

The Restless Mind 7: SpinTunes 26, Round 1

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SpinTunes 26, Round 1

Hello, dear readers!

My feeble attempts at putting out a regular newsletter fell apart over the past year, with many things occupying my time and thoughts, including some new consulting work (not a job, but finally some income, after eighteen months unemployed), my wife Grace's spinal injury, many subsequent emergency room visits, and many, many follow-up issues including far too much deferred maintenance on our home, now coming back to bite us as things fall apart. But life has stabilized a bit, I've signed up to be a judge for the SpinTunes songwriting contest #26, and so here we are!

What is SpinTunes?

For those unfamiliar with it, SpinTunes is a songwriting contest in which contestants are required to write original songs and submit them to a panel of volunteer judges. You can read the frequently asked questions [here](#). I was a past contestant in the early days of SpinTunes and I have been a judge previously as well. Now I have to crank up the font size on my computer, but fortunately I have a bigger screen!

SpinTunes sounds fun, and it is, but it is also a fair amount of work. This round, the judges have 44 official songs to judge. There are also three "shadows," songs that are not eligible to compete but are included in the album.

I endeavor to listen to everything at least three times, more if possible, and on different devices — on some nice studio headphones, through laptop speakers, through studio monitors, and even through my phone, since different devices will reveal different things about the performances and mixes. Back when the CD players in our cars worked, I would burn my own tracks to a CD and listen in the car as well, but they are long-dead. I think I've actually listened to the whole playlist five times now. So, that's hours and hours of listening before I've written anything. And if I spent just ten minutes reviewing each song, that's another eight hours of reviewing — and I try to spend a lot more time than that.

It's a challenge for the judges, not just the contestants, and of course for the organizers!

General Thoughts on Round 1

The challenge was quite broad: "Write and record a song with lyrics about or prominently mentioning one or more specific shape(s), of any size/dimension/etc." My initial impression was that all the songs met the letter of the challenge, although a few are questionable, and I will discuss the ways in which, in my opinion, some songs were good, or less good, at meeting the *spirit* of the challenge.

The round 1 submissions include a number of very strong contenders. As judges we're asked to rank all the songs — all forty-four. It's easy in broad terms to put them in a few buckets: these are great, these are OK (they fail to make me feel much of a certain way, good *or* bad), these have some noticeable problems, etc. But actually ranking them into fine gradations within each bucket, especially in the broad middle, and defining the exact boundaries of the buckets? That's tedious, and inherently arbitrary. And it's sometimes hard to think of useful and interesting things to *say* about a song, especially when I've just listened to thirty others. There's a lot of self-talk involved: "don't be hyper-critical, be encouraging; allow for differences in skill level; allow for differences in taste, genre preference, and the like." So I try to work on the reviews in short sessions, and stop when I feel myself flagging, to come back when I'm a bit fresher and might have more to say. But there are only so many days left to complete the reviews!

The Top Songs (1 to 11)

These are the songs that made me really want to listen to them again and again. Every time I listened to the album, I found myself grinning (and sometimes attempting to sing along) when these songs came on, especially the ones toward the top of the list.

1. Also in Blue — Vicious Circle

Reminds me of: Chris Thile (Prairie Home Companion, Nickel Creek, etc.)

This is a fantastic song. I'm a sucker for "happysad" songs where the music is upbeat and happy but the lyrics reveal that the song's narrator is not at all happy. In this case the chorus is quite happy-sounding, but the verses bring the mood down a bit, and the lyrics describe someone completely stuck. The combination is very effective. To call it "catchy" would be an understatement. I'm hooked. The whole song is in fact very much an earworm. I found myself going to sleep with the song stuck in my head and waking up with the song still stuck in my head. I've probably listened to it ten times now. I've started trying to sing along... although it's a bit high for me!

The vocal performance is excellent, loose but not sloppy, especially with the harmony vocals. The lyrics meet the challenge admirably well and there's even a hidden shout-out to the contest name. Both banjo and mandolin? And they are carefully arranged so they complement each other? Delightful. I do think trimming the song to shorten it just a bit would improve it; in general, a producer should be pretty ruthless about the length of songs, even if it means leaving out some of their favorite bits. I think it should fade out on the vocal repeats instead of the music after it. But that's a small change.

The final mix is unfortunately very clipped, and so parts of the song sound distorted and fuzzy. Opening it up in a wave editor, I can see that large chunks of the audio have a flat-top haircut, and are also very asymmetrical. I'm not quite sure what went wrong here, but I'd guess that the gain structure of every track and the mix all need attention, from compression on individual tracks to a multi-band compressor and limiter on the full mix. I certainly understand how difficult it is to get everything perfect on a tight deadline, and this does not deter me from loving this song.

2. Carrie Spillane — The Shape of Our Goodbye

Reminds me of: SpinTunes contributor and songwriting collaborator Denise Hudson, particularly the vocal stylings.

A delicate, understated, and moving vocal performance gives this song a strong foundation for its tasteful and beautiful accompaniment. The lyrics are especially clever in the way they work in numerous shapes and geometric metaphors, all in the service of a lovely song about heartbreak.

Technically, it's a master class on arranging and mixing, especially in the way the string line soars up and around the melody, playing a counter-melody. And the song concludes nicely; the length is perfect.

Sometimes, I just don't have that much to say because I'm too busy re-listening.

3. Stefan Szabo — Circles

A relaxed track with gorgeous keyboard swells and a loping rhythm, this is another very strong entry. In fact this is one of the songs I look forward to re-listening to the most. I found it quite moving — a combination of the excellent vocal performance, wistful lyric, and perfect accompaniment. Conceptually the “story” the song tells is very similar to the story “Vicious Circle” tells, but the mood and style *feels* a world away. This one runs for almost 4 minutes but doesn't feel a moment too long.

The first time I listened to “Circles,” on small speakers, I was not a fan of the processing on the vocal track, and the backing tracks seemed distorted to me. But after blasting it through my studio monitors, which have a lot wider frequency response and a lot more power, I realized it was very nicely done and

the tube-like distortion and harmonics were carefully and strategically applied in post-processing to achieve the desired effect.

