

SOUND BITES

BIG IDEAS IN POPULAR MUSIC

Discussion Questions

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Don't You Wonder, Sometimes?

Tracy K. Smith

Why does the speaker claim that “Bowie is among us” but also admit that “I’ve lived here all these years / And never seen him”? (6)

1. Why does the speaker choose David Bowie as the figure of “something elemental. Not God, exactly”? (5)
2. Why does the speaker ask “what would we do” if we were certain that “someone was there squinting through the dust, / Saying nothing is lost, that everything lives on waiting only / To be wanted back badly enough”? (5)
3. What does the speaker mean in saying “Bowie will never die”? (5)
4. How is Bowie connected to the “woman you lost” and “the life / In which I’m forever a child”? (5)
5. What does the speaker mean by saying that Bowie is “trademarked twice”? (6)
6. What is the source of dissatisfaction for the speaker (and Bowie) in seeing that “The future isn’t what it used to be”? (6)
7. What does the speaker want to believe in saying, “Bowie, / I want to believe you. Want to feel / Your will like the wind before rain”? (7)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Which musical artists do you feel a particularly strong attachment to? Why?
- In what ways can music make people feel that “nothing is lost”? (5)

Voice and Hammer: Harry Belafonte's Unfinished Fight (selection)

Jeff Sharlet

Why does Sharlet conclude by saying that Belafonte has chosen to use his anger to sing his song again, “until they hear it like it’s the first time”? (23)

1. Why does Sharlet tell readers, “Don’t get stuck on the bananas”? (10)
2. Why does Sharlet list the many ways in which Belafonte “was first” in the artistic and award realms? (10)
3. While watching *Tonight with Belafonte*, why does Sharlet say he feels that he is “watching a different past, one in which the revolution *had* been televised”? (11)
4. Why does Sharlet include Belafonte saying, “Voice and hammer, that’s it,” while they are watching *Tonight with Belafonte* together? (12)
5. Why does Sharlet say that the chain-gang and Caribbean songs Belafonte performed are “folk music” only if “you cut away the dull virtue that’s come to pad the term *folk*, cut it down to the gristle”? (12)
6. What does Sharlet mean when he describes Belafonte as realizing he needed “a church” for *Tonight with Belafonte*? (15)
7. Why does Sharlet stress that Belafonte’s contract enabled him to get paid for the show that Revlon canceled rather than allow black and white dancers to perform together?
8. Why does Sharlet include the story of how Belafonte got \$70,000 to civil-rights activists in 1964 Mississippi?

According to Sharlet, how did Belafonte’s anger and Martin Luther King Jr.’s nonviolence work together in their relationship and activism?

1. Why does Sharlet describe Belafonte as seeing television as a “hammer” that would enable him to “break chains” of racism? (16)
2. According to Sharlet, what does Belafonte’s willingness to say to Revlon, “See you around, and goodbye forever” reveal about him? (16)

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Voice and Hammer: Harry Belafonte's Unfinished Fight (selection), *continued*

3. After meeting Martin Luther King Jr., why does Belafonte become one of the biggest donors to the Freedom Riders and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee?
4. Why does Belafonte let the King family stay in his New York apartment?
5. Why is Belafonte willing to take great risks to get money and support to King?
6. When Sharlet asks Belafonte if he struggles with nonviolence, why does Belafonte say, "That's all I struggle with"? (21)
7. What does Sharlet mean when he says, "It's not the grief that's fresh for Belafonte, it's the gap: the awful absence of the *other* imagination, the what-might-have-been-but-is-not"? (21)
8. Why does Belafonte tell Sharlet that all of America's problems "are rooted in the fact that we're all jesters. Not one of us truth tellers"? (22)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Is anger a more positive or negative force in most musicians' lives?
- To what degree do you think the racial landscape of American music has changed since the 1950s?
- Do you agree with Belafonte that Americans are all "jesters"? (22)

Lush Life

John McCluskey Jr.

For Earl and Billy, why is it “enough to bring contexts to dreams, to strengthen those who listened and danced”? (31)

1. Why do Earl and Billy leave the club together before everyone else?
2. Why do Earl and Billy wonder whether the audience hears what they do or brings something “entirely different to the rhythms, something of their own”? (31)
3. Why does Earl tell Billy about what happened when he stopped to demand the use of a club’s piano?
4. Why does Billy refer to playing jazz as “the Life”? (36)

Why does Earl think that playing jazz “could be as risky as working in a steel mill or coal mine”? (36)

1. Why does Billy stop to help the white man on the side of the road, even though Earl warns him not to?
2. After Billy comes back from helping the stranded man, why does Earl tell him his father’s advice that “sometimes you can reach out a helping hand and get it chopped off”? (38)
3. Why does Billy wake up Earl to tell him about the woman whose baby almost died? Why had Billy forgotten the story?
4. Why does Earl respond to the story by saying that jazz “opens people up, makes them give up secrets”? (40)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- To what extent do you think playing jazz—or another genre of music—is risky today?
- Do you agree that music opens people up and makes them give up secrets?

