



**FUCK YOU, HERE'S  
A RAINBOW**

and other essays  
about music

BY ROB HORNING

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# SADE IS PUNK AS FUCK

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If punk necessarily denotes the identity which is not one, than Sade is its ablest exponent



Sade Adu, circa 1984

**IT'S NO SECRET** that pop punk's mainstream success in the 1990s necessitated a retroactive redefinition of what could be considered "real" punk. By its nostalgic defenders, it was no longer to be understood in terms of any formal musical hallmarks -- relentless tempos, simplified song structures, amateurish guitar thrashing, atonal barking rather than singing. Instead punk was re-

branded as a disposition, an iconoclastic attitude that manifests itself as a rejection of contemporary terms of success and embraces a radical posture of refusal, sometimes in the guise of an intentionally abrasive avant-gardist innovation. Punk wasn't merely a genre of music; that is, like all genres it aspired to become a totalizing lifestyle, though its adherents would hardly use that

term. They preferred to discuss it in such terms as “respecting the scene,” disavowing the various brand logos under which they disciplined one another’s behavior.

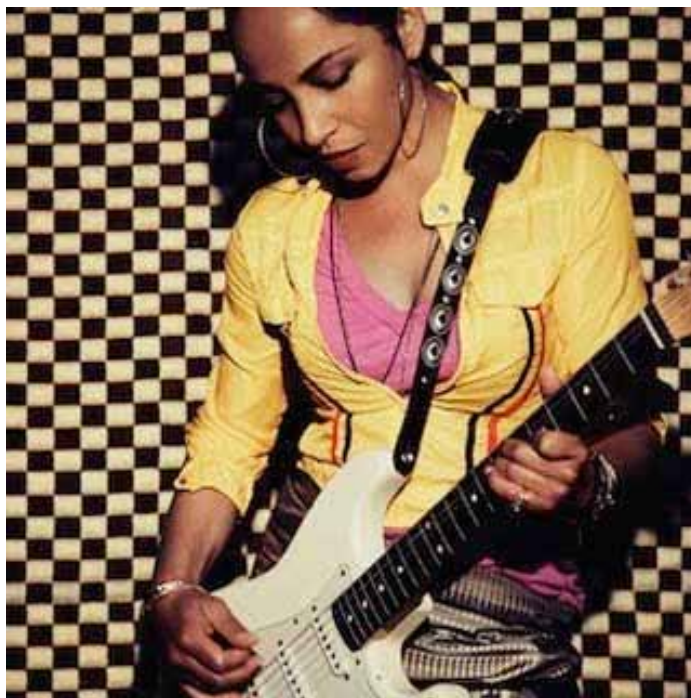
But this idealization of punk was not conceived with the first cresting wave of Dookie. Even in the 1980s, as the dead end of hardcore’s louder, faster nihilism became increasingly apparent, it was clear to many that punk must be embraced not as a doctrinaire adherence to rules but as a contrarian attitude that could manifest itself only in unexpected ways, for a community unified only by its appreciation of difference for its own sake, as sheer possibility, as a utopian expression of perfect tolerance for the collective commitment to shambolic forms of individualism. Punk required not obedience but imaginative disobedience, but not to any given sets of laws per se, but to the Law as such, to the illusion of self-identity. The point was to shatter the coherence of the symbolic, render illegible the codes of cultural capital and distinction. That’s why the most punk-as-fuck thing I did as a teenager wasn’t going to any hardcore show at City Gardens or performing any act of juvenile destruction to my hair. It was when I caught a ride to the mall with my mom, went to the Listening Booth, and plunked down

\$7.99 plus tax for a copy of *Diamond Life* by Sade. (Pronounced *Sbar-day*. It said so right on the wrapper.)

By arguing for the punkness of Sade, I don’t mean only to make a claim that she was punk in relation to the cultural consumption choices available to the average white suburban teenage boy in America in the mid-1980s, though that was almost indisputably the case—Sade was as punk in this sense as were Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet, Level 42, and Swing Out Sister, all of which were music-listening alternatives considered far beyond the pale (pun intended) for the males in high schools like my own.

And I don’t intend to argue merely that as an African-born soul musician, Sade qualifies as an ethnically Other punk inspiration or foil, like the ska and reggae acts that were appropriated by punk bands like the Clash. I want to insist that Sade’s music itself, and not merely her relative position on a matrix of anticipated tastes plotted according to class habitus, must be understood as punk.

Sade’s poised, cosmopolitan jet-setter image may seem less readily assimilable to the anti-hierarchical ethos of punk, but she must be interpreted as a figure of the outsider, condemned to a existential homelessness, embodying the rootless affect of the drifter with no anchor in the existing



order. The first words she speaks on her debut album, in her evocative, accented English, after all, are “laughing with another girl and playing with another heart.” Ostensibly about the male playboy denoted by the pronoun he in subsequent lines, these words also apply to Sade herself. They introduce ludic alterity as not only a tactic indicative of the lover’s presumably egregious callousness but also as a tactic of the singer, a “smooth operator” pedaling deceptively smooth music as complacent background noise, thereby immediately transforming it into a stealthy abrasive. Unlike such clumsy and obvious attempts at punk such as this effort by the Exploited, Sade gets on the skin and rubs it raw.

Reviewers and critics generally read *Diamond Life* as a straight take on sequencer-assisted cocktail jazz, dismissively overlooking the rich, corrosive ironies layered into virtually every track. Consider “Hang On to Your Love,” a seething piece of lounge funk that takes as its subject the biopolitical constrictions of enforced monogamy, by which one must cling to suffocating relationships “if you want your love to grow.” The contradictions of this position climax in the couplet “Hang on tight, don’t fight,” a semi-ironic paean to passivity, both a betrayal of the generative potential of love as well as protection against that energy being expropriated. Power is exercised by “hanging on,” avoiding overt conflict; productivity is expressed as stasis, an apt figure for succumbing to the emerging Deleuzian society of control, in which “everywhere surfing has already replaced the older sports,” while seeming to resist its flows. (Surfing, of course, is a sport in which participants “Hang ten.”)

I would like to assert that punk, particularly as Sade practices it, names precisely that impos-

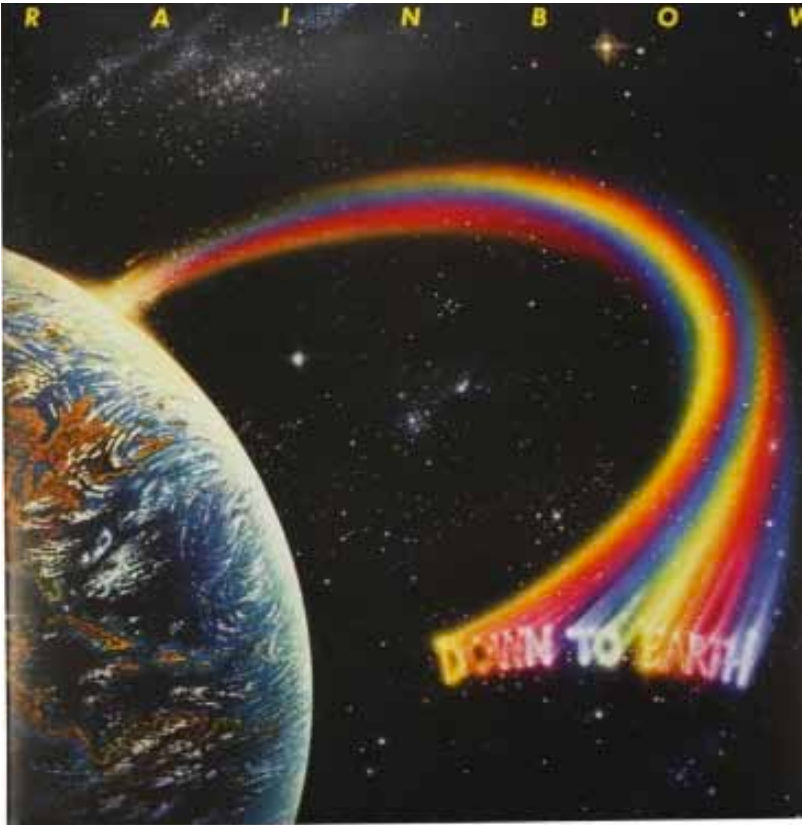
sible juncture at which resistance becomes surrender without ceasing to be either. The best expression of this is perhaps in the aspirational anthem “When Am I Going to Make a Living,” in which Sade gives voice to the generation that is “hungry for a life we can’t afford.” She alternates between giving advice to this generation (“They’ll waste your body and soul if you allow them to”) and claiming membership (“We’re hungry but we won’t give in”), indicative of the inherently shifting subject position Sade attempts to give form to. Identity is chief among the “many lies no one is achieving.” At the same time Sade tells us not to blame anyone else for our lack of place in the social order, she also notes the “sharks wheeling and dealing” and her own exhaustion at “scratching a living.” The result is a prismatic take on precarity, the quintessential affect of punk subjectivity: “no future.”

But the song’s key line is “There is no end to what you can do,” an obvious double-entendre pregnant with implicit meaning. The subjects Sade addresses exist as sheer potential, posited as limitless because untapped and directed toward no productive “end.” They exist in a perfect state of “whatever being,” to use Agamben’s term, or “punk,” to use the term I am limning in this essay. Yet these subjects, as Sade interpolates them, experience their unresolved identity as hunger, as lack, as the threat of endless exploitation that will waste their body and soul in abstract labor. We must remain hungry without giving in, we must embrace desire without it bringing us to assume identity. If we are unable to exist within the instabilities of punk identity as Sade traces it, we risk succumbing to the serial production of the self as a form of capitalist labor. “No end” is, paradoxically, “no future.” ©

# GOT NO SHAME, GOT NO PRIDE

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Rainbow's *Down to Earth* as  
queer theoretical intervention



The cover of Rainbow's  
*Down to Earth*, 1979

**THE RAINBOW AS** a symbol of gay pride dates to 1978, when a flag made by Gilbert Baker was flown at a march in San Francisco and was widely adopted as a symbol of solidarity after the assassination of Harvey Milk later that year. The band Rainbow dates to 1975, when guitarist Ritchie Blackmore became fed up with the image and musical direction new members David

Coverdale and Glenn Hughes had brought to his band Deep Purple—lumbering hard rock-funk fusion; cliched, cocaine-fueled macho posturing—and broke away to form a new group with vocalist Ronnie James Dio.

One might have expected Blackmore to be chagrined when “rainbow” began to be associated with a different sort of audience than what is usu-



Left: Ronnie James Dio and Richie Blackmore, circa 1976; above: Graham Bonnet with a dog, circa 1977; below, Judas Priest's Rob Halford, in leather



ally thought of for his music. But let's not forget that Deep Purple's crowning achievement was an album called *Machine Head*. Rather than shy away from the rising connotations of the rainbow as a marker of gay culture and affiliation, Blackmore responded in 1979 by releasing *Down to Earth*, one of the gayest albums in the hard rock canon, rivaling even Judas Priest's *Hell Bent for Leather* in its willingness to explore homosexual desire within the deeply homosocial context of metal music.

A tour de force of innuendo, coded language, frustrated desire, and orgasmic musical release, *Down to Earth* is not merely promiscuously available to the ministrations and interpretations of queer theoretical analysis; it is so dense

with gay textuality that it might profitably be considered a work of queer theory in its own right.

