

Sleuthing with The Smiths

Tim Sheinman's musical detective game Family is a curious multimedia experiment worth listening to



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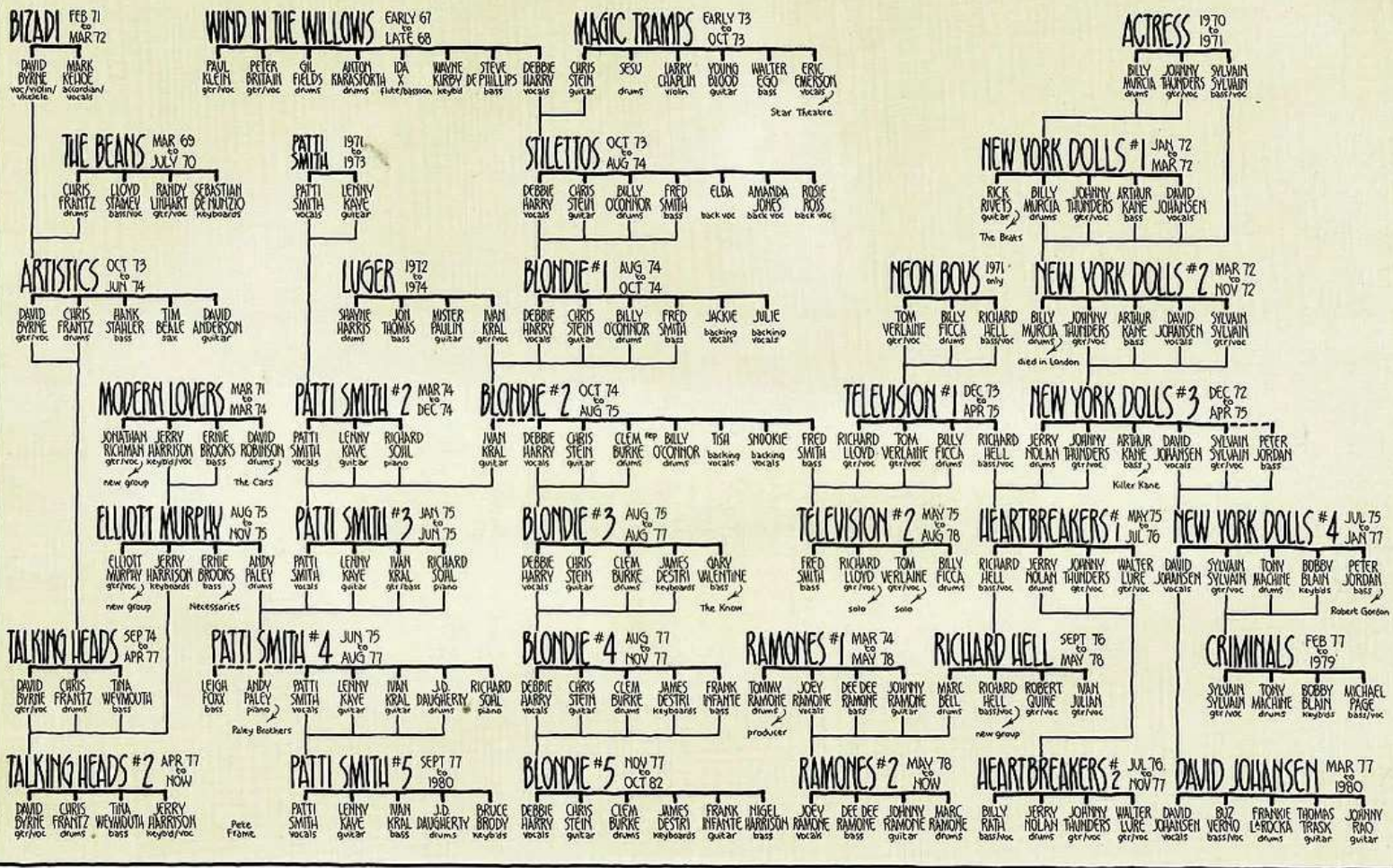


Tim Sheinman — known on [itch.io](#) as Owl_Skip — hasn't always been a game developer. Go back to the first title published on his profile and you might notice it was only uploaded on February 23rd 2020. Over the course of this year, Sheinman has developed no less than 16 short games, starting out with a variety of sci-fi word puzzlers or arcade titles inexplicably centered around guacamole. These early titles are comfortably mechanical by design, largely modeled on game jam prompts and riffing on genre cousins. They are by all accounts video games that relish the traditional act of play.

With his recent portfolio, however, Sheinman has assuredly begun venturing into more ambitious territory reflecting on his personal history and engagement with media beyond the interactive realm. *Family* represents a distinct design shift that synthesises his extensive musical interest, textual gameplay, and fascination with espionage. As its successor *Rivals* goes live, there is no better time to revisit this riveting indie curio and its creative inspirations with Sheinman, fictional Brit indie discography and all.

Broadly speaking, *Family* is a puzzle game revolving around a single conundrum. Much like its detective peers *Her Story* or *Return of the Obra Dinn*, *Family* introduces a central mystery requiring several stages of deduction to unravel whilst enveloping miniature narratives within its greater genealogical framework. Presented initially as a blank family tree, players are tasked with filling in a multitude of fictional bands with their members and respective instruments, revealing their friendships and rivalries along the way. Sheinman's primary visual influence will be immediately apparent to a majority of musical historians, sketchily recreating the meticulously organised craft of Pete Frame's *Rock Family Trees* from the 1990s.

