

2011

“What Makes You Beautiful” One Direction

This is the second year I’ve added updates to this book, and I think there’s a lesson to be learned from *The Timetables of History*, an ambitious comparison of simultaneous events in politics, science, the arts, etc. from 5000 B.C. to its year of publication, 1946. It was updated in subsequent editions. I’ve learned a lot of historical perspective from that book, and a little editorial perspective. What a person can learn from the 1977 update, for instance, is that the important musical events were a number of prominent deaths such as those of conductors, a couple of national anthem adoptions, and Rudolf Barshai’s emigration to Israel. What my own readers can learn is that I’m no more likely to cover important Deadmau5 releases than *Timetables* was to cover *Never Mind the Bollocks*, although it does mention Elvis’s death, which is to *Timetables of History* as my including “What Makes You Beautiful” is to this book: the author couldn’t miss it, even by trying. I should be clear that I do like “What Makes You Beautiful”—that hook, “Everyone else in the room can see it” is very good—but I’m also listening for aesthetics across generations. The group Simon Cowell would have assembled in 1966, the Monkees, whom I love (R.I.P. Davy), worked very nearly within the same aesthetic. By contrast, going back another 45 years and comparing either Monkees or One Direction recordings to, say, Rudy Vallee’s is almost unimaginable. You run all that math and it’s interesting to wonder whether preteens of 2056 will be listening to producer-friendly EDM just because that’s where it’s all going, or whether the surprising message of One Direction is that rock music isn’t all that dead. Oh, I did take a little time to catch up on Deadmau5 songs I hadn’t heard, which is all of them, and I found one called “Ghosts N Stuff” that probably would have made my 2008 list.

“The Holograms” Fol Chen

One nice development of the twentyteens is Asthmatic Kitty Records, which I used to know only as the confusing logo at the bottom of Sufjan Stevens albums: isn’t he on a real label or something? AK is not only real, but home to a remarkable range of talent, producing adventurous material from the elaborate high concepts of Helsinki’s Pepe Deluxé to the bold, arty, near-electronic pop of Fol Chen. There are only a couple of lines in the song, repeated à la Laurie Anderson, but one is, “I’m so sorry, I’ve forgotten your name.” I know Laurie would approve. Insider sonics award: the sample piano with the decay hideously clipped by the noise gate, left in the mix at proud solo volume.

“Transamerica Pyramid” The Corner Laughers

The Corner Laughers are another exponent of the increasingly noteworthy pool of SF Bay Area musicians that also manifests as the Agony Aunts, the most recognizable common feature being increasingly noteworthy lead singer Karla Kane, although the grin-prolonging cleverness of the lyrics is as important an aspect of the branding. The vibe reminds me of Stuart Murdoch with Catherine Ireton in God Help the Girl, with the same gift for tying up a tight rhyme scheme with apparent effortlessness in the casual details: “All the Barracudas...going down Judah/With the slant-sixes purring like the dance mixes.” This was their March 2011 “single of the month,” and I believe I’m ready to sign up.

“Songcycle 2011 [section 6]” Todd Dillingham

Todd Dillingham’s musical world gives the initial impression of being so deep in reclusive folk-psychedelia that there’s just no chance of it making sense amidst a punchy best-of-year collection, least of all a year that’s pretty far from 1972. The guest star here, for instance, is Pete McCabe, whose “The Man Who Ate the Plant,” the crown jewel of Bill Szymczyk’s utterly offbeat Tumbleweed Records (oh to find a copy of “Colorado” by Danny Holien), must have sold in the single digits. The wonder of this isn’t that it’s so good, but that it’s so pro, with arrangement depth that commands a devotion of the ears on its own terms, the comparison that continually springs to mind being to *Rock Bottom* by Robert Wyatt. Apparently another secret weapon here is the “orchestrations” of fellow gifted eccentric Wim Oudijk.

