Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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The Trouble With Superman

A whole lotta trouble is called out in the first lines of “The Man of Metropolis Steals Our Hearts,” as Sufjan Stevens references the unmentionable American product. The Superman clip-art cover of *Illinois* invites copyright trouble and is covered by a John Wayne Gacy-riffing balloons sticker, which makes the composition more and less coherent. It also reiterates another kind of trouble, this one absorbed by the album (whereas Superman himself is externalized to different effect). Meanwhile, in a related concern, cultural priorities (molestation vs. fair use/copyright) are exercised/abused, and Stevens’s 50-albums-for-50-states ambition invites future trouble—a curse like “trouble,” the curse of attention, pressure, doubt, process, tedium. If it’s a gag, it’s a controlling one: Stevens will be known as the guy who claimed he was making a 50-album concept album, whether or not he makes another installment in the series (and/or for as long as we have to wait for another city to burst into songs). On the other hand (the one that just held a bunch of balloons), to say *I’m making 50 albums, one for each state* is a

27 *AKA Illinoise, AKA Come on Feel the Illinoise*
28 on the early vinyl edition: three balloons, to carry three troubles (two “troubled,” one “trouble”) in the first two lines of the “title” song; any one balloon might reference the lure of the child murderer in Fritz Lang’s 1931 film *M* (fka *Mörder unter uns*, or *Murderer Among Us*, or more to the point, as the title was an implicit critique of the Nazi rise to power in Germany, *The Murderers Are Among Us*)
29 The original cover collages Illinoise-ing images of the Chicago metropolis skyline, over which Superman soars, with a quartet of UFOs, a goat, and Al Capone. The Superman-UFO vector is science-fictional, while Superman and Capone pair as good-guy/bad-guy antagonists. The balloons foreground the album’s Gacy motif, drawing Capone’s bemused attention while erasing Superman from the equation—though they do so conspicuously, a chalkboard erasure that leaves a ghost image. The cursed goat (which foiled the Chicago Cubs) stands out to the side.
30 reference trouble
31 or “Superman” itself
32 or exiled
33 he/it is sublimated, or “sublimated” — we know he’s (not) there
species of speech act (and pipe dream) relatable to the claim that “trouble” might displace trouble.

The song stands for the album in a more and less visible way. It opens side three with Superman’s “appearance,” a moment when he flies from the literal cover-art cityscape to the implied lyrical universe of the album. However, due to the machinations of copyright, he leaves the cover (or is obscured by balloons) and can only be referred to (and not named) in the song. Even before trouble arrives over the image, he is not named, but rather cloaked in “Man of Steel,” in which he is recast as only a steel man. Either way, we see him clearly enough, even if our gaze can’t penetrate the balloon sticker that throws off all scale.

Stevens’s stated project, to cover all 50 states in a series of themed albums, was awe-inspiring and doomed as mere ambition from the start. As whisper-sung hubris, it is impeccable: to

which gives way in other editions to a balloonless and Supermanless sky, and a fourth version in which the balloons sink into the surface, or everything rises to meet them

cultural, compositional, parallactical: Either the obscured Superman is far enough away to fit behind the balloons, or the balloons are nearby, as though the adjacent Al Capone, standing in for John Wayne Gacy, has just released them. But they drift toward him, strings streaming away. Perhaps the wind has shifted, just as his cigar-chomping grin seems more appropriate now that Superman isn’t coming for him — or has The Man of Steel merely disguised himself as a snare of balloons? Will Gacy-clowning-as-Capone (and/or Peter Lorre) be entangled in his own inconography? Has Stevens effectively deflected the danger in his material? Or has he stepped into it, putting on his “John Wayne Gacy, Jr.” robe (or clown suit) of song, crooning

... in my best behavior
I am really just like him
Look beneath the floorboards
For the secrets I have hid

Here, let the sticker be the floorboard, let the market of images be his field of prey.

or advertised; and who takes an advertisement for its word, or for more than its words?

Chicagoan rock writer Jessica Hopper’s The First Collection of Criticism by a Living Female Rock Critic (2015) includes an open letter to Stevens from her 2006 Village Voice Pazz & Jop Critics Poll dispatch in which she invites him to go for a drive through Chicago to visit some of the local gems he missed.
say 50 albums, one for each state is to make room for them in the imagination. To provide a sample like Michigan and Come on Feel the Illinoise is to prove the phenomenon as immanence if not imminence. Stevens’s own well-publicized Christianity underwrites a faith in great endeavor, if not (earthly) reward; his soft-spoken delivery and dewy visage disarm his own immodesty.

So industry replaces heroism in the song’s topography, and the stealing cover becomes steel-driven popcraft. And the legend of Sufjan Stevens sings itself.39

38 the sharing of which — among listeners who can imagine the complete set — is faith
39 just as Stevens, who holds a creative writing MFA from The New School — inflates, animates and conflates fiction and nonfiction (and popcraft) in song