



# Outside Voices: An Email Correspondence

Jake Berry and Jeffrey Side

*Argotist Ebooks*

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Argotist Ebooks

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14 October 2006

Jeff,

Good to hear from you. I'm glad you enjoyed the poem. If I had a choice I would publish every poem with a recorded version and every song with its lyrics. I am sending the print version to save you having to type it. And the lines are a little different than what you might imagine from hearing alone, though I try to get the music on the page. Please do put it up at the Argotist. I'd be honored.

My American accent is only one of many. You might find many American accents quite plain. What you hear in my voice is a modified southern accent, ancestry from the Carolina and Tennessee mountains, which were Scotch-Irish originally, and there's always something of the blues singer in my voice.

Hilarious, your description of the contemporary English accent. Just the mixture of those two fellows Hugh Grant and Mick Jagger is an hilarious concept. The English accent we get here is mostly by way of BBC America television. It seems to vary, but the news sounds pretty tame (although much more balanced and with much less hype than American news) and I see some of the mystery programs because my wife enjoys them. I do know an English lady here. She lived through the blitz in WW II. Fine lady, but getting ill now in old age. Her accent remains quite thick, and beautiful.

Hope all is well. We had real English weather yesterday, 60 degrees F, and drizzling rain. I enjoyed it, but having it every day would be too much.

Take care,

Jake

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14 October 2006

Jake,

I like most American accents. I can distinguish the differences between some of them. I can distinguish a Washington one from a Chicago one, a Californian one from a Kansas one, and an Arkansas one from a New York one.

The English accent has changed greatly since the late 1970s. Up until that time there was a discernible 'posh' English accent such as the Queen has and other members of the aristocracy still have. This accent was the pervading one amongst the professions as well as the accent adopted by the TV and radio media, and the acting profession. Everyone who wanted to 'better themselves' had to learn how to speak in this accent; without acquiring it there was little room for upward social mobility. Because of this, there was a growth in elocution courses.

This began to change in the early 60s with the advent of British films depicting working class life (such as those Albert Finney made his name in). They were quite in vogue in the early 60s, and caused a dent in the posh accent's dominance but it wasn't until the Beatles came along and popularized the 'working class' accent that things began to change at a faster pace. But apart from Ringo, the Beatles' accents were not Liverpool working class, but lower Liverpool middle class. Of course, to those who had the posh accent it must have sounded working class.

Now the posh accent in England is becoming extinct. Only a handful of the aristocracy have it and even then their children are quickly ditching it in favor of the more acceptable Jagger/Grant hybrid accent, sometimes known as 'estuary English.' If you listen to Prince Charles' sons you will see that they are not as posh sounding as he is.

By the way, the Beatles' Liverpool accent is not the one that is used in Liverpool today. What we have in Liverpool now is nothing like that. Lennon and Harrison had a musical nasal drawl. This has now been replaced by a more dissonant and guttural sound. The drawl and nasality have long gone.

Best,

Jeff

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16 October 2006

Jeff,

The end of a busy week and the start of a new one. The Wilco show was quite good. They are, relatively speaking, the contemporary equivalent of The Band, Credence Clearwater Revival, or Neil Young's late 60s/early 70s work. Which is to say they draw from the American root sources and add new elements like noise. Interesting to hear a simple folk song with semi-scatological lyrics with a rising noise assault popping up at unexpected places.

The fascinating thing about accents is that they are constantly changing. I thought for a while that global media might create a single language with a single homogenized official version. However, at this point, because diversity is entertaining, it seems to be generating multiple languages, sub-groups and hybrids. There is the official newspeak that one hears versions of in any news program broadcast from anywhere in the world. I can watch Japanese, English, German, and various middle-Eastern news shows and they all sound the same with only slight differences in accent. Same thing with short wave news broadcasts. But once you get below the surface you hear all the hybrids as well as the regional accents that seem oblivious to what should be homogenization.

Do you have any idea why the Liverpool accent has changed? Has there been an immigration into the city from other parts of the country or is it the result of some negative economic downturn, or perhaps a dumbing down of the education system.

Just this past weekend I heard two esteemed university professors lamenting the state of the education system here. And I know many professors locally that have the same problem with students. They don't expect to have to study very hard to get through school. One of the professors I am speaking about was instrumental in establishing an honors college at the University of Alabama. Students are required to pass the kind of grueling exams that used to be required for entry into Yale, Harvard or Oxford. The result is students who are not only intelligent, but eager to learn. I have read my poetry and discussed it with a few classes of these students. They ask great questions. They aren't afraid to really dig into the work, and they come from all over the world. Their accents vary. They can speak the general consensus language with ease, but they also drop into their home accents when needed or adopt any of the hybrids.

The rock press (there's an oxymoron for you) here used to say that Lennon had the 'most English' accent of all the Beatles. I could tell the difference between their accents, but they all sounded like different versions of middle class English to me. And yes, John and George spoke with more nasal inflection. John, perhaps due to his personality, seemed less concerned about modifying his accent.

In China the accents are so diverse that people from the different regions are often unable to understand one another. This would be a problem in the rapid urbanization of the society except for the common written language. If they don't understand one another they write to one another. It will be interesting to see how things change over the next decade or two as Chinese workers live in the city most of the year learn to speak one form of the language yet retain the other form as they return to their families on holidays. Of course one hopes that eventually the situation will resolve itself so that families no longer have to be separated in order to live, but there is a long history of similarly divided families in China, either because of the desire for a civil service job in the emperors massive government or because of the perpetual wars. Thing is, if China continues to grow at the current rate it will quickly be the world's foremost economy. At that point the world will begin to learn how to be Chinese in the same way it learned to be American in the 20th century and English in the 19th.

Take care,

Jake

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16 October 2006

Jake,

Again, I have to show my ignorance in that I've not heard of Wilco. But if they are influenced by the people you mention that can only be a good thing.

I can only account for the changes in the Liverpool accent being due to the influence of contemporary mass popular culture, especially the current pop music scene. Beyond this, it is a mystery. By the way, my last email to you (the one which you have replied to) was bounced back so I sent it again; presumably, it is this second one you got. A similar thing is beginning to happen

with my web-based email client, although not as frequently. Maybe email sending has reached such proportions that the various email delivery systems are reaching burnout or something!

Best,

Jeff

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24 October 2006

Jake,

Thought you'd be interested in a forum thread I started and which has received some criticism from its members:

<http://p2.forumforfree.com/neil-astleys-apologia-for-populist-poetry-vt375-thepoem.html>

Best,

Jeff

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27 October 2006

Jeff,

Based on my scan of the responses you received in this forum it's easy to see what you are up against in British poetry. Seems that most of these folks subscribe to the notion that poetry is made to sell and the best poetry is the work that makes it to the biggest publishers.

If that is what they want to believe it's fine with me. It is also fine with me if they worship the junked bumpers of automobiles. Arguing with them would be like arguing with fundamentalists. You aren't going to change their minds. They have a large group of people supporting their point of view. Mediocrity works that way.

English weather here the past few days. Better than the summer heat, but you don't want to walk around in it for very long.

Take care,

Jake

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27 October 2006



Jake,

That forum crowd will just not be open to other possibilities for poetry. Most of them have stakes in defending hack poetry because most of them are published by the production line UK publishers that feed off it. I find such poets more like journalists or magazine short story writers (no offence to either) than poets. They are obsessed with reaching an audience merely for the sake of it. It's ok to want an audience (what poet or artist wouldn't) but that audience is one that grows in response to one's work and not the work being foisted on an indifferent audience.

Best,

Jeff

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26 November 2006

Jeff,

Hope all is well on your side of the Atlantic, at least in your corner of it.

The DVD of the Leonard Cohen documentary, concert film was released here a few weeks ago and seems to be re-igniting interest in his work. I think his new book is selling well. The DVD is very good, especially the songs performed by those with a deep sympathy for his work, and includes generous amounts of Cohen discussing his work.

Just wanted to drop in and say hello.

Jake

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26 November 2006

Jake,

Good to hear from you. I approached three of Cohen's book publishers a few months ago asking for an interview for the Argotist. But they have not replied. The only other thing I can think of is to email him through his girlfriend at her website. That's assuming she gets the email, of course.

I'm still collecting the questionnaire responses from songwriters for the Argotist song writing interviews. I have about nine replies so far (including yours). Some are still due in. I'm also waiting for two interviews to be completed (one with an English poet, Tony Lopez and the English academic, Peter Barry) and the second part of an essay on Michael McClure by Paul Nelson. He sent me part one in September and will send part two in the New Year. I will let you know when both parts are online and maybe you could notify McClure also as it may convince him to agree to an interview. Have you heard anything back from him regarding the package you sent him? And how is the Gioia interview going?

Best,

Jeff

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27 November 2006

Jeff,

Given the popularity of the *I'm Your Man* film Cohen may be getting a great many requests for interviews from all quarters. I am witnessing the same thing happen with Tom Waits here with the release of his new box set that includes a hard back book with some of the lyrics/poems, some in original drafts in his own handwriting. He has been interviewed by National Public Radio and magazines across the spectrum. It's the nature of the beast. Most of the popularity results unfortunately from people buying into what they are told is good rather than actually deciding for themselves. At least these guys who have plugged away at their work through good times and bad are getting a little credit and making a nice living.

If you think contacting Cohen through his girlfriend is worth a try that's fine, but if he gets the impression we're just another mag wanting an interview because he's popular again he'll probably resist. Strange. I'd like to talk to Cohen any time about any number of things.

Perhaps there is a similar poet/singer who we could approach or a younger one on his way up. I just ordered Jeff Tweedy's book of poetry *Adult Head* for my wife for Christmas. She's a big fan since we saw the Wilco show last month. Perhaps I could read the book and get in touch with him through his publisher. He seems approachable and in a snippet of a solo show I saw in a documentary when a member of the audience called him a poet he seemed genuinely flattered. Perhaps we could interview him as a poet, which would bring his rock fans to the Argotist site and maybe they would find other things there to enjoy. And it might encourage him to think of himself as a poet. If you're interested, I'll see if I can get in touch with him. I need to read the book first, but it should be here quite soon.

I look forward to reading all the responses to the questionnaire once they all arrive. I also look forward to the article on McClure. Once it is complete and posted let me know and I'll send a card to Michael. If nothing else I know he'll be delighted to know people are writing about his work and it might indeed encourage him to do an interview. My sense over the years with McClure is that he truly follows his instincts and inspirations. He does teach, but other than that he doesn't obligate himself to corresponding on a regular basis. He does it when he feels moved to do it. I often don't hear from him for a year or two then will receive a warm letter and a book. Then we will correspond for a few letters and he's gone again.

Nothing from Gioia yet either, but that was anticipated based on his description of his responsibilities as Chairman for the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts). If I don't hear something from him several weeks into the New Year I'll drop a reminder in the mail to make sure he remembers.

Take care,

Jake

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27 November 2006

Jake,

I have attached the first part of the McClure article. I have yet to receive part two.

The Tweedy interview makes sense. Go ahead and approach him. I'm sure he will agree.

You're right, I shouldn't email Cohen's girlfriend, for the reasons you say. I had no idea he was getting some attention by the media lately. I don't really follow his career as much as I used to. Editing the Argotist doesn't leave me with much time to surf the Internet for pleasure anymore. It's becoming like a 9 to 5 job in some respects.

I've been involved in poetry since 1991 in various capacities such as organizing readings, editing magazines, and studying it formally at university that most of the joy I felt when I first got into it has gone. I sometimes wonder why poetry matters anyway, when you have singers like Dylan who do it better and with more beauty than most poets these days.

I've also noticed from my limited experience in the Liverpool folk music scene in 1988 that folk singers are less bitchy than poets, and are encouraging of other singers than poets are to each other. That's why I avoid poetry scenes. You got a glimpse of the sort of thing I'm talking about from that poetry forum I alerted you to a few weeks ago.

Best,

Jeff

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30 November 2006

Jeff,

I haven't read the McClure article yet, but will and probably print it out and send it to Michael, letting him know it's the first part of two.

I received the Tweedy book and will contact his people as soon as I finish reading it. Based on the first couple of poems his poetry would not look out of place alongside your work or mine. It just proves your contention that poets who work with music or become musicians are at least as good as those that don't. I think it is the music that makes for a more convivial atmosphere. A singer or band can usually find a small audience because people will come for the music. They associate it with entertainment. Poetry is perceived as the domain of specialists. After a century of

modernism it's easy to see why the average person would think that, but poets believe it too and revel in it, perhaps I should say they wallow in it. It becomes a kind of intellectual game and the music that is supposed to be behind poetry, and can be heard in readings by modernists like Joyce or Stein or Pound, is forgotten. All that remains is turf battles over semantic tricks.

In this country I've never heard of a debate over poetry coming to blows, though it wouldn't surprise me. It did happen in rock and roll at least once. Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis were arguing over who was the king of rock and roll and they 'took it outside.' Chuck won. At least there was something at stake there. As it turns out there was enough to go around for everybody and still leave Elvis on top. Poets have nothing to gain and nothing to lose; all they have is ego wars and a handful of friends and/or followers.

I think what you're doing with the Argotist is important because it doesn't subscribe to any single philosophy beyond the idea of open form. It is outposts like these on the Internet that give people some place to turn outside the established schools. I know from experience that it is exhausting work. But people do care, and they do come to the site and read the work.

If I can get through to Tweedy himself, or make contact with someone that can tell him we want to talk about poetry and not celebrity then I think he'll be interested. I will also leave open the option that we can do the interview by email. That way he could respond at his leisure. He seems to have four or five musical projects cooking all the time, but perhaps between gigs in hotel rooms or on the bus he might find it interesting to talk about poetry. But I'll interview him by phone, or in person if he's coming this way again soon. If the documentary *I Am Trying To Break Your Heart* is any indication he seems to be quite shy and soft spoken. We'll see what happens. In my opinion we have to start bridging the supposed gap between music and poetry in both directions. If the Argotist could be the first journal to make that happen by way of more articles and interviews with poets who essentially sing their poetry it might suggest a way for poetry to move out of the ruts of literary academia and turf battles and start having fun again. Depth and substance in verse does not have to be sacrificed just because someone is singing it.

Books are great repositories of words, and you can do many interesting things on the page (its an obligation as far as I'm concerned), but the voice of the poet is the best possible way to get the poetry.

Take care,

Jake

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1 December 2006

Jake,

I find much academic poetry and discourse on it pointless. For me poetry should be a catalyst for emotional catharsis (as songs are). This idea is frowned upon in the more 'experimental' corridors of academic poetic discourse because it is seen as having a Romantic influence. I don't

like the Romantic poets, by the way, apart from Blake and Shelly.

You are spot on when you say, "Poets have nothing to gain and nothing to lose, all they have is ego wars and a handful of friends and/or followers." The stakes are so low in poetry that one wonders why such bitching goes on. It's not like serious fame or money is at stake as it would be in the world of rock or film.

It is difficult to be taken seriously if you belong to no recognised school of poetry. Also, if a poet is not part of a school, the chances of his/her inclusion in accounts of poetry's history will be slim. Such accounts only mention poets who were allied to movements or schools. (Of course there are rare exceptions such as Dylan Thomas.) In a world where categorization and uniformity matter; to be on the outside of literary cliques is a bad thing. Would the Beat poets have been published (or even heard of) if the notion of a Beat 'school' to which they belonged hadn't evolved? True outsiders like Blake and Keats went to their graves largely unpublished and unknown, yet Wordsworth became famous partly because he was loosely categorized as part of what was known as The Lake School of poetry.

This need to be in a school before you are taken seriously doesn't seem to be in operation in the song writing world. Yes, there are styles of music and different audiences etc., but by and large a singer/songwriter has as equal a chance of getting a recording deal as any other singer/songwriter despite not being part of a musical school.

It is perceptive of you to say, "I think what you're doing with the Argotist is important because it doesn't subscribe to any single philosophy beyond the idea of open form. It is outposts like these on the Internet that give people some place to turn outside the established schools." I've never thought of it like that but it's true.

When you say, "If The Argotist could be the first journal to make that happen by way of more articles and interviews with poets who essentially sing their poetry it might suggest a way for poetry to move out of the ruts of literary academia and turf battles and start having fun again. Depth and substance in verse does not have to be sacrificed just because someone is singing it." I agree, but there is a risk that in doing so the need for poetry that is not sung may be seen as irrelevant. It is already largely irrelevant but a new place for it has to be found that does not place it at a disadvantage to song. This is the main problem poetry faces: now that song has replaced poetry with respect to cultural relevance what can poetry do to compete with or function healthily along side it?

Keep me posted about the Tweedy interview. And, yes, send the article to McClure.

Best,

Jeff

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4 December 2006

Jeff,

I have been away from the computer for the last couple of days. I did engage in some interesting conversation relative to our discussion here with my sister-in-law and brother. She is about to take her written exams for her PhD. and wanted to talk about contemporary poetry. We hashed over the problems with academia and criticism. I tried to talk about poetry as catalyst, that it needed to remain organic (i.e. connected to the emotions, to be experience instead of an abstract cerebral game).

