

rivers in the stream

Weezer front man Rivers Cuomo

cultivates lovingkindness, mindfulness, and a vow of celibacy amid

the madness of superstardom. **AMY KARAFIN**



Weezer (from left to right): Patrick Wilson, Scott Shriner, Brian Bell, Rivers Cuomo

WEEZER'S "BEVERLY HILLS" was the second most downloaded song on iTunes last year. The first single from the L.A. band's 2005 album, *Make Believe*, was #1 on the Billboard modern rock charts and was nominated for a Grammy for Best Rock Song. The video was shot at the Playboy Mansion, where lead singer Rivers Cuomo, 36, played his guitar among skimpily dressed Bunnies. They sauntered around him, moving to the beat, playing soccer, and, you know, just being Bunnies.

But if you google "Weezer + celibate," you'll get over 15,000 hits. Until his recent marriage, Cuomo, a Vipassana practitioner and student of S. N. Goenka, had observed a vow of celibacy for almost three years—and it drove the media crazy. The group was featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in May 2005, with the headline "Rivers Cuomo Hasn't Had Sex in Two Years, and Boy, Is He Ready to Rock." When he said last year that he would continue past his two-year vow, the Associated Press covered it like it was breaking news, which, in the world of rock and roll, maybe it was. Rivers Cuomo is a rock star renunciant.

Refraining from sexual misconduct is one of the five moral precepts that the Buddha set out for lay practitioners (along with abstaining from killing, telling lies, stealing, and using intoxicants). The "pesky third precept," as it's sometimes referred to by ambivalent practitioners, is strictly defined by some schools as monogamy within a long-term, committed relationship—or celibacy. For most young single American practitioners, it's pesky indeed. But Cuomo doesn't seem to mind. He keeps all the precepts—"Absolutely! That's the foundation!" he says.

Cuomo is a sort of un-celebrity. He graduated in June with a bachelor's in English lit from Harvard, where he's studied off and on for the last ten years; with his old jeans and plaid shirt, scruffy hair, and sheepish grin, he could pass for any twenty-year-old on the quad. He's

Amy Karafin is a freelance writer living in New York. She has been practicing Vipassana under S. N. Goenka for ten years.

attentive and sensitive, and reserved in a way that's cool and awkward at the same time. And he thinks his words through—sometimes a lot—before he speaks. "I forget that I'm a celebrity, so I don't really create that vibration around me. So, I don't know, it seems like nobody thinks much of me."

WEEZER—THE BAND TOOK THEIR name from Cuomo's childhood nickname—released their first album, known as the *Blue Album*, in 1994 and watched in amazement as sales took off, fueled by the hit singles "Undone—The Sweater Song," "Buddy Holly" (with its pseudo-"Happy Days" video) and "Say It Ain't So." The songs bear the imprint of Cuomo's longtime love for heavy metal while retaining a charming pop innocence and delivering some of the most indelible hooks of the decade. Climbing to triple-platinum, the album announced Weezer's arrival among the modern rock elite.

But even as Cuomo was fulfilling his childhood dream, hints emerged that the material life of a celebrity did not sit well with him. While touring the world and playing to packed stadiums with Weezer, Cuomo prepared his application for Harvard, where he would be accepted as a sophomore. In the application essay, posted on his blog on *myspace.com*, he laments the "nearly unbearable boredom" of being a rock star. "Cocaine? Chix? Limousines? I prefer a hot cup of tea, a good book, and a seat by the fireplace in my own living room." He tells would-be rock stars to "be prepared for a lot of Taco Bell. . . . Get used to writing letters because only the biggest stars can afford all the calls you make when you get lonely. And you will get lonely. You will meet 200 people every night, but each conversation will last approximately thirty seconds, and consist of you trying to convince them that no, you do not want their underwear. Then you will be alone again, in your motel room. Or you will be on your bus, in your little space, trying to kill the nine hours it takes to get to the next city, whichever city it is."

Nevertheless, Weezer continued to record and perform. The group's second album, *Pinkerton*, was made in

1996 while Cuomo was at Harvard. Intensely personal and laced with references to Cuomo's favorite opera, *Madame Butterfly* (Pinkerton is the name of the lead character), it was at first widely considered a failure but slowly developed a passionate cult following. It was inducted into *Rolling Stone's* Hall of Fame in 2004, after having been voted one of the year's worst albums by the magazine's readers eight years earlier.

