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Songs Are Like Tattoos: A Response

Eric Lott

“Songs are like tattoos,” sings Joni Mitchell in “Blue” (1971), opening with a figure she’ll work much harder before the song is through. She’s written a song for Blue, and this is it. “There is a song for you / Ink on a pin / Underneath the skin / An empty space to fill in.” More than other songs-about-this-song of its moment (Leon Russell’s “A Song for You,” say, or Elton John’s “Your Song,” or Carly Simon’s “You’re So Vain”), Mitchell’s conjures the mortal stakes of songs and what they do for us and to us. Her voice vaults and swoops; elemental piano hammers it in. Where the alternatives (as ever, as now) are “acid, booze, and ass / needles, guns, and grass,” Joni proffers her song as “a shell for you.” It protects you (until it doesn’t); anyway it’s always with you. As the great pop critic Ann Powers once remarked, and I’m paraphrasing because I don’t recall where (and neither does she, I checked), hardly anybody recites great literature in the shower or reenacts classic movie scenes at weddings—it’s the song that remains, a talisman and a habit, sheltering you or driving you crazy, defining your life. Under your skin, where they begin, where they go to work, and where they stay.

This is certainly the force of that high farce *High Fidelity* (2000). Based on the novel by Nick Hornby (who also wrote a nice little study called *Songbook* [2002]), directed by Stephen Frears, and above all a vehicle for actors John Cusack and Jack Black, it asks repeatedly (like a good pop song) just what constitutes the perfect mixtape—that series of songs in cunning sequence that will both materialize your feelings and slay, as in seduce, your auditor. Cusack was by then no stranger to such notions, having rather bathetically held aloft that boombox at the peak point of Cameron Crowe’s *Say Anything . . .* (1989): standing Romeo-style outside his paternally interdicted girlfriend’s house, he uses Peter Gabriel’s “In Your Eyes” to throw his character’s yearning for connection and completion all the way up into Ione Skye’s room where she lies tossing and turning, an unsilent vigil-cum-siege that perfectly mimics the thrust of the song (which eventually works). “Reaching out from the inside,” as the song goes, Cusack’s eyes make a wordless work of expressive com-

mentary that has in turn made Gabriel's little emo pin stick longer than it otherwise would have. And Cusack does it again in his performance as the older Brian Wilson in the recent Beach Boys biopic *Love & Mercy* (2014; Paul Dano takes the younger Wilson, and both are terrific). But here there's no reaching out, only the chief Beach Boy's swan dive into his sickbed, the singer slain. L.A.'s endless summer, as Theodor W. Adorno discerned from living there, was "damaged life" (*Minima Moralia*), and Brian Wilson seems to have known it too: in accord with Adorno's aesthetic theory, in fact, the almost unbearable beauty of a song like "In My Room" very precisely registers the pain of the world that produced it, not least in the stacked harmonies and falsetto reaches that seem to struggle for dear life to hold on. The room has become his "world," the song goes, the world shrunk to room-size because he's terrified to leave it, and alone in this sanctuary with his "secrets," the singer locks out "my worries and my fears," crying and sighing and laughing at yesterday but *not afraid*, even in the lonely dark. This song is a world, too, each stanza a room in which to hide, and Cusack's fearless performance of Wilson's paralyzing fear lets you see such a song as protective armor, and see as well its cracks that let the light in.

While all of the essays in this "Song" issue of *New Literary History* are rousing and edifying, learned and rangy, I notice two chief tendencies of interest or emphasis. One of these works in line with what I am describing, linking song to vulnerable flesh, sound to unsound mind, and both of these to the coordinates of power that organize them, per much recent work in sound studies (Dillon on medieval song's sound; Gordon on the castrato voice; Peart on Sandburg's post-Lomax acoustics; Graham on songs that resound across time; Goldin-Perschbacher on the trans voice). The other tendency takes up form (song form and its close relations, from poems to films), song's compositional elements (from speech to the requisites of performance), the genres that generate and/or limit what a song can be in a given place at a given moment (Kramer on paraphrase; Lam on *ci* songs; Helsingier on the relations between poem and song; Hartman on Dylan's use of bridge sections; Appert on Senegalese appropriations of hip hop; Gopal on Bollywood song sequences). Knowing this issue's two canny editors, I doubt this is happenstance. But my predominating interest in the first tendency hardly means I find little of interest in the second, and in fact there is probably "juxtapolitical" value (to borrow from Lauren Berlant) in thinking about them together. What's more, each line of thought has a way of glissanding into unexpected pitches. Thus the ever provocative Lawrence Kramer, premising his thinking about song on its status as paraphrase, nonetheless broaches the possibility I consider above, that