Yes, these days it is anathema to do anything that seems romantic. This is the horseshit of so-called postmodernism. Romanticism leads to Modernism and you must rebel against Modernism because, well, it's old now and you have to do something new. It was Pound though that said 'make it new.' Poetry has painted itself into corners all over the place. The academic corner. The Beat/Hip corner. The exclusive avant-garde corner. The anecdotal narrative corner. The poetry slam, open mic corner. All of these are for a very limited audience. I heard Gore Vidal talking about the novel a couple of years ago. He lamented that the novel had gone the way of poetry, into obscurity. Many people would object saying no, there are more novels published every year than ever before. Yes, but have you read those novels? They aren't Dickens, nowhere near it. They aren't even Gore Vidal. It's mostly pulp stuff.

You go right to the heart of the problem when you talk about poetry that is not sung. One obvious direction is for it to become more visual, to do things on the page that can't be done in performance or on audio recordings. There is also the advantage that a book is self-contained. Even iPods and other mp3 players require batteries and recharging. Once you buy a book, or borrow it from a library, you're investment is complete. It's also self-contained in the sense that it offers you the opportunity to imagine the poem for yourself. This happens with songs of course, but songs are always a production of some sort simply by the reality of the recording process. Poetry in a book is much simpler and more direct and is less a construction designed to produce a specific effect. For these reasons and others I think that books will remain with us for a long time. Poetry as text on the Internet is even simpler and more convenient than books once you have access to a computer. Also the Internet is multi-media so it can feature poems as text, or as text combined with sound, or as text, sound and moving image or any variation of these.

A problem that I have experienced with songs is that the expectation of entertainment is part of its baggage. We could engage in a discussion of what entertainment is (for me reading a difficult book on archaeology for instance can be as entertaining as the best film or CD), but what I mean is art that engages lightly without much effort on the part of the audience. There is also the issue of song being background music. Last night while we were talking an excellent album of songs written by Townes Van Zandt was playing. Ironically, the name of the album is *Poet*. Van Zandt was certainly a poet, and his songs reward close listening, but we weren't listening closely to it at all. So the notion of songs replacing poetry may be exaggerated. Popular music is popular because a great many people purchase it and play it on their various audio players. That does not mean that millions of people are seeking out poetry in the form of popular song. Most of them are seeking out something to dance to or something to play in the background while they jabber at one another. There is probably no way to measure this, but it may well be that the number of people that consciously seek out poetry in the form of recorded music is not much larger than the

number of people that buy books of poetry. Probably the overlap in the audiences for the two mediums is very nearly complete as well. I believe that it helps a poem if it can be presented as both text and sound. Books of poetry should come with CDs of the poet reading the work just as CDs of songs should come with printed lyrics. Most publishers are not inclined to add the expense of audio recording to their books. It is also more expensive to post an audio recording of a poem on the Internet than to post the words only (though it seems to be getting cheaper all the time).

The question remains: what about poets that don't care to read their work aloud, that write for the page? There was a brief period as books became affordable to more people and audio recording was expensive or not yet possible that poetry on the page was the best possible way to make poetry public. That period created poetry for the page only. Still, poets often read their work for friends or in larger social gatherings. It never completely lost its connection to song. Poetry read alone to oneself is a beautiful experience though and it would be tragic if that were lost. It is a kind of meditation that has been good for humans individually and collectively. In fact, I think its attraction is strong enough to insure that it will not vanish.

For the foreseeable future I think we will have all the variety of poetry that we now have and that new forms and new ways of presenting it will continue to appear. Precious few poets have ever made a living out of poetry. If Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell were known only as poets they would probably also be retired professors or retired from some other money job by now. They became rich because they work in a medium that sells to people that have very little serious interest in poetry. People will give lip service to them as poets but they became wealthy because they were marketed as popular music. I have no doubt that fewer people read poetry now than they did 100 years ago, and they may blame it on the obscurity of modern poetry, but they aren't buying the poetry of Robert Frost or Walt Whitman either. The truth is that they have more alternatives than they had 100 years ago. Regardless of the number of books being published, the percentage of people who spend the same amount of time reading compared to a century ago is probably significantly lower. Even poets read less poetry because we also watch movies and television, listen to audio recordings and are engaged in the various distractions of our time.

Finally, I don't think we have anything to worry about. Poetry will survive in an increasing variety of forms and the petty squabbling between poets racing for the holy grail of immortality is just another species of the same disease that infects politics of any kind. We'd all love to be read and heard centuries from now, respected and admired, but that decision is really out of our hands, it belongs to the future. Poets who manage to achieve prominence now, in schools or not, may be footnotes, if that much, in the future, and people we have never heard of may be considered the great poets of our age. It is all just so much hot air in a vacuum. All we can do is create work to the best of our ability and make it as available as possible.

Take care,

Jake

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5 December 2006

Jake,

I wish I could be as optimistic as you are about the future of poetry. I accept that poetry will always exist but I think it will do so in a similar way to the arts and crafts specialties such as knitting and weaving, mainly for hobbyists (and also for academic purposes).

It seems to me that the majority of younger poets are just frustrated rock stars, anyway. Poetry has tried to compete with rock over the years. The most recent manifestation of this is the Poetry Slam scene. For me, there is something embarrassing about poets reading mediocre and literal poetry to an audience who are pretending to be enthused and excited.

The problem spoken poetry has is that it has no music. But to add music would make it song, and not spoken poetry anymore. Both song and spoken poetry are poetry in essence. Songs are poems with music; spoken poems are songs without music. Most people prefer the former. Many, as you say, may just consider it background music, but the power of background music can be significant. At the very least, it can attract a new audience for a song they would never have otherwise heard had it not been playing in the background somewhere. This is how I got into Joni Mitchell. I would not have known of her existence otherwise.

In the face of all this, poets must make a choice: either to write songs and reach more people in a meaningful and emotional way; or write poems for an increasingly diminishing and fussy audience without any guarantee of the work moving anybody. I think Dylan made the right choice. But he was fortunate in living in the right period in history.

You are probably right when you say, "it may well be that the number of people that consciously seek out poetry in the form of recorded music is not much larger than the number of people that buy books of poetry. Probably the overlap in the audiences for the two mediums is very nearly complete as well." But such people, I feel, would choose song over poetry if given a choice. Music and sung words will always win out over spoken words alone. Music is something primal, primitive, hard-wired into our reptilian brain. No amount of the spoken word can ever compete with it.

Best,

Jeff

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8 December 2006

Jeff,

Perhaps you are right in comparing poetry to knitting and weaving. (Jack Foley recently mentioned in an email that the root of the word text is the same as that for weaving.) It could become something that people write to one another as little verses of sentimental or humorous doggerel or studied in the same way that archaeologists study old ceramics. The new poetry that would come out of the academy then would be a contemporary equivalent to the old forms.



Yet, here we are, complaining about the fate of poetry and writing poetry that does not fall into these categories. To look at it pessimistically, open form open imagination poetry may be discounted by the academics as not poetry at all but meaningless babble, at best an expression of the same states of mind that was originally expressed in various forms of visionary experience usually grouped under the term shamanism. Lacking a cohesive religious context, that poetry becomes a very isolated experience for a scattered, isolated, marginal audience.

In the minds of some this is precisely the condition of visionary poetics now. While Modernism retains a measure of academic respect along with Language poetry, everything else beyond academically produced work is dismissed.

The word poet slowly becomes a way to compliment someone in any genre, except perhaps poetry. Scorsese is a cinematic poet of urban violence and so on.

Yet, here we are.

I like your description of younger poets as frustrated rock stars. The cult of celebrity has done as much to damage the culture as its corporate wars. Young artists assume a rock star ego then proceed to be poets because they don't have to actually learn how to play an instrument or even read poetry. They just start writing something they call poetry. Occasionally a few will develop a true affection for poetry and start reading varieties that resemble rock lyrics (probably Beat poetry since Beat had the greatest influence on rock lyrics). Fewer still will really dig deep into the full range of poetics ancient to modern worldwide. Some of these will become academics and may retain the desire to write imaginative new work. Most will become academics and reproduce what has gone before or cease to produce anything at all. A tiny handful will become deeply obsessed with the art and will practice it regardless of the consequences.

I don't think that poets have to make a choice between writing songs or poems. We have examples like Leonard Cohen or Jeff Tweedy that do both though they are better known as songwriters. And there are those like myself, Jack Foley and others who are better known as poets, but also write and record songs. I don't think that Jack or myself are expecting to be signed to a recording contract (though the money and exposure would be nice) and from interviews I've read I don't think Cohen or Tweedy expect to be accepted as poets among the established poetry community. Cohen has received awards for his books in Canada, and did so before he ever recorded a song, so he may be said to truly walk the line between poet and song writer, or to dissolve the line entirely. Still, the point is that the division is artificial even when it is reinforced by popular culture on one side and academia on the other.

Slam poetry and poetry performance as a kind of sport may engender interesting performers, but they don't generate much good poetry do they? We had a fellow here, a slam poet or whatever, that managed to convince local restaurants or bars or coffee houses to have a monthly slam poetry event. It was pretty hollow stuff. A friend of mine, James Wisniewski, better known as wZ, as a musician primarily, was invited to be the featured performer at one of these events. He wrote and enthusiastically delivered a poem called "Goddamn the Poetry Slam." He won the contest that night.

A little later a friend of mine opened a coffee house and asked me to host a poetry event on a regular basis. We tried to do something once a week at first, but there weren't enough poets or audience to keep to that. The same fellow I mentioned above hosted a monthly poetry slam for a while. Working together, we managed to have one large event that included poets performing outside the slam and then the slam itself. There were some excellent performances in both cases that night, and a raging thunderstorm blew through during the event, and the house was filled. It suggested what might be possible if we opened the doors to every form and approach. Unfortunately, most of the best performers came from outside the area so it was impossible to repeat every month. I managed to get Jack and Adelle Foley here from the Bay Area and Hank Lazer from Tuscaloosa to come up one evening for a performance. It was attended primarily by older adults most of whom were associated with the local university as art or literature professors. The place was only half full despite an extensive article in the local paper. Shortly afterward the coffee house lost its funding and had to close.

Today there are occasional performances and readings at another coffee house, usually of college students, or at the public library, usually of established poets from other places. The local university sponsors an annual literary event. Two or three notable authors will be featured. One of them might be an academic poet while the others will be novelists. I attended one of these. Reading the books at home would have been more interesting than hearing the authors read them—in either case it would be difficult to avoid falling asleep.

Whenever I perform, I try to make theatre out of it as much as the venue will allow. We have done performances that included the poetry with music, multiple simultaneous video and dancers. I am currently planning a performance that will do something similar at the same venue, a small theatre at the University of Alabama. These events are usually well attended and people both in and outside the university respond enthusiastically. It would be impossible to stage such events very often however since it depends on the performers working for free, in fact paying for the gas, for the expense of their own part of the performance.

Still, going back to the question I asked when I first read the title of Dana Gioia's essay "Can Poetry Matter?" I have to ask the question: Does it matter if poetry matters in a culture whose dominant traits are gratuitous consumption and violence? It is a pluralistic culture of course and I am over-generalizing, but the greatest popular demand is for new things to consume and new wars to fight (be they 'culture wars' or the literal atrocities committed in our name around the world).

Poetry remains and adapts just as it always has. It adapted to the advent of the written word, then the widely published book, and now audio and video recording (which takes us back to where poetry began, in the voice and body, but in an artificial way). Poetry, like images, moving and still, like dance, like myth and other stories are fundamental aspects of the human species. They will all remain. Whether they remain in a way we prefer is another question. Visionary, imaginative poetry may vanish and then reappear later. In the meantime, we continue as best we can with the tools at hand, even though we are struggling against the tide.

Take care,

Jake

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8 December 2006

Jake

Good observation on how Scorsese is considered a poet and poets not necessarily so. I suppose this is because good cinema uses some of the techniques of poetry such as metaphor, dramatic irony, symbolism, metonymy etc. that much contemporary poetry fails to display. Hitchcock's use of color both in the way he lights the scene and the way he dresses the actors has been noted for its symbolic qualities and also its expressionist ones. He will use colors to reflect the characters inner psychological turmoil or as a harbinger for some event that will happen later on in the plot. John Ford does this to some extent also, as do most of the great filmmakers.

I agree with you when you say: "I don't think that poets have to make a choice between writing songs or poems. We have examples like Leonard Cohen or Jeff Tweedy that do both though they are better known as songwriters. And there are those like myself, Jack Foley, and others who are better known as poets, but also write and record songs."

However, my point is not that poets cannot do both poetry and song, but rather that the audience who like both their songs and poems will, if given a choice as to whether to listen to the songs or the poems, choose the songs. This is probably why attendances at poetry readings are small compared to music gig attendances.

Songs have the ability to create a sustainable mood, which poems can't do, in my view. This is because the music maintains the mood despite what the lyrics indicate. So you have a sort of thematic counterpoint going on. You see this all the time in Dylan whose vocal mood will be in one register while the music will be in another register. The affect of this is a sort of ironic counterpoint between words and music. Poetry without music can't achieve this. This is because such poems are entirely dependent for their affects on the words alone.

The only way to get words alone to do what both music and words do together is to come up with a purely lexical equivalent to the musical mood songs create. This can't be done using the formal qualities of poetry such as meter or rhythm; that has been done throughout poetry's history and has failed to bring poetry up to the level of song. So something else has to be found that is purely lexical and inbuilt into the words themselves. In this way, you will have a self-contained poetry that is independent of music, visual art or the other things often used in conjunction with poetry to make it as powerful as song.

Sorry for the lecture but once I get started it's difficult for me to stop.

Best,

Jeff

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11 December 2006

Jeff,

Scorsese was just the first that came to mind because he has a new film out. Hitchcock is another excellent example as would be Kubrick or Goddard or David Lynch. What I meant though was that popular artists are granted the title of poet, but a poet should never be audacious enough to actually accept the name. Both Auden and Sandburg disclaimed the title late in life because they deemed themselves unworthy. It is an unattainable goal for an actual poet unless so dubbed by outside sources. It is like the word shaman or god. An athlete or actor can be described as being like a Greek god or a writer can be called a shaman, but if they describe themselves in those terms they are egomaniacal. Calling oneself a poet hasn't quite gone that far, but watch a person's face when you say you are a poet. There is a dead look. As if to say, 'Yeah, but what do you really do?' No one is allowed to call themselves a poet unless they have been validated as such by awards and so forth. Even then, no poet would dare compare himself to poets of the past. The same thing is happening with novelists. Norman Mailer was asked recently if any living novelists would be remembered a century from now. He said perhaps one or two beside himself. Mailer was being audacious, but he's never been one to pander to expectations.

You're right, large audiences will always choose song over poetry. Perhaps popular culture is something of an aberration compared to audiences before mass media. The popular song holds the place that sea shanties, folk ballads, and drinking songs had before recorded music, radio and television. And we often see current popular artists record some of these old songs for compilation records and frequent collections of the earliest recordings appear from time to time. There is even a website where a vast number of the old cylinder recordings can be streamed. The great mass of people always prefer what is easiest to access.

The difference these days is that most of us who love so-called high art also love low art. I love the Bartok string quartets, but I also love Neil Young and Crazy Horse banging out "Down By The River." Critics of high art still try to make distinctions and rate one above the other, but it doesn't play that way. We listen to both. We understand one is more sophisticated, but that really doesn't make any difference. We don't always feel sophisticated. We don't always want to be elevated. Sometimes we want the raw emotion of popular song. It is impossible for poetry to compete. Not many people are willing to sit down and surrender to the depths of a strong poem in a book or even to listen to a great poet read a poem extremely well. Ezra Pound could really make his poems sing, but given the choice most people would rather listen to whatever's on the radio than old Ez. I think they're really missing something.

Still, there are those few that might have been poets in the high art sense in a previous era that chose, due to ambition, youth or the saturation of mass media, to carry those poetic instincts into the popular medium. Chuck Berry brought the story song that had its origins in the British Isles and Africa out of country and blues music into the new mass medium of rock and roll. Dylan got his foot in the door with folk song out of those same traditions, but picked up the various modernisms and Beat poetry as he moved into rock. He opened the door. After that people who would have certainly been book poets only, like Cohen, Joni Mitchell (also a fine painter), or Jim Morrison (who, like Cohen, had written a book of poetry before he became famous), each chose

to make a career in the popular form while continuing the 'high art.' At their best, these poets managed to merge the two forms beautifully so that great poetry became available as popular song.

I think that poems in a book can sustain a mood as well as a song, but they demand a little more initial effort. One has to be willing to spend as much time reading and rereading a poem as one does listening to a song over and over. Sadly, poets have generally resigned themselves to the fact that they'll get only one reading and then be tossed aside like prose. So they write prosaic anecdotes with exquisite detail hoping to make some impression in the fleeting seconds or minutes the reader spends with the book. They can't compete with the medium of sound, especially with the catchy melodies of popular music so they don't even try. More's the pity.

I wish I could say that I knew of some equivalent textual approach that could sustain the attention of an audience the way song can, but I'm not sure that text works that way. Text requires one to be still and (usually) silent with a book in hand or sit still in front of a screen. On the other hand you can move all over the floor to the beat of a song and sing along to words that gradually sink in as poetry (assuming you're listening to an artist with that capacity). Text was probably invented as a matter of record keeping. Poets and philosophers came late to writing and early on probably only wrote as a means of documentation not popular distribution. Poetry eventually became comfortable with text, but it probably sacrificed much of its musicality in the process. Eventually there were poets who had little or no interest in music at all, certainly no interest in writing songs. In my opinion, this was a sour bargain. Poetry always comes to me as sound first. Perhaps just sound in my mind, but sound before it is language and before it is text. I still want to publish books very much, and to be published in ink and electronic mediums, but that doesn't change where the work originates.

