exceptional alterations in the perceived dimensions of time and space, a result of shifts of communication and transportation systems; and, second, the unprecedented juxtaposition of insecurity and plenty.”³⁹

The excitement about the novelty of watching TV that comes from this earlier generation juxtaposes sharply with the era in which Sloan were coming of age, where Friesen describes the change in reasoning for watching TV,

Why do they spend so much time with television, as much as Canadians twenty-two to twenty-four hours a week? “It is the poor man’s night out. It is habit. But, mostly, it is a break. They don’t want anything else to do. He doesn’t want to be engaged, engrossed or stirred to action. He’s not looking for information...He is no weak, addicted member of the ‘entertain me’ generation, he is tired.”⁴⁰

The fantasy that Sloan presents is of a time with more security, and more time to enjoy leisure activities, where watching too much TV was a luxury and not a requirement for the modern world.

³⁷ Gerald Friesen, “Culture and Politics Today,” *Citizens and Nation: An Essay on History, Communication, and Canada*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 186-187.

³⁸ Ibid, 191.

³⁹ Ibid, 168.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 187.

“I Hate My Generation” contains another classic song trope; that of the “spelling section,” a technique with origins in cheerleading culture. Spelling out words can be found in many songs throughout the 50s-70s, such as Otis Redding/Aretha Franklin’s “Respect,” (1965) the Kinks “Lola,” (1970) and the Bay City Rollers “Saturday Night,” (1975). Sloan use this technique closer to the cheerleading style, such as in “Saturday Night,” by spelling out “Sean Said Play,” again placing emphasis on happiness through nostalgia, longing for that idyllic time before the harsh world of the present.

The song “People Of The Sky,” written by Andrew Scott, also involves nostalgia in its sonic construction. The song begins with Scott singing and playing acoustic guitar through a very lo-fi sounding microphone, almost as if Scott was playing from another time, reaching into ours. This sound of the past was something Scott was actively looking for, as he wanted to “write a song like Bob Dylan’s ‘Ballad in Plain D’.”⁴¹ Sonically, “People Of The Sky” once again takes the cleaner tone aesthetic in the timbres of the instruments with very little effects on the guitars and bass. The main vocal line, sung by Scott, tends to run on, often times trying to fit in too many syllables, reminiscent of the vocal line in Dylan’s “Ballad of the Thin Man.” The most memorable part of “People Of The Sky,” is the vocal hook/refrain appearing for the first time around 0:35. The rhythmic repetition of the syllable “ba” acts as a refrain for the song, more reminiscent of the Turtles’ hit “Happy Together” (1967), than any contemporary of Sloan. These nostalgic

⁴¹ Barclay, et al., 441.

vocal hooks would become a mainstay in Sloan's future work, but at the time of *Twice Removed's* release, they represented a drastic change from their early work. The harmony on the vocal refrain is also evocative of campfire sing-alongs, connecting once again to ideals of a middle-class childhood.

Through image in music videos, Sloan also pushed the nostalgic image they had begun to adopt. In the video for the song "Coax Me", Sloan effectively recalls bands performing on primetime variety shows of the 1960s.



Figure 2. Sloan's obvious allusion to bands from the 1960s performing on primetime talk shows in their video for "Coax Me" (1994).⁴²

This trope in music video was used by American bands a few times in the early 90s, coinciding with the 30th anniversary of the Beatles' debut, most notably by Nirvana for their video for "In Bloom" (1992) and Weezer's "Buddy Holly" (1994). However, Nirvana's video functions as a parody of these performances, and the

⁴² Sloan, "Sloan-Coax Me," YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uj6d-CQNJ-c&noredirect=1> (accessed November 26, 2012).

Weezer video is more an homage to the long-running 1970s sitcom *Happy Days* (itself a nostalgic representation of the 1950s) than the primetime variety show of the 50s and 60s. Is this also a reaction to the economic state of the east coast, with members of Generation X commenting with both longing and bitterness on the pop culture of the baby boom's youth? For Sloan this seems apt, as they rejected the sonic identity offered by their labelmates at Geffen (Nirvana). Sloan would return to this style of video by replicating similar tropes in rock and roll performance for subsequent videos. The video for "The Lines You Amend" from *One Chord To Another* evokes many of the Beatles' live performances, and the band even tackles the "rockumentary" in the video for "She Says What She Means" from *Navy Blues* (1998).

Furthermore, Sloan's use of nostalgia, compared to that of a US band like Weezer's, lacks overt self-aware irony: where Weezer aligns themselves very deliberately and self-consciously with the uncool members of that earlier generation, Sloan simply appears uncool. They wear ill-fitting clothing, never trying to explicitly recreate any of the clichéd rock poses of power and swagger on stage.

Onstage and off, Sloan created an identity that connected with the "nice-guy" rock and roll groups from the 1960s such as Jerry and the Pacemakers, the Liverpudlian contemporaries of the Beatles who seemed not even to seek the kind of success earned by the Fab Four. Guitarist Jay Ferguson explained Sloan's image in a 2000 interview: "We're too nice... There's not much of a

negative slant to what we do compared to other bands.”⁴³ In another interview, Ferguson presents an alternative view to the conventional rock star mentality when it comes to doing interviews saying, “...Just being excited since I was a kid to either make records, play shows, do interviews, do all those rock-star kind of things...how can I complain about something like this?”⁴⁴ This “nice-guy” image is infused with nostalgia; from releasing a bonus album modeled on the Beach Boys *Party!* (1965) to keeping their Juno awards at their parents’ houses on the mantle like so many hockey trophies and science fair ribbons, the members of Sloan constantly refer to the world of their childhoods in the 1960s and 70s. In 1997, before the release of *Navy Blues* (1998), the group performed at a high school in Bowmanville, a small town outside Toronto.⁴⁵ With this performance, Sloan continued to onvoke the nostalgia that their music suggested, presenting themselves as a high school band, and not the group of late 20-somethings they were at the time. Of course, Sloan’s “nice-guy” image did include some rather nasty edges, especially in their relationships with women. In the next chapter, I will look at this sinister aspect of Sloan’s image in my discussion of “Bells On”.

The thirst for nostalgia also spilled into the recording process, relying on antiquated production methods, aligning more with the Beatles than peer-acts such as Nine Inch Nails.⁴⁶ In a guitar-based rock ensemble such as Sloan, the sound of the guitar has a crucial role in forging the image that the band is putting

⁴³ Lisa Wilton, “Far From Maniacs,” *Calgary Sun*, February 21, 2000.

⁴⁴ Jane Stevenson, “Sloan Living Rock’n’Roll Dream,” *Toronto Sun*, October 31, 1998.

⁴⁵ Jane Stevenson, “Sloan Has Gig At High School,” *Toronto Sun*, December 11, 1997.

⁴⁶ Karen Bliss, “Sloan Longs For The Old Days,” *Jam! Music*, October 13, 1999.

forth, so that the drastic difference between the guitar timbre on Sloan's debut, *Smear* (1992) and *Twice Removed* requires serious scrutiny. *Smear* presented a sound and image very close to the grunge aesthetic of the early 1990s, as fuzzy, distorted guitars are draped over the entire album. Feedback is used to a greater degree, littering the album with bursts of noise. The bass tone is much dryer, sharper, and lacking warmth. The guitar tone on *Twice Removed* is in stark contrast to this aesthetic, replacing the fuzz with cleaner guitar tones. Feedback on *Twice Removed* is almost negligible, with all the sound more concentrated and less scattershot. The bass is also a much warmer, rounder tone, mostly due to a decrease in gain used on the bass that adds to the overall smooth feel of the record. As a whole, *Twice Removed* is much quieter than *Smear*, and includes the first of many acoustic songs with the album closer "I Can Feel It". As I have already noted, this drastic change nearly cost Sloan their careers, and started the tension between the band and Geffen Records.

