



## *a brief history of liner notes on the cusp of great change*

### **Liner notes go digital**

*By Mike Doherty, Canwest News Service April 22, 2009*

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Photograph by: (Getty Images), (Getty Images)

There's a moment in the new Tragically Hip album, *We Are the Same*, when Gord Downie sings, "Bring on the requisite strangeness / It always has to get a little weird." The music shifts gears from driving rock to string-laden prog balladry, and the Hip show they've evolved from a band that writes charging anthems about hockey players to one that writes songs about writing songs; next thing you know, they might, say, hire a prize-winning novelist to pen liner notes.

Which is, in fact, is what they've done. Earlier this month, music journalists were greeted by the 21st-century version of the liner essay in their inboxes. Accompanying a download of "We Are the Same" was a 750-word text about the band penned by Joseph Boyden (whose *Through Black Spruce* took the Giller Prize last year) and his wife and fellow novelist, Amanda. While the piece does conclude with the rather lofty phrase, "this album is bread, water, love," it wouldn't be fair to castigate Downie and his pals for pretension. Instead, credit them with giving a boost to the vanishing art of the liner-note essay.

Nowadays, such essays are common only in the classical and traditional jazz genres, and of course in reissues -- in all three cases, they offer a historical angle on the music. In the '50s and '60s, the golden decades of the LP, liner notes had a contemporary feel and strove to be cool, gracing the backs of record sleeves and offering a writer's take -- whether analytical, zany, or oblique -- on the music inside.

Many LP liner notes, as York University music professor Rob Bowman observes, were essentially promotional "puff pieces," but others offered a creative perspective. Bob Dylan's own notes for releases such as *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited*, for instance, have a crazed, poetic energy, and reading them, says Bowman, is "like consuming Dylan in another medium."

Some of Dylan's peers also contributed memorable notes to record sleeves in the '60s. Consider John Coltrane's mystically spiritual notes to *A Love Supreme* ("in the bank of life is not good that investment which surely pays the highest and most cherished dividends," he writes) and

Frank Zappa's militantly countercultural notes for *Freak Out!* ("Drop out of school before your mind rots from exposure to our mediocre educational system.") More often, musicians preferred to hire others to add their own perspectives, occasionally resulting in gems such as Ralph J. Gleason's forceful notes for Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew* ("it's not just the horn. it's a concept. it's a life support system for a whole world"), and Johnny Cash's ode to Dylan on the back of *Nashville Skyline* ("So where are your mountains / To match some men?").

In the '70s, liner notes lost their cachet. As singer and songwriter Robyn Hitchcock recalls, "When we moved into stoner culture, and everybody got hairier, and gatefold sleeves developed, and the music got longer, the old days of 'Hey friend, have you heard The Byrds?' gradually gave way to pictures of the artist as a star and sort of druggie doodles or photographs."

Since the '80s, Hitchcock has been one of the few musicians who regularly contributes liner-note essays -- or short stories or poems -- to his albums. They have allowed him to spin out his singular surrealistic narratives at greater length than in his songs, or, in the case of his major-label debut, 1987's *Globe of Frogs*, to alert new listeners to the kind of music they would hear. "I was aware of the fact that people could accuse me of living in my own world or not being relevant to the issues of the day ... or of being oblique or opaque, so I put that down as a sort of manifesto. A bit like, 'Warning: this contains nuts.'"

Such a warning constitutes the opposite of the panegyric "puff piece" liner note essay. Says Hitchcock, "Those notes would usually be written by somebody else, not the artist themselves. You have to be quite immodest to sit there and say, 'I have just written the most fantastic 10 songs you will ever hear. ... Your money back if your pleasure-o-meter does not go through the roof by track four!'"

The best liner-note essays allow the artist a degree of modesty while providing a kind of cachet, conferring significance on the music.

Famous names have been commissioned: Douglas Coupland wrote a story for Saint Etienne's *Good Humor* (1998); Dave Eggers produced notes for *Still Ravished*, a tribute album to the '80s band *The June Brides* (2006); poet Simon Armitage composed a reverie for Paul Weller's *22 Dreams* (2008) and even the super-secretive Thomas Pynchon contributed an irresistibly zany piece to *Lotion's Nobody's Cool* (1996).

Such writers, more often than not, are genuine fans and/or friends of the bands involved, as is the case with the Boydens and the *Tragically Hip*. Joseph has been close to Gord Downie for a few years; the singer approached him and Amanda to write a piece introducing listeners to *We Are the Same*, offering no direction or parameters.

Amanda's concern, she says, was that they might be "going too overboard" and writing a "love-fest. You don't have to figuratively kiss (the band)! But we were so blown away by the album that it was almost impossible for us not to praise it."

According to Joseph, they didn't feel pressure to sell the album, as "the Hip have a built-in audience"; instead, they wanted to put forward "the idea that you're going to be really surprised

and pleased by this album: What the band has to say and how they say it, and how the band has come together to play."

The Boydens' text, "Coming Clean at the Bathhouse," is unconditionally positive, but its idiosyncrasies are welcome -- officially it's a band bio, but it sidesteps that genre's banal platitudes and affectedly bubbly prose. Its existence as an e-text on the band's website signals that the concept of an album as a physical artifact is disappearing; gone are the days when one would pore over an album sleeve, or a CD booklet, while listening to the music.

Downloadable "digital booklets" in .pdf format exist, but they don't seem integral to the music, and they've yet to catch on. Still, Rob Bowman, who has written liner notes for reissues for over 20 years and won a Grammy for *The Complete Stax/Volt Soul Singles, Vol. 3* (1996), holds out a degree of hope: "Space is unlimited on the Net, or when you're including something digitally (with a purchase). So you could actually get even more in-depth liner notes, if record companies are willing to pay for them."

As Hitchcock notes, cross-platform creativity might flourish: "You can download artwork, and there would be no difficulty downloading a novel or a novella" along with an album.

For that matter, if downloading enables us to combine art forms in new ways, why not hire a musician to write a song that would be packaged with, say, Amanda Boyden's next novel?

"Oh, wouldn't that be good!" she laughs, "but that would take somebody way too long."

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