



## Sleeping through The Big Lebowski: Sleep, Dreams, and Rest in the Coen Brothers' Films and Jeff Bridges' Music

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**Abstract:** This paper examines incidents and themes of sleeping, dreaming, and resting within Joel and Ethan Coen's early filmography and their intensification in the 1998 feature film *The Big Lebowski*. These incidents and themes are also present, to some degree, in certain Raymond Chandler detective stories and adaptations thereof, which influenced *The Big Lebowski*. *The Big Lebowski* involves a convoluted mystery that prevents its characters, especially protagonist The Dude (Jeff Bridges) from resting, so his quest for ultimate relaxation goes unresolved. *Sleeping Tapes*, a later work of sleep music by Bridges, serves as a spiritual successor to *The Big Lebowski* by providing the relaxation sought by The Dude and positioning Bridges as a sleep and dream guide for listeners.

**Keywords:** sleep music; ambient music; Jeff Bridges; *The Big Lebowski*; Coen Brothers



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# Sleeping through The Big Lebowski: Sleep, Dreams, and Rest in the Coen Brothers' Films and Jeff Bridges' Music

## Thomas Britt

### Introduction

On February 1, 2015, a leftfield source of calm broke up the loud, kinetic display of Super Bowl XLIX when actor Jeff Bridges appeared in two short advertisements for Squarespace, a website building/hosting company. In one of these commercials, titled "Om", Bridges plays a singing bowl and chants "*Om*" while seated at the bedside of a sleeping couple. Onscreen text appears, directing the viewer to a website, "DREAMINGWITHJEFF.COM" that was built using Squarespace. The other commercial, "Dreaming with Jeff Bridges", begins with the actor outdoors, framed in extreme close-up, speaking of his fondness for going to sleep while "listening to intriguing sounds". He theorizes that others might enjoy this, as well, and then provides such a sound in the form of a recorder solo. Again, the viewer is directed to the Squarespace site.

A more recent Super Bowl advertisement more directly connects with *The Big Lebowski* (Coen, 1998) as beverage company Stella Artois featured Bridges as his character from that film, Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski, in 2019 spot "Change Up the Usual". As a direct adaptation, this commercial exhibits high fidelity in that it reproduces signature plot elements, costuming, hair and makeup, and a soundtrack selection from the original 1998 film. However, the earlier Squarespace

commercials associate in an arguably deeper way with the content of *The Big Lebowski* in their promotion of *Sleeping Tapes* (2015), an album performed by Jeff Bridges in collaboration with musician Keefus Ciancia, as both of these works are premised on sleep, dreams, and rest. Furthermore, *Sleeping Tapes* and the commercials promoting it might not have explicitly revived The Dude, but their focus on sleep and Bridges' Dude-like characterization resolve a dramatic situation of the often-challenging effort to rest or sleep that runs throughout the Coen brothers' filmography.

In the *Sleeping Tapes* advertisements, Bridges appears as a kind of sleep guide who will lead the listener into an experience of rest. This is a far more authoritative position than the one Bridges embodies as The Dude, whose sleep and rest are frequently interrupted by events outside of his control. On YouTube, explanatory captions that accompany the Squarespace videos seem to respond to a lack of sleep and rest, reading, "Jeff Bridges wants you to get better sleep. That's why he made his *Sleeping Tapes* album" and "Sleep tight to the sounds of Jeff Bridges' new *Sleeping Tapes* album," positioning the album within a musical genre of sleep music that has a substantial history, often associated with ambient or classical artists. For example, ambient/electronic musician Robert Rich performed sleep concerts in the 1980s, an experiment exploring music as a "thread of consciousness" that Rich describes thus: "you can sort of guide yourself into a state of half-sleep and notice the way that your brain shifts perceptions into an internal world. And what's

fascinating is when the external world and the internal world mix, and the mixing becomes blurred" (Morpugo, 2014).

Rich associate Steve Roach was also making a form of sleep music beginning in the 1980s, focusing on the role of silence/quiet within his compositions and using music to aid meditation and healing, features of his music that persisted in subsequent decades. More recently, contemporary classical composer Max Richter released *Sleep* (2015), an album with a running time of around eight and a half hours, intended to accompany an entire night of sleep. Live performances of the album, like those of Rich and Roach, included beds or sleeping configurations for the audiences, who were expected to participate by drifting off into dormancy. Continuing this tradition, Bridges has also performed an adaptation of his *Sleeping Tapes* live, a process chronicled in Fred Goss's quasi-documentary *Life is But a Dream* (Goss, 2018), released by Sleep Club.

