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Middle Eight

# Critical karaoke

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Ann Powers and Daphne A. Brooks

## Introduction

*Joshua Clover*

The Critical Karaoke project was a specific response to the endless parade of polls, lists and casual questions about 'the greatest songs of all time' – particularly to how that measure seems mismatched to pop, which bets everything on transitory pleasures, intensities, its own evanescence. A number of critics, scholars, poets and musicians were invited to the Experience Music Project's annual Pop Conference in Seattle, in the Spring of 2004, to talk about any one song of their choosing, without making a case for its lasting worth, or cultural importance, Truth, Beauty, or any of the other high art values. They just had to take a song they had believed, once, for a minute or a decade, was the greatest song ever . . . and give an account of why they thought that, or how it felt to believe. One of the dreams was to ask for criticism under the sign of the Top 40, not the canon. The other was to hear talented writers tell stories about songs, as they appeared in their daily lives. The trick was that all the participants were asked to tell their story in the span of time it took to listen to the song they had chosen – with the song playing behind them.

## Ange Mlinko

Elliott Smith
'Waltz #2'
*XO*
4.40

When Elizabeth Peyton paints the young men that come into her ken – both through her social circles and magazine photos – and turns them even more red-lipped and dreamy-eyed and lithe, the question critics ask (in strict denial of the obvious) is 'Elizabeth, why do you paint these attractive guys?' And in response, she says something along the lines of, 'Because they live a Beautiful Life that inspires me'. That sounds either very Third-Century C.E., if you're a Neo-Platonist scholar, or very 1960s trust fund Bohemia. But I think she is talking about Autonomy, that which Beauty underwrites for itself. Money is one of the least interesting ways of



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guaranteeing it. Take her early portraits of Napoleon: autonomy for him meant no less than conquering Europe and crowning himself king. But as Belle and Sebastian sing, 'If my family tree goes back to Napoleon/Then I will change my name to Smith'.

'Now I'm a crushed credit card registered to Smith/Not the name that you call me with', replies Elliott Smith. Supposedly, I'm here to explain why 'Waltz #2 (XO)' once occurred to me as the Greatest Song Ever, and avoid either reliance on the ineffable (e.g. it's just a transcendent melody!) or the literary (e.g. I'm doing critical karaoke on a song about karaoke, in which Smith deftly imbeds song titles to tell the backstory for him. Clever!). So one of the reasons is how I experienced it the first time I heard it: Live, eight months before the record came out, in a tiny packed bar with a handmade ticket for an almost secret show. And the last time I had seen him there had been only forty people or so in the audience – he was practically an unknown. This, to me, was privilege. I was in grad school, hiding out from the world, eking out my meagre stipend in the presumptuous, not to mention anachronistic, role of Poet. I was living a Beautiful Life.

It's the chorus, of course. [In sync with song:] 'I'm never gonna know you now, but I'm gonna love you anyhow'. For an audience who imagined the very insiderness of this show to be a privilege, the outsiderness of the lyrics heightened the glow. (The moebius strip logic of indie scenesterism is obvious that way.) But the chorus speaks to the fan at large. Smith is reverse karaoke-ing my desire. He designed the song to be sung back to him. Not because he's the beautiful boy as depicted in an Elizabeth Peyton painting of his photograph. But because he gave us a little present, just a little song, out of some otherworldly luck and an understanding that in the long run, in the big picture, it means almost nothing.

This is my bid for the ineffable beauty of the song, where ineffable beauty is the embodiment of Autonomy – [in sync with song:] 'the place where I make no mistakes' being as good a description of ineffable beauty *or* autonomy as any I could come up with. Opting out of the Top 40 contest and a historical narrative of technical innovation, refusing to make millions of dollars or reach millions of people, it strives for the opposite, in fact – reaching just a few, almost no one, really. To have faith in that is quixotically the Beautiful Life, devotion on the scale of [in sync with song:] 'I'm never gonna know you now, but I'm gonna love you anyhow' epitomising the poet in love with poetry (in its twilight, in its afterhour), and maintaining an eternal eligibility on its behalf.

## Greil Marcus

Roxy Music
'More Than This'
*Avalon*
4:15

Bryan Ferry is a god, and Roxy Music was his court. As a stylist – and that's what he is, not an icon, not a performer, not Lesley Gore, not Bob Dylan, people he would love to be – or to have been – no one touches him, just as no one touches Neil Young. They have their own styles. Their styles are narrow, so much so that they can seem merely self-referential.

