BEST MUSIC WRITING 2006

The Year's Finest Writing on Rock·Hip-Hop

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MARY GAITSKILL Guest Editor

DAPHNE CARR Series Editor

Da Capo BEST MUSIC WRITING 2006

The Year's Finest Writing on Rock, Hip-Hop, Jazz, Pop, Country, and More

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Introduction

This book is titled *Best Music Writing*, but I don't exactly mean it that way, not in the set-in-stone type way. I put these pieces together like a mix tape of sounds a person might hear in life—get up in the morning, put on an old T. Rex song, go outside, hear "Gold Digger" coming out of somebody's car, nameless electronica coming out of somebody else's. A guy walks through a parking lot whistling an aria from Bizet's *Carmen;* something high and haunting leaks out of a passing boy's iPod. Go into a store and there's a faux cowgirl on the sound system singing some artificially sweetened blues. All day songs fly past; some get lost in traffic noise, some enter your imagination and take strange dream-shapes that get inside your thoughts and feelings and make them different. In Robert Wheaton's profile, M.I.A. says, "We *do* hear everything at once," and she's right. But it's hard to *feel* everything at once, to *get* it, and I was acutely aware of that limitation when putting this collection together. I know the essays I picked are not the only great or good ones; the whole time I was choosing I hated to think of the ones I never saw or the ones that for some reason flew past without taking hold in my mind.

Like songs on a tape, I put these pieces next to each other to blend or bang them together, to create a conversation of different dialects with invisible linguistic links—something like the hidden affinity Kevin Whitehead sees (on page 148) between chops fiend Art Tatum and "anti-virtuoso" Thelonious Monk. In "Doctor Atomic," Alex

Ross writes about J. Robert Oppenheimer, the inventor of the atomic bomb; one jump over, Jon Caramanica writes about tragicomic rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard—putting in proximity two strange, poetic and creative men, one who destroyed two cities, one who destroyed himself. Elizabeth Méndez Berry covers the war between men and women with the power of honesty and directness. Charles Michener talks about the same thing differently in his review of operatic love wars, artistic descriptions of violent emotion so piercing and refined that they are almost a kind of psychic violence, cutting elegant shapes in the crude flesh of love. Geoffrey O'Brien's Brill Building essay ends with a story about Bob Dylan, and Geoff Boucher's piece on ex-Door John Densmore starts with one. To which Dave Tompkins's Timbaland piece says, "What the fuck?" and starts something new. When Peter Relic asks Bushwick Bill whether he's a gangster or a prankster, Bill answers as a gangster, then acts like a prankster—he's followed by David Thorpe pranking on R. Kelly, who gets blasted off the page by Raquel Cepeda's "Riddims by the Reggaetón." Mike McGuirk pops in and out, his short reviews like imp faces peeping from behind the headlines.

Mickey Hart, in a beautiful introduction to his 2004 anthology, said: "The muse can be strong and relentless and there is no mercy for the weak or timid." I agree; this is true of any art form. But while honoring the strong in this book, I also wanted to make a place for weakness. I wanted to do this because the weak love music too, and because if they can avoid being crushed, their voices can be moving. The weak are exquisitely attuned to the large forces around them; they are made by circumstance to confront and live with emotions the powerful can forcibly repress or avoid altogether. Sensitivity, delicacy, receptivity, and vulnerability are weak in some contexts, but these qualities are necessary for the strongest artist: Notice the fine receptivity of Timbaland's ear, or how Kevin Whitehead hears the supple "bending" and "swerving" notes inside Monk's "ham-fingered" piano technique. Only a playful and delicate mind could

hear yodeling the way John Biguenet hears it, as "an expression of inbetweenness"; only an imaginative and delicate hand (Frank Kogan's) could open a lyrical door in Shannon Brown's "Corn Fed" and find a whole "insane" community living inside. It took adolescent sensitivity (not used negatively here) for David Marchese to connect the power of High On Fire's "punishing" hell metal to the strength he once saw in the eyes of a crushed and dying little animal. When Caramanica describes Ol' Dirty going from wretched comedy to pain to hope while singing "Good Morning Heartache," he is describing fearless vulnerability.

It is a great thing, a luxurious thing, that our music is so fine and fierce, that it is able to go so many places and speak of so many things, and that there are people with the nimble intelligence to appreciate it in so many forums. But Marchese's High On Fire story is finally about someone trapped in a soft life that's gone dead inside, and too much luxury has a way of turning into an artificial heaven sitting atop a real hell. Pay attention to Moustafa Bayoumi's report on the ways pop, rock, and hip-hop are being used as instruments of torture in the "war on terror": It is a grim and necessary account of how hell can thrive on the desire to protect an artificial heaven. Peter Relic quotes Geto Boy Willie D. rapping—"Mess with my money, I'ma kick you in the asshole"—and it's possible that he's doing just that on an epic scale, that his music has been turned into a giant foot to be used against people he has nothing against by a government he probably despises. Maybe I shouldn't say that because I don't know what Willie D. feels about it. But, after reading Bayoumi, I do know what Metallica's James Hetfield feels. In an interview on the NPR radio show *Fresh Air*, he apparently said about the use of his music as torture that he is "proud" if his music offends Iraqis, and that ". . . if they're not used to freedom, I'm glad to be part of the exposure."