*Sleeping Tapes*, however, differs from most of the instrumental work of sleep musicians like Rich, Roach, and Richter by foregrounding a consistent spoken word performance by Bridges. The actor sounds uncannily like his depiction of *Big Lebowski* protagonist The Dude. He is unhurried, sometimes bemused, and philosophical as he investigates the world around him. Most importantly, though, in contrast to The Dude, is the control Bridges assumes over the sleep experience. His voice meshes with the ambient musical accompaniment of Ciancia, whose

previous association with the Coen brothers includes having served as a producer on the soundtrack for *The Ladykillers* (Coen, 2004). The pairing of a post-*Lebowski* Jeff Bridges with a concept album involving sleep evokes the functions of sleep, dreaming and resting, as well as sleep and ambient music specifically, in *The Big Lebowski*. In this article I will highlight the motif of sleep within the Coen brothers' process and early filmography as well as in *The Big Lebowski* and its direct inspirations, examine how rest and sleep meet resistance in *The Big Lebowski*, and position *Sleeping Tapes* as a spiritual successor to *The Big Lebowski* that provides restful closure.

### **Sleep, Dreams, and Rest in the Coen Brothers' Early Films**

In William Preston Robertson's book *The Big Lebowski: The Making of a Coen Brothers Film* (Robertson, 1998), the chapter devoted to the script of the film is subtitled "Sleeping and Severed Toes", though in this case only one of those two elements refers to a part of the onscreen action in the film. Even a casual viewer of *The Big Lebowski* is likely to remember the severed toe that is supposed to confirm Bunny Lebowski's (Tara Reid) kidnapping but only results in shortchanged Nihilists. The reference to sleeping, meanwhile, relates to Joel and Ethan Coen's process of ideation. In conversation with Robertson, Joel describes their writing process as one that involves a substantial amount of sleeping and staring at the ceiling. When asked about the film's dream sequences and the general "fascination" Robertson assumes they have with dreams

(based on dreams' prevalence in their filmography to that point) Ethan is initially somewhat flippant, saying that "It's just the cheap, gimmicky, obvious way to depict the character's inner life" (Robertson, 1998, p. 50) before elaborating on the harmonizing function of dreams in plots with a "lotta strands" (in the parlance of The Dude).

Though sleeping, dreaming, and resting are central to the plots the Coen brothers write and to their process of generating those plots, the positive value they assign to sleep in their own ideation is often deficient in characters they create. For several characters in the Coen brothers' films, sleep is dangerous, impossible to come by, or some combination thereof. Thus, much of the conflict in their films revolves around the inability to sleep or rest, even as the cinematographic realization of those plots blends the external and internal worlds much in the way Rich describes his musical sleep experiments.

These threats or obstacles associated with sleep are evident in the published scripts for the films, which this article frequently references instead of the completed films to illustrate the intentions of the Coen brothers' writing. *Blood Simple* (Coen, 1984), the Coen brothers' debut feature, is a film noir involving infidelity and fatal misunderstandings. In one pivotal nighttime scene, private detective Visser (M. Emmet Walsh) clandestinely visits the home of bartender Ray (John Getz), who is having an affair with Abby (Frances McDormand), the wife of Ray's boss

Marty (Dan Hedaya). In the Coen brothers' script for the film, the camera frames Visser's point of view and aligns it with the view of the intended audience thus:

*On the bed inside we can dimly see Abby and Ray, asleep. We have been hearing a faint rumble, becoming louder and louder as if approaching from a distance. Just as the rumble becomes deafening a sudden bright flash of light illuminates the room, seeming to polarize the image of Abby and Ray in bed* (Coen and Coen, 2002, p. 44)

This scene establishes several hallmarks of the Coen brothers' approach to writing sleeping scenes, including the use of sound to embed the viewer in the sonic experience of sleep or its interruption, the alignment of a character's visual perspective with that of the viewer so that the viewer shares the gaze of the character (in this case, Visser's looking onto two sleeping figures), and a visual transition that opens up a number of possibilities for what follows the scene of sleep.

