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That's Me in the Spotlight: rock autobiographies

Thomas Swiss

The explanation for the special appeal of autobiography . . . is a fascination with the self and its profound, endless mysteries. (Olney 1980, p. 23)

I me mine. (George Harrison)

Autobiographies: the contemporary catalogue is huge and bookstore shelves are heavy with the weight of life-stories. Ex-Presidents, actors, cooks, criminals, Nobel prize winners, preachers, poets and CEOs all write them. Rock stars write them, too – 'marquee names' like Tina Turner, Melissa Etheridge, Grace Slick, and Meatloaf, but also minor figures such as Dallas Taylor, the former drummer for Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. And plenty of others, including – to name just a handful – Chuck Berry, Ronnie Spector, Anthony Kiedis of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, both Ray and Dave Davies, Dee Dee Ramone, Martha Reeves, Eric Burdon, and John Cale.

This Middle Eight piece is intended to be exploratory, a first foray into a subject that has been mostly neglected by popular music studies. Indeed, researching the topic, I couldn't find a single article about rock autobiographies as a genre, although there are a few essays on the subject of *jazz* life-stories. This piece explores the conventions of 'the autobiography' in general, and the ways in which rock autobiographers position themselves in relation to these conventions. It also looks at the critical reception journalists and fans gave to a number of rock autobiographies, with special emphasis on four books published during the 1990s: Marianne Faithfull's *Faithfull* (1994), John Lydon's *Rotten* (1995), Marilyn Manson's *The Long Hard Road Out of Hell* (1998), and Grace Slick's *Somebody to Love?*(1998). I'm particularly interested in the terms both the autobiographers and their readers employed in making certain judgements about writing and reading these books. I'm also interested in the tacit assumptions behind those terms. At the heart of my exploration is this seemingly simple question: what constitutes a 'good' rock autobiography?

It turns out that answering this question, even tentatively, is as difficult as trying to puzzle out what makes a good song. Of course making evaluative comments about a song typically employs what we think of as musical judgements, while evaluations of autobiographies highlight *literary* judgements. Yet both kinds of judgements are cast in language, both are made and debated in social contexts, and both are in other ways related. We know, for example, that language helps shape how we hear and value music. The language on a particular CD cover, the lyric sheet inside, the ad or email message that inspired us to buy that CD in the first place; all of these language experiences, and plenty of others, can help shape our musical experiences when we listen to songs. In turn this music, and our experiences with it, typically helps shape the judgements we make when we read the lives of rock stars. That is, it's hard to imagine reading a rock autobiography by an artist whose music we hadn't already listened to – and probably enjoyed.

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Of course, before reading a musician's autobiography, we've probably 'encountered' the star in other ways, too. These encounters might include interviews with, concerts by, photographs of, and stories about the artist from newspapers, the music press, television, listservs, and the Web. They all shape our sense of who the artist 'really is'. But as Richard Dyer notes in his book about film stars, not all encounters with what he calls the 'star image' are treated equally by the consumer (Dyer 1986, p. 3). In the case of film stars, movies are likely to have a privileged place. But because careers are historical – a film star, for example, might increasingly do his or her acting on the stage instead of the screen – how we see the star can change over time.

In the case of rock stars, music has a privileged place. In fact, one is more likely to find autobiographical details in their music than in any printed text. Greil Marcus suggests this idea – but does not pursue it – in his book about the making of Bob Dylan's *Basement Tapes.* In *Invisible Republic* (1997), Marcus argues that the particular 'back pages' of musicians – in this case, Dylan – are in the intertextual weaves and wefts of their music, in the peelings of their musical collages, and not in any printed text that settles for being 'about Dylan' – whether Dylan's own text or someone else's.

This argument is appealing. Nevertheless, rock autobiographies (and biographies) continue to get written, published and purchased. While examining some of these books and the critical judgements made about them, it may be helpful to look at academic work on autobiographies more generally. How have scholars defined the genre and what kind of autobiographical writing is most admired? What do scholars see as the job of the autobiographer and do scholars suggest evaluative strategies for readers? Looking at this academic writing, which I weave into this essay along with passages from rock autobiographies and reviewers' comments, can offer us cues about both the literary and social expectations and status of autobiographies, including those by rock stars. These cues point toward ways of describing the choices popular musicians make as they represent themselves as musical-turned-literary subjects, as well as ways of understanding how those representations are valued – or not – by readers.