Perhaps if my poetry had been published by a major publisher and I'd won the big awards I'd be talking out the other side of my mouth. I'll never know. But I'd still be hearing the poem before I saw it as text.

Please feel free to lecture at me. Good correspondence is what is happening here. As a matter of fact I'd like to go back through our emails over the past few months, edit out the personal bits or bits where we're discussing the business of interviews or whatever, and post it on my Conversari blog. Would that be okay with you? I would send you the complete text for approval before I posted it. It is a way of making our discussion available and documenting it publicly.

Take care,

Jake

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11 December 2006

Jake,

Yes, you can post our conversations on your Conversari blog. I wasn't aware of the blog but it

looks like a good place to post our conversations.

You are quite correct in saying: "Sadly, poets have generally resigned themselves to the fact that they'll get only one reading and then be tossed aside like prose. So they write prosaic anecdotes with exquisite detail hoping to make some impression in the fleeting seconds or minutes the reader spends with the book. They can't compete with the medium of sound, especially with the catchy melodies of popular music so they don't even try." I always wonder at the sort of mentality that makes the effort to write such poetry.

I think we are nearing an end of game situation as far as the arts are concerned. By that, I mean everything that could be done in painting, music, poetry, film, song etc. has been done. All that seems to be going on now in each of these art forms is a repetition of achievements but rebranding them as 'innovative.' Painting is still feeding off Pollack or Rothko, and conceptual art is still milking the found object idea. Experimental classical music is still working with dissonance and atonal stuff. Mainstream poetry is still under the shadow of Wordsworth and Whitman; or if it is experimental, it is still operating under the fragmentation/collage aesthetic of early modernist poetry. Modern experimental film seems not to exist anymore (it is now video art) and mainstream film (since Spielberg) imitates the look and feel of German Expressionist cinema in the 1920s. In pop/rock (the two have become the same to me now) the musical sounds are not as innovative as they were with the early 1980s new wave stuff, with its space-age synth sound and robotic feel. What we have now is fourth rate Beatles/Doors/Stones wannabees on the one hand, and soul-based divas (Beyonce etc.) churning out substandard Tina Turner/Diana Ross/Donna Summer with 'attitude' and an R&B base run. There is nothing very innovative being done anymore. Obviously, this is a caricature and not 100% accurate, but it illustrates a trend.

Best,

Jeff

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8 January 2007

Jeff,

I'm reading Jeff Tweedy's poetry now and I want to take the time and go back through all his lyrics, with their musical accompaniment if possible before I request an interview. I want to know his work very well before I start asking him questions. One thing I've noticed is that his poetry in book is more complicated than most of his lyrics, though there is some overlap. I want to ask him why this is. Isn't there a way to get complex lines into music? The lyrics of Dylan and Mitchell suggest the answer is yes. But primarily I want to, in any potential interview with anyone right now, see if we can find ways to fill the gaps between the two genres of poetry. I just heard an album called *Ys* by Joanna Newsom that contains five songs. All of which amount to long, highly visual poems set to a mix of harp and other folk and classical instruments, sung in a breaking high voice, and mixed in strange ways.

More soon.

Take care,

Jake

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8 January 2007

Jake,

I agree. There are ways to get complex lines into music. It is possible to sing anything, really. As you say, Dylan did it a lot in the mid-60s. When you hear songs in a foreign language, you can see the potential for this because to those who can't understand the language the lyrics may as well be complex.

I hope you don't feel pressured by me; what with the Tweedy, Gioia and possibly McClure interviews.

Best,

Jeff

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9 January 2007

Jeff,

You're right. When you consider art-song as well there are many instances where a poem is set to music decades or centuries after the poet. Steve Reich did fascinating work with William Carlos Williams' "Desert Music." Foreign languages absolutely. Writing a song in German must be interesting with all those multiply compound words.

No, I don't feel pressured at all about the interviews. All I can do is ask them. I know Dana Gioia wants to do the interview if he can find the time and I think the same is true for McClure. My feeling is that Tweedy would be very open to an interview because he doesn't subscribe to any of that rock star shit. I am going to suggest an email interview with him. That way he could answer questions on the fly when he got a moment on the bus or between shows.

Hope you're having a great year so far.

Take care,

Jake

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28 January 2007

Jeff,

The interview with Gioia will probably move slowly, one question at a time, through the mails, and McClure still has not responded to my queries. I'll send him another package in a few days to perhaps jog his memory a bit.

Also, I am going to try to contact Jeff Tweedy in the next couple of days.

It occurs to me, when it comes to interviewing these artists that are both poets and song-writers that we might prepare five questions that we would ask each one and, hopefully, be able to follow up on each answer. If we approached them in this way, with only five questions, they might be more inclined to answer. Those that were interested could continue the conversation. It would be advantageous to everyone I think if the Argotist could present a large sampling of well-known poet songwriters responding to the same issues. It might give us a sense of how the art is changing from the perspective of those who are changing it.

Hope all is well in Liverpool. It's damn cold here, well below freezing. Beautiful clear light outside, but too cold for a walk.

Take care,

Jake

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29 January 2007

Jake,

Your suggestion for the songwriter interviews sounds ok. The Tweedy interview (given the five question lead-in) should not make him feel overwhelmed. If he says yes to an interview, you could send him the five questions (I can't think of any at the moment. But our discussions about the sung lyric as compared to the spoken lyric could spark off some ideas).

There was a concert with Norah Jones on TV last night. She has a nice musical sound but her vocal phrasing is monotonous.

Best,

Jeff

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2 February 2007

Jeff,

Regarding Norah Jones, I love her work, but for its musicality. She does indeed sing in a limited



range, but then so did Billie Holiday and that never hurt her. Thinking about Norah Jones as compared to Joni Mitchell for instance brought to mind a way of classifying what we are talking about. Norah Jones is a songwriter. Joni Mitchell is a poet-songwriter. I hate these hyphenated terms, but I think this makes the necessary distinction. With Norah Jones the emphasis is on the music. With Joni Mitchell we have an extraordinary musician, but her technical understanding of music is lacking in favor of a direct connection with the music. Further, if she had never picked up an instrument she probably would have been a poet as well as a painter. Leonard Cohen of course was a poet and novelist long before he was convinced to write and record songs.

Take care,

Jake

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3 February 2007

Jake,

I like your “Norah Jones is a songwriter. Joni Mitchell is a poet-songwriter” distinction. More should be made of this distinction by rock journalists. But I do find that certain rock journalists have a better grasp of what poetry is (or should be) than most poetry critics. I’m reading Paul Williams’ books on Dylan where he analyses every Dylan song on each album and in certain live performances. He understands Dylan better than many poetry professors, who try to explain Dylan, do.

Best,

Jeff

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13 March 2007

Jake,

Thanks for the link to Richard Curtis’s views on performance. I agree with him when he says that though “the Internet is really being capitalized by many artists. I don’t like this form of interconnectivity as much. The human element is too important to me.” For my own part, I don’t really know what performance is anymore. I suppose this is a similar problem to the one regarding materiality in art that Curtis has difficulty with. The older I get the more I keep thinking in terms of how the ‘work of art’ is received by the reader, viewer, listener. The performance element although important as the delivery mechanism is not, for me at any rate, an overriding concern. True, different performers can convey the same art work differently and add something to it (as Dylan does when he covers mediocre songs) but ‘performance’ as a concept, or a kind of aesthetic in itself, has always puzzled me. I suppose Curtis would agree with this to some extent, as he seems to be advocating a broadening of the idea of what performance is. This indicates that he may see the term as problematic also.

Best,

Jeff

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15 March 2007

Jeff,

Thanks for responding to Richard's remarks on performance. I passed them on to Richard. He'll appreciate the feedback and may want to respond to you.

Take care,

Jake

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19 March 2007

Dear Jeff,

I love the theme of your PhD thesis. Wordsworth got off a few good lines, but absolutely, relative to Blake he was a scribbler. Blake lived it, literally burned with the muse, allowed it to devour him. His books, especially, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and his prophetic books, were direct precursors to my own work. I would likely have never taken a visionary path had I not read Blake, and still read him.

Take care,

Jake

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20 March 2007

Dear Jake,

The interesting thing about Blake is that his poetry is like nothing that came before it. It is the first poetry that didn't exclusively place meaning above language. If it weren't for T. S. Eliot we wouldn't really have loosened (albeit slightly) the grip the Wordsworthian aesthetic still has on poetry. True, there are poets (like yourself) who don't conform to this aesthetic but they are very much the exception, as you are no doubt aware.

Ginsberg did attempt to challenge this aesthetic to some extent (*Howl* makes an effort to do so. Although Kerouac's poetry succeeds better, I think) but he was still too hung-up on the Romantic notion of poetry as exclusively self-expression. This is something that Wordsworth would have

advocated. Self-expression in poetry is good but it should not be the sole yardstick by which poetry is measured.

Dylan seldom uses self-expression. What you get with him is the use of phrases that only mimic it. *Blood on the Tracks* has been held up by some critics as Dylan in confessional mode. But it is really more a chronicle of Everyman's journey through emotional dependence. It is not necessarily Dylan's voice that is speaking here. This cannot be said of Ginsberg's poetry, were it is clearly Ginsberg speaking at all times.

Best,

Jeff

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22 March 2007

Jeff,

Blake was indeed unlike anything before. He was himself a break in the cavern in which the west was and for the most still is imprisoned. I like Eliot in *The Wasteland*, *The Hollow Men* and *Ash Wednesday*, and I like the *Four Quartets* as well, but he seemed to have retreated a bit by then, settled into comfortable style.

Yes, Ginsberg had his moments early on, but it was Kerouac who kept going further out. And for prose Burroughs goes further still.

Dylan seemed to be drawing on his own experience a bit for *Blood on the Tracks* and *Desire* and even as late as *Street Legal*, but to say that he was writing in confessional mode is to totally disregard the symbolism, the very way Dylan writes to this day. Even when Dylan writes about himself, *I is another*, he takes Rimbaud to heart, instinctively, better even than Rimbaud.

There's a singer-songwriter thing happening here right now, but most of it isn't worth listening to. There are some good writers like Tweedy and his old band mate Jay Ferrar (Son Volt), Ryan Adams and Lucinda Williams have their moments as minimalist poets. But they usually don't infuse poetry into song so much as write songs that work as poetry occasionally. Certainly, nothing to match Dylan or Mitchell or Van Morrison circa *Astral Weeks*.

No word from Tweedy yet, but I still have hope.

Take care,

Jake

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22 March 2007

Jake,

Yes, Dylan, as you say, “takes Rimbaud to heart, instinctively, better even than Rimbaud.” I think with Dylan that what you get is a true visionary. He seldom has a *modus operandi* to his writing, openly admitting as much. Most songwriters approach the art as if it were akin to fiction writing. Where Dylan does occasionally veer in this direction, he saves himself by the use of symbolism and generalization. I used to be into Paul Simon a lot because I used to think that songs should communicate agreed ‘things’ to us. But once I discovered Dylan all that went to the wind. True, Simon is no longer the storyteller he once was in song and that is a good thing. I hear he and Dylan are friends so maybe that has something to do with it.

Any more news on the Gioia front?

Best,

Jeff

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27 March 2007

Jeff,

I’ve been trying to settle on how to come at a series of questions for Gioia. Thing is, by way of his latest book of essays—*Disappearing Ink*—he seems to have already answered most of the questions I was going to ask. All the same, it might be worth asking him anyway—or bringing lines of poems and songs before him for commentary. I know he’s an Aimee Mann fan. Perhaps I should ask him about some of her work, how it connects to poetry—as high or low art? Why make the distinction? etc. Gioia is going to come down strong in favor of a definitive sense of meaning in poetry. For instance, Jack Foley tells me that Gioia likes Pound, but probably his earlier work. Still, Gioia has translated the Italian poet Eugenio Montale at his most obscure. A complex fellow, Gioia—a catholic who does not believe in God, a free thinker who works in a conservative administration, but who has completely transformed the National Endowment for the Arts into a broad arts support and educational institution.

No response from Tweedy. Though at this point I suppose they have to hire people to sort their email just as with regular post.

Paul Simon yes, I’ve always enjoyed him. Some songs more than others. His solo career is even better than the Simon & Garfunkel stuff. He can be quite poetic at times, and very open form, but he writes short stories in song as well. I really enjoyed his most recent CD. It tapped into the zeitgeist without going pedantic and there were several songs that were poems certainly. Nice atmospherics by Brian Eno as well, and some of Simon’s finest guitar playing in a while. Didn’t know he and Dylan were friends. I would imagine they’d influence one another at this point. Perhaps that explains why Dylan’s latest has him in a more relaxed voice.

We’re getting early heat here, and no rain when it should be raining half the time. We’ll either

have a nasty run of storms or a long hot drought. There's no way knowing these days.

Best,

Jake

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27 March 2007

Jake,

I know what you mean about a lack of response from Tweedy. I emailed three publishers of Leonard Cohen and got no response. I also emailed Paul Williams a Dylanologist and got none either. I'm still waiting for a response to my last email to Kate Fagan. Perhaps people are intimidated by the polemical nature of the Argotist site. It can come across to many that I'm violently anti any poetry that is remotely mainstream. Perhaps Cohen sees himself as not all that removed from the mainstream. Perhaps Williams thinks my views on Dylan would clash with his own. Perhaps Fagan has nothing she feels she can expand on in an interview format.

I haven't heard Simon's latest album. I heard some songs from it on TV but not all of it. It sounds quite good.

Gioia does indeed sound like an enigma. The thing I have noticed about poets who stress that poetry should have an overt meaning is that most of them believe that poetry should serve some social, humanistic or moral purpose—hence the importance of unambiguous communication. But I believe they are misguided because when one looks at Dylan's protest songs one sees that they can convey messages without being didactic. Perhaps you could mention this to Gioia. It would be interesting to get his take on Dylan.

I've now had a chance to listen to your CD all the way through. The musical atmosphere is one of an underlying slightly ominous haunting quality that sits well with the words. This was not readily apparent on first hearing but was discernable on the second. Mind you, this is just the feeling it gave me. You may not have intended it. Having only read parts of *Brambu Drezi* on the Internet it is difficult for me to compare the two manifestations of it (sound and text). The text sections I've seen seem formally quite dense and varied whereas the sound version comes across as more of a continuum. This is inevitable when translating text to sound. I suppose, though, that a musical backing can serve the same function that form does in poetry. Your delivery of the words was expressive and was very much a performance. Some poets I've heard who read their poems merely read them with no feeling or fluency.

The weather here today is overcast. Yesterday it was sunny. The day before that it was windy. The English weather is a mystery to everyone.

Best,

Jeff

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29 March 2007

Jeff,

I'm hoping to get a letter in the mail to Gioia in the next day or two that will include at least the first question of an interview. So much depends on his schedule at this point. I'm sure he wants to accomplish everything he can before his tenure at the NEA is over. I am going to suggest that Dylan is the hinge, the point where a popular form of music became an art form by way of Dylan integrating poetry. Though in this country no one would have ever thought of rock as poetic or art had it not been for the Beatles. There's no escaping the impact they had on popular culture. It's unfair because there were so many others doing the same thing and because Dylan got there first. But Dylan's influence in this country has been more by way of the people he inspired. He has had a few hits, but they are his least substantial songs. It could be argued that given the general tenor of the times that someone would have come along and changed the music and the culture anyway. It happened to be Dylan, just like it happened to be Elvis that was the catalyst for the music becoming a massively popular form to begin with—despite the fact that Little Richard and Chuck Berry not only made music that is as good as Elvis, but wrote their own material.

The ominous, haunting quality you hear in the *Brambu* material is not entirely unintentional, but it is more an aspect of the blend of elements—the poetry coming from the darker, less explored regions of the psyche combined with bass and drums and guitar that have their origins in Africa and the culture Africans created in the Americas—blues, jazz, vodoun, gospel. And there is the chant as well, which is not what we've come to expect from poetry. But the work has always had that aspect. There has always been an invocation in it, the oldest and most organic roots of religion. Growing up in the south one is surrounded by several strong influences. Music, especially music born in the south is always around. Then there are the various distortions of religion. There was also, until the 1970s, isolation from the world. There are still many places in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, etc. where you feel completely disconnected from the world. Florence is on the edge. People here are connected to the broader culture in various ways. The university and hospital brings students, teachers and doctors from all over the world, and the current wave of immigration from the northern cities and the Latin American countries has changed things. White culture (white meaning generally Scotch-Irish and English descent here) is still a majority power, but a greatly diminished majority.

I can send you the entire text of *Brambu Drezi* as three PDF files if you like (one for each book). That would allow you to see the whole work.

Are you familiar with Alan May's work? You might enjoy his poetry. He edits an online poetry journal at: <http://apocryphaltextpoetry.com> and has a book available as a free download at:

[www.lulu.com/content/440262](http://www.lulu.com/content/440262)

I have asked him to do an interview not really thinking about where to publish it, but because he is doing open form work and does not often perform his poetry. The primary way to get his work

is as a text, so I wanted to ask him questions about that and about how he arrives at the kind of poetry he writes and so on. When you have time and if you are inclined, take a look at his work and see if you'd be interested in seeing new work from him, publishing an interview with him or both. Reading his work, I thought you should know about him.

