Musical Necromancy

*Two-Headed Doctor. Listening For Ghosts in Dr. John's Gris-gris*, David Toop
(Strange Attractor Press)

*Folk Music. A Bob Dylan Biography in Seven Songs*, Greil Marcus
(Yale University Press)

I put off buying these books because of their subject matter but gave in before Christmas, optimistically hoping (as it turns out correctly), perhaps intuiting, that they would be about far more than what they appeared to be. David Toop and Greil Marcus are two of my favourite music writers and I should have known they would both have something to say and that *how* they said it would be, as ever, just as interesting as *what* they said.

Toop's book tries to unpick the strands of influence, plagiarism, appropriation and reinvention that the musicians Mac Rebennack and Harold Battiste would weave together to create the musical personae of Dr. John, whose album *Gris-gris* is a murky, dense, layered, fictional approximation of New Orleans myth, magic and sound.

Toop tells us about 'a nineteenth century legend called Dr. John' whose name is borrowed', shows readers where Rebennack lifts his lyrics from, shamelessly and often wholesale, tells us some of the realities of voodoo, its religious trappings and social significance, and shares his intrigue with, as the back cover describes it, 'the nature of the recording studio as a dream state.'

Although Toop is aware that songs 'are capsules of meaning that can be prised out of context and given new voices, new implications, new responsibilities' and that 'they have long lives and [...] enjoy a power that can seem supernatural', he is also concerned with Dr. John's ability to 'create new [musical] spaces in order to colonise them.' Toop is fascinated with the *Gris-gris* album's ability to approximate and conjure up musical and lyrical magic from remixing and perhaps misunderstanding a wide range of source material, but also worried about how 'Rebennack reinvented himself to wander [...] through spaces and scenes that were never his to experience.'

*Two-Headed Doctor* is a book about black experience, slavery, the blues, voodoo, hoodoo, soul music, dance music, jazz, carnival, self-expression, drink and drugs, death, the supernatural, New Orleans, poverty, storytelling and self-mythologising (Dr. John, not Toop). It is a book populated by session musicians, forgotten musicians, unacknowledged musicians, studio engineers, frauds and hucksters, good and evil, magicians, preachers and spirit mediums.

Rebennack, like many characters here, has many attempts at making music he hopes will bring him fame and fortune before he succeeds. Whilst some of the musicians here go on to make popular hits or cult singles in various genres such as pop, soul, disco and funk, become well-established session musicians, producers or arrangers, or simply disappear from view, Rebennack – post *Gris-gris* – *becomes* Dr. John, inhabiting or possessed by his persona. Despite some later 'swamp rock turgidity' and Rebennack's adoption of 'a far more conventional career path, that of the star individual', Toop acknowledges that 'Rebennack's tenacity and talent carried him through a long, varied and fruitful career in which every record and personal appearance he made was haunted by the ghost of *Gris-gris*'.

Rebennack aspired to 'recreate the feel of historical, mythical and contemporary New Orleans' and although 'his intentions were idealistic, generous, nostalgic' and he hoped 'to honour and support extraordinary Black musicians', Toop calmly notes that' he was the one who became famous' while others die 'broke, buried in a pauper's grave.'

Greil Marcus' book in some ways asks similar questions, but he appears to be less bothered by how singers can take or borrow a song and use it for their own ends, especially if that singer is Bob Dylan, with whom he has a long-standing obsession, enough to facilitate becoming one of the foremost and best observers and critics of his Bobness' music.

Marcus is patient and generous with Dylan's music, in a way that I certainly am not. Despite sweeping aside various decades of Dylan albums, he is able to listen to live versions of the song 'Jim Jones' for the duration of a year as it changes, develops and mutates, fascinated even when it falls apart or a performance or arrangement isn't working out. It's unclear if Marcus was there in person or collects bootleg recordings, but he is fascinated by Dylan's attempts and ability to rearrange and inhabit this Australian prisoner's ballad.

This is the penultimate chapter in the book, and the year in question is 1993, a year that Marcus argues is the point where Dylan 'had finally settled into a state of being where he could take up the old songs again, and sing them as if he had written them himself and had been written by them'. Marcus suggests that songs become fictions and can then become adopted by others. The 'Folk Music' of his title is a mix of blues and ballads, mostly unrelated to how we use the word in the UK (no beards, real ale and fingers in ears here). It is outsider music, traditional music, people's music rather than the music of charts, radio and record companies.

Of course, at times this music has been in the spotlight and become popular, and Dylan for a while was one of those who made it so, hoping it might help change the world. But Marcus posits that it took several decades and a lot of albums before he was ready to sing those old songs again. This book mostly jumps between the 1960s and the 2000s, only stopping briefly in 1992 to consider 'Jim Jones' in recorded and live forms. It's audacious in the way it avoids 30+ years of Dylan music, including his best albums, but then other Marcus books about Dylan are available.

For this book, Marcus suggests that Dylan's 'true biography is his inhabiting of other lives, whether they're musically inherited [...] or coming to life in his own hands, the Frankenstein's monsters, made of parts of different graves, the characters in his own songs'. Marcus' informed enthusiasm is addictive, as is his wide-ranging, erudite and nuanced contextualisation and commentary, but even that cannot make me want to listen to 'Murder Most Foul', the track featured in the book's final chapter.

Despite both the lyrics and listeners' responses to the 17-minute single being fascinating, and Marcus' declaration that the song 'can hardly be heard once without sparking anyone's need to hear it again', I will agree to differ. Listening again as I write this, the song remains a turgid, mumbled, overlong and over-arranged jumble of conspiracy, private allusions, sometimes obscure references and personal opinion. I don't mind that Marcus likes this and other stuff I never want to hear again, because on the page he can conjure up and discuss music that – despite bearing little relation to the sonic reality – is fascinating and, in my imagination, totally unique. Like both of these books.

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(1140 words)