POP
WHEN THE WORLD FALLS APART

Music in the Shadow of Doubt

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An EMP Museum Publication

Duke University Press

Durham and London

2012
Introduction

The Pop Conference at Experience Music Project, the source of this collection (the third book to date, along with This Is Pop and Listen Again1), took place in April 2002, much more the spirit of American Idol (then in its first season) than the aftershocks of the previous September 11. The Pop Conference quickly found its voice as an expression of what Kevin Dettmar has called “pop-positive criticism” (a play on “sex-positive feminism”). All sorts of writers gather each year to bring their passion, erudition, and laughter to bear on subjects that others ignore or castigate. Elsewhere, the topics on the agenda might be essentials: best-of lists and other canons. At EMP, the focus is the opposite. One never knows what will find its way onto the program: a Top 40 star reclaimed, a song’s lineage traced through radically different incarnations, a seemingly random occurrence treated as central rather than deviant. We have fun each spring and go home rejuvenated.

Over the years, what started as a banquet has come to feel more like an oasis. When we reconvened in 2003, military operations in the Iraq War were under way. In 2006, Hurricane Katrina was on our minds, and the destruction of New Orleans, America’s musical cradle. The recording industry steadily withered through the 2000s, paralleled by the loss of jobs in music journalism. Then the rest of the economy collapsed as well. As moods darkened, so did our conference themes. In 2006, the topic was, essentially, guilty pleasures, except that Drew
Daniel, a program committee member, shrewdly recast it as shame and “loving music in the shadow of doubt,” a thornier subject than taste hierarchies. In 2007, the EMP gathering was titled “Waking Up from History,” a Gen-X reference (Jesus Jones!) that nodded to our sense of living in some sort of embattled aftermath. And in 2008, at the urging of two other committee members, Joshua Clover and Ned Sublette, struggle took over: the theme became music in the mode of conflict—songs in the key of strife.

It is these last three years of conference proceedings, 2006 through 2008, that shape this book, which finds common ground in how pop lovers confront crisis—recognize cracks in the fundament and shake their stuff anyway. These are not marginal approaches to listening. After all, at the end of 2009, heavy metal sites gleefully reported that Metallica’s album *Metallica* (also known as *The Black Album*), the release that brought the band into the mainstream in 1991, had just passed Shania Twain’s *Come on Over* to claim the title of best-selling album of the SoundScan era. As a race between tortoise and hare, and between one musical mood and another, the contrast is striking. *Come on Over*, released in 1997, shot ahead quickly, combining a sentimental ballad, “You’re Still the One,” with endless upbeat affirmations: no artist is as fond of exclamation points in her titles as the author of “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” *Metallica*, recorded during the first Gulf War, was a million copies behind it as of 2003: the year that the second military operation got under way. Since then, however, *Metallica*’s “Sad But True” lyrical disaffirmations have plodded ahead as decisively as the band’s down-tuned guitar riffage, consistently attracting new cohorts of the “dead-end kids” Donna Gaines captured so well in her book *Teenage Wasteland*, also a 1991 title. “The Unforgiven,” six minutes of a boy growing old scratching against rock in a lightless hellhole, might prove in retrospect the defining commercial statement of the past generation.

Can our analyses evolve to match? In the months following *Metallica*’s first release, the far bigger media story was *Nevermind*, Nirvana’s blow for Generation X and the rock-and-roll dream: those instantly iconic cheerleaders with the anarchy outfits in the “Smells Like Teen Spirit” video applauded music as a rebellious force (an irresistible idea), even though Kurt Cobain’s lyrics pronounced it all “less dangerous.” One critical response to the disillusioning collapse of alternative rock was so-called poptimism: an impulse to celebrate commodified culture for its ability to represent the types of people left out of the rock rebellion paradigm. What would it
mean, however, for poptimism to confront the calcified disillusionment of Metallica to the same degree as bouncy Shania?

This book gets at an answer by taking as its theme music in times of trouble: the role of pop at times when it seems that the world has fallen apart. Trouble, it must be noted right away, can be as much interior as exterior, as much a part of normal life as of extraordinary crisis, as much Metallica on permanent simmer as Nirvana boiling over. There is an old radical song, “The World Turned Upside Down,” which began as a broadside in the English Revolution and gave title to the classic study of working-class social history by Christopher Hill. That kind of broadside, with its roots in carnivalesque rituals of social reversal and connections forward to “Summertime Blues,” “Say It Loud,” “Born to Run,” “Blitzkrieg Bop,” “Bring the Noise,” and “Smells Like,” presumes identification: the powerless finding representative voices. Pop When the World Falls Apart presumes disidentification, what the queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz describes as placing one’s self in moments and objects not coded for you and accepting the often shameful consequences. The disidentifying subject, Muñoz writes, is neither rebel nor subservient, working “on, with, and against a cultural form.” Given a generation-long shift from industrial-era group consumerism to postindustrial economic gaps, queasy celebrity culture, and record business collapse, popular music is almost inherently something to be disidentified with now: emotionally claimed through, rather than in resistance to, personal or collective breakdown.