4. Ironbark — Hourglass

Reminds me of: honestly, I'm hard pressed to think of anyone... maybe His Name Is Alive? It sounds *quite* original to me.

This is quite a fascinating song. I am especially impressed by the melody and musical arrangement, but the vocal performance is sensitive and wryly moving as well. The lyrics take the challenge and knock it out of the park, all wrapped around the idea of the hourglass, as female figure, as metaphor for squeezing through difficult parts of life, moving on to acceptance and joy and love, and of course also as a metaphor for our lifetimes that run out all too soon. The real brilliance of the lyric is the way it manages to mix all these meanings subtly into every verse, and we get a sardonic bridge lyric about living "in this best of all beautiful worlds." Another impressive thing is that the chorus lyrics all differ, so the choruses aren't repeated verbatim.

Technically, this song has the same problem as several others do with the recording of the vocals — too much reflection. I know it's hard to set up at treated space especially on a low-to-no budget, but there are tricks that can help. Even a duvet hung on the wall behind the microphone can help with this.

5. West of Vine — A Hole Shaped Like Ohio (In My Heart)

Reminds me of: Ed Haynes, They Might Be Giants.

This is great take on the sad country ballad, with simple but appropriate instrumentation and a sweet-and-sour vocal performance. I am impressed by the creativity displayed here — it takes confidence to take the challenge as given and decide that the shape in question ought to be the shape of the state of Ohio! It's also a bold choice to write a song with no chorus at all until the very end, with the rest of the song serving to build up the listener's desire to hear it. But I think it works quite nicely.

What is a hole shaped like Ohio shaped like, anyway? High in the middle and round at both ends? Does this mean that Ohio also has a hole in *it*, shaped like the narrator?

6. Cosmic Ray Corruption — Trapped in a Hypertorus

Reminds me of: Devo

This is a delightful little song with energetic video game-ish instrumentation. The music sounds better than the song actually works as a song, if that makes sense. The metaphor is a bit strained and muddled. Verse 2 makes it sound like the narrator is trapped in the back rooms. There's not much of a story in the lyrics, but that's okay. It's more a vibe, and it ends at under two minutes, so it

never wears out its welcome. It's a good example of how a mostly-spoken vocal can still convey emotion and be fun to listen to. On a technical level, it's a real workout for my studio monitors — mastered very loud, but not clipped. The sung part of the vocal is a little rough, especially in the doubled part, but the overall experience is a lot of fun.

7. Jennifer Lynne and the Dandelion Rebellion — If I Don't Pack My Bag

Reminds me of: Loretta Lynn

This is a lovely mournful country ballad. The guitar accompaniment is nicely done and the vocal (with breathy tremolo!) is beautiful. I have listened to the yappy dogs chiming in at the very end and they makes me smile every time — it's a nice reminder that in a timed contest, the participants don't always get the luxury of a perfect take without interruptions.

8. The Moon Bureau — Your Geometric Dreams

Reminds me of: The Cure, Let's Active, The Church

I love the combination of acoustic and electric guitars in this song, with several different effects on them. The high percussion (a glockenspiel?) produces a nice counterpoint. The lyrics meet the challenge admirably, and the song is quite short and sweet. The vocal performance is well done. I like the idea of the hapless narrator trying to beat himself “into shape.” There's a certain pathos about it. “I'd be any polygon up to the Nth degree / if I could find the shape where you loved me” is a very funny line. Although, I do find myself urging the narrator to find someone who will love him for his own real shape! The title feels slightly off; it seems like the narrator is the one having the “geometric dreams.”

9. Nathan Joe Long — A Thousand Paper Cranes

I'm a sucker for finger-picking and I like the lyric a lot. The vocal performance is strong and touching. It's an intriguing take on the challenge — origami as metaphor! And the lyric is loaded with additional metaphors and even double entendres. What does it all mean? How should I know? Do I look like an English major? (Wait... I *was* an English major... but it's been a while). Anyway it's a contemporary poem set to music very beautifully, and I can't really ask for more than that.

10. Pigfarmer Jr. — Heart-Shaped Pillow

This has a straight-up country-rock sound with a bit of that happysad thing going on — cheerful sound, sad lyrics. The instrumentation is very well done. I especially like the way the organ kicks in to warm things up before heading into the bridge. It tells a sad and funny and self-deprecating story in a satisfying

way. The heart shape is a small but recurring symbol and that works fine. It's paced well.

11. Brother Baker — The Rhombus

Reminds me of: The Proclaimers

This is one of the more literal takes on the challenge. It's a big noisy blast of a song, and it's a lot of fun. There's something inherently funny about the singer opening the song by passionately proclaiming "I am a rhombus!" I've taken to randomly singing "I am a rhombus!" loudly, when family members come to talk to me, and I find that it livens up our interactions.

The rhombus becomes an extended metaphor for the narrator's feelings of being unable to fit in: "Too pointy and pointed to roll with the circles / Too many dimensions just to make a point / Too jagged and jaded to clear all the hurdles / Too acute and obtuse for incongruent joints." I like the word choices and rhyme scheme quite a bit.

There's an interesting thing that happens in a few places where two vocal lines intersect and overlap, a musical idea I think could have been used a bit more, with careful editing. Those overlapping vocal lines give it just a bit of a prog rock feel — I'm reminded of Gentle Giant, although I wouldn't say it's really a progressive rock song. Both the accompaniment and vocal parts are bold and engaging.

Strong Contenders (12 to 22)

12. Jealous Brother — Hexagons

Reminds me of: Marshall Crenshaw

This is a nice song that wouldn't have been out of place in a musical featuring Sha-Na-Na. It's a neat bit of storytelling and the beehive metaphor is certainly creative.

In an actual beehive it's the wriggling little larvae that start out in those honeycomb cells and so this leaves me scratching my head a bit at the metaphor that the narrator and the person he's singing to are like the honeycomb, not the bees, but it makes a certain amount of sense if I imagine them starting out *in* the cells.