For *Down to Earth*, Blackmore decided to replace Dio with Graham Bonnet, who was something of a departure from the swords-and-sorcery, rock-and-roll-wizard image Dio had cultivated. Bonnet, an R&B singer who had achieved limited success covering songs written by the



Far left: Graham Bonnet; left: Faith-era George Michael

Bee Gees, had a look that was a cross between a Halfordesque leather boy with a penchant for aviator sunglasses and a softer, feminized male model out of *International Male*. Faith-era George Michael seems to owe a bit of a debt to Bonnet.

The startling conceptual departure that Bonnet marked merely through his physical appearance should have been sufficient to alert Rainbow fans to a shift in the band's intellectual concerns—there would be no songs about tarot cards or warlocks here—but if that wasn't enough, a song like “Love's No Friend” left no room for doubt.

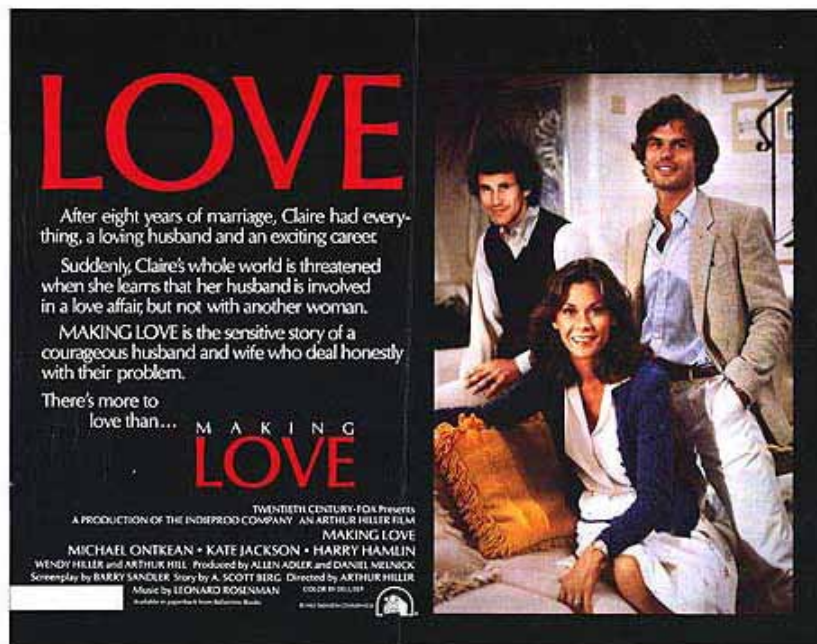
As the song's title suggests, “Love's No Friend” is an interrogation of heteronormative narratives in the culture and the pervasive damage they inflict by forbidding the expression of

alternative forms of desire, whether they are same-sex or outside the couple form. The lyrics make plain their intentional queerness: “I've learned to live with a cloud above my head,” the singer declares, and then evokes two key concepts in the enunciation of gay struggle: “Got no shame, got no pride.” The pain of exclusion presents gay subjectivity with a paradox: being cast to the margins allows one to act without shame, though without cultural recognition or validation. The tension between these two poles suspend the gay subject in a detrimental equilibrium. “Got no feelings left inside,” Bonnet moans, with a passion that obviously belies the meaning of the words. The song preaches defiance—“Ain't gonna fall for no line,” the singer cries—but Blackmore's melancholy, minor-key soloing





Movie posters for *Cruising* (1980) and *Making Love* (1982)



undercuts it, suggesting it is at best a partial solution. One cannot reject heteronormativity at the level of the individual; its hegemony deforms the subject beyond the reach of the conscious will. To correct the deformity would require a change in the entire drift of society.

The other tracks on *Down to Earth* take up various facets of that challenge, exploding the tropes and anxieties of straight masculinity and positing challenging alternatives to it, as in “Danger Zone.” Again, the lyrical intent of this tough cruising anthem is not exactly obscure:

Love don't make it on those pin-  
striped nights  
When you're looking through  
someone's disguise  
You can't make it alone, so you  
gotta make a move  
But you're looking at nobody's eyes

The chorus then ambiguously asserts that “love don't go begging in the danger zone.” The idea here is that “love” in the sense of sexual activity can easily be found in the cruising “danger zones” of the pre-HIV 1970s, but at the same time it would be a mistake to name it “love”—love doesn't go there, and its ideologized comforts won't be found. You will not find a self-stabilizing relation; instead it is a place where normative gender relations and the straitjacket of sexual orientation evaporate (your own eyes become “nobody's”), and you will learn that, as the song states, “faking has no return.” Here, then, we are deep in the “danger zone” of jouissance, as Leo Bersani would later describe in “Is the Rectum a Grave?”

Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of losing sight of the self, and in so doing

it proposes and dangerously represents  
jouissance as a mode of ascesis.

So the danger zone—really a sexual counterpublic, in Michael Warner’s sense—is dangerous only to the extent one is attached to the self as such and that which anchors it in patriarchal society, the gendered power relations that hinge on viewing passivity and penetration as sexualized violence. The danger zone is as dangerous to social control as it is supposed to be to self-control.

The other tracks on *Down to Earth* are not as overt in their queer themes, but they are unmistakable once one begins to listen for them. The album’s opening song, “All Night Long” at first blush seems full of standard numbskull cock-rock bluster. But it turns out that this exaggerated parody of straight desire is displaced aggression, a response to how that desire always threatens to dissolve into a puddle of anxiety. The singer keeps insisting, “I want to love you all night long!” but the very insistence of the demand transforms it into a plea: Give me the sexual capacity to go all night long, let me escape the trajectory of straight male desire and its deadening refractory periods, let me become like a “girl who can keep her head, all night long.”

Such capacity is theoretically available with a willingness to be penetrated, but as Bersani notes, “To be penetrated is to abdicate power.” Thus that furtive desire to become feminized, with an insatiable capacity for pleasure, must be buried under derogatory sexist comments: “I don’t know about your mind but you look all right”; “Your mouth is open but I don’t wanna hear you say good night.” This sexism is the price for maintaining the heterosexual couple, as Warner and Berlant put it in “Sex in Public,” the

referent or the privileged example of sexual culture.” It is a gender-inflected expression of what Bersani calls “sex as self-hyperbole,” a self-aggrandizement to stave off the way desire threatens to shatter identity.

If “All Night Long” is about the trap of masculine phallocentrism, the album’s hit, “Since You Been Gone,” is about homosexual panic, about a fear of, and desire for, the closet. Its bridge addresses the closet directly (“These four walls are closing in, look at the fix you’ve put me in”), which clues listeners in to how “you” stands for both his gay desire, alienated as a invading entity, and for debilitating protection the closet affords. Without its protection, the singer admits he has “been out of my head, can’t take it.” But there is no alternative; desire has already fractured his pretense to hetero identity: “I get the same old dreams same time every night, fall to the ground and I wake up.” The dream of becoming a “bottom” hinted at in “falling to the ground” is not something the singer can elude. “You cast a spell, so break it,” he implores, looking for a release, but there is no escape.

So in the night I stand beneath the  
backstreet light  
I read the words that you sent to me  
I can take the afternoon,  
The nighttime comes around too soon

When night comes, disruptive desire reasserts itself and language is useless for dismantling it. Incapable of coming out, yet incapable of not acting on this desire, caught between homo/hetero, the singer is driven beyond epistemology (his conflicted desires render him “out of my head”) and representation.

But the album’s centerpiece is “Makin’ Love,” which not coincidentally would become the name



Joe Lynn Turner  
in the video for  
Rainbow's "Street  
of Dreams"

of a groundbreaking American film about a married man having a homosexual affair. The song's lyrics tie together the disparate theoretical ideas of the album in one tightly wrought chorus.

How can I deny my heart  
When my love is blind  
I got no choice  
I've gone too far  
I lose my mind  
When we're makin' love

Here, the singer admits to a "blind" passion beyond sociocultural categories that carries him "too far," past the will to normativity. This desire, he confesses, will cause him to lose his mind, forgo subjectivity and admit the "internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of

sacrifice," to borrow Bersani's phrase. "When I look into your magic eyes, the mirror of my love," he sings, openly acknowledging mimetic desire rendered sexual, and the urge to shatter that mirror in an act that's equally transgressive and unnervingly familiar.

Though *Down to Earth* was among the band's higher-charting records, overt queer theorizing at this level of sophistication was somewhat over the Rainbow. Bonnet would leave the band after this album, to be replaced by Joe Lynn Turner, an anodyne Lou Gramm clone, as Blackmore would try to steer his band toward conventional MOR success. Instead of continuing to chart the course of radical intervention in the name of queer culture building, gay fans of the band were abandoned, left to walk the Street of Dreams. ©

# KIPPERS FOR BREAKFAST

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How Supertramp and Baudrillard reached the same conclusion about the American land of plenty



Supertramp, *Breakfast in America* (1979)

*Could we have kippers for breakfast,  
mummy dear, mummy dear?  
They got to have 'em in Texas,  
'cause everyone's a millionaire*  
—Supertramp, “Breakfast in America”

**I HAVEN'T SPENT** much time in Texas, but I'm pretty sure that everyone there is not a millionaire. I never saw anyone in Texas or anywhere

else in America eat kippers for breakfast. I'm not entirely sure what a kipper is.

Yet because I was at a vulnerable and impressionable age in 1979 when the English group Supertramp's “Breakfast in America” dominated FM radio, part of my mind has always clung to the idea that in Texas, there are millionaires eating kippers for breakfast. The very fact that I had

## KIPPERS FOR BREAKFAST

no idea what that meant was exactly what made it alluring, aspirational. I wasn't sure if I would like to have kippers for breakfast myself (I could be finicky), but I definitely wanted to be the sort of person who knew why that was desirable. I wanted people to think I was eating them.

In my youthful naiveté, I saw secret and powerful knowledge in a line that was meant to convey Supertramp songwriter Roger Hodgson's own naiveté about America when he was young. Eating kippers for breakfast was something that happened in England, not America. Hodgson was trying to evoke what it was like to try to imagine the unimaginable — what life was like where I already lived. I was already living the unimaginable. Or perhaps it's better to adopt the terminology of another naïve interpreter of America, Jean Baudrillard, and say I was already deeply immersed in the hyperreal, in “simulations of simulations” that were “more real than real.” There are no “real” kippers to have for breakfast, yet “kippers for breakfast” as an concrete idea, as something to sing and wonder about, is endlessly reproducible and served for me at least as a constitutive fantasy.

Baudrillard writes in *America* (1986): “There is a sort of miracle in the insipidity of artificial paradises, so long as they achieve the greatness of an entire (un)culture.” Kippers for breakfast is that sort of miracle. An entirely implausible fantasy that is nonetheless perfectly characteristic. In America we want what we want when we want it, even if “we” never would consider eating a kipper. As Americans, we still expect to be seen as



having anything anyone else could imagine wanting.

The point of being an American, as it is refracted back to Americans, is that you live in the most thoroughly stocked marketplace in the world, an efficient engine for realizing desires, imagination, experiences as products available to anyone who chooses to afford them. As Baudrillard contemplates the desert—perhaps a desert not unlike the rugged high plains of vast, sparse West Texas—Baudrillard comments that it is “a miracle of obscenity that is genuinely American: a miracle of total availability.” In “Breakfast in America,” Hodgson captures this same fantasy about American plenitude in the song's opening verse:

Take a look at my girlfriend,  
she's the only one I got  
Not much of a girlfriend,  
never seem to get a lot  
Take a jumbo across the water,  
like to see America.  
See the girls in California  
I'm hoping it's going to come true  
but there's not a lot I can do

In America, there is an overflow of eagerly available California gurls and an apparent promise of sexual abundance for every dismal, passive man bogged down in monogamy, even though there is “not a lot” he can do about it. The singer's dream of America seems to be that he will deplane from the jumbo and the women will throw themselves at him. That is what it means to him to “see America”: consequence- and effort-free libidinous indulgence. He will become a

perfect consumer who “gets a lot,” who derives pure pleasure from sheer quantity of generic offerings, uncompromised by any specific appeals to him as a particular subject, as such hailings would also bring specific responsibilities. And in America, who wants that?

