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REAL LIFE ROCK TOP TEN

A MONTHLY COLUMN

by Greil Marcus

(1) I'm Not Jim, *You Are All My People* (Bloodshot). A songwriting collaboration between the novelist Jonathan Lethem and Walter Salas-Humara, singer-guitarist for the Gainesville, Florida, band the Silos—and from the first track you're somewhere utterly familiar where nothing quite fits. "Mr. October" is the title, but you might have to listen a long time before you catch Reggie Jackson flashing across the TV screen in the bar, just as the singer (Salas-Humara, as on every number) is having trouble putting the bits of memory the tune assembles together. Hangover music—*Did that really happen?*—but the first reason you might miss Mr. October is that the melody, running down descending lines on the guitar, breaking up as the lyrics aim for the last line of a verse, is almost too sweet to bear. It carries regret for the fact that neither you nor the singer can come away from this song with any certainty. Did the singer ever see any of the people he's singing about again?

The half-light of "Mr. October" is filtered through everything that follows: the noir one-liners in "Missing Persons" ("a bum tries to sell you his hat"), catchy bubble gum ("Amanda Morning"), a depressed ballad that would have fit in Lethem's *Men and Cartoons* if baseball cards count as cartoons ("The Pitchers Gave Up"), and, maybe with more sticking power than anything else, three shaggy dog stories, spoken-word pieces that could have come off of a 1950s beat comedy LP by Ken Nordine, one of which actually features a dog. A man with a talking dog walks into a bar, where the old routine immediately shatters. The guy telling the story keeps a level head, but he can't keep the story straight. The bartender's comebacks don't fit the lines he's handed. It's a *Twilight Zone* episode that can't find its way out of the first act. "I've been in every bar in every joke in this country," the guy says, as if he deserves to know how all this comes out as much as you do.

(2) Robert Altman, *Santana, Altamont Speedway, Livermore, CA, December 1969,* in *The Sixties* (Santa Monica Press). Everyone knows Carlos Santana's the-pain-of-the-universe-is-in-my-fingers grimace, and this is one of the best shots ever made of the guitar god hitting that note. Except that he's playing maracas, which kind of takes the edge off.

(3) Miranda Lambert, "Famous in a Small Town," from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (Sony). From last year, not the hit, still floating around the country stations, an expert number about truth, lies, and gossip: "Everybody dies famous in a small town," and, even in your grave, you'll never hear the end of it. "We heard he was caught red-handed with her mama," Lambert sings querulously. "So that's just what they let us all believe." You mean that with-her-mother story was a cover-up? For *what*?

(4) Rolling Stones, "Gimme Shelter," in "The Dark Defender," on *Dexter,* season two (Showtime). Dexter walks into a bar… to find the bartender who killed his mother with a chain saw thirty-four years before, in front of him, when he was three. Slow motion, tilted image, with a red filter, and as Michael C. Hall opens the door, the song comes up on the jukebox; at the end of the long lead-in, when the last guitar note breaks over the rest of the music, he sits down at the bar. The music moves on. The suspense that is generated is the suspense the piece has gathered to itself over all these years, never sounding like the past, still sounding like the future.

(5) James Lee Burke, *The Tin Roof Blowdown* (Simon & Schuster). The ten-minute egg: Detective Dave Robicheaux and his boss, Sheriff Helen Soileau, approach Detective Lamar Fuselier at a crime scene: a hut holding the rotting bodies of two men shot to pieces. ("Their viscera was exposed, their facial features hardly recognizable. Their brain matter was splattered all over one

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wall. Both men wore sports coats, silk shirts, and expensive Italian shoes with tassels on them.") Fuselier throws tough-guy repartee at Robicheaux, who once saw him cheating on a police exam. "'Mind if we take a look?' Helen said. 'Be my guest,' he said, finally taking notice of her. His eyes traveled up and down her person. 'We got barf bags in the cruiser if you need one.' 'Give it to your wife,' she said."