Strangely, after reading that, I thought of an actual song someone put on an actual mix tape he made for me. It is the sort of joke song

that people put on mix tapes, a live recording of Elvis in his twilight years doing a horribly shit-faced version of "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" He is completely screwing it up, and not caring, singing dumb joke lyrics and lapsing into fits of mirthless cackling. Less strangely, I thought of Metallica's 1991 hit "Enter Sandman," a grinding, efficient sludge of dark sounds and flickering images, a story of primitive dream evil triumphantly emerging to bear away a sleeping child, despite his earnest prayers. The songs don't normally go together in my mind, but right then they did. Elvis's performance is the sound of something wonderful turning into something horrible, with the audience clapping at the end as if it's all the same to them. It's also the sound of someone teetering between playfulness and ruin. "Enter Sandman" gloats over its clownish horror, makes you enjoy it and fear it a little, like a kid shining a flashlight under his face in a dark room can sometimes suddenly reveal something truly eerie in that kid. A pop culture that can casually entertain such ambivalent trifles is highly developed. It is also decadent, its passion spent on violent fantasies, its sensitivity spent on trivia dressed up to look urgent. James Hetfield may have turned out to be a soft and foolishly cruel man, blithely wishing pain he has no concept of on people he knows nothing about. But in "Enter Sandman" he described something powerful: Timeless destruction that takes form in the unconscious of a praying child, offers the boy its hand and takes him away to Never Never Land. *Boom.* Giant guitars fill the sky. *Boom.* And we're there.

MARY GAITSKILL
May 24, 2006
New York, NY

Contents

GREIL MARCUS

Stories of a Bad Song

I'm going to talk about how meaning is generated in cultural work, over time; I'm going to talk about how it is that bad art, a bad song, can make its way through time so persistently that questions of good and bad become absolutely moot. I'm going to talk about a very old song by Bob Dylan.

Last year Mojo magazine ranked Bob Dylan's "Masters of War," his 1963 song about arms merchants, number one on a chart of "The 100 Greatest Protest Songs." It was followed by Pete Seeger's "We Shall Overcome," the anthem of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, by James Brown's "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud" from 1968, an anthem of the Black Power movement, the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" from 1977, an attack on Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee, and Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" from 1939, a song about the lynching of southern black men by southern whites. Not to mention Lesley Gore's 1963 "You Don't Own Me" and Eddie Cochran's 1958 "Summertime Blues"—a record about a teenager with a mean boss, mean parents, and a congressman who won't help because the kid's too young to vote.

But for "Masters of War" the lack of subtlety was perhaps the point. "Come you masters of war, you that build the big guns," Dylan begins slowly: "You build the death planes / You that build the big bombs." He goes on, stepping on a somehow mysterious, inviting

melody. "Not even Jesus would forgive what you do," the twenty-two-year-old Bob Dylan sings. And then he does something that, even for a protest song, was shocking in 1963 and is shocking now: he calls for the death of the people he's singing about. "I hope that you die," he says flatly.

And your death will come soon
I'll follow your casket
In the pale afternoon
And I'll watch while you're lowered
Down to your deathbed
And I'll stand over your grave till I'm sure
that you're dead

Now, no matter what Bob Dylan has done in the last forty-two years or what he will do for the rest of his life, his obituary has already been written: "Bob Dylan, best known as a protest singer from the 1960s, died yesterday . . ." The media loves a simple idea. No matter how famous you are, when you die you get one idea, and one only.

In 1963, in the small world of folk music, protest songs were the currency. They said that the world should be changed, even implied that songs could change it, and no one wrote better protest songs—or as many—as Bob Dylan. It was a way of getting on the train of his own career, he'd say years later—but to the tens of thousands of high school and college students who had begun to listen to Bob Dylan because, they said, he could draw on their own unshaped anger and rage, terror and fear, and make it all real, even make it poetry, that was not how the songs felt.

They felt like warnings the world couldn't turn away from, crimes that had to be paid, promises that had to be kept. Bob Dylan wrote songs about the nuclear war that in 1963 almost everyone was sure would take place sometime, somewhere—and in 1962, with the Cuban Missile Crisis, almost had: the war that, as Robert McNamara,

Secretary of Defense in 1962, said in the recent film *The Fog of War*, came closer than even the most paranoid protest singer dared imagine. Dylan wrote and sang long, detailed songs about racial injustice, he wrote funny protest songs like "Talking World War III Blues," visionary protest songs like "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall"—but mostly he wrote and sang songs that told stories about the wrong inside a nation that believed it was always right: "With God on Our Side," "The Times They Are A-Changin'," "Blowin' in the Wind." These were the songs that brought Bob Dylan into the common imagination of the nation, and those were the songs that fixed him there.