In other words, the fantasy of touring America, of conquering America, of becoming American, is a fantasy of losing oneself and being perfected in the hopeful consumerist melting pot as an exquisitely receptive pleasure sensor. Baudrillard writes, “The only question in this journey is: how far can we go in the extermination of meaning, how far can we go in the non-referential desert form without cracking up and, of course, still keep alive the esoteric charm of disappearance?”

This fantasy stems not only from America’s colonial history as a catch-all for Europe’s dissidents, heretics, and hustlers. It has more to do

with its post-World War II climb toward global hegemony, as the Cold War exporter of freedom in the form of consumer choice and glamorized commodities—its movie stars and its blue jeans, inspiring the “children of Marx and Coca Cola.”

But as the U.S. was beginning to send its McDonaldized way of life around the world with the rise of economic globalization, life within America was becoming ever more vertiginous, as American culture was situated at the vanishing point reflected in two mirrors pointed at each other. Growing up as an American meant trying to master that infinite regress, to take cultural hegemony in stride even as it spawned ambiguous forms of resistance in the zeitgeist, like Supertramp’s homage. In part, it meant discovering one’s own privilege in the distorting, mocking, and envying representations of it in entertainment products from abroad—products that Americans feel unabash-



A still from  
Jean-Luc Godard's  
*Masculin Féminin* (1966)



Supertramp in  
the 1970s

edly entitled to appropriate. And in part it meant coming to terms with building an identity in line with America's apparent competitive advantage, which is in making seductive images and then quickly rendering them obsolete.

So Americans learn to know themselves in relation to ephemeral signifiers that tenuously have value attached to them, that can come and go like Supertramp did over the course of the summer of 1979. As the chorus of "The Logical Song," the other massive hit from *Breakfast in America*, put it, "I know it sounds absurd, but please tell me who I am."

On its face, "The Logical Song" is a pretty straightforward song about the disillusionment of coming adulthood, as one is forced to accept the reality principle and the "logic" of society's repressions and compromises. Wrenched from the childhood idyll in which "all the birds in the trees, they'd be singing so happily, joyfully, playfully, watching me," the singer is instead thrust into "a world where I could be so dependable,

clinical, intellectual, cynical." This is the corollary of America as the land of libidinal plenitude: America as land of hyperrational calculation and alienated consciousness. Kippers for breakfast turn out to be a very different sort of pleasure than the *jouissance* of being at one with the birds who are watching you and singing to you, the pleasure of being assured of your belonging within the natural world. Banished to the desert of the hyperreal, one must banquet on ultimately empty signifiers, strategizing all the while how to consume more of them before it becomes meaningless in the eyes of others to do so.

I have lived in that desert, with its many mirages, and I've become too disoriented to find my way out of it. I still want kippers for breakfast, and if I didn't, I'd want something else impossible to nourish me. I don't think the birds were ever watching me, and if they were, I would have thought they were just jealous. I had the new Supertramp album on 8-track, and what the hell did they have? ©

# TRUE SAILING IS DEAD

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On “Horse Latitudes” Jim Morrison dared to walk the plank between ambition and pretentiousness



Jim Morrison performs on the *Smothers Bros. Comedy Hour* in 1968

**WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE** between artistic ambition and pure pretentiousness? When one listens to the Doors, this question can never be far from one's mind. Yes, the group often does blow open the namesake doors of perception in many a young child's fragile eggshell mind, but these same minds also tend to reach a point at which

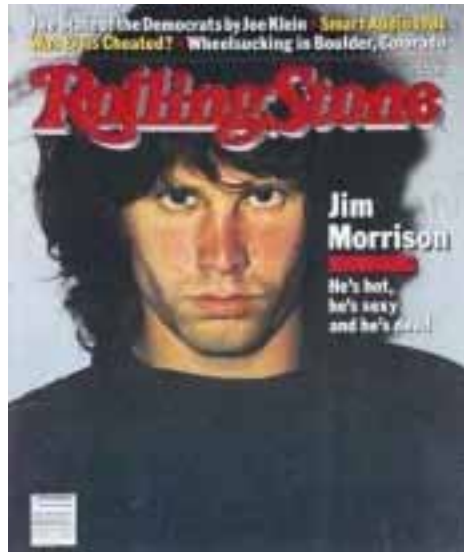
they are ashamed at having been so transfigured. Once they break on through to adulthood, they find themselves embarrassed to realize how little substance there is to the Doors' parables of transgression. The garage-goth organ and the sinewy guitar figures remain alluring, perhaps, but the overriding silliness of Jim Morrison's postur-



ing, his portentous, overenunciated delivery and his egregious lyrical overreach, becomes impossible to ignore and all too easy to ridicule.

But it's also hard not to feel somewhat sorry for him. Undermined in his quest to be taken seriously in part by the occasionally solid pop instincts of his band and most of all by his own leonine looks, Morrison sought various ways to sabotage his success, from dropping surreal poetic fragments into otherwise innocuous songs to getting fat and growing a beard (an approach Joaquin Phoenix would later emulate in his own quixotic quest for credibility) to exposing himself while inebriated during a performance in Florida. Lost in his Roman wilderness of pain, he would eventually die of a drug overdose in a Paris bathtub in 1971, at age 27. Ten years later, adding insult to injury, *Rolling Stone* would help spearhead Morrison's elevation to the youth-culture pantheon by putting him on its cover with the tag line: "He's hot, he's sexy and he's dead."

The associated story, by Rosemary Breslin, depicted Morrison as an empty icon of teen rebellion for his new generation of fans: "To these kids, Morrison's mystique is simply that whatever he did, it was something they've been told is wrong. And for that they love him." Breslin's thesis, that Morrison was the latest iteration of the eroticized bad boy for mass consumption, seems plausible enough when you look at photographs, but recasting the self-styled Lizard King as James



Dean seems to miss the peculiar appeal that his decidedly unsexy music has for adolescents. Conspicuously lacking in subtlety and seductiveness, Doors albums have more in common with those of female-repellent wizard-rock bands like Uriah Heep and King Crimson than with anything you'd put on for a make-out session. They revel in inscrutability, haunted-house creepiness, jarring juxtapositions, and aimless, self-indulgent instrumental passages. Their love songs, of which there are surprisingly few, are generally anodyne and unconvincing, when not arrestingly blunt ("Touch Me," "Hello, I Love You"). In short, outside of their singles, the Doors often thrived on being awkward and petulantly unapproachable, just like many self-conscious teenage boys.

My own Doors phase began one Christmas when I was in elementary school, after my brother got the double-8-track set of *Weird Scenes Inside the Gold Mine*, an early-1970s deep-cuts-and-oddities package that seemed designed to cash in on the emerging idea that Morrison was a symbolist-inspired visionary rather than a drug-abusing alcoholic poetaster. Whereas the band's other greatest-hits compilations naturally focused on their accessible material, this collection featured the Doors' more outré efforts, including "The End," an ominous and meandering tour of the unconscious climaxing in Oedipal bathos; "The Wasp (Texas Radio and the Big Beat)," an incoherent, semi-spoken-word excursion into the Virginia swamps and the land of

the Pharaohs (“Out here we is stoned, immaculate”); and “Shaman’s Blues,” which has an unsettling coda during which Morrison spouts sinister lines like “The only solution, isn’t it amazing?”

These songs were unlike anything I’d heard, except for the Beatles’ *White Album*—which was fitting, since that record evoked a person-age I came to have a hard time keeping separate from Morrison in my mind: Charles Manson. I had already discovered *Helter Skelter* on the family bookshelf, so when Morrison enthused about how “blood stains the roofs and the palm trees of Venice” in “Peace Frog,” or declared that “all the children are insane” in “The End,” it wasn’t hard for me to imagine him leading a band of drugged-out disciples on a killing spree to set off the apocalypse.

I certainly wasn’t drawn to Morrison because he seemed a cool rebel; if anything, he seemed remote and terrifying, someone likely to shout “Acid is groovy, kill the pigs” as he climbed through the window to murder me. That *No One Here Gets Out Alive*, the hagiographic Morrison biography by Jerry Hopkins and Danny Sugerman, put forth the proposition that the Lizard King faked his own death and was out there still, haunting the forests of azure as Mr. Mojo Risin, only fueled my fears further.

But by far the weirdest scene of all on those 8-tracks, the thing that frightened me the most, was “Horse Latitudes,” in which Morrison recites—in stilted, stentorian tones without nuance that gradually ascend to incongruously belligerent yelling of Rollins-level intensity—a poem he claimed to have written as a child.

According to Hopkins and Sugerman, young Jim was inspired by a suggestive cover he saw in a bookstore. Over a spooky backdrop of

moaning wind and various nautical sound effects, we hear this:

When the still sea conspires an armor  
And her sullen and aborted  
Currents breed tiny monsters,  
True sailing is dead.  
Awkward instant  
And the first animal is jettisoned.  
Legs furiously pumping,  
Their stiff green gallop  
And heads bob up.  
Poise  
Delicate  
Pause  
Consent  
In mute nostril agony  
Carefully refined  
And sealed over.

Though it has some crabbed, superficially interesting diction, “Horse Latitudes” doesn’t stand up all that well to repeated listening. It starts to sound less unsettling and more ham-fisted. But Morrison was clearly proud of the effort, choosing it over his other undecodable poems (eventually anthologized as *The Lords and the New Creatures*) and persuading his bandmates to put it on the *Strange Days* album. The band may have believed, along with the label execs at Elektra, that literary esoterica was an important part of their brand.

But I wonder if Morrison’s fondness for it stemmed from his identification with the sacrificed animals, the expendable ballast. I’m not sure what “mute nostril agony” is supposed to mean, but it seems like a concise description of Morrison himself, who would be doomed to a fate of lashing out against the airhead image the media was conspiring into an armor for him. His career would prove little more than a series of “awkward instants,” whether they were musical moments,



Morrison with the Doors on Danish television in 1968



pharmaceutical misadventures, or sullen and aborted confrontations with live audiences and the police. (I'll refrain from speculating on what sort of "furious pumping" went on.)

Morrison seems to have sincerely wanted to launch his drunken boat like a latter-day Rimbaud, but he failed to register the superficial Romanticism in the cultural zeitgeist couldn't really support such a self-image. The Whiskey-a-Go-Go was not fin-de-siècle Paris; the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour (on which the Doors performed "Touch Me") was not Le Mercure de France. As much as he may have wanted to will himself into becoming a poet from another age, nobody can make the era amenable by fiat. So he became a sad anachronism.

