Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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Appendix B: Cover

Record Related #3: And I could use a thing or two...

Lambchop, Mr. M (Merge) /  
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Who put the M in Mr. M, and what might that M be? Maybe it has to do with the gallery of dandies on the album artwork. Three line the bottom of the front cover, two the back, and one heads a label on each side. We read, above two Van Gogh-ish portraits on the back cover (all swirling visages and lacinato backgrounds), that Kurt Wagner — house painter, guitarist and word-man for the Nashville alt-chamber indie-rock collective known as Lambchop — is responsible for these images, which come from a series called Beautillion Militaire. The title references an organization dedicated to providing “personal development experience and recognition … for African-American male high school students.” M as in Mr. and Militaire. The dandies are perfectly overdressed for the melodic melodramatics and stylized, exaggerated precision of Mr. M.

NPR reports that Mr. M was once Major League Bummer, and the album notes thank “Major League Baseball for their assistance with the title.” In an interview for Denver Westword, Wagner bemoans MLB’s nixing of the title Mr. Met, as folks might mistake the album for the New York Mets’ mascot. As a concession, track four is “Mr. Met.” We also read, in the lower right-hand region of the back cover, that the album is dedicated to James Victor Chesnutt, musician, who passed away in late 2009 (truly a major-league bummer).

These are among the stories that might hit us before we listen to Mr. M. Once we turn it on, the music takes over. Hmm, there’s that M again.

The lyric micromanagement Maybe add some flutes places Wagner in the opening song, fiddling with the phrasing. Grandpa’s coughing sounds like a coffin in the kitchen. Just so, a ladder
becomes the latter. Before we know it, Here come the crazy flutes again, and again the flutes are only in the words of “If Not I’ll Just Die.” These misdirecting call-outs nonetheless make us attend the strings and piano — an ornate, if deflated, segue to the album. The mood throughout will be a sagging elation, an emotional hangover. We won’t be carried all the way away, though we’ll go there with the song.

“2B2” is flash fiction in slow motion. “The Good Life (is wasted)” is country indulgence. “Never My Love” is a billet-doux backed by “a London string ensemble.” “Buttons” is Suburban Gothic. It’s all supper-club Americana, all par for the many courses we’ve come to expect from Lambchop.

Simple as it seems, It was good to talk to you while we’re cooking / Sounds like we’re making the same thing (“2B2”) manages to be an astonishing lyric. It takes us to two kitchens and hangs us up on the phone, with a precision that is in no way fussy. There’s a gorgeous piano figure splitting (or joining) the lines, and the warm, doubled vocals underscore the image (two voices overlapping on the line(s)).

The music works on vibration. Each note is a duration, everything left open. Note, pulse. Sometimes Cat Stevens appears to appear to sing (“Gone Tomorrow”), as Wagner borrows Stevens’s chuckling vibrato for the mid-chorus line Looks like water flows over from somewhere else. He pulls it off by pairing it with a familiar Wagnerian aside, speak-sung in his own voice: And I could use a thing or two today. The strings swoon, and the broken voice grounds us, while periodically taking us off guard, either with its own swing, its phrasing, or its vocalese punctuation adrift — Oh... yeah.

We forget the open spaces, but they’re there, perhaps filled with lyric reflection (ours). Or we can already associate notes and vocal beats, so they become interchangeable. “Gone Tomorrow” spreads out and wades. Drifts off, comes back, ends. Sounds familiar. Maybe it’s a wake. They say Vic Chesnutt haunts the album. Tours the stage toward the end of side one, which ends on an extra beat.
Notes and beats are the same, pairing and aligning to a vanishing point of distinction, a propulsion reflected in the vocal phrasing. First song, side two, “Mr. Met” brings it home. Each word on a beat, a note. Sometimes crowding two syllables on a note, but mostly monosyllabic, and when the words lengthen, they often have their own beats: scansion as diagramming sentences. Sometimes one syllable bumps along multiple notes, but not often enough to be distracting. It’s background music that takes you to the background. Easy listening made complex.