certain songs carry a moment of self-understanding or self-interrogation, are not “deaf to their own singing”—and as a result dissolve into other registers, in Schubert (argues Kramer) the vocal shimmers that transpose the referentiality of language into a mystic new medium. Here “words melt in the mouth of the singing voice” in a “creative deformation” of speech, revealing song or at least tune as prior to or underneath the skin of spoken words—song as the materiality of language’s intention as “purpose, impulse, and desire.” Likewise, in Joseph Lam’s essay on *ci* songs, the superimposition of different dynastic interpretations on what are already multidynastic compositions (Tang tune coupled with Song lyrics, say) produces new and various Rancieresque “distributions of the sensible.”

If sensuous dimensions wink into view in these discussions of form, historical ones grow out of Charles Hartman’s work on Dylan’s bridges and Sangita Gopal’s on Bollywood song sequences. Hartman’s account enlarges our sense of Dylan’s 1965–66 *annus mirabilis* by adducing his shift from ballad and blues forms into Tin Pan Alley and Brill Building AABA forms, which actually helps you hear the early stuff better as well as apprehend the full heft of Dylan’s historical turn (until he turns again, to Nashville). Gopal uses the fate in New Bollywood of song-dance sequences to make a historical case for a certain cinematic melancholia: pushed out of the diegesis into the soundtrack, the now residual sequences precisely evoke the past, assuming a new archival function. “An object whose time has passed but whose loss must not be surrendered,” the form itself takes on melancholic affiliations, becoming a kind of “optionally added value” or sonic reminder of something once promised but never realized, now conjuring up other orders of time. The reflections on form by Elizabeth Helsinger and Catherine Appert, meanwhile, give rise to tacit theorizations of space and cultural formation. Taking the lyric as “neither monument nor citadel,” Helsinger spies “the possibility of a second, perhaps anonymous, but much wider life for poem and poet in song.” Not only does this essay put forward acute formal—and cultural—considerations of what happens when one form steps into another, but also a sort of spatializing of form occurs when Clare, Blake, and Morris go broadly pop even as they “*intervene* [my italics] in the culture of song,” seeking to redress its language in “an age of commercial remediation for large audiences.” Appert takes up remediation as well in the context of global hip hop circulation and its contribution to reworking local practices of Senegalese song form. Hip hop’s global reach here meets the perceived social function of *mbalax* to produce an ideology of antimelodic vocality; in the semiformal music economy of Senegalese hardcore, there emerges a refusal of the kind of singing tied up with colonial hegemonic dominance.

These latter essays, though centrally concerned with song form, confirm my sense of the importance of the formations in which forms reside. They variously suggest the relatively underexploited opportunities to study song's environs, its status in and as space. If, as Henri Lefebvre wrote, "sovereignty implies 'space,'" so does sound, even as it too produces and intervenes in sovereign states. The current vogue of soundscape study makes plain and yet undersells its own governing trope. Like landscape and other of modernity's scapes (as Arjun Appadurai describes them in *Modernity at Large*), the idea of a soundscape implies or involves dimension, extension, layout, terrain, as well as the issues of sovereignty in cultural formation that the articulation of space always raises. Space, per Lefebvre, is always sociopolitically produced space, however seemingly given or natural, and is therefore a congealed vista of power. Sound, likewise "invisible," is an impacted dimension of power we might more forthrightly consider. I have long been fascinated by the way a Stephen Foster blackface ditty, "Oh! Susanna," first aired in a Pittsburgh ice cream parlor in 1847, soon got picked up and pirated widely on minstrel-show stages, only to become the theme song or anthem of the California gold rush (with plentiful variations on its lyrics). Its little tale of an Alabama slave with a banjo on his knee working his way back to his New Orleans honey (most likely separated by slavery) comes to analogize the westward frenzy of migrants bent on striking it rich—a frenzy boosted by the polka rhythms and choral elations of a song that thus twins not only slaves and white land-grabbers, but also the sociospatial questions that most Americans at the time would have preferred to keep separate: sectional conflict and post-Mexican War territorial acquisition. Far from providing a spatial safety valve for the slavery controversy, the Western imperium exploded it by pressing the question of whether that territory would be considered slave or free—which is to say that "Oh! Susanna" condenses the politics of space and race that it partly thematizes, unwittingly enacts, and vastly influences.