In *Blood Simple*, the flash of light could be the flash of gunfire, because Abby and Ray are indeed threatened by Visser's presence and his acting on behalf of Marty. When the flash is revealed to have merely been that of a camera, the repercussion is evidently no less fatal, as Visser presents Marty with "*a black-and-white shot of Abby and Ray in Ray's bed. The sheet that partially covers them is pocked with three dark bullet holes and is stained with blood*" (Coen and Coen, 2002, p. 46). Though it seems as if sleeping secured the death of Abby and Ray, a subsequent twist

reveals that the photograph was altered to make them look dead, while they are in fact alive. In its narrative function, the presentation of the photograph is a predecessor to Bunny Lebowski's couriered toe: simultaneously authentication and misdirection, which are two key drivers of Coen brothers' detective stories.

*Barton Fink* (Coen, 1991) is not primarily a detective story, but rather a form of psychological thriller that is resultantly much more concerned with "the life of the mind" (a recurring phrase within the film) than *Blood Simple*. The plot of *Barton Fink* concerns the titular character; a playwright portrayed by John Turturro, as he journeys to Hollywood to work as a screenwriter and becomes increasingly damned to a hellish existence in a spooky, decrepit hotel. *Barton Fink*'s attention to sleeping and dreaming beings on the first page of the script, as Barton watches actors perform his play on Broadway. One of the actors, positioned on "*the offscreen stage*" delivers a line in character that includes the phrase "Daylight is a dream if you've lived with your eyes closed. Well, my eyes are open now!" (Coen and Coen, 2002, p. 399). The way in which the script for the film establishes Barton's relocation to Hollywood--reluctant on his part, abrupt for the intended viewer--echoes the aforementioned sleeping scene from *Blood Simple*: "*We hear a distant rumble. It builds slowly and we cut to: A GREAT WAVE Crashing against the Pacific*

*shore. The roar of the surf slips away as we dissolve to: HOTEL LOBBY" (Coen and Coen, 2002, p. 407).*

Though the time period, location, and characters of *Barton Fink* are distinct from *Blood Simple*, the use of a "rumble" to introduce the new enigmatic image is consistent with the scene/transition writing technique of the earlier film. The meaning of this brief beach scene changes in conjunction with the many appearances of a picture of a "*bathing beauty*" (p. 411) on the wall in Barton's hotel room, and eventually the beach becomes the foretold setting for the film's ambiguous conclusion. The recurring beach imagery in *Barton Fink* functions in a dream-like way, insofar as each reference sends the viewer's mind backwards or forwards in time to connect the quite separate location and discrete atmosphere of the Pacific shore to the events of the present action, mostly confined to a dank hotel room. This traversal of time bears a resemblance to Jung's description of dream psychology:

[I]n every dream certain details can be found which have their origin in the impressions, thoughts, and moods of the preceding day or days. To that extent a certain continuity does exist, though at first sight it points *backwards*. But anyone sufficiently interested in the dream problem cannot have failed to observe that dreams also have a continuity *forwards*...since dreams occasionally exert a remarkable influence on the conscious mental life (Jung, 2012, p. 24).

This type of structure and the increasingly fantastical events and style of *Barton Fink*, a film all about the mental life, cause some viewers and critics to interpret various sections of the film as more dream than reality, which contrasts with *The Big Lebowski*, whose famous dream sequences are more clearly defined. However, beyond the dream content of the script and film, Barton's difficulty in going to sleep or finding rest is very similar to The Dude's later, constantly interrupted quest to "take it easy". Uncomfortable in his hotel room, Barton often lies awake, looking at the ceiling and hearing the distracting sound of a mosquito; sights and sounds that the viewer shares, many times from his perspective.

In the most dramatic of these scenes involving Barton's perspective of the ceiling and the sound of the mosquito, he wakes from sleep and into a living nightmare, as the woman he slept with has been butchered in his bed. This horrific discovery links sleep with death, much like the doctored photograph in *Blood Simple*. In the script for the film, this event creates a new characterization of the character as "haggard" with "sunken eyes" (Coen and Coen, 2002, p. 481), a weary writer in the middle of a mystery he cannot solve alone.

Before moving on to the specific ways in which *The Big Lebowski* advances similar techniques and thematic engagements with sleep and dreaming, it is important to highlight a comparatively minor, though tonally distinctive example from *Raising Arizona* (Coen, 1987).

*Raising Arizona* stands out from earlier Coen brothers films for its broad comic style, so that adversities endured by the characters, even a fiery biker of the apocalypse who drives out of a character's dreams and into reality, are ultimately rendered in humorous or bittersweet terms. The story of a couple, H.I. (Nicolas Cage) and Ed (Holly Hunter), who kidnap a baby to satisfy Ed's desire to have a child, begins with the two meeting as a result of H.I.'s repeat offenses in holding up convenience stores. He's a robber and convict and Ed is the photographer who takes the arrestees' pictures.

