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The Song in the Tower of Academia

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The Song in the Tower of Academia

Abstract

This essay discusses the emergence of the song and the album as significant modern genres. It also follows my experiences of writing and playing songs while seeking to combine critical theory, personal essay, song-writing, music production, and on-line publishing. I have been working toward a form of writing that theorist Walter Benjamin calls “montage practice.” My work is similar to hyper-text prose, and combines recorded original songs with prose writing, photography, and video clips to make an illustrated poetry/ music/ essay form that expands our traditional understanding of genre to include the song and its amplification through the internet. Advances in computer technology and internet accessibility make this possible. My ongoing project has grown in collaboration with a group of musicians, The Karma Refugees, who get together to write and record songs. It has developed into a website where my study of poetry, personal essay, critical theory, and cultural theory meet. This article will include recorded music performance and visual montage.

Keywords

Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Bob Marley, singer/ songwriter,
internet, culture.

“Popular songs are the only form that describes the temper of the times... That’s where the people hang out. It’s not in books; it’s not on the stage; it’s not in the galleries.”

Bob Dylan in Michael Gray, *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*, (63).

Well my friends are all gone and my hair is grey
I ache in the places where I used to play

And I'm crazy for love but I'm not coming on
I'm just paying my rent every day in the tower of song.

Leonard Cohen, "Tower of Song"

The Song

Two events of this past fall have shone a bright spotlight on the song as a literary genre. The first of these was the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Bob Dylan, for "having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition"¹ and the second was the death of Leonard Cohen.² Salman Rushdie made this comment on Dylan's award:

We live in a time of great lyricist-songwriters—Leonard Cohen, Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, Tom Waits—but Dylan towers over everyone. His words have been an inspiration to me ever since I first heard a Dylan album at school, and I am delighted by his Nobel win. The frontiers of literature keep widening, and it's exciting that the Nobel Prize recognizes that.³

Rushdie's experience mirrors my own. I was in ninth grade when I heard Dylan for the first time. This motivated me to ask my parents for a guitar for Christmas. When my sister and I got guitars that year, the first song we learned to play was "Blowin' in the Wind."⁴ It seemed appropriate to me that Patti Smith chose to sing "A Hard Rain's A' Gonna Fall" from the same album at the Nobel Prize ceremony. These songs mark the beginning of my lifelong attachment to Dylan's work. I heard these songs as a teenager. Because they were so powerful and moving to me, I studied "Lord Randall" and other old ballads. In short, I became interested in literature because of Bob Dylan's songs. Wilfrid Mellers, professor of music and former *Scrutiny* literary critic, notes:

We talk nowadays as though the relationship between words and music constituted a problem; even as though there was a natural antipathy between them which composer and poet must overcome as best they may. Yet the separation of the two arts is comparatively recent, and the link between them would seem to be rooted deep in human nature.⁵

My path to the study of poetry and literature passed directly through the song.

The debate that arose in the wake of the Nobel announcement centered on the question, “Is the song literature?” For me, this is a non-question. My thoughts always centered on a counter question. In what ways are literary works derived from songs? My study of literature and culture began with Dylan.

I had been educated by Dylan; like so many, I became inspired to play the guitar. I learned about Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Medgar Evers, Hattie Carrol, and countless others from Dylan’s restless and relentless retelling of America; Dylan framed the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements for me. I was a young teenager and this became my world. It is only now, looking back, that I understand I was living through the emergence of the “singer/ song writer” as a cultural figure and the evolution of the song as an important form of contemporary art. Dylan was the catalyst behind this evolution. But when I had evolved and wanted to write my own songs, Leonard Cohen provided me with a direction. Dylan was always enlightening but his work was so vast it seemed beyond my reach. Leonard Cohen’s spare and melodic style was more personal to me. David Remnick notes:

Cohen’s links to Dylan were obvious—Jewish, literary, a penchant for Biblical imagery, Hammond’s tutelage—but the work was divergent. Dylan, even on his earliest records, was moving toward more surrealist, free-associative language and the furious abandon of rock and roll. Cohen’s lyrics were no less imaginative or charged, no less ironic or self-investigating, but he was clearer, more economical and formal, more liturgical.⁶

Edward Docx makes the comparison more explicit:

While Dylan’s lyrical gift is wild, copious, and immoderate, Cohen’s is precise, supplicatory and cloistral. Where Dylan rambunctiously inhabits the multifarious world, Cohen more often circles the many mortal contrarities that lie between the lovers’ bed and the altar – regularly, for him, the same thing. Where Dylan’s genius often has a

dizzying and effortless quality, Cohen's feels mesmerizingly measured. You have your Dylan days and your Cohen days, and they're very different.⁷

I had noticed the links all along but see them more clearly now. Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen are practitioners of the recently evolved and evolving modern genre. They are both charter residents of "The Tower of Song."

