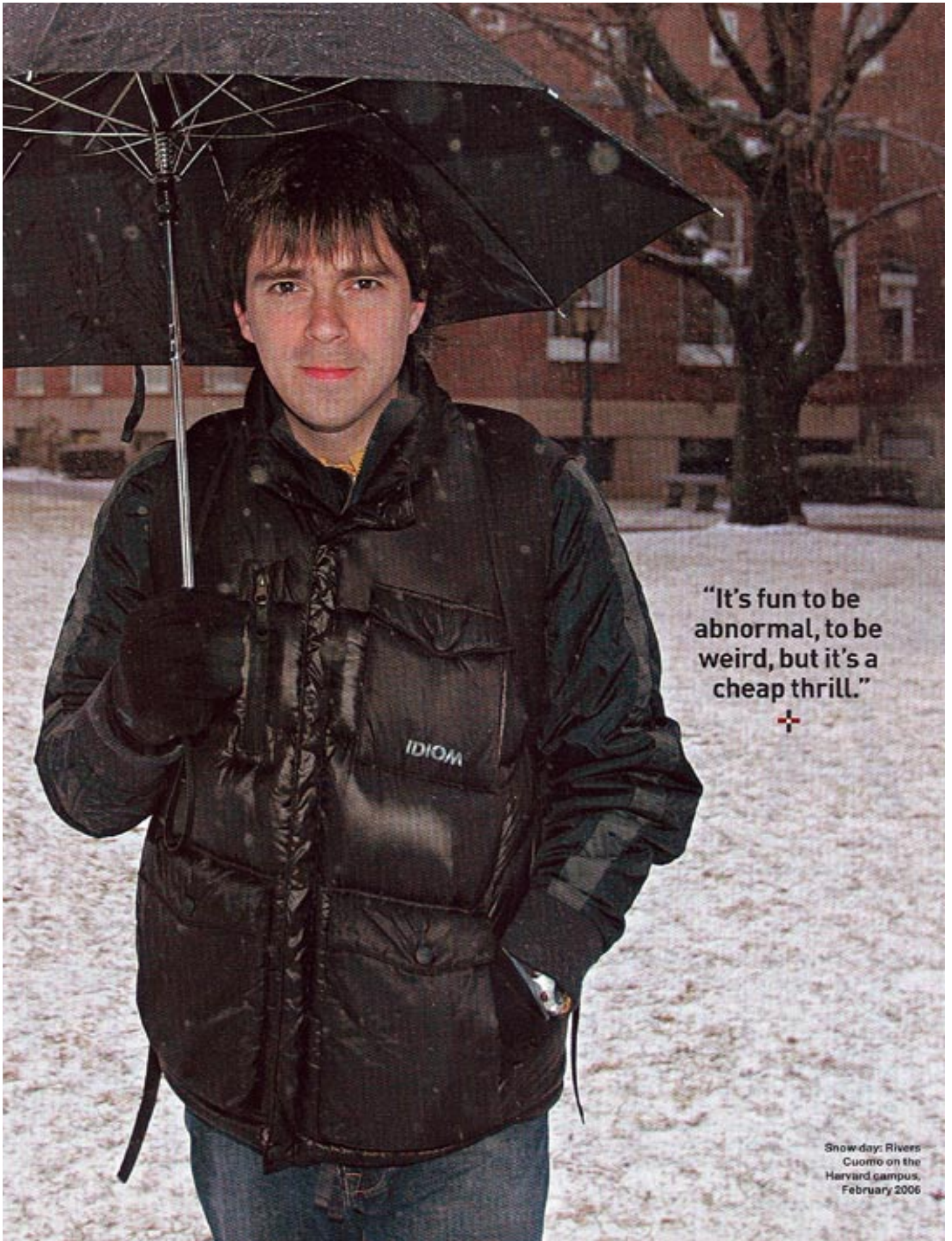


SCHOOL OF ROCK

# Weezer GOES TO Harvard

Meditating in a closet, fending  
off fans in the cafeteria,  
studying sex in the Age  
of Enlightenment,  
**Rivers Cuomo**  
is one busy pupil.  
What the hell  
is going on?

