

DAVID MERRITT & THE MUSIC OF NOT LISTENING

by Carl Wilson

It was hearing about an application called Shazam that made me finally give in and buy an iPhone. Rumour had it that it let you point your phone at any music playing, say, on the radio or in a shop or bar and, with a swipe of finger over touchscreen, get the song's and artist's names. For a writer about pop music whose superpowers do not include total trivia recall -- and who, for great chunks of his life, didn't pay especially close heed to what was on the charts -- it was an irresistible lure: When "On the Loose" came chugging through the room, I'd be able to make a surreptitious consult and meet expectant questioning eyes with the answer that it was Saga who had to do it their way or no way at all, not any of the other 1970s Canadian chest-hair bands whose names might scissor-kick their way across my brain, like Triumph or Chilliwack or April Wine. No wonder the app was christened with the shibboleth of magical malarkey that comic-book Billy would shout in order to be lightning-strike-morphed into Captain Marvel.

But in real life, Shazam was not such a thunderbolt. It can't make out what I hear through the porous walls and floors of my apartment, or through the registers ringing or tableware clanking at a cafe. It can only identify what was set apart and clear, the way music seldom comes these days -- Shazam pays a variety of attention to music that seems old-fashioned in a slick digital device, like the caricature of the "true" music fan that remains from album-era rock culture: headphones on, eyes shut, hands in prayer position against the chest. Shazam turned out to be less, not more able than a human to sort out the droplets of information that constitute the cluttered, clustery pop-culture cloud that swirls ubiquitously over contemporary North America.

Perhaps I'd have expected that if I had first encountered the art of David Merritt, itself a sort of technology (and magical malarkey) that renders the outline of that cloud visible, along with the passions and lacks that inflect it -- dark spots and fadings, densities and dispersals.

Sorting and diagramming are endemic to the pastime (and business) of popular music: Commercial charts portray stacks of songs stepping on each other's heads to attain the Toppermost of the Poppermost; the lists made compulsively by critics array and rank songs by their degrees of supposed perfection or by their membership in some random category (Top 10 Songs Feat. Thunder-and-Rain Sounds), or the ties between their creators (Pete Frame's hand-drawn volumes of Rock Family Trees set down the cross-pollinations by which the Byrds begat the Flying Burrito Brothers begat the Eagles and Poco). These exercises mark a mastery of the gnostic rites of music fandom, including the hierarchies of its clergy.

But how would it look to be an agnostic of music? Merritt's visualizations of pop -- his "re-chartings" -- summon from within songs, as well as the moments of tape hiss or radio silence between them, spirits that move unbidden by the logics of order: minor phoneme-bound deities, semantic ghosts. Merritt works with, among other found materials, the lyrics of popular songs

through the decades, collected almost as arbitrarily as if through a rainspout into a barrel. He then skims out of them molecules of meaning -- pronouns, abstractions, images, conjunctions, contractions -- that are diffused in drips and drizzles onto paper or looped and lost among strands of ~~sisel~~ fibre. The resulting surveys of the musical noosphere are mute on questions of a song's quality, but rich with the quality of song's questions.

In the relatively simple "~~Me and My~~," for example, each of those three words appear in a coloured cell (or a cartoon speech balloon), with "me" occupying a self-satisfied, cerebellum-shaped cloud of green, "and" in a demure grey circle, and "my" in an orb blushing red with desire, from which tangled paths lead to various potential hand-scrawled completions of the phrase. "Shadow," the first finish I would think of, is dangling down the lower left margin, but there's also "me and my baby" or "me and my gal," which could be plucked from any number of songs, while "me and my chauffeur blues" could only be the 1941 gunned-my-driver-down hit by Memphis Minnie (or one of its contemporary cover versions by Lucinda Williams or Maria Muldaur). There's my wife, my horse, my .38, my eighteen-wheeler and my lord. Perhaps these phrases will trigger mental music for you, or perhaps you won't know the songs. Perhaps Merritt doesn't either. Because all the roads lead out from "my," you get a fairly specific sense of the people and things partnered to the assumed speaker, but "me" him- or herself is a cipher, a missing singing voice.