When contemporary bands, like Nirvana, were producing loud, distorted, disjointed guitar sounds, they also presented an image and identity consistent with that sound, with performances usually ending in a cacophony of noise and the destruction of public property. Sloan however, created a different guitar sound to represent their post-grunge persona, a sound that Matthew Bannister identifies as "Indie Guitar Rock".⁴⁷ Distortion is used at a minimum, in favour of a more clean tone, reminiscent of the 1960s, as well as more use of instrumental

⁴⁷ Matthew Bannister, "'Loaded': Indie Guitar Rock, Canonism, White Masculinities," *Popular Music* 25, no. 1 (Jan, 2006): 77-78.

and guitar hooks with generally a more upbeat feeling, as opposed to the more aggressive riffs of 90s metal and grunge. One of the most convincing sections of Bannister's argument is in his requirements for good Indie Guitar Rock groups, saying, "A great rock group...needed not just a sexy singer, a great virtuoso, or a sussed marketing scam...It needed a pop historian."⁴⁸ This role in Sloan fell onto the shoulders of Jay Ferguson. He became interested in music at a very young age, and began working at Ol' Dan's Records at the tender age of 12.⁴⁹ Through this job, Ferguson started his education in popular music, both classic and contemporary, a knowledge that he would bring to the table often in Sloan, described by Murphy, "Jay knew all the latest shit, everything from Nirvana to Happy Mondays or whatever...In a lot of ways Jay takes me, the Rush/punk fan, and shows me all this other music. Without him, I don't know what I'd be."⁵⁰ Bannister reinforces the centrality of old music to indie rock, writing that "Not only the music, but also the ideologies of the 1960s act as a common reference point," which we have seen to be a hallmark of the Sloan sound.⁵¹ Even during the grunge/shoegaze period of Sloan's career, this use of the 1960s as a reference point came through Ferguson who described loving bands such as My Bloody Valentine and Slowdrive because, "They all seemed to echo 60s pop melodies, and buried harmonies with loud distorted guitars."⁵² This nostalgia-laden guitar sound also has a bearing on Sloan's particular version of masculinity: "Musicians

⁴⁸ Bannister, 78.

⁴⁹ Barclay, et al., 422.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 432.

⁵¹ Bannister, 81.

⁵² Barclay, et al., 432.

wouldn't necessarily want to talk about their influences because it would compromise their cool...a man who talks too much about what he 'knows' becomes feminized, a nerd..."⁵³ The knowledge itself is not uncool or feminized, but the act of presenting oneself as well-versed is. Sloan's image in music videos, their vocal choices, their guitar tone, present them as what may be the "least cool" image in rock and roll: unoriginal. This is not to say that having influences is a bad thing. Nirvana front man and grunge rock legend, Kurt Cobain has said that Nirvana was like, "Black Sabbath playing The Knack."⁵⁴ The problem arises when the band or artist becomes too studied, contradicting the ideology of spontaneity and originality that was central to the early 90s rock scene.

The question remains: how does Sloan use this nostalgia associated with beta male identity as a signifier for Canadian identity? This is where the theme of isolation brings Sloan into the realm of Canadian identity. *Twice Removed* opens with the track "Pen Pals," a song written from the perspective of a boy and girl from two different countries corresponding with each other. Connecting with Frye's garrison mentality, the protagonists are not only separated by immense distance, but they create social walls around themselves by focusing on their faults. Specifically Amal, the girl from Algiers, sees herself as strange and worries that her pen pal will also see this, with the lyrics at the end of the first verse literally exposing this fear. The mere notion of pen pals may be viewed as

⁵³ Bannister, 86.

⁵⁴ Stereogum, "20 Songs That Influenced Kurt Cobain," http://stereogum.com/4096/20_songs_that_influenced_kurt_cobain/list/ (accessed December 4, 2012).

nostalgic, recalling a ritual that many elementary school children went through. Also, this album comes at the beginning of the email revolution and instant global communication, so this song can be seen to position itself with the past.

“Bells On,” a slower ballad on *Twice Removed*, begins with quiet ambient noise, placing the listener in a very contained space. From the very beginning of this track, Sloan used noise in a very different way than on *Smear*. Noise on *Smear* seemed to take over the song, whereas the small amount of fuzz used in the intro of “Bells On” actually quiets down the record after the vibrant pop sounds of the “Coax Me” outro. We learn that the protagonist is attending a funeral, while the object of his affection (or angst depending on how you hear the song) is far away in the city of New York. This distance is interwoven into the narrative of the song, and the protagonist deals with distance in both a physical and emotional way. Isolation and vastness are also found sonically within the song, with a sense of openness created through the use of sustained piano and doubled vocals, which cause an echo effect. Contrast between very dense soundscapes and very simple sounds also create a sense of isolation, such as in “Shame, Shame” which rotates between extremely simple sections and heavy, distorted sections. The simple sections, with the clean guitar tone and lack of rhythmic intensity on the drum kit, become even emptier after hearing the larger, denser sections of the song, filled with multi-layered distorted guitar and rhythmically intense drums and bass. Though the structure of the song is similar to grunge at the time, the quiet to loud transitions from verse to chorus, “Bells On”

never reaches the abandon that is found in a song like “Lithium” by Nirvana. “Bells On” also presents the nasty side of Sloan’s “nice guy” image. Written by Murphy, the song deals with the relationship troubles most of the band was going through at the time, and a theme that Sloan would go to again and again within their music. The songs protagonist goes from longing to anger within the song, climaxing with, “If you had a funeral, I’d be there with bells on,” a lyric emphasized by the vocals breaking down into “la” syllables after.



Figure 3. Sloan interacting with “nature” in their video for “People Of The Sky”.⁵⁵

The song “Snowsuit Sound,” one of the later tracks on the album, may be the best intersection of Canadian identity, landscape and beta male identity. The protagonist is a young boy, or more accurately a young man remembering his youth, who is in love with an older girl. The second song on *Twice Removed* to be written by Ferguson and it is the only song that he sings on the record. In a similar style to “I Hate My Generation,” “Snowsuit Sound” trades minor, distorted verses with clean, pop-y choruses. The bass uses a distortion effect during the

⁵⁵ Sloan, “Sloan – People Of The Sky (Official Music Video),” YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_vHk_IOxGnc (accessed November 26, 2012).

verses, backed by a simplistic beat on the drums and sporadic guitar riffs. The verses of the song are in line with most of the sound of *Smear*, however the chorus breaks away from this in a big way. The rhythm speeds up and the key changes from minor to major, but more important is the inclusion of acoustic guitar as an additional rhythm guitar, giving the chorus a much brighter tone than the verses. Ferguson's quiet and close-miked vocals on the verse add an intimate touch to the song, giving it an autobiographical feel. Ferguson's lack of vocal prowess adds to the sense of the protagonist as a quiet, passive guy. The quiet, non-confrontational protagonist of the song fits well into the image of Canadian masculinity described at the beginning of this chapter with reference to Wayne Gretzky. Both images of masculinity, the protagonist in the song and Gretzky, present their masculinity within the realm of the harsh winter environment and this becomes their realm of competition, either romantic or athletic. The chorus emphasizes this image of quiet and humble Canadian, ending each verse with an enthusiastic "It's not up to me." Thus, the obviously Canadian character once again takes the inferior position, a man who does not act, but reacts, a sentiment actually crucial to Gretzky's style of play. In the words of Gretzky himself, "People think to be a good player you have to pick the puck up, deke around ninety-three guys and make this ungodly slap shot. No. Let the puck do all the moving and get to the right place."⁵⁶ Thus, Gretzky's method is not to act but to react.