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Maybe so. 'More Than This', from Roxy Music's *Avalon*, from 1982, twenty-two years ago that can feel like last night, summed up everything the band's style ever implied, everything it ever wanted. 'More Than This' is the essence of the story the band told, and at least half of the story Ferry always meant to tell – no, you can't fit his version of Dylan's 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall' into 'More Than This'.

It begins with Phil Manzanera's high-stepping guitar, and then Bryan Ferry on a swing, pumping slowly, going just a foot higher with each pass – all you can do is sigh. All you can do is shake your head, that anything could be so perfect.

Now, this is my karaoke number because I love it. When asked to pick a song, this popped into my head without a thought. But after I chose it, I realised that behind that choice really was karaoke – Bill Murray in a Tokyo karaoke bar singing 'More Than This' in *Lost in Translation*. For this moment, anyway, the title of the movie is strange: in this moment, every word is enunciated, singled out as a thing in itself, made plain: every word is exposed. You realise that the man Bill Murray is playing, in his attempt to seduce the woman played by Scarlett Johanssen, in his attempt to seduce himself, to convince himself that he is still sexually alive, cannot afford to miss, even to elide, a single word. The song is the truth; in this moment, the only way Murray's character can imagine telling the truth is literally. But the truth of 'More Than This' is anything but literal; the truth of the song is that to remake the song as fact is to show how afraid of the song you really are.

For me anyway, after twenty-two dissolving years of listening to the tune, Bill Murray's halting, heartfelt version was a shock: the shock of discovering that 'More Than This' has *words. Lyrics*.

Absolutely terrible lyrics, on the order of 'Castles in the sky/Castles made of sand/You and I will last forever/My ring upon your hand'. You hear not a word of this when Bryan Ferry sings the words that he himself wrote.

*More than this – nothing*. Those are the words to 'More Than This'. As far as I'm willing to go, that is the complete lyric.

Roxy Music's 'More Than This' is a drift, a float. The sounds coming out of Ferry's mouth, except for the chorus, when the whirlpool is stopped, when it's centred, when he steps out as if to make a speech, are a golden smear.

Four minutes and fifteen seconds long, the song begins to fade after two minutes and thirty-two seconds. You hear 'More than this – nothing' – and then Phil Manzanera, who has simply been counting off the rhythm behind Ferry, play his solo. It's maybe eleven bent blues notes – there and gone in under three seconds. It is the most elegant and ephemeral distillation of the guitar solo, any guitar solo, imaginable, and it brings up a question. What is a guitar solo? What happens when the singer steps back and gives the song – its themes, its argument, its imagery, its story – to a musician?

What happens is the admission that certain things can't be said in words, but they can be said. Almost always, when this happens in a song, there's a sudden thrill, a catch in the heart – even if what follows is bland, blank, time and no more than time.

## Ann Powers

Johnny Mathis
'Alfie'
*Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head*
3:15

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When I was two, Burt Bacharach and Hal David wrote 'Alfie' as the title theme for a quite nasty Michael Caine comedy about a lothario who lays waste to the women of Swinging London. I discovered it later, at ten or so, around the same time I learned the word 'existentialism' from a blurb on a paperback copy of Camus' *The Stranger*. I tried to digest that story of killing an Arab, but I didn't get it. I didn't need to: 'Alfie' taught everything about life's beautiful meaninglessness.

It's a standard, you must admit – recorded by hundreds of varying talents, a hit for Cher, Cilla Black *and* Dionne Warwick, most recently revived in a Brie-rich interpretation by Ronald Isley. Bacharach says it's his favourite, and why not. He broke all the pop rules here, or rather, he rewrote them in the style of his first love, the art songs of composers like Darius Milhaud. 'Alfie' has no chorus, no refrain really, just an elegantly arcing melody made to be swathed in gossamer strings, a structure as natural as the heart's pumping, its swells always tempered by an inward pull.

And then there are the words. Hal David has said he wrote them in the voice of one of Alfie's conquests, the docile romantic played in the film by Paul McCartney's cast-off girlfriend Jane Asher. But to me, 'Alfie' is a man's song, a philosophical statement about the futility and irresistible purposefulness of romance, the sad refrain of another Camus character, Sisyphus, as he ascends hope's hill and tumbles down, the eternal believer feeling the rock of human limitation against his shoulder. 'His fate belongs to him', wrote Camus of his tragic hero, and 'Alfie' makes the same statement for any lover, revealing passion not as the teenage outburst of so much pop, but as an adult choice, a weary willingness to buy the dream.