Then the metaphor shifts and the characters *are* the bees. It seems like it could be a story about young lovers, but it also might be a story about young bandmates who fought and split up and become rivals — was the "wax" they made a series of hit records? I think there is more than one interpretation possible. But never mind all that — no matter how it is interpreted, it's an enjoyable piece of music that captures the rock-and-roll vibe of a not-quite-lost era.

13. David Taro — Tesselations

Reminds me of: The Beatles, “Happiness is a Warm Gun”

I like what the contestant is doing here — introducing a melody by picking it before the song itself kicks in! Then we get a nice multi-tracked vocal, slightly pitchy, and a nice build up in the instrumentation. I really feel like I *want* to hear the chorus each time we get to it, and the choruses sound different enough to make them really land. The bridge vocal builds to a nice crescendo. After the bridge we have a real wind-down, and a great, concise ending. A strong entry! I especially like the way the drums and guitars are recorded — in particular we get real thump in the kick drum and some air on the picked guitar parts.

14. Cheslain — Bokeh the Squid

OK, I had to look this one up... “bokeh” is the aesthetic quality of blur captured in the out-of-focus parts of a photograph. The lyrics kind of explain this. How this becomes a squid, I’m not entirely sure. Those hexagonal shapes of blurred points of light remind the narrator of a squid?

Anyway, I don’t quite get it, but I’m not sure I really need to get it to enjoy the song. It’s evocative. It’s all atmosphere and background sounds, reverberating over ambient instrumentation. The vocal reminds me a bit of Peter Gabriel.

15. miscellaneous owl — Alfred Hitchcock Silhouette

Reminds me of: Tanya Donnelly (Throwing Muses, The Breeders, Belly)

This is a very clever and original take on the challenge. I doubt that many of you are old enough to have seen the Alfred Hitchcock Presents TV show back in the day. Hell, *I’m* not old enough to have seen it when it first ran between 1955 and 1965 — but I saw reruns. Wikipedia describes the introduction:

Alfred Hitchcock Presents is well known for its title sequence. The camera fades in on a simple line-drawing caricature of Hitchcock’s rotund profile (which Hitchcock drew), to the theme music of Charles Gounod’s “Funeral March of a Marionette” (suggested by Hitchcock’s long-time musical collaborator Bernard Herrmann). Hitchcock appears in silhouette from the right edge of the screen, and then walks to center screen to eclipse the caricature.

It’s funny and self-deprecating. The song runs with that idea and makes it ominous, about “playing a part” in both a TV show and a relationship, maybe about a man who keeps looking for the perfect woman to fill a preconceived role and never settling for the one he’s got.

This really takes the idea of a shape as a starting point and runs with it, turning the old silhouette gag into, dare I say it, a psychological horror story? I’m impressed.

While I like the lyrics and the song concept very much, the recording is fuzzy and “muddled,” as my wife described it — it definitely has a lo-fi vibe. But it’s clear enough to get the impression of the song you could consider this recording a demo for, if that makes sense.

16. The Pannacotta Army — Rough Diamond

This starts with the upbeat framework of a blues shuffle, but elevates itself with some nice dynamics changes and a very catchy chorus. A country-style solo fleshes out the second half of the track nicely, and it’s pretty much the perfect length for a pop song. Overall it sounds very good. The vocal performance is tuneful and lovely. It’s very professionally recorded, with excellent compression and equalization on each track, and the final mix sounds loud and full without clipping or blowing out any particular frequency range. Nicely done! The lyrics are using the suits of playing cards as shapes. Hearts and diamonds are obvious, but the spades and clubs aren’t things I normally think of as shapes, but it makes sense!

17. Ominous Ride — Bad Shape

Reminds me of: Blue Öyster Cult, “Veteran of the Psychic Wars”

The guitar riff propels this song along nicely and I feel that the lyrics are strong. “Bad shape” is not really a shape in itself, it’s a bit of a joke (what shape? bad shape!), but the song mentions a number of other shapes for good measure. When the backing vocal tracks come in, it gets even better. The lyric makes sure to nail the challenge. Some kind of solo or instrumental break would have been a nice addition — I feel that the drums come close to being a real featured element of the track, so maybe a little drum break, or at least some fills, would have improved the song. I like the cold ending. This track didn’t really turn me on the first time I listened to it, but after listening a few more times, particularly on headphones, I got into it, and brought it up higher in my rankings.

18. the profane bells — Circle Back to the Start

Reminds me of: The Church, “The Unguarded Moment”

A nice example of creative pop song with standout accompaniment. It’s mournful but also feels upbeat and hopeful. Is there hope, or isn’t there? The bulk of the song seems to suggest that the relationship can be healed and “rebooted,” but then the last line (“Our feelings must surely mend / and if they don’t, maybe it’s right that this ends”) suggests that the narrator is open to the alternative. So it seems to have a bit of a mixed emotional message and ends on an ambiguous note.

Musically, I really like the tremolo effect on the guitars during the chorus. The vocal style I might call “laconic” — laid back — but maybe a bit too much, as I find it a little hard to understand the lyrics in the verses.

19. Sober — Boxes

Reminds me of: Johnny Cash, Hank Williams (Senior, not Junior)

A plaintive country tune, where carpentry serves as a nice metaphor for building a relationship, and building boxes serves as a shorthand for all of fine carpentry. While I don't know that much about carpentry, this strikes me as not really that much of a stretch. I very much like the *specificity* of the woodworking terminology and how graphic it is. It makes a very visceral metaphor for a rough patch in a relationship: "all splinters and tearout on the cut."

The vocal performance is quite easy on the ears, with that mournful but gravelly thing going on, dropping into a spoken register for a word or two now and then. The slide guitar and fiddle parts are nice touches. The recording and mixing were both done very well.

20. Best Dad in Yorkshire — Cross It Out

This song meets the challenge in a literal way, but I don't feel that it crosses over very well from the literal to the metaphorical. Referring to "square one" meets the letter of the challenge, but the "cross" in the song is a verb; does that count as a shape, because it is also the name of a shape? The lyric just feels a bit vague.