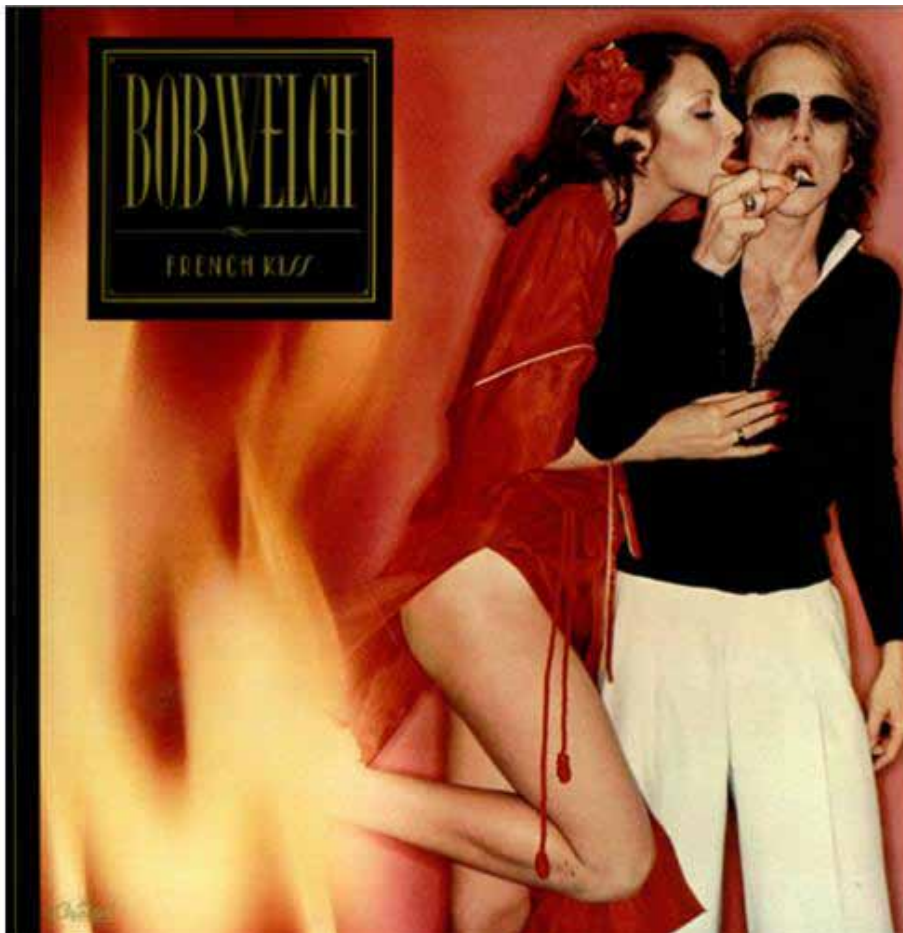
But this is also why Morrison can still speak

to misfits and outcasts who don't want a sex symbol to emulate but someone who epitomizes the Pyrrhic victory of the will. Like other writers that appeal mainly to adolescents — Ayn Rand, J.D. Salinger, Edgar Allen Poe, J.R.R. Tolkien — Morrison caters to a specific sort of precociousness, encouraging certain baroque ideas about the superfluity of adulthood and tapping into alterity despite his conventional path to fame. And in actual adulthood, you can return to the Doors for a nostalgic idyll about what you once thought the future should hold in store — moonlight drives to the end of the night, supersaturated posturban decadence, cars "stuffed with eyes" in "fantastic L.A.," daring escapes to some soft asylum. But unfortunately, "Horse Latitudes" always lies in wait to remind us which dreams we must jettison first. ©

# WE WERE PROMISED HOT TUBS

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Bob Welch and the glories of the  
lost ideal of 1970s adulthood



Bob Welch,  
*French Kiss* (1977)

**I GUESS I AM** old enough now for my music-writing “career” to have entered officially into the obituary rather than the discovery phase. It’s just more likely at this point that a musician I already love will die than it is that I will find new musicians to get that attached to.

Anyway, I wanted to write something about

Fleetwood Mac guitarist Bob Welch after I heard about his death, maybe something about the neglected Mac albums that feature him prominently, *Bare Trees* or especially *Mystery to Me*, or maybe something about his special flair for vaguely cosmic, meandering midtempo love songs like “Emerald Eyes” and the epic “Future Games.” But then I

remembered I had written an appreciation of sorts a few years ago of his first solo album, *French Kiss* (1977), the apex of his success. It seemed as good a time as any to opportunistically rework that.

At the Princeton Record Exchange, there are probably enough copies of *French Kiss* in the dollar bins to wallpaper an entire apartment. It's a testimony to how popular the album became when the single "Sentimental Lady," a re-recording of a Bare Trees song, went to the top of the charts. Any reasonable person would identify that song as Welch's chief legacy, but whenever I think of him, I think of this album cover and what it did to me as a child. Somehow I got it into my head that this is what adulthood would look like.

When I saw this cover in a Listening Booth as a kid, I concluded that this was the essence of adult entertainment. Clearly it was meant for people who weren't embarrassed or reluctant to have left youth behind. As you can see above, the left half of the album cover seems to have set itself on fire in an effort to cleanse itself of the seedy filthiness of what's happening on the right. Welch, balding but with the long scraggly wisps of the middle-aged man who hasn't given up, wears pleated white pants and what looks to be a misbegotten cross between a track suit and a rugby shirt, opened to expose his sparsely haired chest. He seems barely able to stand as he tries to ... what exactly? At first it appears he's trying to ignite some unidentified smokeable object (cigar? roach clip? gnarly half-smoked butt from the ashtray?) but on closer inspection he might just be trying to throw a lit match into his mouth. He has on oversize, burgundy-tinted sunglasses that almost but not quite conceal heavy-lidded, utterly wasted eyes, which stare out vacantly at the camera.

Draped on him is a tall, heavily made-up

woman wearing a red dress or maybe some sort of terry bathrobe that exposes her leg up to the top of her thigh, where her bronze tan begins to fade. Her spindly fingers, with their long, blood-red nails, are stretched across Welch's chest. (Both she and Welch wear rings on their ring finger, but you don't get the impression they are married to each other.) Most strikingly, she is tonguing his face, or perhaps his earlobe—confusing, because isn't french kiss when you put your tongue in someone's mouth?

This cover tells you everything you need to know about the '70s ideal of languid self-indulgence: It gloriously conjures up cocaine spoons and key parties, empty promises made in hot tubs, interchangeable and indifferent bodies letting it all hang out in discos, sex in sports cars and hotel rooms while the 8-track of something like this album repeats and repeats.

The rock milieu today seems suffused with nostalgia about the time when the genre's aging audience was teenagers. It implies that those were inevitably the best years of our lives and that being grown up is one compromise, one sellout, one dreary responsibility after another. In fact, it's hard to think of anything in contemporary culture that celebrates adulthood today as a distinct, appealing stage of life with its own special allure. But *French Kiss's* cover embodies the idea that adulthood can be one endless party too, a better one, since everyone has more money, better drugs, and fewer inhibitions.

This mood is epitomized by "Sentimental Lady," which opens the album and encapsulates the era's zeitgeist. Lindsey Buckingham produced this remake after replacing Welch in Fleetwood Mac and gave him the biggest hit of his career. If you want to get a sense of Buckingham's genius,

it's worth comparing the deluxe version with the not-bad original. He revamps Welch's serviceable album cut into something indelible. From the shimmering arpeggios that open the track to the pillowy backing vocals from Christine McVie to the spare guitar solo over the bridge to the elegant, contrapuntal layers of sound during the fade out, "Sentimental Lady" is as perfect a specimen of the California soft-rock sound as ever blessed FM radio, and it surely must have mellowed many a midlife crisis. Welch is no one's idea of a strong singer; he had a wispy voice that was equal parts Neil Young and Glenn Frey. But "Sentimental Lady" makes his weakness a strength, as the indifference built in to his laconic intonations takes the cloying edge off the lyrics

You are here and warm  
 But I could look away and you'd be gone  
 That's why I've traveled far  
 Because I feel so together where you are

and generates a bracing undercurrent of tension: He seems both deeply in love and deeply bored.

The rest of *French Kiss* doesn't live up to "Sentimental Lady." Welch had a second hit with "Ebony Eyes," which has a "Begin the Begin"—like opening guitar hook and a chorus punctuated with a string arrangement typical of the many attempts to assimilate disco to soft rock. The video has some of the same sleezy vibe as the album cover, though: Welch wanders around what is supposed to be a high-class supper club, wearing a beret and holding both a mike and a cigar while an interracial couple dances some warped version of a tango. Several of the clientele hold masks in



Lindsey Buckingham

front of their faces. There is also a guy who appears to be on a date wearing a Shriners hat.

"Hot Love, Cold World," the album's third single, is less memorable—a stab at funk with some incongruous soloing more suited to Welch's subsequent work with his ill-fated progressive-metal band, Paris. The rest of the album is rounded out with material that sounds like the Elton John of those

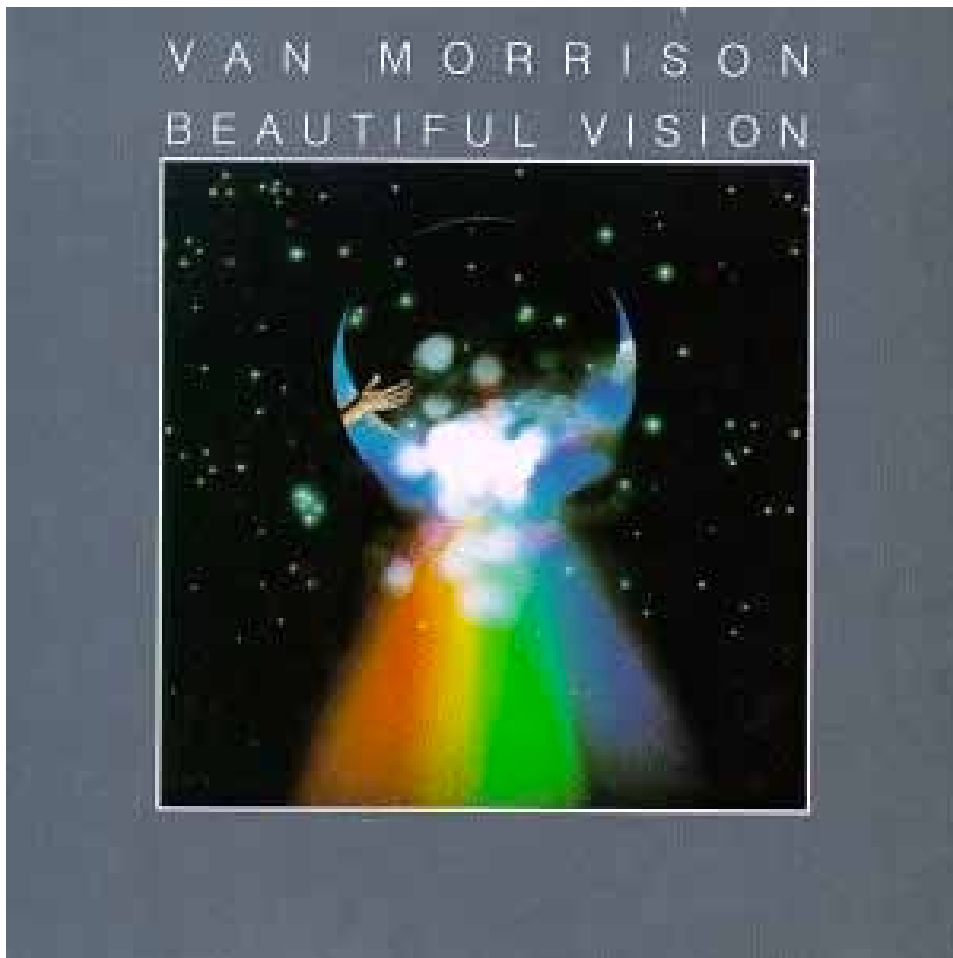
years ("Don't Go Breakin' My Heart", bicentennial anthem "Philadelphia Freedom")—peppy and synthetic, replete with choppy bursts of strings and overexuberant backing vocals, often from Welch himself, multi-tracked unmercifully. This was the AOR-certified hitmaking formula of the day, and Welch adheres to it dutifully, absconding on the spacey contemplativeness of his Mac songs to engage in some slick pandering.

