Book reviews . . .

Nancy L. Roberts, Book Review Editor

The Future Has Arrived
Next Wave: America's New Generation of Great Literary Journalists
Edited by Walt Harrington and Mike Sager.
Reviewed by Holly E. Schreiber 98

Doing Time in the Gallery: The Parliamentary Reporting Careers of Four Great English Writers
Literary Authors, Parliamentary Reporters: Johnson, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Dickens
by Nikki Hessell
Reviewed by John Tulloch 101

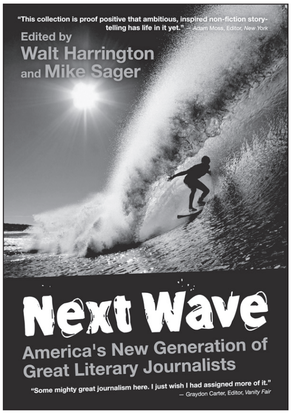
On an Island with Franzen the Birder
Farther Away
by Jonathan Franzen
Reviewed by Mark Neuzil 104

An in-depth look . . .
Legacies of Literary Style in Music Journalism
by Todd Schack 106

The Future Has Arrived

Next Wave: America's New Generation of Great Literary Journalists
Edited by Walt Harrington and Mike Sager. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012. Paperback, 370 pp., $18.95

Reviewed by Holly E. Schreiber, Indiana University, U.S.A.


"This collection is proof positive that ambitious, inspired non-fiction storytelling has life in it yet." — Adam Moss, Editor, *New York*
Edited by
Walt Harrington
and Mike Sager
Next Wave
America's New Generation of
Great Literary Journalists
"Some mighty great journalism here. I just wish I had assigned more of it."
— Graydon Carter, Editor, *Vanity Fair*

Walt Harrington and Mike Sager's edited collection, *Next Wave: America's New Generation of Great Literary Journalists,* promises to quell those rumors that the death of literary journalism is nigh. The book's cover, introduction, and advance praise excerpts all invoke the same anxiety surrounding the future of the form, even if only to assert the opposite—that literary journalism is alive and kicking, and is the choice form for some of the most promising talents working in journalism today. The editors write: "We're here to prove that the naysayers who predicted the end of literary journalism—compelling, long-form, nonfiction stories distinguished by in-depth reporting, artful writing and unique authorial point of view—were greatly mistaken" (xi).

And without a doubt, the collection of journalism assembled by Harrington and Sager does just that. With topics ranging from celebrity profiles to crime stories to disaster reconstructions, a reader's interest is easily maintained through the nineteen stories collected. To limit the collection, the editors chose stories written primarily in third person from writers who as of 2011 were under the age of forty. Other than these restrictions, the editors were guided by taste alone, leading to an impressive variety of work from magazines and newspapers across the country, both national and regional.

Stories that embrace ambiguity and complexity are harder to tell, and often fall between the cracks of mainstream journalism. It is the contribution of literary journalism to tell the difficult story—one that involves complicated characters rather than simply heroes and villains, with no easy answers in sight. The strongest of the pieces included in *Next Wave* do just this, showing that more consideration, more research, and more empathy can lead to a completely different story than has previously been told. Indeed, many of the stories in the collection come from what Dan P. Lee refers to as "scorched earth from the mainstream" (193), or material that has already been thoroughly (and at times gleefully) covered through other major news outlets. These reassessments are inherently critical of sensationalist, reductionist, or just plain insensitive journalism, even as they offer models of more responsible storytelling.

A particularly powerful example of this is Pamela Colloff's contribution, "Hannah and Andrew." Hannah Overton's arrest and trial had been covered before Colloff began her research. The case itself was harrowing: Overton was accused of poisoning her adopted, troubled child by force-feeding him Zatarain's seasoning. She had already been convicted of capital murder and sentenced to life in prison, in part due to the media and prosecution's portrayal of her as a cold, heartless child abuser. However, Colloff remarks that during the course of her own research, "the picture that emerged of Hannah was so radically at odds with the picture of her that had been presented at trial that I started thinking about that as a theme of the story. She was either an angel or a monster, and nothing in between" (28). The story that results not only forces readers to change their perception of the case, but also to consider the terrifying power of reductive characterizations such as "good" and "evil."

In another example, Wil S. Hylton's "The Unspeakable Choice" covers the astounding number of children abandoned shortly after the passage of Nebraska's safe-haven law. Hylton began his research with trepidation, wondering what responsible story could result from such tragic circumstances. He recalls asking himself, "Beyond the sordid tale of negligence and trauma, did the episode reveal anything larger?" (127). His exhaustive research and reporting did indeed reveal something larger, that the passage of a safe-haven law with no age limit provided an opportunity for desperate parents from across the country to guarantee medical care for their children that they could not provide themselves. Instead of portraying such parents as irresponsible and cruel—as the media, lawmakers, and politicians have done—Hylton puts a human face on the issue through his sympathetic portrait of an exasperated and desperate mother who chooses to give up her child to the state. Ultimately, he reveals a hidden story of how state institutions are failing to cope adequately with mental illness and are unfairly placing the blame on struggling parents.

