

MUSIC IN  
REVIEW



T I M O T H Y Y O U N G

As a creative race, we may have reached a high point on 13 October 2016 when the star chamber for approved cultural signifiers, the Norwegian Nobel Committee, announced that its prize for literature would be awarded to Bob Dylan. The Nobel Prize is given for a particular kind of literature, the sort that moves the reader and provides phrases that can be kept in memory for insight and inspiration – lines from Munro and Saramago and Jelinek and Neruda and Morrison. Dylan’s lyrics may be the easiest kind to retain, since they are set to music, a generally successful mnemonic combination. It might be too much to think that this award resolved all arguments about popular music, for which Dylan’s output stands as a pinnacle of the genre in its imaginative expanse, being a true art form. But at least it may finally settle the question of whether popular music can and should be taught to high school students alongside Shakespeare. Anyone who attended public high schools in the United States in the late 1960s may remember the genre of youth-focused textbooks that included lyrics by Simon and Garfunkel next to the poems of T. S. Eliot and cheer Dylan’s laureate.

Because the sense of what *literature* is has been expanded to

encompass a wider range of artistic verbal expression, it seems that now might be a good moment to change the name of the award to the Nobel Prize in *Rhetoric*. All writing uses rhetoric, of course, but creative (or, as a professor of mine liked to call it, “nonutilitarian”) writing is buoyed by rhetoric. Popular music is one of the most easily accessible repositories of rhetorical devices. Mind you, you’re not likely to often encounter the really fun ones, such as zeugma or apophasis, but you will find the grab bag of easy-to-remember tools that we were taught early on: metaphor, simile, and hyperbole.

Bob Dylan is a master of a particularly effective rhetorical device, balancing one of his best-loved songs on a metaphor, “Like a Rolling Stone.” Other songwriters dive equally deeply into word-play. Van Morrison built one of his most pointedly romantic songs around the comparison of his love (and the quest for social justice) to Tupelo honey. Tom Waits worked unashamedly with personification in the 1970s when he sang: “The piano has been drinking, / my necktie is asleep; / And the combo went back to New York, / the jukebox has to take a leak.” A master class can be taught using the work of John Prine, who came up with the simple “The air’s as still / As the throttle on a funeral train” (“Mexican Home”). Even the honest poetry of Ferron relies on figures of speech, as in her classic “Ain’t Like a Brook”: “But life don’t clickety clack down a straight line track / It comes together and it comes apart.”

While these masters of persuasive writing have been accorded their due, more or less, there is an equal strength in plain narrative, a neutral form that posits one thing after another – storytelling without embellishment or comparison. A songwriter who has built a successful career while forgoing dependence on rhetorical devices is Jonathan Richman, one of the most interesting songwriters that America has produced in the past forty years. While he may not be placed in the lineage of Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, he possesses an introspective and charming manner. Calling him charming might offend long-time fans who continue to hold him up as one of the first real voices of punk music. The Modern Lovers, the group he founded in the early 1970s in Boston, played a key role in the formation of punk. The band made short and direct songs that rejected the bloviated frippery of the prog-

rock landscape popular at the time. Some of the subject matter of the early songs was assertive (“Pablo Picasso was never called an asshole”), but Richman never played to the seething discontent calling for revolution. He was interested in the details of daily life.

After nearly two decades of shifting band membership and occasional record releases with the Modern Lovers, Richman went solo in 1988 and found his mature voice. He was signed to Rounder Records and began to produce a stream of albums that explored his inspirations, passions, and obsessions. His eponymous debut from 1989 was a grab bag: instrumentals, including a version of “Blue Moon” that sounds appropriate for a country club dance; a cover of “Que Reste-t-il de Nos Amours”; and a spoken word piece, “I Eat with Gusto, Damn! You Bet.” His next outing, *Jonathan Goes Country*, which could have been executed with tongue firmly in cheek, is, instead, a labor of love, mixing covers of songs made famous by Marty Robbins and Skeeter Davis with new compositions, including “You’re Crazy for Taking the Bus” and a song that begs to be covered by a mainstream country star, “Since She Started to Ride.”

