

## Book Reviews

### **England's Hidden Reverse: A Secret History of the Esoteric Underground**

DAVID KEENAN

SAF Publishing, London, 2003

303 pp., \$45.00 (cloth)

Part biography and part history, this book focuses on three specific bands—Current 93, Nurse With Wound, and Coil—and attempts to weave together many of the major players of the European experimental and industrial music scene from the 1970s to the present. Together, these three bands have exerted a tremendous influence on experimental music, and it is surprising that this is the first book to focus on them.

Keenan begins with the influential industrial band Throbbing Gristle and provides a sort of family tree for the British underground, with Current 93, Coil, Nurse With Wound, Whitehouse, Psychic TV, and others playing key roles in the evolution of industrial, experimental, and noise music. However, not all of the branches in this family tree come from the same roots, and some branches seem to have been grafted in much later, which may create some confusion for the reader and contributes to a general lack of continuity throughout the book.

Keenan draws heavily on the personal lives of the core band members—David Tibet (Current 93), Steven Stapleton (Nurse With Wound), John Balance (Coil), and Peter “Sleazy” Christopherson (Coil)—in an effort to explain the influence that their past experiences exert on their music. Delving into drug and alcohol addiction and occult activities, this book combines biographical elements with the sensationalism of rock and roll journalism, which should come as no surprise since Keenan is a writer for UK music magazine *The Wire*.

This attention to personal detail is the main strength of the book. The book is a patchwork of interviews and stories from numerous sources compiled by Keenan, which gives the book a rather personal feel, as if the protagonists are speaking directly to the reader. Moreover, these people have led interesting lives, providing an engaging read for even those uninterested in the music of these bands. Stories such as Tibet's hallucination of Noddy (the children's book character) crucified over London, which leads to his idea of a drug-induced “puppet theology,” are counterbalanced by more commonplace experiences such as Stapleton's account of moving his family from London into the relative isolation of rural Ireland to keep the pace lively without relying solely on shock value.

One drawback to Keenan's specific focus on Current 93, Nurse With Wound, and Coil is that it creates artificial divisions within the text. Even though these bands often share members, the chapters seem disjointed, switching from one group to another with little to tie the pieces together. In addition, Keenan jumps around both temporally and spatially. Although I am very familiar with the works of all of the artists involved, at times I had trouble understanding where Keenan was heading. In a way, it reads as if three different books were written and then the chapters were shuffled like a deck of cards to form one book. In the end, no conclusion is drawn and there is little effort made to tie the three bands together. Perhaps focusing on only one of the bands would have made the project more coherent. After all, a book could easily be written about any one of these bands.

Despite its limitations, this book is one of the few to attempt to provide a history of the British experimental music underground and the only one devoted to Current 93, Nurse With Wound, and Coil. Those interested in the history of these bands will find this book to be an interesting read. In addition, those interested in the roots of modern industrial and experimental music will also find this book useful. My only reservation about the book is that, in its devotion to the three main bands, it seems at times just to brush the surface of this rich history.

For those unfamiliar with these bands, the book comes with a compact disc containing selections from each band. With the exception of the Nurse With Wound track, which is a mix of previously released music, the rest of the CD is simply pulled from previously released albums. Those already familiar with the bands or collectors hoping for unreleased tracks will likely be disappointed. While the tracks Keenan selected for this compilation are a good indication of each band's recent work, it would have been better to include more of their earlier works to provide a better overview of each band's evolving sound.

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### **Somewhere for Me: A Biography of Richard Rodgers**

MERYLE SECREST

Knopf, New York, 2001

xv+457 pp.

Meryle Secrest, the author of the latest biography of Richard Rodgers, sets out to explore her subject's "secret life," a nearly impossible task given that Rodgers was emotionally aloof and inscrutable, and maintained strict separation of work and family. Secrest builds on William Hyland's biography of 1999, which was the first to challenge the typical hagiographical portrayals of Rodgers by exposing his drinking, womanizing, homophobia, depression, and insularity. David Ewen, Rodgers's first biographer, described the composer as businesslike, affectionate, and philanthropic.

Given the damning evidence that Secrest and Hyland present, this view no longer holds up.

