DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 293 CS 506 165

AUTHOR Aiex, Nola Kortner
TITLE New York City: Musically Speaking.
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Culture Association (7th, Louisville, KY, April 3-7, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audiodisks; *Musical Composition; Music Appreciation; *Popular Culture; Singing; *Songs; Urban Culture; Urban Environment
IDENTIFIERS Lyrics; Music Composers; *New York (New York); *Popular Music; Rock Music

ABSTRACT

New York City as a subject has fascinated generations of artists, writers, and musicians. However, the glamorous image of the city has changed over the years, and in the 1960s, popular music, in particular, began to reflect a utopia/dystopia dichotomy in relation to New York. During the past twenty years, six popular singer-songwriters who have produced record albums destined for mass market consumption and specifically dealing with the concept of the city are (1) Laura Nyro--"New York Tendaberry" (1969); (2) Bruce Springsteen--"The Wild, the Innocent, and the E-Street Shuffle" (1973); (3) Neil Diamond--"Beautiful Noise" (1976); (4) Billy Joel--"52nd Street" (1978); (5) Joe Jackson--"Night and Day" (1982) and "Body and Soul" (1984); and (6) Bryan Ferry (Roxy Music)--"Avalon" (1982). Although the six musicians all project different visions of New York City, such is the city's diversity that each succeeding portrayal seems as valid as the previous one. Each artist uses the city in his or her own way, either as background or as foreground for particular preoccupations; some of them present realistic pictures of the city, while others go out of their way to avoid realism. The essential kernel of truth about New York City seems to be that it reflects the wishes and desires of those who inhabit or visit it, and that is all. (NKA)

NEW YORK CITY: MUSICALLY SPEAKING

Nola Kortner Aiex

Nola Kortner Aiex
2113 Boudreau Dr.
Urbana, IL 61801

"One of the supreme subjects of our century" -- that is how the eminent art historian, John Russell, referred to New York City in a recent newspaper article. Frequently delineated and celebrated in popular songs and in films and on the musical comedy stage during the pre-rock music era, America's largest and most vital city continues to exercise its fascination over today's popular musicians. In an article published in 1974 entitled "The Image of New York City in American Popular Music: 1890 - 1970", sociologist Floyd Henderson presents his conclusions that from the 1890's, when the commercial music industry began in this country, until the mid 1950's, the image of NYC presented to the public was a positive one, but that "between 1950 and 1960 something happened. Flaws began to surface in New York's glamorous tinseltown image. The musical West Side Story (1957)... told of life in the slums, gang warfare, and gave a completely new perception to New York City. Although these songs were not an overt negative view, they did tarnish the city's glowing image so carefully cultivated and preserved in the previous sixty years of music. Until this time no popular song had ever portrayed a negative side of New York City."[1]

Although it is difficult to accept Henderson's premise that no negative view of New York had ever appeared in popular music before the late 1950's -- Rodgers and Hart's 1939 classic"Give It Back to the Indians" ia one song which comes to mind immediately, a humorous but extremely negative picture of the city, as the title clearly implies -- it is true that the city's image was an overwhelmingly positive one. Leonard Bernstein, the composer of West Side Story, the musical mentioned by Henderson and which surfaced many times in the research I conducted for this study, was also responsible for two earlier musical comedies which

deal with New York City, On the Town (1944) and Wonderful Town (1953), both stories of small-town "folks" on the loose in the Big Apple. In a fascinating book which appeared only this year called The Art of the City, the author Peter Conrad has this to say about On the Town: "Its purpose is still the sentimental, sanctifying contraction of the city... the project of the musical is advertised in its title: to present the bruising, indifferent city as that smaller and more amenable unit, a town."[2]

There seems to be general agreement that life in the city began to take on different aspects with the dawn of the 1960's. One of the elements which intervened in popular music between 1950 and 1960 was, of course, rock-and-roll, which had mutated into rock by the time this paper begins, at the end of 1969. Rock demanded a more matter-of-fact view of the world in general, and even songs that had little to do with rock reflected this more realistic side after the fifties. The sociologist, Floyd Henderson, concludes at the end of his article:" ... Songs to date (1974) indicate that the city remains rather undesirable. It is spoken of as the antithesis of the perceived good life available in the Rocky Mountains or even California. This pattern coincides with the overall negative image of cities found in the lyrics of today."[3] In other words, the utopia had become dystopia, at least for some musicians.

