
MAKING SENSE OF SOUND: READING THE SONGS OF MARK KNOPFLER AS AURAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract: Popular song tells stories that engage one at various levels . Auditory images create an aural landscape that is built by the listener, musician and lyricist creating a semantic harmony.

The songs of Mark Knopfler create an aural world, though steeped in a certain tradition ,that is peopled by characters who have a universal appeal. Is it his songs that have cut across global cultural barriers or do the listeners find themselves mirrored in his aural community...a bourgeois Camelot so to speak?

This paper explores his characters , their stories and how his music tells the story of the citizen of the World today.His work truly represents a 'Worlded art'.

It also strives to make a case for the introduction or re introduction of music studies as a part of literary studies. Film Studies is a almost a regular part of Literary studies Programmes but music, especially popular music is relegated a secondary role as part of Popular Culture studies or Culture Studies. However , music supplements an understanding of verbal text to a large extent and therefore deserves a closer examination.This paper will explore one album of Mark Knopfler's as a revisiting of the American dream in an attempt to establish the literary quotient supplemented and thereby heightened by his use of music , chiefly his guitar.

Keywords: audiotopia ,aurality, aural narratives, , song in performance, sound scapes.

Introduction: Considering Time and Space are presuppositions of meaning, then the intersection of these two would create an essential aspect of a narrative: locale.

For instance , in *A Fine Balance* , Rohinton Mistry's fine novel set against the backdrop of the Emergency in India, the readily identifiable space is Bombay 's street life. However the menacing omniscience of the backdrop of the breakdown of Government machinery that resulted in the declaration of a State of Emergency is the locale that ultimately provides the violence of Fate that drives the destinies of the four central characters. It is the intersection of the four lives that creates the tragic tension that the story derives its momentum from.

Marking time and space in a narrative is often assumed to be achieved through detailed descriptions and life like settings. While this may prove valuable in identifying location more markers or supplements may serve to breathe life into such construction.

Sailing To Philadelphia was released on 26 September 2000 as an album of 13 songs that mark the progress of British singer Mark Knopfler's solo career(the second album of his solo career) as songwriter, composer, guitarist and vocalist. It was released internationally by Vertigo Records internationally, and by Warner Bros Records in the United States

As the title suggests , the album is a compilation, a veritable anthology of the seemingly natural progress of all productions to America .It appears as though all pop music productions must pass through tis ritualistic baptism of fire before they are disseminated across the globe.Knopfler himself acknowledges ' The Americanisation of our culture

comes later but always comes'(Knopfler) .Things must go the American way before they are acknowledged by the rest of the world.

The opening track , *What it is...*(Knopfler)is a vivid description of the current scenario in England, folks cursing the government as they shovel hot food down and staggering out of the drinking dens looking for someone's arms to fall into. This universal stereotype of any developed nation's populace is interspersed with a nostalgic string of images...the castle and the keep, the lone piper stands, there's frost on the graves and the monuments and there's the ghosts of Dirty Dick and Lil Nell chasing each other down. While the breathless series of images need no defence in their ability to evoke in Knopfler's own phraseology 'another Time, another Place' (Knopfler) a universal experience of antiquity interwoven with modernity is achieved, the hallmark of the modern city .

Aural spatiality is challenging to map as the aural experience is brief and immediate. It is often believed that music does not have semantic meaning , but cognitive meaning. The lyric as soon as it is read becomes verbal text and therefore is again isolates the listening experience.

Kant called music a language of the emotions and Hegel called it a language of sentiment.

Most anthologies of English poetry begin "Caedmon's Hymn." The word hymn is a clue to the blend of poetry and music: both were combined in religious liturgy and ceremony in most cultures, and were essential modes of communication in oral cultures. The ancient Greeks accompanied poetry performance with music - the poet carried a lyre (hence lyric) onstage, and today, cradles a guitar

The album *Sailing to Philadelphia* (Knopfler) is structured like an anthology. Despite the nautical, maritime feel of the title, the cover art is a departure from this image and depicts instead a view of a soaring aircraft (he refers to them in *Silver Town Blues* as steel birds) from the window of an airborne aircraft going by the clouds that suggest a 'sea' of sorts.

The metaphor of the pilgrim fathers sailing to Philadelphia is established as an analogy for the route to success seeming to lie in a modern day jet age journey via America.