Secrest is of course under no obligation to protect or even to like Rodgers, but she seems to lack the kind of passion about her subject that would bring Rodgers to life. She practically ignores the importance of his musical theater innovations, and thereby misses an opportunity to contextualize Rodgers's work in the tumultuous history of American popular culture of the last century. Rodgers's career, which consisted of three nearly equally long creative periods, provides an ideal framework for exploring the cultural upheavals in America from before World War I through the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Rodgers's psychological shortcomings and sexual exploits are crucial for a full understanding of his life, but, isolated from his music, they are just so much fodder for gossip. In this book, one almost loses sight of the fact that Richard Rodgers was one of America's cultural giants during the 20th century. Perhaps in some way, Secrest's biography illuminates the false relationship that we create with our public cultural icons by forcing us to see them as human.

Secrest, like so many writers of popular biography, is guilty of being fashionably irreverent toward her subject. Her accomplices are Rodgers's two daughters, Mary Rodgers Guettel and Linda Rodgers Emory, who invited her to snoop around the closet for skeletons. Secrest also makes extensive use of material left by Rodgers's wife, Dorothy Feiner. She relies so heavily on these sources, though, that her biography starts to become a vicarious outlet for the family to air long-suppressed resentments. Mary's introduction for her father's recently reissued autobiography, *Musical Stages* (1995), hints at such buried resentment:

There's a kind of marvelous, rich, emotional quality to what my father wrote that didn't often manifest itself in his personality. He could be quite sharp-tongued with my sister and me, and sometimes quite frightening when mad....I didn't lose any more than you did, folks, because basically what I loved about him was only what you love—his music.

The involvement of Rodgers's daughters accounts for the biography's overriding pejorative tone and helps to explain why Secrest never developed a strong point of view of her own.

Secrest's primary contribution to the literature on Rodgers is her examination of the composer's relationship with his wife (and daughters). Her analysis destroys all previous notions that Rodgers and Dorothy enjoyed a blissful marriage. Although they worked hard to give the impression of being the perfect couple, theirs was a highly dysfunctional relationship. Secrest spends considerable time exploring the couple's early correspondence, which reveals Rodgers struggling to find his way emotionally and to negotiate between the freedom of his bachelorhood and the commitments he faced as a husband. The letters from their newlywed phase are prophetic of the problems that were to come. Long periods of separation were common, and Rodgers constantly had to reassure Dorothy of his faithfulness. He wrote, "My disposition, my gut and my love for you still hold out, so don't worry" (130).

Apparently, the pressure that Rodgers felt to provide his wife with reassurance continued throughout their marriage. He wrote from Los Angeles,

Baby darling, when I mentioned Ginger last night on the phone, you said, "Please be good." I beg you, darling, don't think like that. We've gone over seven years without hurting each other and I love you more now than I ever did before. Let's put things like that out of our minds and remember what we have. (180)

Later in their marriage, Rodgers quipped sarcastically, "Don't you think I have been good? I have been leading a very active but well-behaved life and I want a nice little blue star for not wetting my bed" (180).

Dorothy of course had plenty of reason to be concerned. Rodgers was frequently unfaithful, and he even kept an apartment above Sardi's for his affairs. As was well known, he enjoyed the company of women, but he was known to be vulgar and misogynistic, as when he once propositioned a woman by inquiring directly "Do you want to fuck?" Dorothy learned to cope with her husband's marital transgressions, although Mary Rodgers believes that her mother's suppressed jealousy caused her to be chronically ill. Secrest sees Dorothy's taking refuge in chronic illness as being common for a woman in her social position at the time. She suggests that Rodgers may have gotten away with philandering but that "his daily penance was to assure his wife that he loved her" (268). This discussion would be richer had Secrest in some way acknowledged feminist theories of the power dynamics in women's illnesses.