H.I.'s inability to stay out of prison establishes the point from which his union with Ed (and unorthodox fatherhood) will help him mature. An early scene in the script depicts H.I. going to sleep in a prison cell, imagining that "brighter future" with Ed (Coen and Coen, 2002, p. 123). This scene includes point-of-view camera directions and visual transitions common among other sleeping scenes in Coen brothers' films like *Blood Simple* and *Barton Fink*. In the script for the film, H.I.'s voice-over narration interacts with the action description so that his line of dialogue "when the last of the cons has been swept away by the sandman" sets up a view from his perspective, of "*The underside of the top bunk*" followed by a "*sudden flash*" that produces a vision of Ed the photographer (p. 123).

This instance of H.I. going to sleep continues with his voiceover indicating that the future he hopes for is "only eight to fourteen months away" (p. 123), a line that corresponds with an image of his eyes closed and another transition of a visual flash that springs the intended viewer forward in time to his parole hearing. This is a rare peaceful instance of sleep in the Coen brothers' filmography, in which H.I. can endure his prison sentence because he (and the intended viewer of the film) is able to literally see an image of his better half on the underside of the mattress above him, guiding him through his sentence. The figure of a dream or sleep guide becomes increasingly common in the Coen brothers' subsequent films. Additionally, the temporal leap, somewhat analogous to the spatial leap that begins Barton Fink's journey in Hollywood, eliminates any of the hardship of H.I.'s sentence and is framed on either side by a camera flash, here a visual representation of Ed as his sleeping guide.

### **Sleep, Dreams, and Rest in the *The Big Lebowski* and its antecedents**

A synopsis of *The Big Lebowski* that accompanies the published script for the film reads as the disjointed logic of a dream, describing the structure of the film from first incident through complications:

a case of mistaken identity which escalates when Jeffrey Lebowski--alias The Dude--attempts to seek recompense for the despoliation of his ratty-ass little rug, and then finds himself

entangled in a kidnapping caper as a bagman--a situation that goes from bad to worse due to the interference of his hapless bowling partners. (Coen and Coen, 1998)

The Dude is a passive, disengaged character at the beginning of the film, which parallels the state of a (non-lucid) dreamer who is not particularly involved in their dreams but present for them. In the book *Sleep & Dreaming*, psychology scholar Jacob Empson outlines the typical structure of dreams, noting, "While there may be a coherent plot, events do not unfold in any steady progression; rather, there are sudden changes in scenario, or scene shifts, which are sometimes baffling. Ordinary logic is suspended. One can fly" (Empson, 2002, p. 71). All of these particulars, including the flying while dreaming, are present in the journey of The Dude, and the Coen brothers have acknowledged particular sources for the strange logic of the picture; a logic that guides the entire plot, not merely the fantastic dream sequences. In a contemporaneous interview conducted by Michael Ciment and Hubert Niogret, tellingly titled "The Logic of Soft Drugs", Ethan observes, "You could also say that there's a certain logic in *The Big Lebowski*, but it'd be the logic induced by soft drugs!" (Allen, 2006, p. 100). Joel follows this observation by specifying that "The logic here is more episodic--like in a [Raymond] Chandler novel, the hero sets out to clear up a mystery and while doing so visits a lot of odd characters who spring up like Jack-in-the boxes" (Allen, 2006, p. 101). As a burnout-turned-detective, The Dude is not a focused, articulate, controlling

presence like Chandler's private detective Philip Marlowe. The Dude merely wants to return to a mellow state of being, made impossible by the odd events and characters he encounters.

In this sense, The Dude is the endpoint of a characterization rooted in Chandler's Marlowe and filtered through previous cinematic adaptations from Howard Hawks and Robert Altman, both of which the Coen brothers acknowledge in their comments about *The Big Lebowski*. Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946) adapts Chandler's 1939 novel of the same name, and while both the original source novel and the film adaptation are regularly framed as being unconcerned with a coherent plot, certain more insightful scholars have shrewdly observed that this lack of resolution is the intended meaning, and not a deficiency, of a character like Marlowe and the story world he inhabits. For example, Robert Merrill writes of Marlowe's position among the labyrinthine plot, "Among the novel's characters, Marlowe is the only one who understands that his solution of the book's mystery really solves nothing" (Merrill, 1999, p. 9).

