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The poetry of rock: song lyrics are not poems but the words still matter; another look at Richard Goldstein’s collection of rock lyrics

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It’s 1969 and an eighteen year-old is going up to university to study English Literature. His mind is full of possibilities, standing at the beginning of an imagined world of books and music, walking through the old town with a mind full of Keats and Shelley and a heavy greatcoat and flowing hair to match. Against the wall in his rooms are stacked LPs by Leonard Cohen, Procol Harum, The Doors and, of course, Dylan. The bookshelf has most of the canon of English poetry, together with translations of Rilke, Rimbaud and Dostoyevsky and a recently read The Doors of Perception. A new book has been added since arriving at university; the pocket-sized Bantam imprint of Richard Goldstein’s The Poetry of Rock. This has been our young student’s constant companion of late, alongside academically sanctioned volumes of the Romantic poets and others in the canon that answer his needs for existential questioning and introspection. He feels the words of these serious new musicians should also be seen as valid poetry and Goldstein’s volume is doing the important job of legitimising the voices of these young (mostly) men for him.

So, why return now to a book that seems to be so very much of its time? The reason is that it signalled a move to valorising elements of pop that had previously been taken for granted. The idea of foregrounding the lyric became worthwhile to a certain type of serious, engaged listener; this was at a time when the position that pop and rock music occupied in people’s lives and minds was changing. Simply put, as can be seen from the place song words occupied in our young student’s life: song lyrics now mattered. But why?

Lyrics in pop have always been the subject of attention, with writers like Peatman (1943), Mooney (1954) and Horton (1957) focusing on lyrics and undertaking ‘content analysis’. Taking their musical starting points in the generic themes of Tin Pan Alley songs, these writers concentrated only on what the words of songs were saying, generally variations on themes of love and modern courtship. As Frith (1990, p. 2) says: ‘This appealed to empirical sociologists because it employed
an apparently scientific method’. However, by the 1960s, lyrics had begun to work in different ways and deal in a far wider range of subject matter. Post-Dylan, subjects that were previously the premise of literature and more particularly, poetry – whether that meant the mystical declarations of William Blake or the amphetamine-driven outpourings of Ginsberg or Kerouac – were now likely to appear in a rock lyric; have a look at any page in the second half of The Poetry of Rock for evidence of this. As such, song lyrics now fulfilled a new set of functions for a new audience.

A difference in the engagement with lyrics was signalled by Goldstein’s collection; it was the beginning of the time when the rock and pop fan could situate their tastes alongside more ‘high’ cultural values. Where, in the previous decade, the sophisticated consumer would have probably aligned themselves with jazz or folk or Sinatra’s finely wrought ballads, now rock was providing an aesthetic vocabulary for the more (self-defined) ‘discerning’ fan. Leaving aside a degree of snobbery in this (the same mindset that caused Dylan fans to baulk at his electric work because it seemed to them to be a more vulgar form of rock and roll, not allowing them to hear – as many a grandparent used to complain – the words), there was now an element of substance and layers of meaning in many rock lyrics. From my experiences teaching many years of undergraduates in popular musicology, the esteem artists like Morrissey, Joni Mitchell, Thom Yorke or India Arie are held in – for all the value their music is acknowledged as possessing – has most to do for their listeners with their words, in what their lyrics say. One need only to search for a lyric online in one of the many sites – brash and loaded with online advertising – that provide this service to see the demand from the music audience to be able to read back a lyric. Obviously, this need is the same one that was being answered in a rather more gentle fashion with The Poetry of Rock.