Still unseasonably warm here, but we had some rain and thunder last night. More is predicted along with cooler weather. If everybody in the world had English weather that wouldn't be nearly as bad as Siberian or Saharan weather. I could live with it. The cool and rain would get old, but I think I would always prefer it to the heat and humidity we have here. If you have ever wondered why music from the American south is slow and raw (the blues, authentic country music) just sample the weather. Once the heat sets in no one does anything fast.

Take care,

Jake

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29 March 2007

Jake,

Yes, send me the PDFs for *Brambu*.

Yes, the chant is something not frequently utilized in poetry. Ironically, poetry probably started as incantation. Music is incantation, as is song. That's why I don't like poetry that is too much like prose—there is no incantatory element. Ginsberg's *Howl* is good only because of its incantatory aspects not because of its language—although there are some good lines in it.

I'll check out Alan May's work. He included my poetry on his site last year. Yes, I will publish the interview with him.

Best,

Jeff

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5 April 2007

Jeff,

Getting a package in the mail to Gioia later today that includes what I hope will be the first question in the interview:

'Does Dylan and those he influenced blur the line between high and low art? Though we might say there is a continuum with one end occupied by the most insipid pop music and the other by self-consciously, still primarily textual, academic poetry, is the entire range now a gray area?'

Take care,

Jake

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6 April 2007

Jake,

Your suggestion for the questions for the Argotist songwriters is a good one. It simplifies things a lot. It means that we can get the interviews completed and online relatively quickly. Such a series of interviews would have crossover interest and could attract links with rock, folk and other musical sites not necessarily poetry based. This in turn could get to the ear of Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen etc. who may think that the Argotist has enough musical credibility for them to be interviewed by it at a later stage. I'll see if I can come up with a question or two.

It could follow the same question and answer format as the interviews with poetry editors on the Argotist site.

Best,

Jeff

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9 April 2007

Jeff,

Yes, if we follow the same format for the songwriters as for poetry editors the process would move along quickly, assuming we can get more songwriters lined up. I know quite a few songwriters, but I'm not sure how many of them would think of themselves as poets on any level.

Take care,

Jake

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9 April 2007

Jake,

It is true that many songwriters don't regard themselves as poets. Maybe this is because they see what they are doing as different from what is nowadays labeled 'poetry.' Some of them may even dislike poetry because of its misrepresentation by the mainstream publishing houses etc. So there could be a problem finding songwriters who unashamedly call themselves poets.



The best thing to do might be to sound out some of the songwriters you know on this matter. As a last resort, I could always post a message on forums and mailing lists asking for songwriter/poets to be interviewed.

Best,

Jeff

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12 April 2007

Jeff,

There are three or four songwriters I had in mind when I mentioned songwriters I know. I actually know many more than that now that I think about it. But I will indeed sound them out in person and by email depending on their location and see what they say. Perhaps once we come up with the five questions I could just tell them what I'm doing and ask or send them the questions. These are all people I would call my friends. They probably know other people who would be receptive once we get past their inhibitions about what constitutes poetry. One thing I am certain of is that they are going to give us answers that have nothing to do with literary pretense, which would be refreshing. I remember Dylan in a rare interview on major broadcast TV here in the 80s. The interviewer asked him point blank if he thought he was a poet. He shook his head in the affirmative and said, 'Yeah. I don't know what people like Eliot or Keats would say about that, but yeah.' I think that's the kind of response we'll get from songwriters. Curiously, 20th century poets, Auden and Sandburg come to mind, are on record as having said they never felt they lived up to the word poet. What rubbish! As if the word poet was somehow a defied thing, as if to be a poet was to be a messiah. No wonder post- modern theory is so rife with self-doubt.

Are you familiar with the work of Ivan Argüelles? Jack Foley? Neeli Cherkovski? They are three outstanding poets I know that live in the San Francisco Bay Area that might be fun to interview. Each is very unique in the kind of poetry he creates. There is also Lissa Wolsak in Vancouver, Canada, Shelia Murphy in Phoenix, Mary-Marcia Casoly in Northern California—all working in open form poetries.

Take care,

Jake

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12 April 2007

Jake,

Yes, approach as many of the songwriters that you know about the interviews. But we should limit the number asked to about 20.

I agree Auden and Sandburg's idea of the poet as something to be deified is ridiculous. I always get slightly embarrassed by the word 'poet.' I would much rather be called a songwriter who can't come up with tunes, or even a 'poem-writer' than a 'poet.' I don't mind it when someone says they write 'poetry,' though, because that is what they are technically doing.

Apart from Jack Foley and Sheila Murphy, I'm unaware of the poets you mention. I'm not really all that familiar with Jack apart from his interview on the Argotist and some poems of his there, also. Also Sheila has some poems on the site. I'll put the other names on file for possible future interviews.

Best,

Jeff

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23 April 2007

Jeff,

I still haven't contacted my songwriter friends. I've been busy with a song and other musical ideas as well as working on what will probably be the opening pages of *Brambu Drezi* book 4, which is demanding quite a bit of research. I have managed to keep the interview going with Alan May however. I think we should wrap that up soon. Possibly this week.

Take care,

Jake

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28 April 2007

Jake,

Sorry for not replying sooner. I've been quite busy the past few days with various domestic problems that I won't bore you with.

How long have you been working on the *Brambu Drezi* series? Maybe I could find someone to interview you on it, if you like. I like interviews about the genesis of ideas for works etc. I would interview you myself but it is best if you have someone more intimate with your work.

I listened to Dylan's *John Wesley Harding* again for the first time in many years. I'm always struck by the articulation and powerfulness of the drum playing on it. It definitely makes the album for me.

Best,

Jeff

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29 April 2007

Jeff,

No need to apologize for delays. I knew you were busy.

I've been working on *Brambu Drezi* off and on since the Fall of 1985. I usually take two years or so off from it between books. I am just this spring beginning work on book four and promoting the collected books one-three as I can. We did a performance in February and it looks like we may do something else this fall—probably in Mobile and New Orleans. I'd be delighted to do an interview. It would probably be best if I were interviewed by someone I didn't know, or at least did not know well.

*John Wesley Harding* is one of the finest Dylan albums. It sounds like it was recorded in a few days with a tight acoustic band. He was in good voice and the songs are among his best—musically as well as poetically. I never thought about the drums being so important to the set, but you may be right. They may be so appropriate to the songs that I missed the importance of their contribution. I read an interview once, from around 1969-70, Dylan said of that album that he was trying to get a sound similar to Gordon Lightfoot. I like Gordon Lightfoot, but I don't think he's ever done an album that would compare favorably to *John Wesley Harding*.

Take care,

Jake

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1 May 2007

Jeff,

1960 or thereabouts seems to be a time when the old guard began to vanish in the wake of a major cultural shift. McLuhan would probably start talking about hot mediums and cool mediums here—and that has something to do with it. Once moving pictures were broadcast into every home things began to change very quickly. I would not go so far as to say the medium is the message though. I think the content makes a difference. If the moving pictures that people were watching were the best films, documentaries and true investigative reporting the culture would have still changed, but it would not have become so shallow. A case in point, Martin Scorsese, ill as a child and unable to play outside with his mates, was stuck inside where an early TV station played Italian Neo-Realist films. His family liked them because they were in their native tongue. In that case TV shaped someone's life for the better. We can see what he did with the influence. Unfortunately, he is the exception. In a print culture a PhD in the arts, literature or the humanities in general, would be in fairly high demand. In an audio-visual culture reading is incorporated in the great stream of moving images and sounds. It becomes secondary. You don't have to know

how to read to enjoy television. In fact, considering the most popular TV programs, reading might actually get in the way.

That doesn't mean people should stop getting their PhDs in the arts. I hope that never happens. But it will make things more difficult, at least for a while. Eventually print will either make a return or the arts, including poetry, will adapt, and people will still need an education in those things. At that point though you might ask your students to watch a performance by a poet, perhaps watch it several times, rather than read a book. The academy is struggling. It is offering a mid-20th century education to people who can only remember the 21st century. That kind of education is not in demand so not as many teachers are needed. Problem is, when a professor tries to change the curriculum, he is in danger of losing his job. In this context an education in literature is in danger of becoming a cottage industry. Great books can be preserved, and the study of them preserved, but it will have to be done in a multi-media environment.

When I meet students of friends who teach in the universities here, I am often astonished at how ignorant they are, even of their own discipline. Most of them complain about having to do any work outside of class and only a few leave with a real education. They will have degrees and will be working in the service industry. Those are the only jobs that remain. Most of the old trade union jobs have been outsourced to China and other Asian countries. Many of the high tech jobs are leaving as well. There is still room for innovative small companies and individuals, but neither the government (in its current incarnation, since Reagan) or the private sector is doing much to promote innovation. Heavy manual labor, construction and so forth, is increasingly done by immigrants (both legal and illegal) because they will work for less than half the wage of union labor. One can't blame the immigrants for wanting to work. And the work they do is as good as union labor. The problem is at the top—the rich wanting to get richer. How much is enough?

Take care,

Jake

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2 May 2007

Jake,

Your analysis of cultural changes being not necessarily due to technology makes sense. The thing I am learning about the Internet is that it enables people to do the same things they do in the 'real world' faster and over greater distances. This has inevitably changed the nature of fame. At one time someone became famous because they were in a film, wrote a novel or sang pop songs etc. And because there were not many record companies, TV stations or alternative means to read a book, the audience for each product was aware of all the other products produced by these means. For instance, a fan of Norman Mailer knew who Dylan was, and vice versa.

Could there ever be a situation where someone became famous purely because of the Internet and also have people in the real world be aware of him/her as well? I don't think this is possible with the Internet because I doubt it can create celebrities. This is because to have real fame, one

has to be known by many people and because of the fragmented and decentralized nature of the Internet, and the haphazard surfing habits of people, I don't think this is possible. I think the Internet will be the demise of universal celebrity and will replace it with the sort of 'celebrity' that must have existed before printing was invented.

Yes, the educational system today is still operating with a 20th century outlook. Teaching poetry will be increasingly difficult. The idea of poetry as a distinct art form will probably become obsolete. We can see it now with the advent of multimedia combinations of poetry, image, music, ambient sound etc.

Best,

Jeff

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4 May 2007

Jake,

I envy you meeting Neil Young. The nearest I got to Dylan was when a friend of a friend who worked in the box office of a venue in Liverpool got me some tickets at a reduced price for a Dylan concert in Liverpool in 1996. I was in one of the back seats and couldn't see him without binoculars.

I did manage to hand a copy of the *Argotist* magazine to one of his band as they came out of the stage door asking if he could give it to Dylan. It was in an envelope and I'd enclosed a letter asking if he'd like to be interviewed for the magazine. Needless to say nothing came of it. I was hoping Dylan would come out of the stage door but I think he came out of another door as I waited for ages and no one else came out after his band. Al Kooper was in his band that night so I saw him come out of the stage door and get onto the tour bus.

Best,

Jeff

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7 May 2007

Jeff,

We met Neil after a show in 1983. It was just fans meeting the artist. Neil's attention was primarily taken by a guy who so drunk he could hardly stand and babbled endlessly. Neil seemed to be fascinated by him, or maybe just trying to follow what he said. But he's one of those guys who looks, sounds, and acts exactly as he appears in videos and films. No pretense at all.

As you know from experiences with Dylan, it's impossible to get enough time with these guys to

have a real conversation. Spooner Oldham, who lives here, always has, was part of the Muscle Shoals music scene and so on, has played keys for Neil off and on for years. He's very approachable, easy to talk to, but completely in his own space musically. Spooner could give Neil a call at any time and Neil would be delighted to hear from him—they're friends. But unless you have major press credentials there is no way people like that can take the time to talk. They have to maximize interviews to the largest audience. Otherwise all they would do is give interviews.

Take care,

Jake

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10 May 2007

Jake,

I've added you to my friends on MySpace, but your photo is still in my 'Pending Friends Request' folder in my MySpace mailbox. Normally this would automatically be removed once you had approved the adding of a friend. Underneath it is a 'Cancel Request' button. But I don't want to press it to remove your photo in case it removes you from my friends list. Can you shed any light on this?

Best,

Jeff

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11 May 2007

Jeff,

I can't understand what is happening. I have approved, or thought I had approved you. You are the only Friend listed on my page. I'll keep looking around. I sent a few friend requests out to people tonight. I tried to add Steve Reich, but he has to know you even though his page is maintained by friends.

An infinite sea of people out there including many who don't even pretend to be who they say they are. One wonders if something happened to the Internet how much information would be lost. If it continues to go in this direction it will become absolutely essential to maintain it or a whole century could be lost. I'm sure the sci-fi people are hard at work on the possibilities of this scenario.

Take care,

Jake

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11 May 2007

Jake,

I've pressed the 'Cancel Request' button next to your photo and it has now gone and you are still on my friends list, so it must have been some sort of glitch in the system that caused it not to have been removed automatically. I can see my photo on your friends list so you must have approved despite the system saying that you had yet to.

One person who added me to their friends list couldn't see my photo on it after he approved me (it's now on), and another who I added couldn't approve me till MySpace verified my password and email address. I suppose all these problems will be ironed out by MySpace eventually.

Yes, if the Net went down lots of information that wasn't backed-up would be lost. I imagine most of the stuff on the Net isn't backed up (at least in paper form). This is a concern that many historians and archivists must be aware of. John M. Bennett, as you probably know, is involved with archiving poetry that is on the Internet—or at least that's what I heard. I can't be sure. If so, this is a wise move. I'm sure most universities are doing the same thing. The irony is that the computer was seen as a way to avoid having stacks of paper files lying around, but it looks like the increasing need to archive internet content will not solve this.

Mind you, paper archives shouldn't really take up too much space. Let's suppose that a person (poet, novelist, artist, anyone famous, etc.) accumulates enough personal papers, poems, letters, diaries, etc. to fill three train carriages (and I can't see it being more than this) then these three carriages could easily fit into, say, the Mojave Desert. Let's suppose there are a million of these people, all with archives three carriages full; then this would still not be too much to fit into the Mojave Desert (in underground facilities, of course). So there is definitely room for all this paper storage, the problem is that you would need an army of archivists and curators to look after it all.

One of the problems with using computers for creative writing is that you leave no historical paper trail behind you. With the advent of word processing and the ability to edit a document by deleting rather than crossing out, or starting a new page in a notebook, a lot of the material that charts the development of a creative work is lost. All we are left with is the final electronic version as a printout.

Best,

Jeff

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12 May 2007

Jeff,

Are you familiar with the Long Now Foundation?

<http://longnow.org/>

They specialize in thinking about the long term. Brian Eno and a couple of other people started it, but it has taken a direction of its own. The best part of it is the series of lectures that are available online or can be downloaded. It isn't always what you'd expect. Many of the lecturer's have different views about the future and how we might get there. One lecture in particular was about how to maintain electronic data over the long term. Because operating systems and formats change so often it has already become a problem. The best answer so far seems to be to tag things and keep passing them on to the future by keeping them current on the Internet. Still, if the whole net collapsed, or if most of the electric grid worldwide became as unreliable as it is in much of the so-called undeveloped countries then we'd be back to paper. Over the long term, paper, especially paper made of the right materials, or parchment, seems to hold up relatively well. A few thousand years in the best case. At some point however, assuming no total collapse, the idea of long term electronic archiving will become appealing, perhaps even profitable. We might be surprised if we were able to see a thousand years in the future to find that all the electronic information now online and since, and whatever networks succeed the web, would still be easily accessed. Perhaps in something small enough to fit in the palm of your hand.

Take care,

Jake

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13 May 2007

Jake,

The Long Now site was interesting if puzzling. I don't quite understand what they are doing with regard to the Rosetta Project; whether they are just compiling samples of world language as grammar or compiling literature, philosophy, poetry etc. in these languages, and if so from what sources etc. Here is information on the disk itself:

<http://www.rosettaproject.org/about-us/disk/concept>

I can't make out from this description of the disk exactly what they mean as to how to see its content. I initially assumed it was some sort of CD but it isn't. It looks more like a paperweight. To read what's on it would mean that only one person holding it at a time could do so. Looking at the disk's photo, I can't see how anything can be 'read' from it (it mentions you need a magnifying glass for this), let alone all the languages of the world having been 'micro' inscribed on it. Also, it is impossible to copy or email the material on the disk as you can with digital information.

I have a suspicion that the Rosetta Project is intended as a thought provoking Eno-inspired art object rather than a practically intended storage device. But it does serve the purpose of reminding us that information is too often regarded today as transient and disposable and that



we should slow down and treat it with more respect. I haven't looked at the rest of the Long Now site yet so I may find that the articles etc. may offer more practical data storage solutions.

The only way I can think to save electronic information from being destroyed or lost if the Net went down is if in the future each of us could house the Internet in our physical brains. It would not run on electricity, though, but on some sort of bio-electrical 'energy' that our bodies already produce. If the Net existed in each of our brains then only the death of everyone living would make electronic information obsolete. Accessing the Internet in this way would require only thought. In fact, we would probably come to see the Internet part of us as indistinguishable from our normal thinking processes.