Following the initial letdown of low sales and poor reviews, Cuomo, dejected, left Harvard and in 1998–99 devoted himself to a rigorous study of creative methods. Secluded in his Los Angeles apartment, he set out to understand what defined great music and to devise techniques for making it. This drive to analyze and break down the creative process would eventually lead him to the dharma, but at the time it brought him to Nietzsche, Goethe, and Stravinsky, among others. He charted songs, studied artists' methods, painted his room black, unplugged his phone, and reveled in discipline. Looking back on this period, in 2004 he wrote in

cism from *Pinkerton* fans—he decided to become the band's manager as well as its lead singer and songwriter. He studied business strategy, got to know the industry inside and out, and began negotiating the band's contracts himself. Weezer bypassed the music industry altogether for *Maladroit*, their fourth album, which they financed and distributed themselves. Despite critical acclaim, however, *Maladroit* was a slow seller, and Cuomo set out once again to demystify the artistic process.

This time, his determination to harness and master his creativity brought him somewhere unexpected: love poetry. In 2003, the band's producer Rick Rubin gave him a copy of *The Gift*, a collection of poems by Hafiz, and Cuomo was taken with the fourteenth-century Sufi poet's odes to love. He started reading the *Tao Te Ching* and contemporary writers such as Dzogchen teacher Ken McLeod. He delved into the work of the mystic poets Rumi and Kabir, whose verses he used as a guide to spiritual communion—not with God, but with music. Cuomo's previ-



Rivers Cuomo performing with Weezer at the Oakland Arena in October 2005

his second Harvard application essay that “My goal was to purge myself of all weakness so that I could write ‘perfect’ songs as reliably as a machine.”

Cuomo is known for this kind of intensity of purpose, and because of it is often depicted as a maladjusted obsessive by the mainstream rock press. In 2001, after the release of the group's third album, the *Green Album*—a return to the straight-ahead style of the *Blue Album* and another commercial success in spite of criti-

ous songwriting aids had ranged from Tequila and Ritalin to physical pain and induced emotional states, all of which had complicated his life and eventually lost their potency. Now he began thinking about improving his concentration and eliminating ego as a means of making better songs. He gave away many of his possessions, made a vow of celibacy, sold his car, fasted, and started volunteering six days a week to prepare meals for people living with HIV. He had also just discovered Vipassana.

THE SYSTEM OF MEDITATION that Cuomo found through the Internet and ultimately committed to is that taught by S. N. Goenka, who received the technique from Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899–1971) of Burma. Goenka’s ten-day courses include three days of *anapanasati* (mindfulness of the breath) instruction and seven days of Vipassana (insight) meditation; *metta* (lovingkindness) meditation is taught at the end. The courses are rigorous: the schedule runs from 4:30 a.m. to 9 p.m., with participants tak-

the record company was unhappy, my associates were unhappy, and I was unhappy,” he wrote in his 2004 Harvard essay.

His relationship with his mother, Beverly Shoenberger, was strained. “He was in a difficult situation, and we had gotten to the point where we couldn’t even really talk,” she says. “I loved him, but I didn’t understand him or how to reach him.” When he started Vipassana, she was concerned. “Rivers had been going through a lot of

“My goal was to purge myself of all weakness so that I could write ‘perfect’ songs as reliably as a machine.”

ing a vow of silence and committing to the five precepts. Experienced meditators work in a cell—basically a ventilated closet—and practice keeping their eyes downcast and their attention inward at all hours. They cultivate awareness of and equanimity with the subtlest physical sensations as the links to the unconscious.

In Cuomo’s first fourteen months of meditating, in 2003–04, he sat seven ten-day retreats and volunteered at two, meaning that in just over a year he spent ninety days in a semimonastic environment and about seventy in the depths of his mind. It wasn’t long before he sat a twenty-day course, the prerequisites for which include five ten-day courses, two years of regular meditation practice (two hours a day), and one year of keeping the Five Precepts. For most students, the journey to a long course is slow and filled with diversions, but Cuomo had begun working toward the requirements on the first day of his first course, and he completed them as early as he could. “I’ve been lucky. I’ve had the freedom to sit whenever I want, and just a ton of enthusiasm and motivation because I was in such bad shape. So I really dove in.”

Being a superstar is no easy job, and by 2003, after nearly ten years of fame, Cuomo had become distanced from his family. On top of that, he was going through a period of self-doubt, concerned that he had lost his touch after fans who wanted more of *Pinkerton*’s raw emotion had criticized the *Green Album* and *Maladroit* for being dry and impassive. “The fans were unhappy,

problems in the prior few years, and I was concerned that it might be harmful for him,” she says.

But then one day, after going months without speaking, Cuomo sent his mom an email after returning from a ten-day course. He apologized for anything he had done that might have hurt her and said he now understood that he was 100 percent responsible for his own life. This simple sentence, Shoenberger says, was the turning point. The changes she then began to see in Cuomo were dramatic. “I don’t even have words for it. It was huge. I felt like I had my son back. He was becoming more deeply himself, like this was the grown-up Rivers of the boy that I knew.”

