



# Bee Thousand

*Marc Woodworth*

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## **Bee Thousand** Marc Woodworth

Marc Woodworth's book covers the album's long and unorthodox period of writing, recording, sequencing, and editing. It includes interviews with members of the band, manager Pete Jamison, web-master and GBV historian Rich Turiel and Robert Griffin of Scat Records. At least sixty-five songs were recorded and considered for the album and five distinct concepts were rejected before the band hit upon the records final form. One late version, very nearly released, contained only a few of "Bee Thousand"'s definitive songs. The rest were left out and nearly ended up in the boxes of cassette out-takes cluttering up Robert Pollard's basement. The story of "Guided By Voices" transformation from an occasional and revolving group of complete unknowns to indie-rock heroes is very much part of the story behind the making of "Bee Thousand."

In addition to providing a central account of how the record was made, Woodworth devotes a substantial chapter to the album's lyrics. Robert Pollard's lyrics are described by critics, when they're described at all, as a brand of tossed-off surrealism, as if his verbal sensibility is somehow incidental to the songs themselves. Nothing could be further from the truth. Woodworth offers a sustained discussion of Pollard's work as a writer of often sublime, beautiful, and very human lyrics.

The third key section of the book covers aesthetics. Woodworth considers the great appeal of the do-it-yourself nature of "Bee Thousand" and reflects on the larger importance of the strain of alternative rock for which this record is a touchstone.

## **Bee Thousand Details**

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# From Reader Review Bee Thousand for online ebook

## Jean Bosh says

Woodworth's collage/snippet-style structure perfectly suits a book about Bee Thousand and the fans that would want to read said book. There's a little bit of everything - a peep-hole into songwriting and recording details, creamy insights by Woodworth who clearly gets what Bee Thousand is all about, thoughts from random fans, interviews from all the major players (including Uncle Bob himself), word games incorporating lyrics from the album, and more all in digestible portions not unlike the gems found on Bee Thousand itself. I've only read a handful of books in this series, but it's difficult to imagine an author completely nailing an album like Woodworth has done here - and as an obsessive GBV fan, it's greatly appreciated.

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## Justin says

Interesting structure

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## Andrew Kleimola says

Bee Thousand reads like an academic essay. Although chock-full of anecdotes surrounding the making of the album, those anecdotes are asphyxiated by the heady analytical discourse, particularly the lyrical dissection. The 4 page description of Pollard's leg-kick during a live performance is the best example of unnecessary analysis. After Pollard's first-person account, the rest of the book is kind of lackluster. I am glad this book exists if only because reading it caused me to re-discover the gem of an album.

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## Nathan says

This book reads exactly like a Guided by Voices album. Some parts are glorious, and some parts you grow to love in time, and some parts, you might just discard. But still, like the album, it's worthy of a read.

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## Craig says

There's always a danger when it comes to reading anything remotely critical, especially when it's regarding one of your favourite albums or films. It's very easy to label a book or article as utter bilge if it acts against your sense of confirmation bias. Luckily, I'm a fairly rational person (if I do say so myself) and this book was not only fair in it's discussion, but helped shine new light on an album steeped in mystery. Achieving a cult status amongst lo-fi connoisseurs, *Bee Thousand* is the epitome of the word "rock". I don't want to turn this book review into an album review, but some context is to be offered if the following is to be understood. Robert Pollard (frontman of *Guided By Voices*) is a master at crafting infectious melodies which already sound aged and appreciated. Everything I felt about the record is put into such wonderful words in this book, from the often overenthusiastic breakdowns of the band's recording processes to refreshingly honest listener

responses. It shows the width and breadth of *Bee Thousand's* influence.