The cynical expediency with which Welch dispatches tracks on *French Kiss* seems like a taunt, as if he's daring you to call him on merely going through the motions. But his barely disguised jadedness is part of what makes the album such a piquant 1970s memento now: This suits the way we've been trained to remember the '70s, as a time of soulless selfishness and narcissism, of baby-boomer egomania gone amuck. Welch makes selling out—agreeing to the compromises of adult life—seem like a grand fuck-you gesture whose material rewards always garner you the last laugh on the earnest. For this reason, *French Kiss* is still grimly compelling, like that one last line when it's already five in the morning and you're way past strung out. You can't even feel anymore, but that's no reason to stop. ☺

# FUCK YOU, HERE'S A RAINBOW

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The heroic tedium and anti-nostalgia of Van Morrison's 1980s



Van Morrison,  
*Beautiful Vision* (1980)

**WARPED NOSTALGIA CAN** take you to weird places. Recently, I suddenly started listening to this Van Morrison album *Beautiful Vision*, which I've owned for more than 20 years and never particularly liked before. Now I can't stop listening to it.

Part of this is egotistical contrarianism. Most

critics think the record is mediocre; the incredibly lame album cover may have something to do with that. It might be the worst cover ever for a musician who has impeccably bad taste in cover art.

It's like he is daring his audience to listen to it. The message seems to be: "See how indifferent I am to the surface things of this world? I put out

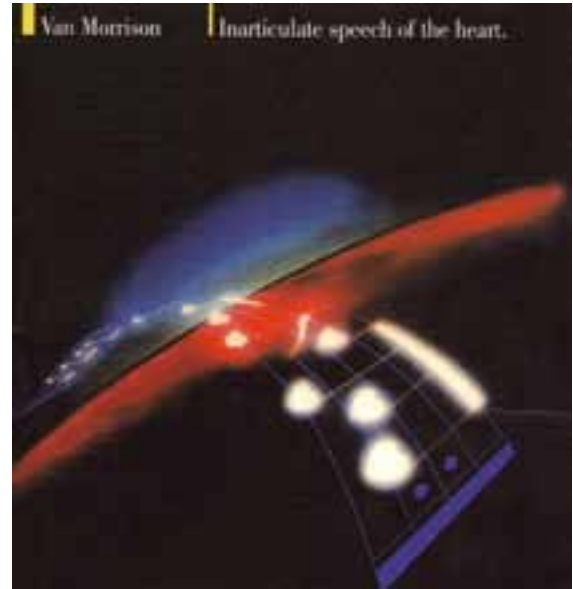
my music with this on the cover. That's how far I have moved beyond petty commercial posturing. Fuck you, here's a rainbow."

But probably the design was a calculated attempt to move into the burgeoning New Age niche of the time, especially given that space-music synth player Mark Isham was among the musicians on it. The cover has the Windham Hill hallmark fonts and design motifs, which are applied almost parodically. Whose hand is that supposed to be popping out of that crescent, emerging from the otherwise depthless space? What's with the smeary blotches? It looks like someone spilled something on the negative and didn't bother to wipe it up.

I am drawn by this design that seems to make no place for me, that makes no concessions to anything a person like me would find appealing. I am also drawn by the thought of listening to a revered musician's rejected work. It gives me intimations of immortality—I've got so much time left that I can burn some of it listening to *Beautiful Vision* instead of *Astral Weeks*. I'm not worried about time. I've beaten the hype cycle.

Listening to "bad" albums also indulges that arrogant side of fandom that leads me to believe that I can hear the greatness in records lesser fans are beguiled by. I am the only one who appreciates their merit; I alone understand where Morrison in his genius was coming from. I too am an artist, an artist of listening.

But mainly what keeps me playing the album is anti-nostalgia. *Beautiful Vision*, though clearly an indulgent nostalgia exercise for Morrison ("Down the mystic avenue I walk again" and so on), inspires in me no memories of the good old days when I used to listen to it, it invokes no glory from my past, borrows nothing from the



Van Morrison, *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (1980)

melancholy of my lost youth. Unlike Morrison, I don't want to go back. He can go back for me. I'm moving forward. Or maybe I'm mythologizing my present moment for myself through sheer repetition.

I like that *Beautiful Vision* sounds nothing like any music I have ever liked before. The younger me heard this record and thought, What a bunch of bullshit. The whole album is drenched in a diffusive, trebly sheen, like it is trying to twinkle. Though it concludes with a bombastic instrumental that rains chords on listeners' heads like so many velvet hammer blows, it steadfastly refuses to rock. It proceeds with a kind of sublime indifference to its audience. No hooks, no attempts to engage listeners directly—instead he captures a complete self-absorption, totally lost in his own music and esoteric preoccupations. He's not afraid to throw out a song title like "Aryan Mist," which is one of the album's many references to occult spiritualist and apparent racist Alice Bailey. He can't be bothered to explain that the "Vanlose Stairway" is a real place in Copenhagen where





The San Mateo–Hayward Bridge

his girlfriend lived and not some made-up mystical abstraction, though he sings about it like it's the Veedon Fleece or his own personal stairway to heaven. Then he takes the opposite tack with “Across the Bridge Where Angels Dwell”—allegedly a reference to an actual bridge in San Mateo that led to a house where his ex-wife and daughter lived. Morrison chooses to present this private iconography in the blandest, most generic spiritual terms, as if to protect it from our phony bandwagoning.

But that's a big part of why I like it all of a sudden. I take the album as a soothing investigation into how to turn precious memories into “precious memories” or a “beautiful vision.” That is what Greil Marcus is getting at in *When That Rough God Goes Riding* when he lumps *Beautiful Vision* in with a bunch of other of Morrison's

1980s and '90s albums that he says “carry their titles like warning labels.” The warning is that the spiritual process generates generic artistic by-products. The titles are indicators that the aesthetic substance has been extracted and consumed in the search for private spiritual meaning, and what's left is a holy relic from a religion you can't belong to.

Marcus claims these albums have “no tension,” whose “tedium” is “almost heroic.” At this point in his career, Marcus argues, Morrison had embraced the placidly indifferent side of his musical persona: “He wants peace of mind and ordered satisfaction most of all, and sings as if he already has them.” Marcus thinks that is a bad thing, but it's actually kind of awesome. *Beautiful Vision* promises spirituality as a process of abstraction and nostalgia as process of exclusion.

No one else needs to understand your memories for them to transport you, and you don't have to torment yourself with how ineffable your nostalgia is. If you get preoccupied with your own mythology, you flatten out your personal history, which is better remembered spontaneously and not in deliberate and protracted trips through your inner sanctum.

In fact, your memories mean nothing to anyone else unless you are willing to make them into broad metaphors. The song "Cleaning Windows," where Morrison connects his youth of listening to soul records and washing windows with his view of his current self as a yeoman musician, expresses this tension: "cleaning windows" wants to be a metaphor for his bringing some spiritual clarity to the audience through his devoted, unassuming devotion to his humble craft, but in practice Morrison doesn't care how dirty your window is, and the last thing he seems to want is for you to be peering through his. Clean your own damn window; I'm getting paid to do this.

Marcus would seemingly prefer that Morrison always sing as though he's desperately seeking transcendence, not comfortably assured of it. He wants Morrison's music to validate an endless struggle, a life that promises only fleeting rewards in ecstatic instants to the aesthetically attentive, moments in which music and art unexpectedly transport you after you've paid your dues in patient attention. Morrison is supposed to be the rootless poet—"nothing but a stranger in this world"—who makes us appreciate the valiant struggle of art vicariously while we get to take comfort in our commonplace lives. You don't want to have to live Van Morrison's creative torment, especially when you can simply consume the experience.



When Morrison was making *Beautiful Vision*, and *No Guru, No Method, No Teacher*, and *Poetic Champions Compose*, etc., he seems to have been working against this deliberately. He doesn't want to commoditize his struggle; he wants to bask in its private resolution. The lyrics are still all about spiritual quests and finding transcendence, but poetic pain no longer is the route.

Morrison was apparently determined (if you believe this Wikipedia page) to reject the heritage of American blues and soul music that he had relied on for so long in favor of something more authentically Celtic. Blues and soul music operates by and large within that idea that suffering is the only communicable form of artistic commitment, the blues the only gateway to transcendence—only pain is real. Instead, he extracts a different message from the dubious and somewhat inhospitable theosophical material he was working with—that the poetic and the powerful are impersonal, and art that can move you draws its energy not from some wellspring of personal suffering that permits an individual to express spirituality authoritatively but from nature at its most ordinary. Stop fawning over your memories by combing them for anguish. Your pain's got nothing on a rainbow. ☺

# CONSULTANCY ROCK

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The solace of sociological distance  
in the music of Rush



Rush, *Signals* (1982)

**CERTAIN ROCK GROUPS** persist as their own subgenre. The venerable Canadian band Rush is one of them, maintaining a legion of loyalists willing to stick with them as they release album after blandly titled album—*Power Windows*, *Presto*, *Test for Echo*—that defiantly sell in the millions despite little mainstream notice or media excitement. Like the devotees of other cult

bands (Phish, Dave Matthews Band, etc.), Rush fans seem to believe that ostentatious musician-ship excuses indistinguishable songs—that tracks from, say, Rush's 1993 grunge disc *Counterparts* are somehow over the heads of ordinary music fans rather than simply being inaccessibly boring.

But maybe the Rush cult is right. Though the band's music often belatedly reflects rock

A tour shirt from  
Rush's *Grace Under  
Pressure* tour, 1984



trends, Rush seems to deliberately exist outside the hype cycle and the desperation it fosters in listeners who try to keep up with it or, worse, direct it. Bands and songs can easily become phonemes in a musical-taste language meant to express cultural capital. Unreflexive music consumers—if such people can even exist in a Spotify universe—may not be invested in the status games that often enshroud pop music, but their listening habits are still shaped by the zeitgeist, which constrains what is possible and what gets circulated. The appeal of Rush, however, is that being a Rush fan seems to exempt one from such constraints and anxieties, from feeling required to validate tastes by advertising them. No matter how counter-intuitive or ironic things become, throwing on a *Grace Under Pressure* tour shirt or air-drumming to “YYZ” isn’t likely to impress anyone.

How did Rush get there, beyond irony, beyond cool and uncool?

Originally the group was a Led Zeppelin imitator—with a vocalist far shriller than Robert Plant in Geddy Lee—that seemed happy to turn out functional songs like “Working Man” and “Best I Can,” exploring the evergreen prolekt themes of hard work, horniness, boozing, and bro-ing down. But then Rush rejected their manifest destiny of becoming a barnstorming heartland rock act à la REO Speedwagon, Head East, or Kansas (or fellow Canadian anthem-mongers Triumph and April Wine) and made the genuinely brave choice to dorkify their music, serving up increasingly intricate sci-fi fantasy opuses like “The Fountain of Lamneth” and “Cygnus X-1,” and supplying socially awkward boys with that perfect fusion of King Crimson, banshee wailing, and Piers Anthony novels that they never even thought to hope for.

The decisive move for the group, however, came after it achieved its greatest fame, with the 1980 album *Moving Pictures*. Having built a hardcore prog following and cemented their virtuoso bona fides with a series of hyperambitious concept albums (1976’s *2112* featured a sidelong epic about an oppressive race of techno-priests who obliterate rock and roll), Rush smoothed the edges just enough to make their sound accessible to the unwashed rock masses, crossing over into massive AOR success with “Tom Sawyer” and “Limelight.” But rather than consolidate their popularity by reprising *Moving Pictures*, the band members suddenly became enamored of moody,



Left: Rush, from the *2112* album, 1976. Above: Rush in the 1980s.

atmospheric new wave. They jettisoned the roman-numeraled, Ayn Rand-inspired suites they were known for, cut their hair short, swapped their Chinatown junk-store kimonos and hooded robes for New Romantic-style suits, and began using more synthesizers and sequencers than Tubeway Army. On their next album, with the aptly sterile title of *Signals*, Rush offered fussy, hermetic soundscapes that seemed inspired by bands like the Police and the Fixx.

