Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

Jeff T. Johnson

Published by Punctum Books

T. Johnson, Jeff.
Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics.
One Kind Favor (“See That My Grave Is Kept Clean”)

On behalf of the dead, the living are nostalgic for life. The dead bear this patronage as they must: They sing on. The song does not change when the singer leaves the world, though we hear a strain previously hidden to us. Perhaps the singer pre-empts our concerns with instructions, but they twist in the passage. Bury my body by the side of the road formerly implied You treat me so mean. Now it signs off, What do I care?

†††

Blind Lemon Jefferson has a last request, one kind favor he’ll ask you over and over until the recording passes completely into the aural fog that already obscures his appeal. We can’t imagine the man alive, singing the song, paying forward the trib-

---

50 or our agenda: If the dead keep singing, they sing for us as much as they sing to us.
51 In Robert Johnson’s version of this floating lyric, he grants permission — You may bury my body down by the highway side — then translates the line sotto voce, Baby I don’t care where you bury my body when I’m dead and gone. But he’s already made the accusation, also from the side of his mouth, You know you ain’t doing me right. We believe everything this man says, after his claim that he walked with the devil. He sells it with the (unhidden) strain in his voice when he sings Me and the Devil. That me is every bit as terrifying and unspeakable as I’m gonna beat my woman until I get satisfied. It’s certainly leagues scarier than the Devil (which is not comforting company). Here’s a man beyond kindness, and here’s the song for which he traded his soul: “Me and the Devil Blues.”
52 Much later, Bob Dylan will ask one kind favor, that you allow him just one more chance, but Jefferson knows he’s already had his last chance.
53 though it does nothing to disperse its affect; on the contrary, it binds us, or hides us together.
ute he demands— and it is a demand, polite as it sounds. It also comes across plaintive, so we shroud him in longing for the breath he expels in the song. But the request itself, see that my grave is kept clean, resists our sentimentality even as it appears to beg it. The clean grave is no tribute to life, and the dead have no use for flowers or songs. The one kind favor is asked of you, but you disappear in the request itself— just as the task is never completed. You become witness without a body, or you pay forward when you too pass into the fog.

Lou Reed stretches Jefferson’s two-minute-forty-two-second plea into seven-and-a-half minutes of recording static transmuted into guitar feedback, texture and sustain. He knows the singer is dead, even if he’s thinking of Jefferson. He also knows he too will pay forward the request. Meanwhile, Jefferson sings on, blind as he may be to the world without end.

---

54 or putting a down payment on it; the song, however, is free, as is the use of the lines he takes (and gives), so though he expects a return, he can’t receive it, and gives away his song, even if it isn’t his to give

55 One kind favor I ask of you suggests “if it isn’t too much trouble,” but as we will see and hear, it might just be trouble enough.

56 “No trouble,” we reply.

57 or hand off (trouble or no trouble), though you don’t benefit from the gift; perhaps you pay backward, though Jefferson can hardly benefit, except as legend in our minds — and who benefits from that?

58 The song was recorded live for The Harry Smith Project: Anthology of American Folk Music Revisited. Songs from Smith’s anthology were recorded by multiple artists during three concerts in 1999 and 2001, then released in 2006 as a four-CD box set. If you search today for Reed’s version, it will undoubtedly carry a new date — October 27, 2013, the day Reed passed into the fog of the song.

59 Here, then, is where the kind favor is advanced. The singer passes his request (if it isn’t too much trouble) to the next singer (and listener), keeping the grave (and others in turn) clean, keeping the song (also a grave, or at least a headstone) in the world, wherever that is.