The book itself is a wonderful companion to the album itself. It served me well to play the album as I read along, because tracks can fly by so quickly you've barely begun to hum along before you're three songs behind. The frantic, "collage" approach to the book's composition compliments the album perfectly, with very little overstaying its welcome. You're not left bored by the over indulgence, rather you're left wanting to know more about the band's unconventional writing and recording methods. While the author is prone to getting lost in his own wording sometimes (including the infamous tick-by-tick description of Pollard's bicycle kick) it feels only right that a bizarre album hosts bizarre commentary. It may ooze pretentiousness, but for all the humility *Bee Thousand* emits, you can forgive as quickly as the album squeaks to a halt.

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## **Krok Zero says**

*Bee Thousand* is the greatest album of all fucking time. I was introduced to it in high school by a more musically savvy friend, and it took me a while to understand it; on first listen I only really liked "I Am A Scientist," then set it aside for a while, then randomly came back to it and was blown away. I never stopped being blown away; nearly a decade after first hearing it, the album still sounds fresh and surprising to me. GBV frontman Bob Pollard wrote the sweetest melodies since the heyday of Lennon & McCartney, the kind of tunes that you can't believe no one had ever thought up before, and then proceeded to fuck them up with distancing noise effects and weird splicing and mistakes and experimentation and the famously "lo-fi" recording quality of the basement four-track sessions -- economic necessity bled into aesthetic preference; there's no use trying to separate the two -- so that you have this tension between pure pop beauty and the fractured sound that seems to represent its maker's own fractured psyche. Oh, and the album blazes through 20 tracks in 36 minutes, because fuck the expected three-minute structure: once you've gotten your great idea down on tape, why repeat it?

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Guided By Voices, Midwestern heroes of art for art's sake and rock's greatest functioning alcoholics, called it quits in 2004, although that really only meant two things: (1) that Bob was free to resume his ever-prolific career without the baggage of the Guided By Voices name and legend, and (2) he could go out with a bang on a kick-ass farewell tour featuring all the old ghosts of the band's past iterations. As it happens I was there for the penultimate show of said tour, an epic night at the Metro in Chicago on 12/30/04. (I couldn't go to the final show on New Year's Eve, at the same venue, cuz it was 21+ and I was, resentfully, 18 at the time.) Little did I or he know that a short six years later Bob would be putting the "classic lineup" ('92 - '96, unquestionably their most fecund period; it's refreshing that Bob seems to understand that he did in fact have peak years) back together for one mo' tour (the Hallway of Shatterproof Glass tour, shrewdly named after a line from this classic), coinciding with Matador Records' 21st anniversary extravaganza in Las Vegas, which GBV will be co-headlining along with fellow '90s indie rock giants Pavement, also reunited this year. Needless to say, this was exciting news for me, and it has sent me into a reignited frenzy of GBV obsession, one facet of which was to finally sit down with the *33 1/3* entry on my favorite album.

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The *33 1/3* project, in case you don't know, is a series of short books about landmark albums in pop music's history. It's a great idea that's been embraced by rock nerds, as it should be: what's more rewarding than having your own musical obsessions validated and reflected by someone who loved the album so much they

wrote a whole damn book about it? This is my first exposure to the series. In the future I plan also to read the entries on Neutral Milk Hotel's *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, Belle & Sebastian's *If You're Feeling Sinister*, The Pixies' *Doolittle*, and possibly others. But I'm happy to report that this one, the one about the greatest album of all fucking time, does justice to the peculiar greatness of *Bee Thousand*.

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The credited author of this volume is a gent named Marc Woodworth, a published poet. His ruminations are a satisfying triform of the fan's (and the fellow artist's) appreciative awe, the poet's linguistic creativity, and the academic's critical analysis. I say "credited" author because Woodworth's prose shares space with multiple voices: original band-members contribute first-person accounts of the album's making; a collagist is interviewed about his affinity with Bob Pollard's art; GBV fans write in brief, wonderful "listener responses"; poetic fragments and GBV-inspired language-games show up uncredited. The book, then, encompasses at least three different modes: criticism (Woodworth), memoir (band members), and testimony (listeners). Criticism, memoir, testimony: each contains a piece of the truth about *Bee Thousand*, and this three-pronged approach provides a more efficient way for the book's 160 pages to get at that truth. Plus, a book about a fragmented album ought to have a bit of a fragmented structure itself, no?