Electronic Dance Music’s Love Affair with Ecstasy: A History (selection)

Nash Jenkins

Why does Jenkins think that the commercialization of the rave scene shows that “popular culture is a contradiction of terms”? (48)

1. What is it about EDM culture that leads Dr. Rick Doblin to claim, “There’s something fundamentally wholesome about these communal dance parties”? (44)
2. What does Jenkins mean when he writes, “This force hasn’t knocked the revolution off its axis, per se—it has simply made the axis illegible”? (45)
3. According to Jenkins, why did the “ethos built around” Ecstasy collapse, even while people kept getting high? (45)
4. What does Jenkins think caused the EDM scene’s “themes of transcendent universal harmony” to degenerate into “bitter tweets”? (45)
5. Why does Jenkins suggest that “the sphere of the mainstream can preserve themes and messages until the disintegrating force of popular attention shows that they’re just a façade”? (52)
6. Why does Jenkins conclude that the rave scene’s problems may come from its having been “built upon an unsustainable premise”? (52)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Doblin’s claim that drugs and spirituality are linked?
- To what extent does it make sense to see the early EDM community as a utopian experiment?
- Is it possible for a communal musical experience to be both idealistic and commercially successful?

Bop

Langston Hughes

What does Simple mean when he says that Bop comes “from the police”? (54)

1. What is the difference between “Re-Bop” and “Be-Bop,” according to Simple? (53)
2. Why does the narrator tell Simple that “Be-Bop is passé, gone, finished”? (53)
3. Why does Simple believe that the “white boys” who learned Be-Bop from records “don’t know what they are singing about, even yet”? (53, 54)
4. According to Simple, why is “real Bop . . . not to be dug unless you’ve seen dark days, too”? (54)
5. Why does the narrator’s “nonsense” depress Simple? (55)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What forms of music now come “from the police,” in Hughes’s sense? (54)
- Do you agree with Simple’s judgment that the narrator is speaking “nonsense” at the end of the story? (55)

I Am Your Conscious, I Am Love: A Paean 2 Prince

Hilton Als

Why does Als feel that by making such records as *1999* and *Purple Rain* Prince had decided to “betray the colored queer in himself”? (59)

1. What meaning does *Lovesexy*, both the album and the tour, hold for Als?
2. What does Prince’s “colored queerness” mean to Als? (59)
3. What does Als mean when he says that Prince “stopped being a girl” and that Prince “wanted to be a boy”? (60, 61)
4. What does Als mean when he says that during the *Lovesexy* tour “Prince was showing his ass again”? (61)
5. When Prince suggests that Als write a book about him, why can’t Als look at Prince or look away?

Why does Als frame his experience with Prince by describing two relationships with men?

1. What does Als mean when he says that he “longed to be the Prince to someone’s Cat” and vice versa? (60)
2. Why does Als’s date refuse to eat the peach pie Als made?
3. Why did Als want to be someone’s Dorothy Parker?
4. What does Als mean when he says that the man he was interested in “needed a woman”? (72)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What do we mean when we say that an artist “belongs” to us?
- Why might you feel “betrayed” by an artist?

Amor Prohibido (selection)

Jeff Winkler

According to the article, what is the Quintanillas' primary motive for trying to control Selena's image, name, and legacy?

1. Why does Mr. Quintanilla, and by extension the Quintanilla family, have a problem with Sylvia D. and her Selena tribute?
2. What does Winkler mean by the statement about Selena, "She was manufactured, and her primary creator still lords over all"? (85)
3. Why does Winkler say that the line between "protecting the family" and "protecting the commodity" can get blurry? (86)
4. Do you agree with Suzette's assertion that "if you cheapen something, no matter what it is, it brings down its value"? (88)
5. Why does Suzette mention that the Quintanilla family doesn't further capitalize on Selena's legacy even though they could?

Why does Winkler call the Fiesta de la Flor the celebration of Selena that the *pueblo* deserves? (93)

1. Why does Mr. Quintanilla threaten to block Winkler from attending the Fiesta de la Flor if he attends Sylvia D.'s Selena tribute?
2. Why does the Corpus Christi Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) make it "very, very clear" that the Quintanilla family has approved the Fiesta de la Flor? (90)
3. Why does the Quintanilla family allow the CVB to host the Fiesta de la Flor even though the "white power structure" of the city has had a strained relationship with its Latino citizens? (91)
4. Why is the stand where people can Photoshop themselves next to Selena so popular?

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Amor Prohibido (selection), *continued*

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree that unauthorized tributes can cheapen an artist's legacy?
- Why do people like Monica and Honey spend their time impersonating their favorite stars?
- Is it possible to protect the legacy of an artist without commodifying the artist and profiting?

Thieves in the Night

Dante Smith, Talib Kweli Greene, and Charles Njapa

According to the song, who or what causes people to hide “like thieves in the night from life”?

