

music

this week's essential reading

‘It was written: books by rappers’ by James Guida, N+1

‘Rap is poetry,’ says Jay-Z, ‘and a good emcee is a good poet.’ But a good emcee is a good emcee; isn’t that enough? Why the grasping for literary stature?

Improving with age

A new box set celebrating blues legend Bessie Smith is one of a number of excellent retrospective packages drawn from America’s musical archives, writes Andy Battaglia

“It’s hard to love someone when that someone don’t love you.” There, in that fateful conflagration of words, lies the essential source code of the blues – especially when transmitted through the ages by a timeless voice still resonant after nearly 90 years of scratchy, hissy history.

Bessie Smith, to be sure, was timeless and resonant, plus much more: booming, cooing, cocksure, coy, hateful, happy. She was hallowed too, in her 1920s-1930s prime and all the more – with posterity in line to back her – now. Was she the greatest singer to ever live? Certainly there are other worthy candidates, and declarations of this sort are made to be debated. But listen to Smith at the right moment, preferably alone at night with the lights down low, and there is no contest.

Smith sang on the then-new medium of vinyl records from 1923 to 1933, and almost all of them are collected in a new 10-CD set called *The Complete Columbia Recordings: Bessie Smith*. It’s a lot of music – just under nine hours’ worth – but Smith has almost supernatural ways of paying back any conceivable amount of time and emotion invested.

Her voice is so steeped in the blues that it turns even her most pained proclamations into celebrations of toil and torment. It’s hard to be alive, she seems to say, but the only alternative is to be dead. That would be worse, of course – or would it? In one song, *Haunted House Blues*, Smith suggests otherwise: “I’m so worried and I’m blue all the time,” she sings. “Tell the undertaker to fix that old coffin of mine.”

It’s not the only song in which Smith digs the prospect of dying. In *Cemetery Blues*, she moans, “I’m going down to the cemetery, ‘cause the world is all wrong. Down there with the spooks to hear ‘em sing my

sorrow song.” In a place so still, she even finds a suitor in the form of a corpse – a man, unlike others more liable to run around, she always knows where to find. “If you want true loving, go and get the cemetery kind!”

That’s the blues and then some. But then, life is not all bad. When she directs her phenomenon of a voice to “trouble, trouble” itself, Smith sounds like she couldn’t be more flush or fulfilled. That happens in *Down Hearted Blues*, a classic now consecrated in the United States government’s National Recording Registry, a collection of 350 recordings meant to pay tribute to America’s audio legacy. (Others include field recordings of Passamaquoddy Indians from 1890, the first transatlantic radio broadcast from 1925, a Beethoven overture played by a high-school orchestra, and *Daydream Nation* by the noise-rock band Sonic Youth.)

Down Hearted Blues is also the song with the “hard to love someone when that someone don’t love you” sentiment, which Smith sings as if it’s a condition so common as to be known, intimately, by everyone. Which it is, if we’re lucky.

Other conditions find Smith’s favour, such as ones amenable to abundant love. In *Mama’s Got the Blues*, she ticks through a list of

paramours available to her in cities all over the American south. (“If you don’t like my peaches,” she implores the men at her attention, “please let my orchard be.”)

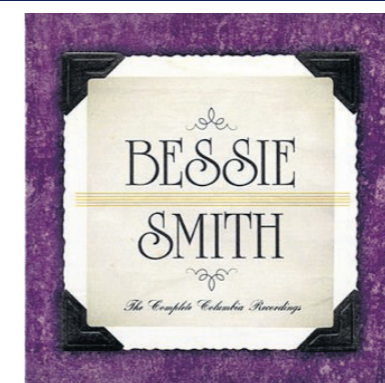
In another song, she inventories all the sundries she desires – “furs and things ... diamond rings ... airplanes, motorcars, and such” – and makes her prospects of getting them clear to the admirer who might come up short: “if you don’t, I know who will.” In yet another, she hisses at a conniving man on the make: “aggravatin’ papa, don’t you try and two-time me!”

Throughout it all, Smith sounds unwaveringly stable and grounded in the glorious mess of the earth beneath her. Her voice, as noted in the box set’s spare booklet, had a “horn-like” quality that made her well-suited to reconcile the shortcomings of primitive recording technology of her era. You can hear some of those shortcomings in the static that accompanies her songs, which sound as if they were dug up out of the dirt. It’s a pleasingly aged quality, though, like that of fine wine, which loses aspects of clarity and sharpness over the years but gains immeasurably in terms of mystery.