Best,

Jeff

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14 May 2007

Jeff,

The Rosetta project disk is I think a prototype, but yes, an art object. Such an object might be useful in a future where many languages were lost. It would serve the same purpose as the Rosetta stone. It would not be a way to preserve more than a bit of the languages themselves. But at some point such an object, or perhaps several of them scattered around the globe might be useful. In a scenario where some future culture discovers some archive of books or electronic media and figures out how to 'excavate' it, boot it up—if the languages were alien to them it would do them no good. But I think the assumption behind the artifact is that there may be a time so far removed from us that fragments are all that remain, fragments that would make no sense except for something like a global Rosetta stone. A problematic assumption here is that it assumes people will still read text far into the future. Humans have only been reading text of some kind for six or seven thousand years. Text may be a relic in a few thousand years. There may be some form of direct communication between people based on interconnected neurology or people may return to images and sound without the abstraction of sound-images like alphabets. The issue I suppose with Long Now is to try to think about the very long term and try to find ways to ensure continuity or rediscovery at least.

This may be enough questions for the songwriters. What do you think?

1. Do you think of your lyrics as poetry?
2. Do you think it is important that songs rhyme and if so why?
3. Do you think song lyrics must conform to recognized song structures such as clear rhyming schemes, choruses, refrains, hooks and bridges or that songs can also be like free-verse?
4. When you read poetry in school or elsewhere did you recognize any connection to the music you enjoyed?
5. Was there anything about poetry in books that influenced your song writing?
6. Why do you think songs are more popular with people than poetry is?

Take care,

Jake

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14 May 2007

Jake,

Yes, I think we have enough questions now. I think the best way to proceed from here is for you to send the questions (in the order they stand in your last email) to the songwriters you have contact with or those you can get to. I will do the same.

Best,

Jeff

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17 May 2007

Jeff,

I'm not sure how many people we should interview. We could say that we shouldn't ask more than a dozen people and if we only get half a dozen responses we could send the questions to another half dozen.

More soon.

Take care,

Jake

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13 June 2007

Jeff,

Thanks for the BBC links. I haven't had a chance to explore them yet beyond going to the site and making sure everything worked. Thank you.

I have a package of 5 CDs with their cover material ready to go to you. I hope to be able to mail them this weekend.

All the best,

Jake

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13 June 2007

Jake,

The BBC Radio Player is always interesting to look around. I'm too busy to listen to the radio so the Player enables me to hear what I miss.

I look forward to listening to your CDs.

Best,

Jeff

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16 June 2007

Jeff,

The BBC in general seems to do excellent broadcasting. We get something in this country called BBC America. It consists of programs that air on BBC that someone somewhere deems is suitable for a segment of the American audience. It seems to be working. My wife loves the mystery and police dramas. I've watched a few of them with her. With a few exceptions on the American side, most of the BBC is a cut above American broadcasting—both for news and entertainment. Indeed, American news is trying very hard to be entertainment. The BBC on the other still seems to know the difference. Most American TV is simply too stupid to watch. We have a Public Broadcasting service that provides a good mix of info, news, drama, and comedy (some of it originally from the UK—*Fawlty Towers* a few years ago). Some of the pay TV can be good—the recently completed *Sopranos* series for example.

Regarding music. I listen to it almost all the time. While I'm working at the computer I am listening to instrumental music or vocal music in a language I don't understand. When I'm doing chores around the house I listen to rock, folk, and so forth, also in the car. I'm a glutton for music of almost any kind. The music in films is often as important as the film itself. I still don't watch much video online. Many people are crazy about YouTube or Google Video. The screen resolution isn't very good though and I think I prefer to spend my time when that close to the screen to be working at something. IFctv.com does have some interesting short films though.

I got the package of CDs in the mail to you yesterday.

Best,

Jake

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16 June 2007

Jake,

Living with the BBC every day, I can tell you that you only get to see the best of it in the US. Ninety percent is crap. A typical evening's schedule will consist of three reality shows back to back, one makeover show, a soap and maybe one mediocre drama. What BBC America shows is the best that the BBC has to offer, which is around 15% of its outcrop. Since around 1990 British TV has dumbed down to such an extent that I get very depressed just thinking about it for what it says about the intelligence of the British public. Our commercial channels are even worse! Yes, the BBC news is marginally more somber than US news and the news items are slightly more in-depth but I find BBC news patronizing.

I like the old US TV shows best. Shows like *Dr Kildare*, *Star Trek*, *Ironside*, *Perry Mason*, *Colombo*, *The Virginian*, *Dallas*, *Mork and Mindy* etc. I find much modern US TV drama boring (especially *CSI* and its never-ending spin-offs) and lacking in the dramatic element that I loved in *Dr Kildare*, *Star Trek* and *Dallas*. The level of dramatic tension in *ER* and *Gray's Anatomy*, for instance, is very low considering these shows are supposed to be about life and death. They seem to concentrate more on the mundane domestic problems the doctors are having than on the life and death issues. And when they do deal with the latter they do so in an extremely matter-of-fact way. I can't see why *Gray's Anatomy* has to have a soundtrack consisting of bland contemporary songs instead of an orchestrated score like *Dr Kildare* had. These songs only serve to signpost the fact that the show is not really a drama at all but a romantic soap. *Chicago Hope* was the only medical drama since *Dr Kildare* that treated the audience as adults and not teenagers. I also don't like *Desperate Housewives*, which (like *Ally McBeal*) is trying too hard to be eccentric and quirky. And I found the *X Files* less scary than *Friends*. *The Invaders* was more disturbing than the *X Files*. And whilst *The Sopranos* is more adult, I still find its portrayal of the Mafia too sanitized. Compared with Scorsese's *Goodfellas* and *Casino*, *The Sopranos* is like *Little House on The Prairie*.

Maybe all this has something to do with the modern vogue for always wanting to be seen as knowing, cool and post-modern. This attitude is the reason why today's music, TV, poetry, film, theatre and art are so bland. British TV drama is just as bad, but I won't go into that otherwise I'll be at the computer all day. Sorry to be such a grouch about all this, but no one seems to be saying these things so I thought I should.

I'll let you know as soon as I receive your CDs.

Best,

Jeff

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20 June 2007

Jeff,

It sounds as if TV there is about the same as here. We have all the reality shows and game shows and other useless distractions. I watch none of them. My wife is a nurse and that drew her into *Gray's Anatomy* and *House*. I've never watched the former, but I have watched several episodes of the latter with her during a meal. *House* is like a video game for medical professionals. The plot is always the same, guess the disease, and the humor and other asides are always in the same vein. It's pretty much unbearable except that the lead actor is good enough to keep me from being entirely repelled.

I was a big *Star Trek* fan. They were attempting to deal with real issues. Other shows I enjoyed for the same reason were *All In The Family* and *MASH*, the early seasons in both cases. I watched *Seinfeld* for a while, but it was ultimately too vapid to endure. The characters were funny, but the routine grew tiresome.

No, the *Sopranos* were not even close to the great mafia films, whether the *Godfather* films (which are really more a parable about America) or Scorsese's gangster films. I thought *The Departed* was very good, probably in the long run as good as any of his films.

The TV I watch of my own volition is either films or documentaries or on the weekends one of the C-SPAN channels becomes BookTV—which features non-fiction books, usually authors doing readings, answering questions from small audiences. There are long interviews. Gore Vidal has done one of those. And during the summer they cover the various book fairs and conventions that usually feature panel discussions by authors on political, historical and other non-fiction topics. If it were not for my wife I would have no idea what broadcast TV was like these days, or what was on the news. She loves CNN. She recognizes it for what it is, as infotainment, but often leaves it on and drops in when a story comes on that she finds interesting. I work in a converted back bedroom and usually have the headphones on so I miss all of that.

If television is a means to knowing in the post-modern, or to being cool, then I don't care to join the club. Film is interesting because the story must be compressed, as in a play, and there is so much that can be done with directing and cinematography and editing. Most of it is garbage of course because it is merely product. But there are enough good films out there that I usually watch two or three a week either on DVD or TV (without commercials/adverts. I wouldn't even watch *The Godfather* or *Hamlet* if commercials were involved).

Visual mediums can be as informative and profound as text when they are applied toward those ends. For the time being, text remains the medium of greater intelligence. It doesn't matter if the text is onscreen or on the page. Written language makes demands of us, requires a level of engagement and reasoning that most visual mediums, especially moving images, do not. A hot medium as opposed to a cool medium. The moving image can become quite hot, but it requires an effort on the part of the audience that they have been trained not to make.

Still, the majority have never been the true rulers of a society. Every citizen of Athens could vote, but most people who lived in Athens were not citizens, and even among the citizens, most didn't participate. The struggle is between engaged minorities. The wealthy always have a stake and

various small portions of the disenfranchised citizenry assert themselves. This is what democracy comes to. The vast majority go along for the ride so long as they don't become too uncomfortable, and comfort is a very relative term. Majorities don't cause revolutions or a renaissance, minorities do, usually a collaborative effort between minorities.

Best,

Jake

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21 June 2007

Jake,

I received your CDs just now in the post and look forward to hearing them. Thanks for going to all the trouble to copy them and the lyrics etc. I will buy CD cases for them.

Best,

Jeff

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24 June 2007

Jake,

So far, I've listened to *Naked as Rain* and *Strange Parlors*. I like 'Turning The Mysteries,' 'Coming Down Straight,' 'An Animal Beneath Her Skin,' 'Pale Blue Light,' 'Dark Water,' 'Delivery Boy Blues' and 'Four Ways Round.' I'm sure the others will grow on me, and they are strong lyrically, but the ones I mention had a more immediate emotional impact on me.

You are certainly musically versatile: playing most of the instruments yourself. And you have experimented with blues and jazz forms I see. Your lyrics work well both as poetry on the page and when heard—a rare feat.

Do you have a fan base for your music? If not your MySpace page would be a good way of nurturing one.

Best,

Jeff

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26 June 2007

Jeff,

Glad the CDs made it through. *Naked as Rain* and *Strange Parlors* both employ alternate tunings on almost every song. This makes it easier to avoid the cliché progressions and licks, but it also demands a little more of the listener. You're a sophisticated listener so you're picking up on things right away, but most people would have to listen to these five times to begin to get what I'm trying to do. Almost all of my favorite albums are like this.

I'd love to be able to hire musicians, rent studio time and so forth. I know the people and the studios are available here, but I can't ask the musicians to play for free (though some of them would). The Bare Knuckles CD, *Trouble In Your House*, was recorded in a more or less legitimate studio at the local university. But because we getting it free (Wayne is a professor there) and had to work around student sessions we had to work very fast. Everything is first take. The whole CD was recorded in about 8 hours and mixed in another 3 hour session. Working this way drives engineers crazy, but we had a guy who caught on very fast and got the best that could be had out of such quick work. You'll also notice how much more traditional the Bare Knuckles songs are. That was the intention—to write in the place between Appalachian folk and delta blues.

As far as an audience in concerned. The songs I have uploaded at MusicDownload.com have done very well for artists with no promotion at all and the tracks at LastFM are beginning to get some airplay as well. You are right though, I need to post a few songs at MySpace. I need to learn how to do it. I think I may have passed up the option at first and now I need to go back and change the settings.

Thanks for your comments. They mean a great deal. It helps to hear from people who understand both poetry and music.

Best,

Jake

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26 June 2007

Jake,

Yes, I noticed something experimental about the two albums but couldn't put my finger on it. The lyrics are certainly more sophisticated and literary than the genres of country and blues are known for. It is as if you are bringing to these genres a classical poetic sensibility. Leonard Cohen is the only other person I know of doing something along these lines, but not with regard to country and blues.

*Slow Motion Town* seems musically and lyrically more in keeping with these genres, but it also evokes a mysterious mood not normally apparent in country and blues. The tracks I like most are: 'Slow Motion Town,' 'These Days off,' 'The Waters of Marah' and 'Red Red Road.'

The way you produce your albums seems to be a potentially stress free one rather than if a big record company were behind you. If that were the case, it would be a treadmill and each album would take longer to produce. As it stands, you have control over the process.

Best,

Jeff

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28 June 2007

Jeff,

*Slow Motion Town* is often very literally about things I have observed locally. The title song is directly descriptive of the life of most people that live here. 'Black Cat Stomp' is about one of my cats and he really did walk on his hind legs and try to bite someone. He lives up to all the black cat legends in blues folklore despite everything we can do to change him. 'Taste of Poison' was the first song I wrote for that set. It made the rest of the set inevitable. It was something I had to get off my chest.

Yes, the thing I enjoy about recording at home is that there are no pressures beyond those I place on myself. I'd love to have a home studio with all the best equipment and an engineer on call. This is what most people do who make a lot of money in the business. They are still subject to rejection from the record company. Occasionally an artist will develop such stature that the record company will grant him or her complete freedom because there is a significant core audience. But even Van Morrison was dumped from Warner Brothers when the company changed key personnel. He didn't have any trouble finding another label, but that shows you how insane for big money the record companies are. Even independent labels make most choices based on potential sales. A growing number of artists aren't even bothering to try to get a label and have even turned down offers because they don't want to work for them. It's a strange time for the music business. For as little as \$50 anyone can have an album for sale at iTunes or eMusic. How does any person or group of persons sift through it all to find what they like? I'm completely overwhelmed when I browse around at eMusic. There are so many artists I've never heard of and 30 second samples and reviews aren't really enough to let me know if I will enjoy the music. I usually have to hear a new artist on internet radio before I know whether or not I want an entire album. And while it is easier to get airplay now, the people with the most money behind them get the most promotion and most airplay. You end up with the same situation as before except that it is just easier for your music to be available. It really doesn't matter. I'd be writing poems and songs regardless of the circumstances.

Best,

Jake

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29 June 2007



Jake,

I've listened to *Bare Knuckles* and *Shadow Resolve*. I like 'The Hard Road,' 'Dark Side of Heaven,' 'Maggie's Soldier,' 'Sweet Mercy,' 'Drifters Code,' 'Psalm,' 'Toward Autumn,' 'Keys to the Kingdom,' 'Scales of Madness,' 'Deep River' and 'Walking.' Have you tried publishing the lyrics to your albums as poetry collections?

The van Morrison situation you mention is the reason why Joni Mitchell has semi-retired. She mentioned in a 1994 interview that her record company was thinking of dropping her. As you know Paul McCartney has left EMI and is now with Starbucks who released his new album. I don't know if his move from EMI was out of choice or because they dropped him. The depressing fact is that only what stands for R&B sells. R&B has been the dominant force in pop music for the past 15 years or so, and I can't see this ending.

I have a new printer now, so I will print out *Brambu Drezi* and *Blood Paradoxes* and read them. I think that the long poem is the ideal form for poetry. Long poems have an incantatory effect that short ones don't. The history of poetry is largely the history of the long poem. When we speak of the great poets of history it is mainly in connection with their long poems. With songs, the situation is slightly different. With a song, the music somehow gives it 'length.'

Yes, there is so much music to choose from now. I think the only way to do this realistically is from recommendations from friends. I still have too much music from the past 30 years to catch up on, so have no time for the newer artists—unless they are recommended to me. I still haven't heard Dylan's last album. I tend to get his albums three or four years after they come out. The only ones I got at the time they were released were *World Gone Wrong*, *Time Out of Mind* and *Love and Theft*.

Best,

Jeff

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1 July 2007

Jake,

I have asked some more songwriters for interviews. They are: Steve Earle, Richard Thompson, Roy Harper, Joan Baez, Kate Rusby, K.T. Tunstall, Beth Orton and Martha Tilton. I'm hopeful the others will agree. Rusby, Orton and Tilton are quite well known in the UK among folk aficionados. Martin Carthy's daughter, Eliza, has agreed to the interview.

Carthy, as you may know, met all the US folk singers that passed through London in the sixties. He knew Dylan, Paul Simon (whose arrangement of 'Scarborough Fair' was based on Carthy's arrangement of the song), Tom Paxton and the underrated Jackson C. Frank.

Best,

Jeff

---

2 July 2007

Jake,

Bryan Ferry has a new album of Dylan covers out. Thought you might like to know.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/release/45w6/>

Best,

Jeff

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5 July 2007

Jeff,

Difficult to tell from the samples, but these sound quite good. I knew that the more melodic songs would work best for Ferry. 'Simple Twist of Fate.' 'If Not For You'—but the slow reading of 'Positively 4th Street' is a surprise. As usual Ferry has impeccable style and the band reminds me of Roxy Music. It's the same odd combination of a crooner with a rock band. I wonder what he would do with some of Leonard Cohen songs. That might be a better match; Cohen always drew on the older forms of pop and cabaret, but didn't have the voice to bring it across. Ferry could probably work wonders with a song like 'Hallelujah' or 'I'm Your Man.'

Best,

Jake

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5 July 2007

Jeff,

I am familiar with Martin Carthy to some extent. I've heard a bit of his music and like it. He was part of that whole wave of British folk singers that appeared in the 60s. The best of them were true to the folk music of their place. One of the things I admire most about Richard Thompson is that even though he has incorporated many elements into his music, rock, blues and so on, you can always here English folk music behind it all. I know Roy Harper a little. I remember a few things from the 70s and I've seen ads for Orton and Tunstall in the music mags. Baez still has a loyal following here. One of the great voices in the folk movement. She's still doing wonderful work. I'd love to hear how any of these respond to the questions. In most cases I think the artists

would like to respond to the questions, but it's just a matter of having the time. Most of them spend 9 or 10 months of the year on the road and the remainder either working on new material, recording or recovering. It's a hard way to make a living.