1. Why does the song begin with the statement “Give me the fortune, keep the fame”? (97)
2. What does it mean that it’s a “rhetorical” question to ask “why we follow the law of the bluest eye”? (97)
3. How does the song answer the question of whether money is the cause of all evil or if it’s “the mindstate that’s ill”? (97)
4. Why do “most men join the ranks cluelessly”? (98)
5. Why is it that black people are “either niggas or Kings, . . . either bitches or Queens”? (99)
6. Why are the phrases “Not strong (Only aggressive),” “Not free (We only licensed),” and “Not compassionate, only polite” repeated? (98, 99)
7. What does it mean that “the captors own the masters to what we writing”? (99)
8. What is the “true essence” the listener is being told to find? (99)
9. Why does the song end with “stop hiding, ’cause ain’t no hiding place”? (100)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- “Thieves in the Night” uses phrases from Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*. How does knowing the art or event a musician references in a piece affect your understanding of that work?
- What music with a political statement or social message has had the most significant impact on your life and why?

Bowie (selection)

Simon Critchley

Why does Critchley believe that Bowie “is a seer *because he is a liar*”? (105)

1. On what grounds does Critchley claim that “Bowie’s genius allows us to break the superficial link that seems to connect authenticity to truth”? (105)
2. What does Critchley mean when he says that there is “a moodful truth, a heard truth, a felt truth, an embodied truth” to Bowie’s art? (105)
3. Why does Critchley say, “The truth content of Bowie’s art is not compromised by its fakery. It is enabled by it”? (105)
4. Why does Critchley argue that “authenticity is the curse of music from which we need to cure ourselves”? (106)

Why does Critchley assert that Bowie’s type of “theatrical” music is “what can save us from ourselves, from the banal fact of being in the world”? (106)

1. What leads Critchley to conclude that “art’s filthy lesson is inauthenticity all the way down, . . . fakes that strip away the illusion of reality in which we live and confront us with the reality of illusion”? (102)
2. When Critchley says, “If Bowie’s art is inauthentic, if it is *F for Fake* as Orson Welles might have put it, then is it also *F for Falsehood*?” what do you understand by the term “falsehood”? (103)
3. Why does Critchley ironically ask if “true music” should “come straight out of the heart . . . and into our waiting, shell-like ears”? (103)
4. Why does Critchley declare that “music is a discord with the world that can allow a certain demundanization, a withdrawal that might permit us to see things in a utopian light”? (103)
5. What does Critchley mean when he claims, “To turn yourself to face yourself is not to confront your authentic subjectivity”? (104)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- To what extent do you agree or disagree that “music at its most theatrical, extravagant, and absurd is also the truest music”? (106)
- What music in your experience has helped you “think of another life”? (106)

When Whitney Hit the High Note

Danyel Smith

Why did Whitney Houston’s performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” have people “weeping in the stands, weeping in their homes”? (117)

1. Why does Smith list the other singers who are part of Houston’s lineage?
2. Why does Smith describe Houston’s performance of “One Moment in Time” at the Grammys as having the “uplift of big blues”? (114)
3. According to Smith, why did slowing down the tempo of “The Star-Spangled Banner” make it “the blues”? (115)
4. Why does Smith include the full introduction that Frank Gifford gave to Houston’s performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner”? (115–116)
5. Why does Smith emphasize the “casual confidence” projected by the clothes Houston wore to sing the anthem? (116)
6. How does Houston’s performance make “bravery look easy,” according to Smith? (117)
7. What does Smith mean when she describes Houston as still being “the ghost in the machine”? (117)
8. Why does Smith describe Houston’s posing with her head back, “as one’s can be when victorious, and as one’s can be when asking for and ecstatically receiving the glory of God”? (118)

Why does Smith repeat “you have to understand” and “you have to remember” at several points?

1. Why does Smith begin by listing acts of mass violence that had not yet been committed in the United States when Houston performed at Super Bowl XXV?
2. Why does Smith emphasize the state of music technology and the internet in 1991?
3. What does Smith mean when she says, “The (pre)cursors are blinking”? (112)
4. Why does Smith include references to Houston’s career after Super Bowl XXV?
5. What does Smith mean when she says that seeing Houston “onstage, on MTV, on an album cover” was “proof of life”? (113)

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When Whitney Hit the High Note, *continued*

6. Why does Smith emphasize that Houston “wanted mainstream pop equality”? (113)
7. Does Smith think Houston’s performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” is an instance of “white American affluence being comforted by the performance of black freedom”? (114)
8. Why does Smith end her piece by repeating “you have to understand”? (118)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Smith that the relationship between the NFL and the military “has grown vinelike around a state of perpetual war”? (117)
- How much influence do you think Whitney Houston’s legacy has on performers today?
- Which renditions of “The Star-Spangled Banner” and other patriotic songs do you find especially moving?

