

Introduction

I insist . . . on being interested only in books left ajar, like doors.

—André Breton, *Nadja*

Casually thumb through these pages and you'll figure out that, as Nieusche said of *The Dawn*, "A book such as this is not for reading straight through or reading aloud but for dipping into" (sec. 454). Less obvious, perhaps, are my reasons for embracing a form that encourages reading this way. Why forsake the sustained argument of traditional scholarship for the fragmentation associated with MTV and kids with attention deficits? Why three ABCs of short essays, filled out with supplements? Certainly, I ought to justify the form of this book. Before doing that, though, I want to account for its existence and explain why I wrote it.

This book greatly expands an assignment given by Marc Weidenbaum, one of two senior editors at Tower Records' *Pulse!* Marc asked me in 1993 to take over a newly established column called "Definition of Sound." I had been writing for the magazine for just over five years, mostly about jazz and gospel music, and I suspect Marc saw no future in locating a different amateur lexicographer every month. I quickly committed to the column as a regular gig. After all, its requirements were pretty straightforward. Excepting the occasional editorial nudge—from Marc, Ned Hammad, or Jackson Griffith—I was to write 140-word, extended definitions on any musical topics that struck my fancy. My goal was Brechtian (a term Marc might very well have used when he first described the column): Under the guise of entertainment, I was to aid readers in understanding some of the terms regularly tossed around by the magazine's writers. Every once in a while, I could experiment a bit and let whimsy guide my efforts. Here was a project tailored to my temperament! That temperament—indisputably postmodern—is best illustrated by an anecdote from my childhood. Just about all my friends have heard it. The story evokes a decisive, formative moment; it describes an experience that fixed in me an already developing love of popular and, specifi-

cally, African-American music. I'm telling it here because it turns out to be a myth, a tale useful for explaining the origins, aims, and functions of this book.



My car radio taught me just about everything I needed to know about the Motown Sound, but my first encounter with what I would later regard as real soul music occurred in a physical-education class in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I was a junior at Brainerd High, a school that, while racially integrated, was still known as the Home of the Fighting Rebels. "Dixie" was our theme song. Our symbol was the Confederate flag—the Stars and Bars. We waved it at football games; it was stamped on class rings. The year was late 1969.

My phys-ed class—forty or so boys—had just finished playing several rounds of everybody's favorite game, battle-hall, a particularly rough variant of dodge-hall. We had returned to the locker room and were changing out of our blue-and-white gym suits, back into school clothes. The room buzzed with conversation.

Then, all of a sudden, a black guy in white cotton briefs—his name was James Sears—squealed "Yeeeeeah, Yeah-Yeah!" James leaped onto one of the room's narrow wooden benches and started dancing, gyrating his hips like he was swinging a hula hoop while his feet did a double-time shuffle. He kept grunting and screaming "Popcorn." A few times he shouted "Looka here!" and "Gotta-hava-mutha-for-me!" When he finished this impromptu performance, everybody laughed and shook their heads. A few guys might have clapped.

Now here was a story my parents would enjoy. "Daddy," I'd say at the supper table, "you shoulda seen that black guy! He was wild—totally out of control!" Then, in mock-serious tones, I'd ask, "Mother, do you think he's demon possessed?"

"Michael, don't make fun of the things of the Lord," my Dad would say. To which I'd reply, "Come on, Daddy! You know I'm just kidding."

Mom and Dad were never glib about spiritual matters, and while they undoubtedly spent no time pondering or trying to name the species of bug that had bitten James Sears, they never once doubted where he had contracted that hug. That, after all, was partly why our

independent Baptist church sent missionaries to Africa, and it was precisely why my parents prohibited their children from attending dances. “Be not drunk with wine,” Mother would say, quoting the Apostle Paul, “but be filled with the Spirit.” Then she would amplify, unconsciously repeating Augustine and consciously citing John’s first epistle: “Satan wants us to lose control; God wants to control us. ‘Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.’”

I was not a rebellious child. I kept my parents’ rules. I never fornicated, drank alcohol, smoked tobacco (or any other substance), took God’s name in vain, went to the movies, or attended a high-school dance. I knew lots about being marginalized. And I also knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, who had possessed James Sears. It wasn’t Satan. It was James Brown, Soul Brother No. 1

Eighteen months before the locker-room experience, my ninth-grade class had taken a trip to Washington, D.C., where we toured all the predictable sites of civic interest: the White House, the Capitol, the Smithsonian Institution, Arlington Cemetery memorials to Lincoln, Jefferson, and Washington. We also saw buildings burned to the ground they were still smoldering from the violent wake that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. And I was moved—troubled in the most conventional sort of way James Sears was there, too, but I never asked him how he felt about what we’d seen. Maybe he felt black. I say that because, later, when James did the Popcorn, I felt white: bleached out and trembly pale.

Did James Sears—a boyish reflection of a pop star I hadn’t yet seen or heard—make me want to be black? Possibly. I do not doubt that he prompted racial envy. Still, such an assessment diminishes the profound effect James had on me. He became an icon, inseparable in my mind from James Brown. Flannery O’Connor would call him a “means of grace,” so thoroughly did he alter my conception of the world and my place in it. Certainly, he spoke of much more than race. The epiphany he brought me cut deeper than skin color. It said The world is worth knowing; it is worth loving.

Postscript: One night, shortly after Bill Clinton was first elected president, I dreamed my way back to Washington. I was standing beside a stairway in the White House. I looked up and saw the President. “Mr. Clinton,” I asked, “do you like James Brown?”