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Woodworth's arguments can be a little overzealous or far-fetched, at times; his burning passion for this music sometimes manifests itself in ways that less forgiving readers may view as pretentious. I can't say I felt enlightened by his step-by-step deconstruction of Bob's high-kick stage move, or entirely convinced by his attempt to posit the album's DIY production as a modern act of Emersonian self-reliance; but hey, unconventional subject matter calls for unconventional coverage. And if it gets to be too much, there's a plainspoken memoir-chapter or listener response just around the corner.

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It's worth noting that one longish section of the book, an analysis of Pollard's lyrical style, is presented as the "unfinished dissertation" of a graduate student who met an untimely death while engaged in bizarre practical research for his critical study of GBV, complete with professorial introduction by the student's advisor. I can't say absolutely that this presentation is a hoax, but I'm pretty sure it is. The "student" liberally quotes from the memoir accounts commissioned by Woodworth for this very book, and his ideological perspective w/r/t GBV closely mirrors Woodworth's. Plus, the story of the student's death is transparently ridiculous, although not so ridiculous as to be impossible. Assuming it is a hoax, the question is: why? What's the point of cloaking these particular arguments as the work of someone else? The only answer I can think of is that it's Woodworth's attempt to do what he continually praises Pollard for doing in his music: to "fuck up" that which is "creamy," meaning to fracture and disorder and alter that which is clean and easy and consistent. And if that was Woodworth's goal, this hoax is kind of a weird way of going about it, but you know what? Fair enough.

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Woodworth likes to debunk myths about GBV and *Bee Thousand*, such as the myth that the album was an "accidental" masterpiece slapped together by naifs who just got lucky while hanging out and getting drunk in each other's basements. But sometimes the memoir accounts contradict Woodworth and end up sort of supporting the myth; of *Bee Thousand*, Pollard says, "It's still funny to me to call something thrown together so haphazardly a masterpiece." So which is unreliable, the memoirs (which offer a fascinating glimpse into

how the sausage got made) or the criticism (which offers the kind of distance that the artist himself can never have)? Dunno.

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For me, the essential meta-contradiction of Guided By Voices is this: how do you reconcile the sublime artistry, the perfect songwriting, the dreamlike imagery, the inventive soundwork, with the fact that this stuff was made by beer-guzzling, overgrown fratboy-jock-slobs from Ohio? Smartly, Woodworth acknowledges this discrepancy without attempting to explain it. The soul of an artist can take form in any old jerkoff, Woodworth seems to be saying, and the fact that Pollard is a hard-drinking ex-jock has little to do with his inner compulsion to create or the inner genius that makes his creations so brilliant.

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When tickets for the upcoming GBV reunion tour date in Chicago went on sale, they sold out in under two minutes. I was not among the fortunate quick-drawers, so I ended up getting tickets to see 'em in Minneapolis, where my sister lives; it seemed like a good excuse for a visit. Later, I found out that the Chicago show had been moved to a larger venue and more tickets were (and still are) available. So GBV is now responsible for me taking a little out-of-state trip that I wouldn't otherwise have taken -- another instance of "fucking up" my "creamy" plans, I guess. In any case, I now feel extra-prepared for the show, having read this book, which is really a must-read for the serious GBV fan. *Bee Thousand* is one of my most treasured cultural objects, and I can't wait to get on a bus and reexperience its highlights as performed by the gray-haired, beer-bellied, fifty-something iterations of the guys who made something truly great and are stopping to acknowledge it one last time before moving on forever.

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## Brad says

Four-and-a-half stars.

Following the arty and playful format of the album, this collection pieces together small bits (analysis, reflections from the band, listener responses, and more) along with the occasional long bit to create a literary soundscape of what *Bee Thousand* is. Most anyone reading the book already agrees that the album is of value, so the book doesn't try to sell it (or give meaning to it) as much as it tries to create understanding around the value it has. If this sounds overly beardy or pretentious, this may not be the book for you; if such an exploration sounds curious or inviting, dive in.

