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Art, bikes and rock 'n' roll

Jeff Williams of NIL8 has been creating music and art in Springfield for 30 years

BY SCOTT FAINGOLD



Rock musician. Fine artist. Cycling champion. If lifelong Springfield resident Jeff Williams does not qualify as a genuine renaissance man, he'll have to do until one comes along. In addition, these disparate areas of interest have built on each other throughout a 30-year career, in often unexpected ways. Williams and his band, NIL8, have come into contact with an extended parade of leading national and international alternative music acts. More recently, a crossover between a love of both bicycling and painting uncovered an undreamed-of niche market, landing his canvases in numerous galleries as well as on the cover of a national magazine.

Today, it's not an uncommon sight to see Jeff Williams barreling around Springfield on his bicycle with a look of steady concentration, a mountain of dreadlocks crushed under a protective helmet. Every weekday Jeff makes the 35-minute bike ride to his full-time job as a graphic designer at ISI Printing on Old Rt. 36. When not working or biking, he's usually painting, having recently found himself sought after for commissioned works, as well as having joined the local art collective, The Pharmacy. He also continues to lead NIL8, the rock band he helped found in his teens. At 49, Jeff is a picture of physical and mental health, balancing a restless creativity with fitness and practicality. It has been a long journey to reach this point.

Skateboard beginnings

Every shaggy-dog story has to start somewhere, and the saga of Jeff Williams begins in the cultural wasteland that was Springfield, Ill., in the early 1980s, when a burgeoning outlaw sport provided an entrée into rebellious music. "I just remember things really sucking," says Jeff's brother and bandmate Bruce Williams. "There wasn't anything exciting going on around here, and musically we weren't into anything until we started to read in skateboard magazines about West Coast punk rock. So it was really through skateboarding that we got into music at all."

The earliest version of NIL8 to perform locally, circa 1982, featured Jeff on guitar and Bruce on bass, with Gary "Walnuts" Swaggerty playing drums and Terry Wilson on vocals. Venues in Springfield at the time were scarce, perhaps even more so for a group of hardcore punkers, none old enough to legally enter a bar. But that didn't stop them from trying. A show headlining the premier of a "New Wave Night" at short-lived downtown nightclub Positively Fifth Street ended with the band being banned from the club due to an overenthusiastic audience member breaking a stage light, in turn causing New Wave Night to never be repeated. "We gave the new wavers a bad name," Jeff laughs. "We tried to tell them we weren't even a new wave act. Don't bring down the whole thing

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just because we came up here with these shenanigans!"

This was not the only performance to end in chaos and banishment for the young band. Their show at Baur's Opera House began with a blatant piece of youthful subterfuge, with singer Terry Wilson donning a cowboy hat and presenting a cheaply disguised country music cassette as an example of NIL8's music. The ruse worked well enough to land them the gig, and soon the ragtag teenage skate punks found themselves billed as a country and western band, sandwiched between an r&b act and a light jazz combo. "So we show up, we hardly know how to play our instruments and we're all the way as cranked up as loud we can be," says Jeff. Things went predictably haywire from there, ending with the manager cutting the power and the band having to unload their equipment across a gauntlet of hostile audience members.

One person who didn't see what all the controversy was about was Elvina Williams, mother of Jeff and Bruce. "It never was scary or anything," Mrs. Williams insists. "I remember either an assistant principal or a counselor at Lanphier [where Bruce and Jeff attended high school] calling me and saying, 'Ohh, you'd better watch them, they're starting to hang out with kids who are into punk music!' But I heard them practice, and it was fine. I mean, it had an edge, obviously, but it wasn't like, 'Oh my God!'"