While we tend to think of music in temporal terms—meter, historical periods—John Cage's insistence on thinking about the "world" of sound (in *Silence* and other writings) might be taken as a challenge to think about the collective, and therefore spatial, world-making—and breaking—interventions performed by songs of all stripes. Think of the ways in which the production and regulation of song are fundamental, for example, to prison life and work, as John Lomax's son Alan came to document with varying degrees of sensitivity; Michel Foucault for his part devotes interesting pages in *Discipline and Punish* to the disciplinary injunctions regarding prison silence. Or consider the overdetermined sonic environment of that key institution of American modernity (as C.

L. R. James termed it): the plantation, with its hue and cry of oath and imprecation, the sounds of sovereignty and pain (Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester's scream, as Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten discuss it), all of it given significant form in the slave songs Douglass so brilliantly interprets in his 1845 *Narrative of the Life*, themselves command performances by enslaved people playing on the master class's behalf a highly creolized music generated out of forced labor, only to be forbidden certain musical forms of their own, from drumming to religious worship. (Not for nothing does Thomas Jefferson discuss the African origins of the banjo in the "Laws" chapter of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, as Camilla Ammirati has noted.) Song as a mode of both self-possession and dispossession: music and music-making *take up space*—organize and announce new collectivities, confer rights, produce obstructions and transgressions, the latter also known as "noise." The cultural history of sound, as Carlo Rotella has remarked in the context of urban blues, might be written by looking at who at any given moment has the right to say "you are hurting my ears"—and with pain we are back to song and embodiment, the other tendency that organizes this special issue on song.

It is Bonnie Gordon's essay on the castrato that most dramatically introduces the idea of songs as voiced and the voice as mediated physicality and materiality. The castrato in her reading foregrounds what makes song possible, the trained and instrumentalized matter, the blood and guts turned machine, of vocality. Although the "technique" of castration preserved the prepubescent condition of the castrato's larynx, with consequences for pitch and tone, Gordon helpfully directs our attention past the cut to the crucial organ—the throat—and its always already socialized grain. Emma Dillon and Andrew Peart amplify song's sonorous properties, from Occitan troubadours to Chicago modernists; their attention to singing and performance, acoustics and frequency, wavelength and breath advance new epistemologies and political exigencies of song, audience, and historical occasion. Peart's discussion of the phonographies (in Alexander Weheliye's term) attending the Chicago circle that included Carl Sandburg and John Lomax richly demonstrates the ways sound allows for the meeting of the material and the spectral, the modern and the archaic, in Sandburg's dedication to the incantatory power and harmonizing political potential of folksong. T. Austin Graham compellingly activates sound across multiple waves of temporality; like Greil Marcus in *The History of Rock 'n' Roll in Ten Songs* (2014), he challenges us to consider the shape of a song's time, the mutually defining relationship between song and moment, song as historical artifact but also as ever-changing afterlife. Taking the long view of "songs of the century," Graham adduces song and singer as media multiply and repeatedly

activated, ventriloquized, and dispersed—the very air that socializes the embodied voice in the essays just mentioned. Graham's signal analysis of Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" as an "intersectional song," a "statement about the musical transformation of the self" or "simply an example" of such transformation (analysis that he extends to the Beatles' use of the Shirelles), finds its counterpart in Shana Goldin-Perschbacher's discussion of the trans voice in Americana musical genres. For Rae Spoon, Girlyman, Actor Slash Model, and others, "transAmericana," as Goldin-Perschbacher terms it, far outstrips the assumed essentialism and conservatism of country and offers up a medium or milieu in which the voice is no longer the "truth" of gender but its culturally constructed transformational by-product. Musicking (Christopher Small's term) is here the performative shuttling between establishing and dissolving the self, a particularly vivid example of song's proximity to flesh; from hormone usage to the bending of genre expectations, transAmericana witnesses (once more) the remaking of bodies in the body of song.