The first few chapters of this book hail the cracked-up self. The novelist and gawky dancer Jonathan Lethem, keynote speaker in 2007, salutes the wanna-be, the happy fake who ensures that pop, blessedly, remains “a kind of trick.” If James Brown was no real musician, according to his trained sidemen, the rest of us (Fifth Beatles) have nothing to worry about. Greg Tate, as much of a self-confessed “sci-fi nerd” as Lethem but also a curator of négritude, traces a few vivid moments in a lifetime of his black rock efforts to keep space open for his “irreverent, neologistic, avant garde art-damaged ass.” To the categories of wanna-be and nerd, Alexandra Vazquez’s immigrant “softy polemic” adds the ideal of knowing nothing, being “comfortable being uncomfortable . . . entertained when left out of the conversation.” Finally, David Ritz, king of the as-told-to memoir and a twelve-step veteran to boot, testifies to why he became a ghostwriter: putting the urge to express his self directly aside like a dangerous substance.
From the conflicted self we head out to reclaim for darkness and doubt the notoriously conflict-averse suburbs. Three chapters are set in Orange County: birthplace of fast food and Reaganite conservatism, a toxic home for Karen Carpenter, and then launching pad for Gwen Stefani. Tom Smucker, in old-school rock critic fashion, compresses libraries worth of social and cultural context to contrast the commercial requirement that Karen Carpenter project an inner life with Lawrence Welk’s sanction to just blow bubbles. Smucker’s EMP talk inspired Eric Lott to write his own take, in newer-school American Studies fashion. “What is worst in Carpenters’ music,” Lott posits, “may also be what is best about it”—a harmony so overstated it negates itself. Then Karen Tongson explores a later Orange County: an eighties breakdance nightclub (evoked, Stefani says, on her Love. Angel. Music. Baby solo album), based in an amusement park, once as pale as Disneyland, that wound up catering to queer kids, immigrants, and other suburban B-boys-and-girls looking for “a parcel of fantasy . . . as the cold world melted away.”

Two subjects I very much hoped that this book would confront were the Iraq War and New Orleans after Katrina. Happily, J. Martin Daughtry and Larry Blumenfeld have delivered important and detailed accounts of how music joined these different battles. Daughtry makes his focus the act of listening in a situation where to hear at all is to risk being deafened. Here, airmen create soundtracks for self-produced videos of their bombing runs (only one way that music and violence are relentlessly intertwined), then cool down to “normal” Top 40. In New Orleans, by contrast, police drive through second-line gatherings, and Congo Square—the only place in North America where Africans were once free to drum—remains padlocked. Blumenfeld’s investigative reporting probes at a jazz culture fighting for its life as a community culture, which is to say a popular culture. “Kill ’em with pretty,” the Mardi Gras chiefs say. Not a bad way of describing the song that centers the next chapter, Israel Kamakawio‘ole’s version of “Over the Rainbow.” Nate Chinen schools us to hear in the performance a plea for Hawaiian sovereignty from the land of rainbows, “a sense of anguish braided with uplift.”

After exploring turbulences of self, suburbs, and sovereignty, we move on to tensions around the genres that constitute pop’s “worlds.” Music genres, cemented in a half century of Fordism and Keynesianism, as the entry of dispossessed groups, in particular African Americans, into consumer economies corresponded to heightened social and political clout,
have become a much murkier category in postindustrial, postmodern, post–civil rights America. Diane Pecknold considers how a country song, “By the Time I Get to Phoenix,” became the vehicle for Isaac Hayes’s transformation into “Black Moses,” a symbol of cultural nationalism, at the moment Hayes’s world—Stax soul, played by integrated bands for integrated audiences—collapsed with the shooting of Martin Luther King Jr. Oliver Wang takes up soul from a radically different perspective: the retro-soul revivalists whose entire aesthetic is based on the conflict they have with how the music has developed since the late 1960s. Carlo Rotella examines Magic Slim, the Chicago blues master journeyman who somehow became the last orthodox player in a genre taken over by simulacra; his “substantive party music” was built to survive apocalypse. Finally, a University of Iowa writing program triumvirate, Brian Goedde, Austin Bunn, and Elena Passarello, fashion dramatic monologues from interviews with white hip-hop fans in the Tall Corn state.

No book on music in troubled times could avoid the theme of anger, which is often to say punk and metal. Yet when Michelle Habell-Pallán picks up the story of a classic punk rocker, Alice Bag, she draws gestural correspondences that the 1970s L.A. scene would not have recognized, connecting Bag’s sharp elbows and loud lungs to Mexican canción ranchera, the estilo bravío of postrevolutionary women such as Lucha Reyes. Scott Seward, a hospital custodian, writes from the intellectual underclass about “middle of the road . . . death grunts,” Heinous Killing’s “Strangled by Intestines,” Shinto-texted Japanoise, and an album titled Gothic Kabballah about a mystic who lived four centuries back. Open the archive, as Habell-Pallán insists we do, and anything might come out. Kembrew McLeod’s punk friends in Virginia didn’t get mad when the alternative rock industry came calling in response to a bogus Spin feature on the scene in New Market, Virginia. (Reread name.) They got even, treating the label reps to one prank after another. Amazingly, the Dave Matthews Band was lurking, unsigned, a few burgs over. Forget real versus fake, McLeod’s anecdote argues: credulity drives the whole enterprise of pop.

Ending the volume is what those in an earlier era of the cd reissues trade might have called a bonus track. Carl Wilson’s Pop Conference presentation on the “guilty displeasure” of hating Celine Dion ranks among our best-received ever, and grew to be the basis of a book of its own, that received pop-cultural discourse as few music writers ever achieve, from glossy magazines to the Academy Awards runway and the Colbert Report.
Here, we include the original talk (notice how Hurricane Katrina finds its way in at a crucial turn), along with a postscript reflecting on the book’s journey. “People who complain that thinking, writing, or talking too much about music ‘ruins’ it or is ‘not rock ’n’ roll’ are getting it backward,” Wilson insists. “Whether or not the music needs any discussion, discussion needs the music. Rock may not need discourse but discourse needs to be rocked.” I hope that, through our annual gathering and books such as this, the Pop Conference continues to do its part.

Notes