Regardless of one supportive mother's opinion, things soon got to the point where NIL8 had developed an unshakable notoriety in Springfield. After a 1983 appearance as part of the "Rock Against Reagan" tour's Old State Capitol Plaza stop (also on the bill were Austin, Texas, band Millions of Dead Cops and the charmingly named Crucifucks from Michigan), bar owners in town began refusing to book the band outright. "They basically knew: numbers and letters in the name, stuff gets broken, they play with bands that hate cops and Ronald Reagan, stay away from that group," explains Jeff. "We couldn't really deny anything. And then they would just say, 'Aren't you guys too young, anyhow?' They knew we couldn't be in the bar, so that was their out. So we then changed our name to the Gargoyles," significantly the first version of the group in which Jeff both played guitar and sang lead vocals.



Concurrent with this calculated name change, the once-and-future NIL8 found a savior in the form of stalwart local musician and longtime IT contributor Tom Irwin, whose postpunk-flavored pop-rock band Condition 90 was then regularly packing crowds into the Crows Mill. "We started getting some of our own shows again, plus Condition 90 would have us open for them," Jeff says. "We'd be playing and Tom would just be laughin'. I don't know what he was thinking, 'It's a train wreck but it's entertaining,' something like that. But it did get us playing in

front of people.”

Since long before becoming the Gargoyles, the band had experienced a constant revolving door of drummers to rival that of the fictional hard rockers in the film *This is Spinal Tap*. Things came to a head when Gargoyles drummer Steve McDaniels had his drum set repossessed, at which point Bruce Williams introduced Lance Reynolds as a temporary replacement. When McDaniels died soon after, as the result of an asthma attack, Reynolds signed on permanently. With the addition of guitar player Eric White, the band reclaimed the NIL8 name and began the most productive phase of its career. “That was the first version of NIL8 that more than 25 people knew about,” says Jeff.

Full time, on the road

This lineup boasted several unique advantages. Musically, White’s muscular guitar work allowed Jeff to do less guitar playing himself, loosening him up onstage and allowing the emergence of his freewheeling and charismatic front-man persona that quickly became NIL8’s calling card. There were also practical and business advantages. Reynolds was interested in sound engineering, eventually setting up a private recording studio in the house where three quarters of the band lived, which allowed them to record music any time the mood would strike them. White, for his part, revealed an affinity for the business side of things, dealing with record labels, clubs and booking agents, leaving Jeff to spend his time working on the band’s songs. “It needed to be done, and I had no problem stepping in to fill the void,” says White, who credits his business acumen to the role model provided by his father, who ran his own local film and video production company.

With the addition of White and Reynolds in 1989, NIL8 completed its musical evolution out of the raw teen aggression of hardcore punk and into a sound that was tighter and louder, both more expansive and more precise, with Bruce, Eric and Lance pounding out violent, harmonic backdrops behind Jeff’s often humorous, just-as-often lugubrious passion plays. Within a few years, the band had become a full-time concern, playing up to 270 nights a year on the road and opening for many of the major lights of the so-called “grunge” era, including high-profile gigs with Smashing Pumpkins, Flaming Lips and Faith No More – though never Nirvana, despite the fact that in the ‘80s, a 15-year-old Dave Grohl (future Nirvana drummer and Foo Fighters frontman) had written a letter requesting NIL8’s early music. A chance to open for the Seattle-based future superstars was lost when a small club in Champaign offered the band the choice between opening for Nirvana and the (at the time) better known Ohio band Afghan Whigs. The band chose the Whigs and never lived it down. NIL8 did achieve a certain mainstream visibility when its name was displayed prominently in the popular John Cusack movie *High Fidelity* (2000). “Aiman Humaideh [assistant director of the film] is from Springfield and he got some of our posters and a sticker in there. I mean, right on the screen, Jack Black’s talking and there above his head it says NIL8!” Jeff exclaims, clearly still exhilarated. “That may have been the high point of the band’s career right there.”