⁵⁶ Wayne Gretzky and Rick Reilly, *Gretzky: An Autobiography*

"Snowsuit Sound" all takes place during a stereotypical Canadian winter (read: cold), and the idea of the "snowsuit sound" is something that most northerners can relate to: the sound of a swishing snowsuit on a cold, impossibly quiet night, embellishes the sense of loneliness the protagonist feels with his inability to act on his feelings. Sloan taps into a distinct collective memory of Canadian youth to help the listener identify and sympathize with the protagonist.

Even today, the reception of Sloan's *Twice Removed* is remarkable: the album was voted best Canadian album of all time even before it went certified Gold in Canada, but never attained even cult status in the United States.⁵⁷ Through presenting an image that is both Beta Male and intrinsically Canadian, Sloan was able to connect far more effectively with Canadians than Americans. This is primarily an effect of Sloan's use of nostalgia within their music, as well as the use of isolation and garrison mentality. However, this is not the only facet in Sloan's Canadian popularity, and later chapters will delve into other Canadian themes within the music of Sloan.

⁵⁷ Barclay, et al., 421.

CHAPTER THREE SLOAN AS HALIGONIANS

With their position in Canadian music history as the foremost successful band to emerge from the Halifax Pop Explosion in the early 1990s, Sloan has cemented its reputation as both a true Halifax band and a historically significant Canadian band. Everything from their image to the references found in their music solidifies their authenticity within the scene. However, this image of authenticity, which in turn strengthens their identity as Canadian, is not as straightforward as it appears. *Twice Removed* is -- as I have shown -- a seminal Canadian album, yet it was entirely recorded in New York with an American producer.⁵⁸ Even with the geographical and sonic change, Sloan still managed to remain “authentic,” an ability that would follow Sloan throughout their career.

This ability to move geographically and still remain a strong emblem of Canadian identity comes from Sloan’s position in both the Halifax scene and the broader Canadian musical scene. Sloan’s formation and incubation in the Halifax musical community allowed them to be involved in rock scene dissimilar to the conventional male-oriented rock scene, by working in a scene that had a strong female role. Also, I will discuss one of the most important traits of Canadian identity and the Canadian music scene, humour and how using humour has kept Sloan authentic in the scene even through a dramatically changing sound. Through their use of unconventional masculinity and humour, Sloan have managed to remain authentic and “true” in the Canadian music scene, mastering

⁵⁸ Barclay, et al., 439.

the idea of authenticity as a moving, changing force. In his *Romancing the Folk*, Benjamin Filene states "...authenticity is not a fixed and static entity. Rather, it takes on different configurations according to when, by whom, and to whom it is applied."⁵⁹ The scene from which Sloan emerged was very important in influencing not only how their sound was created but also how their masculine identity was shaped, and how it connected them to a broader Canadian identity of masculinity. Sloan's move to New York for the recording process, and their more permanent move to Toronto, also followed in line with what an accepted narrative for young people on the east coast of Canada: to truly succeed in the world, one eventually has to leave. Sloan was not generally seen as a traitor to the Halifax cause, as Gretzky was with his move to Los Angeles; rather the band was seen to be doing what everyone before them eventually did, and what many continue to do even today. Sloan's move was not an immediate overnight decision, moreover; first Scott moved to Toronto after Sloan went on hiatus following the release of *Twice Removed*.⁶⁰ Eventually, Ferguson and Murphy joined Scott in Toronto after the success of *One Chord to Another*. Finally, during the recording of *Navy Blues*, Pentland made the final move to Toronto and Sloan had officially relocated.⁶¹ The long transition period definitely helped ease the Sloan move to Toronto, as well as Murphy and Ferguson's dedication to Murderecords during the hiatus.⁶² What made Sloan's move to Toronto easiest, however, was due to

⁵⁹ Filene, 77.

⁶⁰ Barclay, et al., 442.

⁶¹ Ibid, 449.

⁶² Ibid, 442.

the fact that Sloan was technically broken up when the majority of the band moved away. Most of Halifax at the time had moved on from Sloan, captured best by this post on the *Sloannet* archive, a collection of posts from the Sloan fan forum run by James Covey in the early 90s,

Sure, it's a shame that Sloan broke-up, they were a good band, but so were Kearney Lake Road, so were Happy Co., etc., etc. If the bands I listed above hadn't broken up, there would be NO Rebecca West, NO Superfriendz, NO Sloan, NO Coyote, NO Trike. Would you people like that? Would you like to live without all of those bands? Do you really think that these Sloan characters are going to give up music simply because their band broke up? Give them a bit more credit than that, and if they do 'give it all up' over this, then what does that say about them in the first place?⁶³

Sloan's time in Halifax had come to an end by this point, but during the *Twice Removed* era, they were very much still a Halifax band.

Filene describes a similar understanding of the story of Muddy Waters whom he describes as trying to, "secure a role in the genesis of American Music."⁶⁴ Waters, alongside a number of other important figures of folk music, are called "memory workers" and realize that creating a memory is not only contained to a specific cultural location, but an ability to reinterpret and renew cultures.⁶⁵ Filene states that memory work is, "an effort to string lines between past, present, and future."⁶⁶ Both Sloan and Wayne Gretzky have not only been able to connect these lines, but have used that very ability to market themselves throughout their career. While there is a great deal to be said about Sloan's ability to maneuver

⁶³ Michael Damian Catano, sic, "sloan breakup (a plea for sanity)", message posted to <https://www.mail-archive.com/sloannet%40sloanmusic.com/msg01439.html> (August 11, 1995).

⁶⁴ Filene, 131.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

within the cult of their authenticity, for the purposes of this work I will focus on Sloan's early career in the Halifax music scene, and how this influenced their identity as white, Canadian, young men.

In her case study of the alternative rock scene of Liverpool, UK in the 1990s, Sara Cohen posits that rock music is not inherently masculine but that "rock is produced as male through the everyday activities that comprise the scene; through the sensual, emotional aspects of the scene; and through systems of ideas that inform the scene, including the contested concept of 'scene' itself."⁶⁷ Her argument discusses everything from the rehearsal spaces used by the musicians to the music magazines popular at the time. From Cohen's case study, we can look at masculine identity represented in rock music in many other scenes. The Halifax scene, a musical scene happening at the same time as the Liverpool scene in Cohen's work but on the other side of the Atlantic, presents a different male identity than the "Lad Culture" found in Liverpool in the 1990s.⁶⁸ The male identity associated with the Halifax scene in the early 1990s is melancholic and indifferent, living in the shadow of a city that never was. It is no surprise that the anthem that would propel Halifax into the larger musical world would be Sloan's "Underwhelmed," (1992) a song that expresses apathy and indifference. In exploring the male identity of the Halifax music scene, I take many cues from Cohen's work, looking at where these bands were usually formed, the

⁶⁷ Sara Cohen, "Men Making A Scene," in *Sexing the Groove* ed. Shiela Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997): 17-18.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 26.

make up of the scene's background players (producers, engineers, venue owners), as well as environmental factors.

Halifax and Liverpool share a number of similar traits, both being harbour towns with previous interests in shipbuilding that had dwindled to all but nothing by the 1990s. Both cities had experienced population booms, with the population of Halifax nearly doubling from 1941 to 1961, but the increases in population began slowing after that.⁶⁹ Halifax, considered a major Canadian city by some, represented not even one tenth of Toronto's population in the 1990s, judging by census figures from 1991-1996. In fact, the suburban sprawl of Halifax is limited in comparison to many other major Canadian cities, due mostly to the hilly, rocky landscape surrounding the city. This is the world that Halifax bands like Sloan grew up in, being told that Halifax was going to be something but never seeing it. In comparison, Liverpool youth in the 1990s were constantly reminded of the greatness that came out of their city, most choosing to ignore it.⁷⁰ Where the youth of Liverpool rejected the historical narrative of their town, the Halifax scene grew around the idea of accepting the historical limitations of their town and making it into something new and better.