These are only two examples among many. The collection abounds with stories that critically examine the nature of truth-telling today. Harrington and Sager remark on this key feature of literary journalism: "In a world where it seems everybody has a strong opinion about everything, these stories remind us to be humble about what we think we know. They illustrate how literary journalism can unlock the inner workings of human experience in ways that traditional news, investigative and feature journalism can't" (xv).

Besides being excellent reading for nonfiction enthusiasts, *Next Wave* will undoubtedly serve as a resource for students, teachers, and practitioners of literary journalism. The collection offers several supplements that aid in the reader's appreciation of the process behind each of the stories included. Among these are a list of notable young literary journalists and "Walt Harrington's Selected Readings," a guide for students or teachers who would like to read more broadly among contemporary and historical examples of literary journalism. Perhaps the most enlightening feature of the collection is the inclusion of a short personal essay, entitled Author's Afterword, from each of the contributors. These essays describe the authors' approach to the topic, their own experiences writing the pieces, and other challenges unique to each story. Through this feature, research methods are illuminated that might be obscured in the final products.

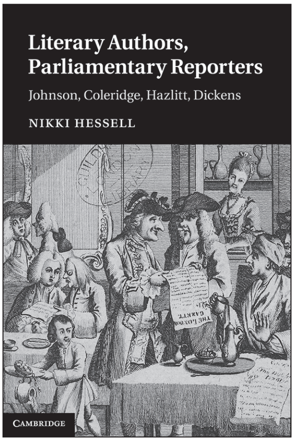
As the editors are heartened to hear, most of the personal essays emphasize good old-fashioned journalistic practice: getting to know the sources; spending time immersed in the field; and devoting hours to perfecting prose and searching for the ideal narrative structure. This goes to show, once again, that the tradition of literary journalism is still strong. This emphasis leads to my one major quibble with the book, however: while the collection vigorously refutes the idea that engaged, stylistically masterful nonfiction storytelling is no longer relevant in today's society, it does not particularly address the ways in which literary journalism *has* changed in the last two decades. Besides being under the age of forty, there is little that explicitly distinguishes these writers from those preceding them. Perhaps too much energy is being expended on making sure the form persists to allow the editors to reflect critically on the capacity for change, growth, and experimentation within the genre. While this collection is valuable in that it offers material that fits squarely into the established genre of literary journalism, this lack of historical awareness of generic change keeps publication of this book from being a field-defining event.

As the editors note in the introduction, this text is available primarily as an eBook with paperback editions printed on demand. In this reviewer's copy there are repeated typographical errors in the introduction and final piece, which unfortunately mar an otherwise excellent collection. Nonetheless, it will prove to be of great interest to fans of good literary journalism, and an invaluable resource to students of the form.

Doing Time in the Gallery: The Parliamentary Reporting Careers of Four Great English Writers

Literary Authors, Parliamentary Reporters: Johnson, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Dickens
By Nikki Hessell. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Hardcover, 195 pp., $90.

Reviewed by John Tulloch, University of Lincoln, England, U.K.


Literary Authors, Parliamentary Reporters
Johnson, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Dickens
NIKKI HESSELL
CAMBRIDGE

The struggle to win the right to report the doings of the secretive and corrupt parliaments of Georgian England is one of the grand narratives of Whig history and crucial in the emancipation of the English press and the construction of the Georgian and early Victorian public sphere.

Secrecy and corruption of course largely *was* the system. It was only in the mid-seventeenth century that the first attempts were made to report parliamentary news. But the publication of anything that was said in parliament was a breach of privilege and remained so for most of the eighteenth century. Despite the growth of a lively and scurrilous London morning press, in the eyes of most Georgian MPs the public had no inherent right to know what they were up to. Rather than representatives, they saw themselves as the entitled placemen and hangers-on of various aristocratic factions, lovingly delineated by that great historian of the system, Sir Lewis Namier.[1] Editors and printers were routinely fined and jailed for publishing unofficial accounts, and newspapers were forced to resort to a variety of methods, such as reporting the proceedings of fictionalized assemblies. As an official account tells us: "One of the most famous was the Report of the Senate of Lilliputia, which appeared in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, edited for some years by Samuel Johnson."[2]

Nikki Hessell's extraordinarily interesting study bridges a period of seventy years from the 1760s to the 1830s during which parliamentary reporting moves from the disguised reporting of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, to the advent of morning newspaper accounts which aspired to a more complete and accurate reflection of what was actually said, in some cases based on shorthand. Her study focuses on four of the most celebrated men of letters and creative writers in English literature: Johnson, Coleridge, Hazlitt and Dickens.

By analyzing that most taken-for-granted form of journalistic work—the recording of the diurnal chatter of an assembly—she both raises the status of the reporter from that of humble hack to creative interpreter of actuality and undertakes a penetrating scrutiny of that most taken-for-granted journalistic value, accuracy.

