

## Songs of the Century

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**W**HAT IS THE TIME, THE SEASON, THE historical context of a popular song? When is it most present in the world, best able to reflect, participate in, or construct some larger social reality? This essay will consider a few possible answers, exploring the ways that a song can exist in something as brief as a passing moment and as broad as a century. It will also suggest that when we hear those songs whose times have been the longest, we might not be hearing “songs” at all.

Most people are likely to have an intuitive sense for how a song can contract and swell in history, suited to a certain context but capable of finding any number of others. Consider, for example, the various uses to which Joan Didion is able to put music in her generation-defining essay “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” a meditation on drifting youth and looming apocalypse in the days of the Haight-Ashbury counterculture. Songs create a powerful sense of time and place throughout the piece, with Didion nodding to the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Quick-silver Messenger Service, and “No Milk Today” by Herman’s Hermits, “a song I heard every morning in the cold late spring of 1967 on KRFC, the Flower Power Station, San Francisco.”<sup>1</sup> But the music that speaks most directly and reverberates most widely in the essay is “For What It’s Worth,” the Buffalo Springfield single whose chiming guitar fifths and famous chorus—“Stop, hey, what’s that sound / Everybody look what’s going down”—make it instantly recognizable nearly five decades later.<sup>2</sup> To listen to “For What It’s Worth” on Didion’s pages is to hear a song that exists in many registers and seems able to suffuse everything, from a snatch of conversation, to a set of political convictions, to nothing less than “The ’60s” itself.

“Slouching Towards Bethlehem” is a series of loosely related vignettes and encounters, but when “For What It’s Worth” appears near the essay’s middle, the narrative tightens up. Didion is on her way to interview an elusive member of the Digger commune; she learns that the address she has been given is incorrect; she calls her source to ask for the right one; and she is told, “I don’t know. And don’t go there. And don’t use either my name or my husband’s name if you do” (*STB* 101). Two sentences later, there is this fragment:

*Paranoia strikes deep—  
 Into your life it will creep—  
     is a song the Buffalo  
     Springfield sings.*

Song and setting are fully interdependent here. Didion's source betrays a faintly absurd, self-defeating anxiety that provides the occasion for recalling Buffalo Springfield's apropos lyrics, and the relationship between music and its immediate context is so mutually reinforcing as to be tautological. One cannot easily say whether Didion invokes "For What It's Worth" as commentary on her source or the other way around, whether the song helps us understand a paranoid woman or a paranoid woman helps us understand the song, and it is the close-knit quality of the moment that makes it so evocative. In an essay full of memorable meetings, digressions, and insights, this musicalized poem, almost imagistic in its fused, enigmatic economy, stands out.

"For What It's Worth" is not confined to this brief appearance, though, for the listening reader can hear echoes of it throughout "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" and the city it observes. Those who know the song may remember that its first chorus names "children" as the ones who ought to "stop" and listen to "that sound," anticipating Didion's climactic description of the counterculture as "a handful of pathetically unequipped children" attempting to create "community in a social vacuum" (*STB* 122). The warnings of polarization in "For What It's Worth"—"There's battle lines being drawn / Nobody's right if everybody's wrong"—are similarly audible in both the essay's early, Yeatsian warning that "the center was not holding" and its conclusion that "the signals between the generations are irrevocably jammed" (*STB* 84, 122). But in something of a paradox, it is the song's most abstract qualities that make it such a particularly good fit for the milieu Didion sets out to capture. "For What It's Worth" is notably unspecific in its lyrics, conjuring "a man with a gun," "young people speaking their minds," and other hazy archetypes. For all its political suggestiveness, it lacks an identifiable politics, describing "people in the street" with signs that say nothing more progressive or reactionary than "hooray for our side." And much of the song's mysterious, even eerie allure grows out of its refusal to say just what "sound" it wants its audience to hear, or to elaborate too much on its declaration that "There's something happening here / What it is ain't exactly clear." By not being "clear" itself, "For What It's Worth" is able to speak in any number of contexts, and its vagueness is especially eloquent in the San Francisco of "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." Didion, after all, is impelled to write by a compa-

rably cloudy quality in the hippies she has met there: her essay worries that an authoritarian, “militant trip” could be taking hold of Haight-Ashbury, and the danger exists precisely because “it remained not at all clear to most of the inhabitants of the District” (*STB* 121). Something is going down in 1967 because nobody makes any real effort to look out for it, and by dwelling upon that which is not being seen and not being understood, both Didion’s essay and Buffalo Springfield’s song capture a pervasive feeling of unease.

Not for nothing, then, has a recent history of popular music characterized “For What It’s Worth” as a “scene-encompassing” work.<sup>3</sup> But even that is not worded strongly enough, because like the poem that Didion alludes to throughout her essay, the significance of the song continued to expand in ever-widening gyres after “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” was published. It came to symbolize the era’s activist politics writ large, even to the point of anachronism: as its author, Stephen Stills, has testified, later listeners often heard it as a response to the Kent State shootings, in spite of its having been recorded years before. For others it has become synonymous with ’60s ferment in general, appearing today on the soundtracks of historical films and television shows as a touchstone for past sensibilities. It is easy to make light of such associations and argue, as Fredric Jameson does, that historical understanding requires a great deal more than invocations of “costume and fashion, haircuts and coiffures, hit songs, popular music, the yearly make of the automobile and the occasional distinctive building style.”<sup>4</sup> But in the very act of questioning the historical depths of “For What It’s Worth,” we still find ourselves far away from Joan Didion, in a phone booth on Arguello Boulevard, talking to a paranoid and hearing a song one day in the cold late spring of 1967.