Some musicians who dealt specifically with New York during the sixties were pre-punk practicioners Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground who delineated the seamy side and Paul Simon, the quintessential middle-class New York singer/songwriter. During the early seventies the "transvestite" New York Dolls were active writers and performers.

The Velvet Underground and the New York Dolls never gathered much of an audience outside New York City, despite their often cited influence on other musicians. The artists that I am going to deal with were or are extremely popular or, if you will, are mass market recording artists who write and perform their own material, and all produced concept albums about New York City between 1969 and 1984. Three of them are native New Yorkers; three are not. Does this influence their vision of the city? To the extent that the New Yorkers accept the contradictions and the random nature of the city more easily than the non-natives, I think it does. But each artist uses the city in his own way, either as background or as foreground for his own particular preoccupations; some of them provide us with a realistic picture of the city, others go out of their way to avoid realism. All filter their environment through their own sensibilities.

Laura Nyro, whose late 1969 record, New York Tendaberry, is the first one in my study, has elements of folk, jazz, musical theater, and even the French art song in her work. Her singing style and piano-playing suggest a European cabaret performer, but at the same time she shows a strong gospel and rhythm-and-blues influence. The only artist on my list who was never really commercially successful on her own (she was never more than a cult figure), she was one of the most successful songwriters of the late sixties and early seventies, writing hits for such diverse mass market artists as the Fifth Dimension, Blood, Sweat and Tears, Barbra Streisand, and Three-Dog Night. A native of the Bronx, she attended the High School of the Performing Arts where she received a solid musical grounding, and she then began her career at an early age. New York Tendaberry, her third album, and the second in a

trilogy about the growth of a young woman, was composed when she was not yet twenty-one.

The album opens with impressionistic art-song chords on the piano à la Debussy and the words "You don't love me when I cry" sung very softly. Farther along she switches to the Gershwinlike lament style of Porgy and Bess which finally resolves into a quiet jazz guitar and the words "I got funky drawnblind blues." This mood is continued in the second song which she offers in the delicate voice of a little child -- it is a confessional song about drugs -- and which modulates and ends with a strident chorus of Blood, Sweat and Tears horns and repeated sung phrases which trail off into silence.

In fact, one of her lyric devices is the repetition of certain phrases almost obsessively, especially in the songs which represent her own interior life or her life lived within an enclosed space, her room. Nyro alternates between these songs and vignettes of ordinary life on the streets of the West 80's, with occasional more accessible selections, the more universal gospel-style songs. The musical variety is astounding, but it is finally this sprawling quality which renders the material somewhat incoherent. One interviewer suggested that she was like Gershwin on acid: "To Laura, the city is life. The struggle in the city is between health and sickness -- God and the Devil."[4]

The very last song on the album, the title song -- "tendaberry" is a word Nyro invented to describe the warm, tender core she perceives deep inside the city's grating exterior -- ends with the lines "You look like a city, but you feel like religion to me." Passionately attached to her city, she used her self-consciously poetic words, her rather grating emotional voice and her rhythmically complicated dramatic music to "look

into the heart of the city and transcend its decay with the knowledge that, somewhere beneath the dirt, God is alive and waiting."[5]

One of the most ballyhooed recording artists of the 1970's, Bruce Springsteen is a native of the small rundown South Jersey Shore resorts, a world away from New York City in atmosphere if not in miles. Already a seasoned live performer when he released The Wild, the Innocent, and the E-Street Shuffle in 1973 at the age of twenty-three, Springsteen was trying to liberate himself from the label of "the new Dylan" when he appeared with this, his second album. It was a firm critical success, but he would have to wait until 1975's Born to Run for his breakthrough into a mainstream audience. Springsteen is a genre artist, and he seems to have absorbed all the fifties and sixties urban rock and blues repetoire.

The second side of The Wild, the Innocent, and the E-Street Shuffle has been described as "a sort of suite, an homage to New York City."[6] It consists of three long narrative songs about the city's youthful losers, characters with names like Spanish Johnny, Puerto Rican Jane, and Rosalita. "Rosalita" is also the title of the middle selection, a rousing rock-and-roll number positioned between two more ballad-like pieces, "Incident on Fifty-Seventh Street" and "New York City Serenade." If the two ballads have not survived, "Rosalita" has long been a staple of Springsteen's stage shows. Extroverted where Nyro is introverted, Springsteen's imagery is wildly romantic, his characters filled with youthful bravado. One of the sequences in "New York City Serenade" says:

It's midnight in Manhattan
This is no time to get cute
It's a mad dog's promenade.
So walk tall... or baby,
Don't walk at all.