Johnson was involved with the *Gentleman's Magazine* for six years in the early 1740s, although he apparently only attended one debate. Coleridge reported for the London *Morning Post* in 1800. Hazlitt reported for another London daily, the *Morning Chronicle,* from 1812–1813. Most famously, Dickens began as a shorthand reporter for the *Mirror of Parliament* in 1831 and worked in the gallery until 1836. [3]

Unsurprisingly, Hessell finds that biographies of all four writers tend to dismiss the parliamentary reporting phase of their careers as a mere "interlude" in their path to fame, only interesting for what it reveals of the nascent creative writer struggling to emerge. She is determined to rescue their journalism not only from the condescension of posterity but its ignorance. "It is easy to overlook the degree to which these literary writers operated as *highly successful journalists*, not frustrated novelists, poets and literary essayists, during their time in the gallery." [4]

Taking the journalism seriously involves placing it within its proper context, using as a point of comparison the work of other reporters. It also involves understanding the way in which their authorial voice as a journalist is submerged in the work of a journalistic team, the reverse of romantic concepts of authorial exceptionalism—not the "egotistical sublime" that Keats criticized in Wordsworth's poetry, but what Hessell playfully terms "the collaborative sublime," which is "a state in which a writer needs to both relinquish originality and idiosyncrasy in the interests of a collective authorial voice and bring something distinctive to the collaboration."[5]

Hessell outlines the interaction between fact and fiction in the construction of Johnson's reports—"actual speeches transformed to notes changed to stories taken for the fact by the original speakers and the author who thought he knew they were fictions."[6] This malleability was a characteristic of early eighteenth-century print. But what did the actual readers expect? Hessell suggests "they both desired accuracy *and* were doubtful about its likelihood."[7]

Hessell compares coverage in the *Gentleman's Magazine* with its rival *London Magazine*—notably the celebrated speech by Sir Robert Walpole of 1741 in response to a motion to remove him from office[8]—often cited as Johnson's finest piece of parliamentary reporting.

Although the debate was a passionate one, Johnson's rendering of Walpole at bay is strikingly dignified and restrained, employing a balanced Augustan rhetoric in which the symmetry of the clausal structure stands for a statesmanlike poise:

> Having now heard the charge against me with all the Aggravations which suspicion has been able to form; and Eloquence to inforce; after the most fruitful inventions have combined to multiply Crimes against me, and the most artful Rhetorick has been employed to blacken them, I stand up to offer to the House a plain unstudy'd defence. . . . [9]

Hessell accepts that this account is substantially fictional, and certainly lends Walpole a suave Ciceronian grace that he is unlikely to have possessed. But she argues that it fitted in well with the house style established by the *Gentleman's Magazine*:

> Legal constraints and the absence of effective techniques for capturing parliamentarians' words made it inevitable than parts of the magazines' coverage would be

> invented, no matter who was reporting. Fictionalization, however, or the addition of aesthetic flourishes where none had existed in the original speeches, needs to be understood as a journalistic technique; that is, as a journalistic technique as opposed to a literary technique. . . .[10]

Parliamentary reporting remained controversial throughout the eighteenth century. In December 1798 it was described by no less than the Secretary at War as "evil in its nature . . . inflammatory information . . . [which] kindled . . . heat among the lower classes."[11] Journalists were not allowed to take notes until the 1780s and had no guaranteed access to the Strangers' gallery. Frequently forced to rely on memory, they could be turfed out at the instigation of any MP. [12]

Coleridge joined the parliamentary reporting team of the London *Morning Post* in January 1800. Among other reports, Hessell examines his rendering of William Pitt's celebrated speech of 17 February 1800 on the object of the war with France. She claims Coleridge himself said in a letter: "I reported the whole with notes so scanty, that—Mr Pitt is much obliged to me. For by heaven he never talked half as eloquently in his Life-time. He is a *stupid insipid* Charlatan, that *Pitt.*"[13]

Why did Coleridge want to make Pitt speak so eloquently? The answer, Hessell reckons, is Coleridge's "journalistic vision." His version matched the newspaper's politics and provided a "springboard" for his other writing on Pitt in the paper, including a brilliant sketch which later drew on the speech to illustrate Pitt's mental limitations: "Press him to specify an individual face of advantage to be derived from a war—and he answerd, SECURITY! Call upon him to particularise a crime, and he exclaims—JACOBINISM!"[14]

This is a fascinating book, which compresses an admirable weight of scholarship and close, analytical reading into a small space to illuminate large issues. What constitutes an accurate account of a speech or a debate or indeed any event? And what is the relationship between accuracy and truth? That quirky, rowdy, noisy, undisciplined, drunken, corrupt and occasionally mutinous male club would always have been a nightmare to report accurately. Think of the hours! Shudder at the company! A major issue—as now—was actually being able to *hear* what people had said, and to *see* who had said it, let alone render a plausible account. Add to that the restrictions imposed by parliament to prevent or severely control reporting, in the interests of keeping the lower orders in their place, and it is extraordinary how much emerged, whatever its reliability.

Hessell expands her theme from the intriguing *minutiae* of the journalism of her four subjects, to query the whole basis of the nature of accuracy claims, and to explore the balance that journalism must needs strike between the mere Gradgrindian transcription of basic verifiable facts, quotes, etc., and the evocation of states of mind, human emotion, atmosphere, and perception that can creatively animate stories. Essential reading!