The whole song sounds quite good, with a strong vocal performance, excellent guitar and bass throughout its short runtime, and I like the changes in dynamics, the way parts come in and out, and build, and the wordless middle section — although that does feel like a way of making up for a lyric that didn't turn out long enough. The ending does not feel decisive to me — I think a cold ending on a strong vocal repeat would be better.

21. Vom Vorton — Out of Shape

Reminds me of: New Order

Definite New Order vibes ooze from this tune, from the guitars and synths to the vocal performance. It meets the challenge well. The opening verse is poignant with wry humor. The meandering high synth line wears out its welcome a bit; it's slightly too loud and unvarying, and the "bah-bah-bah" backing vocal part doesn't really seem to fit well with the song's vibe. The forced rhymes ("hex-a-gun" pronounced to rhyme with "overdone," for example) come off as a bit silly, although I *think* the intent was to make something that was both homage and parody of New Order's signature sound, and it does a good job at that.

22. Ross Durand — What the Hell?

A protest song! I was hoping we'd get one. There's an awful lot to protest. This meets the challenge, in a straightforward way. The vocal performance conveys

a lot of emotion, and the guitar accompaniment is appropriately angry, rough, and rhythmic.

Weaker Contenders (23 to 33)

23. Betty and the Rubble — Tesseract

The song definitely meets the challenge and I enjoy most of the lyrics; the tesseract here is used cleverly as a metaphor for not fitting in, in this case, the narrator uses “not fitting in” and “coloring outside the lines” is a metaphor for queerness, not just existing outside of heteronormativity, but traveling outside of the bounds of L and G into B. “Spare me from the fetishizing male gaze” is maybe a bit too on-the-nose as a song lyric, but overall this is the better of the two submissions that use a tesseract as the shape to meet the challenge.

The arrangement and music is simple, but it works okay. The vocal performance is pretty good, but the vocal recording has the “singing through a cardboard tube” problem. The constant cymbal hits through the whole song are a bit fatiguing — I feel like the drum part could have been crafted to fit the song a bit better.

24. Berkeley Social Scene — The Einstein Hat (Aperiodic Monotile)

This song fits squarely in the middle of the pack. It certainly meets the challenge. I understand the geometry and so I like the phrase “you won’t be coming ’round for a while,” and the “one stone” gag, but the whole lyric feels a little on the abstract side, and a bit hard to relate to. Maybe it’s a little too personal? What’s up with the “French t-shirt?” Aside from something to rhyme with “dirt?”

Musically, the song is a mixed bag. In a previous century I used to play guitar in garage bands, so I have a soft spot for the garage-band style, but I don’t really love the sludgy churning “doom” guitar riff on the choruses, and the drum part is unimaginative, as is the bass part, until we get to the bridge, where the bass starts to shine. I do like the arpeggio playing on the verses and I like the brief round of harmony vocals on the bridge. I think the slide guitar solo is the best thing about the song — it’s great!

The vocal sounds like the singer is singing through a cardboard tube on the verses, and is more distant and muffled on the choruses. Was the singer singing the choruses from behind the drum set? Maybe it’s just the usual “recording in an untreated space” issue. That’s not a deal-breaker, but I’d suggest finding a way to cut down on reflections to improve future vocal recordings.

25. David Dolan — Square in a Round World

A straightforward blues song with an almost-straightforward guitar accompaniment. The lyric and vocal are nicely done. The backing guitar does not integrate

all that well with the main rhythmic accompaniment part — the two tracks drift in and out of sync a bit. It needs a little more arranging and planning to get them to work together without bumping into each other. Saving the solo bits for a distinct solo would be nice. Oddly this reminds me of some of Sting's songs on *The Dream of the Blue Turtles* where he puts a little too much soprano saxophone everywhere. It's a shame because I like the vocal performance a lot and better arrangement would have helped it.

26. chewmeupspitmeout — be a circle in a world of squares

Sounds like: Soft Cell, Gyruss, Robotron 2084

This is a well-produced track with clever lyrics. I especially like the vocal jump in the line “But I... I'm not firing on all cylinders / So much these days.” The song meets the challenge well, as it is quite stuffed with references to various shapes. There's a nice musical breakdown in the bridge, and I like the use of vintage chiptunes sounds that might have been heard in a video game arcade in 1984. Pepperidge Farms Remembers!

Several entries mention “squares” in the vintage sense of “uncool persons.” This is one of the better entries to use that idea, so it's tucked in right after David Dolan's song.

27. Flintsteel — Demon, Awake!

Reminds me of: Iron Maiden, Tenacious D

I'm amused that we've got a song about the Pentagon and another one about a pentagram. This is a banger of a song. The guitar parts were laid down by someone who clearly knows this genre well. It's flashy, I'll give it that, but the style seems a little played out, and I don't find that it does much for me — it's almost *too* perfect an example of the genre, if that makes sense.

If I open up the WAVE file in Izotope RX 11, it's clear why the song doesn't give me thrills or chills — it's because the mix is very compressed, with no dynamics left, except during the keyboard solo section, where there is a little headroom. Gather 'round, children, and I'll tell you a tale of brick wall limiting and the bad old days of the loudness wars, when record companies weaponized limiters to make louder and louder records while listener enjoyment flat-lined.

In this case it looks like the mix was brick-walled, but then normalized to about -10 LUFS, with a loudness range of only 3.2 LU (it ought to be more like 6 to 12 LU). So the result is that it isn't clipped, and it doesn't even sound all that loud, because there are no loud peaks. But the dynamic range is wiped away, and that translates to lack of ability to excite the listener. Of course it would also be a mistake to mix entirely by the numbers, but this is a way to confirm what my ears are telling me.

28. Stacking Theory — the shape we're in

This song has a very “live” sound to it — it’s nicely produced. It was a bold choice to put the long pauses into the song, and after each pause, to bring the song back to life with more energy and emotion. In the start of the second section after “flatlining,” it starts to sound like it could be a James Bond film soundtrack, or an Ennio Morricone soundtrack to a Western film. It’s very stylish, and very different, but also a little slow and dirge-like, and it does drag a bit. The songwriter took some big risks with this track and I appreciate that, and it did pay off, but maybe not quite as well as it could have.