Rumor has it that Bruce Springsteen spent a short time in the chorus of a revival of West Side Story in 1970, and perhaps the Romeo-and-Juliet love affair in that musical provided the spark for his treatment of the lovers in "Incident on Fifty-Seventh Street", Spanish Johnny and Puerto Rican Jane:

> Well, like a cool Romeo he made his moves
> Oh, she looked so fine
> Like a late Juliet, she knew he'd never be true
> But then she didn't really mind
> Upstairs the band was playin'
> The singer was singin' something about going home
> She whispered, "Spanish Johnny, you can leave me tonight
> But just don't leave me alone."

Dave Marsh, Springsteen's biographer, has written of his subject: "Springsteen does not know the City well. These songs have less sense of place and physical detail than, say, the New York Dolls' demimonde epics.... As with any outsider, his belief in the City is stronger than a native could ever afford."[7] His extravagant imagery verges on parody, but he invests his nightworld with passion and romance, so that we care about the characters he creates. We are caught up in their lives, and in the rush of the songs,"which use multiple bridges, varying choruses and meter stretched until it almost snaps...."[8]

1976, the year of the next album, Neil Diamond's Beautiful Noise, puts us right in the middle of the disco craze. However, the New York which Diamond evokes is not at all concerned with disco and only intermittently with reality. Although his particular forte as a songwriter has always been a sort of heightened reality, here he puts that aside for a romantic excursion into Tin Pan Alley's past. Although a Brooklynite, Diamond projects even less sense of place than Springsteen; he uses no street

names at all. What he does use is every pop music form that Tin Pan Alley produced -- from minstrelsy through ballads and torch songs and into rock.

The album opens with mimetic traffic sounds substituting for the typical Tin Pan Alley verse of the title song, and the simple, strong melody is inexorable in the manner of "Begin the Beguine", swirling and winding upward to a light climax and then downward again to the deceptively quiet ending:"It's a beautiful noise coming into my room, and it's waiting for me just to give it a tune." There is a world of personal ambition present in those words, and the rest of the album suggests Broadway rather than Tin Pan Alley. Rolling Stone, in a generally skeptical review felt that if the upbeat selections "begin to evoke New York clamor and hustle, none conjures the feelings Diamond wants nearly as well as the classic score for West Side Story did."[9]

The loose, episodic structure of the album, similar to Laura Nyro's, allows the writer to show us someone holed up in his room toiling during the day, and then descending to the street to observe the "Street Life" at night. More coherent than Nyro, Diamond uses the classic AABA pop song form for the ballad selections; the upbeat songs are more freeform. The writer's picaresque progression on the first side of the album suggests a person alone in his own world; even his descents to the street are dreamy and self-absorbed, and everything he observes is kept safely at a distance. However, by the time he arrives at the second song on Side Two, brutal reality has pierced this knight's shining armor. The song is called "Home Is a Wounded Heart." If the metaphor is typical Tin Pan Alley, the image of optimistic ambition which appeared in the initial title song has degenerated to the desperate ambition to make it big in the Big City, even if it means shattering a marriage in the process.

The words are "He's out for love and for glory, she's waiting home by the fire," but it is sung with a mixture of intense bitterness and guilt that completely subverts the hearts-and-flowers of the lyrics. By the time the album closes with the hymnlike "Dry Your Eyes," a feeling of deep melancholy pervades the atmosphere, the unmistakable impression being that for survival in New York and in life a sort of existential stoicism is necessary. Tin Pan Alley fantasies are difficult to reconcile with a post-modern world.