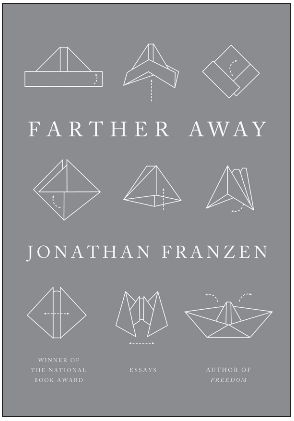
NOTES

1. Sir Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George II*, London: Macmillan,1929; Sir Lewis Namier, *England in The Age of the American Revolution*, London: Macmillan, 1930.
2. Hansard (2012*) Story of Hansard*, http://www.hansard-westminster.co.uk/story.asp accessed 23 September 2012.
3. Hessell, ix.
4. Ibid., xi; my italics.
5. Ibid., 15.
6. Alvin Kernan, *Samuel Johnson and the Impact of Print*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989, 163, quoted by Hessell, 23.
7. Ibid., my italics.
8. Ibid., 50–57.
9. Ibid., 55.
10. Ibid., 57–58.
11. Ibid., 65.
12. Ibid., 66.
13. Ibid., 89.
14. Ibid., 91.

On an Island with Franzen the Birder

Farther Away
by Jonathan Franzen. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. Hardcover, 321 pp, $26.

Reviewed by Mark Neuzil, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, U.S.A.



Jonathan Franzen is a wonderful writer with a well-imagined grasp of how a good story fits together. Most famous for his four novels, including 2001's *The Corrections* (a National Book Award winner), Franzen has also written a memoir, a translation of Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, and two collections of essays. Franzen's second collection, *Farther Away* (2012), is what concerns us here.

Eight of the twenty-one chapters in *Farther Away* are, in a broad sense, reviews of authors or their works; four others are speeches, including a eulogy for his friend David Foster Wallace, and a half dozen more are short essays.

The remaining three stories in *Farther Away*, including the title piece, have Franzen committing journalism. The deft architecture evident in his novels can be seen in his stories, and carrying those techniques over from fiction to nonfiction serves to make the case that these chapters can be considered literary journalism.

Franzen is an avid birder, and the reporting he does includes stories on the status of avian species in the Mediterranean and China as he immerses himself in adventures in those locales. But the best story of the trio is the first, in which he gets dropped on a rugged Pacific island, 500 miles off the coast of Chile. The locals call it Masafuera ("Farther Away"), and it has inhabitants only during the fishing season.

Franzen is attempting an escape—pressures from the "nonstop" promotion of a novel, the suicide of Wallace, general boredom—to the same island used as a model by Daniel Defoe for *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719. Part of his task while on Masafuera is to scatter some ashes of Wallace at the request of his widow. This circumstance, plus the Defoe connection, is combined with Franzen's search for a particular rare bird, the Masafuero rayadito, to form a literary plot line that drives the story. When the weather turns dirty, his adventure intensifies along a treacherous mountain ridge:

> Although I was very determined to see the rayadito, there came a moment when I was afraid to take another step, and I was suddenly able to see myself: spread-eagled against a slippery rock face, in blinding rain and ferocious wind, with no assurance that I was going in the right direction. A sentence so clear that it seemed almost spoken popped into my head: *What you're doing is extremely dangerous.* And I thought of my dead friend (37).

Crusoe was alone on the island for years; Franzen for a few days, and that was enough. When Crusoe sees a footprint on "his" land after fifteen years of solitude, he struggles, rather than rejoices. "[A]ll it takes is one footprint of another real person to recall to us the endlessly interesting hazards of living relationships," Franzen writes (52).

In "The Ugly Mediterranean," the poaching of songbirds in Cyprus and nearby is the focus of the text. Immersion journalism amid lawbreakers is a hardy perennial of literary journalists, and although the illegal shooting or netting a three-ounce bird might not seem like the standard seamy underbelly of society, it makes for a good tale. My favorite scene is when Franzen and two companions are served twelve small birds in a discreet private dining room, the breast meat of which "looked like a dozen little gleaming yellowish-gray turds. 'You're the first American I've ever served,' the proprietor said" (105).

In "The Chinese Puffin," Franzen uses a Christmas present of a golf club head cover (the puffin) as the excuse to visit China, where it was made, and spend time with the fledgling Chinese bird-watching community and the factory. It doesn't have the suspense of a deserted island or Italian poachers, but readers are rewarded with a story that they probably did not know they were interested in, on birders in China.

Franzen was famously called by *Time* magazine the Great American Novelist on its cover; his tiff (since healed) with Oprah Winfrey and her book club made headlines in 2001, as well. As a leading twenty-first-century American writer, Franzen's life and these stories would be fruitful ground for classroom use.

An in-depth look . . .

Legacies of Literary Style in Music Journalism

By Todd Schack, Ithaca College, U.S.A.

