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Introduction

These magic moments: pop, writing, and the little stuff

A couple of years ago, *Jane* music editor Jeff Johnson began soliciting and compiling what he called 'Sad Song Scenarios', a celebration, if you could call it that, of moments when music undoubtedly made a grim day worse. Ideally, the whole project unfolds in a powerpoint of strained saccharine and swift kicks in the imagination. But here's one example, courtesy of the novelist Sam Lipsyte:

> 'Vienna', Billy Joel
> As piped into an examination room, while a doctor you randomly found on an HMO list gently kneads your balls, because you're convinced that you have testicular cancer but the doctor says, 'I'm sorry, I don't feel anything'.

Are 'Sad Song Scenarios' music criticism? I hope not, because formally they represent a level of writing I couldn't possibly hope to compete with. Bound in no way to the journalistic need for timeliness, or the scholastic need for concerted research that adds to a discipline, they are a completely amateur production.

Of course, to the extent that they are also vivid, fun, semi-obscene, off-the-cuff, and entirely reliant upon the moments they recall and capture, Sad Song Scenarios are also quite a lot like pop songs. Recently, critic Greil Marcus published a book on Bob Dylan's 'Like a Rolling Stone', a work whose canonical status needs no further explication. Yet as Marcus bears down on the song's origin, and not just the song but the produced version of the song that has been freeze dried by history as the 'essential' version, what strikes him again and again is how remarkably random its creation was.

He concludes:

> No matter how timeless 'Like a Rolling Stone' might turn out to be, what happened over the two days of recording sessions makes it clear that had circumstances been even slightly different – different people present, a different mood in the studio, different weather in the streets outside, a different headline in the morning paper – the song might never have entered time at all, or interrupted it . . . 'Like a Rolling Stone' is a triumph of craft, inspiration, will, and intent; regardless of all those things, it was also an accident. (Marcus 2005, p. 224)

In a similar vein in this special issue of *Popular Music*, musicologist Charles Kronengold proposes that we regard pop songs as, fundamentally, accidents. That, he argues, is really their genre, more than funk or punk or crunk. He writes:

> What would the study of popular music look like if the differences among songs were to drive our investigations, if we allowed variety to pick up the check? . . . I have tried to reach a perspective from which everything looks accidental – the ordinary moments, the magic moments, everything. I think there's value in this sense of vertigo, this realisation that causality or determination is precarious and incomplete. I'm asking what it does if we *start* our investigations in this way. It's not only that 'anything can happen'. It's wonderful that anything *does*.

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I say musicologist Charles Kronengold; I might also say obsessive vinyl record collector Charles Kronengold; or Charlie Kronengold who, we realised after a couple of years of meeting at conferences, graduated from the same high school I did just a year later; or the rock critic type who refuses to be one, to the frustration of at least one alternative weekly music editor I know. Our professional identities define our work only so much as the genre labels they reluctantly accept do the work of professional musicians; the most distinctive parts of who we are and what we obsess about remain far quirkier.

The point is that popular music writing comes from any number of places and that multiplicity of inspiration is best served by authors who wear a lot of hats. The spirit that prompts it can no more be contained in music departments than in the equally professionalised record review sections of the major entertainment publications. At its finest it remains, at least in part, an amateur's occupation. The digressions are at least as important as the conclusions. There is much to savour but there doesn't have to be anything to learn. Fuzzy in its origins, the music can never be rendered fully legible. Famously resistant to notation, it's at least as spurnful of prosaic translation.

Yet the temptation is to try, to squint with one's ears and trope at will. Pop critics are often accused of only writing about the lyrics; more often, though, they write about homologies, categories, fan concerns, a sense of where the stuff of their instance is going, or has been, or should try to go – in other words, everything but the music, which is very different. Musicologists, as David Brackett points out in his article here, are just as subject to trains of free association, and should indulge them. Overall, writing that adapts even in part the perspective of the amateur and the eclectic inevitably changes what one focuses on within the pop soundscape. The spaces between genres, the examples that complicate rather than clarify the set narrative, take centre stage.