I'm familiar with Tom Paxton. He still gets quite a bit of airplay on folk radio shows as do people like Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Pete Seegar, and so forth. Ry Cooder has an excellent new CD out called *My Name Is Buddy*. It uses animal characters set in the depression as wandering, down on their luck, but brings the whole thing across as a metaphor for the present situation. The music is straight from the roots music of the period. It would not be out of place if played next to a Woody Guthrie or Robert Johnson tune.

I will check into Jackson C. Frank. I don't recall ever hearing of him. Makes you wonder how many people have been missed along the way.

Best,

Jake

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5 July 2007

Jake,

Good point you make about Ferry being suitable for Cohen covers. I think Ferry's version of 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' is the best of all the versions there are. The musical arrangement enhances the melody and his singing brings a slight cynicism to the song. Ferry is a sort of urbane Dylan when it comes to the love song. His obvious posture seems to be that of the world-weary sophisticate but lyrically I hear a lot of Dylan-like regret and disappointment in his songs.

I've still to hear back from the songwriters I approached apart from one called Kate Rusby who has agreed. Joan Baez's manager said that she doesn't like to do email interviews preferring face-to-face ones.

By the way I'll check out Ramblin' Jack Elliot and see if he writes songs—I'm sure he does, but I'll make sure. It would be good to have an exclusive interview with him. I heard an old clip of him singing in 1960 and I thought it was Dylan until the announcer said who it was.

Best,

Jeff

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10 July 2007

Jake,

Richard Thompson has agreed to the interview. With him onboard we should be able to pull a few better-known songwriters, or convince the ones who have not replied that we are credible.

Best,

Jeff

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13 July 2007

Jeff,

There was a documentary on Ramblin' Jack a few years back, made by his daughter, called *The Ballad of Ramblin' Jack*. She did a good job getting a multi-dimensional portrait of him. His skill with a song is obvious as well as his ability to tell a story and entertain. He has some resentment toward Dylan because Dylan picked up a few things from him then dropped him when he dropped folk music, then picked him up again for the Rolling Thunder tour only to drop him again. Jack felt he should get more credit as a mentor to Dylan and couldn't understand why Dylan would drop him. I don't know how much writing Ramblin' Jack has done. Most of what I've heard from him is older folk music he has adapted to his own style. I like the website though it seems to be incomplete in places.

Best,

Jake

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13 July 2007

Jake,

I have listened to *Doppelganger Blues* and like the tracks: 'Take a Long Nap,' 'The Night Before Tupelo,' 'Caroline,' 'Stream of Darkness,' 'Help Me Jonah,' 'Prison Bell,' and 'Someplace You've Never Been.' I've listened to all the CDs you sent me now and will make a compilation CD of my favorite tracks.

Best,

Jeff

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16 July 2007

Jeff,

Glad you enjoyed the Bare Knuckles songs. We were obviously holding closer to the American folk tradition there. We've been playing some of this material in public again. I don't want to go back into all the necessary preparation that goes into doing regular two or three hour performances, but when we play at the gallery downtown I'll sing all the songs I can remember lyrics for. We usually do some Robert Johnson songs and some Dylan, as well as the original stuff. We even created a version of Van Morrison's 'Into the Mystic' on the spot. I could never sing it in his key, but dropping everything down a fifth seemed to work well enough.

Best,

Jake

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16 July 2007

Jake,

With regard to your performing songs in public, do you have a folk/acoustic scene where you live? Years ago in Liverpool there used to be lots of folk and acoustic venues where you could just turn up and sing a song or two without getting payment. But the stress of even just doing this forced me to give up. So I turned to writing and performing my poetry at poetry reading venues. I naively thought that performing poetry would be a less stressful preoccupation because one didn't have the responsibility for playing an instrument and remembering lyrics. Initially this was the case, but after a few months I got stressed out just being in the company of other poets because I found them less generous in spirit and more competitive and bitchy than the performers in the folk/acoustic scene.

I really don't know why this is. Perhaps poets think they are doing something more important than songwriters. I know that in your case, you see the two arts as equal but not all poets see it that way. Many will pay lip service to the idea that song and poetry are one, but not all believe it. Many poets will say Dylan is a poet but when you press them on why he wasn't nominated for the Nobel literature prize they will say something like, 'Well, his stuff lacks gravitas.'

Best,

Jeff

---

17 July 2007

Jeff,

There isn't much of an acoustic scene here. There is a songwriter's showcase every week at a local bar. We have performed there as Bare Knuckles and as Ascension Brothers (improvised music). The Bare Knuckles event went well enough, but I had a bad mike that didn't pick up my vocals very well. The Ascension Brothers event knocked them out their seats because most of

them had never heard anything but pop music. They responded so enthusiastically that we were never asked to perform there again. Most of the performers are trying to break into the Nashville market. There are quite a few places where bands perform. Max Russell performs either solo or with a band once or twice a week on average. We could do that as well, but that is all we would have time to do. The audience comes looking for entertainment, something to listen to while they drink and chat with friends. That seems kind of rude to the musicians. Why don't they save money and just play CDs?

There is a scene in Jeff Tweedy's solo performance DVD *Sunken Treasure* where he loses patience with a noisy audience and calls them on it. He offers to do whatever it takes to entertain them, then forces them to sit silent for 10 seconds just to prove how powerful it can be.

I didn't know you played guitar and sang. Have you continued with it? I mean at home, among friends? Have you ever written songs? If you could perform Simon and Garfunkel you must have a good voice. The kind of open mike format is available in almost every town in the U.S.—either for poetry or song or both. There is no shortage of people who want to perform. Problem is they only hang around long enough to perform then they leave. Again, seems rude to the performers not to stick around and hear what everyone is doing.

You are right, songwriters are much more open and friendly than poets in these situations. Part of this is the romantic notions that remain about poets. They are supposed to be serious, moody, or whatever. Songwriters on the other hand can be any kind of songwriter and they don't come with all the high literary pretense. I caught the last part of *The Last Waltz* on TV a few nights ago. I've seen it several times, but it had been a while. Van Morrison's version of 'Caravan' there is extraordinary and the Dylan's one two punch—the pathos of 'Forever Young' followed by the near punk attack of 'Let Me Follow You Down.' I thought watching it again how much better this was than almost any poetry reading. It had nothing to do with the fact that The Band was made of such good musicians. The difference was the way Morrison and Dylan performed their work. Rather than deliver a stoic reading they wailed and shouted. It seemed like something important was at stake, that they were passionate about what they sang. Most poets simply don't realize that performing a poem means more than an aural version of the text. It shouldn't be a quiet event. Even if the poem is about a quiet moment, it should be delivered with the nuance of a quiet song—Simon and Garfunkel are the perfect examples of how a song can be quiet but full of emotion.

We have been taught that the stuff in books is more serious than the stuff on CD. For that reason people that are attracted to poetry feel they have to do books to be validated. Indeed, poets don't grant Dylan his due because most of his poetry is set to something similar to popular music. It is easy to forget that Homer was a singer. In the ancient world, even if the poet didn't perform his own work he would have someone perform it for him while he stood beside with his hand on the shoulder of the orator to emphasize whose words were being performed. It is also easy to forget that even when you are reading words you are hearing a voice. If poets want to limit themselves to the page that is fine with me, but they disregard the origins of their own art when they do so. They also miss the experience of discovering what it is like to sound out the words of a poem. People like Dylan. Paul Simon and Van Morrison and all the others will always be known as poets and musicians. The best of both worlds and they got rich doing it. I'm sure that inspires no end of

envy for many poets and drives them further into their silent texts—but text is not silent unless no one reads it.

Best,

Jake

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18 July 2007

Jake,

I haven't seen *The Last Waltz* for a few years but from what I remember of it the Dylan and Morrison performances were as you described ('Rather than deliver a stoic reading they wailed and shouted. It seemed like something important was at stake, that they were passionate about what they sang'). A similar sense of urgency in Dylan's performance can be heard on most of the tracks on the album *Hard Rain* (especially 'Maggie's Farm' and 'Shelter from the Storm'). I can't be sure, but the musical arrangements for the live tour this album documents seem inspired by the Fairport Convention sound. It is more energetic than Fairport but I sense some sort of influence.

Ideally, as you say, poetry is best experienced when heard. I used to go to all sorts of poetry readings in the early 90s and initially enjoyed them but found that most of the poets reading were passionless in their delivery. This was in the days before poetry slams had caught on in Britain. I've never been to a slam but I've seen some extracts of them on TV and heard audio clips of them. The performances are very passionate at times but I find the poetry a bit weak. In contrast, I heard some archive audio clips of Kerouac and Ginsberg reading their poems in the late 50s and thought it brilliant.

I did get to hear John Ashbery reading in Liverpool in 1991. It did, after a while, put me in some sort of semi-trance-like state that I found pleasant—which he may have, perhaps, intended. I think, also, the fact that the reading was held in an art gallery (in a beautiful low-ceilinged room with expressionist paintings on the walls) contributed to the pleasing affect the reading had. When I heard Ashbery read I had only been involved with poetry a few months and so was naïve regarding the stresses and strains of being involved with extra-poetical activities such as getting involved with poetry readings, organizing readings, and getting magazines up and running. Yet, that Ashbery reading acts as a sort of symbol of what I should be feeling about poetry and its various related aspects. It is a bit like one's first experience of love, it is never forgotten and is held up as the ideal for the way things should always be in a relationship, however much the reality differs from it.

Best,

Jeff

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15 August 2007

Jake,

I'm reading the Allen Ginsberg biography *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg* by Bill Morgan. It is the best bio I've read on him. I have mixed feelings about Ginsberg's talent. The first three pages of *Howl* are very good, but the rest of his poetry is quite bland. His reputation seems to be founded (like that of The Beatles) on his social/cultural significance than on any artistic achievement. Kerouac's poetry (via Dylan's Beat-like lyrics on *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*) has had a far greater artistic significance in my view.

Best,

Jeff

---

17 August 2007

Jeff,

Thrilled to hear that Richard Thompson is answering the questions, even if at a slow pace. It indicates I hope that he understands what we are trying to do. He's one of those artists that has never done a bad record in my opinion—at least I've never heard it, and I've heard most of them at least once.

My feeling about Ginsberg is similar to yours. I like *Howl* straight through, the whole book, and I like *Kaddish* as well and the late revisit to the *Kaddish* subjects (primarily his mom) in *White Shroud*, and there are a few other poems here and there. He was a good ambassador for the Beat spirit and for freedom generally, but he got lost in his fame, and he knew it and stated it in his last poems. For me Kerouac really had the geist, the imagination and the musical qualities in his novels and poems that made Beat happen and make him one of the great American writers. I've read about 75% of his novels and most of his published poetry. He really woke me up as a kid and has continued to be a treat always. Among the Beats my other favorite is McClure because he is so unique. He really sounds like no one else. I also love Burroughs, but it's difficult to associate Burroughs with the Beats beyond a friendship. He was a little older and his writing is closer to hallucinated, distorted detective fiction, spy novels with a lot of innovation that is primarily his own.

Best,

Jake

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11 September 2007

Jake,

I have more song writing interviews in. I'm still waiting for Richard Thompson's though. I



managed to contact Linda Thompson's publicist who says she will ask her if she'll do the interview. Roy Harper, Bruce Cockburn, Grace Slick, Ralph McTell, Steve Earle, Teddy Thompson and Judy Collins have yet to respond to interview requests. I can see this dragging into next year.

Best,

Jeff

---

13 September 2007

Jeff,

Sorry that none of the songwriters you mentioned are responding to the query. I suppose it's difficult to get the message through that you aren't interested in all that pop star stuff.

Working here on *Brambu Drezi 4*. I have finished the first video section and now I'm editing the poetry and working out the soundtrack (music and other audio elements).

Take care,

Jake

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15 September 2007

Jake,

I didn't know you were doing a video version of *Brambu Drezi*. What does it consist of: performance, mime, etc? I think that poetry will have to return to its theatre and performance roots to survive. I just don't see the printed page as being the most effective way to present poems any more, given the reluctance of most people to open a book of poetry. People would much rather go for a night out somewhere where poetry is being performed.

Best,

Jeff

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20 September 2007

Jake,

I managed to get through to Neil Young's manager. He says that Young is busy at the moment directing a film and is not doing any interviews, but he said he'd forward my email request to

him. I told the manager that the interview questions don't need to be answered immediately; they can be answered anytime from now till March 2008. By that time, Young may have some time to answer them. The manager said he'd tell him.

I've also sent emails to Lou Reed, John Cale and Ian Hunter of the early seventies band Mott the Hoople.

Best,

Jeff

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8 October 2007

Jake,

I've attached Richard Thompson's interview answers, which I've just received.

Best,

Jeff

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11 October 2007

Jeff,

This is pretty much exactly what I would expect from Richard Thompson. Its honesty from a fellow that has learned how to be honest with himself. It's refreshing. I pretty much agree with him. I might suggest that jazz can be and is both entertaining and high art. Also, he's right that the arts generally seem to have hit a wall, but that wall only stands in one direction. There are many ways the arts can go. For instance, poetry can grow inside popular forms or modifications of popular forms. Leonard Cohen is a good example. Dylan of course. Some of Captain Beefheart's best material manages to come from a very primitive place but simultaneously be complex poetry. I'm thinking of the albums *Trout Mask Replica* and *Doc at the Radar Station*.

Concerning Thompson's remarks: It appears at this stage that the difference between high and low art has been abolished. One can no longer draw that line. It is a continuum in constant fluctuation. I think this is a good thing. It was a long time coming.

Hope all is going well.

Best,

Jake

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11 October 2007

Jake,

Yes, Thompson's interview is honest and he comes across as having some humility. I'm hoping to get Teddy Thompson to do the interview also. That will mean all the performing Thompson's will be interviewed in the same magazine. I think that may be a first.

It's a pity you don't want to be interviewed because you generated the initial idea and supplied some of the questions. I think you should reconsider this as the interviews have gathered some quite respectable names and it would be a shame for you not to be included in this company.

Best,

Jeff

---

29 October 2007

Jake,

Hope you are well. Here is a list of the interviewees interviewed so far:

Pietra Wexstun, Ralph McTell, Richard Thompson, Carol Decker, Linda Thompson, Martha Tilston, Steve Harley, Jack Foley, Max Russell, Van Eaton, Haley Hutchinson, Eddi Reader, Michael Rothenberg, Beck Siàn, Kate Rusby, Helen Seymour, Bariane Rowlands, Brendan Quinn, Adam Fieled, Jennifer John, Neil Campbell, Chris Stroffolino Gerald Schwartz, Andy Gricevich, Eric Unger, Heather Haley and Kyla Clay-Fox.

I'm still waiting for the questions to be answered by:

Alison Sudol, Jazamin Sinclair, Al Stewart, Eliza Carthy, Julie Felix, John Martyn and Roy Harper.

Songwriters who I've asked but have had no response from are:

Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, Ian Hunter, Bernie Taupin, Lou Reed and John Cale.

Songwriters who have said no are:

Joan Armatrading, Joan Baez and Randy Newman (Neil Young may or may not do it depending on his work commitments, according to his manager)

I have yet to ask:

Jeff Lynne, Ray Davies, Donovan, Suzanne Vega, Roger McGuinn, Robbie Robertson and Tracy Chapman

This thinking of people to ask has become quite compulsive and I think we may have too many interviewees as it is. What do you think?

Best,

Jeff

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31 October 2007

Jeff,

Good to hear from you.

You have done a wonderful job compiling respondents to the songwriter query, with some people I didn't think would answer. I think it will amount to a kind of archive on the subject. Other interviews, like the one I read last night with Labi Siffre, are also a valuable part of this. Answers from some of the people who have not responded or who you have not asked would be wonderful. I think in particular Ray Davies and Roger McGuinn. McGuinn might be approachable. I think he lives in Florida now. He seems to be recording on small labels, old folk songs and a few originals mixed in. It would be nice to hear from Bernie Taupin especially because though he writes lyrics he does not usually write music. I'm curious how he sees his words. Did he hand Elton John poems or lyrics or both?

I have a couple of people that need music almost immediately for projects and a film maker thinks he has a part for me in a short film. Very odd since I've never done any acting. Supposed to meet with him some time this week.

Take care,

Jake

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31 October 2007

Jake,

Compiling the song writing interviews has at least let songwriters get a chance to talk about songs and poetry, which few of them probably get a chance to do. I don't think Taupin will reply as it has been a while since I wrote to his manager. I also wrote to Judy Collins' manager and am still waiting for a reply also. I could write to Hal David I suppose, as next to Taupin he is the most well known purely lyric writer. I could also write to Tim Rice for that reason. In fact, I think I will approach them both.

I hope McGuinn agrees. As you say, his career has been scaled down somewhat so he may be amenable to a low profile interview. Mind you, I hope the interviews will not remain low profile. I'm sure each artist will mention it on their websites, MySpaces and in any publicity at least. It would be great if Dylan came across them.

Ginsberg acted in some small-scale films in the sixties. He even wrote a script for a few of them that never got made. I think someone wanted to make *Kaddish* into a film. Don't worry about not having acted, sometimes people who can't act make the most interesting performers. Look at Dylan's acting for example; it is awful but very watchable. I also saw an old surrealist film with Picasso in, and it was watchable for the same reasons.