Black Flag

John Albert

Why do Albert and his friends feel “bruised and elated” after the Black Flag show? (123)

1. Why does Albert love punk rock even though he knows “it is a fantasy”? (120)
2. Why do Albert and his friends mistreat the “well-meaning” student from the Claremont Colleges who drives them to shows? (120)
3. Why is Albert willing to break a window and run away from his parents to go to the Black Flag show, despite knowing nothing about the band?
4. Why does Albert feel that Black Flag is performing “music made specifically for us”? (123)
5. After the show, why does Albert feel that “the riotous music has somehow given our confused lives a fleeting sense of purpose”? (123)
6. Why does Albert conclude with shoplifting the Black Flag EP?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Does listening to music about anger and alienation do more to help or hurt people who are already feeling angry and alienated?
- What lasting influence do you think the punk music of the 1970s has had?

Millie Jackson's Country Roots

Jalylah Burrell

According to Burrell, why has the “generic and thematic ravenousness” of Jackson’s career “mostly secured its dismissal”? (125)

1. Why does Burrell emphasize the “ambivalence” of Jackson’s 1972 performance on *Soul Train*? (126)
2. Why does Burrell describe Jackson as stepping into “a silty bank of creativity” upon abandoning the Motown formula? (126)
3. Why does Burrell describe Jackson as “throwing a soft blow at patriarchy” in the song “Hypocrisy”? (127)
4. According to Burrell, what purposes do the spoken interludes in Jackson’s songs serve?
5. According to Burrell, why does Jackson cover others’ songs but often change or add to the lyrics?
6. How does Burrell see Jackson using the “outlaw vocabularies” of the country music she heard as a child in Georgia? (129)
7. Why does Burrell conclude by saying that despite the artistic success of Jackson’s genre-spanning work, “black bitchiness remains unrecuperated”? (131)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Jackson that “country artists can get away with saying more than” black artists can? (129)
- What enables some musical artists to cross genres successfully?
- Do you prefer cover versions that are relatively close to the original song, or those that take greater liberties?

Beatlemania: A Love Story

Devin McKinney

Why does McKinney emphasize that “in its first flush Beatlemania really was a very innocent thing, something naive and without guile”? (137)

1. Why does McKinney begin by contrasting the military metaphors that male reporters used for Beatlemania with language that might have been used “on the distaff side”? (133)
2. What does it mean that the fifteen-year-old girl fan “*was the story*”? (134)
3. Why did all the skeptical and contemptuous adult commentary about Beatlemania fail “to shape the event in any way”? (135)
4. Why does McKinney describe the Beatles as “co-conspirators” with the fans? (136)
5. After only a few days in the United States, what circumstances allowed the Beatles to achieve “an intimacy and ease with their audience unlike anything that existed before them, unlike anything that exists today”? (136)
6. Why does McKinney ask if the photo caption in the Dallas newspaper is “a warning to Lennon and whoever else might speak plainly to watch what you say”? (138)
7. Why is the “honeymoon” period of Beatlemania so brief, before the “weird scenes” begin? (137, 138)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree that the kind of innocent joy in performance that McKinney attributes to the Beatles is no longer possible in popular music?
- In what sense are artists “co-conspirators” with their fans today?

Sonny's Blues

James Baldwin

As he listens to Sonny play, why does the narrator realize that Sonny “could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did”? (172)

1. When Sonny's friend asks the narrator what he's going to do about Sonny, why does the narrator say “what the hell *can* I do”? (143)
2. Why does Sonny's letter make the narrator “feel like a bastard”? (146)
3. Why does Sonny's letter make the narrator start to wonder “about the life that Sonny lived inside”? (147)
4. When Sonny first tells his brother he wants to play jazz, why does the narrator think it is “beneath” Sonny? (155)
5. Why does Sonny tell his brother that people “*ought* to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for”? (156)
6. Why do Isabel and her family come to see Sonny as “some sort of god, or monster”? (159)
7. Why does the narrator see Sonny's music as “merely an excuse for the life he led”? (160)
8. Hearing Sonny play, why does the narrator think of “how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument”? (170)
9. As Sonny and his friends play, why does the narrator realize that music telling the tale of suffering and triumph is “the only light we've got in all this darkness”? (171)
10. Why does the narrator think of Sonny as going “all the way back” while he plays? (171)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Is it necessary for musicians to suffer in order to achieve greatness?
- What music seems like a light in the darkness to you?
- How might the relationship between a musician and his or her instrument be “awful,” in Baldwin's sense? (240)

A Poem for Ella Fitzgerald

Sonia Sanchez

Why is divine imagery used to describe Ella Fitzgerald in the poem?