The Halifax scene in the 1990s was less strictly male-dominated than the Liverpool scene. For every Sloan and Thrush Hermit, there was a Jale and Plumtree. Besides the major all-girl groups in Halifax, many of the important Halifax bands included female members, such as Hardship Post and the band

⁶⁹ Statistics Canada.

⁷⁰ Cohen, 27.

that basically started the Halifax music scene in the 1990s, Jellyfishbabies.⁷¹ This is vastly different than the make-up of bands in Liverpool at the time where, outside of the very few all-girl bands, women were usually limited to the role of singer. In Halifax, on the hand, women musicians filled any number of roles, from the bass player to more male-identified roles such as the drummer. Indeed, Colleen Britton, the drummer for Halifax elder states-band Jellyfishbabies, would have her drumming style emulated by everyone in the Halifax scene in the 90s, including early Sloan, Elevator to Hell, jale, and Thrush Hermit, the first band of Canadian musical icon Joel Plaskett. Jellyfishbabies hold a special place in the Halifax music scene, having been both an early star in the scene, and one of the first bands to make it out of Halifax.⁷²

The Jellyfishbabies hold the honour of being the era's first band to release a record outside of Halifax, and they also contributed a track to the compilation album *Out of the Fog* (1986).⁷³ This album, along with the Jellyfishbabies's self-titled debut LP, were the first inklings of what was to come: an alternative rock scene in Halifax. On top of being one of the only bands in Halifax at the time to have an album, Jellyfishbabies were one of the few bands that toured outside of Halifax. Ferguson recalled his love of the band in *Have Not Been The Same*, "I thought Scott Kendall was so cool on stage...I think that's what elevated these bands in our minds. Because there were no other bands, you get excited about

⁷¹ Barclay, et al, 460.

⁷² Ibid, 461.

⁷³ Ibid, 459.

having a rock star in the north end of town.”⁷⁴ The Jellyfishbabies inspired Sloan in a way that Sloan would inspire other bands, such as Jale, in the near future. Ferguson’s love of the Jellyfishbabies, as well as the other members of Sloan, was so fervent that they opened an all-ages show at the McInnis room, their biggest show to date in Halifax, with a cover of a Jellyfishbabies tune.⁷⁵

In Liverpool, the scene was based mainly around the Liverpool Music House, a musical space “apart from women”.⁷⁶ The scene in Halifax was based around another art space the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, or NSCAD. Art schools have conventionally been centres of alternative masculinity, and by the 1990s, a place for both men and women to attend. Halifax record label Cinnamon Toast Records, known as the sister label to Sloan’s Murderecords, was run by a woman and was focused on the emerging female bands, such as Plumtree.⁷⁷ The inclusion of women in the Halifax music scene is a very important distinction between Halifax and Liverpool, as it dispels the idea of a “lad culture” mentality, and more importantly shows that Halifax rock was not a “boy’s club”.

It is also worth noting that the vibrant Seattle rock scene of the early 90s was highly male, with a “sister scene” developing around the riot grrl movement in nearby Olympia, Washington. The presence of women within Halifax’s scene in more than just performance roles has an influence on the masculine identity formed within the scene. Women still appear as objects of desire in the musical

⁷⁴ Ibid, 460.

⁷⁵ James R. Covey, “the gig to end all gigs,” message posted to <https://www.mail-archive.com/sloannet%40sloanmusic.com/msg00112.html> (October 4, 1993).

⁷⁶ Cohen, 21.

⁷⁷ Barclay, et al., 488.

output but within these portrayals the women are almost always seen as on par, if not superior, to the males in the scene. Take, for instance, the male and female characters in the Haligonian anthem, Sloan's "Underwhelmed": "She skips her classes and gets good grades/I go to my courses rain or shine/She's passed her classes/while I attend mine."⁷⁸

Sloan's interactions with women are not simply one way or the other, as they were romantically linked to female musicians in addition to being part of the same scene. With songs such as *Smeared's* "Median Strip" and *Twice Removed's* "Shame Shame," Murphy has openly written about his relationship with author/musician Laura Borealis.⁷⁹ Murphy's most infamous song regarding his relationships with women in the scene is surely *One Chord to Another's* "G Turns to D," a song about the women who learned guitar from him and the damage dealt to him from songs by Borealis and Jale's Jennifer Pierce.⁸⁰ Pierce herself explains some of the drama caused by this,

I know I wrote some response songs...These are no comprehensive assessment of the scene though. It's sketchy at best and very elite...I suppose I rather not spoil them by revealing their true meaning...It is safe to say that a good percentage of what I wrote was not so much directed at Chris, but me working through some of my confusion about Chris.⁸¹

Laura Stein, bassist of Jale, saw Sloan's rise to fame as inspiration for Jale and other bands in the scene to try and make it, "Their (Sloan) rise to fame was unbelievable for them and a lot of bands. They were good musicians, but they

⁷⁸ Sloan, "Underwhelmed," *Smeared*, 1992.

⁷⁹ Barclay, et al., 478.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid, 480.

were just normal art school kids and that's why we thought we could do it too."⁸²

Sloan had a reputation for helping less fortunate bands in the Halifax scene by donating gear and giving them opening slots, acts that many attributed to their romantic interests. Alyson MacLeod, drummer for Jale, disagrees with this assessment of their motives: "In one way or another they've helped everyone here. I've heard things like it's because we went out with some of them. That's not why. They were very supportive and they were recognizing something that was worth being seen...to see them go through things was like having an older sibling and watching them."⁸³ The music, along with these firsthand accounts, portrays a complex community of men and women working together, unlike the Liverpool scene. The influence of women on male identity in the Halifax scene, however, only makes up one part of the complex, masculine identity. A stronger influence, in fact, comes from the city itself.

In his seminal work on the Canadian prog-rock band Rush, Chris McDonald explores the themes of escapism found in Rush's music, specifically escape from suburban life that the members of Rush all found themselves in at one time.⁸⁴ The same need for escape is not found in the music and identity of men in the Halifax music scene. Where the members of Rush had the booming metropolis of Toronto to compare from their dull lives in suburbia, the suburbs of Halifax only really had Halifax to compare to. Halifax in the 1990s, much like

⁸² Barclay, et al., 481.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Chris McDonald, "Anywhere but Here," in *Rush: Rock Music and the Middle Class* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 31.

today, was a small, isolated harbour town steeped in history. Due to some interesting limitations on downtown development, the citadel hill fort looms over the downtown core. Teens living in Halifax were surrounded by images of a bustling city during the major wars of the 19th and 20th centuries, economic booms that never really resulted in anything. The Sloan record *Between The Bridges* (1999) best describes the feeling of growing up in Halifax in the 1990s: leaving the suburbs did not have that same escapism of the big city because it was the same on the other side of the bridge, causing young people to just exist. That need to escape into the big city that is found in the work of Rush, is not found in the music of the Halifax scene. The indifference heard within the music of such bands as Sloan and Jale can be attributed partially to this environment. Not only did they have very little to do, the climate caused bands to perform underground, in small dingy clubs performing music that -- until the explosion on the larger Canadian scene in the mid-90s -- was largely unnoticed in favour of more traditional maritime music. It is in this atmosphere that the youth of the Halifax music scene existed, just existed.

While these young musicians just existed, they created a formidable music scene, built by no one else except those in the city at the time. The venues were run by friends of the bands, who shared gear with each other and helped friends start record labels, which in turn gave the bands a chance to be heard in more than just dingy pubs in downtown Halifax. It is through this music scene with participation from men and women, in a small isolated city in the shadow of what

never was, that we get the complex, melancholic masculine identity found in the music of bands like Sloan, and other Halifax bands like Elevator to Hell, Leonard Conan, and Thrush Hermit. In fact, if you listen closely you can almost hear Patrick Pentland sighing woefully as he plays.