What I liked best was the ways it bridges Pollard's songwriting and album compilation styles to his collage-making. This has given me a renewed appreciation.

(view spoiler)

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## **Adam Witt says**

Bee Thousand itself is a patchy, scratchy, occasionally-incoherent mess of cobbled-together ideas, lines, riffs, and inspiration. This all comes together, through the alchemy of talent and determination, to create one of the best albums of the 1990s. It's a landmark; one of those landmarks you come across in a small city you're passing through, but one you want to go back to, one that sticks with you.

Marc Woodworth has the, frankly unenviable task, of trying to sum this thing up, however possible, in the minimal, blocky amount of space that the 33 1/3 series affords its writers. A lot of these books can't be trusted: the freedom they offer their talent is a double-edged sword. Woodworth makes the absolute best of this, and the album is given the due it deserves.

There are interviews with the band, testimonials from listeners, interesting stretches and factoids, sonnets, an incomplete essay by a fan dead too-soon; it's a patchwork. There are bits that are more successful than others, certainly. The same can be said of Bee Thousand. As well as that album puts itself together, it just as easily takes itself apart. Pollard and friends knew exactly how to sequence it, and, as such, it's a triumph. This book achieves the same feat. There are definitely weak points of the book, but you won't remember them, and you won't care much, minus the moment, much as you might have those one or two tracks on the album you might skip.

The best kind of criticism, almost undeniably, is that which adds to the source material. This book hits that platonic ideal: you might come out of your read loving Bee Thousand even more.

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## **Jack Wolfe says**

The pieces that Woodworth himself wrote are extremely hit-and-miss-- many seem far too pretentious for this wonderful, humble little record-- but he's done a great job collecting revealing interviews and some priceless fan reactions. The book ends up reading a bit like a text version of a classic Guided by Voices record: it's fragmented, inconsistent, but frequently touching and usually pretty fun.

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## **Ryan says**

This is the first book I've read in the 33 1/3 series, and it's mostly what I wanted from a 150 page exposition on the essential Guided by Voices record, Bee Thousand. I like how Woodworth gives just enough history of the band without making this a biography, and just enough praise to not sound totally fanboy. The criticism from Woodworth is a singular interpretation rather than a series of responses to how Bee Thousand has been received by other critics or a history of its critical reception.

The inclusion of the brief Listener Responses segments moves the pace along quickly, allowing other voices in the room just at the moment when Woodworth's own is hitting empty walls. He's wordy (for such a short book), though he obviously has spent a lot of time listening to the record. The writing is best when it points out something specifically idiosyncratic and authentic about the music and expounds on it. It's less than satisfying when the author spends too much time describing what the music sounds like in elaborate and

imperfect metaphors.

The section written by Bob Pollard is excellent, for you really can't beat hearing from the musician themselves when they speak so fluidly about their own work. There are more than a few gems here when he discusses the inspiration for those colorful images that keep listeners coming back to this album.

Definitely looking forward to reading more from this series.

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### **lindy says**

Man, this book was terrific. It's a sort of collage of all different writings about *Bee Thousand*: some from fans, some from friends of the band, some from the likes of Bob Pollard and Tobin Sprout. There's an author who writes parts in between to connect everything as well. I know far too much about Guided by Voices for my own good (mostly from reading James Greer's book about the band and also obsessively trying to track down everything they've ever recorded), but I learned quite a bit from this book. It was fascinating to see what different people get out of a record that isn't really "about" anything but has still come to mean something to a whole lot of people. A lot of fans seem to project their own memories and shades of meaning into the lyrics, which absolutely convinced me that Bob "de de de de de de de/kicker of elves" Pollard is probably the most brilliant lyricist of our time. I can't listen to "Goldheart Mountaintop Queen Directory" anymore without picturing Pollard looking into a mirror while tripping on acid and seeing his son's face. I was very glad that the author didn't try to literally decode Pollard's lyrics but took a more imagistic approach to analyzing them.