1. Why does the poem begin with Fitzgerald coming on stage amid “rumors of hurricanes” and a red moon? (173)
2. How does Fitzgerald become “holy” while she is singing? (175)
3. What does the speaker mean by “all of spring held us / in a single drop of blood”? (175)
4. Why does the speaker say that Fitzgerald became the Egyptian sky deity “Nut arching over us”? (175)
5. Why does the poem include variations of lyrics from songs Fitzgerald sang?
6. Why does the poem end with versions of the phrase “be good”? (176)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What stylistic commonalities do certain poems and songs share?
- Do you think poetry and other forms of writing can adequately capture the experience of playing or listening to music?

Elvis Presley (selection)

Bobbie Ann Mason

According to Mason, why did “marginal groups” of people hear the promise of “freedom, release, redemption” in Elvis’s music while others found him “shocking” or “uncouth”? (180)

1. Why does Mason’s family feel that Elvis was “great, so familiar—and he was ours!”? (178)
2. When Mason visits the house where Elvis was born, why is she “mesmerized” by the glitter poster of Jesus? (179)
3. What qualities lead Mason to call Elvis “a natural symbol of integration”? (181)
4. Why does Mason consider Elvis’s 1954 recording of “That’s All Right” to be “the seminal point in rock-and-roll history”? (183) Why does she call it both “deeply derivative and totally original”? (187)
5. Why does Mason emphasize the way “That’s All Right” resisted classification, with listeners not knowing “if it was rhythm-and-blues, country, or what”? (188)
6. Why does Mason believe that Elvis crossed the racial boundary “innocently” and “purely and simply because he could feel the music”? (188)
7. What does Mason mean when she says that the southern poor, both blacks and whites, felt that Elvis’s music was “authenticating their lives”? (188)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- To what extent has the ideal of “racial harmony” that Mason hears in Elvis’s performances been achieved in American music today? (189)
- What aspects of Elvis’s musical legacy do you think are most enduring?
- Do you agree with Mason that Elvis became “a nervous national joke” in the 1980s because he represented a range of ideas that made people uncomfortable? (178)

Star Child (selection)

Margo Jefferson

Why does Jefferson conclude that Michael Jackson’s showing the public his psychic scars is the “final price of admission” child stars demand? (200)

1. What does Jefferson mean when she says that child stars have to live out “adult mythologies”? (192)
2. Why does Jefferson include Jackson’s comments about watching a strip show at the club where he was performing when he was “nine or ten”? (193)
3. Why does the mix of boy’s and men’s voices on “I Want You Back” heighten the song’s “sexual play”? (196)
4. Why does Jefferson believe people would rather talk about how Jackson treats children than “how we treat child stars”? (200)

Why does Jefferson believe that Jackson’s talent pushed the Motown machine “past its limits”? (195)

1. Why does Jefferson point out that she is “slipping into that tone—ironic, artfully dismissive—that Motown lures writers into when we crave cultural purity”? (193)
2. Why does Jefferson write of Motown that the “active seeking of a white audience always arouses shame”? (194)
3. According to Jefferson, why were the Jackson Five able to bring “youth culture back to Motown”? (195)
4. What does Jefferson mean when she says, “There was nothing compensatory about the Jackson Five’s popularity”? (198)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Jefferson that the Jackson Five’s hits made Michael “a sex toy”? (197)
- Is it possible for a child star to be protected against the kind of damage Michael Jackson and others sustained?

When Johnny Cash Visited Leavenworth

Albert Nussbaum

Why does the audience at the prison believe “Cash is real”? (204)

1. Why does Nussbaum point out that Cash came to Leavenworth “without advance publicity, fanfare, recording, taping, or filming”? (201)
2. Why does Nussbaum note that country music is popular in places “where music without a guitar just isn’t considered music”? (201)
3. Why do the bleachers fill up “hours before anyone could hope to see a show”? (202)
4. Why does June Carter tell the audience, “We’ve been to most of the good prisons—most of ’em”? (203)
5. Why does the man in the audience believe Cash means it when he says, “If there’s ever anything I can do for you all, let me know somehow, and I’ll do it”? (203)
6. What does Nussbaum mean when he calls Cash “a man’s man”? (204)
7. Why does Nussbaum describe Cash’s songs as “a man’s songs, full of life’s sad and unkind moments”? (204)
8. Why does Nussbaum conclude that Cash “has an empathy, a sympathy and an understanding for prisoners that would be difficult to counterfeit”? (204)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Why does sharing music often comfort people who are oppressed or imprisoned?
- How can you tell if a performer is “real” in Nussbaum’s sense?