From the early 1970's on, the third New Yorker of the group, Billy Joel, had been writing and recording slice-of-life songs about his native Long Island ("Cold Spring Harbor") and the city ("New York State of Mind"), playing a pounding bravura piano à la Elton John and singing in a braying, cocky tenor. With the release of 52nd Street late in 1978, he finally attained great commercial success -- this album was a simultaneous gold and platinum disk. Said Stephen Holden in his review of the album: "Joel's is a sidewalk voice from the chorus of West Side Story, vending chutzpah. His complete lack of vocal subtlety, though an artistic limitation, is still one of his charms. He's every scuffling city boy who ever made it big, crowing with ego but also giving back his all."[10]

52nd Street consists of a series of vignettes of New York, and the atmosphere is Manhattan by night, with the jazz joints of 52nd Street for background. Joel's songs are of classic pop song construction, AABA or chorus, bridge, chorus, even the rockers, and his melodies are memorable, if derivative. They sometimes suggest Paul Maccartney or the aforementioned Elton John, and he is such an accomplished pianist that he seems able to play in any style. This sometimes works against him, since

he almost always seems to sound like someone else. Alec Wilder once made an interesting observation about composers of this type: "In my experience, the better the piano player or orchestrator, the less pure or autonomous are his melodies. For the inventiveness and dexterity of the fingers can so brilliantly clothe and decorate a tune as to make any succession of top notes (melody) sound good."[11]

Unlike Nyro, whose material oscillates between quirky ultra-personal mannerist art songs and fullblown dramatic narratives, Springsteen, who adds a cinematographic element to his own dramatic narratives, and Diamond, who is a fantasy hero in search of his own Holy Grail, Joel limits his own persona to that of a brash Jimmy Cagneyesque observer. Stephen Holden continues:

> ...the characters in 52nd Street -- a Puerto Rican street punk ("Half a Mile Away"), a social climber ("Big Shot"), a sexual bitch ("Stiletto"), a barfly sports fan ("Zanzibar"), and a Cuban guitarist ("Rosalinda's Eyes") -- comprise a sidewalk portrait gallery of midtown hustlers and dreamers. The likenesses, though roughly sketched, are accurate and sometimes even tinged with romance... Even the numbers that aren't portraits fit nicely into Joel's scheme. "Honesty" laments the cynicism and loneliness behind the facade of Gotham glamor, while the title song, which closes the album, is a fragmentary pop-jazz post card.[12]

Although the overall orientation of the album is more rock than anything else, the generous dollops of jazz and the Latin interpolations, together with Joel's cocky voice, give 52nd Street a particularly New Yorkish ambience.

The youthful British New Wave rocker, Joe Jackson (b. 1956), moved

to New York City in 1982 and some months later produced an eclectic concept album entitled Night and Day, whose subject was what People magazine called a "threadbare urban life." I would rather term it a charming homage to the city, albeit one with the slightly paranoid fears of the city dweller who does not yet feel fully at home in his new environment. His personal fears for his safety ("Everything Gives You Cancer") seem to have been allayed by the time of 1984's Body and Soul. It is a much more optimistic work, a sunny valentine to the artist's adopted city. By 1984 Jackson was completely at home in New York and did not seem to be constantly looking over his shoulder anymore. According to the Village Voice, "Jackson was still tinkering with his image on Night and Day, fancying himself a sort of New Wave George Gershwin by ignoring the guitar for the piano."[13] Although Gershwin was a dynamic pianist, Cole Porter was the composer of Night and Day, and, indeed, the album Night and Day, with its emphasis on the Night aspect of the city seems, to my ears, to be more indebted to Porter than to Gershwin.

The caustic tone of several of the selections,"Cancer," "Real Men," "TV Age," "Sad Songs," suggests that brittle sophistication is what he is after, even though he cannot quite manage a sneer with his wispy high voice. His paranoia undercuts the sophistication, as do his sometimes awkward lyrics:

> Somebody say I'm crazy, Livin' in this crazy town
> I say, maybe you're too lazy, Got to either swim or drown.
> Uptown, downtown,
> No one's fussy, I'm a target.
> Black, white, day, night,
> No one's fussy, I'm a target.

His musical idiom is a syncopated Latin jazz, close to salsa, with

extensive instrumental interludes, and almost no rock at all.