Joel Coen, in conversation with Ciment and Niogret, comments on *The Big Lebowski*'s memorable voice-over narration, provided by The Stranger (Sam Elliott). He says, "In the movie adaptations of Chandler it's the main character that speaks offscreen, but we didn't want to reproduce that...It's as if someone was commenting on the plot from an all-seeing point of view" (Allen, 2006, pp. 102-103). Within the dreamlike story world of *The Big Lebowski*, The Stranger

is a secondary character, possibly a creation of The Dude's acid-damaged mind, whose lucidity is superior to that of the primary character. In fact, The Stranger might be considered the true detective of *The Big Lebowski*, because he, like Marlowe, perceives of the events of the film not as a puzzle to be solved, but as a process within the ongoing "way the whole durned human comedy keeps perpetuatin' itself...across the sands a time" (Coen and Coen, 1998, 140). The reference to the sands of time echoes of H.I.'s reference to "the sandman" guiding the convicts to sleep in prison in *Raising Arizona*.

Paul Tholey's research on lucid dreams includes a type of dream character who "not only becomes lucid before the dream-ego, he also possesses a higher degree of lucidity than the dream-ego later achieves" and that such a character "may be characterized as standing for the so-called internal-self helper (ISH) who gives important advice to the dreamer for [their] dream and daily lives" (Tholey, 1989). Therefore in addition to his presence as a form of all-seeing detective, The Stranger serves this function for The Dude in their interactions within the film. He also signals to the intended viewer when one of The Dude's dreams is about to take place, prefacing the dream with the memorable line of dialogue, "Darkness warshed over the Dude" (Coen and Coen, 1998, p. 101).

Hawks' film version of *The Big Sleep* does not provide many references to sleep, apart from one character who is defined in part by her tendency to sleep and forget things, possibly as a coping device, and a joking reference to Marlowe working in bed like Proust, certainly a reference that would be recognizable to the Coens as nap-prone writers. There is, however, in Chandler's novel a concluding passage about sleep that explains the significance of the book's title (itself the literally nominal source of *The Big Lebowski*) and confirms Marlowe as the guiding consciousness of the book and his awareness of the effects of the plot on his psychology:

What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of the nastiness now. (Marlowe, 1992, p. 230)

Though *The Big Lebowski* largely avoids this "nastiness", there is always a possible commingling of sleep and death in Coen brothers' films, as evidenced by *Blood Simple* and *Barton Fink*, among others. After Donny (Steve Buscemi), a skilled bowler and inquisitive young man, dies of a heart attack in a showdown with the Nihilists, Walter Sobchak (John Goodman) eulogizes him atop a "wind-swept bluff" (Coen and Coen, 1998, p. 136). Walter's farewell to Donny ends

with the words "Goodnight, sweet prince", equating death with rest, that elusive element of life for characters in Coen brothers' films.

Another Chandler-related source that was a significant inspiration for *The Big Lebowski* was Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), adapted from Chandler's 1953 novel of the same name. In a 1998 *Uncut* magazine article featuring an interview with the brothers, David Bennun writes that "the film *The Big Lebowski* most closely resembles is *The Long Goodbye*" (Allen, 2006, p. 116), a claim to which Ethan Coen responds affirmatively. He agrees that Altman's film is the most significant precursor to *The Big Lebowski* in part because "the Elliott Gould character [Philip Marlowe] is purposefully anti-Marlowe...Of the current time and yet not, wandering around L.A. in a suit. *In Lebowski*, all the characters were supposed to be throwbacks" (p. 116). The beginning of Altman's film provides a template for the grocery-store set introduction of The Dude in *The Big Lebowski*. Except in *The Long Goodbye*, there is a protracted sequence that begins with Marlowe sleeping, before choosing to go to the store to buy food for his cat. Altman's choice to introduce his detective as a sleeping figure is significant for the same "throwback" characterization that Ethan Coen would later cite as the intention for his characters. In the book *Manors and Alleys: A Casebook on the American Detective Film* (1988), Altman is quoted as saying, "There's no reality in the Marlowe character. Marlowe can only exist in the minds of the readers or in an audience. He's an anti-character. I tried to play him as if he had been asleep for thirty years" (Tuska,