The recent publication of two works of literary journalism about music, Will Hermes's Love Goes to Buildings on Fire *and John Swenson's* New Atlantis*, provides an excellent reminder that there is a rich literary journalistic heritage—especially since the 1960s—of writing about music. In the following essay, Todd Schack examines the hallmarks of style to which these recent authors are indebted.*

Works Discussed

Bangs, Lester. *Mainlines, Blood Feasts, and Bad Taste: A Lester Bangs Reader*. Edited by John Morthland. New York: Anchor Books, 2003.

Bangs, Lester. *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*. Edited by Greil Marcus. New York: Anchor Books, 1988.

Costello, Elvis. *"A Man out of Time Beats the Clock." Musician, October 1983, 52.*

Hermes, Will. *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire: Five Years in New York That Changed Music Forever*. New York: Faber & Faber, 2011.

Kent, Nick. *The Dark Stuff: Selected Writings on Rock Music*. Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2002.

Meltzer, Richard. *A Whore Just Like the Rest*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000.

Tosches, Nick. *Hellfire: The Jerry Lee Lewis Story*. New York: Grove Press, 1982.

Swenson, John. *New Atlantis: Musicians Battle for the Survival of New Orleans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

With the publication of two recent books, both of which are meticulously researched, highly entertaining, well-written romps through the music scenes of two different cities in two different eras, the jaded platitude that "music journalism is dead" is betrayed as either premature or dead wrong. With Will Hermes's *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire: Five Years in New York That Changed Music Forever*, and John Swenson's *New Atlantis: Musicians Battle for the Survival of New Orleans*, we have the opportunity to examine what music journalism does best: it provides a context for, and as such a historical understanding of, what music means to us culturally, socially, and politically. And when it is done well, using the stylistic devices and writing techniques of the best of *literary* music journalism, it does so with an importance and an immediacy that situates music as a cultural endeavor that matters vitally.

Both Hermes and Swenson are carrying on a tradition of music journalism that was born at the same time as the New Journalism moment of the 1960s, and to which it bears some striking similarities. Certainly, the traditional literary devices, such as scenes, dialogue, status details, and immersive reporting are present in most, if not all of what we consider the best of music writing, from the likes of Richard Meltzer, Lester Bangs, Nick Kent, Greil Marcus, and Nick Tosches. But in their best work, music writers also carry on literary traditions that go beyond Tom Wolfe's checklist of devices, many of which I am here calling the *legacies of literary style* in music journalism: 1) a first-person, even Gonzo-style point of view that establishes both the writer and the reader in the moment, as well as authority of voice; 2) writing that makes the reader "hear" or "feel" the music—a form of synesthesia, and the most difficult to pull off; and 3) writing that makes the music make sense: it situates the moment (the band, the gig, the song) culturally, socially, historically—and helps create the "rock mythologies" that will come to define a certain moment in time.

I. The Music Journalism Perspective

For music journalists aspiring towards the literary, the use of first-person voice is essential. Since the writer is relegated to the sidelines anyway, the general rule of thumb is to make his or her stance on those sidelines as interesting as possible. Hence, the similarity with Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo style—that is, if they can't *be* the music, at least they could *be there*, and that presence became a focal point.[1]

Of course, in the early days of magazines such as *Rolling Stone, Creem* and *New Musical Express*, the writing was as much about living the rock 'n' roll lifestyle as it was about the music. The pioneers of rock journalism went to extraordinary lengths of Thompson-esque excess, all of which bought them a sort of street credibility—both with readers, and more importantly, with the aristocrats of rock themselves. Most famous along these lines were Richard Meltzer and Lester Bangs.

Meltzer, who arguably was the first great rock journalist, certainly argues as much himself: "Before Lester Bangs was, I am (and he's dead). Which, heck, I dangle as neither credit nor debit—just my way of saying hi" (3), shows exactly this sort of living-the-life example in a piece entitled "Rock-Crit Blood 'n' Guts:

I was always a fucking zealot. The giddiest smartass to hold the banner high. This is among *writers* we're talking; the rock-roll flag of whatever. (Something to do with the night.) We'd all be at this party, for inst, for the fabulozoolous Rolling Stones at some fussy French—or was it Italian?—New York eatery. After '72 at the Garden. There's this huge fountain, *indoors*, this incredible fountain—so who's gonna JUMP in the thing? I look around, I don't see no candidates, Mick's asleep face-down on a table. So it's gotta be me—*got* to, right? 'Cause if not, if the option's so clear and *nobody* does it, rock-roll as we um uh know it will um uh *perish*, y'know? . . . that sort of trip. So I jump and they give me the boot, a big security jerk on each arm . . . you get the idea: I once really, truly *gave a shit*; I cared religiously (3).