29. Hot Pink Halo — Gather Between the Stars

Reminds me of: Cocteau Twins.

This song has a heady, ethereal beauty, with its dreamlike, floaty keyboard sounds, dramatic piano, and gentle, close-miked brushed-snare percussion accompanying soft vocals with lovely stacked harmony parts.

I found this song frustrating to review, because while I do find the music and arrangement to be quite gorgeous, the song doesn’t really do much to engage me. It has a definite vibe, similar to some great 4AD record label releases, I just don’t feel that it moves much: it’s more like a frozen moment in time. It doesn’t give me much that I can identify with as a listener other than that beautiful vibe, and then it ends, oddly, with a few stray bass notes, rather than a repeat of the chorus. I think it could have used one more chorus with a bit of a musical change-up. Without that it ends feeling that it didn’t really complete the journey it set out on.

I try as a judge to be open to a lot of different genres, and I do *like* a lot of New Age (in college I had a late-night New Age radio show). I’m sorry that I don’t “click” more with this song, because it really is very pretty.

30. Star Bear — Tessellations

Reminds me of: a cross between Nirvana (“Heart-Shaped Box”) and My Bloody Valentine (“Soon”)

Right from the get-go we’re thrown into a vast wall of sound, layered guitars and percussion. The drums are, I think, one of the most interesting instruments, as they drop in and out and change approach on the different choruses.

The vocal performance is very emotionally expressive, and the phrasing sped up and dragged out in an interesting way, but the question that keeps coming into my head is this: *why* does the narrator sound so anguished? What’s going on for the narrator to make this make sense? On the choruses the lyrics go “We tile along the plane / Each child a different name / Meanwhile we’re all the same / For miles we tessellate.” What does that actually mean? What is it a metaphor for? And what is it that is worth saving?

It's frustrating to review, and I'm sure it must be frustrating for the artist to *read* this review. I apologize for that, but I just don't quite *get* the song as a whole, hence the ranking. While I didn't really click with the song, I can tell that some real creative effort went into the music, and recording the vocal performance, and I do appreciate the way everything sounds.

31. Falcon Artist — The Spire

I had to look up the Spire — it's a giant, skinny cone with some odd markings on the base that are intended to make it look as if it was a core sample pulled out of the ground in Dublin. Looking at pictures of it, it appears to be quite an unusual sculpture. I feel like I'd be better able to appreciate it in person.

Anyway, the song meets the challenge and I admire Falcon Artist for choosing such an unusual subject for a song, and for writing a genuine folks song. It's well-done, but doesn't make me feel much of anything in particular except the desire to go see the monument in person.

I was delighted to read that someone apparently came up with a way to hang a Palestinian flag on the Spire and no one can come up with a good way to take it down!

I'd like to hear more from Falcon Artist in the future!

32. traumadolls — Flattened

Reminds me of: "Our Lips are Sealed," The Go-Gos cover by Fun Boy Three

Sometimes on first listen a song will make a bad impression on me, and I'll fixate on that. It's one of the reasons I always try to give songs multiple listens, although I don't always succeed in starting with a blank slate.

So let me say that, contrary to the relatively low ranking, this song sounds great. I especially like the glassy, spacious delayed guitars coming in to the stereo image and interlocking with the bass line. When the choruses kick in and the keyboard parts come up, it's gorgeous. The vocal performance fits the lyric very well.

A couple of things led to my poor initial impression: the fuzz effect on the vocal did not sound good to me, although I've gotten used to it, and I guess it's a commonly used effect in pop music now. I also didn't initially feel that it met the challenge very well, as I didn't feel that "flat" or "flattened" really named a shape, and I still don't.

The song does sound great. If I wasn't trying to judge the lyrics in the context of the challenge, I would like them quite a bit more, because they do a great job of describing the *feeling* of being beaten down, having the well-roundedness beaten out of you. I can certainly identify with that!

33. Sunflower Bastard — Stadium

Reminds me of: Howard Jones, Pet Shop Boys, OMD, ELP, Led Zeppelin, Queen

This song is certainly well-produced, everything in it is nicely recorded, and the instrumentation sounds good. I do have some difficultis with it, though. I don't feel that it does an especially good job of meeting the challenge. Does "stadium" really count as the name of a shape? (I guess?)

But the larger question in my mind is: *why* write a song about a stadium? Especially in the context of this challenge? The song is very upbeat and emotive, but I don't feel like it does a good job of convincing me *why* I should be excited about a stadium. As a townie who lived for twenty years in downtown Ann Arbor without once going *inside* the University of Michigan stadium, game days were mostly a pain in the ass. So maybe I'm just not the right audience for this song.

Structurally, it also seems like this is actually several different songs jammed together. The first song: Howard Jones bass synth and Pet Shop Boys vocals, a synth-pop ballad, with an Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark keyboard solo. Lovely! And that could have been fleshed out to form a complete song.

But starting at about 1:12, it pretty much becomes a completely different song. The synth bass element continues, but the lead vocal and harmony vocal styles change completely, and a different organ sound comes in. The lyrics also change radically in tone and accent, to "get down with your sausage party." (What?)

At about 1:55, a synth solo kicks in, and it's an especially wild and earsplitting synth solo, sounding like something from the early days of Moog synthesizers, something you might hear blasting out of the P.A. system as Keith Emerson sticks forks and knives in his keyboards and kicks them around the stage, while the audience suffers permanent hearing damage that they won't really realize occurred until they hit late middle age. Are we now talking about "stadium rock?" Which is cool, but does that have anything to do with the challenge?

In the midst of this keyboard solo, at about 1:50, a John Bonham-style heavy drum part kicks in, along with a new tinkling high keyboard part, and we've drifted into a very different musical landscape.

At 2:12, the song drops down to just chorus vocals, drum kit, and I preaching spoken-word vocal exhortation, telling us "Do not tangle! With the disco rectangle!" (OK, I guess a shape is finally named). This reminds me a bit of "We Will Rock You" when the instruments drop out. At about 2:30, the bass synth part returns, and we're back to finish out the song "get down with your sausage body / you look like you like to party." Then everything drops out and we're left with one plaintive "stadium!" and a few apologetic, mumbled words I can't quite identify.