Soul Survivor

David Remnick

According to Remnick, in what ways does the power of Franklin’s music stem from the “particular inheritance of the black church”? (211)

1. What does Remnick mean when he says that Franklin is most distinguished by her “musical intelligence”? (208)
2. Why does Remnick say that Franklin’s rendition of the song “Respect” is “as precise an artifact as a Ming vase”? (208)
3. Why does Remnick describe Franklin’s being paid in cash and keeping the money with her in her handbag while she performs?
4. Why does Remnick describe Franklin’s mink coat and her relationship to it?
5. Why does Remnick include quotes from W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, and Barack Obama?
6. Why does Remnick detail Franklin’s family history, including that her father gained “national fame by recording his sermons”? (212)
7. In Remnick’s view, what enabled Aretha Franklin to find “just the right blend of the church and the blues”? (215)
8. Why does Remnick consider Franklin’s album *Amazing Grace* “perhaps her most shattering and indispensable recording”? (217)
9. What does Remnick mean when he says that “in her reading, the blues always resides in gospel, and somehow this is her version of grace”? (218)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Ralph Ellison that some female performers embody an idea of aristocracy that is “more than mere class conceit”? (208)
- What other musical performers do you think have succeeded in transforming hardship and sorrow “into something full of beauty and vitality and hope”? (211)

Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play “The Star-Spangled Banner” at Woodstock

Sherman Alexie

Why does Victor’s father tell him stories in the days after each Jimi Hendrix “ceremony”?

1. Why does Victor’s father tell him that when Hendrix played “The Star-Spangled Banner” at Woodstock, “it was exactly how I felt”? (228)
2. Why does Victor believe his father is telling him stories because he feels “so guilty” after each “ceremony”? (229)
3. How does his father’s telling of stories function as “a means of apology” to Victor? (229)
4. Why does Victor’s father tell him, “Indians are pretty much born soldiers anyway. Don’t need a uniform to prove it”? (231)
5. Why is the conversation about war and Indians the kind “that Jimi Hendrix forced us to have”? (231)

Why do his experiences with his father lead Victor to think “music just might be the most important thing there is”? (231)

1. Why does Victor set the Jimi Hendrix “ceremony” in motion repeatedly? (228)
2. Why does Victor find new meaning in Hendrix’s version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” while he and his father are driving through a snowstorm? (230)
3. Why does Victor’s family take pictures of themselves lying next to Jimi Hendrix’s grave?
4. Why does Victor’s mother tell him that her marriage might be the only one “broken up by a dead guitar player”? (234)
5. Why does Victor think Robert Johnson “understood what it meant to be Indian on the edge of the twenty-first century”? (235)
6. Why does Victor listen to music on the nights he misses his father most?

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Because My Father Always Said . . . , *continued*

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- How do media representations of war affect attitudes toward it?
- Do you agree that music can compel people to have certain types of conversations?
- Why do famous artists become part of some people's emotional and spiritual lives?

Why the Shirelles Mattered

Susan J. Douglas

How did girl groups help female listeners in the early 1960s create “a knowing sorority”? (244)

1. Why did teenage girls in the 1960s look to “the record players, radios, and jukeboxes of America” for answers about how to negotiate the Sexual Revolution? (239)
2. In the early 1960s, why was music “the one area of popular culture in which adolescent female voices could be clearly heard”? (240)
3. Why did girl group music enable girls to “feel how desire—irresistible, irrational, timeless—was shaping our destinies”? (242–43)
4. How did the Supremes make it “perfectly normal for white girls to idolize and want to emulate their black sisters”? (249)

Why has much music criticism “ignored” or “trashed” girl groups? (239)

1. How does Douglas explain why many critics have not recognized “all the warring impulses, desires, and voices” girl-group music contains? (239)
2. Why does girl group music emphasize feelings of both “liberation and enslavement”? (246)
3. According to Douglas, why were black girl groups “more acceptable” to the music industry and to “white culture at large” than white girl groups? (248)
4. Why does Douglas consider the go-go girl dancing in a cage “one of the sicker, yet more apt, metaphors for the teen female condition during this era”? (250–51)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What lasting importance do you think girl group music has?
- Do you think music critics are more evenhanded in their assessment of female performers today?

Earbud

Bill Holm

How does the speaker feel about the earbud and the person wearing it?

1. Why is the earbud described as a “tiny marble sheathed in foam”?
2. Why are the sounds emanating from the earbud called “private noises”?
3. Why is “sudden silence” something to be protected from?
4. Why must the person wearing the earbud be “safe” from other noises?
5. Why does the poem shift from what the speaker observes and thinks about the person wearing the earbud to what the speaker does to the person wearing the earbud?
6. Why might the person wearing the earbud notice a touch on the arm but not a tornado or a polar bear?
7. Why does the speaker compare the earbud to a “shrunk lover waiting in your ear”?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- How has private music listening affected the way people engage with each other?
- Is it a good or a bad thing to be protected from “sudden silence”?

Salsa y La Naturaleza: How a Willie Colón Song Taught Me About Queerness and Love

Gabby Rivera

Why does listening to “El Gran Varón” enable Rivera and her father to communicate about her sexuality?