Mary and Linda now recognize the unhealthy foundation of their parents' relationship and the negative impact that it had on their upbringing. It was a family of secrets, and, according to Linda, "nothing was ever talked about" (148). Dorothy organized all aspects of their life—social, emotional, fiscal, even "the joint façade they presented to the world" (179). Mary seems to have suffered the most from Dorothy's need to control everything about her daughters' lives. Stephen Sondheim, a longtime friend of Mary's, believes that Dorothy was particularly abusive to her:

They were as bad as parents can get....My guess is that they wanted a son and Mary was such a disappointment they made her pay for it all her life....Dorothy Rodgers is one of the real monsters of the world....I don't think Dorothy was crazy. I think she was genuinely an awful person. (177)

When Rodgers's last musical, *I Remember Mama*, was in production, Mary overheard her mother screaming at her father, venting her resentment for having been a devoted wife for so many decades. The year was 1979, and they seemed to hate each other. Linda remarked that her father "was never as happy as he wanted to be." Mary recalled that "When he got over admiring how pretty she [Dorothy] was and all her various talents, he must have found he had fallen in love with a straitjacket" (179). It is no surprise to learn that Rodgers also suffered bouts of depression and saw at least five psychiatrists.

Secrest's writing reflects the felicity of someone with her experience in popular biography, but many of her analogies seem forced, as when she draws a comparison between Rodgers's father-in-law's suicide and Hart's death (234). The biography is

burdened with too many prosaic descriptions, such as one that likens Hart, who was famous for vanishing and reappearing, to a character in a Feydeau farce, or Dick and Dorothy first to Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and then to Nick and Nora Charles. It should also be noted that the reproductions of photograph are too grainy and too small, and many of them seem too familiar, having appeared and reappeared in the previous literature on Rodgers.

Geoffrey Block has just published a new book on Richard Rodgers. It is the first volume of the Broadway Masters Series, whose mission is to provide serious musical theater scholarship to a wide audience. Block explores difficult topics regarding Rodgers that had previously been neglected, such as transmission, audience reception, revivals, and archival sources, to name a few. He also compares the two versions of *Connecticut Yankee* and the three versions of *Cinderella*, and provides in-depth analyses of *The Boys from Syracuse* and *South Pacific*. Block's study counterbalances some of the negative inquiry that, although illuminating, occupies Secret's biography disproportionately.

Now that the centennial of Richard Rodgers's birth has come and gone, we are no closer than at any other time since the composer's death in 1979 to reconciling his link to "Hammersteinian" idealism and his brilliant contribution to American popular culture in the twentieth century with his homophobia, his battle with alcoholism, and his marital transgressions. The cognitive dissonance between Rodgers's career and his personal life remains a puzzle. Secret's previous biography is of Stephen Sondheim, who had at best a strained relationship with Rodgers. Reflecting their entirely different cultural and political views, Rodgers dined with presidents whereas Sondheim wrote a musical about assassinating them. Secret successfully showed how, in Sondheim's case, art and politics are inextricably linked. There is considerable irony in the fact that, although Sondheim is just as psychologically complicated as Rodgers was, he did not confound Secret to the same extent. However, both biographies lack a strong point of view and almost entirely ignore the composers' artistic importance. What remains in the Rodgers biography is an almost anecdotal and emasculating portrait of this once towering cultural figure.

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**The Colonel: The Extraordinary Story of Colonel Tom Parker and Elvis Presley**

ALANNA NASH

Simon &amp; Schuster, New York, 2003

xiv+394 pp., \$25.00 cloth

A friend of mine once observed that a great book about Elvis is a great book about America. The occasion of his remark was the publication in 1994 of Peter Guralnick's *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Little, Brown). Guralnick's book—which drew unsolicited praise from the normally taciturn Bob Dylan—told, in a nuanced and sophisticated way, that most American of stories: the rise from obscurity and poverty to celebrity and riches. *The Colonel: The Extraordinary Story of Colonel Tom Parker and Elvis Presley*, Alanna Nash's third contribution to the field—her others being *Elvis Aaron Presley: Revelations from the Memphis Mafia* (HarperCollins, 1995) and *Elvis: From Memphis to Hollywood* (Popular Culture Ink, 1992)—also tells a quintessentially American tale: the immigrant's story. In telling it, Nash benefits from both the strengths and weaknesses of Guralnick's second volume: *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley* (Little, Brown, 1999).