Which is to say he was more than willing to make himself the story in order to have a story, a very Gonzo thing to do. In this, his archrival was beyond question the incorrigible Lester Bangs. In perhaps one of the most famous interviews of all time, the hilariously titled "Let Us Now Praise Famous Death Dwarves," Bangs does not so much interview Lou Reed as uses him as sounding board for Bangs's own neurotic ideas and to showcase his writing acrobatics:

> I decided to change my tack again. "Lou, we're gonna have to do it straight. I'll take off my sunglasses if you'll take off yours. " He did. I did. Focus in on shriveled body sprawled on the bed facing me . . . Lou's sallow skin almost as whitish yellow as his hair, whole face and frame so transcendently emaciated he had indeed become insectival. His eyes were rusty, like two copper coins lying in desert sands under the sun all day . . . Anyway, I was ready to ask my Big Question, the one I'd pondered over for months . . . . (2003a, 178)

Suffice it to say, the "Big Question" was more about Bangs than it was about Reed: "'Do you ever resent people for the way that you have lived out what they might think of as the dark side of their lives for them, vicariously, in your music or your life?' He didn't seem to have the slightest idea what I was talking about, shook his head" (178). This was what made Bangs so great: he was able to make the audience care more about his own rock 'n' roll writer persona than those of the famous rock 'n' rollers that he interviewed. Borrowing from this tradition (and here I refer more to the use of first-person point of view than the rock persona guise), both Will Hermes and John Swenson establish their voice and their authority in similar fashion.

For Swenson, who is chronicling the musical, social, and political events of New Orleans leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina, this first-person perspective takes on another layer of significance: Swenson, a long-time resident, was himself one of the displaced victims. As a beat writer covering the music scene for years, he knew scores of people who either left, stayed, returned, failed to return, or died, and he himself lived through the best and the worst that New Orleans saw of the storm and our nation's bungled response to it. Certainly this establishes his voice as authoritative, and makes his story intertwine in a significant way with those of the musicians whose stories he tells:

> The ride into the city was my first view of the miles of total devastation, my first taste of the oily, dusty death smell that pervaded New Orleans. I got off at the Elysian Fields exit of I-10 on the way into the Ninth Ward, where the destruction was total—awesome in some unimaginable way, familiar streets lined with gap-toothed skulls of ruined houses, mile after mile . . . Wind had removed a sizable portion of the roof on my Piety Street home and part of the side of the house. As a result rainwater had gotten in, bringing mold and ruin from above, but at least the house didn't need to be gutted. (16)

Thus he immediately shares the same dire situation as those he writes about, and solidifies his position as the right person to tell this story, as well as endearing his persona to the reader.

Will Hermes, who writes about the New York music scene in the early 1970s, employs a different tactic. He admits he was a "bridge-and-tunnel" teenager living in

Queens in the mid-seventies, and thus did not actually witness all of the iconic music moments "in the City" during his teen years. Instead, he utilizes his own "impressionable youth" perspective to signal a more important factor than being in-the-same-room with Patti Smith, or the New York Dolls, or whoever was playing that night in Manhattan. He is able to signal what the music meant—what it meant to him, an impressionable youth, and by proxy, to every adolescent who was at that moment in time dying to get out of the suburbs and into the city, where all the action was. Music was what gave that longing a voice:

> My greatest obsession remained music. I couldn't wait for new records to turn up at my local music store. I would check the ads in the Long Island press, strap on my army-navy store backpack, jump on my ten-speed racer, and ride the four miles to Korvettes in Douglaston to survey the latest titles and the cutouts, pop history shrink-wrapped at 99 cents a throw. (95)

Here Hermes casts himself as not only the record buying target audience (and thus raison d'être for the entire industry), but also establishes his voice as authoritative, one that was living the musical moment vicariously, if not in the flesh. Yet he was also able to steal his own moments, as he did what so many teenagers do: sneak out from under the protective yoke of mom and dad, and head to the city:

> Around this time, at the urging of a friend, I took the E train into the city to see Television at CBGB. My fake ID couldn't get me into the Bottom Line (to see Springsteen), but the handsome dark-haired woman at the door of CBGB barely looked at it. I wore a loud polyester-print Huk-A-Poo dress shirt, thinking it made me look older than fourteen. Too timid to attempt buying a beer, I found a place to stand near the side of the stage. The music was intense and dazzling. I recall Verlaine's hands, which seemed freakishly huge, like spiders. And I remember "Little Johnny Jewel," which seemed to go on forever. (147)

It is this perspective, one of a teenager to whom music is a matter of life and, if not death then at least suburban ennui, that we as readers can so readily identify: everybody knows that anxious feeling of youth that something is happening—some vital band is playing that you must see—somewhere, anywhere but here, and if you could just sneak out and get to the city to find it, you will be rewarded. It is this that Hermes taps into, establishing his voice as the right one to lead us on this ride through New York's glittering seventies.

II: Making Words Read Like Music

For music journalists, the special challenge has always been the representation of the musical performance in written prose. This is most likely the reason Elvis Costello, pace Martin Mull, famously quipped in an interview that: "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture . . . it's really a stupid thing to do" (1983, 52). By far the most difficult aspect to pull off is to make the readers actually feel the music, and when it is done properly with literary style, the writer strikes a delicate fine point, using a sort of synesthetic detailing with descriptive language, making us "hear" the music through words.