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In surveying recent critical work on popular music, one quickly notices that the complex historical character of songs like “For What It’s Worth” accounts for many of the pleasures and challenges of studying them. A song can be an artifact, offering a conduit to a particular historical moment. A song can be a consequence of its prehistory, having grown out of earlier times and practices. And a song can have an afterlife, moving across history and accreting new meanings as it finds new audiences. The question is how to listen for these dimensions, and for their intersections.

Ideally, the student of song is always alive to an aesthetic quality that Lionel Trilling, writing at the dawn of the rock ‘n’ roll era, termed “his-

toricity.” For Trilling, an artwork from the past is best evaluated from more than one historical perspective: critics should try to understand it in the terms that were available to its creator and first audiences, but they should also learn how “it has lived its life from Then to Now, as it is a thing which submits itself to one kind of perception in one age and another kind of perception in another age, as it exerts in each age a different kind of power.”<sup>5</sup> The passage “from Then to Now” allows a work to reveal hitherto unnoticed aspects, to generate novel interpretations, and to make a bid for what Frank Kermode would later call “modern classic” status (an honorific he reserved for art capable of signifying “more than is needed by any one interpreter or any one generation of interpreters”).<sup>6</sup> But these are not the only reasons to study the work at various points over time. Along the way, it also gains an important measure of “historicity,” which Trilling describes as a kind of temporal patina or “pastness” that begins forming at the moment the work enters the world, that grows more and more pronounced as the years go by, and that grants “an extra-aesthetic authority which is incorporated into [the work’s] aesthetic power,” like the crackle of dust in a vinyl record’s grooves.<sup>7</sup> The art of earlier ages thus develops a new attribute between Then and Now, and appreciating its ever-increasing historicity requires the critic to negotiate any number of different pasts from the vantage point of the always-advancing present. When Stills wrote “For What It’s Worth” in 1966, he intended it as a contribution to anti-curfew demonstrations in Los Angeles; for Stills’s listeners, it could speak to the concerns of Vietnam War protestors, the Students for a Democratic Society, black nationalists, skeptical conservatives, and many others besides; when it played on an episode of *The Wonder Years*, Boomer wistfulness entered the mix; when Skee-Lo referenced its lyrics in “I Wish,” it earned a place in ’90s hip-hop; and according to Trilling, all of these connections and connotations could be said to have become part of the song itself, adding to its continued “aesthetic power” today.

As this invocation of an earlier academic generation is meant to suggest, scholars have long understood the importance of balancing permanence and change in cultural studies. But the dynamic has special urgency with regard to popular song, a genre that can seem unusually, even uniquely timebound. Whether because of its contributions and debts to tides of fashion, or its ability to reach mass audiences and constitute events, or its profound capacity for heightening personal experience, popular song is often discussed in its relation to historically discrete moments, audiences, and scenes. Contemporary novels about the recent past, for example, are almost unthinkable without their musical *aides-mémoires*—Jennifer L. Fleissner observes that songs are the “new madeleine” for

today's reminiscing authors, and Nicholas Dames, in a study of 1970s "throwback fiction," hears a generation's nostalgia expressed by "the tag-line leading in to one of the decade's most famous guitar riffs: close your eyes and it slips away."<sup>8</sup> We might all know, in an intellectual sense, that songs resonate differently for different people in different eras, but as anyone who has ever had a passionate attachment to one will understand, it doesn't always feel that this is possible.

It should therefore come as no surprise that a great deal of writing on popular music studies songs in carefully defined historical contexts, using methods that limit what can be heard in them even while seeking to explain them more fully. Some of these works opt for circumscription, listening to music only at its moment of genesis and making concerted efforts to keep history's later verdicts at bay. Bob Stanley's *Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!*, a compulsively readable survey of popular song from 1954 to 2012, is emblematic in this regard. Writing against a digital age in which the entirety of recorded music is instantly available "to be enjoyed and pilfered, curated, compiled, and recompiled," Stanley tells a story of singles on the charts, with songs discussed only at the moment they break through.<sup>9</sup> The result is that Stanley's musical past is a great deal more crowded, and considerably less inevitable, than memory can sometimes suggest it was. Motivated by a reparative impulse common to historicist scholarship, *Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!* resurrects forgotten, "one-off" songs and restores the equivalence they once enjoyed to the work of now-iconic artists; in its version of 1967, a fleeting trifle is as deserving of attention as an evergreen like "For What It's Worth."<sup>10</sup> As for those songs that have stood the test of time, Stanley's approach encourages the kinds of fresh responses that are usually not possible after decades of repeated listening. "It is much harder," he correctly notes, "to recover the menacing impact of '(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction' or future shock of 'I Feel Love' without hearing them alongside contemporary hits."<sup>11</sup> *Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!* revels in the unsettledness that has often characterized the pop landscape, and it offers a respite from heavier critical methods: the history of canon formation, the genealogy of dominant musical traditions, and the like.

That said, historical circumscription can put extraordinary weight on a song, as one finds in Joshua Clover's *1989: Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About*. Studying a constellation of songs in the year that saw "the disintegration of the most durable confrontation known to the century"—if not the end of history itself—Clover finds popular music engaged in a titanic struggle between Western liberal democracy and collectivism.<sup>12</sup> Hip-hop, rave, proto-grunge, and Billy Joel are all shown to be fighting on different fronts of the same war in 1989, and Clover is

able to make his case so tenaciously because song, especially the popular, anointed variety of it, is assumed to reveal the inner workings of the public mind at particular points in time. As he puts it, "Pop's thinking is always also the thought of the audience, the choice of some songs over others, of selecting *this* and not *that* by way of trying to grab hold of the moment."<sup>13</sup> Listeners embraced one musical "way of knowing" in 1989 and rejected others, and not just because certain songs seemed to fit the zeitgeist better: Clover sees the shape of things to come in these choices, and at the furthest reaches of his argument, he wonders if "rather than pop emerging in new history, new history emerged to meet pop" in this miracle year.<sup>14</sup> But while the music of 1989 may point toward the late-capitalist future, Clover does not generally listen to it there, nor does he ask how it might sound differently in the world it helped bring into being. Instead, his book globalizes the socially expressive musicality that Didion had heard in 1967 San Francisco, understanding song as an art that reveals and even makes history.