My back pages

Know thyself. (Delphic Oracle)

Why do rock musicians become autobiographers? Most obviously, as Dyer points out, 'stars are made for profit' (Dyer 1986, p. 5). In the case of rock stars, not only can a best-selling autobiography produce profits for its publisher and handsome royalties for its author, but it can also potentially increase the artist's music sales. Beyond that, and more to the point of this essay, writing an autobiography is generally regarded by scholars as an opportunity for the subject to seize narrative authority and bring the writer into a dialogue with history. Rock stars, that is, want to control their own stories by telling them in their own terms.

In the books I'm looking at, the attempt to establish authority is undertaken in at least three ways. First, rock autobiographies typically disclose previously uncirculated or private stories from an 'insider' point of view. The jacket for Grace Slick's book, for example, promises 'a behind-the-scenes, no-holds-barred view of rock's grandest stages' (Slick 1998), while Melissa Etheridge's (2001) autobiography is 'filled with personal revelations, the stories behind her music and lyrics'.

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Not surprisingly, readers generally want to read new stories too, seeing them as a positive feature of rock autobiographies. Reviewing Gene Simmon's (2001) autobiography, detailing his life from his birth in Israel through the thirty-year life span of the rock band Kiss, the reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* writes that Simmons 'delivers this season's most fascinating backstage pass' (quoted on Amazon.com 2001). As a fan writes of Marilyn Manson's book, 'we want to know the details' (Amazon.com 1999). In fact, books that don't offer new stories or 'backstage passes' are usually deemed less interesting: a largely negative review of Slick's book, also published in *Publishers Weekly*, contradicts her publisher's promise, noting glumly: 'There are few revelations here' (quoted on Amazon.com 1998).

Second, rock autobiographies allow musicians to be critics, supplying the 'authorised' or 'authentic' version of stories that have previously circulated; they challenge other versions as told in the press or elsewhere by journalists, confidants, academics and others. In this case, the author is typically concerned with 'setting the record straight'. Here, for instance, is John Lydon, early in his autobiography, disputing manager Malcolm McLaren's often-told tale about the origins of the Sex Pistols: 'Who put the Sex Pistols together? Not Malcolm, really. Born out of a clothes store he owned? That's the pop myth'. (Lydon 1995, p. 2). On the next page, Lydon implicitly critiques Greil Marcus's well-known book on punk rock, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Marcus 1990). In his book, Marcus notes relationships between various European avant-garde movements, such as Dada and Situationism, and bands such as the Sex Pistols. Lydon writes: 'All the talk about the French Situationists being associated with punk is bollocks. It's nonsense! Now that really *is* coffee-table book stuff' (Lydon 1995, p. 3).

In her generally well-received autobiography, Marianne Faithfull makes a similar rhetorical move to take control of a story of more personal nature. After a chapter on her childhood, she begins her second chapter by confronting what she, like Lydon, calls 'pop mythology':

> According to Pop Mythology, my life proper began at Adrienne Posta's 'launching party' in March 1964, for it was there I met Mick Jagger. Mick fell in love with me on the spot (or so the story goes), decided I was fit to be his consort, and wrote 'As Tears Go By'. I, on the other hand, immediately began shooting heroin and having a lot of sex. (Faithfull 1998, p. 20)

Later in the book, Faithfull confronts what may be the most infamous story about her life in the company of Jagger and the Rolling Stones: a drug bust at Keith Richard's house in 1967. Faithfull offers her own chapter-length version of the story, putting forth a competing narrative, no doubt meant to be the 'last word' on the subject. She concludes: 'The Mars Bar was a very effective piece of demonising. It was far too jaded for any of us even to have conceived of. It's a dirty old man's fantasy – some old fart who goes to a dominatrix every Thursday afternoon to get spanked. A *cop*'s idea of what people do on acid!' (*ibid*., p. 113).

On the subject of authors' sex lives – a topic, not surprisingly, nearly all rock autobiographies deal with at length – Marilyn Manson attempts in his book to delegitimise a widely circulated story by narrating the following about an early concert in Florida. He describes it, straight-faced, as 'a new adventure in performance art' (Manson 1998, p. 117).

