

Print Run

New music books and publications

A Is For Anarchist: An ABC Book For Activists
billy woods & M Musgrove
Universe Hbk 48 pp

If you approached the average billy woods fan and told them that the New York rapper had written a book, I doubt there would be much surprise. The depth and expanse of woods's lyricism suggests that he has got at least one book in him. Instead, the surprise might come from the fact that he decided to write a children's book. In 2022, I reviewed UK hip-hop artist Lee Scott's *Swan Songs* [*The Wire* 456], in which I labelled him as the first rapper to debut with a fiction novel. Well, this time round, I think I'm right in saying that billy woods is the first rapper to debut with a children's book.

As surprises go, this one makes a lot more sense when you get to grips with the book itself. The son of a Zimbabwean revolutionary and a Jamaican intellectual, woods wanted to write something cool to read to his children, and what could be cooler than a comically cynical and subversive take on the more conventional ABC format? It's a method that manages to repackage the same energy that populates woods's music onto a platform for a less mature audience, but without any hint of condescension.

From the outset, *A Is For Anarchist* conveys what are still considered radical notions (but shouldn't be), in a much more digestible form for younger readers. The titular anarchist is described as someone who doesn't like rules, or being told what to do, before pointing out that you, the reader, are already an anarchist. Match this up with M Musgrove's illustration of a monarch's legs poking out of a bonfire and you have the recipe for a delightfully entertaining book that should bring as much joy to any adult playing the role of narrator, as it will to the children themselves.

M Musgrove is the perfect partner for woods on this adventure, having previously collaborated with him on various projects, including an award-winning music video for "Stonefruit" by Armand Hammer and The Alchemist, and some artwork for woods's solo album *Hiding Places*. Her illustrations are easily adjustable to the needs of this literary world, their whimsical nature making them the perfect counterpart to the definitions put forward in woods's prose. Two parts amusement to one part abstraction, Musgrove's drawings further capture the reader's fascination.

If a lot of the letters in *A Is For Anarchist* follow along the same direct lines as the title – C is for communism, F is for fascism, and so on – there are also more subtle moments. W explains that walls are all around us, then asks if they are made "to keep people out or to trap us inside"; and elsewhere K defines knees as things that help us run, jump or stand up, for

example if you need to stand up to a racist police state. Rap music gets a mention too, thanks to I, standing for Nas's *Illmatic*, aka "the best rap album of all time".

All in all, I couldn't think of a better plan and execution for a contemporary children's book. It is certainly the kind of book I wish I had been exposed to as a child, and it will be one I share with my own son in a few years' time.

Tim Fish

A Licence To Rock And Pop: An Inventory Of Attitude

James Fry

Slimvolume Pbk 272 pp

This step by step guide to how to be a rock 'n' roll cliché is not so much a manifesto as a child's first primer, offering illustrated chapters including "How To Swear", "Do You Like My New Hair?" and "Yes, Smoking". At the back of the book is an exhaustive 18 page form, featuring knowingly invasive questions on the reader's recent experience of sex, witchcraft and terrorism. Submitting this to the publisher will result in the licence of the title being issued or withheld.

The body of the book is self-consciously modelled after Marshall McLuhan's mosaic books (most obviously, *The Medium Is The Massage*) and tonal tactics follow the textual. McLuhan promoted amusement over anger, escapism via alienation. Which is presumably why every point here feels so blanketed in irony that it's hard to know if Fry cares, or indeed whether we're supposed to. But, where McLuhan's illuminated texts are designed to be opened at random and microdosed, Fry explicitly demands we consume all of his in "their natural order". Of course, the meta-game here is surely that no one with any attitude would follow such instructions – any who do will fail the test. A decent joke, if so.

After laying the book down, I've found I do care. I ask myself why the advice – however tongue in cheek – seems to belong to another pre-internet world. I've wondered how iconic images of old school rock attitude have informed BIMM seminars on Stadium Stage Presence or the hyper-styling of state-sponsored K-Pop. I've tried to imagine whether there's an audience for such widescreen postures, when even *The X-Factor* (built around 'star quality') lies in pixelated ruins.

The fact is, today's Alexanders, Alexandras (and maybe even Alexas, if we're dragging vocaloids into it) weep because they have no more mainstream to conquer. A shared, top-down culture didn't entirely capsize so much as list sideways – pluggers and chroniclers alike eclipsed by algorithms endlessly injecting eerily accurate playlists (new and old) into our taste bubbles.

And, in a multi-dimensional world – where a Schrödinger's cam model can be both famous and utterly obscure at once – the kind of bombast perfected for big stages is pure

cultural cringe. Today's exciting technologies – from generative software to prescription meds to queer theory – swerve aspirations to imperial fame precisely because the centre didn't hold. Likewise, all listeners and fans are floaters, without the sunk-cost loyalty of album ownership.