For all that these scholars study song in delimited historical contexts, though, one often feels the music pulling them outside of their self-imposed boundaries. Clover's subject is not so much a year as "The Long 1989," a period whose musical foregrounding goes back some ways and whose singers often imagine a future anterior.<sup>15</sup> The title of Stanley's book, meanwhile, suggests a search on the author's part for a song capable of transcending its moment and standing in for the entire history of pop, and it is very much worth asking whether he might have found it. If one assumes, as I do, that the exclamation "yeah! yeah! yeah!" is taken from the refrain of the Beatles' "She Loves You"—the song that sparked "Beatlemania" when the band performed it on American television in January of 1964—then Stanley has chosen well, because the words evoke any number of histories and contexts. For a time they denoted the Beatles themselves, who were referred to as "The Yeah-Yeahs" across Europe during their early celebrity; today, a very good indie band boasts much the same name.<sup>16</sup> Of course, the Beatles were neither the first nor the last musicians to sing the refrain, which was all over the songs they listened to in the 1950s and continues to resound in modern rock, R&B, and rap. And it takes but a single turn of the dialectic to hear the words drawing inverse attention to the jazz-based tradition of popular song that the Beatles did so much to displace. In some ways, to listen to "She Loves You" and hear "yeah! yeah! yeah!" is to respond to the song as the elder generation did in 1964: for many who had grown up on Sinatra, those words in particular represented everything that was wrong with rock, an antipoetic, slang-ridden noise whose message was not much more eloquent than "blah, blah, blah." Whole traditions, whether past, present, or future, reside in this song's lines.

If studies like *Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!* and *1989* sometimes imply a desire to widen the temporal horizons of the songs they study, there is a well-known model for doing so in Greil Marcus, the groundbreaking cultural historian who has built a career on the proposition that, when the subject is music, “a critic’s job is not only to define the context of an artist’s work but to expand that context.”<sup>17</sup> In such classic books as *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* and *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ’n’ Roll Music*, the time of a song can be measured in hundreds of years, and music is that which defies narrow periodization: in the former, punk rock continues the antisocial efforts of “dadaists, lettrists, situationists, and various medieval heretics,” while in the latter, the most profound American songs contain “the whine of the white mountain music that goes back to the Revolution,” the blues, “the legend of Huckleberry Finn,” the profanity of Lyndon B. Johnson, and still more besides.<sup>18</sup> Marcus’s books are products of voluminous research and vast knowledge, but they seldom establish patterns of influence that definitively unite present artists with past interlocutors. Instead, they wander freely in what Wai Chee Dimock has called acts of “crowdsourcing history,” putting songs in contrapuntal relation to various eras and constructing cultural “feedback loops” on dramatically large timescales.<sup>19</sup> For Marcus, one of song’s unique affordances is its ability to find new vocabularies for that which has always been with us, thereby creating “spectral connections between people long separated by place and time, but somehow speaking the same language.”<sup>20</sup>

This adventurous method has won Marcus many fans, inspired a host of emulators, and done much to demonstrate the historical importance of song as a genre, but it has drawbacks. One is that it is usually set up to move backward in time, with songs mostly tied to the past and seldom generating their own historicity: Marcus’s representative US musicians are said to express “unities in the American imagination that already exist,” and his Johnny Rotten is more of a “medium” than a creator.<sup>21</sup> Another is that it is often better suited to discussing the visions of artists than to studying songs as such: *Mystery Train* and *Lipstick Traces* both hear an uncontainable “presence” or “spirit” that endures through history, and the musical works that these abstractions pass through can occasionally seem secondary, vessels made of “bits of symbolic discourse, deaf to their sources and blind to their objects.”<sup>22</sup> Useful correctives to these tendencies, however, can be found in Marcus’s recent *History of Rock ’n’ Roll in Ten Songs*, which is animated by an awareness that musical compositions can speak as loudly as musicians do, and for a great deal longer. Here Marcus follows “In the Still of the Nite,” “Crying, Waiting, Hoping,” and other songs as they outgrow their first singers and reappear in new

settings across several decades, and if his is “only one version of the story” out of “an infinity” of possibilities, it is nevertheless a significant attempt to listen, and listen again and again, to music on its journey from Then to Now.<sup>23</sup>

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This turn in Marcus’s thought—approaching the musical past while facing the musical future—is as timely as it is flexible. It comes at a moment when scholars across the humanities are reexamining the basic, even foundational question of how the arts are to be related to history, and when the practice of evaluating cultural phenomena “in historical context” is receiving particular scrutiny. For some of the most influential voices in this debate, received historicist methods have come to seem like temporal quarantines, too quick to assume the past’s alterity and too unwilling to recognize its ongoing presence. These critics therefore urge greater attention to the afterlives, continuations, and legacies of the arts, and while there are any number of ways that the various disciplines could respond, song provides an especially promising ground for experimentation.

