

Frame of Reference: The Blueprints for Braid's Masterpiece

By Kim Windyka

In 1993, when Bob Nanna — then a college student in Champaign, Illinois — was looking for a musical side project to bide his time while he played in another emerging band, Friction, he likely didn't realize the long-lasting impact that this extracurricular endeavor he'd soon call Braid would ultimately have on the emo genre as a whole in the following decades, nor the legacy it would leave.

The band was hardly an overnight success, however; amid the breakup of Friction in 1994 and a handful of lineup changes to the burgeoning Braid, Nanna stayed the course and recruited who would become the group's core musicians: bassist Todd Bell, guitarist and vocalist Chris Broach and drummer Roy Ewing, who remained until 1997, when Damon Atkinson stepped in to take his place.

Braid's third album, *Frame & Canvas* — which is widely considered their magnum opus and an essential emo record — was released in 1998. But it was years before that, with their initial two releases *Frankie Welfare Boy Age Five* and *The Age of Octeen*, that they laid the foundation, worked out the kinks, and grew the quartet to its influential status, step by step.

Frankie arrived first in July 1995. It was raw, rough around the edges, and remarkably dense for a debut by any standards, let alone for one from a relatively unknown band. Featuring 26 songs that spanned more than an hour, it unquestionably tested the mettle (and the attention spans) of its listeners. One thing, however, is certain: the emotion, passion and authenticity shine through on every single track, and for those who were open to embarking on the often overwhelming experience, there were numerous unpolished gems just waiting to be uncovered.

“Angel Falls,” *Frankie*'s short and understated opener is a gorgeous, fully instrumental— albeit slightly deceptive — preview of what's to come on the rest of the record. The band keeps its cards close to its chest here, and for someone new to Braid, it doesn't reveal much at all about who they are and what they sound like.

It's “Capricorn,” the next song, that kicks things into high gear and introduces Nanna's impassioned, aggressive vocals, Ewing's energetic drumming and Broach's driving, punk-influenced riffs. It closes on a somewhat odd note with what sounds like a rough demo of a

different track, which Nanna has since identified as an unreleased song by Braid contemporary Cap'n Jazz called "Hot Lunch."

The aggressive, raw group vocals on "New Dollar Building" take things further still, amping up the urgency and desperation and making everything feel high stakes — because when you're young and finding your way, it all seems to be. "Dream don't die on me please," Nanna pleads. "When I find my future, I'll lock it in a locket/Ground it in the ground/Pocket in a pocket/Until now is over/Get it?"

"Garner Hall Music Room" captures the sound of nostalgia and carefree, youthful spirit and as the title suggests, evokes the feel of a college band practice space, complete with indiscernible background chatter.

There are some other unexpected moments throughout the album, like the instrumental interludes "Red Dye Company" and "Quarters," the hopeful "X Marks the Hope Box," which features a frenetic opening, an unconventional groove and softer, sweeter vocals from Nanna and the almost grungy "Featherweight," that sneaks and slinks quietly before unleashing a cathartic "Home, I'm coming, queen" chant.

One of the more immediately accessible tracks, "Summer Salt" has multiple melodic motifs, calling to mind the feeling of cruising with the top down on a hot day.

The final song on *Frankie*, "Zero Frisco," is quick, aggressive, and punchy, with a mix of Nanna's signature fervent declarations, like "Marry me, baby, some things are crazy/This whole thing never meant as much as zero," and a last, guttural scream.

While the album gathered steam after its release, Braid slowly but surely began growing their fanbase from the ground up, playing shows at fans' houses and local VFW halls along with more conventional bars and clubs.

The Age of Octeen was released just over a year later in July 1996. And despite the relatively short time frame between efforts — not to mention the length of the record, which featured just 11 songs over 38 minutes — Braid's growth was swift and evident, giving credence to the phrase "quality over quantity" and reflecting a strong contrast from the time and patience *Frankie* demanded for listeners. Many of the rough edges were smoothed, the vocals were less abrasive, and the band's sound started to take a clearer and more defined shape.

Even on the somewhat loose and casual first track, "My Baby Smokes," Braid's newfound maturity is evident from the start, with noticeably more subdued feel and an instrumental groove that quietly snakes and weaves around vaguely lovelorn lyrics, convincingly delivered by Nanna:

“I thought it best to let it simmer/Then deliver/Pour the facts and feelings from a fever pitcher of smoke/A cough and a choke.”

Returning slightly to the rawer sound of *Frankie*, the band turns up the volume on “Nineteen 75,” with unconventional time signatures, yearning vocals, and melodic-yet-noisy breakdowns.

While the musical development is clear, many of the record’s themes, lyrics, and messages still reflect the slightly immature, but guileless and endearing point of view and emotional responses you’d expect from someone in their early twenties.

For example, “Jimmy Go Swimmer” is 2 minutes and 25 seconds of jealousy-fueled energy, with lyrics like, “What style he shows swimming past me/Doesn’t he make it look so easy/You’ll be famous someday” and “I want to shine/I want to replace yours with mine.”

“Movie Clock Star” is among the most melodic and catchy tracks on *Octeen*, perhaps aligning with its universally relatable references that can be interpreted as speaking to the monotony of a shift at a dead-end job: “Keep keep watching the clock, keep watching the clock son/Your time will come.”

This upbeat vibe continues on “Grace Car Part One,” despite its jilted storyline, which Nanna relays, almost poetically: “I saw your picture today on a card/I tried so hard to remember that smiling face you placed/On my prince’s pillow in that broken down car last summer/You sang to me so beautifully/You were promised to me like a ring to a tree/But you cut it all off and that’s what kills me.”

It slows down immediately afterward, however, with the initially haunting “Harrison Ford,” which briefly transforms into a mid-paced anthemic rocker before reverting to its original pace.

With the brief, completely instrumental “Autobiography,” *Octeen* ends on a similarly quiet, reflective and almost somber note that, as the perfect finishing touch, still manages to elicit strong emotion in a little more than a minute.

Much has been said, both positive and negative, about the grittiness of Braid’s first two albums, and *Frankie* is especially polarizing, even among longtime fans. In fact, it’s often characterized as a release that can only be appreciated by the most diehard devotees.

Yet, however much truth there is to that idea, there’s just as much veracity to the notion that *Frame & Canvas* wouldn’t exist without it, nor *The Age of Octeen*. For music fans who relish the ability to witness a band’s evolution firsthand as they grow alongside them, it’s an incredibly rewarding experience to watch it happen in real time — and ultimately look back at each record

as an integral piece of an artist's puzzle. Braid, perhaps more than many other artists, fully embodies this journey; it's one that's been perfectly woven through skill, dedication and intention.