



Highland Music Express

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Joseph Maviglia's "Critics Who Know Jack: Urban Myths, Media and Rock & Roll"

By V. Morris

Joseph Maviglia is a poet, musician and essayist from Canada with a strong sense of the sublime and a keen eye for detail. When you need to sort out for yourself what matters in contemporary culture, and laugh while you try, read this book. In it, Maviglia explores tv (beginning with *The Fugitive*), films, various kinds of literature, music (popular song, rock & roll-even opera), reflects on his day-to-day life (including dreams and memories) and gives us both his serious and not so serious reactions to the culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century world we live in (particularly in North America) and his thoughts on what—in art and life-has (or hasn't) value.

His subjects are each given intense scrutiny and vary widely in scope: titles range from THE SPIRIT OF ABBIE HOFFMAN through THE DEATH OF *SENSU* (SENSUALITY), ROLAND BARTHES AND TODD GITLIN (the Interpretation of Meaning and Media), DUDE STOPPING BULLFIGHTS to I CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION AND DARKNESS AT THE BREAK OF NOON AND GINSBERG'S HOWL (Poetry and only the Suggestion of it) and SMART-ASS TALK (*Independence Day* versus *On the Road*). He does not spare us his wit. For instance, he skewers critics-of all kinds-in INTERVIEWING THE CRITICS. In this piece, an artist proposes to a radio broadcaster an idea to interview critics from various fields, "After all, what do we know about the critics around us? Where are they trained? Who influenced them in their chosen fields? How they come to their decisions and authoritative voices? How did they acquire their platform to speak, offer opinion and influence." Then, in the course of the actual interview, we hear the assembled critics reveal, one by one, in dialogue with the artist, their profound ignorance, lack of qualifications and lack of backbone!

On the topic of contemporary mores, Maviglia's comic sensibility is evident throughout the book. In BEAUTY AT THE CAFÉ (BAD ESPRESSO 2), OR: SEMIOTICS MY ASS! the writer, as observer, sees (from another café across the street) a woman sitting at a café : "Speaking of signs! Five-foot-ten. Long black hair. Red lipstick, A Starbuck's latte, a dog and a yoga mat! And she sits and sits and sits...Don't you have to move? Isn't adventure about action versus sitting watching and talking about it? Hold it! Some guy is coming over? He's not Fabian but he's got good teeth. He's carrying a Luigi Pirandello play and resembles a European (French) professor..." The "professor" soon goes inside to order "Miss Red Lips" another latté. The observer misses (while a guy next to him asks him for some change) seeing "Miss Red Lips" get up and leave but does see the hapless professor come out on the patio... "Later, at the park, you see him kicking dogs away from his well-cuffed pantleg-a real gunslinger-two lattes in his hands with no Miss Red Lips to be seen."

On musicians, he can be tough. In BAD POP SONGS, he's hard on Bobby Darin's version of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's *Mack the Knife*: "Darin completely guts the song's meaning to mere shank," but-after spending time discussing Brecht's intentions, "And in truth, Brecht was fascinated by the American Mobster and corruption by capitalist enterprise. Yet he *did not celebrate it as a way to be.*" -Maviglia praises Dave Van Ronk who "did record a version of Brecht and Weill's song with an integrity and fear that would have made Brecht smile."

In LATE FOR THE SKY, he takes up the 1973 Billy Joel song, *Piano Man*, of which he writes, "His one man piano and long narration of a night over a microphone playing songs to folks in the torpor of their loneliness came on the back of Harry Chapin's long song, *Taxi*. Two interesting perspectives from which to view life and create a song." Then he goes on to look at music of Joel (*The Stranger*) and others later in the decade, particularly Jackson Browne, saying, "His instrument was also the piano, and if one compares his songs to Joel's the difference between pop-for-show and popular song as an art-form becomes apparent. Billy Joel post-*Piano Man* wrote melodies that sounded like perfume and hair advertisements." In the same essay, he examines Scorsese's film *Taxi Driver* and finds that the character Travis Bickle "is the polar opposite to the smug male pain and tepid lament of Billy Joel's "stranger." He concludes: "with Billy Joel's stranger, you continue through each song to feel he is writing song, not experience. And with Jackson Browne, you find that he is able to craft and experience at the same time at a very sophisticated and literate level. Literate in the manner of expressing emotion that is rarely acknowledged or articulated by male or female narrators and artists attempting to enter the music markets."

Many of the more personal pieces look at the writer's past. Some are whimsically constructed to look at how we all handle certain phenomena in modern life (i.e., coffee shops, tattoos, internet dating, therapy, discussions with a fundamentalist). In MARGINALIA, he shares his attempt to behave decently while talking to a friend who has a rigid belief system without ruining the friendship: "Recently I had the joy of meeting up with an old ball-hockey pal ... (who) now believes we are in the 'end times' and disses the days we listened with intrigue to Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. That is all now 'devil stuff'. ... He believes *Stairway to Heaven* to be hedonistic and born of the influence of Satan... He now has set his target and belief that all energy must be directed by God, yet when I saw him last he wore a Bob Marley T-shirt. I dared not ask him about his understanding or knowledge of Rastafarian culture and religion. I dared not ask because I feared the total loss of one of our true connections-the joy of rock & roll music. I found though that he was willing to talk of Bob Marley and the lyrics in his songs. He didn't offer that Marley's religious beliefs were a distraction and a movement away from God." Maviglia later laments that "The religions outside his interpretation of Christianity have been relegated to the margins. Would I had Aragones' last installment in *Mad*. In fact, if I can leave this for a moment, I think I will go to the newsstand and see what I can find." He leaves us with a smile-knowing we too need distraction in a world in which some of our friends appear to have gone mad.

In the section "TITLES", he tells us, "Titles do what a full text cannot do. One bad title can be firing-squad time. It's hard to recover from a book with a bad title." He looks into titles and

names of songs, movies, novels, product brands, rock & roll bands, poems—"One title you can't mess with is *The Inferno*. Italian, Latin or English, the title's *clear as bell* and it's gonna come off... some titles are hilarious from the top and you just want to say them *Dead Skunk in the Middle of the road* by New England songwriter Loudon Wainwright III (great name) comes to mind... Sports teams? This is where it gets racy, (if not racist) to some. "Cleveland Indians." "Washington Redskins." "Edmonton Eskimos." "Atlanta Braves" (though I'm sure there are brave white men in Atlanta)...The significance of titles and names fills out our plumes. We puff up when called by them and allow words to define (as best we can) the five senses' need for allusion and indication. Everything doesn't need to be called something but we need to call it something. We can't hang out with a preposition." Maviglia riffs on how we determine value both in titles and in people's names. One imagines what he might make of Donald Sterling, the Clippers basketball team owner (who changed his name years ago from his original Jewish given name). 'Sterling' for instance, implies living up to a certain standard. Since being caught on tape making racist remarks to his African-American girlfriend and continuing to do so through the more recent interview with Anderson Cooper -when he put down Earvin 'Magic' Johnson for not helping "his people" enough (while it turns out Johnson has given away 4 billion dollars to the community for everything from scholarships to urban renewal)- Sterling definitely failed to live up to the standard signified by the name he chose to give himself!

Score - 'Magic' = 1 'Sterling = 0! ...and Silver (Adam) trumps (not that Donald) Sterling every time!