Guralnick undoubtedly raised the bar in Elvis scholarship, and Nash's work is, with one important exception, well-documented and thorough. The quality and success of *Last Train* appears, however, to have led the Elvis Presley Estate to embrace Guralnick. In return, Guralnick seems to have compromised some of his objectivity for access. Nowhere is this clearer than in his portrayal of the Colonel as a relatively benign or uncontroversial figure, and there is a definite sense that much is left unsaid. Nash's book, lacking even the semi-official seal of the Estate—her collaboration with the non-Estate-approved Memphis Mafia members Billy Smith, Lamar Fike, and Marty Lacker on *Elvis Aaron Presley* ensures that—is able to avoid Guralnick's problem altogether. Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of her book is Nash's account of the ways in which the Colonel exercised influence over his client's career even after both were dead. Nash recounts how, for example, after the journalist Chet Flippo came down hard on the Colonel in his introduction to the book *Graceland: The Living Legacy of Elvis Presley* (HarperCollins, 1993), Priscilla Presley put pressure on the publisher to order a recall (331–32). Nash suggests that much of this influence stems from an agreement that the Estate reached with the Colonel in 1981, an agreement in which Parker surrendered his excessive share of certain deals he had made for Elvis (his take was often more than 50%, with the singer receiving considerably less) and the Estate wrested some degree of control back from his manager. The success was, however, only partial and the Estate has been careful to portray the Colonel in a benign light ever since. Indeed, Nash details how the Estate ended up paying the Colonel several million dollars for what was effectively its own property: not a bad achievement for an elderly and infirm (the victim of several heart attacks) illegal immigrant who sometimes struggled with the English language.

The revelation that the man who became Colonel Tom Parker was born Andreas Cornelis van Kuijk in Holland is not new—Albert Goldman’s *Elvis* (McGraw-Hill, 1981) broke the story—nor indeed is the telling of the Colonel’s life story: two previous biographies, Dirk Vellenga’s *Elvis and the Colonel* (Bantam Doubleday, 1988) and James L. Dickerson’s *Colonel Tom Parker* (1st Cooper, 2001), have already taken care of much of the narrative. What is new is the meticulousness with which Nash traces the Colonel’s early history—his fleeing of Holland, his shadowy military service, his years as a circus carnie, and his entry into show business managing Hank Snow and Eddy Arnold—and his financial dealings. This good work is, however, somewhat undermined by the sensationalist claim at the heart of the book: that the Colonel was a murderer. Leaning more towards the demands of the traditional celebrity biography than careful scholarship, Nash bases her allegation that Andreas Cornelis van Kuijk murdered a housewife and then fled his native Holland on the flimsiest of evidence, and returns to this claim throughout the book whenever she is short of a motive for the Colonel’s often puzzling behavior. While there is always a chance that Nash’s suspicions are correct, she relies too heavily on this slim possibility for explanatory leverage. Without it she might have been forced to delve more deeply into the Colonel’s contradictions—his immense generosity to his former carnie friends and his need to humiliate a series of would-be adopted sons (Elvis included); his hard-nosed business dealings and his sentimentality towards animals—and a more complete picture of her subject might have emerged.

The real interest for scholars in Nash’s study lies in her vivid accounts of the early days of rock and roll music and the growth of the music industry from the 1950s onwards. Nash credits the Colonel with inventing modern rock promotion—it was he who pioneered the first worldwide television concert via satellite, organizing Elvis’s “Aloha from Hawaii” concert broadcast live around the globe—and with creating the rock and roll merchandising industry. In this, it seems, the Colonel was a visionary, even if, as Nash portrays it, his motives were often less than pure, or serendipitous: the “Aloha” TV special was a direct result of the Colonel’s unwillingness to tour Europe or Asia due to his immigration problems. The methods that Parker used were undeniably successful from a commercial viewpoint, and the two men at the center of the book made millions. That both men also appeared to be near bankruptcy at the time of their equally lonely deaths—Elvis on the verge of mortgaging Graceland and the Colonel struggling to pay off a rumored \$30 million in gambling debts—shows, perhaps, that commercial concerns alone are not enough to sustain a meaningful life and career. In this we also see the toll that American success stories—be they of the poor boy made good or of the immigrant who toiled his way to success—may take on their central characters. In this there might be evidence for extending the claim that a great book about Elvis is a great book about America to incorporate a (mostly) great book about his manager too.