1988, p. 388). Altman's variation of Marlowe, performed by Gould with many qualities that influenced The Dude, is both a sleeper and a figure that only exists in the mind, a character seeming to be externalized but only as a projection of the internal; a walking product of the processes of sleeping and dreaming. Much of the comic irony of *The Long Goodbye* involves Marlowe's attempt to rest and stay calm in a world populated by characters that are unmoored from his (anti-)reality. Altman illustrates this aspect of the character in a scene in jail, where Marlowe has spent days being held for unsubstantiated reasons. Upon being released, he remarks to his still-confined cell mate that there is a difference between a physical body being held in jail and the true self, which can transcend captivity even in jail. Marlowe's attitude towards the divide between the corporeal and the psychological or spiritual suggests that the true self exists in a purer state within the mind that is the field of play for dreaming, rather than the body beset by the confines of reality. This scenario and comment, which appear to be a strong influence on H.I.'s acceptance of his own sentence in *Raising Arizona*, motivates Marlowe's ability to stay calm and darkly humorous about his condition as he is maltreated by several characters in the narrative.

Within the increasingly chaotic plot activity of *The Big Lebowski*, many characters in the ensemble are specifically attempting to rest or stay calm, with such effort being continually interrupted. The first character to be introduced in a state of sleep is an antagonistic one, meaning

that in the world of The Dude, it is only the bad that sleep well. During The Dude's first introduction to Bunny, Uli (Peter Stormare), a nihilist, is passed out in an inflatable chair in the pool that Bunny sits and faces as she paints her toenails. Within the metaphorical dream framework of *The Big Lebowski*, this scene is one of the film's many playful nods to another well-known sleep/dream narrative, *The Wizard of Oz*, as this early stop on The Dude's own yellow-brick road begins with the tell-tale color of emerald green being applied to Bunny's toes. The logic of only the antagonist sleeping well is that Uli "doesn't care about anything" (Coen and Coen, 1998, 22), thus he is free of the internal conflicts that would prevent his rest.

By contrast, other characters who stand on the film's side of good have at least one defining interest that, when challenged, has the effect of preventing them from rest. Walter, for instance, is fixated on rules that he insists are universally applicable towards maintaining order. However, he consistently fails to realize that the motivations for this worldview, including his own experiences in the Vietnam War, his status as a Jewish man, and as an individual too-devoted to his ex-wife, are not shared by everyone around him. He is presented as the opposite of Uli, in that he cares too much. In the script for the film, he points a gun at the head of a fellow bowler concerning a minor infraction, shouting "HAS THE WHOLE WORLD GONE CRAZY? AM I THE ONLY ONE WHO GIVES A SHIT ABOUT THE RULES?" (Coen and Coen, 1998, 26). The further comic development for this intense scene occurs almost immediately, two pages later, when Walter insists

to The Dude, "I'm perfectly calm, Dude...Calmer than you are...Calmer than you are" (28). The viewer, like The Dude, sees that Walter is incapable of staying calm for very long, but from Walter's perspective, this is only because the world is crazy and he is, in fact, calm.

This dissonance has the effect of disrupting others' calm or rest, as Walter does provoke The Dude from maintaining his mellow state and bothers others' equilibrium. He shouts pleasantries at a minor character confined to an iron lung and incapable of participating in conversation, going on to destroy property just outside of that confined and resting man's home. He even bungles Donny's ultimate rest, Donny's big sleep, by throwing his ashes into the wind and therefore onto The Dude. A comic payoff of Walter's contradictory embodiment of rest is his insistence on observing Shabbat, a day of rest, pointing out the many activities he is prohibited from doing because of his faith tradition, even as The Dude continues to inherit tasks and troubles caused in part by Walter's inability to stay calm.

Whereas Walter tries and fails to maintain the appearance of calm, The Dude often attempts in earnest to relax or sleep, to no avail. Philosopher Nicolas Michaud has written about The Dude in the contexts of slow living and idleness: "Recreation, not work, seems to be the point of the Dude's life...We...envy the Dude, who is simply making recreation what he does" (Michaud, 2012, p. 214). With mellowness and recreation as cornerstones of The Dude's overall life choices,

it is his much more mundane attempts to lie down and rest that also meet resistance, birthing scenes of unreality and chaos in *The Big Lebowski*. More significantly, concerning the film's connection to *The Sleeping Tapes* is the conspicuous use of field recordings and ambient or sleeping music in such scenes of interrupted rest and sleep.

Just as The Dude's detective journey is beginning, he attempts to rest on a Persian rug he purloined from the wealthier Big Lebowski (David Huddleston). The script for the film establishes the scene not only with an overhead visual of The Dude lying down with his eyes closed, but also through the sounds that The Dude hears in this moment:

He wears a Walkman headset. We can just hear an intermittent clatter leaking tinnily through the headphones. In his outflung hand lies as cassette case labeled VENICE BEACH LEAGUE PLAYOFFS 1987...we faintly hear a ball rumbling down the lane. (Coen and Coen, 1998, 40).