“Mike,” said the President, “I have an almost religious affection for James Brown.”



Even though self-revelation has become de rigueur in cultural studies and critical theory, I’m still convinced that it’s generally a good thing. It doesn’t hurt readers to picture—and, yes, to hear—the author of the text they’re reading. My anecdote, I’m confident, allows that. In a highly compressed form, it pictures a kind of primal scene that tells how I was, in effect, conceived as theorist and journalist. But it is a story. Its information is encoded as narrative. And that means it’s woefully inadequate as exposition or analysis. I could, however, retell it—transpose the story into another register that would make manifest its political and psychological dimension. It might sound like this:

At its most elemental, my story is a Myth of Othering: Confronted by his cultural illiteracy—his exclusion from and inability to read, not just black culture, but electronic culture—a white boy compensates. Projecting his own feelings of exclusion onto a black classmate—who *appears* to be a model of ecstasy under control (an icon of grace, marking an entrance to another world)—the white boy idealizes blackness as a solution to being marginalized, cut off from the world. He falls in love with soul music, specifically and with popular culture, generally

Or, if motivated, I could once again rewrite. But let’s say *this* time I didn’t scrutinize the ideology that informs and enables my writing. Instead, I just accepted as a given the social and psychological forces that shape me and abandoned the “plain” or “invisible” style of writing employed in my anecdote (and typical of realist narratives). Then, the production of “poetic” or artistic effects might become my primary goal. For example, I could write a “talk poem”—modeled after David Antin’s work—that relies on the cadences of my Southern drawl something like, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a White Boy Looking at a Black Boy Who Knows Damn Well That He’s Being Looked At.”

Here’s my point. Robert Ray expresses it perfectly in *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy*: “An author producing a text always finds himself, like someone playing a video game, provided with three knobs, labeled narrative, expository, *poetic*. At any point during the text’s creation, he can adjust the balance (as one would adjust a

television's colors), thereby increasing (or reducing) the level of any of the three" (200). And that's why I'm attracted to the ABC form. It allows knob twiddling. As Roland Barthes put it, in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, this method of organizing information frees "horizontal discourse" (7). The themes and motifs sounded in an ABC might resonate, generating the equivalent of overtones, but they are not integrated on a higher level (vertically, as a unified work). Instead, they are distributed by means of an unmotivated series—the alphabet. Which is to say that ABCs lend themselves to a variety of approaches; they lend themselves to fancy. And while they imply copiousness—what can't find its way into this form?—they aren't encyclopedias. Rather, we might regard them as potential encyclopedias. Topics in ABCs suggest a reservoir of cultural history. They skim surfaces, suggesting unplumbed depths.

Perhaps because they're more evocative than fully descriptive, ABCs have historically been associated with children's literature. The avant-garde has favored them, too. But the popular music press—with its penchant for annotated lists and catalogs of reviews—has been especially adept at exploiting the fast shuttle between anecdotal, analytical, and metaphorical discourses enabled by alphabetical organization. In fact, books and columns written by Robert Christgau, Lester Bangs, Greil Marcus, Ellen Willis, Simon Frith, Anthony De Curtis, Greg Tate, Ira Robbins, Ann Powers, and Simon Reynolds have wrapped cultural insight in formal daring more tightly than any number of treatises published by academics. They've alerted me to new sounds, told me about new worlds. They've served a function similar to the one James Sears once played in my life. They're paradigms of invention.

Over and over, the vanguard of music writers has suggested new modes of writing for an electronic age. Not only has it shown that contemporary sounds—of whatever stripe—are worth thinking about, it has also repeatedly demonstrated that sounds form a vehicle suitable for thinking. Many of us think **with** music. Music doesn't reflect our individual lives or the greater culture, because it isn't outside our lives or our culture. Music isn't a way to get at the weightier topics of cultural studies, though that's how it's often used. Rather, it's an apparatus; it's an important part of our culture. Writing about music is a

way to do cultural studies, and the critics I've mentioned understand this. Their importance, however, does not derive from their orientation to music, the object of study. Rather, it derives from their orientation to readers, the so-called mass audience. Like the music and musicians they describe, these writers have turned "popularity" into a research problem. They've benefited from precisely the same tensions that drive popular music: How can I say something meaningful—perhaps unique—and **still** get lots of people to listen?

It's time for cultural studies *to* ask the same question. First, it's the socially responsible thing to do. Academics need to communicate more effectively with students and an interested public. Second, and more **selfishly**, such communication could transform scholarship in unpredictable ways. Granted, that's a bit melodramatic. Better to say that academics need to take up the problem of popularity more **rou-**tinely, and hasten to add that plenty of academics are already doing this. Witness recent books by Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, John Corbett, Robert Ray, Krin Gabbard, Robert Walser, and Susan McClary. To this list, I'd like to add the book you're holding.

I suppose this book really wants to be a box of pop-music singles—or at least it should be regarded as critical theory and cultural **studies** at 45 rpm. Very few of the book's topics receive anything resembling symphonic development. They rarely strive to spiral like Coltrane's improvisations. Instead, this book is intentionally incomplete. (Then again, how could it be otherwise!) The number of entries is limited to three fairly idiosyncratic passes through the alphabet. The supplements that fill out these entries are—and again I'm quoting Barthes—"not authoritative but amical I am not invoking guarantees, merely recalling, by a kind of salute given in passing, what has seduced, convinced, or what has momentarily given the delight of understanding (of being understood?)" (Lover's **Discourse**, 9). Most of all, I'm trying my best to get readers to dance. The goal is a book that's as infectious as James Sears doing the Popcorn.

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