Still you're apt to be drawn into the Rabelaisian comedy of all these contrasting configurations of possession or intimacy, the myriad varieties of ownership and yoking it proposes (or rather proposes that pop music proposes) are available in our lives. Look at how heavily the small, burning-red "my" hangs from the expansive, fertile "me," a pendulum unable to swing because of all that it is tied to, with a tangle of interdependency on its left side, while vast open space for selfish, unencumbered, irresponsible play stands unused to its right. Poor "me," forever tethered by its "my." (The outlier on the other side from the unshakable "shadow" is "arrow," from Harry Nilsson's 1970s children's song, flying freely east -- that's still "your" arrow after you've shot it into your fleeing enemy's horse's ass, after all; or maybe this arrow is just a sense of direction or portent; either way, what a wonderfully uncomplicated possession, compared with a "baby" or a "lord.")

I'm left mulling over the costs of connection and commitment thanks to the remarkably light-handed collaboration Merritt's charts make with their pop sources; more than they denote or depend on what a song by Memphis Minnie says, they tweak our knowledge of what sorts of things songs are prone to say. A singer with an eighteen-wheeler is probably in a country trucking song; if she's got a .38 instead, she could be a metal queen or a blues wailer or gangsta rapper; and if someone addresses a lord, then it's either a gospel ode or an 18th-century English ballad. But these urges toward detective work are less compelling than the assembled evidence that, in any genre, people like to sing about what they've got or who they're with -- a declaration that may enhance status, solicit sympathy or exorcise demons.

To me these drawings carry a whiff of accusation, or at least a knowingness akin to the psychoanalyst's measured, disingenuously neutral nod as a patient relates a dream -- "You humans may think you've covered up your dirty little secrets," the drawing says, "but, you see, I've heard your pop music." No one song, no matter how insightful, can be quite as devastating about human nature as an inventory of all songs' cliches. That's how Merritt's spidery diagrams gum us up in their webs.

His method also nods at an aspect of pop music worth pointing out to anyone (if such a person still exist) who finds something profane in vulgar, cheesy old pop serving as raw material for serious art: More than in any other art form, pop produces meaning more profusely through interplay between works than it does in any individual instance. As the poet and critic Joshua Clover argues in his 2002 essay, "Good Pop, Bad Pop: Massiveness, Materiality and the Top 40," no matter how pleasurable or profound a pop song is, it generates that effect by introducing just the right dose of novelty into a formula that guarantees an appropriate amount of sameness. So, taken as a "meta-narrative" (whether in the Top 40 of a given moment or in its shifts over decades), pop in many ways is a continuing probe of the tensions between consistency and change in a global, capitalist, consumer society. A hit song may be remembered fondly for generations, but it gains that foothold by how much it stands out when it is new, and that depends deeply on its relations with songs that appear before, during and after its debut. Of course this is true of all the arts, but the cycles in pop churn with unrivaled brutality and speed (styles of painting take many more years to go from fashionable to laughable to classic or distantly charming).

That's also what makes pop songs so potently evocative of their times (and so prone to nostalgic fetishization), and part of why genres of music so easily associate with social stereotypes. Since meaning in pop accretes so interactively and so chronologically, the most revealing analysis a cultural critic can make is often to treat sets of songs by different artists (half the argument is in selecting which songs to mix or bundle, which is partly what motivates all the list-making). Conversely it's an easy trick to isolate any individual pop song and hold it up to ridicule, bereft of its relationship to trend or genre, as fuddy-duddy TV and radio broadcasters loved to do with faux-poetic lyric readings in the early days of both rock'n'roll and hip-hop.

Merritt does pop the honour, then, of stripping out the features that give a particular song a facade of self-contained completeness, and teasing out a more telling dynamic of sameness (the word-units that link the lyrical fragments) against difference (the units that lie in between the connection points).

Yet again, that's only if you jump in and play the game. Standing further back, you see not the pixels of data but the referential haze and environmental or anatomical shape (jellyfish, tornados, tumbleweeds) suggested by the structure. These aren't just process works but drawings, and you can drink them in whole. I could extend my line of thought by saying that this is part of pop's accretive character too -- on the radio, you can not pick up a word nor hum along to the tunes of

any of the particular records, but still get a substantial sense of what's happening in pop or country or R&B.