The version of 'Alfie' I heard as a child was this one by Johnny Mathis, and that was my luck – the reason I sensed that this was a song into which I could grow. Mathis captures the *weltschmerz* of 'Alfie' better than anyone – his entire career has been a study of restraint, as a tease, a mask and a promise, and here, working within the exquisite constraints of Jack Gold's production, he turns inward to confront the costs of such self-possession. Holding the song's climactic note, Mathis enters that space when Sisyphus walks down the mountain and becomes genuinely alive. 'Without true love we just exist', the lyrics shout, but Mathis finally tempers his ardour, 'convinced', as Camus writes, 'of the wholly human origin of all that is human'. 'What's it all about?' Such unanswerables carry us through life, like 'Alfie's melody, which ends like a question, unresolved and longing to be asked, to be heard, again and again.

## Daphne A. Brooks

Journey
'Lights'
*Infinity*
3:10

for Nathaniel Hawthorne Brooks, Sr.

Chicago, Boston, even Bay City had its Rollers. Ohio its Players and we had Journey. Spinning a round and luminous urban lullaby as cheesy and bloated as a Battle of the Network Stars.

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Like the Fanta orange sunset hanging over the Bay. Like the cocksure swagger of Burt Reynolds on a cannonball run. A slick, lilting guitar gently weeping and weaving the soundtrack to my summer of '79.

Of course it was Journey, with Steve Perry's yowling, androgynous, blue-eyed soul vocals. Darryl Hall meets Ozzy, crossed with Boston on a hit of helium. Ear-piercingly earnest and equally full of pitch-perfect bombast. It had to have been Journey doing its damnedest to churn out a knock-off Stax tune, a wannabe Redding or Cooke number, a song that Al Green could eat for breakfast without breaking a sweat.

At ten and a half I found the light in Journey, making a tape off of KFRC AM and onto a cosmic blue cassette. A band on the run, they caravanned with me on the Brooks Family Vacation tour. Mystifying my family during those thick, hot summer trips to the South. A song made for dropping like James Brown to your knees in the tall Texas grass.

Living for the feedback of a pre-Jan Hammer Neal Schon solo, an eruption of blistering guitar contrivances.

Of course *I* was Journey. Straight outta the suburbs, travelling like a rolling stone back to the roots of my elegant and ambitious 'King'-size parents. I was their post-Civil Rights baby who found a homecoming in a rip-off melody that became the theme song for my mall-culture blues.

I longed for San Francisco in all its half-baked, overcooked stadium-rock excess.

Lighting up my yellow Walkman, I rode a distinctly derivative pop train into the night.

With Gregg Rolie's keyboards steamrolling along at the bottom of the track, bypassing the sunkissed southern-California country-rock of the 1970s and taking a train to Memphis by way of Elton John and Billy Joel's piano man sound.

A magical metropolis just up the 101 stretching all the way over the bridge and into the nation of Oakland and across to planet Berkeley. A rock and roll Mecca strewn with revolutionary petunias. Hustler preachers, assassins, and cult leaders. A machine-gun toting newspaper heiress. A queer wonderland. A black nationalist matrix of fisted pledges and socialist breakfasts. A field of dreams with Giants like Mays and McCovey. I seeped up the mysticism of this aching lament and imagined that I could click my heels and return to my land of milk and honey. Call me Tania, Angela or Huey. And find me tickets to Bill Graham's next Day on the Green.

This remarkable place where my Civil Rights pioneer father once shared a coffee with Janis Joplin on his way to work. And where this past Monday I walked into the ballpark by the Bay – waiting for the mighty Bonds to launch 660 into the cove – only to spot a mullet-free Steve Perry sitting in the stands. I offered him the tale of my summer of '79. And he told me how he'd heard about my late father the activist and my sister the ballpark announcer.

And so this cornball anthem goes out to my Dad who left this earth last June, to my Mom, and to all of the brave men and women who lived and died so that I might inherit the right to rock in a strange and colourful new world of hurt-so-good pop songs and Top 40 dedications. I will always pull out my lighter and raise a flame to you. This one's for you Daddy.

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