This is where it becomes possible to tell who the best writers of the genre are, due to both musical acumen, the knowledge of what the musician is doing on stage or on record, and the command of language, the ability to translate sound to printed word. Certainly the standard was set with the likes of Bangs, et al., as their collective ability to spot musicians' craft and turn that into art on the page was what set them apart. For example, when Bangs reviewed Nico's *The Marble Index*, which he called "the greatest piece of avant-garde classical serious music of the last half of the twentieth century so far," he wrote of the song "Frozen Warnings":

> Through a pale morning's arctic sunlight glinting dimly off the snow, a bank of violas emits one endless shrill note which eventually becomes electronically distorted by points of ice panning back and forth through the space between your ears, descending and then impossibly ascending in volume and ineluctable intensity until they're almost unbearable though infinitely graceful in their beauty; at length they wind off into the skies trailing away like wisps of fading beams. (2003b, 212)

Or Nick Kent, describing the way Iggy Pop and his band The Stooges play when at their best:

They were hell-bent on taking a time capsule right back to the darkest ages of music they could hope to sink into, back to that dim time when the world was one big, pulsating swamp which shook with the terrible thunderous rhythms of nature's raw elemental power. To this end they beat out this muddy, brutal, ecstatic music that grabbed anyone in its path roughly by the scruff of the neck and hurled them headlong onto the very wilderness of the senses that lies stretched out just beyond man's deepest primordial fears. For some, like myself, being exposed to music this raw and alive had a profoundly liberating effect. (245)

Sometimes, however, it's not the music itself that is the most important, but the atmosphere of place, or the demeanor of the artist, that tells us the most about the musical moment. For instance, in the following passage Nick Tosches captures the spirit, dark as it is, of Jerry Lee Lewis:

> He was the Killer and he was immortal—damned to be, for as long as there were good and evil to be torn between in agony. He would sit backstage in a thousand dank nightclubs, and he would know this, and he would swallow more pills and wash them down with three fingers more of whiskey, and he would know it even more. He would walk like a man to the stage, with his Churchill in one hand and his water glass of whiskey in the other, and he would pound the piano and sing his sinful songs, and he would beckon those before him, mortals, made not as he to destruction from the womb; he would beckon them to come, to stand with him awhile at the brink of Hell. Then he would be gone into the ancient night, to more pills and more whiskey, to where the black dogs never ceased barking and dawn never broke; he would go there. (188–89)

Both Hermes and Swenson tap into this descriptive language as well, and situate the music in similar fashion. In the following passage Swenson describes a quintessential New Orleans moment in the first post-Katrina Mardi Gras, one that few thought could have transpired amidst the devastation:

> The angry funk rocker "Rat a Tang Tang" was originally written about punishing someone . . . but in this instance it sounded like a musical curse on Katrina. Os-

> borne began chanting, "Indians, here dey come!" and Boudreaux approached the microphone. Sousaphone player Kirk Joseph stepped up and began honking away an accompaniment to the groove. Monk . . . picked up the chant and, with Jellybean rolling a second-line drum rhythm, the moment was pure New Orleans, a mixed group of black and white musicians hammering out a monster beat that had everybody in the place moving. . . . "Mardi Gras morning, well, here it come," Monk bellowed . . . the lines, repeated over and over with variations—took on a magical vibe as Monk transformed into the shaman, an elemental force that seemed to invoke the furious storm itself . . . Osborne's guitar line soared, the music took wing, and just as it hit another peak, the power went out again. (54-–55)

Swenson's descriptions are able to capture the moment, placing the reader in the room to not only feel the music with descriptors such as "a musical curse," chanting, honking, hammering, bellowed, but he is also able to translate that moment and make us know what it meant to be there, in that room, on that day, a "magical vibe," with Monk the "shaman, an elemental force," who would later say of the power failure: "I don't need no 'lectricity once the spirit takes hold." This moment, as Swenson writes, was "pure New Orleans." It takes a special writer to capture that, and Swenson manages to do so throughout the book.

Hermes, although his main goal is likewise sociocultural, manages to get that aspect across within a tight description of the music itself. Here he describes why "Piss Factory," the Patti Smith song, "is for the ages":

> Beginning quietly with [Richard] Sohl's simple chords and [Lenny] Kaye's alternately slithering and strutting lead, the men build a five-minute jam-vamp under Smith's prose-poetry, which dances to the music without clinging to it. She begins her story about working for thirty-six dollars a week in a sweatshop with women who threaten to beat her up for doing her piece-work too fast . . . Then she's yanked back to the foul workaday scent. . . . Smith is about to faint from the heat, but she fights it, Kaye's circling electric-guitar notes and Sohl's piano runs, part Debussy and part Jerry Lee Lewis, pulsing like the blood in her temples, lifting the song higher. Finally Smith decides to flee. She's naked now, confessing desire that's absurd, desperate, deeply true, exploded in flames. "I'm gonna get on that train and go to New York City," she sings as the song hits its peak, declaring her intent to be famous, to be a star, to never return. And the music keeps circling like wind in the aftermath of a storm, scattering ashes and debris. (88–89)

