

PJ Harvey at the Vic Theater, Chicago

Seth Kim-Cohen

Published in the *Chicago Reader*, 1998.



Lo what a sea change Tina Brown hath wrought. In the October 26 & November 2 issues of the esteemed publication, *The New Yorker*, this cat named Hilton Als and his far-flung, shallowly-thought, and limply-argued suppositions have been welcomed with an editorial stance that can only be described as open-armed. (I can but hope my editors at the *Reader* extend half as warm a welcome to me.) Mr. Als writes under the heading "A Critic At Large." Which begs the question "What must a critic do to earn this 'At Large' license?" Presumably, one is given such reign on the merits of his or her observations and insights. Therefore, I expect to come away from such critiques with the impression that what I've read has been 'keenly observed.' That's my litmus test, as it were, for whether this critic deserves to be 'at large.'

In Mr. Als first paragraph he fails to clear the bar set at 'keenly observed.' He, in fact, firmly raps his bony skull against the bar, taking it down with him in a twisted, gulumphing heap. He attacks Beck by saying "His *branché* cool stems not from his doing anything as old-fashioned as playing a musical instrument but from his ability to synthesize computer-generated sounds that play like bright commercial jingles." Bzzz. I'm sorry, Hilton. The correct answer was "Beck played almost all of the instruments which were then sampled and looped to create the album *Odelay*." If Hilton Als had done even

the most rudimentary research he would have stumbled on this fact. Not to mention the adjacent fact that Beck has released two albums of old-fashioned musical instrument playing. Later in the same paragraph he takes a swipe at Beck's "slick pimp suits." Check me on this: (if you've paid any attention at all to Beck's fashion sense and have spent some time in second-hand clothing stores) are those suits "slick pimp" or are they mismatched, anything-but-slick, intentionally geeky, thrift store couture? Hilton needs to get his corduroy-with-the-suede-patches-on-the-elbow-jacketed ass out of that room with the shag-carpeting, the paneling and the over-stuffed bookcases and get a whiff of how the kids down at NYU are dressing these days. He might be shocked by the sudden explosion in the pimp population.

Mr. Als goes on to convolute all manner of musical misinformation, among other things, pointing out that white artists such as Beck, the Beastie Boys and the Backstreet Boys have "borrowed extensively from black music." (By "borrowed extensively" it is clear that what Mr. Als means to say, pejoratively, is *stolen*.) He fails to note that the most egregious "extensive borrowing" is being done by a black artist, Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs who has "borrowed extensively" from white artists Sting and Led Zeppelin. (By "borrowed extensively" I mean he took songs, in their entirety, and merely rapped some lame shit over the top of them.) If Mr. Als had pursued this "borrowing" line of thought more fully, he would have also realized that "Kashmir," the Led Zeppelin song used by Puffy, "borrows extensively" from Eastern and Arabic modal music. And that white artist Fatboy Slim has "borrowed extensively" from white artists, the Who to create his breakthrough single. You see, in the world of cultural and creative production, all the world is fair game, so long as you make something good from what you've taken. Beck, in my opinion, has done just that. Puffy Combs and Fatboy Slim have not. It's not a matter of the racial origin of the original material nor of the usurping artist, as long as everybody's getting paid (and

in the aforementioned cases, trust me, everybody's getting paid), it is simply a matter of the quality of the resultant work.

Now, I must admit, I feel a little bit odd attacking Hilton Als so full-on. Because I was aware, even before I started reading his essay, entitled "No Respect," that, in the end, the piece would endeavor to praise PJ Harvey, an artist whom I feel doesn't get her critical due. You see, on the page facing the initial page of the article, there is a gaudy pastel illustration depicting the white PJ Harvey in the foreground and, peeking out from behind her, the black Lauryn Hill, the R&B/rap artist who began her career with the enormously popular hip hop group the Fugees and who has recently released her first solo album. The illustration's caption reads "Polly Jean Harvey may make a better soul-music diva for the new age than Lauryn Hill." This helps focus the essay's ever-so provocative subtitle "Is the future of black soul music in the hands of a white British woman?"

The framing of this essay struck me as very Jerry Springer. Perhaps Mr. Als or Tina Brown herself could introduce Ms. Harvey while Ms. Hill waited backstage in a soundproof booth. Ms. Harvey could tell the audience how she was the future of black soul music and she "wasn't gonna give it up for nobody, no-how." Of course, when Ms. Hill emerged from backstage and repudiated Harvey's claim by calling her a "skank-ass-bitch," *The New Yorker's* burly stage hands, would have to separate the cat-fighting divas.

I'm pissed off by Hilton Als' assertion that Polly Jean Harvey is a soul singer. I'm equally pissed off by the surfeit of critics who claim she's a blues singer. Just to set the record straight, PJ Harvey plays rock music. I find it appalling and saddening and frightening that so many people who write about music can't identify rock music, even when they hear it presented as purely, as sure-footedly, and as traditionally as PJ Harvey plays it. Rock's always relied

on elements of blues, frequently employing 1-4-5 chord progressions and cyclical, twelve-bar patterns. But Harvey's body of work is certainly less indebted to blues than, say, the Rolling Stones (who, incidentally, are widely known as "the World's Greatest Rock 'n Roll Band.") Wednesday night at the Vic Theater PJ Harvey and her band played rock music which owed equal debt to the arty-new wave of her English youth, circa 1976-1982. Her band, four short-haired, broad-shouldered gentlemen wearing predominantly black clothing and Doc Marten-style English work shoes, recalled, in appearance and sound the halcyon days of the Fall and the Wedding Present; a repetitious blend of melodic and dissonant restraint.

