

# The New Pornographers

---

For what purpose the popular song? Does the popular song have a purpose? Is it just a sequence of auditory gestures, desperate acts, adrift in the bigger broader silence of an unforgiving cultural landscape? In what follows, we will assume that the purpose of the popular song is to unite warring disputants and to repair the manifold puncture wounds of life, so that life is revealed, again, as less accursed than it appears. And let's assume that we go on listening to the popular song, which in the vast majority of its iterations is a failure, because we are chronic in our need for this rehabilitation of our puncture-wounded selves. Take any fine example, take "All You Need Is Love," by the Beatles, or "Walk Away, Renee," by the Left Banke, or "Tears of a Clown," by Smokey Robinson. Try listening to these songs. Almost immediately, your suppurations begin to clot.

Into this tryingly difficult history of the popular song stride The New Pornographers, into a period in which it has to be acknowledged that the medium is mostly dead, is passed, is no longer a uniting force, but, more frequently, a medium of division, one entirely controlled by the Ownership Society and made profitable according to shareholders who don't give a fuck if your puncture wounds are healed over as long as the product ships. The New Pornographers, stunningly, do not seem to understand that the popular song is dead, is passed, and The New Pornographers, despite their complete and nearly monastic understanding of the Secret Knowledge of the popular song, will themselves into being, characterized by a uniform devotion to the great history that precedes them by only a couple of decades, and their coming into being in a somewhat unlikely place, Vancouver, not previously noted for a unvarying profusion of rock genius, is particular not only for uniformity of purpose but because they manage, in this uniformity, to bring a considerable cast of local adepts all as one into the tent. The cast of adepts is now well known, but includes at least two startlingly good songwriters, three spectacularly good singers, one of the very best drummers in all of contemporary music, an in-house filmmaker—and that is merely to scratch the surface on the question of bench strength, the shocking amount of bench strength in a band in which everyone seems to be able to produce quality audio emanations from any instrument and to sing, and in which the studio is an instrument as it is in few bands.

Their first album is great, and is power pop, power pop, and more power pop, their second album (Electric Version) refines the form and tinkers, with more studio brilliance on display, the third, viz., Twin Cinema, is an artier thing and a proggy thing, revealing a breadth of confidence, and a breadth of confidences, both senses, and a command of lyrical nuance and anthemic talents that display themselves in unusual spots, in songs that don't begin anthemically, but which then reveal urgencies; Challengers, the fourth, has some quieter annunciations on it, seems to come from a place of adulthood, from a recognition that urgency can be in the theme, and the affirmation of the song is not in the lyric necessarily, but in the commitment, in the commitment to the sonnet-like cadences of the popular song, and the title song herein, "Challengers," a miniature about a romantic entanglement that literally walks past the narrator, takes us far beyond the adolescences of the popular song into the adult spot where really great songwriters begin to ply their craft.

Which brings us to the ineradicable present, which is the moment when The New Pornographers have already done everything they can do, in some senses; they have had songs in films and on television, they have toured the world, they are respected and covered and well reviewed and lionized, and everyone in the band has a justifiably earned reputation for excellence and admirability, chief among them A. C. Newman, first among equals with respect to these musical bulletins, Neko Case, the singer who never met a line of lyrics that she could not in same way make indelible, and Dan Bejar, the stealth member and interpretation-resistant Mandarin troubadour.