Another trait that connects Sloan to Halifax, and the Canadian musical community in general, is their humour, a characteristic that is strongly influenced by the Halifax music scene and the nonconventional masculinity Sloan presents. “Underwhelmed” from their debut record, *Smear* (1992), was the band’s first foray into the witty lyrical style that would be a sustained feature of *Twice Removed* and beyond.

Humour and music in Canada have a very close connection, less commonly found in the US, with conventional music-comedy groups such as Bowser and Blue, a satirical duo from Montreal and Buddy Wasisname and the Other Fellers from Newfoundland. Then there are the “comedy-rock” bands, bands that aren’t necessarily comedy acts but rely heavily on humour, the most famous of these being Sloan’s Toronto contemporaries the Barenaked Ladies. Even conventional comedy troupes in Canada have a long history with music with Canadian comedy icons such as Wayne and Shuster and Kids in the Hall incorporating musical numbers into their performances. The Kids in the Hall went even further than just musical performances to present sketches that involve musical culture, such as Bruce McCulloch’s portrayal of a stereotypical super rock fan of the Doors, Kevin McDonald’s “Bass Player Beat Poem”, and Dave

Foley's ode to Folk Music.⁸⁵ Halifax itself was home to two of the most important groups in Canadian comedy; the *Trailer Park Boys* and *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, the latter of which I will discuss in this chapter. Coming from this long tradition of music and comedy together in Canadian culture, Sloan present themselves as Canadian in their humorous nature through lyrics, image in music videos and extra-musical context, such as how they act during interviews. Sloan created their musical personae not just by the music they made but how they interacted with extra-musical realms, as discussed in the previous chapter in regards to Auslander's work on musical personae. I will explore this idea, of Sloan's performance identity, later in this chapter and now focus on how Sloan uses humour within their music.

"Deeper Than Beauty" presents the cheeky, self-deprecating lyrical style that is found both in beta male identity, as previously mentioned, and Canadian humour. Chris Murphy's solo vocals are accompanied by only a loose, repetitive guitar riff, once again with a clean tone, and straightforward drumming, making the focus of the song primarily the vocals. The drumming is almost so repetitive and lackluster (the drum line contains very few drum breaks and when they do occur they are less than spectacular) it becomes sort of humorous to hear. The song gently skewers love songs that describe the many ways that the object of affection is wonderful. Murphy's lyrics make it quite obvious that this is infatuation and nothing more, giving an ironic tinge to the title "Deeper Than Beauty", in the

⁸⁵ Season 2 ep. 14, Season 1 ep. 16, Season 1 ep. 14.

first verse, “I suppose I’ve seen you three times now and I guess I’m wondering how you keep the boys at bay.” The ambiguity of saying “I’ve seen you three times now” can either be taken as the protagonist and his object of affection have spent time together three times or that he has literally seen her three times. The latter being the case makes the most sense within the song, as we learn very little about the girl beyond the way she looks. In fact, the entire song is dedicated to the way the protagonist likes this mystery woman to look, with the second verse describing how seeing her with her hair down calms him and the third, how much better she looks without her “hideous glasses”. Murphy then follows up these musings with statements that he knows she goes “deeper than your beauty” but that because he “grew up too cool” he will never find out.

It is tempting to interpret this kind of narrative as an example of the Canadian literary technique analysed by William H. New, who defines Canadian irony as how “we walk the border,” separating us from our neighbours to the south.⁸⁶ New states that the importance of irony in Canadian culture is that, “it reconfirms what for Canadians has become a characteristic idiom – an oblique discourse, a communication by indirection, which of course only works if the power to interpret such obliqueness is culturally shared.”⁸⁷ The use of irony positions Sloan within a history of cultural figures that used irony as a way to associate themselves as Canadians. Sloan even comes from the same city, and began at roughly the same time as the famous Canadian satirical news program

⁸⁶ William H. New, *Borderlands: How We Talk about Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 49.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

This Hour Has 22 Minutes, a show that used satire, parody and irony in a uniquely Canadian way.⁸⁸ This usually involves deadpan humour while discussing current events, a style that lends itself to the mock journalism of *22 Minutes*, as well as poking fun at many different Canadian stereotypes, especially those from the east coast of Canada. Sloan also incorporates deadpan, dry humour into their work, as well as humour and references that specifically associate them with Canada, the latter of which I will be discussing more in the next chapter.

“Deeper Than Beauty” even contains the hallmark humour of beta males, that of self-deprecation. Murphy’s final verse turns the judgmental gaze on himself singing, “like the rest of us with thumbs up our asses, if you call I will come but I’m about as quick as molasses.” This “sadsack” persona that Murphy presents in the song, ironically quite different from the actual Chris Murphy, can be seen as a stereotype of a Canadian: slow, boring, and humble. It even extends into his vocal timbre, stretching high into his register, nearly breaking on the climactic moments, calling back to the awkward vocal acrobatics of his teenage years. This playing against type that Murphy does in the song connects back to that tradition of irony within Canadian comedy. Where the lyrics of Sloan connect to the use of irony and self-deprecation in Canadian and beta male culture, the music videos created by Sloan focus more on the goofy nature of Canadian culture.

⁸⁸ *22 Minutes* name was a parody of the 1960s CBC news journal *This Hour has Seven Days*.

Goofiness is a strong force in Canadian culture. From the quirky denizens of SCTV, to the east coast debauchery of the Trailer Park Boys, goofiness can be found. This is a style of humour that focuses on silly or stupid antics, and an overall jovial or non-serious take on life. This type of humour can act as a buffer towards the harshness of the real world, its popularity in Canada being another offshoot of Frye's garrison mentality. When it comes to performance both live and recorded, Sloan definitely pushes goofiness to the foreground of their image. The coda of "Deeper Than Beauty" is a rather goofy ending to the whole song, with Murphy discarding actual lyrics and singing the vocal melody with the "la" syllable high into his falsetto. In video, a consideration of three different renditions of the song "Penpals" reveals the use of goofiness throughout. In the official music video, comprised of footage from a performance on *Rita and Friends* (a CBC variety show hosted by fellow maritime musician Rita MacNeil), and an appearance on the CBC children's show *Kids' Canada*, the performances all hinge on the members of Sloan not taking themselves too seriously.

The official music video for "Penpals" is made up of footage that appears to be from the recording of the song as well as a nondescript hotel room. The film of Sloan in the recording video has a jovial vibe to it, with the band playing their instruments and smiling and laughing. It also switches between colour footage and black and white footage. The black and white footage lends the video a realistic, documentary feel, yet at the same time the members of the band make it explicit that this is in fact a put on performance, by not playing their instruments in

time with the music, and by mugging at the camera. Also, Chris Murphy, who plays bass on “Penpals” is seen in the video only singing and playing the maracas. The footage in the hotel, which also goes between colour and black and white, feels almost like watching a sitcom with each member of the band fitting into a specific role: Murphy, the wild outgoing one, is jumping on the bed, Ferguson, the lead guitar, is strumming away at his guitar, Scott, the handsome drummer, is watching TV and smoking a cigarette, and Pentland, the quiet one, is in the corner on the phone wearing sunglasses.

The video could also be seen as an act of defiance to their label, who wanted Sloan to have a more conventional band setup, with Murphy as the “leader” of the group. Pentland reports “When we signed to DGC (Geffen) they were very into the idea of pushing one guy as the leader...Chris, with the most songs and the biggest grin, got the tag. That really held me back through the second record.”⁸⁹ The label wanted Sloan to be a more conventional commercial band, and Sloan responded with a mockery of that archetype. In fact, most of the resulting marketing for *Twice Removed* is really fighting against what the label wanted. Besides the goofiness of “Penpals,” the music videos for both “People of the Sky” and “Coax Me” undermine the idea of the conventional rock band hierarchy of guitar over drums and bass, an idea that I will discuss further in the next chapter on Sloan and egalitarianism. This style of subversion seems to stem

⁸⁹ Barclay, et al., 437.

out of their Canadian and/or beta male identity, as Sloan took a more passive aggressive approach at first to the criticisms from Geffen.