As previously stated, the Coen brothers' approach to sleeping and dreaming sequences involve aligning the perspective of the intended viewer with that of the character. In this case, before the viewer shares the visual perspective of The Dude, we are already enveloped in his aural perspective. That aural element, which is a field recording of an old playoff game, is a type of recording associated with ambient music listening, and this is the first direct signpost of *The Big*

*Lebowski's* connection to sleep music. This tranquil scene abruptly shifts into a dream sequence with, as is customary for the Coens, a visual flash. A previously unseen character, a henchman, punches the dude, which prompts the following action: "*A million stars explode against a field of black*" (Coen and Coen, 1998, 41). The content of the dream, which involves The Dude (and by extension of his perspective, the viewer) being swallowed by a bowling ball, is undoubtedly influenced by the field recording guiding his dream.

A later scene also involves violence against The Dude during a moment of attempted rest, and it, too, includes an explicit reference to ambient music. After a contentious argument with Walter, stemming from Bunny's supposed severed toe, The Dude tries to relax in his bathtub at home. His home, already having been invaded by thugs and to be invaded again and again, is no site of sanctuary, but The Dude's ability to turn his home into a meditative place is a significant marker of his commitment to staying mellow. In this bathtub scene, the Nihilists storm into his home and throw a marmot into the tub, manhandling The Dude, naked and defenseless, as they threaten to cut off his manhood. There is a noteworthy difference between the scripted version of the scene and that in the final film. In the script, "*The Dude sits in the bath-tub, staring stuporously, a joint pinched in one hand, a washcloth draped across his forehead*" (Coen and Coen, 1998, 71). However, in the produced film, there is significant addition to the setting and action, as The Dude

is also listening to a music cassette called *Song of the Whale - Ultimate Relaxation*. This ambient/chill-out cassette, which soundtracks the scene for the viewer, again associates The Dude with sleep music and denotes that "ultimate relaxation" is the object of his quest, even as his life is growing more complicated.

### ***Sleeping Tapes as Spiritual Successor to The Big Lebowski***

Although The Stranger does appear in some form at the beginning, middle, and end of *The Big Lebowski* to tie together the various strands of The Dude and the case he is trying to solve, the conclusion of the *The Big Lebowski* implies that the trail continues, long beyond the little breakthroughs The Dude, Walter, and other characters might have experienced. The Dude does not become a successful detective or evolve into anything too different from his characterization in the beginning. Whether he learns anything from The Stranger, his guide, remains to be seen. *The Sleeping Tapes*, as performed by Bridges, is rife with references to *The Big Lebowski* and could be read/listened to as a work in which The Dude (or someone very close to such a character, embodied by the same actor) ascends to the position of dream guide.

In the opening number, "Introduction (Good Evening)", the descending notes of the music have the effect of calming the listener down into sleep or rest. The first utterances of Bridges, the sleep guide, are his laughter and exhalation, which is a disarming touch contributing to the project

as an unstuffy and intimate listen that often identifies itself as a recording with a very specific purpose. Bridges philosophizes, "Sleep...implies waking up. Tapes imply recording, yeah? Sharing things. Sort of implies, uh, you know, the past and the future. Things recorded in the past to share at some future time." Bridges' vocalized pauses are much like those of the Dude, whose often-quoted line, "Yeah well, that's just, ya know, like, your opinion, man" (Coen and Coen, 1998, 39) would fit directly into the narration style of "Introduction (Good Evening)" without variation.

At the end of the song, he mentions "sleeping...dreaming...waking up," each element of which is repeated at the beginning of the next track, called "Sleep. Dream. Wakeup." This time, however, the words are mixed and edited in such a way that they specifically echo a sound editing design from *The Big Lebowski*. The words "sleeping...dreaming...waking up" are subject to speed variations, repetitions, reverb, and other effects very much akin to the dialogue audio in *The Big Lebowski* when The Dude is beginning to experience the effects of the spiked drug offered by Jackie Treehorn. It is no coincidence that this song about a sleeping, dreaming, and waking cycle receives the same treatment as the dialogue that directly precedes the film's second spectacular dream sequence, guided by The Stranger with the phrase "Darkness warshed over the Dude" (Coen and Coen, 1998, 101).