There are no more interesting rock and roll bands, you know, there are opiate-addicted white boys who cannot play very well and who are unwilling to turn down the amplifiers so as to be heard, and there are machines and auto-tuned fembots, and there are hip hoppers with public-relations simulated gangster simulations, and there are working-class guys with a lot of tattoos who can play really, really fast. But there are no more interesting rock and roll bands, and there are no longer songs that make you want to get out of bed. Still, The New Pornographers are unable not to behave like underdogs of yearning, like a united front of yearning, and they are also unable, it seems, to resist the challenge to make a perfect album, a form so dead that it is on its seventh wave of maggotty, and so they have an eye on history, and they do love a windmill, they love to charge, and they do not know how to do otherwise now, which means that theirs is a contagious form of yearning, and if in part their longing is postmodern, which is to say that they often writes songs that are about other songs ("Crash Years," e.g., is about "You" by George Harrison, and "Moves" is, in part, about "25 or 6 to 4," by the beleaguered Chicago), they are not able to treat the form simply as a kind of commentary (which has caused others fatefully to go away), but also as a surgical intervention for puncture-wounded civilians everywhere, as a joy delivery-system, and in this joy-delivery system there are new and interesting twists, for those who are curious about what the ineradicable contemporary moment sounds like, sound-wise, and the twists on this new album, have to do with strings, really, and with a sort of chamber pop orientation, lots of cello, that is, of a sort that calls to mind the amazing Sister Lovers LP by Big Star, around whose open wounds A. C. Newman has orbited in the past but more fearfully than now.

Fewer keyboard flourishes, and fewer things that sound like they necessitated a good computer programmer, and more things that sound like A. C. Newman and the rest of the band playing in a room. This is probably an illusion, this playing together, but it is an illusion with a purpose, because there are at least two songs on this album that use togetherness as the assembling cement, the epoxy of their composition. The first of these is a big rock song, "Your Hands (Together)," and as you would expect the putting of hands together also occasions a silver bullet, of the mortally inflicting variety, which is the paradoxical sort of thematic approach that we would expect from songwriters who are no longer young, and who are willing to write a couplet that answers the question "What's love?" with the response: "What turns up in the dark." All of this is perforation for the tearing away of the final track, "We Get Together," in which the hook, the title, is at the very end, buried in the mix, and the whole is about familial dynamics, much in the way that "Oh, Sister," from Bob Dylan's *Desire* is about familial dynamics, which is to say not at all, and more about the injunction to "do damage" than it is about familiar unity, "I'm for damage, sweet damage," Newman and Case sing, and the cellos come back around, with their genteel bolshevism, with a hint of the early Electric Light Orchestra, and Carl goes in and out of his

falsetto as he does when he's winding up like a violent debater, and they hold back on the drumming, which is what they do, until it's absolutely necessary, and that is a big advantage when the drummer is this great, and then we come to the out chorus, in which Case seems to be singing "ma ma ma ma," as if to mislead you into thinking that the song, is about familial dynamics, and Newman sings "we end up together," and then there is guitar feedback. End credits.

What does he mean about ending up together? What would it mean for a popular song, while clearly supporting an aesthetic palette devoted to "sweet damage," nonetheless to support the idea of ending up together? Is it, paradoxically, about the kind of romantic failure that makes for all the best popular songs? Is it a recognition that the only unifying that can come from the contemporary popular song is the kind of togetherness that recognizes the truth of human life, namely that all is apartness, and all is lonesomeness, and this even if the principle songwriter in the band is recently married, and, by all evidence, reasonably content? Yes, it's all about the ship going down, and the rats leaping from the sinking vessel, the vessel of the popular song, and there is nothing to do but to celebrate a recognition of this rats-going-down business, and, nonetheless, to view the articulation of same as a joy and a responsibility, such that the best joy-delivery system is the song itself, so that the medium is dead and yet is being used to celebrate its death, and it's in our mutual recognition of apartness that we are most together. (The band setting is no different, in this way, from quotidian human life. It is a triumph over the entropic energy that would drive it, the band, apart.)

This is an eschatological approach, and, indeed, some of what you are hearing on Together, by the New Pornographers, is a band of ghosts who are mining their fin de siècle imagery for all its worth, even though we are at the beginning of a century. They are from Vancouver (mostly), they still believe that they have something to say, they are adults, they don't use drum machines, they are not emcees. What could they possibly have going for them? Everything they stand for is over, they are the last iteration, they are the bitter end, the sweet aftertaste of something intoxicating. And yet they believe in doing it, still, together. We are so much the better for it