As dramatic as the change in musical direction was, the change in Rush's lyrics was more significant. Previously, the lyrics, written by drummer Neil Peart, were maladroit and generally inscrutable, and when they were comprehensible, they tended to offer the sort of libertarian life lessons you might get from an accomplished member of a high school debate team: "I will choose free will"; "Live for yourself, there is no one else more worth living for"; "The men who hold high places must be the ones who start to mold a new reality, closer to the heart."

Such ideas had an obvious appeal for those who would become the stereotypical Rush fans: the lonely gifted kids who found respite from relentless social anxiety in the belief that their irrepressible superiority was what made others reject them. Initially, Rush didn't pander to this audience so much as epitomize it: asexual nerds, always obsessively diligent about their work and ostentatious with their learning, always seeming to try too hard, and always with a tendency to invent grandiose escapist fantasies. The band embarrassed rock critics because the pretentious juvenilia its records were saturated with was precisely the sort of thing the critics were struggling to distance themselves from.

With *Signals*, though, Rush seemed finally to be attempting a similar move, putting away childish things and embracing a measured lyrical maturity. Hence "Subdivisions," the album's opening track, assumes a distant, Olympian tone toward the suburban milieu it describes, patronizing the teenagers suffering within it:

Growing up it all seems so one-sided,  
Opinions all provided,  
The future predecided,  
Detached and subdivided  
In the mass production zone.

Whereas Rush once brought solace to the outcast “dreamers” and “misfits so alone” that “Subdivisions” mentions by being manifestly one of them—looking gangly and hopelessly unfashionable, quoting J.R.R. Tolkien and perpetually practicing their instruments—the band now suddenly came across like well-intentioned guidance counselors surveying their core fan base from a sociological distance. The video adopts this perspective as well: cutting clips of the band’s passionless performance with some establishing aerial shots of freeways and tract housing and grim scenes from a teenage Rush fan’s miserable life.

The song’s chorus begins with a voice intoning “Subdivisions,” a word so uneuphonious that they didn’t bother to rhyme it or set it to melody. The word just hangs there: a clunky abstraction that establishes the analyst’s viewpoint and the homology between suburban development and high-school hierarchies. It’s followed by an inventory of the sites where conformity is constructed: high-school halls, shopping malls. Then the chorus concludes with a dismal diagnosis:

Any escape might help to smooth  
the unattractive truth,  
But the suburbs have no charms to soothe  
the restless dreams of youth.

The implication was clear. Rush had escaped this grim fate and now looked on with realist detachment at those teens who were doomed to the



A still from the “Subdivisions” video

modern order’s either/or, summed up in the song as this: “Be cool or be cast out.”

Though it seemed that Rush were abandoning the misfits it once celebrated, the band was actually offering a new mode of escape, a better solution for the brainy teen’s alienation, something that, more than role-playing games or math metal, could prove legitimate in the eyes of outsiders. The detached, transcendent point of view of “Subdivisions” points toward a technocratic future for those analytically minded teens, toward a successful place in the universe of research consultancies and policymaking think tanks. They need not become bogged down in high-school popularity traumas as long as they can take the long view, can see them clearly from the outside, and can assume the ability to comment on them neutrally, as if they didn’t affect them personally at all.

This subtle refinement catered to the nerdy teens’ sense of innate superiority in a new—and arguably dangerous—way. With “Subdivisions,” Rush taught the embryonic meritocrats among its fan base that power, coldly and clinically deployed, is the best way to redeem awkwardness. ©

# A BEIGE SUFFOCATION

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The impeccable despair of the Carpenters



*Carpenters* (1971)

**SOMEWHERE BEYOND ANGST**, beyond hopelessness and utter desolation, lies the Carpenters. Even if Karen Carpenter's anorectic decline hadn't been mythologized in song (Sonic Youth's "Tunic") and film (Todd Haynes's *Superstar*), the creepy sexless photographs of the brother-sister duo, with their strained toothpaste-white smiles and their lacquered bangs and their

polyester wardrobe, are enough to project the ineffable sadness of pretending to casualness when you are in fact suffocating. And of course the pair's music is merciless in the way it pummels you with Sunday afternoon ennui and dentist-office despair. Nothing else in the history of pop music sounds quite like their otherworldly blend of sunny harmonies and glimpses into the



The original cover of the Carpenters first album, *Offering*

abyss; in retrospect it seems amazing that they ever could have been on the charts anywhere on planet Earth, let alone field a half dozen or so Top 10 hits.

Initially marketed as flower children (have a look at the original cover of their first album, *Offering*, above), the Carpenters began their career covering Buffalo Springfield and hippie anthems like “Get Together”. But they didn’t catch on commercially until they released their version of Burt Bacharach’s “Close to You,” which takes the somewhat corny song’s implicit wistfulness and makes it a steamroller of melancholy. Paced like a death march and embalmed with a fastidious, airless arrangement, it’s like the musical equivalent of the most luxurious casket in the funeral director’s showroom: One could lay oneself to rest forever in its easeful, languid groove.

*Carpenters*, their third album, was released in 1971, with a novelty faux-envelope that concealed the mawkish photograph of the duo sitting together in a meadow. This was the first record to feature their distinctive logo, lettered in the customary brown and featuring the sort of typography that you see in Christian bookstores. It evokes a hymnal, with Richard and Karen as the priest and priestess of some strange neutered religion. Just as this record comes sealed in its dainty flesh-colored envelope, the Carpenters themselves are hermetically sealed off from the world we know, inhabiting instead a muffled inner sanctum where every dream

inexorably goes awry and there is every opportunity to lament and ruminate over what you are powerless to affect. Listening to this record is like slow-motion drowning in a bathtub full of tears.

Side one opens with a musical suicide note called “Rainy Days and Mondays,” on which Karen sings cheerless lines like “Walking around, some kind of lonely clown” and “talking to myself and feeling old” with a remorseless, pitch-perfect clarity, accompanied by mournful notes on the harmonica and a lachrymose string arrangement calibrated for maximum pathos. The lyrics gesture toward a supposed consolation in love and friendship, but the overwhelming feeling evoked is that depression is impossible to eradicate and there is indeed “nothing to do but frown.”





Karen and Richard  
Carpenter

After the brief one-minute interlude of “Saturday,” a bouncy music-hall tune sung by Richard that is pickled in nostalgia, a show tune lurched out of context that may have been intended to introduce levity but instead demonstrates how far away such lightheartedness can seem, how much effort it can require, how false and accelerated it can feel, it’s a relief to return to lugubrious desperation on “Let Me Be the One,” an economical song with a verse that lasts only one line before it hits the pleading chorus. The bridge, which has four lines, seems to last a relative eternity. This subtle reversal of what you’d expect from the verse-chorus structure keeps listeners off balance for the entire duration, mirroring the uncertainty that the lyric evokes and conveying an ultimate sense that the singer is not going to “be the one to turn to” for the “silent understanding” she promises, that nothing but anxiety lay on that path. “(A Place to) Hide Away” returns us fully to the darkness. The lyrics verge on psychedelic—“Bright colored pinwheels go round in my head / I run

through the mist of the wine”—and dwell on the usual themes of sorrow and self-recrimination. Richard’s arrangement, framing Karen’s unearthly voice with tasteful woodwinds and swelling strings, is as soft and gentle as always, a downy, fluffy pillow slipped comfortably over your face.

The side closes with readymade wedding song “For All We Know,” an apparent attempt to repeat the duo’s earlier success with “We’ve Only Just Begun.” Ostensibly a joyful song celebrating the possibilities of love’s growing, it nevertheless conjures a stubborn moroseness; it seems to mock the very thing it tries to describe. Again the music is warm and coddling, but it nurtures unsettling contradictions. When Karen sings that the couple remain “Strangers in many ways” and fatalistically concludes that “love may grow for all we know,” the outcome of the relationship seems very much in doubt. This is what the Carpenters excel at: creating exactly this kind of self-consuming artifact, producing songs that efface themselves as they play, leaving a chilly feeling of

pristine emptiness where you'd expect the heart-warming treacle to be.

The first side forms a perfect suite of purgatorial misery, capturing the way depression can pass itself off as a grim kind of perfection. Hope shimmers only to evaporate before our eyes. But that all pales in comparison to the album's centerpiece, "Superstar." On the surface the song is a maudlin account of a groupie hopelessly in love with a musician—the man with the "sad guitar"—who's used her; but in the Carpenters' hands the scenario takes on almost existential significance. What's being described through the song's unbearably dramatic *mise en scene* is the way that pop culture in general invariably lets us down and the irremediable despair that's bred into us when we are taught to respond so thoroughly to the disposable chintz that's sold to us for entertainment.

Despite being made for the masses, pop songs can seem to speak to us personally and se-

duce us. They can seem to have been designed to specifically illuminate our lives, but ultimately they have nothing to reveal; at some point we discover that everything we thought we saw in them came from inside us and that they have duped us into engaging merely in an ersatz emotional dialogue with ourselves. The pathetic groupie in the lyrics is just us, scoring our deepest feelings to songs that were written only to distract us. "Loneliness is such a sad affair," indeed, and our only recourse is to lose ourselves again in another song.

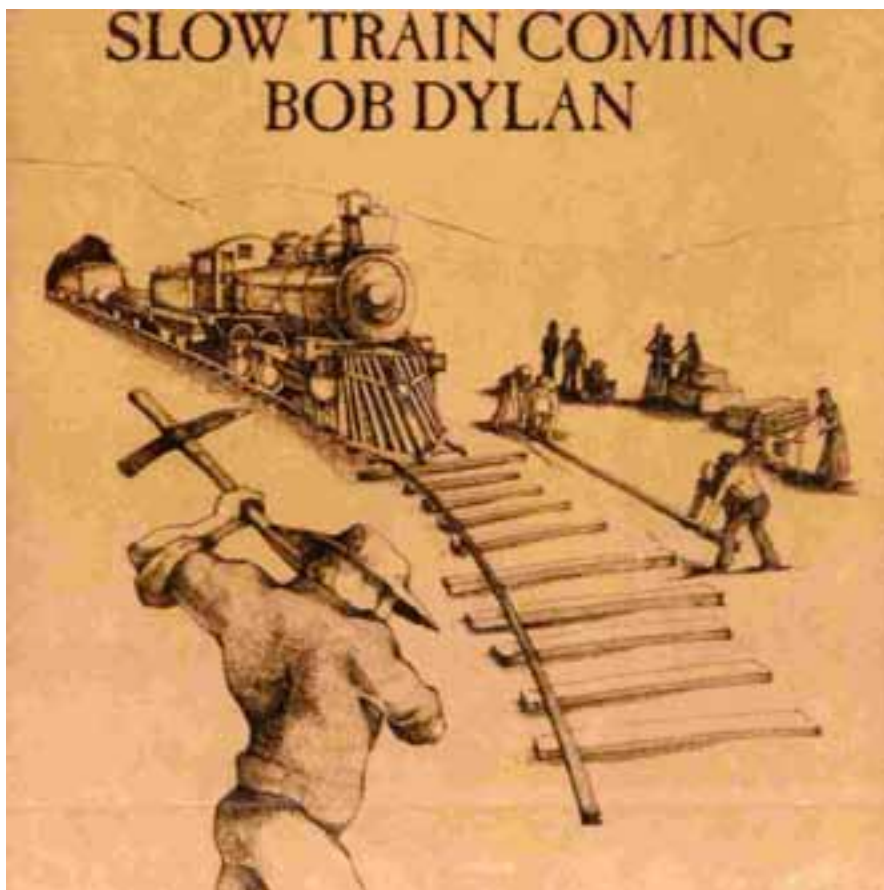
It's the most devastating portrait of futility on an album replete with them, and its effortless effectiveness, its irresistible pathos, lures us in to listen to it again and again, condemning us further each time to the peculiar hell it so adroitly describes. It makes misery indistinguishable from bliss. *Carpenters* leave us with confirmation of just how good it can feel when our culture betrays us. ©



# NO MAN RIGHTEOUS

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The pseudo-conservatism of Bob Dylan's born-again period



Bob Dylan, *Slow Train Coming* (1979)

**TROUBLED BY THE** sectarian, paranoid place America has become—and probably always has been—I occasionally yearn for a moment of negative capability that would allow me to understand where birthers, Tea Partyers, evangelical Christians, and all those who smell apocalypse in every current event could possibly be coming from. At such times I take solace in the

album that inaugurated Bob Dylan's notoriously baffling born-again-Christian phase, *Slow Train Coming*, which offers as complete a picture of the mind of a newly minted reactionary as one could hope for.