My wife described it this way: "I like soy sauce. I like chocolate sauce. But they don't necessarily go together in the same dish!" I would describe this as a song

that seems to have competing goals — making a Pet Shop Boys song, making a call-and-response halftime-show song, and making a wild keyboard solo. We’ve got an artist here who was clearly bursting with creative ideas, but failed to turn it into one coherent song. It all sounds very impressive mashed together, but I’m still left scratching my head in confusion.

The Weakest Entries (34 to 44)

34. Paul Dermody — Making Circles on the Ground

This is a straightforward, workmanlike song that takes on the challenge in an uncomplicated way and meets it well. The guitar sounds good and the vocal performance is good.

The bridge could be a little stronger. Changing up the instrumentation or at least varying the meter would help it feel a little less repetitive in the choruses. I feel like there weren’t quite enough verse lyrics to go with this many near-repeats of the chorus. The recording has quite a bit of distortion on the guitar — something was clipping.

It’s interesting to compare this song to “Vicious Circle” given the similarity of the concept. The narrator is describing someone else stuck in a similar situation, and does a very effective job of that.

35. Boo Lee Crosser — “I haven’t been thinking of you”

Reminds me of: The Long Winters, “I Ain’t Missing You at All” by John Waite

This song has a great low-key mournful feel, and the instrumentation supports the good vocal performance, which does a good job at conveying a mood.

My wife Grace was listening in today while I played this song and said “I like the feel and the sound of it, but I didn’t really click with the lyrics,” and I agree with her. I don’t think it meets the spirit of the challenge well. True, the line “I wish I could count all the cards / Jack of diamonds and a Queen of hearts” does mention shapes, but the shapes don’t really fit into any sort of scheme of symbols or metaphors, and don’t seem to refer to anything other than cards. Maybe the narrator is the Jack of diamonds (but why diamonds?) and the person he’s singing to is the Queen of hearts, and diamonds and hearts are shapes, but that’s my interpretation.

So, it scores points for the music and performance, but loses points for a lyric that didn’t quite do as much as it could have.

36. Huge Shark — Spheres

Reminds me of: Hugo Largo

I really like the keyboard swells and drums-and-bass percussion on this track. The ethereal vocal is pretty. The lyrics are relatively simple but the imagery is

enjoyable.

That said, it's not a long song, but yet I can't help but feel that it gets a bit repetitive by the end. It seems to me that it could use some contrasting elements to mix things up.

37. Boffo Yux Dudes — Isocahedron

I like the concept here, where the shapes are the dice in a role-playing game in which the narrator is losing at love. It's funny, nerdy, and relateable.

The realization of the lyric in the song is where it fails to stand out, especially the vocal performance, stuck somewhere between a spoken part and a pitchy sung part. I am not making a "Bob Dylan can't sing" argument here — because I think people with unconventional or untrained voices (and I count myself as one of them) absolutely *can* present a song nicely and convey the intended emotional meaning, but I don't feel that this vocal performance does that. The droning instrumentation also doesn't really do much to make the song work.

We're encouraged as judges to write words that will be encouraging to aspiring songwriters, and to look for things to praise in the songs. Boffo Yux Dudes, though, have been doing this for a minute, so I feel a bit freer to say guys, sorry, this one isn't great. But I would never want you to stop doing what you do!

38. So Then I Says to Mabel, I Says — Fallen Arches

Reminds me of: "Fortress Around Your Heart" by Sting

I tucked this one right under the Boffo Yux Dudes because it has some of the same problems as "Icosahedron," in the unevenly-paced accompaniment and vocals. The shape in question is an arch. The lyrics are... complex. The topic is intriguing.

The performance, though, especially the vocals, is hard to enjoy, as the singer doesn't seem to care much about staying on key. Neither of the two guitar solos sound very good, and there's too much noodling all throughout the song. So what could have been a much catchier melody fails to sound very catchy. I do think that the lyric has some real strengths.

This kind of extended metaphor *can* lead to a great song in more experienced hands — consider "Fortress Around Your Heart," and I'm sure there are other examples — and so I would hope that this artist might try revisiting the lyric in the future with a new arrangement.

39. glenny — The Octagon

The octagon in this song is a gaming table where friends meet to play games like Catan (Settlers of Catan). Or, at least, friends *met* (past tense). This is a breakup song of a sort, and I really appreciate the creative approach to the

challenge. It's an example of synecdoche, where a change in the usage of a physical object becomes a stand-in for a much more significant change in a whole group of relationships.

I don't feel, though, that the style of the song, and the performance, really does a great job conveying the emotions present in the lyrics, and expressing the pathos of this small (and large) breakup story. So I'd say that more attention to the nuance of the vocal performance is in order. The final mix is also loud and distorted.

I appreciate originality of the music, particularly the way that a very fast beat supports fast verses and contrasts well with slower choruses. I can also hear the effort that went into recording the higher-range backing vocals and they sound quite nice!

40. Siebass — Always around

Reminds me of: Robyn Hitchcock, like it could have been an outtake from his album *Invisible Hitchcock*; Billy Corgan solo material

The guitar and harmonica are nice, and there are harmonies coming in, in the background, and some picked-note breaks. But the mumbling vocal part doesn't especially do it for me.

According to the submitted "song bio" notes, "I wanted to see if I could make you feel your feelings by writing from the perspective of a circle, dreaming of one day, maybe having sides."

OK, fair enough, but the song lyrics themselves don't mention the name of a shape *per se* at all, and despite listening to it several times I didn't really *get* the meaning of the song until I read the notes; I was thinking more metaphorically, while the song lyrics were more literal. "Always around" morphing into "always round" indicating that the narrator is a circle — not really enough to hang a song on.