“No Church in the Wild” Kanye West & Jay-Z

Voltaire said, “Judge a man by his question rather than his answers,” and Kanye is a powerful enough lyricist to knock you out with these three quick punches: “What’s a mob to a king?/What’s a king to a god?/What’s god to a non-believer?” That’s respectable anthropological deconstruction, and Jay-Z keeps pace heavinesswise with “Tears on the mausoleum floor/Blood stains the coliseum doors.” And Plato. And Socrates. And Jesus. It all makes me slightly disappointed that I don’t really feel like working out what their answers to these questions are, not so much because they don’t cohere, which to some extent they don’t, but because I’m afraid of them cohering as more rejection of the morality of the weak in favor of something merely more self-serving, better tuned to having impressionable kids idolize these guys because they can imagine shooting their own mouths off and lording their own advantages over someone. Still, in pop lyrics, effrontery is good enough if you do it just right, just as on the musical end, sounding like *The Wall* is good enough if you do it just right.

“I’ll Be Waiting” Adele

If there are people who are only so enraptured by Adele but are pretty big fans of *Dusty in Memphis*, I wouldn’t want them to miss “I’ll Be Waiting.” It must be said that Adele is probably the vocalist of the year unless it’s Merrill Garbus of Tune-Yards, and I’ll admit I was doing that thought experiment at a time when I assumed Merrill was a black male. I’m realizing that Adele has an unusually listenable vocal style for a giant star. The rule, especially for women, seems to be that if you don’t overdo, you don’t get noticed. There’s a little bit of Billie Holiday when the vibrato shatters into the rasp, which reminds me that a song where a woman hopes a man will take her back because now she’s changed

has been a long time coming.

“Hour of the Idiot” Meat Puppets

I don't quite want to say that with the Lydian, too-many-fourths vocals, the Meat Puppets sound like they've suddenly been influenced by Alice in Chains, but maybe they've accidentally made me appreciate how for them, deciding to suddenly be influenced by Alice in Chains would almost be brilliant. I'll instead say this dense, fussy, synthesizer-emulsified production is so crazy and wrong it might have made me pay attention to Alice in Chains.

“Go Right Ahead” Sondre Lerche

My wife Kristine introduced me to the wordsmithy—and slightly Smithy—Norwegian Sondre Lerche, and I thought of him as a pretty obscure find, even a little on the difficult side with his wash of sevenths, sixths, augmented this, and diminished that. But that was a couple of Letterman appearances ago, and he's a little less difficult nowadays, if a lot less obscure. Not to take a thing away from the records, but it's hard not to do a double take at the unexpected fullness and precision of both his live vocals and his live guitar, so don't miss those.

“Born Alone” Wilco

This is a curious set of lyrics. It gives the impression of being non-sequiturs used to fill out what might have been their best melody ever and then just left there for the heck of it rather than teased into making sense. What's left in the apparent inchoate state seems to shake out as a meditation on ultimate concerns. It doesn't sound like it's striving toward religion but lo and behold, there are “gospel” and “divine” and “mine eyes” a couple of times, where originally what mine eyes have seen was the coming of the Lord. Besides the title line, “I was born to die alone,” I like the phrase, “Subtract the silence of myself”; I wouldn't go so far as to say they clarify the point, but maybe it's kind of like: how do you become alone when you die if you're subtracting the experience of aloneness?

“Modesto Waltz” Rachel Taylor Brown

We want death contemplation! We want death contemplation! In this song, Rachel Taylor Brown, who sounds great on the second of the two records of hers I've heard, is listening to carrion birds circling and trying to talk her into dying: “It's easy to go/To lay down the host/Drop the body/Keep the ghost.” This is a bluesy waltz-time piano number with high gloss backing vocals, all vaguely recalling the Delta Rhythm Boys doing “Dry Bones” in some way I wouldn't attempt to justify. Her response: “It's a blue green glorious day/I thought I had many things to say/But maybe I don't.”