> For the second set, a girl named Terri disguised herself as me, wearing a black wig, a tuxedo, a top hat and a very realistic strap-on dildo. When she walked on stage, everybody thought it was me with my dick hanging out of my pants, which was nothing new by that point. As the band

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began its version of 'Cake and Sodomy', I crept around her and gave her a blow job, so that it seemed like I was sucking my own dick. Maybe that's where the rumour that I surgically removed my ribs so that I could give myself fellatio started. (*ibid.*, p. 117)

As I have noted, all of these counter-stories – including Manson's crude articulation of performance art – mean to persuade readers that the autobiographer is the best source for and final authority on his or her history. They are intended to elicit comments such as this one by a fan of *Rotten* who writes: 'The book cleared up a lot of misconceptions I had about the band' (Amazon.com, 1998). Indeed scholars remind us that writing an autobiography *is* writing history – unorthodox as these histories and the telling of them may be.

Finally, as an additional way of establishing authority, rock autobiographies use photographs to anchor the subject in the physical world and to sanction, through photography's evidential power, the writer's 'true' account of events. Linda Haverty Rugg makes this point in her provocative book *Picturing Ourselves* (Haverty Rugg 1997), arguing that photographs can be used with a 'double awareness' on the author's part. This double awareness includes employing photos to suggest a 'de-centered, multiple, fragmented' self as well as using photos as 'an insistence on the presence of an integrated, authorial self, located in a body, a place, and a time' (*ibid.*, p. 2). She argues that Mark Twain, August Strindberg, and others used photographs in their autobiographies to support both of these apparently opposing views.

Most rock autobiographers, however, seem only to have a 'single' awareness of photography's function – that is, most authors use photographs (and most readers probably see them) in what Rugg terms 'naïve' ways: as a 'natural' and expected supplement to the text. Here an early studio photo of Grace Slick with the Jefferson Airplane, there a middle-aged Slick on stage. Here Dave Davies at eleven, there with his smiling family years later. Here is Marianne Faithfull with Roy Orbison, there with Jagger. And so on. An exception is Marilyn Manson's book which employs not only photographs but other documentary 'evidence' (his early poems, letters from religious critics, etc.) in innovative ways. But most rock autobiographers use personal and studio photographs only in the traditional way, including supplying minimal captions for the images.

The autobiographers I am looking at are silent on the subject of photos in their books, except for Lydon. In *Rotten*, he offers the following comments about the photos immediately following the book's table of contents. You can see how Lydon works to build authority in the ways I have been describing:

Most of the photos that appear in this book are more of a personal nature than the usual Sex Pistols pictures you have come to expect. To the best of my knowledge, very few of these have been seen. Since they were taken by my family and mates, you'll notice the deliberate lack of flash and polish. (Lydon 1995, p. vii)

Like the text, the images legitimise. They authorise. They are an exertion of control over self-image. In addition, as Rugg points out, 'the integration of photographs into the autobiographical act highlights the presence of the author's body' (Haverty Rugg 1997, p. 14). Foregrounding the body in a book by a rock musician seems especially significant when we consider the importance of bodies as expressive sites in the culture of rock – in performance, on the dance floor, and so on.

Before discussing the ways that rock autobiographies have been received by critics and fans, I need to note a particular feature of most rock autobiographies. They are written collaboratively. Of course, many pop culture autobiographies are written

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collaboratively, as are a few 'high culture' life-stories. But how can an autobiography, by definition a story in which actor and author are understood to be one and the same, be written by – or, rather, 'with' – another? Most collaborative rock autobiographies list the musician's name first and then add 'with', as in *Be My Baby* by Ronnie Spector with Vince Waldron (1990), and *Faithfull* (1994) by Marianne Faithfull with David Dalton. But what does it mean to write with another? How does collaboration work in these cases? What are the processes, advantages and problems? Grace Slick's book gives us a bit of insight into her case in an 'author's note', which I quote in part:

> . . . [our] method involved Andrea's [her collaborator, Andrea Cagan] giving me a foundation for each chapter by providing a list of topics she'd heard me discuss, at which point I'd write down my recollection or interpretation of that aspect of my life . . . Yup, these are my words, with the help of the runway, the mechanic, and the control tower. (Slick 1998, p. xi)

Slick goes on a bit more, suggesting that Cagan served only as an unusually active editor. Employing Slick's metaphors, we are meant to understand that Slick did the actual 'flying' or writing. But what about other cases involving musicians and their collaborators? In his essay on jazz autobiography, Christopher Harlos ponders some of the same questions as those I'm asking here. Closely reading Count Basie's autobiography, *Good Morning Blues*, Harlos locates this 'lesson':

> The lesson to be learned from *Good Morning Blues* is that like jazz itself, where the completely solo performance is atypical, jazz autobiography also easily lends itself to being produced on a collective basis. (Harlos 1995, p. 151)

Harlos's analogy is provocative. But regardless of whether or not we can import this analogy from jazz to rock – rock musicians work collaboratively, too, in many situations – collaborative autobiographies remain a murky subject deserving more attention from critics.