Among the more provocative of these calls has been “‘Context Stinks!’”, Rita Felski’s essay on the present appeal of past culture. In theorizing “transtemporal” relationships between art and its audiences, Felski encourages scholars to think of history as a traversable network rather than as a confining “box,” and to regard texts, literary and otherwise, as “nonhuman actors” whose careers can continue long after they make their debuts in the world.<sup>24</sup> Texts, Felski argues, tend to seek out new environments, and they might even be understood to possess a kind of agency, capable of “enabling their own survival” over the years and across periods by “making friends, creating allies, attracting disciples, inciting attachments, [and] latching on to receptive hosts.”<sup>25</sup> A text from a past era remains vital by finding ways to speak in a new one, and when it succeeds, its explanatory “context” can no longer be limited to its prehistory, moment of creation, or first reception—if it could be, after all, the text would effectively be dead to the future, and no one would be interested in trying to contextualize it in the first place. (Or, to put it as Hans Robert Jauss does in an old but still vital essay, a text “can continue to have an effect only if future generations still respond to it,” and that effect necessarily changes over time, an “orchestration which strikes ever new chords.”)<sup>26</sup> The discerning scholar, then, should also attend to later stages in the lives of enduring texts, those occasions when they take steps to ensure that they will see another day.



Understood in these terms, a text's "context" is anywhere it makes a meaningful connection, and music can be very gregarious art. Indeed, one of Felski's most vivid examples of a transtemporal, context-expanding, nonhuman actor is "the song on the radio that unexpectedly reduces you to tears."<sup>27</sup> But how does a song actually go about "making friends" and thus living throughout history? What is the process like? And how is a song's survival assisted by the affordances of its genre, of its condition as a song and not as another thing? Felski's essay does not say with much specificity, discussing the musical arts in the same, broadly "textual" terms as it does novels, paintings, and theater. A few possible answers can be found in Marcus's *History of Rock 'n' Roll in Ten Songs*, which is largely a chronicle of hits winning over new fans, getting covered by new artists, and being otherwise consumed by new audiences. Yet even this future-oriented historical model can be too confining, too much of a methodological "box." As some of the most incisive works of musicology have argued, after all, to listen for new soundings of a song over time is in many ways to miss the secret of its persistence, and even to constrict one's understanding of music's distinctive transtemporal possibilities. According to this line of scholarship, songs can travel across history not only because they are uniquely attractive objects, but also because they are uniquely able to inspire action, enduring not so much as fixed musical products as mutable invitations to "musicking" processes.<sup>28</sup>

It is easy to imagine how a song might survive through history as a coherent structure, identifiable by its title, lyrics, melody, rhythm, and other markers: "the song on the radio that unexpectedly reduces you to tears" is an example of this, as is the poignant Amy Winehouse cover of "To Know Him Is to Love Him" that closes *The History of Rock 'n' Roll in Ten Songs*. It is harder to imagine how a song might survive through history as a kind of behavior, partly because it can require a fundamental redefinition of what a "song" even is. As Christopher Small has noted, it is common to fall into the "trap of reification" when studying music, conceptualizing it as a body of authored "works" and "original texts."<sup>29</sup> Thinking this way means valuing composition over performance and reception, design over activity, and artists over audiences. But Small calls this a near-total misunderstanding of the art, arguing instead that "*performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform.*"<sup>30</sup> We cannot know the song from the singer, and the character of a particularly popular song—and the reasons for that song's living on over time—may have more to do with the musicalized responses it is able to elicit than it does with any of its formal features.

Especially instructive on this distinction is W. T. Lhamon, Jr.'s *Raising Cain*, a wide-ranging meditation on the varieties of American blackface performance between 1820 and 1990. Lhamon's story is one of cultural retentions, following a set of impressively resilient musical behaviors and dance moves as they coalesce in the busy fish markets of Manhattan's now-vanished Five Points neighborhood, thrive in the days of travelling minstrel shows and early film, and provide a programming template in the glory days of MTV. It has been some seventeen decades since the time when songs like "The Original Jim Crow," "Coal Black Rose," and "Jim Crow, Still Alive!!!" were penned, but according to Lhamon, they are very much audible to us today. If we continue to hear these songs, though, it is not in anything like their first iterations, for they survived largely because they broke down into their component parts long ago. The patterns, phrases, and "particular charismatic gestures" of the blackface tradition eventually detached from one another and set about finding "receptive hosts" to perpetuate them, and so the old routines lived on in dispersal, enacted over and over in refracted contexts by several generations of performers—the final performance of these tropes in *Raising Cain* is MC Hammer's "U Can't Touch This," and there have been many others since.<sup>31</sup> The behaviors of blackface will continue to thrive, Lhamon writes, regardless of whether their performers ever realize the historical significance of their acts, and they are to be accorded a certain respect, for they "have survived all their judges, as they will us."<sup>32</sup>

Unusually vital and persistent songs have unusually dynamic historical contexts, serving as emissaries from the past (for us) even as they enjoy a long present (for themselves). To hear the full extent of these songs' contexts, though, we must first be able to hear the songs themselves, and detecting their more subtle insinuations over time can require acts of attentive, even creative listening. It might entail thinking of songs as combinations of forms, elements, and actions that travel "beyond the boundaries of their home texts," as literary allusions and mythical devices can do.<sup>33</sup> It might entail approaching them as something like memes, granting more agency to musical behaviors and less to the artists and audiences who engage in them. And it might entail listening in unexpected places, for a song may never be more present than when it is hidden within another song entirely. As Joseph Roach has memorably argued, the circum-Atlantic history of music, theater, and dance was founded on an ever-cycling process of imitation and erasure across various cultural and racial lines, and so new performances "often carry within them the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions—those that were rejected and, even more invisibly, those that have succeeded."<sup>34</sup> In this version of musical history, an ordinary song strikes a listener's fancy;

the song inspires another that repeats it in some way; the new song's author labors to hide the debt; the second song enters and circulates in the world; the cycle of adaptation and disguise begins again; and yet the first song remains through it all, serving as a center of gravity that is no less powerful for its seeming absence. Hearing the songs with the longest histories, in other words, may require us to listen for those "indispensable actors," human and otherwise, that are "forgotten but not gone" in the songs we have now.<sup>35</sup>

