APPENDICES
Appendix A: Demo

Trouble on the Line


*Troubles, no troubles, on the line,* begins the second song on the Silver Jews LP, *Starlite Walker.* Actually, it’s the first song on the album, if you don’t include the preceding “Introduction II,” which is a spoken/sung invitation to the record, a warm room with a well-stocked beer fridge. “Trains Across the Sea” opens with another intro, this time just piano, which could be called “Introduction I.” Perhaps, after such stoned gestures of welcome, one should be ready for the double-speak of the song’s first line.\(^1\) Perhaps one has also merely been warned: You’ve entered a place where the unspeakable is spoken of, where life is a dream we’re having even now. Troubles? What are those?

The Silver Jews seem built to confound. *Starlite Walker* is often listed as the band’s first album, from 1994, though the Jews dropped *The Arizona Record* in 1993. The latter sounds like a living room recording made on a drunken dare. Sometimes it sounds like a joke, sometimes like a hoax. The first song, “Secret Knowledge of Backroads,” sounds like wasted buddies singing along to their favorite song on the stereo. Almost ten years later, a live version by Pavement appeared as a bonus track on the deluxe reissue of *Slanted & Enchanted.* Call it a half-cover, since Pavement singer Stephen Malkmus, credited as Hazel Figurine, sang on the original recording. Pavement’s version was recorded in 1992 for BBC Radio 1’s John Peel Show, which means it hit the air before the original was released. It’s a complete heartbreaker, with a perhaps telling Malkmus ad lib, where he sings,

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\(^1\) Incidentally, the line is also an echo of a country standard called “Trouble on the Line.” If intentional, the reference might be a disavowal or a bit of self-deprecation by a band known to dabble in country stylings. Later, principal Silver Jew David Berman would move to Nashville, Tennessee and record a country record, *Bright Flight.* In 2004, country mama Loretta Lynn would co-write her own “Trouble on the Line.”
“It’s not as good as the first EP.” He could be referring to Pavement’s _Slay Tracks 1939–1966_ (released as a 7” in 1989), the Silver Jews’ _Dime Map of the Reef_, which would be released in 1993, he could be talking about _The Arizona Record_, or he could just be talking shit.

_Troubles, no troubles, on the line._ Don’t worry about how you got here; have a seat, have a beer, sing along — whether you know the words or not.

“Trains Across the Sea” has always bothered me, not so much in the sense of “to worry or trouble,” as _Webster’s New World College Dictionary_ first defines it, but in the second sense, “to bewilder or fluster.” It’s part of Starlite Walker’s unreadable introductory gesture, which puts me in mind of the first few lines of John Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
And swerving easily away, as though to protect
What it advertises. …

What are these troubles, brought up only to be dismissed? Though the singer insists they do not exist, he has handed them to me. I began to notice “troubles” appearing in other songs, and they were usually handled with something like care.² I have regularly revisited these songs, and they continue to hang me up, warmly, at the door. Still, they at least invite me into their rooms. I will never know them, and so I return.

_What Would the Community Think?_

As we awaited the follow-up to Cat Power’s devastating 1998 breakthrough album, _Moonpix_, Chan Marshall offered _The Covers Record_, which was, sure enough, a record of covers (in-

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² As when a pitcher throws a curveball — he casts something away from him, though he first holds it deliberately, and he throws it with the intent to confound.
cluding a cover of one of her own songs). Some considered it a diversion, something to tide us over, or something to distract Marshall from the pressure to top Moonpix. It might have also been a perverse way of telling listeners that you can only do something once: Marshall reworks some of the songs to the point of unrecognizability. Her “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” strips the song of its calling-card guitar riff and tosses it into a pile beside her bed, along with its chorus. She makes the song her own, and if I’ve had a few beers, I’ll tell you I prefer it to the Stones’ original.

On side one, Marshall also covers an old standard, “Troubled Waters,” in which she announces that “I must be one of the devil’s daughters,” then says, “I’m going down to the devil’s daughter/ I’m gonna drown in that troubled water.” She may be singing about being in over her head, but she’s already proven with “Satisfaction” that she can hold her own with the devil’s music.

On the second side, Marshall takes on Bob Dylan’s “Paths of Victory,” and after jaunty intro piano and scenery (a trail, a road, a “clearer road up yonder”), we come to the chorus, which begins, “Trails of troubles and your roads of battle,” and concludes “they lead paths of victory we shall walk.” Perhaps she is preparing herself for her “true” follow-up, which would come three years later in the form of You are Free, or YOU ARE CAT POWER FREE, as it reads on the cover, which may or may not be a fuck-you to everyone who bothered her about recording the follow-up to Moonpix (or accused her of stalling with a record of covers).

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3. Dylan has recorded at least 24 songs with some form of “trouble” in the lyrics, several of them far better known than this song, which appears on Dylan’s Bootleg Series, Vols. 1–3 (Rare & Unreleased) 1961–1991. I’m not accusing Marshall of willful obscurity — she covers “Sea of Love,” too. She sings Dylan’s song because it sings to her, and this sense of singing back at songs haunts the album in a way that certifies it as a Cat Power record.

4. As a heavily anticipated follow-up, a covers record is a disappointment, but as a record of covers, The Covers Record is a victorious achievement.
Marshall’s own troubles with performance-anxiety, her erratic concerts that can move an audience to gooseflesh and tears, then frustrate them with false starts, talk of unhappy concert hall spirits, and center-stage meltdowns, have added to Cat Power lore. Marshall has spoken about a dark night of the soul in which she was troubled by demon specters which she could only keep at bay by singing and playing her guitar. This was the night she wrote most of Moonpix, using her cat power to save her mind. It’s this off-kilter self-assurance that gives her a grip on the old, troubled songs of The Covers Record.

Good and Gone in Song

A few cymbal taps, a commotion of voices in a room, and Jason Lytle croons “Trouble with a capital T,” as Grandaddy launches “Lost on Your Merry Way.” His voice, as usual, is a sweet, warm falsetto with a hint of irony. He’s probably not being sarcastic, but he lets you know he might take it all back—whatever it is he’s talking about, which is often unclear. As with the Silver Jews’ David Berman and Stephen Malkmus, he’s committed to sincere bafflement, as if he’s not sure what to make of words, or doesn’t quite trust them. By the second verse, Lytle’s trouble line has morphed into “Trouble with people like me.” In the first verse, the line is followed by “‘Tie him down’ they said,” and now it’s “‘Tie ’em down and then they vanish instantly.” Like Chan Marshall, Lytle isn’t above fucking with the listener to make a point, and here, he might as well be defending each singer’s right to keep the meaning of his troubles to himself.