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Middle Eight

31 Songs and Nick Hornby's pop ideology

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31 Songs (re-titled *Songbook* in the United States) is 'a little book of essays about songs I loved' written in 2002 by Nick Hornby, author of the 1996 hit novel *High Fidelity* and latterly pop critic of the *New Yorker*. Hornby's assumption of the role of music critic echoed the wish of the protagonist of *High Fidelity* whose No. 1 in a list of 'my five dream jobs' was 'NME (*New Musical Express*) journalist 1976–1979'.

This is one of several parallels or overlaps between the first person narrators of the novel (record store owner 'Rob') and of *31 Songs* (successful novelist 'Nick'). This propensity to overlap is perhaps not surprising as both narrators are created by Hornby: although *31 Songs* is presented as a work of 'fact', it is fruitful to regard its narrator as a counterpart of Rob since the Nick character is a pompous and (unintentionally) comic narcissist every bit as clearly drawn as the 'morose' Rob whose 'devotion to rock 'n roll has . . . blighted and retarded his life' (Nick's summing up of Rob in *31 Songs*). Since all narratives are performative and there can be no absolute boundary between autobiography's rhetoric of 'truth' and fiction's rhetoric of 'artifice', in what follows I have adopted the hypothesis that both Rob and Nick are products of Hornby's sometimes underpowered imagination.

The hypothesis is, I think, strengthened by the fact that not a few pages of *31 Songs* are devoted to a pedantic refutation of any suggestion that two features of *High Fidelity* were transposed directly from 'real' life, thus making the book an 'autobiographical novel'.

The first alleged transposition is that Rob's record store (Championship Vinyl) in *High Fidelity* cannot be based on the real North London shop run by Nick's friend Lee because the latter did not open until after the publication of the novel. The second feature is about musicians and sex and is trickier to refute. Nick has to confess that a concert he attended by Texan singer Marce LaCouture had inspired a *High Fidelity* plotline whose primary purpose seems to be to permit Rob to have (zipless, guilt-free) sex with an American songstress (Marie LaSalle – Nick admits to giving her the same initials as Marce) who soon afterwards conveniently disappears from the scene so that Rob can return to his (and the novel's) principal and far from guilt-free relationship. In his eagerness to ensure there is no chance that anybody should conflate Rob's experience with Nick's, the latter writes with coy self-deprecation that 'I am sure that Ms LaCouture would confirm – with hurtful alacrity – that we didn't sleep together'.

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31 Songs is a book of bits, some of which aspire to the condition of conventional criticism with such assertions as 'the truly great songs . . . are about our romantic feelings', 'the best music connects to the soul, not the brain', and some thoughts on songs and lyrics (© S. Frith). There is even a brief excursion into aesthetics when Nick commends Walter Pater's oft-anthologised dictum that 'all art aspires to the condition of music' but spoils it a few lines later by announcing that music is 'such a pure form of self-expression' when what Pater had in mind was the erasure of the self.

There are comments on critics – Nick likes Greil Marcus and is paranoid about the writing of 'young people over-excited by edginess or danger' in music – and a lengthy description of Nick's *New Yorker* working practices. This is 'a gig that necessitates having hundreds of CDs you don't want thrust through your letter box every morning . . . My usual response to these unwanted CDs is as follows: (a) I look at the cover . . . hoping something will lead me to conclude that this album is Not For Me . . . If I still haven't formed an antagonistic prejudice, then (b) I look at the press release. If it uses as a comparison any of the approximately 300,000 names whose music I don't have time for . . .well, I don't play it then, either. So very, very few albums make it as far as step (c), which is where I actually . . . listen to it. 'Listening' . . . means waiting for the first chord change in the first track, at which point I can . . . dismiss the whole thing out of hand as a joke'. The section is rounded off by the assertion that a favourable review is guaranteed for any artist who 'ever worked in a record store with one of my friends' (a statement that could equally have come from Rob).

This bizarre *tour de force* leaves readers to wonder if it, like those CDs, should be dismissed 'out of hand as a joke'. The issue seems undecideable since Hornby is not exactly a witty writer. If there is humour here it's a deathly English irony where the interlocutor maintains a straight face, intending the listener to take his narrative at face value. But if this is ironic – and in reality Hornby at the *New Yorker* behaves like any averagely conscientious reviewer – what is the point of this sadistic bravado? The book contains other episodes where the narrator gives an unconvincing performance as a tough guy (notably in attacks on the snobbish wimps of classical music); it is tempting to conclude that it's all a camouflage for a deep insecurity. For example, Nick ends one chapter with this warning to young rock critics: 'don't try to make me feel morally or intellectually inferior'.

'I wanted mostly to write about what it was in these songs that made me love them, not what I brought to the songs' is Nick's critical credo as stated in the introduction to *31 Songs*. Unfortunately this is almost immediately contradicted by his claim that 'sometimes, very occasionally, songs and books and films and pictures express who you are, perfectly'. This narcissistic approach colours much of what follows in *31 Songs* as Nick indicates that what he mainly values in songs is how far they mirror his own moods, feelings and situation. Jackson Browne's *Late For The Sky* is 'perfect accompaniment to a divorce' while The Avalanches are criticised for an excessive use of samples and told that they should try harder to create music to 'fit the moods we know'.

This narcissism is accompanied by a consumerist attitude towards music. For both Nick and Rob, size matters. For each, the best song is the one they have 'played' (i.e. inserted into the CD tray or placed on the turntable) the most. Nick calculates that he's played Bruce Springsteen's 'Thunder Road' 1,500 times in over twenty-five years. This is 'just over once a week on average', almost the same as the 'around once a week, on average (three hundred times in the first month, every now and again thereafter)'

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of Rob's 'most played' favourite songs in *High Fidelity*. Nick also has a weakness for metaphors of consumption in describing his relationship to music. He's either eating (in his 'musical diet', 'Elliott Smith is my bag of peanuts') or defining music as a non-renewable resource when he 'mines exhaustively' Bob Dylan or Dire Straits or asserts that 'you sure can exhaust a great song more quickly than you can clean out a great novel'.

Equally significant is the size of a person's record collection. Nick contrasts 'a feeble little CD collection that will fit into some stupid designer tower' with 'a wall of shelves occupying a disproportionate part of your living room'. For Rob it gets more personal. He condemns his rival in love because 'he's only got about ten records. CDs'.

Nick Hornby is no longer the pop critic of the *New Yorker*.

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