1. Why does Rivera describe her mother’s words as “Denial. Assured Denial. Aggravated Denial. Denial” when her mother insists that her father loves her? (256)
2. Why did hearing the Colon song “El Gran Varón” when she was seven press “stillness into my Pentecostal child-anxiety”? (257)
3. Why does Rivera cry for Simón, the protagonist of “El Gran Varón,” even though she can’t understand all the words?
4. Why does Rivera’s father tell her that Simón died of AIDS and that “His family didn’t love him anymore”? (258)
5. Why does Rivera describe how over the years the song “found space in the grooves of my fingertips, the tension behind my eyelids”? (258)
6. Why does Rivera describe her father allowing “El Gran Varón” to play without interruption as “a radical act”? (259)
7. Why does Rivera think that “Maybe if we could talk to our fathers there would be less shock and awe. We wouldn’t be at war”? (259)
8. Why does Rivera feel that “Simón died alone so that I didn’t have to”? (261)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- To what extent can music reshape listeners’ social or political convictions?
- What musical genres were you not allowed to listen to as a child?
- What song or songs have filled up “the spaces of confusion and shame” for you? (260)

Brainworms, Sticky Music, and Catchy Tunes

Oliver Sacks

Why does Sacks describe earworms as “the clearest sign of the overwhelming, and at times helpless, sensitivity of our brains to music”? (267)

1. What does Sacks mean when he describes musical imagery becoming “pathological”? (267)
2. What does Sacks mean when he speculates that aspects of music can act as “neural facilitators, setting up a circuit”? (266)
3. Why does Sacks say there are “attributes of musical imagery and musical memory that have no equivalents in the visual sphere”? (268)
4. What does Sacks mean when he describes an “almost defenseless engraving of music on the brain”? (269)
5. At what point does Sacks believe that “the balance sometimes shifts too far and our musical sensitivity becomes a vulnerability”? (269)
6. What does Sacks regard as the problems associated with “nonstop music”? (270)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do other art forms inspire or provoke similar compulsive internal repetitions?
- Do you agree with Sacks’ claim that “a visual or social scene can be constructed or reconstructed in a hundred different ways, but the recall of a musical piece has to be close to the original”? (269)

Reluctant Exegesis: “(I Bless the Rains Down in) Africa”

Steve Almond

Why does Almond see this Toto song as “the love child of Muzak and Imperialism”? (274)

1. Why does Almond imagine the reader “remembering, or rediscovering, how much you *love* ‘(I Bless the Rains Down in) Africa’ even as you’re hating yourself for this love”? (271)
2. Why does Almond characterize the song’s protagonist as “our hero”? (272)
3. Why does Almond say that “the old African” will supply “long-forgotten words or ancient melodies” because “all Africans, by definition, possess ancient melodies”? (272)
4. Why does Almond recount “the ‘Africa’ creation story”? (272)
5. Why does Almond say that it is unclear “what ‘solitary company’ might be, but never mind—Paich only had six months to work on the words”? (273)
6. Why does Almond include a paraphrase of the song, in the form of a letter from “our hero” to “Drought-Plagued Continent”? (274)
7. Why does Almond list the “quintessentially American attitudes” he believes the song expresses? (274)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you think popular music does more to reflect or to shape Americans’ views of the world?
- Does Almond convince you that “(I Bless the Rains Down in) Africa” is imperialist?

Good Citations: The Rise of the Rock Curator

Simon Reynolds

Why does Reynolds believe that music has become “disconnected from History” and is now focused on reflecting itself? (280)

1. Why does Reynolds say that when Brian Eno elevated the status of the curator, “he was slightly demoting—or at least, *recasting*—the role of the artist”? (276)
2. According to Reynolds, why did rock music go from being “a commentary on adolescent experience” to “at times substituting for it entirely”? (279)
3. How does Reynolds connect “the cancer of irony” to the sense that “pop history has come to a halt”? (280)
4. Is Reynolds admiring or criticizing Sonic Youth when he describes the group’s “relentless” curation? (281)
5. What is Reynolds’s attitude toward Numero Group’s musical “reparations programme”? (288)
6. Why does Reynolds suggest that “maybe forgetting is as essential for a culture” as it is for individuals? (290)
7. Why does Reynolds describe the box set as “music that’s been curated to death”? (291)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you think that curation of the kind that Reynolds describes can lead to important and emotionally affecting new music?
- Which bands or artists do you think are making original and socially relevant music today?

Beginning to See the Light

Ellen Willis

Why does Willis admit she is “turned on by the Sex Pistols,” despite her initial skepticism about punk? (293)

1. How does Willis reconcile her response to the Sex Pistols with her belief that “sexism combined with anger was always potentially fascistic”? (294)
2. Why does Willis go to a Halloween costume party dressed as a punk? (294)
3. Why does Willis describe liking the Sex Pistols as a “capitulation”? (296)
4. On what grounds does Willis reject the argument that she is “caught in the myth of the sixties”? (297)
5. Why does Willis feel that the Sex Pistols’ music helps her feel her anger about being “still oppressed as a woman” in the 1970s? (298)
6. Why does “the extremity of its disgust” that Willis hears in “Bodies” force her to recognize the same feeling in herself? (301)
7. Why does punk music with content that is “antiwoman, antisexual, in a sense antihuman” still encourage Willis’s “struggle for liberation”? (301)