The physical condition of any edition you may find will tell you something of its historical position; having not been reprinted for several decades, the extant copies are always yellowed or dog-eared, or both, as befits a possibly valuable but nonetheless largely forgotten object. The cover of the 1969 Bantam edition is emblematic of so many counter-cultural, ‘feed your mind’ clichés; a vaguely Revolver-like image of a long-haired type with their head full of acoustic guitar-toting people in as many colours as a slender printing budget of a late 1960s paperback would allow. The first point to make about The Poetry of Rock is that what it seems to be saying is as significant – as Goldstein eloquently argues in his introduction – as what he tells us it is saying; ‘Is John Lennon’s wordplay truly Joycean? Is Bob Dylan the Walt Whitman of the jukebox? In a sense, assertions like these are the worst enemy of liberated rock’ (Goldstein 1969, p. 11). If we leave aside the countercultural nods and nudges in this (‘enemies of liberated rock’), he makes a robust and valid point, but when later in the collection, talking about the song ‘Sally Go Round the Roses’, Goldstein suggests that its ‘ambiguous refrain almost seems cribbed from an obscure corner of Waiting for Godot’ (ibid., p. 34), the comparison seems mainly concerned with asking for high culture legitimacy. In his introduction, Goldstein notes that in some early rock lyrics like The Silhouettes’ ‘Get a Job’, vowel sounds work as primal signifiers and expressions of emotion. He then goes on to seek to affirm this practice by linking it with the avant-garde high art practice of concrete poetry. Later in his selection of more contemporary lyricists, he completely misses the link from The Silhouettes’ doo wop lineage to James Brown, surely a very obvious candidate for canonisation as a concrete soul poet; his inchoate grunts and wordless howls being one of his primary tools in lyrical communication. However, for all the insight of
its introduction, the book still promotes the thing Goldstein is astute enough to qualify – namely, that if we can prove a ‘depth’, ‘intelligence’, and certain ‘poetic’ characteristics, then these words will qualify to stand alongside the legitimised canon of high poetic art. But within the fabric of the book itself this idea is constantly undermined by the many examples of rock lyrics acting up with an eye on the academy, exemplified by Jim Morrison’s overblown ‘Horse Latitudes’. On record, the words are articulated in the style of a poem read by a poet, with all attendant stylistic clichés; the grave recitation, framed in flowing hair and dark clothes, playing up to his role as ‘The Lizard King’. The words themselves are an exercise in grandiloquent poeticism. Morrison’s ‘poetry’ is placed alongside some rather over-wrought lyrics from Keith Reid, whose sole job in Procol Harum was to write the words. Even though there had been a very long tradition of words being written by lyricists alone, in the newly emerging context of the rock lyric an occasionally spurious adoption of ‘higher’ weight and meaning became de rigour and prefigured some of the worst excesses of 1970s rock words, not least the mandatory gatefold sleeve containing the all-important lyrics which ache to be read as standalone poems.

Simon Frith highlights exactly this issue with The Poetry of Rock and several subsequent collections: ‘Rock “poets” are recognised by a particular sort of self-consciousness; their status rests not on their approach to words but on the types of word they use’ (Frith 1988, p. 117). So Goldstein – like most of his contemporaries – misses a trick in not recognising Lou Reed’s song work in the Velvet Underground. Here was a body of eminently literate lyrics that chimed convincingly with many contemporary literary concerns, casting a cold eye on the darker elements of society and human behaviour. This without bringing to bear the fact that one of the major visual artists of the late twentieth century was the producer and sleeve artist for their first album, The Velvet Underground and Nico. Ultimately for the rock-lyrics-as-poetry apologists, his words were deemed to be not ‘poetic’ enough according to a very eighteenth-century notion of the form; where the work was always located in a pastoral, idealised, and generally ‘poetic’ place and articulated in a more formal linguistic style. This point was also noted and examined by Frith in his analysis of songs as texts where he argues that the anthologist’s perception of rock lyrics was stuck in a set of ‘middlebrow criteria the New Criticism successfully drove out of the academy in the 1930s’. (Frith 1996, p. 117). Robert Christgau, in a piece entitled Rock Lyrics Are Poetry (Maybe) from 1967 (revised 1968), predating The Poetry of Rock itself, acknowledges these contradictions and highlights one of the most useful ideas in later writing on song words (Frith 1988; Griffiths 2003). He points out presciently that ‘Poems are read or said. Songs are sung’ (Christgau 1967). He concludes by linking the work of lyricists and singers of song words to an almost lost bardic tradition, where their function was to speak to a new, non-literary, audience, which anticipates the demand and subsequent appearance of The Poetry of Rock.