The live performances of “Penpals” have a more outward goofiness to them, mostly due to the settings they chose to perform in. The earlier of the two performances takes place during the original tour run of *Twice Removed* on the CBC variety show *Rita and Friends*, a staple of Canadian music culture in the mid-’90s, winning a Gemini for “Best Performance in a Variety Show or Series”.⁹⁰ As a vehicle for Canadian musical talent, *Rita and Friends* brought many important Canadian acts to households across the country, during a crucial time for Canadian music. *Rita and Friends* featured artists like the Crash Test Dummies and the Barenaked Ladies during their early days, as well as Canadian staples such as the McGarrigle Sisters. For this performance in January 1995, Sloan dressed up in Victorian-era costumes but performed the song in apparent seriousness, without acknowledging their eccentric attire.⁹¹ The second performance in May 2012 on *Kids’ Canada*, is one of the most outwardly Canadian performance Sloan has ever done. The setting for the song is outdoors in a facsimile of Kensington Market in Toronto, the conversation before and after the song is very polite and Chris Murphy’s mugging to the camera accompanies all the jokes from the host of the show, a talking yam in drag named Mamma Yamma.

⁹⁰ “Remembering Rita,” *ritamacneil.com*, <http://www.ritamacneil.com/pages/about-rita> (accessed March 3, 2014).

⁹¹ “Sloan – Penpals,” *Rita and Friends*, CBC (January, 1995).



Figure 4. Chris Murphy and a talking yam in a very Canadian picture from *Kids' Canada*.

In all three performances of the song, Sloan managed to hold onto the jovial spirit that they became known for early on in their career, and also continue to present the non-threatening beta male image crafted in the Halifax scene. The final chapter will deal with another prominent traits of Canadian identity, as well as Canadian masculinity, expressed by Sloan on *Twice Removed*: egalitarianism.

CHAPTER FOUR SLOAN AS CANADA

By now, I have touched on many symbols and ideals that have been upheld as Canadian (nostalgia, Canadian humour and alternative masculinity) that can be found in a close reading of Sloan's *Twice Removed*. Where these symbols may problematize the image of Sloan as Canadian is that they may be limited specifically to young white male Canadians. To explore Sloan as an image of Canadian-ness as a larger sense I will explore a larger concept: egalitarianism. Egalitarianism connects to a "Canadianness" that crosses cultural and gender barriers for Canadians and has been an important part of efforts to define Canada since the early 20th century. In this chapter, I will discuss how egalitarian ideals are built into many of Canada's cultural hubs, specifically the music video provider MuchMusic as examined in Kip Pegley's book *Coming To Wherever You Are*. I will then explore how Sloan use egalitarianism in their song writing and how this connects them to the Canadian music scene and Canadian music tradition. This is not to say that Sloan incorporates the actual ideals of egalitarianism into their lyrics; rather, egalitarianism is demonstrated the way that the music is written, how the band is run, and how they present themselves in both musical and extra-musical realms.

"With support all around me like a fence or a drink," begins the seventh stanza of Sloan's "People of the Sky". This one lyric, in a song seemingly filled with nonsense, describes the musical philosophy of Sloan, one Elaine Keillor

describes as “egalitarian” in her *Music in Canada*.⁹² Keillor’s thoughts echo in the words of Murphy on the songwriting style of the band saying, “The band that we are trying to create is this four-way democracy, which is really hard. I would argue if there were any bands in Halifax that were influenced by us, it was less musically and more so politically.”⁹³ Murphy’s words ring true especially in the case of Sloan, a band who has had fall-outs with major labels, disputes within their own local scene, and at least one major break up of the band. However, this one principle that Murphy describes, this “four-way democracy” has held strong throughout the 20+ year career of the band. I will explore this unusual aspect of the band in this chapter, and I will argue that this egalitarian stance in music making is one of many themes that confirm Sloan as Canadian music.

Before focusing specifically on Sloan, the egalitarian nature of one of Canada’s primary music providers, MuchMusic will be discussed in reference to Kip Pegley’s *Coming To Wherever You Are*. Then, with a close reading of the video “People of the Sky”, I will discuss how an egalitarian approach to song writing is presented in the musical personae of Sloan, an idea I touched on in the previous chapter. I will also look at how this egalitarian stance extends outside of Sloan into the Halifax scene of the early 1990s. Finally, I will be connecting Sloan to a larger Canadian musical tradition of creating music in Northern isolation, such as a lumber camp, or in Sloan’s case Halifax, Nova Scotia.

⁹² Elaine Keillor, *Music in Canada: Capturing Landscape and Diversity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2006): 290.

⁹³ Barclay, et al., 419.

In *Coming To Wherever You Are*, Pegley contrasts MuchMusic and MTV in 1995 as two channels with similar ends but drastically different means. Where MTV was created around a more commercial mode, MuchMusic was closely associated to the public television model. Even though both stations are part of a much larger commercial media corporation, MuchMusic took some of its approach to programming from fellow Canadian station the CBC, as opposed to another commercial station. The difference in these two models breaks down to how the consumer is meant to view; with MTV it was a continuous viewing whereas MuchMusic's model leaned more to a selective viewing format.⁹⁴ What Pegley found was that within a standard broadcasting day, MTV went under 7 thematic shifts whereas MuchMusic was involved in 17 thematic shifts. In the span of one broadcast day, MuchMusic went from a mixture of rock, alternative and urban (rap and hip hop) videos from about midnight to 1:30am, then three surges of genre in the form of *Rap City*, *The Wedge* for alternative music (punk and grunge), and *Power 30* for metal, with rock returning a foothold on programming from about 4 am to 5:30am⁹⁵. This was followed by a surge in pop/rock in the form of French-Canadian focused show *French Kiss*. That entire seven hour block of programming on MTV, from midnight to about 7am, was almost exclusively dominated by alternative and rock music.⁹⁶ The result, Pegley suggests, is that, "...MuchMusic's viewers were constantly informed of the

⁹⁴ Kip Pegley, *Coming To You Wherever You Are: MuchMusic, MTV, and Youth Identities* (Middletown: Wesleyan Press, 2008): 26.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 25.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

plurality of their imagined community in contrast to MTV viewers, who were more often reminded of viewer similarities and shared musical tastes.”⁹⁷

Pegley’s thoughts on this matter parallel the idea of the “cultural mosaic,” first introduced to Canada by Canadian writer John Murray Gibbon, who saw the “melting-pot” assimilation of the United States as a process that forced immigrants to cut ties to their countries and cultures.⁹⁸ Not only can this been seen in the programming, with time spent exclusively on Francophone music from Canada, but in the VJs (video jockeys) presenting the music. Where MTV VJs were primarily of European or African descent, with the exception of Daisy Fuentes, MuchMusic had representation from the Francophone community, Chinese Canadians, African Canadians, and Chilean Canadians.⁹⁹ These cultural identities even became part of the marketing of MuchMusic, with Pegley pointing out a promo for Chilean-Canadian Diego Fuentes discussing his move from his home of Chile to Canada. As Pegley states, “To accentuate this geographical shift, he was shown sweating on sand for the first phrase and shivering in a sweater while holding hockey skates during the second...Here, Fuentes clearly was identified (and celebrated) as a member of Canada’s Latin American immigrant population.”¹⁰⁰ Pegley found that even though MuchMusic was definitely commercial, its format and style attempted to “...serve a wide

⁹⁷ Pegley, 26.

⁹⁸ John Murray Gibbon, *Canadian Mosaic* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1938).