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**Robert Johnson: Lost and Found**

BARRY LEE PEARSON and BILL MCCULLOCH

University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2003

142 pp., \$24.95

The term “legendary” has been applied to many musical artists over time, but none has deserved the term more than Robert Johnson. In their book *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found*, blues scholar Barry Lee Pearson and journalist Bill McCulloch set out to chart the origins of the Johnson myth and prove once and for all that there is absolutely no truth to the belief that the blues giant was a demon-tortured soul who could find no peace in this life.

As blues folklore has it, Johnson sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads in order to play as skillfully as he did in such a short period of time. This Faustian piece of Johnson’s biography should obviously be taken with a grain of salt. Few today would take such a midnight rendezvous literally. But as a symbolic recapitulation of Johnson’s life it has served scholars, critics, and record producers nicely, from John Hammond, who discovered Johnson in the Delta and first attempted to bring him to a wider audience, to Frank Driggs, who produced the 1961 reissue of Johnson’s recordings that introduced him to the folk generation, to Greil Marcus and Peter Guralnick, who wrote definitive profiles of the artist in the 1970s and 1980s respectively. Johnson was, indeed, in their eyes, a tortured soul obsessed with the devil as made evident in his best-known songs, “Me and the Devil Blues,” “Stones in My Passway,” and “Hellhound on My Trail.” Johnson’s mysterious death by poisoning at age 26 was a fitting conclusion to a short, troubled life.

The problem is, as Pearson and McCulloch conclude quite convincingly, Johnson was not that type of person at all. The image of the loner with a tortured soul wandering the darkened back roads of the Deep South is a fabrication, a romantic notion concocted as a way of marketing Johnson to a new audience, a modern white audience, that could not understand the original, wholly African-American context in which his music was created.

Pearson and McCulloch’s book traces the Johnson mythos through its crucial stages and contrasts it with reminiscences of the real Johnson from fellow blues travelers and romantic partners. Far from being a sullen loner, Johnson was a gregarious and friendly young man who enjoyed life, especially women. The fairer sex was indeed Johnson’s downfall as he was likely poisoned by the jealous husband of a woman he was making time with. In fact, as Pearson and McCulloch point out, most of Johnson’s songs were about women who done him wrong, not the devil at all.

*Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* is an entertaining read, well researched and well written. True to their stated aims, Pearson and McCulloch manage to debunk the myth of Robert Johnson while still making him a fascinating character, misunderstood by white audiences who have a tendency always to misunderstand black artists. If the book has a major failing, it is that the authors don’t go far enough in exploring

the consistent need of white audiences to underestimate the aptitude of African-Americans. The talents of black musicians, like those of black athletes, are often posited as natural and not subject to conscious thought, creativity, or plain old hard work. Michael Jordan and Hank Aaron were great athletes with natural talent, it has been said, but they did not have to work as hard as Larry Bird or Pete Rose. As Pearson and McCulloch point out, it is assumed that African-American blues artists sing and write about what they know, mainly their own lives. Johnson must have sung about his life, just as today's rap artists doubtless sing about their own experiences. African-American artists themselves have encouraged this view in order to generate their own "street" credibility. White artists like Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan never have to make such arguments to lend credence to their own work. While Johnson's status as a mythic character may be threatened by Pearson and McCulloch's research, he should gain stature as a performer and as an artist.

Generations of audiences have grown up accepting the myth of Robert Johnson as the man who went down to the crossroads. *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* may be a disappointment to those who have embraced this image. But Pearson and McCulloch want to reclaim the truth behind Robert Johnson, as well as the true context in which his songs were written and recorded. It is well argued here that there were two Johnsons: the real man who sang his songs to enthusiastic juke joint audiences in the Mississippi Delta and the legend whose voice was set into vinyl in Texas in 1936. They have different audiences and different meanings and Pearson and McCulloch do a creditable job of distinguishing between the two.

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