The ease with which Cuomo slid into meditation practice may have had a lot to do with his background. His parents had first met at the Rochester Zen center in New York, where Cuomo and his younger brother, Leaves, spent their first years. “From the time he was born, he was in the culture,” Shoenberger explains, remembering baby Rivers pointing to a picture in the communal home’s meditation room and saying one of his first words: “Buddha.” When Cuomo was six, Shoenberger, by then divorced, moved with the kids to the Yogaville ashram in northeastern Connecticut. They lived in the ashram itself for only a year but were part of the community for eight. Rivers and his brother attended the Yogaville school for three of those years, where they practiced mantra meditation as part of the curriculum. Shoenberger meditated with her kids at home, too.

When Cuomo would miss his father, they would go into the meditation room, light a candle, and send his dad some love.

When Cuomo went to public school at age eleven, he stopped meditating regularly, but continued to use it “in crisis situations,” he says. “In times of extreme pain or fear or something like that, I would start practicing my mantra.” Maybe it’s not surprising, then, that when this little kid who had always run around singing and “making up little tunes” later encountered a crisis situation in his music, he found his way back to meditation.

still a trace of wanting to separate myself from everyone else and be weird or hard-core or ascetic. And that little trace of ego, it put a spin on how I would explain things, and the press jumped on that. There probably could have been a way to communicate that information without drawing so much attention to myself.”

As serious as Cuomo is about his spiritual path, though, he is quick to point out that he originally sought out meditation as a tool for songwriting. What he discovered was that his attachment to the creative process was part of the problem. “My compulsive creativity is very harmful and definitely doesn’t produce

“The more you can let go of those compulsive urges to create, the better a creator you’ll become.”

WHILE THE ROCK STAR LIFESTYLE probably wouldn’t be ideal for most committed dharma practitioners, it seems to agree with Cuomo. Touring the world, for example, doesn’t pose a challenge to his practice. “Some days on the road are tough,” he concedes, “because I can hear another band playing in the background or something and that can be distracting. But my task is the same wherever I am, and that’s to observe sensations with equanimity. If you’re on a stage or in a classroom, when you break it down it’s all just sensations.” Maintaining awareness on stage, he says, “can actually be easier because you can have more intense sensations that really raise their hand.” And he’s careful during interviews to keep up right speech. “I still have the instinct to put a little spin on something, to hide something. I have to be constantly vigilant to come back to a place of equanimity and hopefully speak something that’s more truthful.” Staying sincere in an industry as cutthroat as music is not a struggle for Cuomo, either. “I don’t have to be more hardball. I’ve found that the more honest I get, the more beneficial my relations become to me and to everyone else.”

Cuomo doesn’t blame the press for misrepresenting him or obsessing over his sex life—or rather, the lack thereof. On the contrary, he takes responsibility for the worldwide proliferation of “Rivers Cuomo Is Celibate” articles. “I realize that there was a trace of ego in me as I would tell the press that I’d been celibate. And there’s

the best results. It’s a painful paradox, but the more you can let go of those compulsive urges to create, the better a creator you’ll become.” He credits his Vipassana practice with bringing a new sensitivity and better lyrics to his songs, qualities he felt he had lost after *Pinkerton*. But he has an ambivalent relationship with the creative urges that come up during retreats. “It’s getting more intense, actually. The last two courses I had so many creative impulses and was so tempted to indulge them and start developing my ideas. It’s just constant.” During his last course, song topics and hook lyrics kept popping up. “They’re just so juicy and enticing, and I want to dive into it and start working on it, but I have to wait.” At the end of courses, he busily scribbles down everything he can remember.

The song “Pardon Me,” one of the tracks on *Make Believe*, came to Cuomo during metta meditation. “Sometimes I hurt you so,” the lyrics go, “I know that I can be the meanest person in the world/ So I apologize to you/ And to anyone that I hurt too. . . . Pardon me.” Other lyrics, like those of “We Are All on Drugs,” seem to be about craving as a root of suffering: “We are all on drugs/Never getting enough. . . . I want to reach a higher plane.” In the end, though, the lyrical inspiration is just a fringe benefit. Cuomo’s in it for all the right reasons: “The material is better because you’re down in a deep place. But if you don’t cling to those

ideas, then you'll go to an even deeper place, and so on, and so on, and so on."