The second album is more emotional and direct -- this is the album which calls to mind Gershwin. Robert Christgau termed it "a brassy, basically Broadway pan-Gotham pastiche, sort of like West Side Story."[14]

Body and Soul is an unabashed paean to New York City; the paranoia has disappeared, and the writer is concerned mostly with personal relationships ("Happy Ending," "Heart of Ice," and especially the lovely, "Be My No. 2" -- "Won't you be my No. 2, Me and No. 1 are through, There won't be too much to do, Just smile when I feel blue.") The album ends with the luminous, upbeat"Heart of Ice," an authentic production number which begins as a whispery instrumental with Jackson's thin voice entering and then being augmented by backup singers Elaine Caswell and Ellen Foley, then proceeding to a fullfledged eruption of majestic orchestral sound, vibrant and vital. Night and Day was a sleeper hit in 1983, both with critics and public, but Body and Soul, with its more self-conscious staginess, has not found a comparable audience.

The last album on my list, Roxy Music's Avalon, offers a lushly romantic portrait of the city and its inhabitants, as is evident by the title. Avalon was the enchanted island which rose up out of the mists in the Arthurian legends, and to which King Arthur and his knights' were carried in death. The album's cover portrays a helmeted knight in the foreground with his hooded falcon on his arm, ready to fly. The knight is gazing out over clouds towards a large expanse of calm water, and just visible in the distance is a narrow strip of flat land. Is Bryan Ferry, who is Roxy Music, intimating that he is going to construct his own New York City?

Roxy Music has been a longtime force in British rock, and Ferry, its

songwriter and vocalist, affects a suave lounge-lizard appearance, and sings in a delicate, stylized, light crooner's voice. Like nearly all the songwriters discussed, Ferry intimates that New York City is somehow different at night -- and Avalon is concerned only with the city by night.

The image is of a New York glowing after a light rain. In one of the songs, "To Turn You On," the lyrics go this way:

> Is it raining in New York
> On Fifth Avenue
> And off Broadway after dark
> Love the lights, don't you
> I could walk you through the park
> If you're feeling blue
> Or whatever.

In another song, "True to Life", he continues in a similar vein:

> Dancing city
> Now you're talking
> But where's your soul
> You've a thousand faces
> I'll never know.
>
> There are complications
> And compensations
> If you know the game
> Agitated in Xenon nightly
> I'll take you home again.
>
> Travel way downtown
> In search of nothing
> But the sky at night
> and the diamond lady
> Well she's not talking
> But that's alright.

An anonymous reviewer in Variety once stated bluntly that "Roxy Music's music is so exquisite it can break your heart." This is as good a description as any of the simultaneously cool and lush, distanced yet warm sound that Roxy Music produces. It is rock music with a polyrhythmic base, and it seems particularly appropriate for Ferry's portrait of New York. In combination with the twisted cliches of the lyrics,

it turns the city into pure fantasy, a dream world of Ferry's own devising. Even the two instrumental selections on the album have the exotic titles of "Tara" and "India." We are a long way here from the casual realism of a Billy Joel.

Indeed, it is amazing that six artists, in the space of only fifteen years, can give us six very different pictures of the city, and that each record should seem as valid as the other. Perhaps one reviewer, in discussing Peter Conrad's book about New York City, pinpoints the essential kernel of truth: "New York seems to be everything because it is nothing; it reflects the wishes and desires of those who inhabit it or visit it, and that is all. Unlike other cities it is not greater than its memorialists. It is a built dream, a vision incarnated."[15]

Nola Kortner Aiex
University of Illinois
March 1985

NOTES

[1]Floyd Henderson, "The Image of New York in American Popular Music: 1890 - 1970," New York Folklore Quarterly, vol. 30, No. 4, Dec. 1974, p. 275.

[2]Peter Conrad, The Art of the City, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 298.

[3]Op. cit., p. 277.

[4]William Kloman, New York Times, Oct. 6, 1968.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Steve Simels, Stereo Review, January 1974.

[7]Dave Marsh, Born to Run (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1981), p. 103.

[8]Dave Marsh, New Rolling Stone Record Guide, ed. Dave Marsh & John Swenson (New York: Rolling Stone, 1983), p. 483.

[9]Stephen Holden, Rolling Stone, Aug. 12, 1976.

[10]Stephen Holden, Rolling Stone, Dec. 14, 1978.

[11]Alec Wilder, American Popular Song (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 254.

[12]Op. cit.

[13]Michael Hill, Village Voice, May 29, 1984.

[14]Robert Christgau, Village Voice, May 29, 1984.

[15]Peter Ackroyd, London Times Literary Supplement, Aug. 9, 1984.