It takes an industry to raise a star, and music – out-competed by gaming – is ever more DIY. Seizing the means of (micro) production has helped many musicians, though being their own manager, PR, (bedroom) producer, etc, also diffuses their identity, making most of them (rightly!) more spectral than spectacular. And, in creating inner spaces where fans become patrons, where feedback becomes synthesis, artists turn thrillingly inside out – streaming knowledge via 'making of' documents, giving lessons, listening back. Fantastical memes cum biomes result.

Ultimately, micro-expressions mix better than propagandist posturing. Attitude was always armour; intimacy is where things really happen. If there's hope for rock and pop, it's in the wormholes – where light from dead stars is not required.

Neil Noon

Going Out: Walking, Listening, Soundmaking
Elena Biserna (Editor)

Q-02 Pbk 580 pp

At 11am on Saturday 16 May 1970, The Scratch Orchestra disrupted Richmond High Street in West London. Following scores composed by members Judith Euren and Psi Ellison, the group set out to break the "claustrophobic spell of capitalist normalcy". To that end, a diverse array of tactics were employed. "Either shout or whisper in conversation", ran one set of instructions. "As a group stand and stare in a shop window – humm automatically."

At one point, the group held hands in a long chain across the length of a shop floor in order to "sever Marks And Spencer's". A balloon popping in the middle of another department store succeeded in producing "imbalance" in a branch of Dickins & Jones. It was, in orchestra member Stefan Szczelkun's recollection, "quite harmless but unbelievably dramatic in its effect". The group made a quick exit, heading up the Vineyard Passage and on, following an itinerary which took this movable concert from Richmond Park to Kew Gardens via the River Thames.

Walking, by May 1970, was already a fairly established part of artistic practice. In 1921, André Breton had led a Dada Excursion through the Latin Quarter of Paris, offering nonsense commentary along the way in a parody of the city tourist guide. In the early 1960s, Fluxus artists Benjamin Patterson, Yoko Ono and Dick Higgins had all composed instructional pieces for walkers, albeit not always strictly practical or even possible. Later in the decade, land artist Richard Long had trampled a straight line through a meadow,

and photographed and exhibited the results under the title *A Line Made By Walking*. Adrian Piper had successfully “compress[ed] time and space” by walking around a single New York City block (between 13th and 14th Street and Fifth and Sixth Avenue), recording two hours of “undifferentiated noise” while traversing the block’s outer pavement and then playing it back at double speed while walking the inner pavement. Yet, despite Saint Augustine’s definition of music as *bene modulandi* (moving well), the act of walking remains underappreciated as a form of music.

But as the anthropologist Tim Ingold’s essay here asserts, walking is inseparable from its own “characteristic rhythmic alternation”. Every promenade is at once performance and score. It has texture and pulse, cleaving a path through sound even as sound cleaves through us. In short, as Ingold puts it, “sound walks, just as you do”.

In the years following Scratch Orchestra’s intervention in London, participants in Vancouver’s World Soundscape Project came to define the soundwalk (in Hildegard Westerkamp’s formulation) as “any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment”. Along with related terms (like soundmark and soundscape), the coinage has proven influential. Flicking through the book we find soundwalks by Andra McCartney, Jacek Smolicki, Ultra-red, Edyta Jarzab, Amanda Gutierrez and Christine Sun Kim. But as researcher Charles Eppley notes, Kim’s 2016 work (*LISTEN*), intended for both hearing and deaf participants, presents a critique of “modes of soundwalking that perpetuate oppressive systems of power, especially those that naturalise and normalise hearing and/or environments as neutral spaces of perception and consumption”.

Ingold also takes World Soundscape Project’s terminology to task, finding it too aloof from its environment. “The chorus is not already laid out,” he writes, “it is ever-unfolding... The shapes of sound... can only be made out. And in making them, we make out ourselves as well.” Following Ingold, Elena Biserna’s research makes a compelling case for walking as a “relational practice”. Walking, she writes, establishes both “a radical departure from the spaces and practices specific to art” and “a symbiotic relationship between work and everyday space”. Or in David Helbich’s terms, it can make a piece less “piece-ish”, allowing the work to “retreat into the background”, perhaps even “be forgotten”, but crucially to “leave one changed” nonetheless.

Robert Barry

I Feel Everything You Say, I Feel Everything You Hear

Jan Lankisch (Editor)

Strzelecki Hbk 166 pp

This handsomely presented volume is collated to celebrate ten years of the Cologne based festival Week-End, whose idiosyncratic line-ups are a snapshot of its curators’ favourite artists year on year. To reflect this ethos of personal fandom, over 20 artists who have performed at the festival have been invited to recall a moment, a musician or a place that has shaped their own taste and artistry – aiming to



Flohio

collectively form “the building blocks of a new or different oral history of recent music”.