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What was the song of the twentieth century? Not the best song, necessarily, or the most popular song, but the song that lived the longest, fullest life during that time? It's absurd to pursue a question like that, of course. There are songs worth listening to in all eras; dividing history into hundred-year increments is a basically arbitrary practice; and in a period when a huge variety of music was being produced in a previously unimaginable array of media, there were far too many vital songs for one to distinguish itself over and above all others. More in the spirit of starting conversations than offering answers, then, this essay will venture into the twentieth century's rich archive of mechanically recorded sound and listen to what was surely one of its most historically persistent songs: Mamie Smith's 1920 performance of "Crazy Blues."

Few songs have had as significant a legacy, and yet one so underappreciated, as "Crazy Blues." Smith was the first black woman to make a professionally produced record, and while "Crazy Blues" was not her debut, it was the hit that ensured other artists of her race and gender would have the same opportunity. It sold a then-astonishing 75,000 copies within a month of being released by the Okeh label, and it was celebrated in the African American press as a cultural milestone. Coming after a decade's worth of blues records by white singers, "Crazy Blues" allowed black listeners "to hear one of our own ladies deliver the canned goods," and soon other record companies were adding African American women to their rosters, rushing to meet the demand they had once ignored.<sup>36</sup> Considered purely in terms of the musical outpouring it led to, "Crazy Blues" was one of the most consequential records ever made, the first title in a regal succession of American song. Without Mamie Smith, no Bessie, no Billie, no Ella, no Etta, no Diana, no Aretha, no Whitney, no Mariah, no Janet, no Missy, no Beyoncé.

Until quite recently, though, this was virtually all that scholars could bring themselves to say in favor of "Crazy Blues." It received little of the

close, even obsessive analysis that other 1920s blues records eventually did, and Smith came to be regarded as a coincidental first in a tradition that had quickly overshadowed her: she is barely mentioned, for instance, in classic studies like Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues* and Angela Y. Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the neglect of "Crazy Blues" had much to do with the identity of its performer, with gender, class, and region all playing roles. As Elijah Wald has explained, Smith was one of "the savvy, urban, smartly dressed vaudeville queens" who "generally dominated the market and set the trends" during her musical moment, which meant that her songs did not meet the folkloric and musicological standards of authenticity that were retroactively applied to the blues in the second half of the twentieth century—standards that generally took male singers from the rural South as their ideals.<sup>37</sup> But changing expectations of so-called race music also caused audiences to turn against "Crazy Blues." While Smith's contemporaries may have celebrated her as an African American trailblazer, Karl Hagstrom Miller notes that her sound "shared more in common" with white artists than with black ones in 1920, honed as it had been on the travelling revue circuit.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Wald suggests that the decision-makers at OKeh might not have let her record at all had it not been for her "mainstream, relatively bland style."<sup>39</sup> Smith's place in history would suffer for this in later years: her seminal work meant that future listeners would be able to hear a great deal more music by African Americans, but in an ironic turn, the audiences she helped create would not find her pioneering voice to be especially "black."

When "Crazy Blues" is written out of the blues canon, it is usually for two reasons: listeners think it sounds like something else, and they hear someone who isn't there. Scholars tend to focus on Smith's vocal delivery when explaining the song's alleged fall into irrelevancy, paying particular attention to her stentorian force, her vigorous vibrato, and other tells that associate her not with blues singing but with vaudeville (the miscellaneous, catch-all musical entertainment that had appropriated any number of song forms in the 1910s and '20s). To perform the blues in a vaudeville style, the argument goes, is to perform them in a theatrical, exaggerated, and finally inauthentic fashion. For the early twentieth-century vaudevillian, song was generally to be approached not as an instrument of self-expression, but as a means of assuming different musical personae and giving voice to different characters, especially characters of different ethnicities and races. It was a tradition of mimicry and role-play whose singers might move from "Irish brogue" in one number to "Negro dialect" in the next, and when Smith is said to have struck vaudevillian notes in her performance of "Crazy Blues,"

the implicit point is that she sang the blues as a pretender would. Smith may have been an African American artist backed by African American studio musicians singing a song that had been written by an African American composer in an African American verse form, but by rendering it in a showy vaudeville style, she creates a space of palimpsestic racial indeterminacy for some listeners. O'Keefe had originally slated a white singer, the popular "coon shouter" Sophie Tucker, to perform "Crazy Blues" before scheduling problems intruded, and contemporary historians have detected her voice behind Smith's on the record, exerting a kind of sonic persuasion upon it. Thus can the song come to seem disorienting, and even uncanny: heard this way, "Crazy Blues" is an imitation of an imitator, the sound of a black singer performing in an idiom dominated by white artists who often won their fame by impersonating blacks.