III: Making the Music Make Sense

But the most important element of music journalism, the one that makes the entire genre culturally relevant, is the ability of the journalist to make the music make sense. That is, how they situate the artist and his or her time, how they are able to know before anyone else does the importance—politically, socially, culturally—of a music movement, or a particular band, or singer, or performance. For instance, Bangs writes the following passage shortly after witnessing for the first time The Clash perform in England. He is back at their hotel, and duly amazed at how well they treat their fans—not patronizing, not bored or jaded, but truly interested in what they have to say. Bangs speaks for them, for their entire generation, and for all their desires, political or otherwise:

> The politics of rock 'n' roll, in England or America or anywhere else, is that a whole lot of kids want to be fried out of their skins by the most scalding propulsion they can find, for a night they can pretend is the rest of their lives, and whether the next day they go back to work in shops or boredom on the dole or American TV doldrums in Mom 'n' Daddy's living room nothing can cancel the reality of that night in the revivifying flames when for once if only then in your life you were blasted outside of yourself and the monotony which defines most life anywhere at any time, when you supped on lightning and nothing else in the realms of the living or dead mattered at all. (2003a, 239)

Here Bangs is writing directly for a young Will Hermes, who admits that at that moment he was living those "American TV doldrums": "Like millions of others . . . I spent Saturday nights watching CBS: *All in the Family* at 8:00pm, *The Jeffersons* at 8:30, *Mary Tyler Moore* at 9:00, *Bob Newhart* at 9:30, *Carol Burnett* at 10:00" (107). But what's more important is that feeling, penned by Bangs, that music meant that at least for one moment you could step outside yourself and "sup on lightening," an explosive feeling of absolute freedom and youth. Kent also writes of this feeling, as he watched the New York Dolls:

> The music is raw and alive, played with reckless abandon until it becomes a joyous celebration of the whole "be young, be foolish, be happy" school of thought. Believe me, the records don't even begin to capture the special magic of the Dolls on a good night playing in a pissy little club to their elite little crowd of mascara-daubed misfits and vagrant vamps. Misty glitzy memories of the way we were. So cute. So vital. So star-crossed. (165–66)

Hermes was exactly that person, that young, foolish, happy person to whom the music mattered vitally. Writing about what Smith's debut album *Horses* and Springsteen's breakthrough record *Born to Run* meant to him and all the star-crossed youth of the time, he maintains:

> At core, both were telling stories of escape, from narrow hometowns and narrow conceptions of life's possibilities. And for both, escape equaled New York City, because if you grow up in Jersey or the Outer Boroughs—or other states or even nations beyond—New York was where you ran away to, the place real life was. (145–46)

For Swenson, the main aim is indeed the sociopolitical importance of music, and the dire role it played in bringing the city back from the brink:

> Much of the New Orleans we knew was dead and gone. The city had lost an essential part of its identity. The social clubs and neighborhood joints of African American enclaves like Treme, Mid-City, Gentilly, and the lower Ninth Ward, which nurtured the culture of street parades, brass bands, and the magnificence of the Mardi Gras Indians were gone, along with the departed residents of those ghost-town neighborhoods. Few believed that the intricate family-based institutions that had been built over the span of numerous generations would reassemble in force. (17)

Yet over the course of the book, Swenson details exactly this happening: how music became the catalyst that allowed those who returned to build again, to reassemble those "intricate family-based institutions," using the bonding material of music to recover that lost identity. Then, towards the end, and just when New Orleans seemed to be doing better both physically and spiritually (the New Orleans Saints had just won the 2010 Super Bowl, giving the city a joy-filled shot in the arm), the British Petroleum oil spill occurs. Swenson, turning inwards, writes: "As I drifted off to sleep, thinking of those now gone but still in our memories, I wondered . . . how many more Jazz Fests will take place? I thought about the oil spill, awed by its enormity, and wondered whether New Orleans would survive another summer. . . ." (264). At this point in the book, the reader is struck wondering whether all that had come before—all that the musicians of New Orleans had done for the city and its people—was for naught. But then Swenson breaks this spell: "Once again it was the musicians who best articulated the sense of loss people were experiencing and spoke out on behalf of the victims of this tragedy." (265)

Ultimately, these two books are about more than chronicling a music scene across the span of a few years in two different cities: they are sociopolitical cross-sections, detailing the ways in which music has a fundamental ability to draw people together, especially in hard times. New York in the seventies was ugly, dirty, and dangerous. But if you were punk, gay, Latino, or African American, you could not only find a home in that city's music scenes, you could be a part of something vital. Likewise, New Orleans post-Katrina is likened to the point of cliché as being a war-zone. But if you lived in Treme, Gentilly, the Ninth Ward, or other flood-ravaged sections of the Big Easy, according to Swenson, you were also witness to the rebirth of a spirit of a city the rest of the country had left for dead. And it was the music—always the music—through which that spirit manifested. This is one reason why music is, and always has been, so important. It is also a reason why music journalism is so crucial to our culture. And when the best of it is written squarely within the legacies of style of literary journalism, it creates those music mythologies that we will tell ourselves about ourselves for many generations.

NOTES

1. It is interesting to note here the safe assumption that most music journalists would rather be creating music themselves than writing about it. Case in point: Meltzer, Bangs, Kent, and Tosches all tried—and failed, at least critically and commercially— to create their own bands.