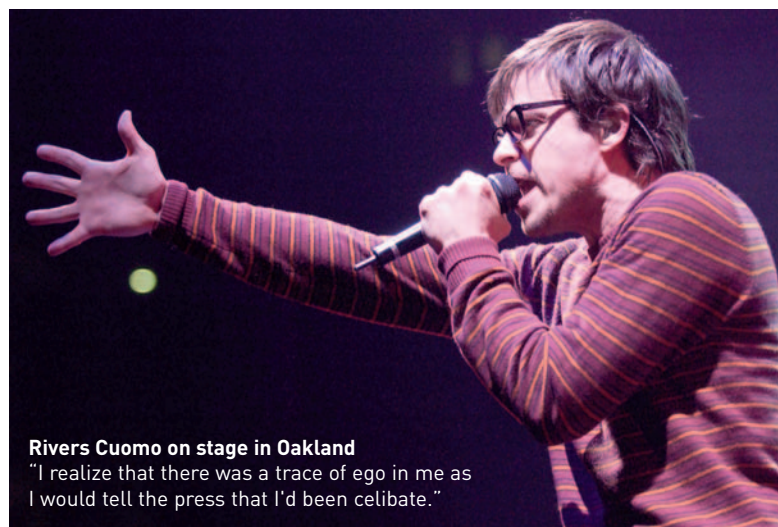
A PASSAGE FROM the *Muccalinda Sutta* greeted fans to Cuomo's website this spring, along with a link to dharma.org, the homepage for Vipassana centers associated with Goenka. Cuomo doesn't consider himself an "extremely important ambassador" but does acknowledge that he's found himself in the role of dharma rep to millions of music lovers. People have approached him at courses to tell him they tried Vipassana because they read his blog or an interview with him. And he's careful to try to portray dharma accurately when he's talking to the press. "Sometimes I don't say exactly the right thing, and I feel bad. But I just keep meditating and hopefully I'll learn how to be a better representative." As for the facetious tone that journalists sometimes take when writing about his practice—a recent issue of the music magazine *Blender*, for example, opened up an interview with Cuomo with "Namaste, dude"—Cuomo accepts what he can't change. "We live in the United States of America in the twenty-first century, and our society is not really prepared to understand this. And on top of that, I'm speaking to the pop press, so I don't expect them to be really sensitive. I just do my best, and hopefully people who are going to be drawn to the practice will see through comments like 'Namaste, dude.'"

Cuomo tries not to develop too much ego around being a meditator—"prime material," as he puts it, for puffing up our self-images. And he tries to keep his practice as unobtrusive as possible. When Weezer began touring last year to promote *Make Believe*, he said that he had insisted on having certain times reserved for meditation. He asked for a private room, for peace and quiet, but found that it didn't feel right. "Meditation's supposed to promote harmony, not create tension," he realized, and stopped fussing about it. "I got to a point where I never even brought it up. I never postponed or canceled an interview for meditation. I just always worked around whatever else was going on, and it worked out fine." As he put it in his blog last October, "Nothing seems more diva-like to people than to inconvenience them for the sake of meditation."

Eventually, the people around him started to get interested. Now, when Weezer goes on stage, bassist Scott Shriner and co-guitarist Brian Bell meditate with Cuomo for a few minutes beforehand. "It was their idea,

not mine," Cuomo said. Shoenberger keeps a daily Vipassana practice, and she and Cuomo sit together from time to time. They support each other's progress, too: he encourages her to stick with it despite the difficulties—"I told Rivers that the ten-day course reminded me of his birth," she says, "that's how hard it was at times"—and she sends him metta when he's in courses. This summer she sat her second course, while Cuomo accompanied his new wife, Kyoko Ito, to her first course at the Japan Vipassana Center. He was careful not to pressure Ito into it. "I've really tried to not even subtly manipulate her into trying it. Hopefully, I haven't," he says, pausing. "Maybe I did a tiny bit, but I think I've been really good about it." In fact, he doesn't try to get anyone to join a course, despite his own enthusiasm. "You've got to just accept everybody and love them as they are."

Cuomo will sit his first thirty-day course this fall. "It's gonna be great!" he says, and it's obvious by the way his eyes light up that he's excited about it, if a little nervous. "I hear the thirty-day is a big step up from the twenty-day." He'll have to keep his precepts for the thirty-day course, but for Cuomo, it's not about require-



Rivers Cuomo on stage in Oakland

"I realize that there was a trace of ego in me as I would tell the press that I'd been celibate."

ments. "I'm keeping them for the rest of my life!" Now that he's married, of course, keeping the pesky third precept will no longer mean celibacy, but right action, in whatever form it takes, is now policy for Cuomo. As he put it in a recent blog post: "The purpose of the precepts is to make my mind calmer so that I can meditate better. The purpose of the meditation is to help my singing, songwriting, performing, and just about everything else in my life. See? It all makes sense. :)" ▼