Much the same thing could be said about Smith's other performances, though, so it is worth listening more closely to the ways that her delivery shapes her historic record of 1920. Perhaps most obviously, it can prevent the "Crazy Blues" from sounding like an especially crazy experience: Smith's singing is consistently strident throughout, which tends to flatten out the song's narrative and make all of its episodes, even its most intense ones, sound more or less alike. "Crazy Blues" is a litany of complaints about an absent lover and the miseries he has left the singer to wallow in, and while the lyrics are sometimes punctuated by expressions of violence that in most contexts would be shocking, Smith's performance makes them seem tonally indistinguishable from the song's more quotidian passages. In the final verse, Smith vows to "do like a Chinaman, go and get some hop / Get myself a gun, and shoot myself a cop," and in an earlier one, she recounts a brush with suicide: "I went to the railroad / Hang my head on the track / Thought about my daddy / I gladly snatched it back."<sup>40</sup> With only a single, very significant exception that will be discussed in a moment, these and other lyrical proofs of the singer's "crazy" condition unfold in an orderly, predictable fashion, with each line's melody repeated in precisely the same form at some other point in the song. There are virtually none of the disruptions, improvisations, and surprises that later blues exegetes would lovingly parse in the performances of Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Robert Johnson, and Smith's delivery of her song can imply a self-control that her character claims to lack.

To insist too much on this point would of course be to fall prey to the imitative fallacy, making what Yvor Winters calls the "sophistical" assumption that a versifier ought to deploy "a disintegrating form . . . to express a feeling of disintegration."<sup>41</sup> It is in fact formal sturdiness,

Winters argues, that most effectively voices unsettled emotional states, and blues performances are often praised insofar as they seem to master trauma, weather calamity, and make extraordinary events—heartbreak, murder, visits from Lucifer—sound like endurable parts of everyday life. But very few blues scholars have heard “Crazy Blues” in this way, and Smith’s steady approach to her violent song is more easily aligned with the vaudeville tradition of blues singing, where the same lyrical tropes were deployed by white artists with a comparable regularity or, if you prefer, rigidity. When Marie Cahill, for example, impersonates “a darky” who has lain his “head right on some railroad track” in her 1917 recording of “The Dallas Blues,” she does little to vary the brisk pace and jokey manner that she maintains through the rest of the song.<sup>42</sup> In the vaudeville blues of both Smith and Cahill, moments of violence are most striking for their relative absence of affect or inflection.

“Crazy Blues” could have been weighed down by its historicity during the twentieth century, with shifts in musical taste turning it into a curio from the vanished past. Yet this was not to be its fate. It enjoyed a long if often overlooked life, and it did so because of the very qualities that made it noncanonical in blues scholarship: with rare, even unprecedented richness, it had demonstrated how various racial and gender identities could be occupied in the space of a single song, and it had invited its audiences to listen for voices other than the one that might seem to be most present. If “Crazy Blues” was rejected in certain quarters because it sounded like something else and caused listeners to hear people who weren’t there, it also survived in a broader musical culture that came more and more to value those qualities.

These aspects of “Crazy Blues” might have been liabilities in the context of the burgeoning twentieth-century blues tradition, but what were their affordances? What did the song’s fluidity allow it to do or make possible? To begin, it was able to pursue larger audiences, which may have meant greater popularity in its time. If, as Wald suspects, some record buyers did not know Smith was black when “Crazy Blues” was released, then so much the better for her crossover potential; as Miller observes, OKeh was in no hurry to publicize Smith’s historic racial achievement when advertising the record in white publications.<sup>43</sup> The protean quality of “Crazy Blues” also allowed it to make a political statement, and a radical one to boot. The song ends, we will remember, with Smith imagining herself as a drug-fuelled “Chinaman” heading into the streets to “shoot myself a cop,” and while her vaudeville delivery might seem to have reduced the impact of the lyric, it is important to consider how the words pop despite—and perhaps even because of—the various layers that muffle them. As Adam Gussow has argued, a threat that would

have sounded “insurrectionary” if recorded by a black man in the Jim Crow 1920s was something closer to “allowable” coming from a black woman, and especially from one who had triply obscured her identity through gendered fantasy, orientalism, and performance conventions associated with white singers.<sup>44</sup> Listened to in this way, “Crazy Blues” says the unsayable, turning its “mainstream” qualities toward subversive purposes. It also reveals itself to have had an even greater historical legacy than it is usually credited with: Gusso hears Smith’s cavalier violence nearly seventy years later in hip-hop militancy, a consequence of her having established a “partial genealogy” for N.W.A., Ice-T, “and other beer-and-blunts-stoked gangsta rappers of the late 1980s.”<sup>45</sup>

But above all else, “Crazy Blues” remained vital because it had modeled synthesizing musical behaviors that continued for decades after its initial popularity, and because it had inspired acts of imaginative listening that went on for just as long. By foregrounding her influences on “Crazy Blues,” Smith achieved what we might today call a state of maximum intersectionality: in the words of Daphne A. Brooks, these three and a half minutes of music inaugurated “a black women’s blues era,” but they were also an “amalgam of voices and gestures” that Smith borrowed from the “black men, white men, and white women” with whom she had formerly worked.<sup>46</sup> Smith was not the first artist to achieve multiply voiced effects in a song, of course. But at least in comparison with what had been captured on wax and shellac before 1920, “Crazy Blues” was one of the most vocally dense songs that had yet been sung, and the first in which the black female voice, previously only imitated, could channel those that had channeled it and thus swell the recorded chorus of American identity. If it did not appeal to later blues purists, this was because it was what Brooks calls “the quintessential generic and cultural mash-up track of its age,” and its acts of merging lived on in a musical future that was all but dedicated to cross-cultural adaptation and fusion.<sup>47</sup>