Best,

Jeff

---

1 November 2007

Jeff,

Maybe the acting thing will work out. Its something I've always wanted to do. Still haven't met with the guy. We're having a hard time getting together, conflicting schedules.

Have you thought about sending Tom Petty the songwriter interview? I caught a bit of a documentary with him. In the scene, he was co-producing Roger McGuinn's 'comeback' album from a few years ago. A couple of record company clowns were trying to force a schlock love song they had written onto the album. Petty was telling them to fuck off in a polite but firm manner. His music and song writing has improved through the years—from being a straight rocker to being very good intuitive material. He toured with Dylan and I'm sure the association with people like Jeff Lynne, Roy Orbison and McGuinn has helped as well. He also does an excellent weekly show on XM satellite radio.

*Kaddish* as a film is a good idea, but it would have to be as strange as the poem. *Howl* would be a better film.

Speaking of films, what do you think of the new Dylan biopic about to be released? He's played by 6 actors, the only one of which looks like him is a woman. The previews look a bit surreal, like maybe inspired by the *Highway 61* period. Only problem I have with all of this is that they didn't use Dylan's versions, but cover versions instead.

Do send the pics of Liverpool when you can. I'd love to see the place for what it is (i.e. outside the usual Beatles context).

Best,

Jake

---

1 November 2007

Jake,

I've attached the Liverpool photos as a zip file.

Yes, I'll approach Petty for the interviews. I liked his contribution to *The Traveling Wilburys* albums. I emailed the radio station that hosts Dylan's show asking them to forward an email to Dylan about the interviews. It's a long shot but anything's possible.

I haven't seen the Dylan biopic but from what I hear I don't think I'd enjoy it as much as if it were more conventional. Dylan's such a fascinating character that a simple biopic would have been interesting enough. And it is a pity that Dylan's versions of the songs aren't included; cover versions of them are never satisfying in my view.

Best,

Jeff

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2 November 2007

Jeff,

Thanks for sending the photos again. Beautiful shots. I was unaware that Liverpool had so much interesting architecture. Also, curious how the Anglican Cathedral is built in the old style, while the Catholic one adapts more recent forms. The same is true here for Episcopal and Catholic.

The differences and similarities we get from movies are interesting. For instance. We see the beaches with concrete breakers, but rarely the sand beaches. Also noticing the moss on the walls of the cathedral, testimony to the wet climate. Enhances its beauty.

You appear to live very close to the riverside. Good photo of you outside your flat. They removed the gravestones and made the cemetery a public park? Without removing the bodies? Must be an interesting place after dark. Absolutely beautiful place. I'd love to take long walks there.

Thanks for all of these. Wish I could make the trip over, spend a year or so moving around Europe. The history there is so long and rich and very well preserved. Although the U.S. has managed to preserve much of its early heritage, even the oldest is only 500 years old, and most only 250 years or so. Most of the country was developed in the last 150 years so the only sense we have of deep history is pre-Columbian. Not the history to which most of us have blood connections. For that we have to go back across the Atlantic or Pacific. I found out recently that the Berry family that came to the colonies in the late 1600s was from County Cork, Ireland. The other side is Scotch. Would be nice to do a tour of the islands some time and then on to the rest of the continent.

I'll start making photos around here of the buildings and landscape and perhaps some of my friends. Nothing as green or historical as Liverpool, but a few interesting things perhaps.

Best,

Jake

---

2 November 2007

Jake,

Glad you got the photos.

Yes, the graveyard of the Anglican Cathedral still has the bodies buried there. All they did was move the gravestones and place them around the perimeter of the cemetery, where you can still see them. It is built into a dip in the land (like a small canyon). One gains access to it via a footpath.

The Anglican Cathedral started being built in 1904 and was completed in 1978. Its architect intended it to be gothic, mimicking medieval architecture, so it looks older than it actually is. I prefer its design to that of the Catholic Cathedral. Apparently, Liverpool is the only city in Europe with two Cathedrals.

As you say, America is a young country at least as far as the majority of man-made structures go. Obviously, it is ancient if geographical factors are brought into play. But living in the UK the only thing that is apparent to me as regards history are those buildings not much older than America's. There are relatively few buildings still standing in the UK older than 500 years. Yes, we have older castles but by and large most of the buildings still standing date from around the 1600 upwards. I'm sure America has buildings also standing from this period.

Yes, I would be interested in seeing photos of where you live.

Best,

Jeff

---

5 November 2007

Jeff,

A couple of days distracted. Met with friends for a while Friday night and was asked Sat. afternoon to do a soundtrack for a short film and have it ready by Tuesday. Interesting situation.

Sometime over the next few days I'll go out and take a few photos around town to give you a

sense of how things look here. Not rural, but by no means the level of urban life to which you are accustomed. Pardon me if this is stupid question, but do you have freeways in England? Large highways like the autobahn? Freeways are the principal connection between cities in the U.S.

Best,

Jake

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5 November 2007

Jake,

Yes we have freeways but we call them motorways. They don't have as many lanes as yours do. I've attached a photo of one.

I have asked one of Leonard Cohen's former backing singers (who is now a songwriter) if she'd take part in the song writing interviews. Her name is Julie Christensen and she backed him on his tours in 1988 and 1993. She was in the 1988 BBC documentary on Cohen called *Songs from the Life of Leonard Cohen*, which covered his life and followed him on his 1988 tour of Greece and a gig in Carnegie Hall, New York.

Best,

Jeff

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7 November 2007

Jeff,

I remember, seeing the photo, having seen motorways in English films, but not often. It seems to go against the sense of identity that British film makers want to project. What we see of England, even on the BBC news and programs is of small streets, old cities, green villages. Whereas in American there's the notion of large open spaces and the open road (Whitman, Twain, Kerouac). All cliché I know, but it's easy to let those things sneak up on you.

Another of Cohen's former backing singers and now co-writer with him is Anjani. She might be an interesting person to contact as well. She wrote with him by taking pages from his notebooks, writing music, passing back to him for comment, etc.

Not sure how the soundtrack work will go. Over the course of several hours Saturday night/early Sunday morning, I came up with something I thought close to his description—sound of tires on a road. It is closer to ambient noise. He liked it and asked for tracks 2, 3 and mins. in length. Then the next day said that the contest he's making the film for requires that the director compose and perform the soundtrack. Seemed a bit strange, but I am unfamiliar with film contests. He wanted



to know exactly how I'd recorded the music. This involved recording multiple tracks with a keyboard then sending them through several levels of processing and effects. In the end I told him he could take credit for the music if he liked if it would help him since he was against a close deadline. He said yes, and thanks, please send the tracks. I did and haven't heard from him since. I assume this is because he's rushing to shoot and edit his film, but if I don't hear anything from him in a few weeks I'm going to feel like I've been taken for a ride.

Take care,

Jake

---

8 November 2007

Jake,

I'm sure the film director guy is sincere. Having been involved in video production in the early 90s I know how chaotic making moving images can be. He probably has a million things on his mind. At least you didn't give him any songs, which is the main thing if he is credit hungry.

I'll contact Anjani, at the very least she may be a channel of communication to Cohen. I contacted his manager who said that he isn't doing interviews until the spring. So I'll try again then. I also will contact Lucinda Williams.

Best,

Jeff

---

9 November 2007

Jeff,

I'm sure your right about the video director. The shooting is the easiest part, editing is very time consuming and difficult to know where to cut. If I had given him a song or even a completely worked instrumental I would have insisted on credit, but it seemed more important not to do anything to prevent him from getting the video completed in time.

Good luck with all those you are trying to send the songwriter questions to. Lucinda Williams would be a great one. I think you also mentioned Robbie Robertson, another favorite. All those great songs for The Band, and I also liked his solo albums, though they were unpopular with many critics. I like his voice, the raspy whisper.

Take care,

Jake

---

9 November 2007

Jake,

I tried to contact Robbie Robertson but could find no contact information. He has no site and his former record company has no way to email their site. I also can't find out who his manager is. It seems that most of the big artists don't have any contact details on the Net. Dylan is impossible to track down. I sent the radio station he DJs for an email for him but that will no doubt be discarded.

Best,

Jeff

---

10 November 2007

Jeff,

Yes, I've noticed too that older artists haven't taken to the web as often or as effectively as younger ones. Neil Young perhaps being an exception to this (though I don't know if you can get in touch with his management through the website). Perhaps they don't feel the need because their core audience is enough to sustain them in relative comfort or because they dislike computers. I read an interview with Brian Eno some years ago where he said he didn't like computers because there was not enough Africa in them. What he meant was that in order to use one you had to sit in one location for a long time in the same position. And last I checked he still does not have an official website dedicated solely to his work. Since the time he said that however computers have become more mobile and things like MP3 players allow us to take an entire collection of music anywhere we want to go, arrange the songs in any order we like and to some extent even remaster the songs. On the re-release of his CD with David Byrne, *My Life In the Bush of Ghosts*, several songs were made available in multitrack form that any member of the audience could download, remix, edit, add new material, whatever and then upload to the site. I listened to a few of them. Some were very good.

Have you tried to contact David Byrne? Some of his songs seem to walk a line between poetry and song. The Talking Heads even turned a Hugo Ball poem into a song. His responses to the interview would be interesting.

Best,

Jake

---

14 November 2007

Jake,

I'll try to contact Byrne. I've written to Bryan Ferry, Pete Townshend and Art Garfunkel also.

You're probably right about the more established artists not needing the Internet to get new audiences. Young and Dylan are in their sixties and their reputations are well established.

Best,

Jeff

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16 November 2007

Jeff,

Here is a link to a recent article in Paste magazine written by one of the members of the group Over The Rhine. Their latest album, *The Trumpet Child*, is one of my favorites of the year. It seamlessly blends all the influences he mentions in the article with excellent lyrics.

[http://www.pastemagazine.com/action/article/5823/feature/music/only\\_in\\_america\\_the\\_trumpet\\_child](http://www.pastemagazine.com/action/article/5823/feature/music/only_in_america_the_trumpet_child)

The only in America concept may be a bit overstated since multiculturalism has become the norm for most 'developed' countries, but I thought the article was much better than the kind you get when a rock journalist covers a band. And the fellow writes well.

Here is the Over The Rhine website:

<http://www.overtherhine.com>

A few weeks ago my brother sent them a verse of lyrics he had written and one of the members of the band emailed him back directly. Might be another good place to send the songwriter questions.

Tom Werzynowski, who contributed the paintings to Alan May's *Notes Toward An Apocryphal Text* has sent me five images of paintings he thought would work well with my *War Poems*. I sent him the ten that I felt worth keeping. I can send you the images if you like.

Best,

Jake

---

17 November 2007

Jake,

I'll check out the links you gave me and approach the group regarding the interview. As you say, they are probably more approachable than some of the people I've tried so far. I feel tempted to put the interviews online now just to get done with the thing.

Leonard Cohen's manager said that he may be able to do the interview in spring after his tour ends. Just having Cohen would round the list off nicely.

Yes, send me the images for your *War Poems*. It is best to send them as a zip.file as it will make it easier for me to download them.

Best,

Jeff

---

20 November 2007

Jeff,

Thanks for contacting Over The Rhine. I'm confident they will respond. I'm not sure where they are in terms of touring at the moment. I know they play in Europe frequently. I had an opportunity to see them earlier in the year but was unable to afford both the ticket and the three hour trip, gas, food, etc.

Have you contacted Anne Briggs about the songwriter interview? Or Bert Jansch? I think I remember you mentioning the latter. I don't know if they do only old folk songs or original songs as well. I heard a song by each of them a few days ago. Quite good.

Best,

Jake

---

20 November 2007

Jake,

I did write to Bert Jansch but got no reply. I have not tried Anne Briggs as I thought she didn't write songs but will see if she does. I wrote to James Taylor, Tom Waits, Tori Amos, Cyndi Lauper and Ray Davies but have yet to get a reply.

Best,

Jeff

---

24 November 2007

Jeff,

It would be another fine addition to the songwriter series if more of the people you mention responded. Tom Waits would be very interesting since so many of his songs amount to spoken poems set inside music.

Reading a bit of Doris Lessing. Short stories. Most of them descriptions of London and environs.

Best,

Jake

---

1 December 2007

Jake,

I got word back from David Byrne's publicist who said he couldn't do the interview. I have about five interviews waiting to be completed when they are I will put all the interviews online and not bother to look for more interviewees (unless you change your mind about contributing). If Leonard Cohen agrees to do it around April, as his manager hinted he would, I'll just add him to the online list.

Best,

Jeff

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4 December 2007

Jeff,

My room here is filled with books. While I always want to have my favorite books it would be nice to have things like books I read for research, history or general knowledge in a small box rather than piling up around me. If its something I really want to read I don't mind paying a reasonable price so long as I can archive the book indefinitely on a hard disk so that I can come back to it years from now if I wish.

While the news media, et. al. chatters about the democratization and decentralization of media at places like Lulu and YouTube, I think what is really happening is the disappearance of mass

media. The more people go to these new outlets for their books or movies the more they will discover that they don't need to buy mass media products at inflated prices. Based on the renaissance model of the great man this will thrust us into a new dark age where there is no distinct direction only confusion and noise. On the other hand it encourages people to think for themselves, to be more individualistic. Maybe we lose our Shakespeares and Kubricks, but maybe we have come to a place where we no longer need them.

In a recent article in *Paste*, the only print music mag I bother to read regularly, the editor was bemoaning the loss of the hugely popular artist. He said he missed the time when he loved the exact same music as millions of other people. If the 20th century taught us anything it taught us that mass consciousness is dangerous. So is total anarchy. We'll have to be careful, but I think the collapse of mass media would probably have more positive than negative effects.

Too bad Byrne can't do the songwriter interview. His response would have been worthwhile. He posts his journal entries online though. Perhaps he feels like he's saying everything he needs to say directly that way. I can't remember when I saw an interview with him. If all artists in his position took his approach we might not need to ask them anything because we would already know. I read his journal/blog quite often and find that despite the fact that we live very different lives we agree more often than not about the arts, politics, and so on. This is in part due to the fact that we are the same generation and both creative and interested in novel approaches to things.

I can't remember if I mentioned this to you, but Philip Glass has composed a series of pieces based on Leonard Cohen's latest book of poetry—*The Book of Longing*. I haven't heard any of it yet, but it seems like an interesting combination. I am sure that is one of the things that have kept him from being able to respond to the questions.

Best,

Jake

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6 December 2007

Jake,

Sorry for my slow response, we had a large storm here on Monday that brought the phone lines down in my street so I've had no phone or Internet connection until this afternoon when the lines were fixed. This incident has shown me just how dependent I am on the Internet and email system. I'm quite disturbed by this fact. But there's no escape from this dependence as long as I choose to maintain the Argotist site. My MySpace and blog don't require me to have a personal domestic internet connection as they are solely web based and can be updated on any computer with Internet access.

What you say about the way mass media is changing is very true. Because of it, I think the concept of fame will eventually disappear because how can fame exist without a mass media

broadcasting to the same group of people. Of course, small pockets of people will still allow for smaller types of fame but the type of fame that Elvis had will not be possible.

Best,

Jeff

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8 December 2007

Jeff,

I understand your frustration with dependence on the computer. It seems to add another level of addition to the system. I think in a large city a computer might be superfluous except for things like email and websites. And you could do those things on public computers a few hours a week. Otherwise there would be access to things like good bookstores, music stores and so forth. We don't have that option here. There are a few used bookstores, but it's a matter of catching something you've been looking for. There's only one true music store left. It is locally owned by a friend. He does his best, but it is simply impossible to keep up with anything beyond the current releases. He does stock a good selection of used CDs, but I don't have the money to buy them as much I would like. I'm concerned that all such music stores will be gone in less than a decade. As the quality of online music files improve it will be impossible for physical stores to keep up. They can't stock the many thousands of CDs that the online stores can. Both the online book and record stores, not to mention the masses of free information online, have been a godsend for me.

Yes, mass media made a few artists available to the whole world, but so much great music was missed, never even had the chance to be heard. The same with books. Now so much more is available. There is no way any individual or small group of individuals could keep track of all of it, but that doesn't matter. The biggest issue is going to be developing electronic archival and retrieval systems that will work be as functional and durable as books. Once that threshold is crossed anyone that relies on mass media for their primary source of information will be intentionally ignorant. The world has never suffered from a shortage of stupid people, but there should be less excuse to remain ignorant from now on.

Take care,

Jake

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12 December 2007

Jeff,

It seems like the book trade went through a process of centralization in the 80s and 90s. A lot of older bookstores were bought out by multinational chains. That happened in many of the larger cities here and only the small used bookstores survived. There are also so many other things for

people to do. Coming out of the 60s Western Society went through a love affair with literature. It wasn't uncommon to see poems of all kinds used in unusual places. It was in vogue to be lit-savvy for a while. Probably a backlash to TV, or rebellion to elitist conformity. The establishment seems to have regained its footing in the 80s by co-opting anything revolutionary that comes along and turning it into product.

Yes, that's the trouble with digital media. It's a little like hieroglyphics at the moment, before the Rosetta stone. People are working on a way to link it to possible futures, with or without digital media, binary code or electricity. In another generation or so the problem will either be solved or the culture will be so blinded by the dominance of digital media that they won't think of a time when it might be unavailable or obsolete.

I'd like to at least slow the pace a little and do work that isn't technology dependent, but can be translated into the medium often enough to keep to keep that door open.

