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Sean Wilentz, Greil Marcus, eds. *The Rose and the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005. viii + 406 pp. $26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-05954-0.

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The Truth of the Matter

The search for truth, underscored by the effort to interrogate where truth lies, drives *The Rose and the Briar*, the recent edited collection by Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus on the meaning of the American ballad. As Marcus writes in the book's closing piece, old ballads carry "a kind of truth ... that [cannot] be found anywhere else," to which he adds, "all ballads, regardless of when they might have been made, are old" (p. 354). The strength of *The Rose and the Briar* lies in the fact that, for the different contributors, the truth of the ballads assumes a variety of forms. Collected in the book are the expected critical essays, but they exist alongside several works of fiction, memoir, poetry, and visual art. Such range of expression fits the goals of the editors, who state in the introduction that they want to rescue the study of the ballad from the positivist methods of folklorists that have dedicated themselves to rigorous investigations into the historical provenance of ballads or strict observations concerning the rules of the ballad form. Wilentz and Marcus claim that "something ineffable is always missing [in the work of the folklorists] about the emotional or historical or visual or aural experience of singing or hearing a ballad" (p. 3). That missing something is what they and their contributors set out to capture.

Complementing the diversity of approaches in the collection is the wide range of source material covered. *The Rose and the Briar* puts forth a purposely broad inclusive definition of the ballad, in which the primary criterion requires that the song in question tell a story. The two most stirring pieces in the book focus on choices that stretch the notion of an American ballad tradition. In "Destiny in My Right Hand," David Thomas–best known as the singer of avant-rock band Pere Ubu–draws a connection between two seemingly disparate songs, "The Wreck of Old 97" (1929) and "Dead Man's Curve" (1964). Central to his discussion of the songs is an idiosyncratic but persuasive argument concerning the significance of "the Magnetic Age," Thomas's term for the era of sound recording. He explains, "after Edison, folk music in American culture enters a state of metamorphosis brought on by the forces that shape the Magnetic Age. At the other end of that process, folk culture emerges reborn in the person of Elvis and all that flows from him" (p. 162). "The Wreck of Old 97" and "Dead Man's Curve" represent the two ends of this phenomenon. Both songs are about transportation accidents; both dwell on the human failure to gain control over the machine. Yet "Old 97" valorizes the effort behind this failure and turns its protagonists into heroes in a manner that Thomas finds false. "Dead Man's Curve," produced with a more advanced sense of the relationship between aural space and subjectivity, brings the listener into the narrative in a more persuasive fashion; and that, for Thomas, is the song's triumph, which is also a triumph of the communicative powers of studio technology.

In "Mariachi Reverie," Paul Berman explores a different sort of "alternative" ballad. The Mexican mariachi classic "Volver, Volver" ("To Return, To Return") becomes an occasion for Berman to meditate on the undervalued status of mariachi and to claim it as an essential American musical form. Berman's observations on the history of mariachi are as astute as his explanation for its contemporary relevance. What makes his piece so valuable, though, is his detailed account of a performance of "Volver, Volver" by Mexican singing star Vicente Fernandez during a mid-1990s concert at Radio City Music Hall. Capturing the fluidity of Fernandez's voice as he moves through the song's different registers, Berman also powerfully conveys the way in which the song became the vehicle for the star to connect with an audience predominantly composed of recent immigrants from Latin America in the midst of what Berman calls "the hugest of historical experiences, the uprooting of the Mexican rural world that had already made a revolution early in the twentieth century and was now making another revolution, if only by fleeing to other climes" (pp. 227-228).

Mediated by this experience, "Volver, Volver," as sung by Fernandez that night in Radio City, projected an emotional intensity that was at once eminently social and political and deeply private and personal.