I write the book

> Personal writing theorizes the stakes of its own performance. (Miller 1991, p. 20)

> I'm a man with a mission in two or three editions. (Elvis Costello, 'Every Day I Write a Book')

All autobiographers stand outside as well as inside their own experiences. The autobiographical act, by design, makes the writer at once the creator and re-creator of his or her identity. But autobiographies, like other genres of writing, rely on particular conventions that come into play as rock autobiographers decide how to represent their identities while telling or, rather, *in* telling their stories. In their book, *Getting a Life* (1996), Smith and Watson note that 'in telling their stories, narrators take up the models of identity that are culturally available' (Smith and Watson 1996, p. 9). I want to do two things in this section: I want to look at the ways rock musicians represent the inside-outside experience of writing an autobiography. I also want to continue the work started above: examining the 'models of identity' musicians create or re-create by resisting, conforming to, or re-deploying culturally available 'star' narratives. This work – couched in different terms – is what critics and fans do all the time when they read rock autobiographies. Indeed, this process shapes one of the criteria by which they judge rock autobiographies.

I start with *Faithfull*, not only because it was generally well received by critics, but because it was often described as 'literate'. 'Literate', like the phrase 'backstage

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pass', is a term that serves as a touchstone around which critical assessments of rock autobiographies often cluster, particularly assessments by professional critics. As used by them, 'literate' appears to bear the qualities of autobiography Albert E. Stone identifies in well-respected writers such as Lillian Hellman and Norman Mailer, among others. Stone says: 'The past is represented by a reminiscing writer who tries to show how certain events, relationships, ideas, and institutions have become functionally and imaginatively interrelated in his or her own life' (Stone 1982, p. 6).

'Functionally and imaginatively' may be the crucial phrase here, for it calls on the autobiographer to have both a good memory and a way into being creative with what is remembered. Being 'imaginative' musically is what we often admire most about our favourite rock musicians, but of course being imaginative in language requires different skills and experiences.

It's not hard to see what critics admired in Faithfull's book. Among other virtues, she is able to find a number of interesting ways of describing the autobiographical act of looking at oneself.

> My earliest memory is a dream of my mother covered in armour, a coronet of snakes entwined around her head. I am three years old. I'm in my bed, in the little room with the blue curtains. In the dream it is daytime, and sunlight is streaming through the curtains. Everything is blue, the blue of Ahmed's hashish-and-jewellery shop in Tangier. Blue curtains blowing in the wind. And beyond them a garden. The green green green of an English lawn. I hear a voice calling me. It says, 'Come, Marianne, come'. (Faithfull 1994, p. 3)

In this first paragraph of the book, we are given a good example of Rugg's 'double awareness'. There's the awareness in Faithfull's prose of the autobiographical self as divided – the narrator re-creates both the dreamer and the dream, both involving herself many years earlier – even as she notes the specifics of time and place. Faithfull's writing is colourful, understated, and even – with its fractured sentences and repetitions – 'poetic'.

Faithfull manages other ways, too, of demonstrating an awareness of her life as a series of performances, including an awareness of the performative aspects of writing about her life. This awareness suggests a form of contingent positioning on the part of the autobiographer – Marianne Faithfull as a composite of 'personas' rather than as a single, unified, authentic self.

As I have noted, Faithfull got high marks from critics when the book was published in 1994. It was praised for being 'analytical', 'self-scrutinising', and 'insightful' – all recurring terms when readers make evaluations of rock autobiographies, employed even when a particular book is found to not have these qualities and is therefore of lesser value.

Marilyn Manson's book, *The Long Hard Road out of Hell*, is one of the best-selling music autobiographies ever written. It's a coming-of-age story in large part, which is not surprising as Manson is considerably younger than the other rock autobiographers under review here. An account of Manson's metamorphosis from a frustrated Christian schoolboy to self-proclaimed Anti-Christ Superstar, the book was generally liked by critics who admired Manson's developmental version of the self. As critic James DiGiovanna wrote, 'Marilyn Manson has written a book that is actually an intelligent look at growing up' (Amazon.com [n.d.]). Other critics, also noting Manson's extended writing about his childhood, called it a 'fascinating account', 'enlightening and disturbing'.