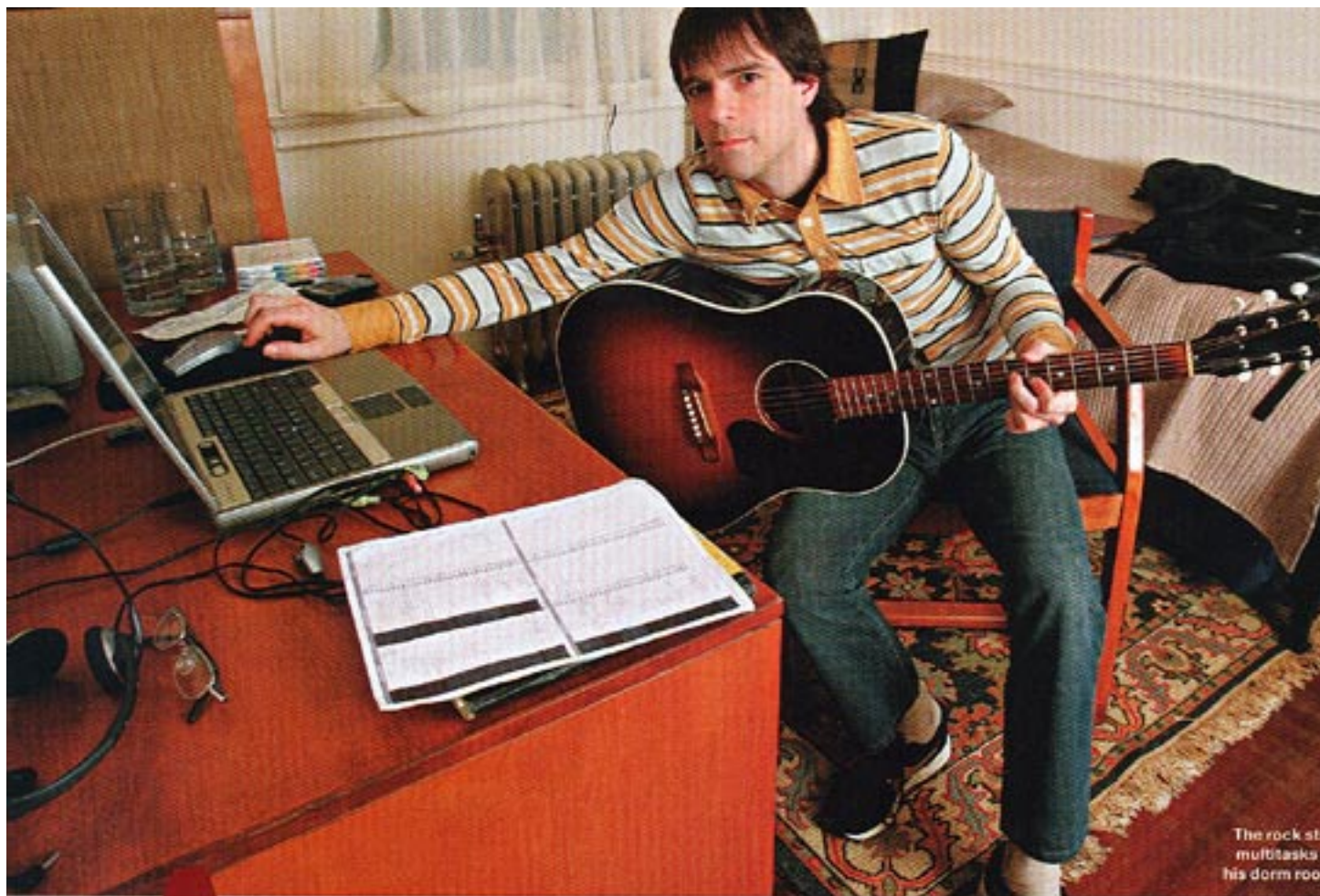
BY KEN GORDON



**“It’s fun to be abnormal, to be weird, but it’s a cheap thrill.”**



**Snow day: Rivers Cuomo on the Harvard campus, February 2006**



The rock star multitasks his dorm room

## A nybody know where Whitman Hall is?"

On the frozen February afternoon I was supposed to meet Rivers Cuomo, only two of the many Harvard pedestrians I stopped had even heard of the dorm, current home of the cerebral Weezer frontman. (The 36-year-old rock star is finishing his final tour of collegiate duty—he started at Harvard in 1995 and has been attending on and off ever since.) It might have been the weather or chilly Ivy League attitude or bad conversational luck, but some of the students even seemed pissed off by the simple geographical question. Nonetheless, I battled my way through the chill and eventually had my audience with Cuomo.

**DAY 1** It's Friday in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I'm standing on the fourth floor of Whitman Hall next to Cuomo's assistant, Sarah Kim, a pleasant 28-year-old who is wearing a long white jacket and has a daub of red in her hair. (Among other duties, she maintains a work-in-progress archive at her apartment with more than 1,000 CDs containing Weezer music.) She

knocks and a little head pokes out. First impression: Cuomo is slight and very white, with worse posture than I expected. Due to his recent immersion in Vipassana—an ancient Buddhist form of meditation—I expect him to be a bit pensive and austere. Instead, he slumps around in black pants and a button-down shirt with intersecting horizontal and vertical lines. A balled-up olive

fleece and non-Buddy Holly glasses are on the bed. A millionaire with a modified mule. Rock's most famous English major is not unaware of how he appears to other people. "I've never been a confident-and-charismatic-frontman type of guy," he says. "I'm not great-looking, and it's kind of just getting worse with time. Now I'm just gonna be a old not-great-looking, not-charismatic guy."