In writing the phrase is "show, don't tell," and I suppose an equivalent in songwriting would be "sing it, don't just include it in the song notes." I feel like it should be possible to understand the narrative of a song, at least in a general way, without reading footnotes — compare this to "The Rhombus" which makes the identity of the narrator very clear, but still leaves room for metaphorical meanings.

So, it sounds nice enough, but I feel that it does not do a very good job taking on the challenge.

41. Christine Fanning — Square

We're getting down to a pair of songs which are difficult to review, because they both have the feel of unfinished rough demos.

The artist clearly put some effort in, coming up with a concept, guitar track, multiple vocal tracks, and a lyric that evokes emotions to get the concept across. The concept is mentioned in the song notes:

“Square” references my town, centred around ‘Liberty Square’, which operates the rules of a round about when navigating in traffic

The song is a curiosity, prayer, unresolved

So then the question comes down to how well the demo works to convey the concept. It’s always difficult to try to judge a recording that sounds like a cassette demo alongside songs that arrive as polished and produced tracks ready for commercial release, but I’ll try.

What we’ve got is a guitar figure, which sounds like it was recorded through a piezo pickup into an audio interface, and then copied-and-pasted in a DAW. The net effect is that the very dry-sounding guitar part loops in a way that sounds unnatural, as it’s not possible for a human to repeat a part this precisely. It would sound better here to record an entire track of the guitar backing, even if it was rougher-sounding than the short figure.

The vocal part starts off a bit unsteady, but then when it hits the chorus, the part that goes “liberty brings freedom / wings to / another town and city / another experience,” there are multiple vocal tracks blending together, and this is the best-sounding part of the song. The vocal performance is soft but plaintive and it definitely does convey a kind of longing.

One of the reasons for the low ranking is that the meaning of the repeated word “square” is developed, and I understood it to mean a town square, but it’s left undescribed. And before we get to hear another verse and chorus, which might have given the listener a clearer view of the square, the song cuts off cold. I’m not sure what happened, but it’s unfortunate, because I’d like to hear more. I would encourage this artist to continue!

42. N/A — Round In

“Round In” is even more difficult to review than “Square,” because it’s even shorter, with fewer words in the lyric.

This one starts abruptly, and sounds like the 4AD Cocteau Twins-style ambient genre. The recording does capture that vibe, although we have to get through the opening part in which the guitar is very distorted.

Lyrically, the triangle doesn’t clearly represent anything that I can discern. While we have enough clues to understand that the square in “Square” represents a town square, in this song, or song fragment, I don’t feel that I have enough words to go on. The lyrics mention “the shape of falling,” so the song mentions a shape, but it’s abstract. At 1:32, it seems like as soon as a musical structure has really taken shape, it’s coming to an end.

There are some promising musical elements here, with the ascending arpeggio line, the bass line, and percussion. These elements do successfully convey a nice ambient vibe, for a short while, although it doesn't give me a lot to work with as a judge. There's a suggestion that this artist can and should be able to put together more complete songs in the future, and I'd love to hear one.

43. [triangle shape] — Don't be a, be a

Now we're down to the songs with the lowest rankings. These last two reviews are the hardest to write. It appears I've written what amounts to a separate essay, just responding to these two songs. What I have to say in each actually applies to both.

In the animated film *Ratatouille*, the critic Anton Ego writes:

In many ways, the work of a critic is easy. We risk very little, yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and their selves to our judgment. We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. But the bitter truth we critics must face is that, in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so. But there are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and defense of the new. The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations. The new needs friends.

I do enjoy ripping apart something I don't like, and it's a struggle sometimes *not*. The biggest reason *not* to do that is that when I was writing and recording my first few songs, I benefitted enormously from silence or helpful suggestions, even when the suggestions were painful. There's a fine line between "constructive criticism" and criticism that just feels mean, especially when the "constructive criticism" I got included suggestions like "you're better at spoken-word performance than singing." That one hurt, but I also took it as a challenge, and *did* manage to record a later song in which my singing voice was more bearable.

Anyway, the artist explains his process in the song notes, so I'll start there, with some points from his notes:

My voice is kinda split into two tracks, one with lots of reverb and widening stuff, and I sing them separately, and i think thats a cool way to seperate my voice from reverb. I liked doing it this way because it kinda let me have overlapping vocals without making the main lyric hard to understand.

I agree — I think that is a cool effect.

He describes how the second part of the song is a

wander through multiple shape inspired time signatures

And I do find that aspect of the track to be a lot of fun, especially the "heptagon"

part, with a meter based on seven. It's the wandering nature of the track that wears on me. I also think that self-reference is something that has to be used very sparingly. A little bit of it works well as a humorous fourth-wall break, but talking about your own song extensively in the middle of the song works less well. So when the artist writes:

his song is kind of about my artist name, but also about trying to
avoid writing about my artist name

I'm afraid that really didn't land for me. I had the same reaction I might have when I see someone in public arguing with themselves.

But the bit of self-reference that I *do* think works well in this song comes right at the end:

...then the bridge drops off to nowhere

I found and continue to find that bit to be funny, although I suppose if the bridge has only one end, then it's not really a bridge, and I would have liked to hear what was on the other side.

I appreciate the way the track sounds, in many ways — I think the vocal is recorded very well, so the artist has a decent microphone and a sufficiently “dry” space to record. The artist is also good at using their voice to convey a lot of rapid-fire spoken word, in both serious and comic ways. Especially comic ways. I think there's a lot of potential there. I do hope that the artist will gain more experience and submit more songs to SpinTunes in the future.

44. The Dreams Corporation — Tesseract

Reminds me of: The Beatles, “Revolution Nine”

The song notes to “Tesseract” are extensive and make it sound like the introduction to an old Infocom role-playing game:

a large open black void with strangely shaped objects (likely Tesseract) floating high in the sky in a grid-like formation. inside some of them appears to be strange creatures, though their full form is not parsable and their appearances seem to morph over time. on the blackened void floor are blue tracks looping around the world...

I have the urge to type “ENTER VOID” as if I was playing an old Infocom role-playing game at this point. But this is not a role-playing game and cannot actually be experienced interactively.