The early chapters especially are self-scrutinising as well as socially specific, mostly in terms of the social dynamics of family. But there are later passages, too, that

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suggest the kind of self-reflexiveness that is admired by critics. In the following paragraph (in his typical over-heated prose style), Manson describes the relationship between Brian Warner, his given name and childhood identity, and the Marilyn Manson persona.

> Marilyn Manson was the perfect story protagonist for a frustrated writer like myself. He was a character who, because of his contempt for the world around him and, more so, himself, does everything he can to trick people into liking him. And then, once he wins their confidence, he uses it to destroy them. (Manson 1998, p. 79)

Like other rock autobiographies, Manson's operates both inside and outside the strategies and stories embodied in the mass media texts that helped make him a star. Critics often applaud rock autobiographies that go at least partially 'against type'. For instance, in Lydon's case, his 'hard-core punk' image was seen as being softened by some of the confessions, and the tone of those confessions, in the book. Thus the autobiography garnered comments from critics such as 'oddly endearing' and 'strange to say, but he has moments of tenderness'. Manson, too, was seen as sometimes working against type – Manson as unreflective, incapable of self-criticism – and his book elicited similar positive comments.

Fans, however, are more likely to welcome books that conform to previously accepted narratives about musician-authors. These narratives have helped shape fans' sense of who the star 'really is', and many fans don't want to disturb those impressions. Grace Slick's book, for example, received decidedly mixed reviews from critics, including this put-down in the *New York Times*: '. . . if you remember hearing her [Slick's] wrenching voice over the radio or in concert, and the intense messages it sent, it's hard to imagine that this memoir came from that same woman'. And yet fans found plenty to like about Slick's book using nearly the same criteria – that is, by judging what they found in the book with their previous impressions of her. One fan writes: 'A great deal of the book demonstrates a true sense of her creativity, wisdom, and intellect, while refusing to deviate from the hard-edged, outspoken style for which she is famous' (Consumer Information [n.d.]).

Of course, critics and fans often have different stakes in these books and in 'star images' generally. Professional critics, after all, are paid to critique, to rank order, to be 'objective', and so on. While fans may engage in these activities, too, they are not required to do so. Thus even when autobiographers do not explicitly cast their lives in shareable or typical terms, and most of these books do not, fans are free to make such translations – into the terms of their own lives. In his book about fans of Bruce Springsteen, Daniel Cavicchi interviewed hundreds of people and concluded:

> Among Springsteen fans, the idea of connection means more than just having an affinity for Springsteen's music; it means making the music a deeply felt part of one's life, of having an ongoing, shared relationship with Springsteen the artist. Indeed, fans talk very specifically about the process of forming a connection with Springsteen . . .' (Cavicchi 1998, p. 41)

The Springsteen case is not an isolated one; the kinds of feelings Cavicchi describes are experienced by fans of other rock stars, too. Here are a few fan reviews of the autobiographies under discussion:

> The book [Lydon's] left me with the desire to meet the man some day and have a talk over a pint. The book feels brutally honest, and is consequently painful to read at times. (Customer reviews, Amazon.com 1998)

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To me, this book [Manson's] is like a Disney book to a child. I'm sure that not only me, but many other people can relate to what he went through. Not only is he a great person and a musician, but he is definitely a great writer. (Customer reviews, Amazon.com 1999)

Reading this book [Slick's], it's as if she has written it to you personally; it's like she's just come over to your house and plops down on the sofa, kicks up her heels on the coffee table, and tells you her life story. (Customer reviews, Amazon.com 2001)

In selecting these particular examples from fan commentaries, I don't mean to suggest that fans are never critical or that their desire to 'connect' always over-rides the ability to make negative judgements. Indeed, many fans are critical of these autobiographies, employing in some cases the same terms and concepts – those I have identified in this essay as well as others – that critics employ in making their own evaluations. If all rock autobiographers must work with genre conventions and the models of identity that are culturally available at a given time, so all readers must work with the critical language culturally available at a given time. That said, the language might be used in different ways as different writers come to different conclusions, depending on who is writing to whom, under what circumstances, and so on. In this way, of course, the reviewing of rock autobiographies resembles the reviewing of rock music.

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