“Machu Picchu” The Strokes

My big bright idea to discover good 2011 songs was going to be Pandora. Kristine and I hear a lot of good music at our favorite sushi restaurant and we found out it wasn't radio or subscription content, it was Pandora. But my own attempt was laughably unsuccessful; I'm trying to recall the exact words of the very last recommendation explanation before I gave up, but it was very close to, “Here is another soft rock song with a lot of repeated words.” What sorcery is this that can read my very soul? I still like Pandora

(sushi), but I have to credit my wife's use of Spotify for turning this up—maybe she just has better taste so she gets better correlations for the suggestions. The Strokes are one of those artists I lose track of just because who can keep up with everyone, but they can sure always surprise you with a gem. I love the development on this one. There's the million-dollar guitar riff—you'll know the one—but it doesn't seem that gripping the first time it happens, it just sails across the very nice dubby verse. But this song is “looking for a mountain [it] can climb,” and the production works powerful magic when it reappears, and the whole ends up being quite an exciting ride.

“Kill the Killjoy” The Disciplines

The jangle on the opening guitar chord is worth appreciation all by itself, with a universe of mysterious overtones you barely hear, not unlike the first chord of “A Hard Day's Night.” The big sound, positive message, and second-to-none melodic instincts make this my 2011 party anthem, for when I'm Detroit-leaning down 101 in my Prius and just need to get things sick!

“Jesus Fever” Kurt Vile

Let's get the Jesus-reference-to-sound-spiritual-yet-ironic warning out of the way, and get right to that delicious acoustic guitar line. Civilization depends on folks like Kurt coming up with one of these every so often; it would be worthy of Johnny Marr in the emotion-tugging arpeggio and Alex Chilton in the wacko not-in-the-key notes that make an impossible resolution. The instrumentation is in fact so generally lovely you never have to worry about the lyrics anyway, and after the fairly decent first line, “I'd pack my suitcase with myself/But I'm already gone,” don't worry too much about your attention wandering back to that mighty pretty guitar.

“Alligator Aviator Autopilot Antimatter” R.E.M.

Who is this Peaches person? I would want to keep replaying this just to hear her backing vocals, but I also want to keep replaying it as a beautiful sixties+nineties rocking way to remember the great R.E.M., who took me by surprise announcing this to be the last album from the most important band of the last three decades. Michael Stipe is at his lyrical best when he sounds like he's summoning all his power to say something confused and pointless, bringing a new point into the world, the point of view of the person no one listens to. Thank you, Michael. This alligator was not a hater.

“A Slanted Tone” F*ed Up**

For old time's sake, Dan Vallor hipped me to another winner, a surprisingly layered, precise, and emotionally nuanced ensemble by any standard, certainly by the standard of bands that do cookie monster vocals and nonstop hardcore punk fuzz guitar, which F***ed Up does. But, f*** me, they are f***ing awesome. The words are carefully crafted, not just an explosion of intense feelings: “He raised a trumpet to his mouth; the sound of every voice tumbled out. When he stretched the canvas into his frame he painted everyone with the same brush.” What does it f***ing mean? The album is a f***ing rock opera and I think this might possibly be the main character's assessment of an unreliable narrator, maybe as an artistic means of exploring the phenomenology of a created being. Or not. F*** if I know.

“Daisy” Curtains for You

Curtains for You were the opening band of a show Kristine saw, and upon some YouTube research, we immediately latched onto this tremendously melodic song. It's a confirmed classic around our house, and should be everywhere. Matthew Gervais's resonant vocals remind me a little of Rufus Wainwright, reinforced by the occasional Cole Porterish turns of the chord progression, and the literacy you might expect from that description is not missing: “Our whole life's condensed into short sentences/Just two daisies trying to fit in/ In this rose garden.” If you'd told me that was a lost line from T.S. Eliot's “Burnt Norton,” I probably would have believed it.

“Paradise Is Not So Bad” Lifeguards

The reunion of the Tobin Sprout Guided By Voices is exciting for sure, but I must divert attention to the other 2011 Robert Pollard album (what, two albums in one year from Robert Pollard?), which is a collaboration with the most excellent Doug Gillard, from the Cobra Verde GBV lineup. It's not like there are hundreds of heavy guitar riffs vying for the crown in 2011, but this would have been the winner even in some years with a Led Zeppelin album, and that's not even the best part, which is the verse B part that goes, “Stuck in the middle of the guest list free for all debutante ball/John, are you ready? No, I am ready to go home.” I love this little lyric detail: one personage in what I take to be a chaotic concert setting is “the flashlight on your feet guy.”