More albums came in quick succession: *Having a Party with Jonathan Richman; I, Jonathan; Jonathan, Te Vas a Emocionar!*; and *You Must Ask the Heart*. He signed with Vapor Records in 1996, a subsidiary of Warner overseen by Neil Young, and his cultural capital spiked in 1998 when he appeared in a film made by longtime fans, the Farrelly Brothers. In *There’s Something About Mary*, Richman appears throughout the movie as a commentator alongside Tommy Larkins, his longtime drummer. “Let Her Go into the Darkness,” his sharp lesson on ill-fated love, is used in the film to good effect.

On Vapor, he released *Surrender to Jonathan* and *I’m So Confused*, broadening his audience base and cementing the trademark of this rich creative period – well-wrought songs that focused on subjects that most singers would never notice. Take “The Lonely Little Thrift Store” from *I’m So Confused*, the most artfully produced of his albums (by Ric Ocasek of the Cars), in which he spies among the cast-offs, “the avocado green appliances / with the smell of domestic violences.” Another stock-in-trade for Richman is dancing and how freeing it can be as a natural ally to music. One of the favorite numbers at his live shows is “I Was Dancing in a

Lesbian Bar,” an account of serendipitous self-discovery usually accompanied by Richman joyously dancing onstage to the delight of his fans. The high point of his art during his tenure on Vapor may be *Her Mystery Not of High Heels and Eye Shadow*, a record that has not a single dull moment. In addition to the title cut, a profession of love that, in its simplicity and earnestness, deflates the myth of hyperbolic love attestations that hold sway in most popular songs, he acts as a one-person chamber of commerce for one of his favorite cities with “Give Paris One More Chance”: “cuz the home of Piaf and Charles Aznavour / Must have done something great and shall do something more.”

His most recent album was released in the summer of 2016 on a small label based in Cleveland, Ohio, Blue Arrow Records: *Ishkode! Ishkode!* (BARCDoo3). (The title is the word for “fire” in Ojibwa.) On this record, Richman maintains his style, commenting on the effects of limerence in “Outside O’Duffy’s” (“When I first saw her standing in front of me, I trusted her instantly / I’d have handed her my passport, instantly”), appealing for guidance in love with “Let Me Do This Right,” and voicing wonder at the world around him in “Whoa! How Different We All Are!” Yet while the quality of his songwriting is consistently good, the album suffers from muddy mastering and uneven sound levels. Even more off-putting are the harmony vocals by some eager but flat backup singers. Richman’s voice is better left unaccompanied. The best songs on the record are “Without the Heart for Chaperone” (which, admittedly, employs personification), a droning contemplation of the libido; “Longtemps,” a Charles Trenet cover; and the soothing “a’Nnamurata Mia,” on which he is accompanied by accordion.

Most important, on *Ishkode! Ishkode!*, Richman remains in the present moment and affirms his reputation as the least nostalgic singer of his generation still at work today. In doing so, he forces us to think about the relationship between rhetoric and nostalgia. It seems that the more deeply invested a songwriter is in rhetorical tropes, the more he or she is evoking memory and, thus, nostalgia – loading our memory with feelings. It’s not that Richman lacks a regard for the past. In “That Summer Feeling,” one of his all-time best tunes, instead of casting his view behind him, he composes the song in the present tense, warning the listener, “That summer feeling / is gonna haunt you one day in your life.”

He predicts the eventual appearance of nostalgia but positions it in the future, rather than giving it power in the present.

The basis for the relationship between rhetoric and nostalgia stems from the function of language. If language can be said to be a system for connecting expectation to satisfaction, rhetoric does that work with more specific intent. Hyperbole and comparison attempt to perfect memory. In describing the past with embellished language, we make it perfect – finished, done . . . and polarized: either better or worse than it actually was. This perfection of the past is the birthplace of nostalgia. The work of rhetoric functions extremely well in nonutilitarian writing, including pop music lyrics. However, when we have a writer such as Jonathan Richman, who creates songs that are at their core documentarian and reportorial – unadorned in a manner similar to that of his peers – movement toward a polarized perfection of the past does not happen so easily. We aren't drawn to the past because his language does not summon it. Richman is here, now, because he is looking right in front of himself for his lyrical content and his reaction to it. He creates neither the space nor the distance for the adornment of memory. He has feelings, after all, but he wants us to experience them in real time.