⁹⁹ Pegley 35.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

demographic of Canadian viewers of varying styles and tastes.”¹⁰¹ Basically, MuchMusic served as an actualization of the cultural mosaic that Canadians embraced as part of their identity.

The egalitarian format doesn't stop at the programming but also involves the image of the VJ. MTV presents the VJ as an all-knowing being, unstuck from time on the colourful planet MTV, but this is in sharp contrast to MuchMusic VJs, whom Pegley describes as “...more like ‘us’: they read prepared texts, sometimes misread texts, and apparently learned the information simultaneously with the viewer.”¹⁰²

Two hallmarks of MuchMusic's programming in the '90s, *Speaker's Corner* and *Intimate and Interactive* also facilitated the idea that celebrities and VJs and the audience were all working together, as opposed to VJs and celebrities presented as above the common viewer. *Intimate and Interactive* presented live music from different artists, including Sloan, as well as interviews moderated by VJs but with all the questions coming from either the live audience or the television audience. This immediacy of interaction could not be found on MTV, where celebrities would either guest VJ without another VJ or be exclusively interviewed by a VJ. Likewise, *Speaker's Corner* took the immediacy of audience member to VJ and/or celebrity during *Intimate and Interactive* and doubled-down by airing videos filmed on the streets of Toronto by anyone who had some spare change. These segments would be edited and thematically placed together

¹⁰¹ Pegley, 31.

¹⁰² Pegley, 36.

throughout the programming day but they effectively made the viewer on par with television personalities. As much as MuchMusic was an example of the egalitarian ideal found in Canadian culture, Sloan used this image even more to market themselves to Canadian audiences. It became such an important part of their image that it would allow them to retain a strong Canadian fanbase through many creative changes, especially at the release of *Twice Removed*.

Even in an extra-musical sense, the dynamic of Sloan's song writing has always been an important part of their image. In articles from the *Toronto Sun* where the band is described as a "four-headed beast"¹⁰³, *Ottawa Sun*¹⁰⁴, and *Calgary Sun*¹⁰⁵ there is always specific time given to discussing Sloan's collaborative songwriting process. Though many bands before and after Sloan have used the format of multiple writers, few have had it incorporated into their image as prominently as Sloan has. The authors of *Have Not Been The Same* express the importance of Sloan's songwriting philosophy:

That moment remains indicative of the integrity that has been the foundation of Sloan's career. *Twice Removed* was about taking a chance and firmly establishing the band as a four-headed democracy. The mandate was, and continues to be, quite straightforward: take the democratic approach of your favourite bands and explore the history of rock as you. The result will hopefully be that nobody - audience included - gets bored.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Kieran Grant, "Sloan Save Best for Last," *Toronto Sun*, March 1, 2000.

¹⁰⁴ Ian Nathanson, "Sloan Rangers," *The Ottawa Sun*, February 19, 2000.

¹⁰⁵ Dave Veitch, "Sloan's Explosive Mix," *The Calgary Sun*, October 5, 1999.

¹⁰⁶ Barclay et al., 420.

The fact that Sloan writes songs in this manner has become a marketing tool for the band, and in my opinion, a strong connection to the tradition of Canadian music that Sloan are a part of.

The best way to understand how Sloan presents itself as an egalitarian band is to watch them doing it. The music video for “People of the Sky” begins with the band members debating which instruments they should play, a humorous allusion to what actually goes on at a Sloan concert, where different members of the band switch instruments through songs, taking on different responsibilities in each song. The use of “Rock, Paper, Scissors” to decide who plays the drums is an explicit call to egalitarianism, with each member having as much a say as the other. Scott, the primary drummer for Sloan, plays guitar and sings lead vocals, where the outspoken Murphy fills in as drummer, an inversion of the singer/drummer hierarchy of the typical rock band. There are also rarely shots of just one member of the band; even when there are close-ups of specific members, they usually include a member in the background playing. Many of the shots in the video are of the entire band, and the only member of the group that gets extra attention is Andrew Scott. The video subverts our expectations even more in the use of the background vocals. On the recorded track, Chris Murphy is the only member listed as background vocals, however in the video we clearly see Patrick Pentland and Jay Ferguson singing. The alternative music video for “People of the Sky” pushes this idea even further. Presented on a stage very similar to the variety shows of the 1960s, the four members of Sloan are literally

equals. The only member who is not on the same level as the rest is Chris Murphy, however, as he is given the most solo shots in the video after Andrew Scott. Perhaps this is a reaction to Sloan's record label pushing Chris Murphy as the de facto leader of the group, when they had always seen themselves as a unit.

Another expression of egalitarian philosophies is the use of humour, a subject I've already discussed in the sense of Canadian/beta male identity in the previous chapter. Besides the importance of equality, egalitarianism also shows a dismissive attitude towards rules and principles. "People of the Sky" has Sloan present their humorous side, for the most part not even playing their instruments in time with the music, and Scott takes the lead with the physical comedy playing his guitar while lying in a lawn chair, yawning when he is supposed to be singing among other things. The members of the band, especially Murphy, take time to mug at the camera, parodying a number of conventional music video clichés.

Sonically, "People of the Sky" uses background vocals in an egalitarian way. The use of easy to sing, single syllable vocals, in this case a repeated "Ba", as well as layering them once or twice, can suggest "Gang vocals". It is very easy to imagine a group of friends sitting around a campfire singing along to this song. This recording technique, a throwback from 1960s pop songs, is used all over *Twice Removed* and is a vocal style that Sloan return to again and again. In live performance this technique creates a more engaging experience, requiring audience members to supply the extra vocal tracks and putting the audience on

the level of the performer. This invites the audience to invest in the music making. Sloan has even included audience participation on their studio albums; *One Chord to Another* begins with recorded audio from a Sloan concert, and *Recorded Live At a Sloan Party* uses sounds from an actual party, including a conversation between Ferguson and a very enthusiastic fan. They even go so far as to include fans in the compositional portion of music making, using Nirvana's fan mail from around the world as the lyrics for the song "Pen Pals" from *Twice Removed*.¹⁰⁷

The style of *Twice Removed* is an abrupt change from their first album *Smear*, and stems out of this new way of sharing the songwriting. In an interview on Muchmusic, Murphy describes what caused the change in the aesthetic, "I got to write most of the songs at first...we really wanted to keep everyone really interested in the band so we split the money in four and we decided we should all be writing songs. It's the best way to keep a band together."¹⁰⁸ This was met with a huge round of applause from the all-Canadian crowd. In the same interview, when asked what they did during their hiatus from the band, Murphy and Scott discussed playing in other bands while Ferguson spoke about his time working with Murderecords, Sloan's very own Halifax-based record label. The interview on Muchmusic, during an episode of *Intimate and Interactive*, shows Sloan in their egalitarian glory. The first four songs of the

¹⁰⁷ Adam Kamin, "Sloan's Jay Ferguson talks re-issue of Twice Removed," *blogTO*, November 22, 2012, http://www.blogto.com/music/2012/11/sloans_jay_ferguson_talks_re-issue_of_twice_removed/ (accessed July 16, 2014).

¹⁰⁸ Sloan, interview with Rick Campanelli, *Intimate and Interactive*. MuchMusic, 1998.

evening trade lead vocalists, showing off the entirety of the band's range, and question are answered not just by Murphy, who is obviously the most comfortable in an interview setting, but by the entire band including the often bookish Scott.