The song also lived on in the behaviors of listeners, and even in the behaviors of listeners who rejected it. As a “mash-up track,” “Crazy Blues” presents a variety of voices rather than a singular one, and much of the song’s interest lies in its vocal interplay. One might decline Smith’s invitation to experience it, but to do so—to decide, this song does not sound like a blues I would accept or enjoy—can still constitute participation. Dismissing “Crazy Blues” as inauthentic or assigning it to another musical category necessarily entails an act of comparative listening and judgment; it requires one to hear a voice and evaluate it in relation to an imagined other. And ultimately, this shuttling between voices and musically defined identities may be a more important part of the lis-

tening process than the conclusions it leads to. In the words of Simon Frith, one of song's distinctive affordances is the opportunity it offers to try out new "modes of social interaction" and feel a "transcendence" that demonstrates "not music's independence of social forces but a kind of alternative experience of them."<sup>48</sup> Crucially, that "alternative experience" of social identity is not the sole province of singers who change themselves in performance, the magpie-like Bowies and Madonnas and Gagas of the world. It can be achieved by audiences as well, and the value of intersectional songs like "Crazy Blues" has much to do with the chances they present for a temporary unmooring of the listening self. Whenever a musical voice inspires us to occupy it and investigate its character—when we explore the boundaries of its blackness or whiteness or femininity or masculinity—we are responding in a way that Smith's song had anticipated.

Did Smith intend "Crazy Blues" to be a statement about the musical transformation of the self, or is the song simply an example of this? The question need not be answered definitively, and if one is concerned with establishing the agency of musical texts, tropes, and other nonhuman actors, it may even be a distraction. Yet it is hard to avoid noticing that when Smith disrupts her song's regularity for the first and only time, she chooses to do so with a verse that does not appear in the song's published sheet music and that takes up the subject of reinvention directly:

There's a change in the ocean  
Change in the deep blue sea, my baby  
I tell you folks there ain't no change in me.  
My love for that man  
Will always be.

Read in transcription, the lyrics describe a condition of immutable, bedrock permanence. On the one hand is the ever-changing sea. On the other is the singer whose pain would be lessened if she could achieve a more fluid state and become someone else, but who is convinced that she never will. The stark contrast falls apart, though, in Smith's performance. The pace of the first two lines suggests that there will be a four-beat vocal pause after the word "sea," but Smith rushes in with her apostrophe "my baby" and changes the lyric's emphasis a full measure early, knocking the listener's expectations off course.<sup>49</sup> The song's single most noticeable change, in other words, comes just before the singer insists that "there ain't no change in me," a coy mismatch of content and delivery that serves to underscore just how changeable the musical identity at the center of "Crazy Blues" actually is. A passing moment,



to be sure. But one that would be heard many times in the century to come, and not just on the unchangeable, endlessly repeatable record that Smith cut in 1920.

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If a song can persist in the behaviors it sets in motion, then “Crazy Blues” has been a constant presence in the nearly hundred years since it was first performed. Its standing as a song of the twentieth century would be assured even if it had done nothing other than open doors to artists of the same race and gender as Smith, with “Crazy Blues” living on in every subsequently recorded black woman’s voice. But its legacy is even larger than that, because its polyphonic expressions and effacements of identity were taken up, emulated, and echoed by any number of other singers and listeners, whether they were conscious of doing so or not. The song has always been recognized for the former, readily apparent achievement, but the latter one has been less remarked upon. This essay, then, will conclude by listening for “Crazy Blues” in two well-known, if perhaps unexpected performances by two very different acts. In one, a song is inspired by the music of black women, and it creates a space in which selfhood drifts. In another, a song by a white woman elicits critical musicking behaviors from its audiences, spurring them to listen for silent black voices. And for all that distinguishes them from one another, both songs can be thought of as part of the widespread, continually expanding historical context for “Crazy Blues.”

On October 17, 1963, the Beatles recorded “This Boy,” a song that would become the b-side for their “I Want To Hold Your Hand” single and that depended, in more than one way, on the music Smith had made possible in 1920. Like so much of what John Lennon and Paul McCartney had written up to that point, it paid homage to the sound of the Shirelles, the quartet of black women whose “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” had topped the American charts in 1961 (a first for an all-female group). According to a biographer, “No musical force beyond rock and roll was ever as crucial to the Beatles’ development” as the Shirelles were, and their influence had been obvious for some time.<sup>50</sup> The band had borrowed their practice of placing backup singers in the foreground, which allowed John, Paul, and George to remain vocally prominent regardless of who sang lead. They had covered Shirelles songs, and included renditions of “Boys” and “Baby It’s You” on their first LP. And they had been intrigued by what was to them a “vital immigrant mix” in the group’s artistry.<sup>51</sup> “Will You Love Me Tomorrow”

was a descendent of the syncretic “Crazy Blues,” a “cultural mash-up” jointly created by black female musicians, a black male producer, and a husband-and-wife team of Jewish American songwriters. That successful “mix” of musical identities suggested possibilities of escaping one’s own in song, and as had been the case on Smith’s record, the multifarious quality of the Beatles’ musical role models led to an enticing liminality in some of their work.