(6) Bob Dylan, "32-20 Blues," from *Tell Tale Signs: The Bootleg Series No. 8* (Sony). Robert Johnson recorded it in 1936, Bob Dylan in 1993 for his *World Gone Wrong,* lines from it traveled the South through the first decades of the twentieth century before turning up in 1956 in the Crickets' "Midnight Shift"—and here, on a three-CD set made up mostly of footnotes to official releases from the last twenty years, it breaks the pace. The dominant tone of the thirty-nine performances is reflective; this is a search for a groove. The syncopation Dylan finds on acoustic guitar at first lags behind his singing; before he's a third through, the fluttery beat has made room for the voice to slide right off the lines, until you can follow the last words of verses ("none"—"nuhhhhnnnn"—"come," "right," and a "hell" so faint it might not be that at all) as if they're rabbits running through the brush.

(7) Dario Robleto, *Military issued blanket infested with hand-ground vinyl record dust from Neil Young's "Cortez the Killer" and Soft Cell's "Tainted Love,"* in "Neo-Hoodoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith" (Menil Collection, Houston, June–September; P.S.1, New York, October 19–January 26, 2009). Beige-cream, with light red stripes, thin on the sides, thicker in the middle: a true army blanket from the mid-1880s. Yes, it calls up soldiers passing out blankets infested with smallpox during the Indian wars after the Civil War—if it's not the thing itself—but it's also a swirl of confusion. "I understand 'Cortez the Killer,'" I said to Robleto in Houston, "but why 'Tainted Love'? Because the blankets were tainted?" From his response it didn't seem as if that notion had even occurred to him. "Soft Cell, *soft sell,*" he said—hey, says the army, we just want to warm up our Indian brothers and sisters on those chilly Plains nights. "But also because of all that '80s synth-pop," Robleto said. "It was like another British invasion"—more like the one in the seventeenth century than the one in the twentieth. Or, as Memphis bandleader Jim Dickinson once put it, turning the story inside out, "Giving synthesizers to the British was like giving whiskey to the Indians. Their culture never recovered."

(8–10) Anton Corbijn's film about Joy Division really should have been titled after the band's "Atmosphere"; in *Control* (Genius DVD), the emergence of the post–Sex Pistols band and the life of singer Ian Curtis to his suicide in 1980, the dark skies and darker streets of Manchester overshadow any story. Even rooms have clouds in them. The second half of the film is predictable, tiresome, like real life, or the biopic version of a real life, but the first hour is like a storm, like a perfect punk show: when the band takes the stage for the first time, when they finished "Transmission"—the actors playing and singing—I realized that half a minute had gone by and I hadn't taken a breath. What Sam Riley as Curtis does with the song ("No language, just sound")—what he does with his face even more than his voice—and what Corbijn does with his camera are as shocking as anything I've seen on a screen. On *The Factory, Manchester, Live 13 July 1979,* included as a second disc with the recent reissue of Joy Division's first album, the 1979 *Unknown Pleasures* (Factory), Curtis sounds as if he were twenty feet tall; Béla Lugosi, passed on by Bryan Ferry, is coming out of his mouth. The performance of "Transmission," the last number, is what was channeled for *Control,* and it's a frenzy, itself seemingly channeling Sarah Bernhardt in one of her tear-my-heart-from-my-own-breast speeches—until, near the end, Curtis lets loose. It's impossible to say what he lets loose with: nothing so commonplace as a scream or a shout, nothing so earthly as a cry of rage or anguish or frustration. It was nothing the band could summon at will. With *University of London Live 8 February 1980,* on the reissue of the 1980 *Closer* (Factory), the music is already freezing, trapped in contrived arrangements meant to frame Curtis's increasingly jittery song structures; the band has become its own prison. People don't kill themselves for reasons; they kill themselves to end the story. ★

With thanks to Chris Walters