The strongest influence on Sloan as a band was not a single artist or group, but the city they called home in their early days. The Halifax scene in the early 90s involved a group of friends getting together to create a scene. Where Halifax was so far away from the larger Canadian cities, they looked inward to create their scene. The chapter on Halifax from the seminal *Have Not Been The Same* discusses the isolation that fostered the scene, "Though it is, by default, the musical capital of Canada's East Coast, Halifax has always been isolated from the rest of the country; most bands' concept of a 'Canadian tour' meant going no further east than Montreal – an arduous 15 hours away from Halifax...Halifax bred its own heroes out of necessity."¹⁰⁹ It did not just stop at friends making bands together; everyone worked together to keep the scene alive. Members of Sloan loaned out their gear to other bands, such as Jale, who were just starting in the scene. Sloan would go on to create their own label, Murderecords, to release their own music as well as other bands in the area. In turn, band members would record on different bands' albums, and even fill in for members when they couldn't make it, such as Murphy's time with the Super Friendz during Sloan's hiatus. Even during Sloan's heyday the band still tried to focus on not only becoming a success but also having the whole scene succeed,

¹⁰⁹ Barclay et al., 457.

as Murphy states, "...we really wanted to be community-minded...we were interested in other bands going on (in Halifax), and that's what made it larger than life. If we were the only band from there, it wasn't that interesting a story."¹¹⁰

This scene bears striking similarities to a description of song making in Canadian lumber camps found in Keillor's *Music in Canada*. Keillor quotes maritimer Angus Enman in her description of music in lumber camps, "Saturday night, you see, when you'd come into the camp after supper you have to tell a story or sing or dance. If you didn't, they'd ding you; they'd put the dried codfish to you...If you couldn't sing, you could tell a good story (or) perhaps you could dance. Oh, yes, somebody he'd go round: 'Now boy, come on. Do what you're going to do.'"¹¹¹ Similarly to the way fellow lumberjacks would fill the various roles (singer, storyteller, dancer), members of the Halifax music scene would fill specific roles in the scene (performer, producer, record label, radio DJ, manager) as needed. Alyson McLeod of jale compares Sloan's role in the scene to an encouraging older brother, "In one way or another they've helped everyone here...They were very supportive and they were recognizing something that was worth being seen. They let us open for them and use a lot of their gear and were very encouraging."¹¹²

Canada, then, plays a very similar role as Halifax in the North American music scene. Besides the geographical isolation of Canada with its major cities separated by largely uninhabited space, a stronger sense of isolation comes from

¹¹⁰ Sloan, interview with Rick Capanelli.

¹¹¹ Keillor, 146.

¹¹² Barclay et al., 481.

being the smaller sibling to the United States. Canada's music scene includes more opportunities for newer music than our Southern neighbours. With institutions such as the FACTOR grant (a way to financially help less known musical acts) and CBC radio 3 (an Internet radio station that only programs Canadian acts). There are also provincial institutions, such as Music Nova Scotia, that also function in a support capacity like booking showcases, newsletters and funding.

The Canadian music scene has always attempted to protect its own, putting into place certain factors to help along the way. The scene in Halifax needed to create its own music, so an egalitarian stance was required to fulfill many of the roles involved in the music industry. Sloan wanted to keep creative control of their art, while also attempting to keep everyone involved and excited about the prospect of making music together. This idea of protecting your peers from outside forces once again is derived from that garrison mentality I discussed in chapter two, and that mentality is a strong connector of Sloan to "Canadianness".

CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION

Sloan works as an excellent model for young Canadian male identity in the early 90s, an image present on the album *Twice Removed*. By presenting themselves first as young beta males, then as key members of the Halifax, and finally as one of many in the long line of Canadian music makers, Sloan cemented in this role.

In terms of Canadian identity and Canadian music, where do we go from here? Does the Sloan image/identity still resonate with young Canadian males as well as it did in the early 90s? Can some of the identity Sloan crafted be applicable to young Canadian women? If not, is there another Canadian artist that can be used in the same way as Sloan? In an increasingly globalized culture, does national identity become more, or less, important?

Sloan have never apologized for who they are. This determined, yet flexible, identity has allowed them to go from small town rock band, to Canadian icons, all the while making the music they wanted to make. With the importance of *Twice Removed*, an album that set the course for their career, it also presented them as the model for young, white, Canadian male identity in the 1990s, and to this day still resonates with Canadians. Sloan use of nostalgia, feelings of isolation, and humour, combined with their egalitarian band philosophy gave them their place in Canadian music history as a truly Canadian band.

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APPENDIX: *TWICE REMOVED* TRACK LIST/PERFORMANCE CREDITS

All writing credits from CD linear notes, and the performance credits come from live performances recorded on YouTube.

1. "Pen Pals" written by Chris Murphy and Sloan
 - Jay Ferguson, lead guitar
 - Chris Murphy, bass guitar and lead vocals
 - Patrick Pentland, rhythm guitar and back-up vocals
 - Andrew Scott, drums
 - Key Signature: B Major
 - Time Signature: 4/4
2. "I Hate My Generation" written by Jay Ferguson and Sloan
 - Jay Ferguson, lead guitar and lead vocals
 - Chris Murphy, bass guitar and lead vocals
 - Patrick Pentland, rhythm guitar and back-up vocals
 - Andrew Scott, drums
 - Key Signature: D minor in the verse, A major in the chorus
 - Time Signature: 4/4
3. "People of the Sky" written by Andrew Scott and Sloan
 - Jay Ferguson, bass guitar
 - Chris Murphy, drums and back-up vocals
 - Patrick Pentland, lead guitar and back-up vocals
 - Andrew Scott, lead vocals and rhythm guitar
 - Tonal centre around A
 - Time Signature: 4/4
4. "Coax Me" written by Chris Murphy and Sloan
 - Jay Ferguson, lead guitar
 - Chris Murphy, bass guitar and lead vocals
 - Patrick Pentland, rhythm guitar and back-up vocals
 - Andrew Scott, drums
 - Key Signature: G# minor
 - Time Signature: 4/4
5. "Bells On" written by Chris Murphy and Sloan
 - Jay Ferguson, lead guitar
 - Chris Murphy, bass guitar and lead vocals
 - Patrick Pentland, rhythm guitar and back-up vocals
 - Andrew Scott, drums
 - Key Signature: C major
 - Time Signature: 2/4

6. "Loosens" written by Patrick Pentland and Sloan
 - Jay Ferguson, lead guitar
 - Chris Murphy, bass guitar and back-up vocals
 - Patrick Pentland, rhythm guitar, lead vocals, and piano
 - Andrew Scott, drums
 - Tonal Centre of D
 - Time Signature: 4/4
7. "Worried Now" written by Patrick Pentland and Sloan
 - Jay Ferguson, lead guitar
 - Chris Murphy, bass guitar and back-up vocals
 - Patrick Pentland, rhythm guitar and lead vocals
 - Andrew Scott, drums
 - Key Signature: G major in the verse, C major in the chorus
 - Time Signature: 4/4
8. "Shame Shame" written by Chris Murphy and Sloan
 - Jay Ferguson, lead guitar
 - Chris Murphy, bass guitar and lead vocals
 - Patrick Pentland, rhythm guitar and back-up vocals
 - Andrew Scott, drums
 - Key Signature: G minor
 - Time Signature: 4/4
9. "Deeper than Beauty" written by Chris Murphy and Sloan
 - Chris Murphy, lead guitar and lead vocals
 - Andrew Scott, drums
 - Key Signature: G
 - Time Signature: 4/4
10. "Snowsuit Sound" written by Jay Ferguson and Sloan
 - Jay Ferguson, lead vocals and rhythm guitar
 - Chris Murphy, bass guitar
 - Patrick Pentland, lead guitar
 - Andrew Scott, drums
 - Key Signature: G
 - Time Signature: 4/4
11. "Before I Do" written by Andrew Scott and Sloan
 - Jay Ferguson, bass guitar
 - Chris Murphy, drums and back-up vocals
 - Patrick Pentland, lead guitar
 - Andrew Scott, rhythm guitar, lead vocals and piano
 - Tonal centre E
 - Time Signature: 4/4