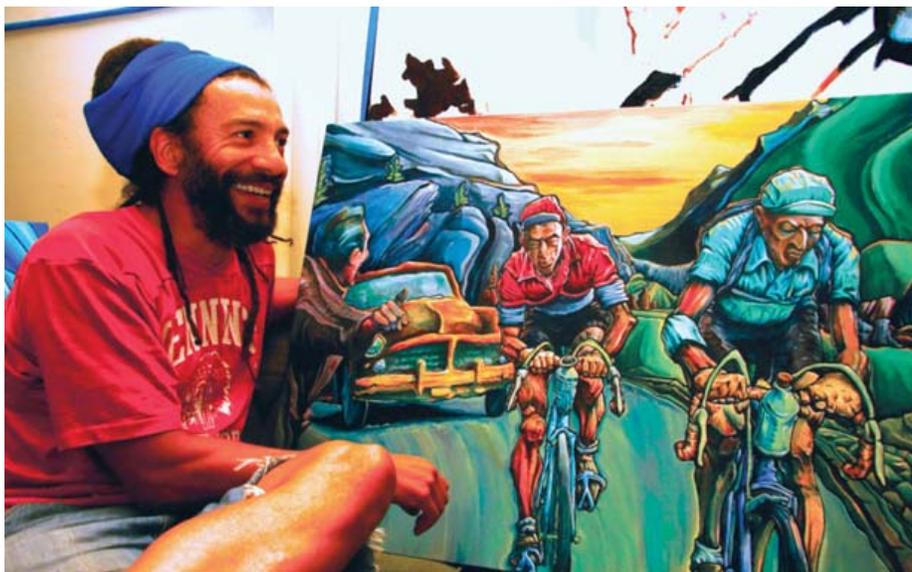


Not every story from the rock ‘n’ roll road is a savory one, and the relatively clean-living band occasionally found itself besmirched, sometimes in unexpected ways. “At one point we were getting a lot of pretty good shows out on the east coast,” Jeff recalls. “One of our booking agents was a large woman who was a dominatrix along with booking bands – I don’t know which one was her day job, but she was moonlighting doing the other one. She would get us really good shows in Philadelphia and New Jersey, and all those club owners would ask us, ‘What’s with your booking agent? What’s her deal?’ ‘Uh, she’s a dominatrix, you know, she definitely would dominate you, she’s scaling around 260, 270 maybe.’ And they would be like, ‘Is she pretty?’” One East Coast club owner eventually spilled the beans that the dominatrix/booking agent had performed phone sex in exchange for his hiring NIL8. “At first we had thought, ‘Wow the East Coast gets us! They get this Midwest band!’” Jeff says, fairly howling through his disillusionment. “Some of those gigs may have been gotten questionably,” Eric White deadpans.

The fine artist emerges

With the departure of White and Reynolds (in 1997 and 1998, respectively), it was time for Jeff Williams to think about non-rock star methods of making a living. A lifelong love of painting (he took his first lessons at the Springfield Art Association at age six and holds a degree in fine art from Illinois State University) had been languishing while he pounded the floorboards of concert stages across the country. Jeff, who has never been married or had children and lightheartedly describes himself as suffering from “commitment or intimacy issues,” soon landed the job with Springfield’s ISI Printing which he still holds, a position which turned out to be a sort of homecoming.

Jeff’s grandfather, Tony Jirik, had been an inspiration and role model to Jeff from a young age, providing an environment where working with art and graphic design was always seen as both a technical craft and a viable form of employment. A comic book inker, painter and graphic designer in the Chicago area, Jirik later relocated to Springfield and started a small company called Advertising Production Service, where as a child Jeff spent many hours observing his grandfather plying his trade. One of the earliest employees of APS was the late Bob Waldmire, Springfield’s renowned Route 66 artist, then a teenager. “I’d see him [Waldmire] at Cozy Dog sometimes,” Jeff recalls. “He’d recognize me and he’d tell me, ‘Your grandfather was one of the local artisans around here, he knew all the old-school ways,’ meaning silkscreening and all the other techniques that were used in advertising way back before computers.”



The art of bicycling

Also neglected during the years on the road was Jeff's passion for urban and competitive bicycling. "When I was in college I started racing bikes and I loved it," Jeff says. "But like with painting, when NIL8 toured a lot I didn't really get to do too much bike racing." Once he was off the musical road, Jeff made up for lost time with a vengeance, training relentlessly and eventually winning first place in the 2008 Masters 40 American Bike Racing Road Race National.