Where the collection also shows its allegiances is in the choice of artists: a massive preponderance of white, male, rock artists, drawn from the members of the new counter-cultural orthodoxy – Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Leonard Cohen and their ilk as well as Jefferson Airplane’s Grace Slick, the sadly inevitable token female. This is introduced by a selection of lyrics from the then newly emerging canon of early rock and soul greats. A look at some of the artists not included is revealing to contemporary ears. No Smokey Robinson, Joni Mitchell, Marvin Gaye, Sly Stone or Ray Davies and many more notable omissions.
However, for all its shortcomings, the importance of the book was its role as a marker for the emerging breakdown of the divisions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural practice that was gathering pace at the time. Where it had previously been very easy to characterise the rock lyric as formulaic and in step with cultural norms of love and life, now there was a real case for it having the spiritual and emotional muscle to express wider and deeper needs in an audience. There soon emerged a body of critical work dealing with lyrical analysis. Arguably beginning with Michael Gray’s *Song and Dance Man: The Art of Bob Dylan*, there is now a flourishing micro-industry around the dissection of Dylan’s lyrics (although, oddly, not many other artists). An eminently sensible and clear-thinking look at these ‘Dylan-as-poet’ approaches is provided in Keith Negus’ study of Dylan as a performing artist (2008). Negus articulates clearly the bewilderment and disconnection with lyrical analyses like that of Christopher Ricks, who, when looking at the lyrics of ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’, claims the song has ‘the wisdom to mock not only the complacencies of Polonius but the inverted (cynical) complacencies of Hamlet, who first mocks and then kills Polonius’ (Ricks 2003, p. 257). Negus notes wearily – in the face of such over-cooked theorisation – that ‘I’m not sure it’s the same song I know …’ (Negus 2008, p. 100). This is something that Ricks clearly acknowledges at the very beginning of his book (Ricks 2003, p. 1) by playing off of Dylan’s quote about critics who ‘dissect my songs like rabbits’ (Crowe 1985, p. 33) against William Empson’s assertion, when a student, that he could produce ‘an endless swarm of rabbits’ from a Shakespeare sonnet. Ricks points out that this can only be done if the poem ‘truly teems’ (Ricks 2003, p. 1) and the critic ‘seems to be a conjurer’ (his italics, *ibid*). So, the provenance of Dylan’s lyrics and Ricks’ knowing relationship to their meanings is deftly and elegantly stated. This makes the book a *tour-de-force* of literary critical analysis, as befits the then Professor of Poetry at Oxford, but still leaves the reader feeling that they have learned more about Ricks than Dylan.

Dai Griffiths has also foregrounded lyrical analysis, but has pursued a different and more systematically analytical path. Rather than simply look at the words as though they were standalone texts, he adopts a more holistic approach, taking into account what one could call the ‘sung factors’ in a lyrical analysis as his starting point. So, he looks at rock lyrics in terms of their position in what he calls ‘verbal space’ (Griffiths 2003, p. 43). He also characterises song words in terms of their qualities as ‘lyric’, exemplified by Belle and Sebastian and their attention to ‘classic’ lyrical form and detail or ‘anti-lyric’ in relation to Underworld’s work and their fractured, ‘cut-up’ style of writing. (*ibid.*, pp. 58, 59). In the same piece, Griffiths references Theodor Gracyk’s comment that ‘in rock music most lyrics don’t matter very much’ (Gracyk 1996, pp. 65, 63) using the elliptical song and dance man himself to prove his point; he quotes Dylan, saying ‘whatever I do … it’s not in the lyrics’ (*ibid.*). So with even Dylan himself refusing to come to the stand in the defence of song words, the difficulties for anyone in claiming their provenance is clear. Notwithstanding the fact that Dylan can be called on to claim the exact opposite to this elsewhere, in his own practice he clearly recognises and values the movement of a lyric. One line of Dylan’s development is from his involvement in the ‘folk revival’, a style which drew strongly on the folk ballad tradition, where the lyric was always foregrounded. In this strophic, story-telling form, the words carry a narrative meaning, requiring them to be heard and understood on some level in order to communicate. These songs were originally performed unaccompanied, and therefore the
singer and the song lyrics were the focus of the work. Also, even when folk lyrics exhibited fractured, symbolic and non-contiguous meanings, the movement of the words is key, as Negus’ discussion of ‘Barbara Allen’ bears out (Negus 2008, p. 118).