In a searching book on the Beatles, Devin McKinney writes that the band was “innocent of the sexual ambiguities they were splitting open” when they took up songs and styles that had been popularized by female singers.<sup>52</sup> Listening to the first verse of “This Boy” makes you wonder. It begins with the closest harmony the band had ever attempted, as three vocalists draw out a line: “That boy took my love away.”<sup>53</sup> No single voice distinguishes itself, and the meaning is opaque on first hearing. It is unclear whether there is one narrator or three, whether the address is outwardly or inwardly directed, or whether the “love” taken by “that boy” was an affectionate feeling (thus suggesting a relationship between the singer[s] and “that boy”) or an object of affection (thus suggesting a triangle of the singer[s], “that boy,” and someone else). For a moment, the song is a space of both queer possibility and the other kind, and while the rest of the verse straightens matters out some, the words remain slippery. The second line promises that the “boy” will “regret it someday,” and the third confesses that “this boy wants you back again.” The arrangement of the characters—a triangular one—is clearer now, but only a bit. The gender of the “you” is not specified here or anywhere else in the song, and the referent of “this boy” is not as obvious as he might be: again, there are three singing voices to choose from, and the use of a distancing indicative rather than a personal pronoun creates a blurred effect.<sup>54</sup> The verse is so fluid that fluidity seems finally to be its point, and in the song’s penultimate line, listeners are faced with a contradiction similar to the one that Smith had introduced into “Crazy Blues”: “this boy” tells “you” that he would be a faithful partner because he “would always feel the same,” but in a song that so undermines the presumption of a stable, singular self, the claim adds a twist rather than provides a resolution.

A little more than half a century later, on October 23, 2014, Taylor Swift’s album *1989* was reviewed by the *New York Times*, and the critic was hearing voices that weren’t there. The record was a change of direction for Swift, who had gotten her start in country: its title referred to the year of her birth, and its synthesizer-heavy production was meant to recall the anthemic ’80s pop of Madonna and Cyndi Lauper. But for all the album’s retro ambitions and historical specificity, the *Times*

reviewer argued that Swift had in fact made a bid for “timelessness” on *1989*, and had pursued it through an act of negation.<sup>55</sup> The songs were described as free of “contemporary references,” indifferent to the latest “microtrends,” and confident in their responses to an “implicit enemy,” namely, twenty-first-century “white pop stars” who had advanced their careers by “emulating black music.” Other white singers in Swift’s milieu might have courted audiences by collaborating with R&B and hip-hop artists, but she was “having none of that; what she doesn’t do on this album is as important as what she does.” African American cultural forms are presented in the review as snares that Swift had been wise to avoid, and her statement of purpose is located in the accompanying video for “Shake It Off,” the album’s lead single: it begins with Swift, costumed in b-boy attire, clumsily trying to keep pace “with all sorts of hip-hop dancers,” and its happy ending arrives when she “surrounds herself with regular folks, and they all shimmy un-self-consciously, not trying to be cool.” The music’s distinctiveness is said to lie in its normalcy, but in an oddity that will be familiar to any reader of Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, that quality can only be appreciated when compared to the black voices that represent its banished opposite.

The review presented Swift’s embrace of the ’80s as an escape from the “overtly hybrid” twenty-first century, but doing so required overlooking and explaining away a great deal. It had to account for Swift’s racialized sounds, not the least of which was a rap she delivered in the middle of “Shake It Off.” It had to refrain from mentioning the inconvenient fact that the album’s title evoked a year in which hip-hop enjoyed previously unknown mainstream popularity, after the epochal platinum releases of *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* and *Straight Outta Compton* in 1988. And perhaps most important of all, praising the album’s racial aporias required looking past the broader social debate that Swift’s music had sparked in the months leading up to the launch of *1989*. In a remarkably tone-deaf bit of timing, the hip-hop-burlesquing “Shake It Off” video had been released on August 18, squarely in the middle of nationwide protests that followed the shooting of a black man by a white cop in Ferguson, Missouri. In a moment when demonstrators had taken to the streets, hands symbolically in the air, to draw attention to racially discriminatory police practices, Swift’s engagement with African American performers—as people to be seen on the screen but not heard on the audio track—struck a nerve. Juxtaposed images of a white Swift (wearing a hoodie and hoisting a ghetto blaster) and a black Ferguson protestor (facing down a SWAT team) made the rounds online, the portrait of a nation that feasts on the signifiers of black culture while systematically degrading the material conditions of black lives. In both

the approving and outraged responses to Swift's music, though, the critiques were founded upon a question that "Crazy Blues" had posed nearly a century before: how should a song's absent voices be listened to? If the answers, in Swift's case, ranged between "not at all" in the *Times* and "a great deal more" in Ferguson, the act of speaking them united each side in a musicking process that audiences have been participating in for a very long time.

As I write these words, Swift is concluding a revealing Twitter exchange with the Trinidadian-born singer and rapper Nicki Minaj, and by extension with a much greater online public. Things have gone well for Swift lately: *1989* was warmly received by music writers and became the only platinum record of 2014. But she has not been entirely comfortable in her success. The conversation began when Minaj, feeling snubbed by an MTV awards program, complained of a music industry that "celebrates women with very slim bodies" and regretted that "Black women influence pop culture so much but are rarely rewarded for it."<sup>56</sup> Swift heard herself being spoken of in these tweets and responded, "I've done nothing but love & support you. It's unlike you to pit women against each other." "Didn't say a word about u," Minaj answered, "But u should speak on this," with "this" referring to the longstanding cultural norms she had drawn attention to at the start of it all. After a day of bad press, Swift apologized, saying, "I missed the point, I misunderstood, then misspoke." Left unanswered were the questions of whether Swift actually caught the point after having initially missed it, whether she will answer Minaj's call to become more engaged with intersectional politics, and whether one of the most popular singers in America and her millions of fans are prepared to listen for the long histories that, now as ever, manifest themselves in song. As the pushback Swift has received makes clear, the twenty-first-century media environment offers an extraordinary number of platforms and microphones for new voices to join, supplement, and redirect our musicking acts, on a scale that few could have foreseen in 1920. Will this open-access culture lead to more discussions of the pasts bound up in our songs, and could the songs that come of those discussions change our history? Only time will tell.

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#### NOTES

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