Since Leonard Cohen built "The Tower of Song" in 1988,⁸ the modern songwriter has an identity, a place to live, and a lot of us want to move into the neighborhood. The song is one of Cohen's most covered songs—by other songwriters.⁹ I guess we all think, ironically, "I was born like this. I have no choice. / I was born with the gift of a golden voice." Cohen's self-deprecating humor in this line also identifies another characteristic of the emerging singer/ song writer. There is no need for a golden voice; in blues, in flamenco, in reggae, the voice only needs to be real.

This paper follows my experience with the evolution of the song in a contemporary academic environment. It necessarily follows the development of the technology to produce and amplify the song. Thus, in addition to the writing, the making of a song implies the technical knowledge necessary to record and mix the music.

It is the creation and amplification of "the song" that makes it a significant evolution in literary art. For not only did "the songwriter" emerge as a cultural figure, but the reproduction and dissemination of "the song" completely transformed. I lived through this transformation. The first recording I made was on a two-track cassette tape machine. The second was on a four-track tape machine. The album recorded in 1998 by my band, The One Drop, was made on a thirty-two track tape machine. Now, however, I have access to almost unlimited tracks with almost unlimited memory on my digital computer. The making of a multi-track recorded song was once the sole province of the music industry and the recording studio was only open to the bands approved of and touted by those in charge. Now anyone can make a high-quality digital recording.

“Dusty Old Stuff”

I can remember when my family used to sing. Whenever my father’s family would gather for a holiday meal, the dinner would be followed by singing. Someone would go to the piano and a circle of adults and children would form. My grandmother’s favorite songs made up the set list of the day. A car ride with her would also lead to singing. My sister and cousins played guitar and so did I. The songs were old ones—not the work of the yet to emerge singer/ songwriters. There was no concept that these songs could be recorded or that they were anything more than the offerings of “drunk[s] in a midnight choir.”¹⁰

My sister sent me this picture of our grandparents when they were young. I can see the family singing in this photo. The woman who would become my grandmother, seated at the far left, lived in a large old two-story white house across the street from us when we were kids. My future grandfather holds a black guitar on his lap. The family told me that he held me on his lap but I don’t remember him. He died the year I was born. Apparently, the man in this picture was known as “Hammy” Opitz. My dad’s older brother, John, is a little kid so the time must be around 1910.



When I was ten years old, I worked for my grandmother doing yard-work, and other chores around the house for 50 cents a week. One day, while cleaning out junk from her garage, I found an old black guitar—missing two strings—buried in a pile of dusty old stuff. My dad told me it had been one of grandpa’s guitars and that once he had gotten in trouble for sliding down the stairs on it. This broken old relic became my first guitar. I can’t say that I cleaned it up much or put new strings on it or even that I studied guitar. It just became one of my “things.” I played it for hours—strumming it upside down in my odd left-handed way. There were no guitar hero idols; rock and roll was just beginning. There was no folk music; Bob Dylan was still in high school; Leonard Cohen was writing novels. Who knows what I was thinking? I was just fooling around making sounds and rhythms. I’m still doing that.

In an often quoted passage from his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin states: “When Abel Gance fervently proclaimed in 1927, ‘Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films... All legends, all mythologies, and all the myths, all the founders of religions, indeed, all religions ...await their celluloid

resurrection, and the heroes are pressing at the gates,' he was inviting the reader, no doubt unawares, to witness a comprehensive liquidation."¹¹ While Benjamin was speaking of the power of film to recreate culture, his insight could easily be applied to song. This is the reason to attempt the move to The Tower of Song, or to at least notice the tower from the ivory tower of academia.

