Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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Trouble can keep you from home, and trouble can be home. A country concept album — or a concept country album — about a town called Trouble, this 1963 debut LP links its songs with Hazlewood’s resonant narration. The album is an evocation, summoning the atmosphere of Anywhereville through the ether of western Americana. The cover art is a rust-orange map overlaid with the script, “You won’t find it on any map, but take a step in any direction and you’re in trouble.” Next to that is a snapshot of Hazlewood sitting on train tracks that recede into the distance. He casually embraces a guitar case as he prepares to light a cigarette. He is clean-cut, if more Bogart-faced than fresh faced, and has not yet cultivated his trademark shaggy hair and mustache as the Sonny Bono of country (in looks, if not — quite — aesthetics). The album is an amiable radio show of country tropes and cowboy humor, a cartoon drama of good and bad (if not good and evil). The spoken interludes are so low-toned and deep-voiced as to be pointillist, providing the listener with a warm buzz that carries over into the po-faced but bouncy tunes. It’s easy to imagine profane, late-night, non-LP versions of just about every song, to the extent that the album sounds like a sanitized version of what the singer withholds.

The album ends with Hazlewood singing trouble with heavy reverb emerging from the harmonica that operates throughout the album as the call of the train. We are now leaving Trouble…

91 or a charter, a claim to stylistic territory or format (which Hazlewood would revisit and rework as a heartbreak sequence eight years later on Requiem for an Almost Lady, which also featured narrative interludes)

92 We expect Johnny Cash’s Orange Blossom Special (1965) cover to appear in that distance, catching a light. (In any case, it’s another cover for Cash.)

93 perhaps headed for “A Stop at Willoughby,” somewhere off on the horizon, a place where we can jump off, the last station in The Twilight Zone