Viewing the contents of *The Rose and the Briar* more broadly, two primary themes come into focus. One is forecast by the book's subtitle: the way that ballads play upon the darker side of love and romantic attachment. Several contributors dwell upon songs in which love somehow proves to be fatal. Often it is a man who kills his female lover, but sometimes the situation is reversed ("Frankie and Albert") and sometimes the act of murder is more allegorical than actual as in "Barbara Allen," in which a man dies of a broken heart when his love goes unreciprocated, and then his cold-hearted lover dies of regret. The sheer recurrence of such symbolism is treated as something of a mystery in many of the book's essays, where the clues being sought do not concern whodunit so much as the fundamental question of why tragic love occurs with such frequency in the ballad tradition. Treating one of the murder ballads in which a woman is killed by her man, Rennie Sparks digs the deepest of the book's authors into this mystery of culture. However, her answer–that such songs represent the drive to extinguish the threatening power of the mythic feminine goddess–relies too strongly on ideas informed by Joseph Campbell, concerning psychological archetypes divorced from historical context. For Dave Marsh, writing about "Barbara Allen," the matter is more straightforward if no less mysterious, as he interprets the song to put forth a lesson about "the peril of denying the complicated mysteries that throb within our hardened hearts and the equal peril of horsing around instead of acknowledging our love for one another" (p. 17). Or to put it more bluntly, love is strange and, if you are not careful, it can kill you.

The other theme that recurs throughout the collection concerns the nature of the folk process. Where do ballads come from and what relation do they have to real historical events or private experiences? How are ballads preserved and how are they transformed through acts of performance? On this score, two works of fiction prove particularly illuminating. Joyce Carol Oates tells the story of an Elvis-like figure named Blue-Eyed Bill Brandy who rises from the rural South to national celebrity in "Little Maggie: A Mystery." In this case, the "mystery" at issue is whether Little Maggie, the object of Brandy's most famous song, is based on a real person and, if so, who. Brandy's estranged daughter narrates the story with a strong sense of wonder at the effect that her father has on people. When she learns the real identity of Little Maggie, the shock of discovery is accompanied by the recognition that some women exert the power to make men write songs about them, and other women do not.

Sharyn McCrumb treats another side of the folk process in "Music, When Soft Voices Die," inspired by the song, "Pretty Peggy-O." Known for her "ballad" novels in which Appalachian music traditions figure prominently, McCrumb bases her piece around a group of actors who are called upon to play out the parts of the narrative whenever an old ballad is sung. These actors have been around as long as the ballads themselves, and have seen the songs evolve and mutate to the point where they sometimes have only the vaguest link to their points of origin. One of their number, Jack, has become increasingly disenchanted with the roles he is expected to fill; so he begins to try to shape the performance of the songs from within, to force the singers to conform to the songs more as he remembers them. McCrumb's preservationist stance comes through strongly, but she also laces the story with humor and insight concerning the many circumstances that lead old ballads to change over time, as when she observes that "an American accent was usually an indicator that the images would be slightly awry in an old tune" (p. 56).

Like any edited collection, *The Rose and the Briar* has its highs and lows. Some of the better-known contributors–Stanley Crouch, Ed Ward, Sarah Vowell, even co-editor Wilentz–turn in some of the more slight pieces. Crouch and Ward offer what can best be called appreciations of artists and works they believe warrant attention (by Duke Ellington, Mahalia Jackson, and obscure Texas soul singer Bobby Patterson, respectively), but both essays lack bite. Vowell's discussion of the metamorphosis of "John Brown's Body" into "Battle Hymn of the Republic" comes across as an exercise in trivia. While Wilentz has done some solid research to uncover the real story behind the murder ballad, "Delia," he falls into the trap he and his co-editor say they set out to avoid, looking for facts while losing the song's dark emotional core.

Despite these occasional lapses, *The Rose and the Briar* benefits from the fluid approach to the subject matter taken by editors and contributors alike. Among the book's most important lessons is that it is impossible to draw strict lines between folk and pop sources in American culture, just as it is difficult to separate myth and reality in the substance of ballads old and new.

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