But even in the heyday of the protest song, "Masters of War" seemed like too much. Too sententious, too self-righteous—stilted, as if it was less a matter of someone writing a protest song than the protest song as such spontaneously generating its own copy, or its own cartoon. "You hide in your mansion / While young people's blood / flows out of their bodies / And into the mud," Dylan sang in "Masters of War." Still, that was almost poetry compared to "You Been Hiding Too Long," another Bob Dylan protest song from the same moment. "Come all you phony super-patriotic"—OK, stop right there, we don't need to hear any more, but there is more, a lot more, no melody, no rhythm, no heart, no conviction, but press a button and the protest song comes out: "You like and mislead / You—for your aims and your selfish greed . . . Don't think that I'll ever stand on your side . . ." and on, and on. It's so awful it's been erased from Dylan's song collections; he probably never recorded it. He may have only performed it once, at a concert in New York in 1963, when he also sang "Masters of War"—but this horrible song is inside "Masters of War," and for one night at least it got out.

"Masters of War" does have a melody—the melody of "Nottamun Town," an ancient British folk song. It's often described as a nonsense song; that's the last thing it is. Today it communicates as twentieth-century surrealism in sixteenth-century clothes: "Not a soul would look up, not a soul would look down . . . Come a stark-naked drummer a-beating the drum . . . Ten thousand stood round

me, yet I was alone . . . Ten thousand got drownded that never was born." This is the first protest song, and the last; this is the end of the world. Traditional versions found in Kentucky or North Carolina were in a major key, which put a sardonic smile in the music, but around "the green pastures of Harvard University," as Dylan once put it, he heard a version in a minor key by the Cambridge folk singer Jackie Washington. That put a chill on the melody, gave him an opening into the bad dream he was after: shadowed, doomstruck, the sound of funeral procession, or a line of flagellants in the plague years.

Dylan had stopped singing "Masters of War" by 1964. Songs like that were "lies that life is black and white," he sang that year. He brought it back into his repertoire in the 1980s; he was playing more than a hundred shows a year, and to fill the nights he brought back everything. It was a crowd-pleaser, the number one protest song. But nothing in the song hinted at what it would turn into on February 21, 1991, at the Grammy Awards telecast, where Dylan was to receive a Lifetime Achievement Award.

The show came square in the middle of the first Iraqi-American War—a break from round-the-clock footage of the bombing of Baghdad. "Uncle Bobby," Jack Nicholson said, introducing Dylan, as Dylan and his four-piece band came onstage to play one song. In dark suits, with fedoras pulled down over their faces, the musicians looked like small-time hipster gangsters who'd spent the previous ten years in the same bar waiting for the right deal to break and finally said the hell with it; Dylan held himself with authority, like the bartender.

It was an instantly infamous performance, and one of the greatest of Dylan's career. He sang the song in disguise; at first, you couldn't tell what it was. He slurred the words as if their narrative was irrelevant and the performance had to communicate as a symbol or not at all. He broke the words down and smashed them up until they worked as pure excitement, until the appearance of a single, whole signifier—"Jesus," "Guns," "Die"—lit up the night like tracer bul-

lets. The performance was faster, the beat snapping back on itself, then fragmenting as guitar lines shot out of the music as if without human agency—and it might have been a minute, it might have been two, it might have been as long as the performance lasted for the melody to creep out of the noise and the song to reveal itself for what it was.

Dylan was asked why, on this night of all nights, he chose to sing "Masters of War."

"The war going on," he said.

Why did he slur the words, he was asked.

"I had a cold," he said.

With that night, the song began its second life. In the fall of 2002, when George W. Bush made plain his intent to launch a second Iraq war—on November 11, just after the midterm elections that Bush had used the specter of war to win—Dylan appeared at Madison Square Garden and again offered "Masters of War" as an answer record to real life. He gathered three musicians in a circle, with himself at the center: playing acoustic guitars and a bass fiddle, seated on chairs, they looked like a coven, and the song sounded like a curse dug out of the ground.

The song began to travel. In May of 2003, with the war under way, Scott Amendola and Carla Bozulich of Berkeley put a nine-minute version on the Internet. They made a storm; they took the song's rage into the realm of abstraction, until the end, when there was nothing left but drum taps, silence, and a single voice, letting you imagine that this was all that was left, after the war.

More than a year later, in October 2004, with Bush and John Kerry battling for the presidency and Minnesota up for grabs, a Minneapolis record-store owner named Mark Treehouse put out a version of the song as a pure rant—with, on the cover, Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and John Ashcroft in red, white, and blue. A month after that, on election night, November 2, in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, with the votes cast but the outcome still unknown, Dylan offered the song once more, again in the middle of a