One of Richman's peers who does adorn, in the most successful ways – creating a body of work that mixes the lyric and the epic – is Leonard Cohen. It would be enough to give him a single entry in the pop record book in the category “Best Simile of the 1960s” for the second line of his song “Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye”: “Your hair upon the pillow like a sleepy golden storm.” But he has achieved many monumental things since his stunning debut album in 1967.

Cohen's work has always meditated on connections – among people, between a person and the infinite – and he built his career on a fan base of loyal listeners and readers. The readers came first, as Cohen published several volumes of poetry and fiction before trying his hand at songwriting (perhaps better phrased as the act of setting poems to music). Once he joined words and music, releasing *The Songs of Leonard Cohen* in 1967, he established himself as one of the finest songwriters of his generation. While critics might give variable ratings to the albums he produced over the years, each of them yielded at least one inscrutably perfect

song: “Suzanne,” “Bird on the Wire,” “Avalanche,” “Lover, Lover, Lover,” “Dance Me to the End of Love.”

Cohen managed to remain relevant despite breaks in his career and album production, due in part to an industry of cover versions of his songs performed by younger singers. A book-length study of the impact of a single song by Cohen was published in 2013 by the journalist Alan Light: *The Holy or the Broken: Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley, and the Unlikely Ascent of “Hallelujah.”* (The book begins by citing a humorous conspiracy theory that the real writer of that continually covered song is actually Bob Dylan.)

After spending the latter part of the 1990s in semi-seclusion at a Rinzai Zen monastery, Cohen released the album *Ten New Songs* in 2001, co-written with and produced by Sharon Robinson, who sings with Cohen on all the songs. The album was a return to form for Cohen, and it also set a new pattern of close collaboration that he would use on most of his subsequent albums. The content of those new songs was contemplative (it feels too easy to call them Zen). “Here It Is” (covered later with élan by Jonathan Richman) begins:

“Here is your crown  
And your seal and rings;  
And here is your love  
For all things.

Here is your cart,  
And your cardboard and piss;  
And here is your love  
For all of this.

May everyone live,  
And may everyone die.  
Hello, my love,  
and my love, goodbye.

*You Want It Darker* (Columbia B01KN6XDS6), released two weeks before he passed away in November 2016, may be Cohen’s most successful suite of songs created during the later period of his life. This group of songs was created in several steps – with Cohen first recording vocals at his home in Los Angeles, then having musicians and singers add tracks in a recording studio. Any dis-

tance or remove is not evident in the final, mastered tracks. They sound as if they were captured on a stage, and are as intimate as a concert.

The title track allies the personal and the political –

They're lining up the prisoners  
 And the guards are taking aim.  
 I struggled with some demons  
 they were middle class and tame.  
 I didn't know I had permission  
 to murder and to maim.

– while the second track, “Treaty,” again shows how Cohen, the poet, is able to distill the history of all relationships into a single metaphor: “I wish there was a treaty / between your love and mine.” For peace? For nonaggression? Maybe just for a cease-fire. A second version of the song, arranged for a string quartet, closes the album.

The sound of the album is buoyant and beautiful, even in the darker moments, such as “It Seemed the Better Way,” which is lifted by the Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue Choir, heard on several other tracks as well. Expert production makes *You Want It Darker* one of the best-sounding albums of 2016 – but then it might have been the best-sounding album of 1988, as unconcerned as it is with the contemporary sonic signatures that bedevil recordings by other older singers. Cohen worked wisely with his son, Adam, to make this last record on his own terms, and like all of his best work, it is unapologetically beautiful. And even while many of the songs discuss death and forms of saying good-bye, Cohen shares a perspective with Jonathan Richman. Hewing to Bob Dylan’s broad advice, they “don’t look back”; they look to the future, even if it is one of endings.