A Trouble Song Interlude

“Buttons” is just over five minutes of faded suburban melodrama. It’s a reverie with no sense of escape, an accumulated loss. There’s not much for you this summer is ostensibly about work, but it seems to have a broader implication — a whole lot of nothing, as months and weeks have passed into years / and your life has changed in some histrionic ways. It’s both mild-mannered and hysterical, as time oscillates in more and less predictable ways. We’re past the surprise that so much has passed, and on to living out of time. The linearity of weeks to months is reversed: Months give way to weeks, all of which are digested by years. There were better days, the speaker says, before you ended up collecting trash beside the motorway, but then again: I used to know your girlfriend / back when you used to have a girlfriend / she was nice and you were not / but I was the big prick back then too. We’re past nostalgia, as well. The good old days are just the old days, and instead of pining for the past, we wonder what she thinks of when she thinks back now of you. The distinction between now and then is that back then, we wouldn’t have imagined ourselves as we are now. We no longer have that luxury, even in retrospect.

The progression from then to now was not inevitable, nor can it be changed, and that’s our trouble. Or, as Wagner sings it, Been better times for those that are in trouble / and maybe there’ll be some better times for you. The real trouble, which the song attempts to correct by dispelling nostalgia, is that things seem bet-
ter than they were. The song leaves it at that, and we’re left with the suspicion that we can only visit the past on the path to (and from) the present. Also, there’s the possibility that by the time we get to were at the end of the song, we have a new past, which was the present only a moment ago, so that we’re no longer talking about all those years ago, but are still misremembering the way we were (just now and back then). Which is to say, at best, we always come back to our desire to change the course we’ve already run, but we at least realize our mistake. At worst, we fool ourselves into believing there was a time before trouble arrived, or before we arrived in trouble, that lonesome town.

Showtime

Kurt Wagner sings like he’s going out of style. He introduces a song by suggesting we continue with the “life love death loss particularly loss thing.” He shakes his guitar, shakes himself, as he plays and sings — his body is his instrument and the guitar is a pick.

Let’s rewind. Upon arrival, we notice Ira Kaplan, of Hoboken’s own Yo La Tengo, sitting near the merch table at the entrance to the club area. Hmm.

When the opening band, Charlie Horse, comes out, Kaplan’s presence at the entrance becomes even more conspicuous. On stage are Kaplan, Georgia Hubley and James McNew, aka Yo La Tengo. Tonight they’re Charlie Horse, which covers an array of songs, mostly recent Yo La Tengo numbers, in a lounge-y style suitable to the setting, as well as the headliner. Hubley’s light touch, and her casual, standing brush-percussion, suggest that drumming is not about power but maybe about force. It’s not quite easy listening, but it’s definitely pop, in the old sense of the word. The approach is especially affecting for a sublimely relaxed take on “Sugarcube,” from 1997’s I Can Feel the Heart Beating as One, played as though it was on that album’s 2000 follow-up, And Then the Nothing Turned Itself Inside-Out. It’s just the right aper-tif before the main course. Mmm, fresh Lambchop.
Delicacy is a delicate ant and a hammer. Lambchop’s set opens with organ grind, or ride. After a libretto, Wagner does the only thing he can do: starts the show with the first song on _Mr. M_, which begins, _Don’t know what the fuck they talk about…_

As Wagner shows over and over again, vibrato and emotion are the same thing, or cannot be distinguished, just as we recognize the piano as the sounds it makes. _I represent you_, he sings, putting mustard on it. He exaggerates his strum gesture — this is a rock band, however sedate. And _Mr. M_ is Lambchop chamber pop, fully realized.

He sings like he’s going out of style. The band is with him all the way. Tonight, we all follow Mr. Music: We do the life love death loss particularly loss thing.