I'm not writing that just to be pedantic — I think it was a sort of artistic misstep, because it seems like the artist created this track *imagining* it as the soundtrack to an interactive experience, in which the listener was in the interactive, virtual world.

But from my end, the experience was not anything like that. I experienced a piece of music with little discernable structure or melody, filled with a lot of echoing spoken words, distorted grinding sounds, growling and grunting sounds, and detuned synthesizer glissandos where sine waves gradually descend in pitch as capacitors discharge.

I was in a maze of twisty little passages, all alike, and I didn't have anything to drop in order to mark my path as I wandered around. There seemed to be no way to escape except to wait. After about four and a half minutes, I finally emerged into a large, reverberant space where a moody, atmospheric piano was playing, and the feeling of relief was palpable.

In 2026 I hadn't known quite what I was about to experience when I pushed the virtual "play" button. In 1968, people didn't know quite what they were about to experience when they put the White Album on their record players for the first time.

When I chose to write down "Revolution Nine" as the name of the song that *this* song reminds me of, though, it was not intended entirely as a compliment. "Revolution Nine" is more an "audio collage" than a song, and reaction to it, when it was released, was mixed. It was bold and innovative, true, and it paved the way for a lot of ambient and sampled music that came after it, but even today I think it is still divisive. The Beatles were one of the first artists to use the infrastructure of the studio itself, by which I mean tape machines, reverb tanks, spinning speakers, different kinds of microphones, tape loops, and early audio effects as part of their creative process.

So this track does have some things in common with "Revolution Nine," in that it emerged from an artist messing around in the studio, but in 2026 that studio is mostly in a computer and can include a virtually unlimited number of samples, synthesizers, MIDI tools, and other goodies. The temptation to noodle and spend a great deal of times to *discover* all the amazing things that studio can do is very strong.

But just as in "Revolution Nine," following through on a concept this way can lead to the artist indulging themselves at the expense of the listener. What we've got here is divisive, it seems to me, and I doubt the judges will agree on whether it is good or not, or whether the artist is being excessively self-indulgent.

I'm not going to say more about that now. I'm not going to break the song down section-by-section or instrument-by-instrument. That would just come off as a lot of nitpicking.

I do want to say that I do admire and encourage the creativity present in this song, and the quality of the sounds the artist has made, and I do hope that the artist will be back in the future to make something more like a conventional song, and less like a soundtrack to a work of interactive fiction that I'd like to be able to interact with.

Shadows

Although we don't rank them, I am including a few comments on the shadow entries.

Micah Sommersmith — Red Octagons [SHADOW]

I like the accompaniment right off the bat — it's fun and upbeat. I like the way the bass follows the vocal melody in parts — that's an unusual choice but I think it works. I like the organ sound flying in on the chorus. The vocal performance works as well. I have to admit, I found myself unclear on just what the octagons *were* because I thought this song was about auto racing, not everyday driving. Then I realized they were stop signs... OK, fine, I'm a little punchy after listening to 44 songs!

Overall, quite a decent effort. Had this been an official entry, I would have ranked it somewhere well above the midpoint, but not in the top five or ten.

The Dreams Corporation — Tesseract (Shoreman's Room) [SHADOW]

The first minute or so of this ambient remix is quiet lovely and soothing, until it gets to the "you interacted with the TV" lines. That said, just a few repeated references to "a grid of tesseracts" would not, in my opinion, really have met the spirit of the challenge, and this one is definitely more of an audio collage than a song.

Turtle Fence — Traffic Cones [SHADOW]

The track starts cold like the first few notes were accidentally chopped off. I think the idea behind the lyrics is pretty good and funny in spots.

The lanes to love [that] you should have opened long before

is a clever line, although it scans better in my opinion if you take out the "that" (as you did when singing it). And I think some other lines are less good:

What seems like paralyzing risk is really just called life

which just seems a little too much like something I'd read in a self-help book. I have to admit, both I laughed out loud while listening to the song and reading the lyric, because I did not feel that I could actually tell for certain if the lyric was intended to be funny or not.

The accompaniment is decent — we have some melodic bits, some arpeggios, etc. Although it does feel a little too busy to me in places, it contrasts nicely with the relatively slow-moving vocal track to provide movement.

The vocal performance, a bit droning, and in places indecisive about landing on a note, does not really do the accompaniment justice, and the vocal seems to

drift slightly out of time in places. At at least one point the singer seems like he is trying to stifle a laugh. I think a retake would have been a good idea there.

When I was struggling with my own relatively weak sense of pitch, sometimes I would play the melody on a keyboard and use that as a reference track while recording, not included in the final mix, to sing along to and help me hit the notes. Getting some reverb going on your headphone mix while recording can also help.

Overall, not a bad submission, but one that doesn't really stand out. I would encourage you to sign up for a future SpinTunes!

Final Thoughts

Whew, this was difficult. I was very impressed with the overall quality of the songs this round. Many of them were clever, many of them were funny, quite a few touched me emotionally, and many of them sounded really good.

I always feel good when I can talk about the things I like in these songs, but it's a different story when it comes to the things I don't like. I'd rather not be hypercritical, but we actually have to rank them, so just as someone has to be first, someone else has to be last. I find it relatively easy to group them into bins, but the precise ranking within each bin? With so many songs, it's hard to feel like I really am being completely fair to each song in an unbiased way. Ideally I'd be able to compare each song to each other song by listening to them back-to-back, but that would involve listening to... ummm... recalling my combinatorics formulas given the number of unordered combinations of 2 songs from a set of 44... carry the one... I think that's 946 pairs of songs to listen to. Clearly that's not going to work! Instead I have to sort of carry an impression of each song and as I go through them several times, put them into an initial order, then go through the list and listen a few more times and push some up and some down until I feel that I've reached a point of diminishing returns and it becomes entirely second-guessing. So that's what I've done.

Congratulations and condolences to the contestants, depending on where you landed, not just in my ranking, but in the overall rankings! Please don't be discouraged if you didn't nail it this time. Every challenge is different and every judge is different and we're all learning as we go. I hope you had fun however it came out! And I look forward to the next round!

Bye for now!

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