NEW YORK NEW WAVE BLONDIE · PATTI SMITH · TALKING HEADS · TELEVISION · HEARTBREAKERS · RAMONES



Frame's Family Tree for the New Wave scene in New York. Source: lovegoestobuildingsonfire.com.

Such a macrocosmic visualisation critically redirects the conversation from the individual music stems towards the music *scene* itself — the tree is more pertinent to preservation than the individual leaves. As Sheinman mentions in our conversation, *Family* is not as specifically attached to the '80s music scene as it is "to scenes in general and the eternal state of being a musician". Whilst *Family* is soaked in aural nostalgia, its overall impression is not tied to the same specificity as its content, rather reflecting on the state of cultural retrospection in a digital age where tools like the Wayback Machine can preserve websites like artifacts in resin. The invitation to embody digital music archivists manifests a unique appreciation for culture and its participants: for names lost through the cracks, for anecdotes scribbled down in diaries, for bands and sounds that only exist when they are actively listened to.

Furthermore, *Family* leverages the attentiveness required to solve its puzzles to create a heightened sense of engagement with its media. Sheinman drops a multifaceted trail of clues to aid players in connecting musicians to their respective bands: gig reviews, interviews, conversations, or even the music itself. For decades prior to his investment into game development, Sheinman was himself a musician and his experience elevates *Family* from a rote mystery to a fascinating immersion into a forgotten time. Each band, from the synth-infused Klanger to the shoegaze blues of Dova Pavlova, comes equipped with their own original single bursting with individual character and style. Sheinman's recordings are so much more than another soundtrack, however, asking players to "actively engage" with the melodies and distinct flavours of each group, instead of passively absorbing the information.

The London Pop Scene (1985-1995)

- Ra-Ra Buffalo
- The Rialtos
- Klanger
- Clarisse Montag
- Casta Nyet
- WaterColours
- Little Red Marx
- Easy Tiger
- Dova Pavlova

Highly sophisticated and sensuous pop music, fronted by a unique singer. The group kept apart from much of the scene and mostly functioned as a slow-moving studio group, due to impracticality of their singer's numerous costume changes in show, and the exhaustion this caused.

Notes and reference

- Interview with Alex Adam, Melody Maker June 1983
- Memor of Gary Madman McKou, Owner of Genesis Records
- Klanger Tour Rider - All or Muffin Tour 1986
- Sound and Fury - The Breakup of Casta Nyet NME Jan 1988
- Clariss Montag Press Quotes 1987 - Life is Piss Tour
- Letter to Mike Jouce (The Smiths) 1987
- Internal Memo - Genesis records 1986
- Tom Catz Interview - Bassist Magazine 1992
- Feet Of Clay - Autobiography of Bob Clay 1998, p. 21
- Watercolours Review - Record Mirror Magazine 1991
- Three - For The Love of Power Trios - Chuck Huden, 1993

It has been some time since a breakup of this magnitude has rocked the London scene.

While Alex Adam certainly possesses qualities as a songwriter, it may be that his lasting contribution to the art is the whirlwind of destruction he unleashes, everytime he senses a group is past its sell by date.

Word from inside the band has been sparse, but it seems that the situation came to a head when Alex left a note on Si Aitken's windshield informing him he had been socked.

Then commenced a long series of heated words, first personally and then through lawyers.

As things stand, the band must find a

THE LONDON POP SCENE (1985-1995)

Diagram showing the relationships between bands and individuals in the London Pop Scene (1985-1995). Key bands include Ra-Ra Buffalo, The Rialtos, Klanger, Easy Tiger, Clarisse Montag, Casta Nyet, Little Red Marx, Dova Pavlova, and The Watercolours. The diagram uses icons to represent individuals and lines to show connections between them.

Family's interface is an eclectic cocktail of influences and styles. Source: itch.io.

Gradually, *Family* transitions from a game about preserving music to preserving a mode of history through this profound engagement. Sheinman tells me that oral histories are at the heart of his inspiration; their

components are a multimedia deluge of interviews, videos, recordings all in the name of reflection and retrospection. Often, these histories will arise from witnesses to that era or cultural product. In *Family*, we are treated to Ella Neil's radio commentary, reminiscing periodically about each act with a first-hand perspective on the meteoric rise and inevitable decline of the scene. The radio lends *Family* another influential medium to its hand — the podcast. Sheinman cites heavy-hitters like *Serial* as instrumental to its storytelling; these true-crime podcasts are, if anything, *aural* histories.

Sheinman concludes our conversation by asserting that he is fascinated more by the “culture surrounding art...than the art itself”. If anything, *Family* is a mightily compelling argument that cultural postmortems create more engaging narratives than their subjects were ever capable of in their prime. *Family* is however much more than contributing discourse. Aside from being a rewarding mystery game, *Family* is a humble celebration of the multitude of ways we communicate and preserve stories, through a cocktail of music, journalism, and play. It is also an overwhelming testament that the greatest stories are not always the ones told; they're the ones that need seeking out.

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