But, as Keith and Mick said, it's the singer not the song. And Harvey's approach bears out the terminal wisdom of the Glimmer Twins' take on rock 'n roll. Rock places no premium on technical virtuosity or on the composition's degree of complexity. That the songs of Bob Dylan, the Sex Pistols, Buddy Holly, the Ramones, and the Stones, themselves, are rudimentary and primitive by the melodic, harmonic, and structural standards of jazz or classical music is not a knock. At Rock 'n Roll High School, it's your hall pass. Ultimately, it's the singer who must sell a rock song's message. King Crimson, Slint, Steely Dan, Yes, Faust, and Gastr del Sol may have made some very interesting, perhaps even compelling music, but none of them made great rock music, because they all aspired to the very collegiate notion that smarter is better and they all lacked a great rock singer. Apparently, none of them were in class the day Professors Jagger and Richards delivered their six word lecture.

PJ Harvey thinks of the rock song as a folk form like the fable. Lyrically, she populates her songs with familiar themes, characters, settings, and scenarios. Unlike the Lilith Fair set, whose lyrics indicate a prescient author with a unique psycho-intellectual perspective, Harvey's lyrics behave as archetypes;

suggestive, yet empty vessels which suggest universal themes such as loss, desire, or despair. Her songs bear familiar, even clichéd titles like "The Garden," "The River," and "The Wind." She makes no attempt to talk about a specific garden, river or wind, just as she makes no attempt to reference her specific loss, desire or despair. She uses these objects for their symbolic value. She is trodding well-worn, traditional songwriting territory and knowingly eschewing the approach more in vogue, especially amongst her singer/songwriter sisters, namely, that of the journal-scouring, personal history-divulging, name-naming, psychoanalytic brand of confessional, lyric-centric songwriting. It is, in fact, a by-product of her approach to the popular song lyric that has egged critics into lumping her work into some modern-day extension of traditional blues. Granted, she doesn't fit the Courtney Love or Alanis Morissette molds, but her work is decidedly rock. She is firmly ensconced in a tradition whose roots stem from the early Elvis Presley through Iggy Pop to Patti Smith and Mark E. Smith – that of performers who give themselves up to the song, whose voices communicate their utter abandon to the moment and whose performances are physical events, providing a cathartic outlet for both they and their audience.

On record, one needs only to listen to the title track of PJ Harvey's brilliant, new album *Is This Desire?* In the first chorus her voice cracks as if she herself is cracking beneath the weight of her plea: "Is this desire/Enough, enough/ To lift us higher/To lift above?" It's a truly heartbreaking moment. Harvey so inhabits the lyric as to give the impression that we, as listeners, are eavesdropping on a private moment – not a rumination on a past moment, but a moment being lived as we listen. Perhaps she is speaking to her lover or to herself or asking a god for answers. But her voice is audible in the present, she is not intellectualizing an emotion already lived to make it worthy, after the fact, of inclusion in her journal. Her voice is the sound of her heart breaking and she makes the listener feel like a trespasser.

Polly Jean Harvey hails from Yeovil, a small town in the southwest of England. But Wednesday night at the Vic theater, adorned in ankle-high, pink, stiletto heeled boots, a lizard skin print skirt, and a red spaghetti strap tank top, she was the Elvis Presley of the 1950's, the Iggy Pop of the 1960's, the Mick Jagger of the 1970's. She didn't merely present her songs (as, for instance, Liz Phair had done on this same stage the three nights previous) she inhabited them, writhing in their snake-like skin in a desperate attempt to shed the burdens and traumas she, herself, built into those very same songs. She was the distillation, the very essence of Mick and Keith's edict. She has the same knack for transforming scrappy, but not unfamiliar-sounding rock music into transcendent, era-defining magic that Presley and Jagger and Pop once had. As I watched her deliver songs from *Is This Desire?* as well as selections from her previous four releases, I had the distinct sensation that I was watching a legend at work. The fact that none of her music has yet had any effect on our era (more or less, "defined" it) was of no consequence. Before anyone is granted "legend" status, they must first mesmerize small rooms full of people who are then entitled to say "I saw her back in 1998." And it is due precisely to the impact her music (performed live or recorded) has on listeners that so many critics have, wrongly, categorized her as something other than rock. It is as if these critics don't believe rock is still capable of conjuring such feelings. But, lest they be confused, allow me to remind them, it is blues and soul which are primarily musical styles of the bygone and, therefore, in common, hyperbolic, critical parlance, "dead." Rock, on the other hand, is very much alive. Those shivers up your spine during PJ Harvey's performance, being the musical equivalent of a very lively EKG.