ALL BY MYSELF

Essays on the Single-Artist Rock Album

Edited by Steve Hamelman

The car sounds in the context of a story set before the invention of the automobile questioned the logic of time in a similar way that the employment of a 1950s electric guitar for the soundtrack had done. As Rosenbaum notes, even without the car sounds, Young's music was "the only unambiguously twentieth-century element in a nineteenth-century story" (*Dead Man* 44). One might counter that the film references twentieth-century music in other ways (one character is called Benmont Tench after Tom Petty's keyboard player, and Nobody's Indian name "He Who Talks Loud Saying Nothing" resembles a James Brown song). Yet the film is otherwise a "period piece" and uses appropriate costumes, props, and dialogue, whereas the soundtrack deliberately breaks with its historicity. The inverted logic of time would explain Greil Marcus's assessment that "for a film set more than a century ago, an electric guitar, playing a modal melody, surrounded by nothing, sounds older than anything you see on the screen." Claudia Gorbman has also remarked that despite its "modern" electricity, a film score consisting mostly of solo guitar was "more realistic than the orchestras of the 1930s and onward" (212) that characterize classic western soundtracks. The "messy" logic of Neil Young's contributions also extends to Johnny Depp reciting William Blake's poetry on the soundtrack album when his character in the film doesn't know who the poet is.

Except for one short track with a solo harmonium playing drawn-out chords, the music on the *Dead Man* soundtrack album consists of solo electric guitar (with an overdubbed second electric guitar on a few tracks) with standard effects like distortion, delay, feedback, and phase shifting. The much-repeated main theme consists of a simple melody over a four-chord sequence (B-minor/E-major/D-major/F#-major) and involves hammering, sliding, and plucking techniques. Another four-note guitar motif appears repeatedly, used in the film when the bounty hunter Cole Wilson is shown. Jonathan Rosenbaum compares the melody of the main theme to Hendrix's rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner" and to the African American spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." For Rosenbaum, the melody is "pointing to the absolute aloneness of both Blake and Nobody, together and separately, even as friends and companions" (*Dead Man* 43). Gorbman traces Young's guitar playing to the instrumental hit "Apache" by British surf-rock group the Shadows from 1960, which "fused the minor-modal tradition of some movie western music with the masculine energy of electric rock guitar performance. It includes a rhythmic riff in the lower register that is a cousin to the last line of the *Dead Man* theme, although the latter has far more tension in its fuzzed-out fortissimo" (207). One could add that another influence might have been Morricone's orchestral soundtracks for European westerns, which often feature an electric guitar melody. Yet what distinguishes *Dead Man*'s main theme from the work of Jimi Hendrix, of Hank Marvin (who played lead guitar for the Shadows), and of Pino Rucher (Mor-

ricone's guitarist) is its unfinished quality. As Marcus aptly states, "The modal melody is never resolved, never completed. It feels less like a song than like a fanfare, a fanfare for a parade no one ever got around to organizing."

The unresolved main theme of the *Dead Man* soundtrack is yet another reminder of the fragile and unfinished state of being which is its major focus, as are the trance-inducing sound effects, "loud, disconnected, arrhythmic guitar notes" (Gorbman 208) that accompany William Blake's state between consciousness and unconsciousness. The jarring guitar notes occasionally make way for drone-like guitar chugging and feedback. In her analysis of the *Dead Man* soundtrack, Gorbman reduces the meaning of Neil Young's music to a crisis in white masculinity, as "*Dead Man*'s overall strategy is to employ generic western sounds and push them to a limit, much as the film both participates in and denatures the western genre itself" (206). This explains for Gorbman why the film employs no Native American music (except for Nobody's chanting) but instead what she calls "denatured 'white' music" (207). While racialized and gendered identities are certainly an important aspect of the film and its soundtrack, it also makes larger claims about metaphysics, as I have argued throughout this essay. In the final section, I attempt to connect these claims more explicitly to what I have previously only hinted at—Martin Heidegger's concept of "thrownness."

THROWNNESS

The notion of "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), introduced in 1927 by German philosopher Martin Heidegger in his seminal work *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*), serves as the most apt description of the fundamental questions posed by Jim Jarmusch and Neil Young with the film and soundtrack to *Dead Man*. Incidentally, Jarmusch describes the major character William Blake's plight in the liner notes to the soundtrack album in the following way: "Thrown into a world that is cruel-chaotic, his eyes are opened to the fragility that defines the realm of the living. It is as though he passes through the surface of a mirror, and emerges into a previously unknown world that exists on the other side." Jarmusch might not have been aware that he was referencing Heidegger—he could have been invoking Jim Morrison's famous line "into this world we're thrown" from the Doors' 1971 hit "Riders on the Storm"—but the concept he invokes helps to understand the film and soundtrack on a deeper and more essential level of metaphysics.

Heidegger's terms are notoriously hard to translate, and "thrownness" is no exception. Heidegger often discusses abstract ideas by redefining common German terms and phrases. In the context of "thrownness," this includes variations on basic terms like *werfen* (to throw), *fallen* (to fall), *man* (trans-