The room is small and tidy—like that of a obedient middle-school kid. On the desk sits a copy of *Robinson Crusoe*; on the shelves, Bible, *The Norton Shakespeare*, a volume of Goethe, a book on the history of India. There are a few electric fans, a humidifier, a laptop and printer. On the walls are several colorful maps of India and one of the world.

He has a modest CD collection, the top rack of which seems to be mostly opera and classical. "Those are just all the CDs that haven't ripped yet," he says. Cuomo has always had a variety of music on the brain. All of last year, he says, he listened to songs from *Billboard's* Hot 100 on his iPod while exercising on the treadmill. "Even in my metal days in high school, I would secretly listen to Debbie Gibson or Madonna," he

says. "It's not surprising that I kind of like pop music still."

The main evidence of his life as a Vipassana meditator—he closes his eyes twice a day, for an hour at a time—is the closet where he practices his ritual. It's covered by two curtains, one green and one blue, both dotted with Eastern-flavored patterns. He later shows me, on his laptop, a short video of himself in India, meditating, talking about Vipassana, playing soccer with little Indian kids.

But it wasn't quite so peaceful earlier today in the Harvard cafeteria. While Cuomo was getting lunch, a student he didn't know suddenly accosted him, proclaiming angrily that a certain Weezer album—our famed frontman would not identify which one—was "horrible." "Well, I hope you like some of our other albums,"

Cuomo calmly replied, and just as he turned to leave, the Weezer song "Photograph" blasted from the cafeteria loudspeakers.

Now sitting cross-legged on his bed, Cuomo describes how the student was "really agitated and shaking," and at the word "shaking," his own hands jump for a second. "Honestly, I was a little scared," he says. "If we'd done this interview yesterday, I probably would have said, 'Everything is great, people treat me great here.' But then this one thing happened."

Cuomo admits he has tried to provoke reactions from people in the past. "It's fun to be abnormal, to be weird, to be different," he says. "You get a rush. But I think it's kind of a cheap thrill, it's a cheap form of attention, and ultimately you don't end up getting taken seriously. I've gone back and forth between wanting that attention for being quirky and being frustrated because I realize it's separating me from the majority of people out there."

## Brainy!

Rivers Cuomo is not the only genius in rock. Oh, no...



**Tom Scholz**

**BOSTON**

Master's degree in electrical engineering from MIT



**Dexter Holland**

**THE OFFSPRING**

PhD candidate in molecular biology, USC



**Brian May**

**QUEEN**

PhD candidate in astronomy, Imperial College, London



**Greg Graffin**

**BAD RELIGION**

Master's in geology, UCLA; PhD in zoology from Cornell



**Mira Aroyo**

**LADYTRON**

PhD in genetics from Oxford University, England



**Sterling Morrison**

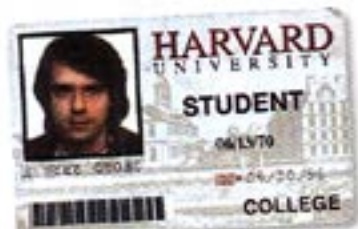
**VELVET UNDERGROUND**

PhD in English from the University of Texas

as: "What's the best use of my remaining days on this earth?"

And he has an answer. Sort of. "It's an open-ended question. It's not like I'm gonna find one particular answer and say, 'Oh, this is my vision statement.' It's more like something I ask myself every day, and I just take one step at a time. So in this instance, this means going to look at houses in Malibu."

After more than two hours of conversation, we call it quits. But before I leave, he walks me through his dorm's elaborate underground tunnel system, a journey that reminds me of the backstage scene in *This Is Spinal Tap*. Cuomo's feet splay out awk-



"I'm not great-looking and it's just getting worse with time."



wardly—perhaps an effect of the 1995 surgery to correct the length of his right leg, which was nearly two inches shorter than the left (the leg had to be broken and placed in a metal frame). But he still moves quite fast. We pass the entrance to the cafeteria and finally reach the music room.

He starts for the door and then realizes that he's forgotten his key card, and we're locked out. It's kind of funny. This guy is doomed, it seems, to be an outsider, no matter what school he attends or how many millions of records he sells.

I tell him that it's no big deal, shake his hand, and thank him for his time.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I can't remember your name."