The chosen subjects are appropriately varied. Sound artist Pak Yan Lau and rapper Flohio talk about cities integral to their work (Brussels and London respectively) and Stephen Pastel writes evocatively about Glasgow (“We’ve tried to reflect the city in our sound, the sense of moving between sandstone tenements”). Hans-Joachim Roedelius discusses West Berlin’s Zodiac Free Arts Lab, and Claire Rousay talks about San Antonio’s The Lonesome Rose, beloved for idiosyncratic music programming varying from country to experimental.

The book’s title comes from Can’s “I’m So Green”, aptly reflected in Stephen Malkmus’s recollection of his performance of its parent album *Ege Bamyasi* at a 2012 festival: “My kids were carefree and crushing some of the greatest play structures known to man in Berlin.” A real highlight is Eiko Ishibashi on composer Jack Nitzsche – an enigmatic reflection of an enigmatic musical persona: “I just love his music, which seems to be telling you something, but actually tells you nothing at all, like coarse sand that falls between your fingers, full of resignation and defeat.”

Some discuss musical mentors and collaborators. Suzanne Ciani confesses to developing a friendship with Don Buchla by way of coveting one of his synths, and Jan St Werner of Mouse On Mars shares some typically funny anecdotes about working with Mark E Smith on the 2007 Von Südenfed album (“Mark’s workday routine was special. It was almost as if he was unionised”). Engineer and producer Scientist recalls being dub master King Tubby’s protégé, and the bittersweet feeling of seeing his techniques popularised after his death: “It would be like the guy who made the first aeroplane, if he woke up out of his grave now and saw what these guys do here with the aeroplanes, he would be laughing his ass off.”

Entries such as Ishibashi’s are more like written essays, whereas others seem to be direct transcriptions of speech. This works for some contributors, like Flohio, whose vocal cadence contributes to the feel of the words. But with others, such as Marshall Allen, the

lack of editing distractingly scatters profound statements amid filler speech.

In one of the longest entries, Brazilian musician Gilberto Gil addresses his lifelong friendship and musical kinship with composer Caetano Veloso, but as someone not so familiar with either’s work I craved more contextualisation. Indeed, given how its featured artists come from all corners of the underground, surely nobody reading this book can be fully familiar with all the subjects covered in their short contributions. *I Feel Everything You Say, I Feel Everything You Hear* is more effective as a companion to its parent festival than a standalone volume.

Claire Biddles

Improvisation: Orphic Art In The Age Of Jazz

Simon Shaw-Miller

Bloomsbury Hbk 336 pp

Improvisation – it’s not a typo. For author Simon Shaw-Miller, the term captures the connections between improvisation and visual art. Central to early 20th century abstract art was Walter Pater’s dictum that visual art aspires to the condition of music. For most writers, the music in question is Western art music – classical music. But Shaw-Miller makes the case that the most important parallel is with jazz. Arguing that jazz and abstract art share creative techniques of rhythm and improvisation, his book offers a novel interpretation of improvisation as aesthetic principle and artistic practice.

What does it mean for art to aspire to the condition of music? The essential idea is that music is the most abstract of the arts – and that painting should be abstract too, rather than depict objects or even represent a three-dimensional space. The book’s subtitle *Orphic Art In The Age Of Jazz* refers to a post-cubist art movement tending towards abstraction. The term Orphism was coined in 1912–13 by French poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire, after the mythical poet and musician Orpheus.

Apollinaire was referring to a movement that bridged the gap between cubism and pure abstraction, in particular the work of Robert and Sonia Delaunay. He believed that making painting aspire to the condition of music was vital to this development. Shaw-Miller defines the Orphic tendency in early abstract painting more generally, covering figures such as Duchamp, Picabia, Kupka and Kandinsky.

He cites novelist and critic Ralph Ellison, who in his 1964 collection of essays *Shadow And Act* aligned jazz, improvisation and visual art. For Ellison, jazz has an internal contradiction – it’s an art of individual assertion within and against the group. I agree that this is true of some jazz, but many improvisors draw sympathetically from each other. Lee Konitz and Dick Katz, for instance, in a trio version of “Weaver Of Dreams” from 1975, almost complete each other’s phrases.

I’d also take issue with Shaw-Miller’s assumption that most musical cultures have improvisation. I’m not sure that the term has application before the 18th century composer/performer divide in Western art music – when the composer became a desk worker who produced scores. Only then can we talk about an opposition between improvisation and composition. Finally, I’d question the