In the early 90's, Dr. Thomas C. Daddesio (now retired from Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania) and I began the serious study of reggae music—using methodology drawn from semiotics and contemporary cultural theory. We had written and made presentations about reggae as a post-colonial discourse. We began to see songs as vehicles for important cultural material and world views. After a while, we decided to try to play the music. This gave birth to The One Drop band—a reggae, ska, soca, rock band that played around campus for eight years and released one album of original work (The One Drop, 1998).¹² Tom moved on to Pennsylvania and other members of the band graduated and also moved on. I played a few times solo or with one or two other musicians over the next several years. Then Tom and I reconnected with Mysterious Madame X, the main singer from the band, and Caitlin Brutger, former student, artist, and pianist. We experienced a harmonious moment making music and decided to get together to record original songs in the summers. We named ourselves “The Karma Refugees” after one of the first songs I wrote for The One Drop band. We've had these summer music sessions for the past four years and plan to keep doing it. We made most of the songs on this website at our summer recording sessions.

This year, filmmaker Emily Schoenbeck (CSB 2016) shot footage at our sessions. In the short films on the website, each member discusses how and why we make the songs each year. Also this year, we revisited the song, “Karma Refugee” and that song is our most recent posting. We see this as making cultural material. It has become possible to amplify our work using this website: www.mikejopitz.com¹³

Pieces of Stories

In “Author as Producer,” Walter Benjamin writes: “Before I ask: how does a literary work stand in relation to the relationships of production of a period, I would like to ask: how does it stand in them?”¹⁴ The answers to that question provide valuable self-reference; as a song maker, you learn where you stand in the system. You learn that you play a role in someone else’s narrative. My trip through music began with that old guitar and grew through multiple forms to reggae. As mentioned above, the song “Karma Refugee” is the first song I wrote for The One Drop, a small college town reggae band of the 90’s. For me, this opens a necessary dialogue. Benjamin continues: “This question aims directly at the function that the work has within the literary relationships of production of a period.”¹⁵ He begins the essay by noting that the debate in Plato’s *Republic*—whether or not poetry should be banished from the ideal state because of its power to corrupt the young—is fruitless and raises the wrong questions. If the word “literary” focusses narrowly on conventional writing, bound in books and “read,” then “what is literary?” becomes another empty question. In “The Age of Technological Reproducibility,” the meaning of “literary” has exploded as information has exploded. New genres, made more of fleeting, fragmentary images and cultural references than stories, find new ways of exploring the ruins of culture. A contemporary reading of Benjamin’s idea here can be extended to focus on “the song,” or “rap” among the emerging modes of expression. Because of the explosion in digital technologies, these forms are inherently reproducible. They are made of bits of information—fragmentary imagery and language, rhythms, sampled sounds of anything, altered sounds, melodies, and pieces of stories. Benjamin uses the newspaper as an example of how mass media enables a shift away from the literary or our common understanding of the story toward information. Benjamin writes of the newspaper, (but today this insight must include the internet and all forms of digital media that make this “the information age”): “For the reader is at all times ready to become a writer—that is a describer or even a prescriber.” That which was once the province of the wealthy (the publisher, the music company, the marketplace)—the power to describe life or to draw conclusions about social and economic conditions—has become diffuse. Through the purveyance of and demand

for information in late commodity capitalist media, “writing loses depth but gains breadth” and “the distinction between author and public” fades. Benjamin notes: “Literary competence is no longer founded on specialized training, but is now based on polytechnical education, and thus becomes public property.”¹⁶ This is the age of change that the singer-songwriter has emerged in and lived through.

The media Benjamin considered (radio, film, newspaper, photograph, telephone) today must include social media, the internet in general, and all its multiple attachments. Included among these attachments is recording software such as Mixcraft or Pro Tools. This allows anyone with a computer to have a recording studio at home. And internet companies such as Sound Cloud and Word Press allow for wide distribution of a song. We have had hits on our website from all over the world.

A final implication of this explosion means the economic bottleneck that made music a lucrative business has faded. A song, such as “Karma Refugee,” performed by a Midwestern college band, stands in these ruins and speaks of them. It does not need a publicity department to find an audience. The audience will be small, interesting, and not manipulated by a marketing plan.

In *One Way Street*, Benjamin’s fragmentary masterpiece that served as an inspiration to the surrealist artists, he states: “History breaks down into images not stories.” Picasso invoked shreds and fragments of culture rather than narrative to reflect the modern world. This famous aphoristic line can also be applied to the songwriter and the song.