*Slow Train Coming* is a gospel album, but it isn't the sort of gospel album that consists mainly of praising the Lord and giving thanks for find-

ing Jesus. Instead, it draws inspiration from the promise of God's wrath rather than his mercy, showcasing scornful, brimstone-tinged songs about the folly of our sinful times and the threat of impending damnation. When it was released, in 1979, unrest in the Middle East dominated the news, an ongoing energy crisis threatened the "American way of life," and a recent nuclear accident had prompted fears of invisible radioactive clouds rendering vast suburban swathes uninhabitable. The economy was dogged by stagflation, and unemployment had remained stubbornly high for years. In other words, it was an anxious time quite similar to our own, in which a disgruntled middle class was able to see itself as persecuted and scorned, and more than just the usual suspects on the political fringes seemed to feel the world had gone irretrievably wrong.

Into such times Dylan issued an album that presented itself explicitly as a conversion story, only the conversion was twofold. *Slow Train Coming* unambiguously conflates Dylan's conversion to fundamentalist Christianity with a conversion to a histrionic form of right-wing thinking that Theodor Adorno branded "pseudoconservatism." Historian Richard Hofstadter, who adopted and popularized the term, characterizes it in "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt—1954" as a "profound if largely unconscious hatred of our society and its ways." The pseudoconservative, Hofstadter notes, "believes himself to be living in a world where he is spied upon, plotted against, betrayed, and very likely destined for total ruin." In "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" Hofstadter argues that for such people, "history is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of

political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade."

With that in mind, consider this verse from the song "Slow Train":

All that foreign oil controlling American  
soil,  
Look around you, it's just bound to make  
you embarrassed.  
Sheiks walkin' around like kings,  
Wearing fancy jewels and nose rings,  
Deciding America's future from  
Amsterdam and to Paris.

Or a verse from "When You Gonna Wake Up," a song which plays like Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" crossed with a Rush Limbaugh radio-show transcript:

Adulterers in churches and pornography  
in the schools,  
You got gangsters in power and  
lawbreakers making rules.  
When you gonna wake up and  
strengthen the things that remain?

Both of these passages convey the hallmarks of the pseudoconservative's paranoid style, which, as Hofstadter pointed out, could be difficult to distinguish from religious millenarianism. For the pseudoconservative, "time is forever just running out ... The apocalypticism of the paranoid style runs dangerously near to hopeless pessimism, but usually stops short of it." Hofstadter continues, "Apocalyptic warnings arouse passion and militancy, and strike at susceptibility to similar themes in Christianity." That is, they play to the religious sensibility, draw strength from it, fusing spiritual and secular goals with the binding agent of rage.

*Slow Train Coming* captures that process in action: how newfound piety can spill into



Dylan onstage in Toronto during the 1980 Gospel Tour

nativism and aggrandizing intolerance, glorifying blind obedience and demonizing nuance; how a fear of the end-times quickly becomes indistinguishable from a yearning for them. That appetite for destruction animates the entire album, from the title track, “Slow Train,” on which Dylan sings, “Sometimes I just feel so low-down and disgusted,” to its closing track, “When He Returns,” on which Dylan has deceptively tempered the vehemence in his voice.

“When He Returns” seems to be self-questioning, expressing the sort of searching sentiments his left-leaning listeners appreciated him for: “How long can I listen to the lies of prejudice? / How long can I stay drunk on fear

out in the wilderness? / Can I cast it aside, all this loyalty and this pride?” These lines can almost be understood as a willingness to lay aside fundamentalism’s moral certainties and threats for a more tolerant kind of spirituality, but the following lines clarify that Dylan in fact means to suggest the opposite. “Will I ever learn that there’ll be no peace, / that the war won’t cease until He returns?” The problem is precisely that he was asking such questions; won’t he ever learn that nothing but the Last Judgment can lay such questions to rest, and that human inquiry along those lines is essentially useless?

By assuming the attitude of a zealot and claiming liberation from prejudice, self-

righteousness, and undue fearfulness, Dylan efficiently delineates the moves typical of and integral to pseudoconservative thinking. First, the responsibility for war and other evils is displaced onto God. Second, intolerance is actually an expression of humility in the face of what the Lord demands, and it is the equivocators and negotiators who are too full of pride, too comfortable in outmoded loyalties. Lastly, from the radical right's point of view, it's not Christians who are prejudiced, despite their adamant certainty about the spiritual errors of others, but secular humanists, who routinely scorn the deeply held and cherished beliefs of the American Christian majority.

These lines, from "Precious Angel," reiterate that last point, suggesting that secularists are tolerant and sympathetic toward all religions except Christianity: "You were telling him about Buddha, you were telling him about Mohammed in the same breath. / You never mentioned one time the Man who came and died a criminal's death." Here, Dylan concocts the same potent blend of persecution paranoia and contempt for cultural relativism that has long served to fire up the G.O.P.'s religious base, presenting the supposed persecution of evangelicals not as a logical conclusion but a given certainty, a familiar leap of common sense. *Slow Train Coming* doesn't ask you to agree or disagree; it exists in some cultural space beyond dialogue. In polarized political times, it promises a debate-proof realm of moral certainty where what is beyond reason can seem eminently, comfortably, inevitably reasonable.

Understandably, Dylan's resentment confused many listeners. It's easy to summarily dismiss this kind of rhetoric when it comes from

the religious right but harder when it spews from a onetime countercultural icon whose words have long been cherished and carefully parsed for their transcendent truths about freedom and social justice. Yet on *Slow Train Coming*, song after song depicts the experience of suddenly realizing that the secular, liberal perspective is hopelessly naive and if not altogether decadent, utterly unaware of the threat of evil. This is most pointed in "Precious Angel," in which he declares that "you either got faith or you got unbelief, and there ain't no neutral ground," before offering this chilling verse:

My so-called friends have fallen under a  
spell,  
They look me squarely in the eye and they  
say, "All is well"  
Can they imagine the darkness that will  
fall from on high  
When men will beg God to kill them and  
they won't be able to die?

On *Slow Train Coming*, Dylan paints a picture of an America in which every civic action must be understood as part of the war against evil, in which neutrality is not an option. You "Gotta Serve Somebody," whether "it may be the Devil or it may be the Lord." Taken as a whole, the album offers a political outlook that resembles that of Carl Schmitt. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt claimed that the inescapable distinction of "friends" and "enemies" is the essence of politics and went on to argue that "all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil." Schmitt insisted that "the high points of politics are simultaneously the moments in which the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy." Dylan's determination to delineate the enemy on *Slow Train Coming*—the various songs

yield an exhaustive, Whitmanesque catalog of villains—comes to seem like a prerequisite for his accepting the reality of his conversion. The omnipotence of the Christian God has created for Dylan a peculiar kind of spiritual certainty that relies on the proliferation of enemies, at once implacable and clueless, to define the deity's strength. This contradictory pursuit of powerful enemies is arguably the quintessence of a reactionary, who wants to be righteous more than he wants to be right.

The inherent confusion in the pseudo-conservative position—its unstable blend of faith, persecution and antiliberal realpolitik—is enough to make one suspect that Dylan was staging some sort of elaborate critique of the ideas he professed to espouse. In other words, by espousing an absolutist rhetoric that admits of no possible nuance in one's worldview, Dylan seems only to enhance the mystery of his “real” thoughts. Some wrote off Dylan's turn to fundamentalism as willful idiosyncrasy, despite his carrying on with two more proselytizing, Bible-saturated records, *Saved* and *Shot of Love*. In retrospect it seems even harder to believe he was ever entirely in earnest about his conversion. Was he actually trying to make an oblique and far-reaching comment on America's growing intolerance and frustration with vicissitudes of pluralism and liberal tolerance? Was he documenting how far an artist must now go to convey any sort of conviction, or was he making a mockery of the very notion of conviction?

There may be an answer in a line from “Gonna Change My Way of Thinking” that seems to jump out and stand apart from Dylan's myriad other complaints on the album: “Don't know which one is worse, doing your own thing

or just being cool.” Here he touches on the underlying existential problems that fuel reactionary politics, the sense of ontological insecurity and inner emptiness that derives from a culture that sends perennial mixed messages about “doing your own thing” and “being cool.” These slangy phrases vulgarize the ideal of self-realization, which consumerism reduces to a series of postures vis-à-vis conformity, but they also capture the way our own identity has come to constitute an inescapable problem for us under capitalism, presenting us with two bad options. Is it worse to try to prove one's individuality or neglect it?

Dylan's attempts to escape from himself and his legend are legion, and it's easy to see his Born-again conversion as merely another attempt to shake off that burden for a rebirth as a nobody in Christ. But even in this, arguably among the most forgettable phase of his career, Dylan proved to be a prophet. The rise of social media means that we all increasingly face Dylan's dilemma, in which our identity loses meaning for ourselves as it gains economic value generally, becoming an asset to be carefully tended and invested. Reactionary thinking in its fundamentalist guise promises to halt the vertiginous self-consciousness that stems from that by letting us think of ourselves not as a personal brand but as a persecuted soul. It tempts us with an apparent liberation from endless self-fashioning, endless risk-taking and deliberation over how best to “do your own thing” or “be cool.” Instead, we are the victims of those cool people, who undeservingly harvest the fruits of this world. As Eric Hoffer noted in *The True Believer*, “Faith in a holy cause is to a considerable extent a substitute for the lost faith in ourselves.” ©

# FUTURE'S COMING MUCH TOO SLOW

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Post-punk is unthinkable without the trailblazing work of 1976 proto-punk band Boston



The cover of the seminal *Boston* (1976)

**THE 1976 ALBUM** *Boston*, conceived by reclusive and uncompromising musical mastermind Tom Scholz, who wrote nearly all the songs, played most of the instruments, and recorded most of the tracks in the studio he built in his basement, is perhaps the ultimate post-punk statement. That may strike some readers as a paradoxical claim, given that the birth of punk

itself is customarily dated to 1977, a year after *Boston* was released. But from its futuristic, post-apocalyptic cover art to its giddy sense of sonic exploration and outré effects to its combative, conflicted stance toward the rockist tradition it warred with (“You’ve got nothing to lose, just rhythm and blues,” the band declared in their manifesto “Smokin’”) to its ardent advocacy for





A 1976 photo of the band assembled by Tom Scholz (center, back row) to promote the *Boston* album

the power of pleasure in a turbulent and cynical political era, Scholz's DIY masterpiece anticipated so many of the hallmarks of the postpunk era that it must be understood as the linchpin of the entire movement, the album without which bands like Killing Joke, Sex Gang Children, Spandau Ballet, and *Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark* would be unthinkable.