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### **James Proctor says**

The band testimonials are priceless and for those I give this little book all the stars. The writer's effort to emulate the band's fragmentary imagery in prose does not rate any gold stars.

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### **Ron says**

The book being a sort of collage, it echoes both the visual and musical work of Robert Pollard in Guided by Voices. The tale of the making of this record--which may have been a final stab by Pollard to make it after the band had broken up--is interesting from both sociological and aesthetic perspectives, Pollard a sort of savant or mystic who was the apotheosis of the scene in Dayton and able to draw their best musicians (don't ever mistake lo-fi for amateurish). Pollard is revealed as a myth maker of extraordinary power, detailing the lives of those around him in song and crafting what is probably the most striking record of the 90s, an evocation of our mythologized past as a way of revealing what Banks Tarver in the book describes as the falseness of our mediated experience and that our collections of anything are mere imitations of what is real. Indeed, what makes Pollard's work stand out from all the rest is that it is his explication of an inner reality that is utterly alien to everyone else rather than some act of will or discipline to craft based on earlier forms.

The sole weakness of the book is repetition, as it is a treasure trove of information for the uber-fan that could very well please those who have only a passing interest.



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## Frank says

When the guy actually talks to people in the band, this book is really insightful. When he's writing album reviews while pretending to be some grad student who jumped off a roof or writing some dumb poetry, I had to skim. So once I got into the actual meat of this book, I think I read it in 30 minutes. Still, if you like GBV, I'd highly recommend it. I wish these 33 1/3 writers would quit trying to write themselves into an album's mythology though.

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## Scott says

Here's what you need to know: the parts of this book that were (assumedly) written by the band members about their time in GBV and the recording of *Bee Thousand* are excellent and well worth reading. The listener narratives or listener impressions (I don't have the book in front of me, so I can't remember exactly what they are called) provide interesting anecdotes. Pretty much everything else (and particularly the sections attempting discussion of the lyrics) is self-indulgent garbage.

Let's see...there's a section where some artist I'm sure I'm supposed to have heard of is supposedly discussing GBV's lyrics (but he's really talking about himself and his art). And then there's the section with the supposed unfinished dissertation on GBV lyrics from a supposed doctoral student who supposedly died while *climbing the Eiffel Tower while listening to Sgt. Peppers because it's mentioned in one of the songs*. It's one of the most pretentious things I've ever read, and I in fact had to skip the section (something I almost never do. Shit has to be *bad* for me to skip it). I'm gonna feel a bit bad if it turns out to be true (the author plays it real straight and even thanks the guys family and stuff), but it almost has to be a joke. I mean, *climbing the Eiffel Tower while listening to Sgt. Peppers to get a more accurate feel for the lyrics because it's mentioned in one of the songs* (and as a dream sequence by the way. Its not even something anyone has claimed to have done.)? Who in their right mind would even consider that?

When I was reading this part, I was reminded of Stewie from Family Guy (who is an incredibly pompous and arrogant character with a voice to match, for those unfamiliar) and I could picture him writing something like this while saying to himself "Climbing the Eiffel Tower while listening to Sgt. Peppers because it's mentioned in a song! Ohmygod, I'm so droll! I'm so clever!" This my friends is not a good thing for me, since academic-y pretension is a huge pet peeve of mine. And the kicker is, again for those unfamiliar, Guided By Voices lyrics are like Nirvana lyrics circa Nevermind - basically abstract non-sequiturs - so any attempt at analysis is a fools errand at best.

In conclusion, I can only give this 2 stars (and 3 "I'm self-centered and try way too hard" Hipsters) and because of all of the filler, but I still recommend it for GBV fans since it's worth it for all of the input from the band members about how this unique album was recorded. Plus, it's not like you have a lot of choice since there aren't many books out there on *Bee Thousand* to my knowledge.

