

FEATURE: ALTERNATIVE LIT-STYLES

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## ***The Dance of Language***

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RICK PERNOD

***THE GIFT OUTRIGHT* (RECORDING)**

M.L. Liebler

Schoolkid's Records

523 East Liberty, Ann Arbor, MI 48104

**\$15.99**

M.L. Liebler's new recording, *The Gift Outright*, is part of a growing phenomenon of poetry-music collaborations that have become available on compact disc and tape. Over the past five years or so, the continuing democratization of poetry and an increasingly inexpensive and accessible technology have contributed to an inundation of releases that number in the hundreds, and maybe thousands. In effect, anyone who chooses to call him (or herself) a poet, for several hundred dollars, can produce a recording out of his own garage and market it in a variety of inexpensive ways. One of the results is the lack of any set standard that an editor in print, for example, might supply, resulting in a wildly broad spectrum of quality, from the willy-nilly production values of a home recording, to a more sophisticated effort, such as Allen Ginsberg's *The Lion For Real*, distributed by the well-established Island Records. Although the maze of good, bad, and indifferent becomes quite difficult to navigate, it is nonetheless hard to ignore a growing trend that includes such fine poets as Sekou Sundiata, Barry Wallenstein, Jayne Cortez, and Vernon Frazier, just to mention a few.

In the blending of pop art and poetry, M.L. Liebler understands his roots. On *The Gift Outright*, Liebler, in collaboration with The Magic Poetry Band, has acknowledged his debt to the attitudinal significance of popular culture and its influence on poetry. The sensual expressiveness of rhythm and sound that is shared by poetry and music, in this case jazz, rock, and rhythm & blues, is well illustrated by the Detroit-based poet and his band. Indeed, this and much of what has often been condescendingly called "performance poetry" can perhaps be viewed as a reaction against the sometimes inexpressive, formulaic virtuosity of the academy and its writing workshops. It may also be an attempt to return to a poetry that is sensually, as well as conceptually, adept. One of the great pleasures of a sensually sophisticated poet, such as Milton or Shakespeare, is the strong musicality and physical pleasure of language capable of producing a frisson in the listener. Poet John Logan said, "Poetry is a ballet for the ear. Without the dance of language, the music and rhythm, nobody believes the vision."

But is it poetry? Does it work on the page? One can almost hear these de rigueur questions before they even form on the lip, eyebrows raised like cynical flags atop the walls defending the sanctity of the printed poem. And while I agree that poetry must display a music that is inherent, that comes about

through the dance of its own language and without the need for external support, I also believe that there is room, as well as a tradition, for the concourse between the two art forms. In Liebler's case, his poems gain energy, lyricism, and texture through the synergistic effect his band's particular music provides.

The mutuality that exists between poetry and music is certainly not anything new. For better or worse, and it can be said to be both at times, the division between poetry and musical lyric has always been blurred to some extent. Poetic forms such as villanelles, pantoums, triolets, sonnetos, and cansones were all derived from folk music. Prayers were set to music in the Middle Ages, the words of minstrels and troubadours were accompanied by music, poets read to bal-musette bands in the 19th century, and the intense interaction between jazz and poetry in the 20th century has been rich. Some of the more rewarding collaborations between jazz and poetry include the work of such poets as Langston Hughes, Kenneth Rexroth, Jack Kerouac, Amiri Baraka, and Jayne Cortez, in conjunction with musicians like Charles Mingus, Pepper Adams, Zoot Sims, David Murray, and Ornette Coleman. Rap, dub poetry, blues, and the poetic elements present in the half-spoken lyrics of so many contemporary singer-songwriters all expand a field in which we experience, to use Amiri Baraka's phrase, "music running into words."