Of course it would be easy to argue that Boston created postpunk merely by spawning punk. The tough, confrontational street-rock attitude of the incendiary "Rock and Roll Band" and the thick guitar sound and three-chord anthemic song structures favored by Scholz in songs like "More Than a Feeling" and "Long Time" are all over the so-called seminal 1977 punk records by the Sex Pistols and the Clash. And certainly "Rock and Roll Band" is as scabrous and uproarious a takedown of the generic state of rock in the mid-1970s as anything punk bands would release, though with an irony that only the later post-punk acts would prove capable of assimilating.

Though the punk bands would in many ways co-opt the apparent rejectionist ethos of

"Peace of Mind" and the clever prog-parodizing of "Foreplay" (intensifying the satire by pairing it with a feigned musical incompetence), it was post-punk that really grasped the angular core of Boston and explored the rich tapestry of possibilities that Scholz wove within the album's intricate and sumptuous textures—the overdriven minimalist noise soloing of "Long Time"; the proto-Goth keyboards

in "Smokin'" the arch, highly stylized yawp of vocalist Brad Delp; the sardonic appropriations of rawk-and-roll clichés; but most of all, the go-for-broke willingness to experiment and extend the standard palette of pop. No other band balanced the sense of the studio itself as instrument with the spirit of spontaneity and openness and celebratory joy like Boston did (with the possible exception of that other great post-punk progenitor, Steely Dan).

It's easy to see that the spirit of endless inventiveness that marks Boston came from an intense sense of isolation. As Scholz noted in a 2007 interview, he and Delp spent five years doing "a lot of basement recording," getting "absolutely zero recognition locally and complete rejection submitting our demos to national record labels." Such indifference not only led to Boston's developing a fierce anti-image, a rejection of the cult of personality that would have echoes throughout the flowering of post punk. Indeed Boston is sometimes seen as the first faceless "corporate" band, presaging the satiric stance of

such acts as PiL and the British Electric Foundation. The isolation also was the mother of a rich and challenging anti-rock species of rock, as neglect warped their nostalgic wonderment into something at once wry and plaintive, evocative and shimmering but with an undergirding rib cage of iron.

Consider the band's breakthrough, both in terms of mainstream popularity and Scholz's musical vision quest: "More Than a Feeling." The lasting influence of its innovative, near oracular soft-loud dynamics is uncontested. The careful layering of guitar noise, the precise use of silence within space, and the sonic separation of the instruments into impossible "rooms" constructed with reverberation effects all work to create a kind of Rubik's Cube of interlocking sound shards that would not be lost on the post-punkers of the ensuing years.

The lyrics of "More Than a Feeling" also speak to the power of stale music (represented by radio songs and the lost love "Marianne") to drive the dream of something new and better, something reconfigured to make "my Marianne walk away." The sensuousness of music is an incomplete experience, the song insists. What is needed is something "more than a feeling," something cerebral that can defrost a listener when they're "tired and thinking cold." The muscularly intelligent bands of late 1970s, groups brimming with musical and political ideas, like Mission of Burma, Au Pairs, Gang of Four, Bush Tetras, Bow Wow Wow, would all attempt to rise in their own various ways to the challenge Boston set out.

"More Than a Feeling" shows us that the past can be a seductive trap, a theme developed further on the song that follows it on the album, the restless, searching "Peace of Mind."

"Future's coming much too slow," Delp sings, setting the tone for the song's antsy impatience and discontentment, all "indecision" and "people living in competition." Instead of getting caught up in ambition that has been conditioned by institutionalized culture, be it corporate bureaucracy or record-company conventionalism or the tired poses of "free expression" and individualism, we should, the song insists in its urgent break, "Take a look ahead! Take a look ahead!" A more suitable motto for post-punk could hardly be declaimed.

The impatience continues into "Long Time" (reinforced at the level of form by the interminable "Foreplay," a pun that works on multiple levels). Positively obsessed with the relentless passing of time, the song declares the singer's intention to "keep on chasing a dream, though I may never find it." He laments that "you'll forget about me after I've been gone," admitting the unshakable truth of the cyclical nature of time, and how the myth of progress, personal or cultural, can devolve into a snake consuming its tail. It seems an eerie and prescient warning, given the eventual fate of one of the few vocalists to match Delp in supple vocal intensity, Joy Division's Ian Curtis, who tragically took his life on the precipice of achieving an oppressive level of fame.

Nonetheless, the song espouses a certainty that what we all want from music, and from life, need not be painfully mysterious and obscure, but is instead "just outside your front door." What's wanted is merely the courage to walk through that door, rather than to procrastinate or to try to sneak out the back way. The turbulent history of postpunk would show how deeply that message was taken to heart by the bands that spawned in Boston's wake. ☺

# SWEET AND INNOCENT

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The more we laugh at the idea of the world remade in the Osmond image, the more its underlying commercial vision comes true



“I could record a Prince song, people wouldn’t probably misconstrue what I’m saying as something dirty because it’s Donny Osmond, right? But if Prince recorded it, then it’s dirty. That’s not fair.”

—Donny Osmond, quoted in Barry Scott’s *We Had Joy, We Had Fun: The Lost Recording Artists of the '70s*.

**AS AN ADULT**, Donny Osmond clearly regretted his having been used as a squeaky-clean weapon in the war MGM boss and one-time California gubernatorial hopeful Mike Curb waged on popular culture in the early 1970s. Curb, even in his twenties a conservative right-wing ideologue, despised the hedonistic individualism that crossed into the mainstream from the '60s counterculture

thanks in part to the pop music that celebrated and advertised such a lifestyle. The Osmonds (who were discovered at Disneyland and honed their chops on the *Andy Williams Show*), perhaps MGM's most successful act during Curb's tenure there, represented his ideal cultural product: a vaguely religious, ultra-white group of boys who were malleable enough to be used to co-opt any other vital form of pop music and neutralize it, draining it of any of the progressive possibilities implicit in its popularity.

Thus, when the Jackson 5 suggested America could accept a black family into its pantheon of stars, Curb was ready with the Osmonds, and their Jackson 5 rip-off hits "One Bad Apple" and "Yo-Yo," to offer Americans an opportunity to keep their radios white. When hard rock began to become a way for teenagers to express rebellion, the Osmonds were there with their guitar-heavy albums *Crazy Horses* and *The Plan*, to remind kids that the establishment was one step ahead of them. Whenever a teen idol threatened to inject some sexuality into the lives of young fans, Donny Osmond's hits were there to make the whole notion of love and sex being connected seem ludicrous: A pre-pubescent boy with the voice of teenaged girl singing wistful, self-sacrificing love songs addressed to other teenaged girls effectively drains all carnality out of the situation.

For Donny to claim that there was something subversive in their '70s hits seems rather far-fetched at first, particularly when the liner notes to their hits collection *Osmondmania!* is at great pains to reassure us of how concerned they were with protecting the delicate minds of America's children, explaining how they edited suggestive lyrics out of their 1974 hit "Love Me for a Reason," and reminding us that despite being banned

in parts of Africa, the Osmonds' heavy-metal anthem "Crazy Horses" is not really about the alluring power of heroin but rather the air pollution emitted by California power plants.

That anyone could have thought the Osmonds were cooking up drug hymns suggests that perhaps Donny is wrong, and that in fact, their aggressive wholesomeness almost demands that we start looking for double entendres in the Osmond oeuvre. It's not hard to discover a plethora of salacious possibilities: what exactly do they mean when they claim that they're going to give a woman "double lovin'," claiming that she'll "get a double pleasure every time"? What exactly is it that "they" call "puppy love"? And in the song "Sweet and Innocent," who in the world could be too young for the 12-year-old Donny, who nevertheless spies "a little wiggle in her walk" that he "loves"?

Because the Osmonds took their role as family entertainers so seriously, because they seem so utterly trapped in a *Reader's Digest* version of the American heartland so extravagantly out of touch with both the world in which it was made and the world in which we now hear it, because they are entirely without pretensions of their own, they are perfectly suited for us to enjoy them as camp.

The packaging of their hit collection is designed with this in mind, emphasizing their ridiculous uniforms and their congenial lack of self-awareness, with photos of them performing karate kicks and wearing mock Native American costumes. The relentless schmaltziness of their sound (what another reviewer has called their "variety show arrangements") manages to be wonderfully silly without ever seeming like the band's fault. Their obvious desperation to please appears guileless, completely unsophisticated, hewing to some

anaesthetic bottom line that rejects all subtlety, complexity and mystery. Musical lobotomies like “Down by the Lazy River” are irresistibly infectious, still resonating with the same hollow feel-good vibe that originally made them hits. Overall, we can enjoy the absurd, surreal fantasy of a world where all youth is remade in the image of the Osmonds without ever fearing it could come to pass.

Countercultural groups at the time, however, must not have felt the luxury of such detachment; judging by the irrational ferocity of their responses to the Osmonds, they must have felt very threatened indeed—the liner notes of *Osmondmania* reveal that the SLA, the anticapitalist radicals who abducted Patty Hearst, announced they would “annihilate” the Osmonds if they performed, and that the Hell’s Angels once invaded an Osmonds concert in Germany and threw “anything they could get their hands on” at the Osmonds on stage.

(Written by Alan, the eldest Osmond brother, the liner notes are, incidentally, fascinating in their peculiar lack of perspective: in explaining how “Osmondmania” was “overwhelming” in “Malaysia, Europe, the Far East and in Norwegian countries,” he depicts without regret how their limo ran over two girls and how their tour bus rolled over someone’s legs, and he cites *Sgt. Pepper* and Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* as inspiration for their 1973 concept album about Mormon theology, *The Plan*, even though *The Wall* wasn’t released until 1979. Alan proudly boasts the Osmonds “were once known as one of the loudest musical acts in the business,” as though their sheer volume would prove to skeptics how with it they were.)

The Osmonds didn’t enact a new era of morally pure entertainment: The whitewash has proved counterproductive. The record industry

now universally accepts that it can maximize the profit it extorts from the youth market by selling circumscribed pseudo-rebellion and a castrated form of übersexuality both hyper-present and completely unattainable.

We are in no danger of having our culture sanitized by the like of the Osmonds. If anything, the Osmonds, with their fluorescent smiles, their robotic identicalness, and their complete surrendering of any will to individual expression, come across like proselytizing members of some creepy cult. Their cheerful cooperation with whatever exploitative measure was commercially necessary, be it performing many of their shows on ice skates, singing incestuous romantic duets with a sibling, or wearing outrageous jumpsuits that reportedly made Elvis jealous, makes them seem even more innocent and harmless now. The marketing maneuvers that shaped them are so transparent to us that they seem laughable rather than repugnant and reprehensible, as they must have seemed to observers at the time when such tactics earned the Osmonds mainstream acceptance.

Outdated hype sometimes seems like failed hype, which tempts us to appreciate the Osmonds, whose marketing strategies now seem so misguided, as a demonstration of how silly and stupid hype really is. But because audiences embraced the Osmonds despite their being overtly synthetic, their success helped usher in an era of popular entertainment where more and more variables are controlled from the top. Audiences made it plain that they didn’t care how much pressure was put on a band to conform. If the record industry was afraid that developments in the late ’60s made the quirks and idiosyncratic concerns of individual artists important to audiences, the success of the Osmonds laid such fears to rest. ©