Together, whether by contrast or in their shapeshifting restlessness, this *NLH* issue's two tendencies make real advances in understanding the sensuous materiality of song, the song as tattoo—less what is sung than the dimensions of its singing. My own thinking about these matters has been influenced by John Mowitt's remarkable book *Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking* (2002), in which he describes music's aesthetic dimension as residing in "the surface that forms between and among subjects and urban structures." That surface is strictly speaking the skin, what bodies share with drums. For Mowitt environment, self-making, and musicking meet in the organized noise of instrumental beating. Mowitt speaks of the drum as a "richly catachrestic instrument." Not only must it be abused to be played, but also, in possessing a body, a skin, a head, and a voice, the drum "has long represented the expressive interiority that we call the subject, the human being insofar as it intones 'I.'" Conversely, the body itself has long served as the site of percussive beating, from medical taps and reflex hammerings to slaves patting juba on their own bodies once drums had been outlawed in North America for fear of their efficacy in facilitating slave uprisings. Manifold registers of experience and expressiveness cluster around the site of beaten skin, so it is interesting that a whole tradition of thought, from Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life" and Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to Barbara Duden's *The Woman beneath the Skin* and Richard Sennett's *Flesh and Stone*, has seized on the variously semipermeable membrane of the skin as that which makes intelligible subject formation in determinate settings. This line of thought informs my study of Howlin' Wolf, The Carpenters, Elvis and Elvis impersonators, Frank Sinatra, rapper Willie D, and others.

If we necessarily consider post-African musics as a percussive field—and I consider most American popular music to fall under this rubric, though variously—with every instrument, as Albert Murray implies in *Stomping the Blues*, involved in a transformational grammar of drumming, then beating becomes the organizing frame for the handling of experience, and I would argue that it takes in quite a sweep of the urban habitus I study by way of US pop: everyday interracial as well as intraracial violence, the beating of bodies in and by the urban setting, the repetitive monotony and oppressive noise of Fordist labor, the general disciplining and regulating of docile bodies that Foucault shows to be proximate to both the military and the prison, the psychic subjection that thinkers from Nietzsche to Butler have shown to be constitutive of selfhood (including its later phantasmatic extensions in beating fantasies), and the repetitive ruminations and instrumental bangings that arise in New World musicking. Post-European martial music may be the most immediate instance of such connections, as I am reminded by the Veterans Day parade I just witnessed marching up Fifth Avenue, but the multiple beatings afoot in John Philip Sousa’s “The Stars and Stripes Forever” (1897)—the official National March of the United States (made so by a 1987 act of Congress)—have had no little impact on musics from ragtime to early jazz to later rock ‘n’ roll. Here the tattoo is assuredly military, and all the more embodied for that, its stomping into later forms only indicating just how much they too are organized by beating and bodies. Second-line New Orleans parading is a central strand of jazz; you can hear it in everything from early Louis Armstrong to drummer Ed Blackwell’s work with Ornette Coleman. The four-on-the-floor drums and brass of Sousa’s most famous marches translate easily into other body musics, “music for the feet instead of the head,” as Sousa himself put it, and there is a rather astonishing demonstration of this fact in the two minutes of stunning fun that constitute Bill Frisell’s cover of Sousa’s “Washington Post March” from his album *Have A Little Faith* (1992). (It’s right there on YouTube: why deny yourself?)

This particular march is in 6/8 rather than 4/4, so it skips along as a two-step instead of strutting up the street, and Frisell’s band wrings every drop of delight and wit out of the concept of a five-piece jazz outfit doing a grand martial blast. With Frisell rocking a distorted electric guitar, Don Byron wailing a superbly controlled clarinet, Guy Klucevsek loping hilariously on accordion, Kermit Driscoll chugging on an electric bass he manages to make imitate a tuba, and Joey Baron doing his circus routine on a kit that sounds outfitted with an enormous bass drum, the band nods to many of the musical forms adjacent and/or indebted to the Sousa march and in so doing offers a little seminar on the DNA of

American pop. Baron announces the march with snare rolls and bass drum thumps that are subtly syncopated in ways that Sousa's original intro is not, gesturing already to African American appropriations of the form. Clarinet and accordion take melodic charge with Frisell's guitar lurking in the mix, and voilà, the march is here and hereafter also a polka. Frisell's guitar rises into the fray, and by the end of the first sixteen-bar verse section his power chords have gestured to Pete Townshend, "Baba O'Riley" or bust. In the second verse section, Byron blows like Armstrong's clarinetist Johnny Dodds and New Orleans polyphony enters the room just as Frisell begins to shred, bringing to mind Buddy Guy and all the rockers that great Chicago bluesman has influenced, most especially Jimi Hendrix. The trio section is all at once polka, New Orleans polyphony, and blues shuffle, at full gallop. The stripped-down drum break before the final verse section sounds like nothing so much as Hal Blaine's famous intro to The Ronettes' "Be My Baby." And when that last verse arrives, the band brings it all careening home, twenty hard-charging seconds of straight-up rave-up, Sousa by way of the Dave Clark Five—a tattoo to move you and mark you and make you glad all over, like the best ones always do.

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