Best,

Jake

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6 January 2008

Jake,

I haven't seen the Dylan biopic *I'm Not There* yet. I have a feeling it won't be very good. I hear that the only soundtrack they use is of cover versions of his songs.

I suppose being a songwriter and performer is more artistically satisfying than being a poet. I have never been comfortable with the idea of poetry as performance. I would much rather go to a music gig than a poetry one. There is a good book called *Positively 4th Street* by David Hajdu which captures the sixties Greenwich Village folk scene. I don't know if you've read it. If not here is a review of it:

[http://trashotron.com/agony/reviews/hajdu-positively\\_fourth.htm](http://trashotron.com/agony/reviews/hajdu-positively_fourth.htm)

Best,

Jeff

---

9 January 2008

Jeff,

I haven't seen the Dylan biopic either. I may catch it when it comes out on DVD. The reviews here have been generally good. I like the idea of there being many different people portraying Dylan,



only one of which, an actress, looks anything like him, and none of them are named Bob Dylan. Maybe that was the idea of doing cover versions of the songs. It's another way that Dylan is not there. Most of the music in Dylan's last film, *Masked and Anonymous*, was cover versions of his own material except when he was performing the songs on stage, and even there I recall him doing some covers of old songs like 'Dixie.'

I'm not sure that being a singer and songwriter is any more satisfying than being a poet. I'd rather publicly perform poetry than songs because there is more room to experiment with interpretations and react to other people you bring into the performance. I tend to avoid performances where I just stand and read the work. I like to bring in a musician or two and even dancers, video, etc. Make it an event. With performing songs, most of them have set chord changes and melodies. If you stray too far from that pattern you lose both the audience and the people you are playing with, so it becomes redundant to do very often. There are also unrealistic expectations placed on performers of anything that resembles popular music. People expect entertainment before art. This creates a divide that is difficult to cross as an equal. You have to do a bit of a song and dance routine. I don't mind that so much if the audience is paying attention, but they are just as likely to look at live music as background for their evening out. In response to that, and because I like the form, we came up with the Ascension Brothers, which was intentionally background, ambient, musical wallpaper as Brian Eno called it. That seemed to work well as long as the right musicians are playing. There's no room for grand standing in that kind of music, but since most of it is improvised the members of the group have to listen closely to one another and converse. In those circumstances, when things are going well I completely forget about the audience. Unfortunately, we've lost our regular Ascension Brothers gig because the gallery where we played has closed. There are a few places for songwriters and bands to play, but the audience expects pop and the kind of junk that Nashville is producing and calling it country music.

I think there are still some interesting melodies out there, it's just that there isn't anything fresh anymore. That's the problem with a musical form as it becomes established. Not much new has happened since around 1980. Instead we get hybrids and new elements borrowed from other music. I thought Radiohead, Wilco, Feist, Sharon Jones, Rickie Lee Jones, John Fogerty and Son Volt all released excellent albums last year, but none of them would be able to have the kind of impact that *Highway 61 Revisited*, *After The Goldrush*, or *Blue* had. It's the same in jazz. There are many great artists out there, but none of them will be able to invent the music the way Armstrong, Ellington, Charlie Parker, or Coltrane did.

The other issue with music is that since it has become so easy to record and distribute via the Internet or home made CDs it is impossible to find anything like a center or to come to a consensus as to what is actually happening. It's physically impossible for anyone to listen to even 10% of what is available. I read through a long list of the critics top ten albums from last year at All Music Guide. With more than two dozen critics compiling lists not more than two albums appeared more than three or four times. I think the same is much more true of poetry because it is not a popular form at all compared to music. People are chosen to win major prizes, but it's just a matter of passing them around to various long established members of the same circles. No one has any grasp of the full range of poetry available. This renders the awards worthless except to the people who receive them. Very interesting times. An age full of opportunity, but also full of

obscurity. A poet can be well published and almost totally unknown at the same time. The same with music, film/video, and the visual arts. Art history may not be dead so much as overwhelmed to the point of total incompetence. The future is not what it used to be.

Best,

Jake

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11 January 2008

Jake,

What you say in the following lines of your email is very true:

‘A poet can be well published and almost totally unknown at the same time. The same with music, film/video, and the visual arts.’

This fact has yet to become widely known. Most people still have an old pre-Internet view of celebrity whereby the artist achieves celebrity via the main media outlets (in all their forms) thus becoming well known to the largely stable audiences that these media catered to. Now, as you say, all this has changed. Instead, what we have are disparate and fragmented communities of readers/viewers/listeners who are catered to by media outlets that specialize in niche marketing. This makes it difficult for those artists who desire a more general recognition in order to (as they see it) gain a more certain posthumous reputation. Until now, this was the accepted method of gaining a standing in history.

It is unlikely that T. S. Eliot would have become as celebrated as he is (both during his life and after his death) if the Internet had been around in his day. His reputation, along with that of other artists who became famous in the old way, is likely to continue forever. What this means is that an artist no longer can be assured that he or she will gain a posthumous reputation. This may not matter all that much if we are only talking about artists as personalities (for in that case it is just vanity that will be offended) but if reputation can't be assured then the loss could be more significant with regards to individual artistic works or 'important' art movements.

It is very depressing but it is, I think, true that the mainstream artists who are 'making it' now via the main media outlets have a better chance of their work surviving than those who are dependent on the Internet for same.

Whilst the Internet has allowed anyone to become widely published and read without having to get accepted by the official publishing gate keepers (which is a good thing) it has also minimized the chances of those writers escaping relative obscurity.

Best,

Jeff

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14 January 2008

Jeff,

Immortality in the arts is probably not all it seems to be. We feel its presence when we read or hear Shakespeare, Homer, Eliot, et. al., but we are poets. There are vast numbers of people in this part of the world that would tell you that the music of Lynard Skynard is one of the most significant influences on their lives. Seems silly to me, but then I guess *The Cantos* would sound like nonsense to them. I once said to Neeli Cherkovski that even Dante would someday be dust. He was quick to argue the point, but that doesn't change anything. We don't know the names of the artists who painted Lascaux or made earlier art now forever lost, of all the singers before Homer or the bards who sang the stories long before Gilgamesh assumed 'permanence' in Babylonian clay.

A star blasted into oblivion, became a nebula that spawned new stars with new planets and on one of them a species of life evolved that make noises and shapes they call art. Eventually another star will blow itself apart and all of it will be gone. The important thing is to tie into the greater process, to find some way of allowing it to live through your work. That way we serve our little bit of infinity for a tiny increment of eternity. Otherwise it doesn't matter if we're as famous as Elvis. We might delude ourselves and the general population of our time, but it won't matter much. What will Elvis mean to people a few centuries from now? If they remember him at all he'll probably just look like a blurry human image who sang songs and moved in peculiar ways in sync with 'primitive' music. Does that mean that his work survives? Will future poets and scholars pour through the pages of *Finnegan's Wake* with awe, confusion, understanding or will they just dismiss it as gibberish from a period of time when artists and writers venerated such work in the name of modernism?

All we can do is make the best noise we can while we can and make it public as best we can. If that means global distribution in all forms of media, or just a few pages on the Internet we can't let that distract us from the reason we started doing it in the first place—because we loved it, because it gave us a sense of purpose and a connection to something as old as culture, maybe as old as the species, maybe as old as the music of the spheres.

Best,

Jake

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14 January 2008

Jake,

What you say makes a lot of sense. I have never tried to court immortality for myself as a personality but I have strived to make my poetry as universal as possible in the hope that future

generations may find something of value in it. Those generations may be limited to just the next four, but even that would be good enough for me.

Best,

Jeff

---

17 January 2008

Jeff,

Amen to that. It is the universality of the work that counts.

Best,

Jake

---

24 February 2008

Jake,

The song writing interviews are almost complete. There's only two to come back. Leonard Cohen's manager said that Cohen might be able to do it in April.

Are you sure you don't want to take part in the interview?

Best,

Jeff

---

24 February 2008

Jeff,

If Cohen is able to do the interview in April I wouldn't mind contributing some questions. Perhaps we could come up with 10 questions between the two of us concerning both his songs and poems and the connection. That would be wonderful if it happened.

Best,

Jake

---

24 February 2008

Jake,

You can interview him yourself if you want. It is best if the interview were unconnected to the songwriters questionnaire-type interviews that are nearing completion, because as well as it being longer and more in-depth it would be best billed as an exclusive.

But it all depends on if he has time. His manager said that he could do the questionnaire-type interview because it is short, but I can work on the manager and sell him the idea of a longer exclusive interview. If he says no to a longer interview in April then I can try to get him to agree to it later in the year. How does that sound?

Best,

Jeff

---

25 February 2008

Jeff,

That sounds fine. In order to make it easier for Cohen you could tell his manager that we would want to ask eight to ten questions by email. We would not want to do follow up questions because we don't want to take up too much of his time, but we would like to offer him the chance to speak to a greater variety of issues since he is both a songwriter and a poet and an artist, and to my mind, a sage.

One thing that just occurred to me is that I'd like to ask what kind of music he listens to? Who influenced his writing, both songs and poems? What does he read, what are among his favorite works of literature? Does he consciously bring these things into his work or is it more spontaneous? He is known to spend years working on a song or poem—does he have a regular daily routine where he studies his notes to work and revise them? And another: Since he has studied Judaism, Zen Buddhism as well as other religions, how do these bear on his work? There are times when he seems to integrate images and ideas from various religions into a single song. Is this a conscious synthesis that portrays a sense of a common spirituality underlying these religions?

The main thing I suppose would be to communicate to his manager that we don't want to take up much of Cohen's time and that we would like to remind the readers of the Argotist that he is important as a poet AND as a songwriter, and also a novelist—and that young poets and songwriters often look to his work and his statements in interviews for guidance.

Let me know how it goes.

Best,

Jake

---

27 February 2008

Jake,

That line of questioning sounds good. It is best if I hand this project over to you as I am really snowed under with various chores that need to be sorted out. Indeed, you are better qualified to do it than me, as I am not a musician and am not all that familiar with Cohen's work.

As I say, it is not certain whether Cohen can do the interview for sure, so it is best not to do too much planning at this stage. I will know in April what the precise situation is with him.

Best,

Jeff

---

27 February 2008

Jeff,

This all sounds good to me.

You are right that we should not plan too much for the interview.

I'll be happy to sort out the questions. Just let me know when and if the interview clears and who I should contact at that time. I know you have a great deal to do. .

Best,

Jake

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28 February 2008

Jake,

I'll confirm things with Cohen's manager in April. If I can get the song-writing interview done with Cohen by May, I will ask if Cohen will do a longer exclusive one with you. Hopefully he will, having already agreed to the shorter one.

Best,

Jeff

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22 March 2008

Jake,

Lidia Vianu says that she's putting together an online archive of translations of English speaking poets into Romanian. She says she can do some translations of your poetry if you want.

Best,

Jeff

---

22 March 2008

Jeff,

That's a wonderful idea. I'd be honored. Tell her to feel free to translate anything she likes.

Thanks,

Jake

---

22 March 2008

Jake,

I've sent her your *War Poems* and *Brambu for Performance* for her to choose extracts to translate.

Best,

Jeff

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22 March 2008

Jeff,

That's good. Those would be good introductions to my work. I imagine someone reading *Brambu* in Transylvania.

Best,

Jake

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5 April 2008

Jake,

Hope you are well.

I am waiting for only four more song writing interviews to come in: two with Leonard Cohen's backing singers now singer/songwriters, one with Keith Reid the lyricist for the sixties UK pop group Procol Harum and one from the UK singer/songwriter John Martyn. I will email Cohen's manager tomorrow to remind him about his saying that Cohen could do the song writing interview in April. Once he has done this interview he may be more open to doing the more general one with you.

Best,

Jeff

---

7 April 2009

Jeff,

I've listened to Procol Harum and like them. The Keith Reid interview responses should be interesting, as should John Martyn's, whose work I also know a little of.

Perhaps Cohen will eventually do a longer interview. I'd love to do that, but even if he only responds to the set of questions it will be very valuable. Richard Thompson's response was extraordinary considering the time and thought he must have put into it, and knowing something of his touring and recording schedule. If Cohen could be even half as generous it would be a coup.

Take care. Stay in touch. More Soon.

Best,

Jake

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7 April 2008

Jake,

I came across some vintage video of Richard and Linda Thompson performing on a UK TV show



in 1975. It is truly evocative of an English sensibility and attitude that has now been lost:

<http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=5upiUrUw0Jk>

I've just emailed Cohen's manager. I'll keep you posted.

Best,

Jeff

---

8 April 2008

Jeff,

Will check out the Richard and Linda Thompson later this evening. I'm a huge fan of both.

Take care.

Best,

Jake

---

8 April 2008

Jake,

Are you still reluctant to take part in the song writing interviews? If we left out who came up with the interview questions then I can see no reason why you can't be included. I think these interviews will be widely read and linked to, and I would like you to get some of the benefit from this.

Best,

Jeff

---

8 April 2008

Jeff,

As long as I'm not listed as one of the people asking the songwriter questions I don't think I have any problem answering them. After all this time the questions seem removed from me anyway. Let me go back and look at them and I'll try to send you my responses in the next few days.

Best,

Jake

---

9 April 2008

Jake,

I'm just waiting for John Martyn, Keith Reid and two of Leonard Cohen's backing singers to complete the interview questions. I approached Antony Hegarty of Antony and the Johnson's and he has agreed to answer them. I also asked Kiki Dee but have got no word back yet.

Best,

Jeff

---

9 April 2008

Jake,

I got a reply from Cohen's manager. He said he'd asked Cohen who said he is not doing any press or interviews for his tour. This is not the impression I was given by his manager last year. Cohen must have changed his mind or be stressed out with the tour.

I'm sorry to disappoint you, as you may have been looking forward to the possibility of an exclusive interview with him after the song writing one had been completed. I will send his manager a link to all the interviews when they are online. Maybe this may make Cohen change his mind.

Best,

Jeff

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9 April 2008

Jeff,

This isn't a surprise to me at all. There's no way of knowing how his manager approached him about the interview. It may have been one of many requests that was placed before him, many demands on his time. With the stress of a tour, and he now in his 70s, time becomes precious. If it wasn't made clear to him exactly what we were asking for then he may have dismissed the interview as unnecessary. At this point if he does any press at all it would probably be with some

medium that would allow him the most exposure in order to promote the album. But he really doesn't need to do that. Feature length tribute films are current and selling well. His core audience must be quite large. He may feel it sufficient to put in the time and effort to tour. But yes, please send him the link to the interviews; at least he'll have the opportunity to see there is more to what you are doing than what the mainstream press has to offer.

Best,

Jake

## About the Authors

Jake Berry is a poet, musician and visual artist. The author of *Brambu Drezi*, *Species of Abandoned Light*, *Drafts of the Sorcery* and numerous other books. He has been an active member of the global arts and literary community for more than 25 years. His poems, fiction, essays, reviews and other writings have been published widely in both print and electronic mediums. In 2010, Lavender Ink released a collaborative book, *Cyclones In High Northern Latitudes*, with poet Jeffrey Side and drawings by Rich Curtis; and *Outside Voices: An Email Correspondence* (with Jeffrey Side) was released by Otoliths also in that year.

Berry's solo musical albums include, *Liminal Blue*, *Strange Parlors*, *Naked as Rain and the Animal Beneath*, *Shadow Resolve* and many others. With Bare Knuckles he has recorded four albums, *Trouble In Your House*, *Alabama Dust*, *Doppelganger Blues* and *Root Bound*. With the ambient experimental group Ascension Brothers he has recorded numerous albums including *All Souls Banquet*, *The Wedding Ball and Pillar of Fire* (which served as soundtrack for a series of plays by Ray Bradbury) and most recently *Transfigurations Blues*.

Ongoing projects include book four of *Brambu Drezi* (which will include a video for each section—the opening sections are available now at YouTube and Vimeo.com), a collection of short poems, an online and print biography of the poet and critic Jack Foley, an album of experimental ambient music with Chris Mansel under the name Impermanence, an album of acoustic songs in collaboration with Jeff Berry and Van Eaton under the name The Cahoots and an album of alternative rock songs in collaboration with Jeff Berry, Ben Tanner, Max and Kirk Russell.

Jeffrey Side has had poetry published in various magazines such as *Poetry Salzburg Review* and on poetry websites such as *Underground Window*, *A Little Poetry*, *Poethia*, *Nthposition*, *Eratio*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Fieralingue*, *Moria*, *Ancient Heart*, *Blazevox*, *Lily*, *Big Bridge*, *Jacket*, *Textimagepoem*, *Apochryphaltext*, *9th St. Laboratories*, *P. F. S. Post*, *Great Works*, *Hutt*, *The Dande Review*, *Poetry Bay* and *Dusie*.

He has reviewed poetry for *Jacket*, *Eyewear*, *The Colorado Review*, *New Hope International*, *Stride*, *Acumen* and *Shearsman*.

From 1996 to 2000 he was the deputy editor of *The Argotist* magazine, and is currently the editor of the online version of this, *The Argotist Online*, which has an ebook publishing arm called *Argotist Ebooks*.

His publications include, *Carrier of the Seed*, *Slimvol*, *Cyclones in High Northern Latitudes* (with Jake Berry) and *Outside Voices: An Email Correspondence* (with Jake Berry).