Why does Willis believe that female musicians need to ask “not ‘How can I make them like me?’ but ‘How can I make them hear me?’” (301)

1. Why does Willis feel that although she enjoys music by female performers, “few have touched those specifically feminist yearnings”? (298)
2. Why does Willis think Patti Smith may be “afraid of her considerable power”? (299)
3. What qualities lead Willis to see Ms. Clawdy as more of a “feminist heroine” than Patti Smith? (299)
4. Why does Willis think a feminist separatist culture “was unlikely to be angry enough, or truthful enough, to be revolutionary”? (300)
5. Why does Willis conclude that “timid music made me feel timid, whatever its ostensible politics”? (301)

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Beginning to See the Light, *continued*

6. Why does Willis say, “Listening to most feminist music was like taking a warm bath”? (302)
7. Why does Willis end by quoting one of Ms. Clawdy’s songs?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you think the sound or attitude of a song is more important than its lyrical content?
- Do you agree that female musicians are more likely than male ones to ask “How can I make them like me”? (301)

Old Records Never Die: One Man's Quest for His Vinyl and His Past (selection)

Eric Spitznagel

Why does playing records with Heather make Spitznagel feel “intimacy, in a way I hadn’t experienced with an old friend in longer than I could remember”? (314)

1. Why does Spitznagel initiate this meeting with his first girlfriend, twenty-five years after they last saw each other?
2. Why is Spitznagel “speechless” when Heather tells him she might have been in a Bon Jovi video? (305)
3. Why has it taken Spitznagel twenty-five years to admit to Heather that he hates the Bon Jovi song they are listening to? (306)
4. Why does Spitznagel focus on re-purchasing the music he “actually consumed” as a teenager, rather than what he brags about liking? (306)
5. Why does Spitznagel feel “drawn” to “*Attila* Billy Joel”? (310)
6. Why does Spitznagel say that “the records felt like an indispensable part” of what happened between him and Heather? (314)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you think most people secretly like music that is different from the music they talk about liking?
- Does listening to music together foster a different type of intimacy between people?
- How much has the shift away from physical formats for music changed listeners’ relationships to music?

Just a Little Bit: Loudness

Ben Ratliff

According to Ratliff, in music what distinguishes loudness with artistic value from loudness without it?

1. Does Ratliff believe that “silence, or at least dynamics, is good for us”? (315)
2. According to Ratliff, why is it that “now most people agree that loudness has no artistic value in and of itself”? (316)
3. Why does Ratliff identify the “Motown beat” and the need for music to be heard during car travel as the beginning of modern musical loudness? (316)
4. Why does Ratliff describe popular music’s loudness in the late 1960s as “a new form of colonialism”? (316)
5. Why does the loudness of Blue Cheer’s “Just a Little Bit” still seem to Ratliff like “a new gift”? (317)
6. What does Ratliff mean when he says “There is no such thing as loudness. There is only weird or surprising loudness”? (318)
7. How does Ratliff distinguish between a “blaring” musical recording and a “loud” one? (319)
8. Why does Ratliff find the white noise in “Titanium” its “most awful aspect”? (321)
9. Why does Ratliff think it is crucial to the listener that Fushitsusha’s loudness “always appears to be a choice”? (322)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Can you recall a “frightening and formative encounter with loudness” in music? (321)
- Do you agree with Ratliff’s claim that wealth and quietness go together?
- In the music you enjoy, how important is dynamic range?

Let's Talk About Love

Carl Wilson

What does Wilson mean when he says that while we've stopped using the word "taste," we pay it "tribute by way of repression"? (325)

1. How does Wilson explain why we don't want to admit we have anything "so stuffy or confining as having a system" for what we do and don't like? (325)
2. What does Wilson mean when he says, "That way we never have to answer the question, 'Who do you mean, "we" ' ? (325)
3. Why does immersing himself in Céline Dion's music force Wilson "to admit I have a taste"? (326)
4. To Wilson, why is the worst part of fearing the neighbors will hear him playing Dion's album "feeling ashamed to feel ashamed"? (326)
5. Why does Wilson want music criticism to put more emphasis on "depicting its enjoyment"? (331)

Why does Wilson think we should stop "campaigning for our preferences to be generally adopted"? (330)

1. Why does Wilson come to see his earlier determination to be "*taken in*" by some music as also "refusing an invitation *out*"? (326)
2. According to Wilson, why does Dion "[stink] of democracy"? (326)
3. How does Wilson explain why we invest "so much cultural capital" in the "muscular aesthetic judgment"? (327)
4. What does Wilson mean when he writes that "the kind of contempt that's mobilized by 'cool' taste is inimical . . . to an aesthetics that might support a good public life"? (329)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Wilson that music critics should focus more on depicting enjoyment and less on judgment?
- Is it productive to argue about matters of taste?
- Do you agree with Wilson that art has now "journeyed beyond the end of taste"? (332)