The Album as a New Genre

In 2012 the Karma Refugees compiled our first grouping of the songs. The album as a form seems to be a genre that has emerged and waned in the age of technology. We had made and called our song sequence a virtual album, *Dreams and Visions*.¹⁷

Sweeping changes in consciousness have occurred almost before we noticed them. One of these changes is the rise and decline of “the album” as a cultural and economically profitable genre. Sometime around the emergence of *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* by The Beatles, the multimedia art form called the album was invented. The Beatles did not make a collection of hit songs for this album. Rather they created a complex network of stylistically and thematically related songs, presented in an artful package as one work. Combining the poetic insights and techniques of the lyrics with powerful African polyrhythms, amplified instruments, voices, and interesting cover art, the album happened when the technology to produce it became available. In order for a product like an album to become reified, its conception, production, and distribution must appear to be inexorably linked to “the music industry”—a particular branch of what Adorno and Horkheimer call “the culture industry.”¹⁸ The emergent genre of “the album” necessarily includes all the details of recording, production, advertising, and marketing. For a complex and powerful new genre, “the album,” to emerge at all, it had to emerge as a commodity. “The Album” became one of the new forms of expression, entirely connected to “technological reproducibility,” speaking of and to an increasingly fragmented world. Still, no matter how discordant and fragmented the messages of albums grew to be, the album somehow managed to find creative ways to hold things together on a single (or double, or triple) disk. Though the album has become a versatile and flexible form, it came into being as a thing, sold for a price, stored in a package, existing as a finished product.

Producing Cultural Material

I remember always feeling uncomfortable about the position of The One Drop, a college-town reggae band, in the relationships of production. Even on a small scale, we were producing cultural material and, reborn as The Karma Refugees, we are still doing that today. Because of the reggae we were playing and its uncompromising stance on social justice, the relationships of production became visible every time we played.

The One Drop often began a show with Willie Williams' roots reggae classic, "Armageddon Time." We knew and loved both the original version of this song and the Clash's cover of it. I remember the feeling of standing around on stage, checking the microphones, the effect pedals, the guitar wires, taping copies of the set list to flat surfaces, and just waiting for the click, click, click of the drum sticks and the big rolling start in B minor—guitar and bass riffs answered by the little keyboard bit in an instrumental call and response; then the song was rolling.

A lot of people won't get no supper tonight
A lot of people won't get no justice tonight
The battle is getting hotter
In this Iration, it's Armageddon time

A lot of people runnin' and hidin' tonight
A lot of people won't get no justice tonight
Just remember to kick it over
In this Iration, it's Armageddon time

The rolling rhythm carries the song. Sometimes we would play the Clash's contrapuntal guitar riff as a signal to begin a dub section of the song. Dub is a kind of producer's jazz where the main instrument is the recording console. The dub producer often removes tracks rather than adding them. Often our concept of soloing meant that instruments dropped out or used echo effects, thereby leaving space in the music—trying to create a rhythmic dub kind of feel. The Willie Williams version says "Just remember to praise Jahoviah." I think all of us felt more comfortable with the Clash's version, "kick it over." I personally took great delight in singing "kick it over." "It" really needs to be kicked over.

The irony of singing about people not getting supper when we ourselves had just eaten and our audience had not only eaten but had also begun drinking is an element of this experience. The line follows down the path of reggae lyrics like those of Bob Marley's "Them Belly Full (But We Hungry)." We wanted to evoke that image and that feeling. We started with this song to set a tone and a mood. We dubbed it out so people would feel the rhythm.

We typically ended with Bob Marley's great song of the economic exile, "No Woman No Cry."¹⁹ Because of the setting and milieu of reggae, it is not possible to play these songs without confronting the relationships of production. The songs name a world where "A lot of people won't get no supper tonight/ A lot of people won't get no justice tonight." Our music explored that world in poetic, sonic, kinetic ways.

Following Walter Benjamin's idea that memory and history leave us with only fragmentary images, last summer, The Karma Refugees gave a short live performance and revisited "No Woman No Cry." This song has been called a lullaby for a generation of children whose fathers left home and travelled long distances to find work. This is a song that I have played many times, often with Madame X singing the lead and me playing behind her. Each time is special. She sings:

I remember when we used to sit
In the government yards in Trenchtown
Observing the hypocrites
As they mingle with the good people we meet.