But I'm also impressed with the tolerance and generosity of the creative approach -- both pop-music makers and Merritt are aware that their work is going to be displayed in places (galleries, the radio, an MP3 player on shuffle) with wide disparities in attention among the audience. A Merritt drawing might benefit by the kind of sustained, detailed engagement that I gave "~~Me and My~~," or it might score a few seconds' glance as a visitor makes a quick circuit of an exhibition or chats with a fellow patron. The art is designed to return the favour either way.

This kind of non-intervention parallels how many of us interact with pop music: One of the most important things we do with our radios is not to listen to them, and many of the restrictions (on dynamics, song length, density, dissonance, etc.) that people lament about commercial pop serve that need. A song can be a great work of art, but if it is too disruptive to serve as background music, broadcasters won't play it. To program a stream of songs that never makes a listener pause, either to listen or turn the sound down or off, is to compose a piece of meta-music, with sufficient contours not to become monotonous but few enough to preserve a sense of flow. The same idea drove Erik Satie's "furniture music" and Brian Eno's "ambient" Music for Airports and, while I'd be quick to agree it's too dominant today, I'd dare say most of us would be distressed if that listening experience -- music as support for a dinner party, for work, for house-cleaning -- became hard to find. The best music you can play on the radio is not openly demanding, and yet also will not let demanding people down.

In Merritt's work, this double-sidedness is not a pandering or crowd-pleasing compromise. It suits what I take to be his philosophical agenda. Many artists recently have made pop music a central subject, a move that in general seems to be about liking reference points more accessible and relevant to non-specialists than art-historical ones are. But from Andy Warhol through the likes of Elizabeth Peyton, Candice Breitz or Canada's Benny Nemerofsky Ramsey, they focus on iconography, on music's visual culture and/or the process of projection through which devoted fans use their favourite music to synthesize identity. These are all figures of people acting, watching or listening with eccentrically rapt attention. Instead, Merritt makes a feast of inattention, highlighting the subliminal, subconscious, collective half-life of music's radioactive effect, which is part of a broader concern in his work with the not-quite-meant, the ever-branching line between presence and absence, and the ineluctability of the unfinished, the transitional and the decayed. His musical allusions allow him to nudge at nostalgia or transcendence without allowing them a big production number, in the way that music -- contrary to much of the rhetoric around it -- echolocates rather than actuates possibility.

Like pop at its least corrupt and self-important, Merritt's work tries to make a better-than-worse peace treaty with the fact that most of life is composed not of peak experiences but of the yearning and disappointment inherent in being capable of envisioning epic achievement or romance; it allows for the sexiness of misunderstanding, the eroticism of just brushing by, as well

as the petty sourness of the missed chance. It portrays libido as at once obsessive drive and cool calculation and, in the art's carefully managed elusiveness, the sickly sweet paralysis that results from confusing one with the other.

It all reminds me of the critic and theorist Sionne Ngai's recent reclamation of "the merely interesting" as an aesthetic category, one at distinct odds with any agenda that aims primarily at the possibly mythic, sudden-lightning-strike of the sublime (Shazam!) -- like the romantic-modernist agenda that tends to divide rock from pop. The interesting, Ngai says, of necessity always contains the alternative possibility that it is in fact boring -- like most pop music, or Merritt's pretty but unassuming word-maps. Deferring the resolution of that aesthetic problem is itself an aesthetic experience: Just as Merritt's drawings give us momentarily beautiful forms that contain an indefinite, near-infinite number of future vectors for exploration, the judgment of "interesting" is agnostic about what particular quality or value its object incarnates, but it publicizes an appetite to keep looking and talking about it.

Instead of the totalitarianism of the sublime, the interesting offers an opportunity to listen, or not to listen, and in this it's more fully and freely human, while recognizing that humanity involves being shaped by systems into which we had no choice but to be born. Like any pop song worth its salt'n'pepa, Merritt's work permits us to forget that for a blissful few minutes. But any aesthetic or technology (even an iPhone music app) that mixes up such contextless reverie with real life is in trouble. So the art of David Merritt, like all great pop music, is also permeated through with wonderful and horrible reminders that we are not, at any turn in this passage, alone.