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*It is good to be reminded that poetry is oral by tradition . . .*

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In M. L. Liebler's case, we see an attempt at a synthesis between the two art forms, which is at times quite successful. The poems, printed out in the liner notes (a good idea for anybody considering this format), although conceptually expressive, making ample use of irony, metaphor, imagery, and other poetic ingredients, often do not work as well on the page as they do when read with the music. This of course, by my very own noted standard, does not in and of itself detract from the artistic merit of the recording. The thirteen selections found on this recording were seemingly composed with music in mind, and the blending of the music with the poetry enhances the effectiveness of the compositions. On the first selection, "Success I Spit!" the carefree, almost frivolous calypso melody and beat work in necessary counterpoint to a language that could seem a bit heavy-handed and tendentious otherwise:

I ask you?  
Did you ever swim in a  
filthy ditch?  
Did your mind ever switch,  
from sorrow to joy?  
From man to boy?

Success I spit!  
Climb the ladder,  
fall to laughter,  
your wrists are slit....

Liebler moves back and forth from speaking to singing, employing an often incantatory style that is religious in its intensity, and the power of the work is as much due to the power and manipulation of his voice as it is to his language's mere verbal energy. His changing of pitch and tone, and the holding of words over several beats, are all effective musical devices. Liebler seems to favor a rapid-fire delivery that is more reminiscent of certain rock, punk, and R & B singers than of the half-sung, heightened, jazz-influenced language of a Jack Kerouac, for instance.

On "Picture of a Man," The Magic Poetry Band, comprised of Bill Blank on drums, Steve Bitto on

guitars, and Michael Smith on bass guitar, uses a James Brown-type funk riff, and Liebler half-singing in juxtaposition to the scratchy guitars and backbeat builds up drama and tension:

Here, in this picture, is  
A man being eclipsed  
By a twilight  
That is as dark as sharks  
Swallowing the pale blue lights....

In fact, most of the compositions seem riff-driven, whether Caribbean, rock, or rhythm & blues. Liebler's voice skates over the instrumentation, the beat propelling him and enforcing improvised phrasings, which use repetition and varying rhythms to good effect. The pieces that work the best achieve a balance between conceptual and sensual expressiveness; and, as a result, the emotional content of the poetry seems fortified.

If these poems were printed as performed, the reader might be turned off. Liebler's spoken lines have been assimilated to the music's measure; against this performance the page sometimes suffers. What can be an effective musical maneuver, such as chanting a line over and over, can become tiresome in print, so some adaptation has taken place in the liner notes. Language in a poem set to music seems to work better if there is space for the successful interplay between the two art forms. In other words, there has to be some room left for the music to maneuver. For the most part, Liebler's poems do engage the listener verbally as well as musically, and the fact that it functions best as a unified piece serves as its own validation.

Where the work on occasion falls short is when the poetry becomes too much in service to Liebler's politics. These instances of sociological art can seem doctrinaire. The rants on the evils of capitalism, nationalism, and racism at times sound like sloganeering and run the danger of approaching self-parody. I was reminded of James Joyce's (Stephen Daedalus's) distinction between what he deems as art that exists for art's sake, "the divinely superfluous beauty" that induces esthetic arrest, and art whose sole purpose it is to induce desire or loathing for a particular object. Liebler, on occasion, runs closer to the latter didactic mode of art.

Overall, I found that the compositions on *The Gift Outright* have a synergetic power that functions quite well as its *raison d'être*. The energy and lyricism of the music are a suitable match for Liebler's words and voice. In closing, Amiri Baraka, a poet who has done some of the most powerful music-poetry collaborations we have on record, further reminds us of the mutuality of music and poetry: "Poetry, first of all, was and still must be a musical form. It is speech musicked. It must be powerful, must reach to where speech begins, as sound, and bring the sound into full focus as highly rhythmic communication." It is good to be reminded that poetry is oral by tradition and is not fated to diminution in the company of its kindred art.

*Rick Pernod is the founder and director of Exoterica, a Bronx-based literary organization. His new release, "The Monkey Trap," a spoken-word recording, was made public this Spring.*

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