Bob Marley wrote the song to his bride as he was about to leave Jamaica for Delaware to work in a factory. As I play the song, I get images of people we have played for at local bars and concerts. We never sat together in an impoverished slum like Trenchtown. Rather, we were "observing hypocrites" and "good people" at Brother Willie's or at Sal's Bar and Grill or some outdoor concert in central Minnesota. The images are memories of people dancing to reggae or making meanings out of songs played in late night venues. Bob Marley, singing in the voice of the refugee, created an image of a man leaving his home and loved ones behind to seek work in a rich country. That image must certainly be one of the central themes of our times as multitudes of displaced people seek refuge in rich countries. The lyrics paint a picture:

And Georgie would make the fire light
Lotta wood burnin' through the night
And we would cook corn meal porridge
Of which I'll share with you
My feet are my only carriage

That's why I gotta push on through
But while I'm gone, seh
Everything gonna be alright.

It's obvious to recognize the theme of refuge and images of refugees in songs like "No Woman No Cry." But what of us, making and playing our songs in a small American college town. What are we refugees from? Songs like those of Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen among so many others raise these questions. What refuge do we seek through our songs?

Notes

1. Bob Dylan Nobel Prize announcement on *The Official Website of the Nobel Prize*. https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2016/announcement.html
2. Mikal Gilmore, "Leonard Cohen: Remembering the Life and Legacy of the Poet of Brokenness," *Rolling Stone*, November 30, 2016. Online.
3. Salmon Rushdie quoted in Eileen Cunniffe, *Nonprofit Quarterly*, October 14, 2016. Online.
4. Bob Dylan, *The Free Wheelin' Bob Dylan*.
5. Wildrid Mellers quoted in *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*.
6. David Remnick, "Leonard Cohen Makes it Darker," *The New Yorker*, October 16, 2016. Online.
7. Edward Docx, "Leonard Cohen in John Donne to Bob Dylan's Shakespeare," *The Guardian*, Nov. 19, 2016. Online.
8. Leonard Cogen, "The Tower of Song" from *I'm Your Man*, 1988.
9. Nick Cave, U2, me to name a few.

10. Leonard Cohen, "Bird on a Wire" from *Songs from a Room*, 1969.
11. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Ed. Michael Jennings, et. al. Harvard University Press, 1999.
12. *The One Drop*, produced by Gary Neyers, Uberaffe Records, 1998.

The band had many members over the years. At the time of this recording, the band included: producer and drummer, Gary Neyers, vocalist Mysterious Madame X, guitarist/vocalist Jeremy Corey, keyboardist Corey Rickheim, bassist Jason Hastings, and me. Tom Daddesio drove from Pennsylvania with a carload of percussion instruments and played bass and djembe on the album.

When Tom and I began to explore playing music, many of our students helped and collaborated with us. Other important members of the band over the years made great contributions to this project. Brooks Peterson taught me electric guitar and multi-track recording; Steve Shumaker played lead guitar on our first recorded tapes; Michelle Krueger was an early vocalist; Brian Rogers and Chris Rustad played guitar and drums with us on our earliest jam sessions; Diabra Stewart from Barbados played drums and sang with us for one year; Maria Stewart (no relation) played African hand drums in our final year. There were many more players over the years. The time was characterized by excellent campus bands and a wonderful, open attitude toward sharing equipment and ideas. Flynntown was still comprised of old houses and every

basement hosted a band or two. Music flourished in that scene.

12.

13. www.mikejopitz.com

14. Walter Benjamin, "Author as Producer," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms and Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Peter Demetz. Schocken Books, 1986, 81.

15. Benjamin, "Author as Producer," 81.

16. Benjamin, "Author as Producer," 83.

17. The Karma Refugees, *Dreams and Visions*. Prod. Opitz and Daddesio. Maltshop Records. (2012). <https://mikejopitz.com/album-dreams-and-visions/> The Karma Refugees are a loosely organized group of singers, players, and song makers. I still play guitar, sing (if you can call it that?), write most of the songs, and now I also produce some of the songs. Tom Daddesio lives in Pittsburgh, plays bass, produces songs and now is our webmaster. Mysterious Madame X has been a longtime collaborator and vocalist. When Caitlin Brutger joined us as a keyboardist in 2011, we began to form a tentative identity as a virtual band. Caitlin also provides visual art, vocals, and production. The differences between these two bands provide an interesting example of the changes that have occurred since the 90's.

18. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944) "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Transcribed by Andy Blunden 1998. Online.

19. Marley, Bob. "No Woman No Cry." Natty Dread, 1974.

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