To go back to Simon Frith’s discussion of songs as texts; as well as noting the obvious area of a lyric as words containing literal semantic meaning, he characterises song words as ‘speech acts’ utilising ‘rhetoric’ (his italics) (Frith 1996, p. 159). So, they function more in the way of plays than as poems. Along with this he highlights the importance of ‘voice’ (ibid.); the sound and personality of human utterance. Useful as these perspectives are, one result of their very cogency has been to largely occlude a fertile area of meaning and significance in analysis. There is a sense that research into the meaning of song words is circumscribed due to some obvious shortcomings in earlier analytical approaches. So, even though song words are now rightly designated as ‘speech acts’ (and not poems), they nonetheless very often have a primary weight for the listener because, arguably, words have greater resonance for us than sounds, notes or musical textures – hence, *The Poetry of Rock*.

The point is that, for all its naivety and pretension, Goldstein’s collection still has the beginning of a valid point to make. Namely, that there is much in a rock lyric beyond its tone and expression. Frith’s articulation of the ways in which a rock lyric functions has been vital but seems to have created a new orthodoxy in relation to the popular music lyric that needs to be balanced with a continuing close attention to song words but without falling into the analytical dead end of treating rock lyrics as though they are poems (as with writers such as Ricks or Gray).

There is an element here where my own practice as a singer, songwriter and performer has informed an understanding of the importance of song lyrics. As a musician I have made records with and without words. There is for me a greater value to those compositions with lyrics, a sense that the material that contains the greatest level of emotional commitment is always that where words are employed. In performance, the moment one opens one’s mouth and sings, this commitment feels borne out, feels like an investment in communication, in contrast to when playing an instrument, where, no matter how expressionistic the playing is attempting to be – and I have also thrown myself into all manner of Albert Ayler-esque guitar explorations – the sense of bodily commitment feels less. In a straightforward sense, when using words in a song, I as the singer am declaring myself in the sense that words are a more actual, concrete expression of feeling. Many times I’ve witnessed performances where the singer/guitarist stops singing and explores the composition on his instrument – at this point there is a distance created from the audience. A closeness is re-established when the words begin again; indeed, that many improvisations on a song in a popular music performance are bookended by a return to a final sung verse is surely no accident in view of this. There is clearly an element of subjectivity in this, but within the larger framework of lyrical meaning and provenance I have outlined, it does, I believe, contain an objective truth.

As the words of ‘Farther On’ by Jackson Browne drift over from my iPod shuffle and he sings: ‘In my early years I hid my tears/And passed my days alone/Adrift on an ocean of loneliness/My dreams like nets were thrown/To catch the love that I heard of/In books and films and songs/Now there’s a world of illusion and fantasy/In the place where the real world belongs/Still I look for the beauty in songs’ – I can hear the movement of sung words that engages one urgently in the communicative act; words are, after all, what we use to communicate in creative musical practice our deepest and most profound feelings. In the manner of their use in formalised social
situations, think of how a funeral oratory will be spoken, possibly sung. The primal expressions of grief, the howls and grunts belong to a different kind of sung expression, a different use of voice and words. Obviously, there is a long lineage of music where this type of use of language is foregrounded; where the human voice as opposed to words themselves comes into play (and, needless to say, there isn’t a clear and always definable line between these two functions). In the end, however, words – as opposed to sound – have a sense of the personal for the listener; the idea of someone addressing them. People’s engagement with certain lyricists seems tied up with this notion of personal address; witness, for example, the devotion and regard the words of The Fall’s Mark E. Smith are held in, despite being barely comprehensible in any linear way. Also, as noted by Negus (2009), song words have an ability to live in the head long after the song has stopped being listened to. The grain of the voice of the singer and their words, sung and intoned, are replayed and played with long after the listening event.

There is also a link with an older, pre-twentieth-century poetry that was designed to be spoken out and remembered, in the way that popular song is now. If one listens to recordings of poets such as Robert Browning, Alfred, Lord Tennyson or W.B. Yeats, the musical, oratorical and incantatory nature of their recitation is clearly apparent in their delivery. Like singers today, this allowed the words' meanings to live in the listeners’ mind in their remembered state and further meanings to emerge through this interaction.

So, words when they exist within a song, sung, have a provenance and function that needs to be looked at above and beyond their place within the sound palette of a track. While acknowledging and utilising the perspectives of Frith and Griffiths with regard to performance and articulation, it seems to me that the closer study and attention to the words of songs could be very valuable in deepening our understanding of how the popular song functions without resorting to the head-full-of-rock-and-roll-poetry apologia that Goldstein’s dated but well-meaning collection does.

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