For several years now, the Seattle museum's Experience Music Project has sponsored a Pop Conference devoted to capturing music writing across as many lines of affiliation as possible. Fanzine writers share panel space with Ph.D.s. All are encouraged to try and step out of their skins; to do work they would be hard pressed to find a home for elsewhere. Some take more naturally to the conference's quicksilver character than others, but virtually all participants have agreed that the collective results are an important departure from disciplinary and even interdisciplinary approaches. Something of the range of what might ultimately be possible flashes out over the course of a weekend skimming from 'I Was a Teenage Slutboy: Punkering Down in the Florida Panhandle' to 'Notes on Black Music and Feng Shui' to an oral history with Benjamin Melendez, whose 1970s South Bronx gang, the Ghetto Brothers, were also the Beatles-obsessed Latin funk band the Ghetto Brothers.

The previous examples came from the 2004 edition of the conference, which was called 'This Magic Moment: Capturing the Spirit and Impact of Music' and which serves as the launching point of this issue. (The articles have been refereed and fleshed out far beyond what was possible in a twenty-minute presentation.) The theme of magic moments proved particularly resonant; presenter after presenter referred back to it in their talks, which generally never happens. Clearly, the idea of work along these lines had great appeal.

To speak of magic moments can be to lapse into a marketing language of over-hyped pseudo-events. Too, the cultural studies work that emanated from Birmingham used to hinge much upon the 'magical solutions' that subcultures offered their protagonists: maybe a young Mod couldn't be Pete Townshend, but at least he

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(and it was usually a he) could forget feeling like a yob for a while. For good reason, many who study popular music have learned to be suspicious of such approaches, which neither canvas the entirety of the social experience of music nor the magic that resides in far less hallowed occurrences.

Yet to dwell upon the magic moments in music can serve as a way to reject what one might call orthodoxies of inclusiveness. Some occurrences truly are special: deciding which ones forces aesthetic judgements back into the project. Devin McKinney, in this issue, makes a concerted effort to characterise the transcendent qualities of pop. It's an impossible task, but the joy of his language speaks to his rapture as a listener. Not surprisingly, those writers who are interested in remystifying as much as demystifying our sense of music history are likely to have a literary bent of some kind. Oscar Garza fantasises the back stories behind different cover versions of 'Land of a Thousand Dances' so he can put his own stamp on the song. Robert Christgau demands that music writing retain an essential earthiness that the forces of gentility and professionalism often turn into blander sentiment. A magic moment is often a personal moment: taking this theme as your starting point can support memoir and utterly subjective responses, from Brian Goedde nodding off at the symphony to the slammed-out smidgens that exemplify Joshua Clover's Number One hit concept for the EMP conference: 'Critical Karaoke': a compression of the prose essay in much the way that pop is a compression of musical theatre.

From the opposite perspective, scholars within disciplines who linger on the exceptional instance are likely to be pursuing an example that works against the taxonomies of their field – an increasingly important task as music departments, now more congenial to the popular, begin a pop canonising process that may ultimately rival the media's. Robert Fink's delineation of the chain of events by which classical music snippets turned into both Kraftwerk and Afrika Bambaataa operates like that: he calls it a 'ghost story' set between the death of one canon and the rise of others. Gayle Wald romanticises a near-forgotten collaboration between the country singer Red Foley and the gospel pioneer Sister Rosetta Tharpe, not because it broke down barriers but because as an artefact from the 'B Side of History' it shows how blurry the genre and racial boundaries always were. And Mark Anthony Neal searches for artistic vantages from where the too-familiar 'White Negro' becomes the as yet uncodified 'white chocolate'.

Ultimately, recognising the very real category of magic moment as an aspect of most people's musical experiences can serve to provide a new analytic starting point. Subcultural studies scoffers may appreciate how Tim Quirk, familiar with reaching such peaks in his own band, looks at the successes and failures of Pete Townshend's own 'magical solutions' with a practised eye. Meanwhile, David Brackett dissects the magic of the E chord, as used by canny folk-rockers to create a field of white hipster dreams separate from rhythm and blues.

This issue of *Popular Music* suggests what might be gained if we shift our focus from movements to moments, from the representative to the sublime, from the categorical to the quizzical. It's also meant to encourage other crossings between academia and the rest of the writerly world: a similar experiment in form is the Continuum Press '33 and 1/3' series, where a mixture of professors, musicians, rock critics and other bookworms-with-headphones get to spend the length of a pocket paperback digressing on their favourite long-players. Pop's most familiar subjects take on a dramatically different cast when resurrected as Sad Song Scenarios or the B side of history. It turns out there is still much undiscovered country. And for popular

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music studies to get there now is more than timely. As our experience of music continues to fragment and recohere, like the vast archive of recordings we now stream, Ipod, and MP3 Blog, these magic moments become something like the norm.

Reference

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