In other songs on *Sleeping Tapes*, Bridges directly instructs the listener in techniques he says he uses in his professional and personal life. For example, "Hummmmm" features an instruction in humming, which Bridges says he uses in acting when preparing for a scene. The incrementally descending melody of the hum is a vocal variation on the instrumental music from "Introduction (Good Evening)". In "Hummmmm", when the instrumentation joins Bridges' humming, both continuing to move downward in scale, the pace also slows, musically realizing The Stranger's phrase from the second dream introduction in *The Big Lebowski*: there is no bottom.

Furthermore, this adult relaxation technique gives way to the recreation and relaxation of youth when the next section of the song includes sounds of kids talking. These youth sounds continue on "See You at the Dreaming Tree", with Bridges now interacting with the children in what sounds like a field recording of children playing somewhere outside. He tells the children about a lucid dream that he would share with his daughter, involving a tree where he would meet her, in his dreams. Chimes sound, seeming to usher in a dream.

Another object, a rug, so central to the plot of *The Big Lebowski*, makes a couple of appearances in *Sleeping Tapes*. "A Glass of Water" features Bridges talking about getting up during the night as a result of drinking water before bed. He says to the listener, "On the way to the toilet, you're noticing the patterns on the rug", a visualization the Coen brothers use to introduce

the first dream sequence of *The Big Lebowski*, as the knocked out Dude disappears into darkness and "The black field dissolves into the pattern of the rug" (Coen and Coen, 1998, 41). "Seeing with my Eyes Closed" is an instruction song as well as one that implicitly involves the rug from *The Big Lebowski*. A song entirely about visualization, "Seeing with my Eyes Close" teaches the viewer to see things with their eyes closed. Bridges mentions the "burnt orange" color that appears to him, which is close to the red undertones of the rug from the film. He then engages in a reflexive question about the nature of dreams and visualization, questioning whether seeing is a function of the mind or of the eyes, which is also one way to contextualize a dream guide like The Stranger.

When further discussing the visions he sees with his eyes closed, Bridges likens the images to "one of those pictures you see of the universe...the Hubble telescope...there's so many stars...it just looks like dust on a black table. And those aren't stars, but they're, they're whole nebulas, whole galaxies". This language alludes to the Coen brothers' introduction to the first dream sequence of *The Big Lebowski*, in which "A million stars explode against a field of black" (Coen and Coen, 1998, 41). This is a significant reclamation of control, because no longer is The Dude being banished to blackness by a henchman. Rather, here Bridges, the dream guide, is himself conjuring stars against blackness to guide himself and the listener into sleep.

Finally, the longest track on the album, "Temescal Canyon", literalizes the guide concept by imagining Bridges leading the listener on "a guided tour to Temescal Canyon in our minds". His description of the scenery surrounding them evokes Donny's final resting place from *The Big Lebowski*, as well as Walter's eulogy thereof: "Look at that. Isn't it beautiful? Stretches from the Pacific ocean all the way to Pasadena." As he does in many songs on *Sleeping Tapes*, Bridges invites the listener to take in each sensation and object one-by-one without overthinking how each one fits into the bigger picture. This focalization inverts the rest and sleep-depriving detective work of The Dude. At song's end, when the guide and the sleeper hang-glide away from the scene, it is not the insecure flying of The Dude's dream. This flight is the path towards ultimate relaxation.

This article has parsed an underexplored element of the Coen brothers' scripts and films, which is the activity and function of sleep within their narratives. Though many critics and scholars have written about the dreams within Coen brothers films, it is sleep and rest, those gateways to dreams, that serve an end much like that of sleep music and its various forms. *The Big Lebowski* is the Coen brothers' movie most preoccupied with the attempt to rest and sleep, most fantastic in its portrayal of the worlds within worlds that dreams occupy. The filmmakers draw together motifs of sleep from detective fiction sources and previous adaptations to situate The Dude in a dreamlike plot with its own strange logic. Though The Dude must rely on The Stranger, an outside guide, to process his role in a nonsensical detective story, 2015 musical-spoken word album *The Sleeping*

*Tapes* provides an opportunity to revisit the guide/sleeper relationship, this time with The Dude's portrayer, Jeff Bridges, at the helm. Seeding his own fancies and instructions with various plot and performance-related aspects of *The Big Lebowski*, Bridges creates in *Sleeping Tapes* a worthy entry in the sleep music catalog, and a spiritual successor to *The Big Lebowski*.

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