**DAY 2** I arrive at Sever Hall early Tuesday for Cuomo's 10 A.M. lecture, Foreign Cultures 12: Sources of Indian Civilization, one of three classes he's taking this semester (the others are Sex and Sensibility in the Enlightenment and a course on 18th-century travel literature). Staring at the bulletin board, I notice, among the usual sorts of flyers—college-radio recruitment, study-abroad programs—an announcement for "a party to benefit victims of sex trafficking in India."

A party to benefit victims of sex trafficking in India?

I secretly listened  
to Madonna"



Shredding is not exactly the first word that comes to mind: Weezer at the Coachella festival, April 2005

At 9:42, the first student arrives for class, in backpack and beard, and I ask, "Is this Foreign Cultures 12?" Beardie smiles and checks his watch. "It will be, at 10," he says. The Harvard wit, I step back out into the hallway, and more students arrive, including Cuomo. Ensnared in a bulky black winter jacket, he shakes my hand, and with a genuine smile, calls me by name and asks about my weekend.

Today's lecture by Professor Diana Eck will tackle the Upanishads, a group of sacred Hindu texts, and I ask Cuomo how he feels about participating in class.

"I don't like it," he says. "But I'm getting better."

"You didn't raise your hand before?"

"No way," he says, and in those two emphatic syllables, I get a sense of Cuomo at 16. Or at least the pre-Vipassana Cuomo. He says that when he first got to Harvard, he could go an entire semester without ever raising his hand.

As we enter the room and grab seats, he tells me that today, which happens to be Valentine's Day, is the 14th anniversary of Weezer's first rehearsal. A few seconds later,

I say, "That's probably the longest relationship you've ever had."

"Definitely," he replies.

Professor Eck wears big, round T.S. Eliot glasses. (Eliot, I remember from my English-major days, made reference to the Upanishads in *The Waste Land*.) The class seems totally unaware that Cuomo is here. Is this an affectation? Is he just very well camouflaged? Regardless, as the professor lectures, Cuomo diligently takes notes, writing in a tiny script on loose sheets of notebook paper. We learn many things, but what sticks in my mind the most are terms like *shramana* ("spiritual striver or renunciant") and *brahmacharya* ("the celibate student life as sacrifice"). I hear these words and immediately think of the different incarnations of Rivers Cuomo.

**A**fter class, Cuomo tells me that at the ashram school he attended as a kid, he studied all different sorts of religions. He even learned some Hebrew. Then he busts out a little: "*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam.*"

We walk over to the cafeteria, and Cuomo

asks the lunch lady if he can pay with card for "his friend" (i.e., me). We grab trays and slices of pizza, and spend some time talking about other rock stars who, I and Cuomo, have embarked on spiritual quests. Inevitably, Cat Stevens, now known as Yusuf Islam, comes up. Cuomo says he always wrote a paper about the singer because he wanted to find out why he quit [pop] music and how that applied to me. Cuomo believes that Stevens very sincerely felt a need for something more in his life and that his movement away from secular music wasn't due to a lack of record sales.

I mention to Cuomo that he is often seen as a polarizing figure because he messes with the myth of sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll. He responds quickly, "If sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll were working for me, I would have stuck with that."

We eventually head back to the music room, and this time we get in. Cuomo tells me that there's "a really good vibe" here and that it's a place to do "some serious creating." In truth, he appears to be the most at ease I've seen him. It's not exactly a punk basement but here's how Cuomo describes it: "Heat, stale beer, instruments." Pabst Blue Ribbon and Bud Light cans are everywhere. On the wall is what he aptly describes as a really weak attempt at acoustic paneling.

He picks up a guitar and I wait to hear some shredding. He plays a gentle A-chord instead. Then he sits down at a dinky kit and mentions that his dad played drums on the album *Odyssey of Iska*, by the jazz saxophonist Wayne Shorter. "I've got his drum set," he tells me. Why didn't he want to become a drummer himself? "By the time I was 13 or so, I felt a strong desire to play pitches, melodies." Cuomo kicks a few beats, and I ask him to do a little "Beve Hills" boom-boom-chop. He does this even better than he speaks Hebrew.

Finally he moves over to a cheap little keyboard. Sitting at the keys, his posture seems to have improved. He plays an instrumental version of "Haunt You Every Day," my least favorite song off *Make Believe*; it's a tinny piano sound and buzzy amp distortion help, but I don't mind. After all his past confessions of unhappiness and insecurity, it's nice to see the guy looking comfortable. Suddenly I realize why Cuomo made such a weak first impression in his dorm room: It was totally removed from his music.

We leave, and Cuomo points out a dance studio across the way from the music room. "In case I ever feel like dancing," says with a laugh.

"You ever feel like dancing?"

"No." ●

## The Rivers Cuomo Formula