“Gangsta” Tune-Yards

The Village Voice “Pazz and Jop” critics' poll is probably the most authoritative conferrer of hipster standing, and Pazz and Jop winner Tune-Yards is the act of the year to upset people who make a living seeing through hipster phenomena. But there's just no toehold there; the stuff is too good on every level. At the very least, the *whokill* album opener “Bizness” does the best Bobby McFerrin ever, inclusive of Bobby McFerrin, and is a swell song, too. “Gangsta” is probably the best purely musical achievement in the 2011 song set if you don't count pop accessibility, and it's actually plenty accessible—if you can't take this, you'll probably want to regift the book you're reading. I always find myself rooting for jazz, saxophone, and right-size freakout passages to make a comeback, and we are on message in all those departments, including the right-size.

“The Valley” Okkervil River

Critics are talking more about the way abstract lyrics make them feel, and I like that, and I do it, but sometimes it makes me think people don't understand how high the bar has been set. It's a little weird being so reverent about Will Sheff, because he's kind of an over-emoting doofus in a lot of the places on YouTube you're going to land when you search for him, but he is the lyricist setting the bar. The money I'll put where my mouth is would be “On Tour with Zykos,” which is sensational from start to finish, but if you don't find “God knows I just want to/Make this white lie big enough to climb inside with you” sensational, again, maybe regift. You have to appreciate his facility with quietly shared emotions to appreciate how radical the 2011 album *I Am Very Far* is. It's the best and most genuinely disturbing album lyric set I've heard in some time, and much of the music is so arch I don't like it, but before you've simply had too much pounded out of you, the first song is pure welcome martial arts. All on a single chord, almost a literal military

march, it details with utter brutality the slit throats, skinned corpses, and last roads out of cities for us who are “fallen in the valley of the rock and roll dead.” The bizarre outcome is that you will actually find yourself joyously chanting, “We are fallen in the valley of the rock and roll dead,” by the way, as well as relishing the sheer size of the drums, organ, and Norman Whitfield-mode unison strings on this monster. And go read the rest of the album’s lyrics, which are amazing, while I continue to try to get used to the music.

“Romance” Wild Flag

My number ones aren’t always grand finales, are they? A lot of times they’re sensitive or innovative, but that’s different. Wild Flag’s “Romance” is a little sensitive and a little innovative, but it’s mostly grand finale. It starts off somewhat deceptively as a sequenced synthesizer line and builds a melody-line vocabulary using mostly the history of girl groups as raw material. (The members have been in A-list groups themselves, though if you’re like me the flipout is that singer Carrie Brownstein is the girl in *Portlandia*.) It’s certainly not their only trick; another excellent song from the album, “Endless Talk,” evokes a different, more new-wave and slightly more male pop history tracing through the Cars back to Buddy Holly, and sometimes they don’t seem to be caring about history at all. But when they do, they’re frighteningly good at it. “Hey hey, can you feel it?” is the first appearance of the main motif: the Go-Go’s. It’s nice enough that anyone would write an unflinching Go-Go’s song, but when that chorus revs, you realize they have bigger plans. Yes, you just have to hear it, but, really, you almost don’t; the momentum is implicit in the sheer layout of the words: “Hands down we like, we like what we like/Hands down we like, we love, we choose you.” Just the horsepower and propulsion of that is overwhelming. Hands down. We’re sure. We repeat it. We agree. “Like” turns to “love” turns to making a choice, a commitment that it’s you. All the lines go by fast, like this brightest of the flashes: “We dance to free ourselves from the room.” Verse 2 starts, “Back when I had no story, nothing to form me/You got under my skin.” Perfect—that’s what romance (the title) is: a story. You make me exist romantically by putting me in a story, and the music is the story, and “Sound is the blood between me and you.” I think it is, too.

