Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

Jeff T. Johnson

Published by Punctum Books

T. Johnson, Jeff.  
Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics.  

For additional information about this book  
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66804

For content related to this chapter  
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2332056
Notes

The note is overmuch, over-abundant, over-exposed, the inexact transparency in the dark that shimmers as the not-seen: what is made visible does not help us to see but encourages a kind of sightless empathy we need and cannot access and cannot not seek.

— Jen Hofer, “Proximate Shadowing: Translation as Radical Transparency and Excess”

Trouble Songs is translation and accompaniment. It is a record, both sides now. That is, if we can imagine side B as subtext to side A, where subtext is becoming text. Or (then) Trouble Songs is a cassette tape played on a 4-track machine from which we can hear both sides, and the other side (which is always side B) plays in reverse, filling especially every A-side pause.

Footnotes make themselves visible while making the body (in) visible. Endnotes are the afterworld, to (and from) which we return. Notes access what cannot be accessed, what we can(not) hear. Trouble Songs are the conversations we have with ourselves as we listen, which accrue on subsequent listens. Those subsequent hearings arrive too soon, echo back to us as we wave them forward.

This has already been written.

To listen (and to sing) is to aspire to empathy — to share breath — and thereby achieve it. To sing (and to listen) is to embody language. To play is to vibrate, to make waves.

The dark that shimmers below the music, the record on the table, the not-seen music spinning. So with reading Trouble Songs and not hearing, or hearing the not-heard.

49 per page
50 Or see/hear (again) De La Soul’s Stakes Is High, where there’s a-side, a-notha side, etc.
A mirror through which we see.

A mirror through which we hear.

†††

_The poem makes its own kind of sense, its own kind of senselessness. The poem doesn't need the notes. The poem needs nothing. The notes need the poem. The translation needs both the poem and the notes. Or insofar as the translation is its own poem, it needs nothing. The notes come directly from and into the translation process itself—they are not afterthought or afterword, but interruption, excess, interjection, extraneous needful commentaries…_

— Jen Hofer, “Proximate Shadowing: Translation as Radical Transparency and Excess”

Here the poem is the song, one of many which play at once, as a song is in the world once and henceforth, occurring once ever, released into the world.

_It is obscene, David Thomas has said, to record a live concert. It is a performance for those who are there._51

_You cannot play a song twice. So says Richard Meltzer._52

Both statements are true/false statements.

David Thomas has made, in a sense, obscene recordings, music (with his band Pere Ubu) played for a sound engineer. And he is correct that a live recording is a monstrosity, a false thing.53

---

51 This is the song of memory, from a talk Thomas gave at The New School (introduced by Greil Marcus), December 2, 2009.

52 Again, the source is memory. Here let us acknowledge the hauntological influence of Meltzer’s _The Aesthetics of Rock_ (first published in 1970) on _Trouble Songs._

53 acknowledged and accentuated in post-production, sometimes including overdubs and amplified or inserted applause (see Johnny Cash, Jimi Hen-
And this is in praise of false things.

Richard Meltzer describes a song that is not a song, but a performance.54

And yet it is true that a song ends before it is replayed. One cannot rehearse a performance.

With apologies and respect to Jen Hofer: A record makes its own kind of sound. The song doesn’t need the notes. The song needs nothing. The notes need the song. Trouble Songs needs the song and the notes, the body and the record, and the notes are the body’s song. Insofar as Trouble Songs needs nothing but songs. The notes come directly from and into the process of listening — they are afterthought and afterward, interruption, obscenity, excess, nonlinear interjection, extraneous unnecessary commentaries…

54 On a related trip, even if the scenery is different, Richard Crawford in America’s Musical Life: A History (2001) stressed “performance rather than composition as a starting point” (from the volume’s Introduction).