The songs read like chapters in a travel book, each a vignette of certain aspects, not always the most easily associated but nevertheless truly representative of the American way of life.

Knopfler, in the tradition of Shakespeare and Chaucer employs characters whose life tell a story. He successfully employs the technique of negative capability, maintaining an objective anonymity in evolving characters. So we are easily transported to their worlds, strange yet familiar. One does not need to have ever set foot in a Las Vegas casino to be able to visualise the gangster scene in *El Macho*. Nor to have visited America to be able to savour the wistful almost love song in *Prairie Wedding*, where the gruff ranch dweller is bashful at the sight of the none too exotic Mary, who he blushinglly likens to Eve, suffusing a ranch marriage of convenience with the new glow of a latter day Eden.

Speedway at Nazareth is a good insight into the open wheel car racing, if historically he has taken some liberties and *One Last Matinee* gives us the perspective of two aging vaudeville actresses, the oldest ugly sisters in variety, Knopfler calls them.

Each of these songs open up a cultural space that contributes to another layer of America that is all often disregarded for more easily recognizable ones such as Disneyland or Hollywood. One is left with a feeling of familiarity, of having been among old friends, conversing about things only we probably remember and with an anxiety that not everyone gets what he's referring too. Europe views America as a large canvas to paint on, adding highlights, shadows and in general, finding meaning for their own existence in the production the American world identity (Joffe 597-626). In this case, it is a series of songs that paint America for us. Or rather fill in colour and detail on a sketch that we carry with us.

The two opening songs from the internationally released album are being examined for their musical nuances. Sound here supplements verbal text to create an aural spatial experience.

What it is.. (Knopfler):

- All instruments build up into the main riff thus adding a sense of texture to a cityspace.
- Violin accentuates lack of vocal lines. The Violin also compliments the mild vocal lines. Slight Melancholic tone is achieved thus establishing a sense of yearning for presumably the loss of a beautiful past in the headlong rush towards progress.
- At 1:11, the guitar slides upwards. Knopfler runs his left hand up the frets to create an upward surge of sound thus creating a soaring effect, building up the city frenzy.
- Jazz Organ plays at 'Bagpiper..' ' line to add mystery and suspense. The organ plays a sustained note that swells in and fades out. the organ lends a tone of mystery and suspense that hints at ghosts from the past.
- At 2:09, the string section becomes less fluid, more staccato thus creating a chugging effect. This signifies a sense of 'travel' and movement, and accentuates the soaring guitar solo.
- The slow part in the middle, sans percussion, creates a sense of wonder. It is also closely related with that feeling of wonder and uncertainty one is struck by on entering an unfamiliar place. The song seems to work on the an arching feel of wonder, familiarity, uncertainty, nostalgia and wonder again.

Sailing To Philadelphia(Knopfler):

- 'Sailing To Philadelphia' and 'What it Is' are on the same scale (F#min -F Sharp Minor)
- The two songs seem to flow into each other because they are on the same scale, thus achieving a sense of continuity supporting the continuity of theme.
- Therefore 'What it is' sets the location, and with 'Sailing to Philadelphia' the story begins.
- Dynamics are at play here which is the modulation of the sound. The flow and ebb of volume, chords and diction of the song/lyrics all serve to set the tone from a sense of again uncertainty to determination, thus capturing the corresponding emotions of the two young British surveyors, Jeremiah Dixon and Charles Mason, who sailed to Philadelphia to pursue their passion in Astronomy and Cartography.
- By using two vocalists and harmonies, he establishes a first person perspective from two different voices. The voices employed are Knopfler's own controlled baritone and James Taylor's tenor thus capturing to near perfection two separate personas

The above analysis is limited to only the opening two songs for the sake of brevity. It studies the elements of composition that creates a certain aura. This album

recaptures the pioneering spirit of discovery and exploration that the Pilgrim Fathers embodied and that every individual's rediscovery of America still entails. The music supplements these moods and tones through the composition, choice of voice and instruments, use of techniques and effects.

By supplementing verbal texts through music a spatiality is achieved that often lingers long after the sound has died ensuring that the lyric lives on. For

instance the lyrics of What it is..lack cohesion as it is largely a catalogue of images of a cityscape with hardly any linkers . However the music provides the cohesion thus creating a fluid series of interlinked images rather than a fragmented list, thus achieving an aural landscape that situates us in a particular locale and prepares us for the journey ahead through America.

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