The idea of bringing bicycling and fine art together had never occurred to Jeff until his mother, Elvina, insisted on showing him the 2003 animated film *The Triplets of Belleville*, in which one of the main characters rides in the Tour de France. "I just loved the artwork in it and the fact that a lot of it was bicycle-related. That movie really tied those two words together for me."

Soon after, Jeff finished the painting "Bicycle Racer with Split Pea Soup," and arranged to have it displayed as part of an event called the North American Handmade Bicycle Show in Indianapolis. "It's kind of an urban hipster biker thing, a bunch of guys with their handlebar moustaches, they're wearing all tweed and they're drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon, for sure," he says. Typical of the kinds of designers he met at the Indianapolis show is Richard Calfee, who makes bamboo bicycle frames in a California plant that he strives to keep entirely off the grid. "I'm not just into biking for the racing thing," insists Jeff. "I also like the fact that it's transportation that is not leaving as much of a carbon footprint as other things. It's not just from a total jock aspect."



Consistent with this concern for the earth is Jeff's connection to the ideas of Mary Baker Eddy and the Christian Science movement (far removed from, though often phonetically confused with, Scientology). To Jeff, the religion amounts to a quest for perfect harmony beyond the physical, and not so much blind obedience to some Zeus-like figure in the sky. "Love is something beyond hangups such as sexual orientation or who bombed who first, or who deserves to be in this area or whatever thing we as humans seem to love to lose sleep about," he says. "My mama is an awesome example of pure love 'cause with the nonsense me and my brother pulled at times, it's a wonder she didn't put us in a canoe on the Sangamon River and set us afloat!"

If the career of NIL8 often amounted to a series of uphill battles, near misses and outrageous incidents, Jeff's foray into cycling art has been a startlingly smooth ride, uncovering an international demand for this very specific work. The Indianapolis exhibition led to displays at NCAA headquarters and the National Museum of Sport as well as shows in Philadelphia, Madison and Chicago. A particular highlight came when one of his paintings

graced the cover of the June 2012 issue of Bicycle Times, which had run an interview with him in February. The coverage has resulted in a series of commissions for bicycle paintings from locales as far-flung as Norway and Germany. "I have a couple commissions that I still need to finish, and it seems like as I get some done, more come in," Jeff marvels. "I don't know if I could necessarily support myself doing it full time, but it's enough where I always have a few more to do." A selection of his non-cycling-themed work was displayed as part of the most recent group show of the Pharmacy, which he joined earlier this year, and his paintings can also be seen on the walls of the Outkast Tattoo Company (1535 Wabash) as well as his website, jeffveloart.com, where 2013 calendars featuring his artwork are for sale.

NIL8 lives on

NIL8 continues to perform every few months in Springfield (look for them Friday, Aug. 31, at BarNone) while still booking the occasional one-off gig out of town. The current band lineup of the Williams brothers along with guitarist Damon Soper and drummer Wes Selinger has been together for 10 years, the longest running version of the band in its 30-year history. "Even after all this time, I still think of the Eric and Lance version as the real NIL8," admits Soper. "I'm just really honored to be a part of this band – they've been icons in town since I was a teenager." Local NIL8 concerts are now multi-generational affairs, with their original punk fans, some now pushing 50, often attending with their kids, while a new generation of local concertgoers discovers the band for the first time. "NIL8 is like the KISS of Springfield punk rock as far as longevity," Soper observes. "They are continually able to produce a quality live show and still gain younger fans. Of course, musically, they're nothing like KISS at all."

"I just think it's really cool that Jeff is still heading down that route," says Eric White. "He's still sticking with the art that's at the forefront of his head, whether it's music or painting, and that's just awesome."

Scott Faingold was a founding member of the band Backwards Day and is the author of the novel Kennel Cough. He can be reached via scottfaingold@gmail.com.

Excellent article. The Williams brothers and Nil8 are staples of spfld culture and were certainly influences to those of us who grew up watching and listening to them. Keep it up guys!



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