The same goes for comparable career-retrospective packages assembled recently by Columbia, including similarly-sized box sets



Blues singer Bessie Smith. Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images



The Complete Columbia Recordings: Bessie Smith
Sony Music Classical

for Duke Ellington (*The Columbia Studio Albums Collection 1951-1958*) and Louis Armstrong (*The Okeh, Columbia & RCA Victor Recordings 1925-1933*), not to mention others like a 19-disc compendium of Judas Priest and 63-disc monument to Johnny Cash.

Appreciators of evocative static would be wise, too, to track down another new, and far more idiosyncratic, treasure trove titled *Work Hard, Play Hard, Pray Hard: Hard Time, Good Time & End Time Music 1923-1936*. Compiled by an enthusiast and organised onto three discs, the set surveys songs about labour, leisure, and religion from the heyday of 78s: old, thick vinyl records that spun at a different speed (read: not 33 or 45 rpm) than the ones that proliferated decades later.

The songs tell the compelling story of workaday people trying to make sense of what it means to live in the world, but the creation of the set itself pulls in another tale worth telling: that of an old man, little known during his life and effectively forgotten since death, named Don Wahle.

Nearly all of the songs from *Work Hard, Play Hard, Pray Hard* come from the collection of Wahle, who amassed massive stores of records in his home in Kentucky. When he died alone in the mode of a “hoarder” in 2010, those records were on their way to disposal – until they were rescued from a dumpster by a younger folklorist named Nathan Salsburg.

Nothing much is known of Wahle beyond the collection of songs he left behind, and what a collection. Developments in American song from the period between the 1920s and 1930s would seem to have been mined by now, not least by Harry Smith’s iconic *Anthology of American Folk Music* from 1952. (That set of then-forgotten songs was said to

have started the folk music boom of the 1960s; Bob Dylan was a formative fan.) But *Work Hard, Play Hard, Pray Hard* seethes with a spirit all its own, from the first song, about driving steel with a hammer by hand, to the last, about communion among Christian friends.

In between is a riotous lot of the kind of music that accumulates when people get together and find themselves with time to bide. Some take stock of matters relating to work, like the Allen Brothers’ 1930 gem *I’ve Got the Chain Store Blues* (with complaints about shopping and a kazoo to boot). Others crane an ear towards recreation, like Charlie Wilson & His Hayloft Gang’s slaphappy *The Beer Party*. Still others take on the fate of faith, like Ernest Phipps and His Holiness Singers’ *If the Light Has Gone Out of Your Soul*.

The mix of the three themes plays well, especially when they overlap, as they often do (in life and in music too). And there are a healthy few songs that would earn their keep no matter the premise. Two of those make up Red Gay & Jack Wellman’s double-parted *Flat Wheel Train Blues*, which celebrates the man-made miracle of a train rumbling down the tracks – with a fiddle played to mimic the slurry sound of a horn blowing at high speed.

It would be hard to hear such soulful creativity and not go soft, at least a little, for the whole of the human enterprise. Additional thrills attend the recognition that it could have just as easily been trashed and consigned to the dustbin of history. Such riches from the past work to make the present better – and the future too.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire*, *Spin* and more.

review

New Order return with satisfying mini-album

Eight years after releasing *Waiting for the Sirens’ Call* (2005), their eighth studio album, New Order return with *Lost Sirens*. Except it’s not really a new album at all – at least not in the conventional sense.

Conceived as an almost instant follow-up to *Sirens’ Call* – the band were in a rich vein of songwriting form back then – its release was delayed first by bassist Peter Hook’s decision to leave the band in 2007 and then by the rancour that accompanied his departure.

Romantics keep their fingers crossed for Hook to one day return to the fold – even though the band functions perfectly well without him – but will have to settle for this short swan song, which, fittingly, serves up lashings of his trademark basslines.

That said, if the Manchester band’s almost mythic and always turbulent story provides any measure, then any outcome really is still possible: New Order looked mortally wounded in the 1990s after the release of the occasionally epic *Republic* (1993) and following the demise of Factory Records – the anarchic independent record label they were signed to and which they propped up financially for years – before staging an energetic comeback with *Get Ready* (2001).

Belatedly then, *Lost Sirens* gathers seven previously unreleased tracks, all originally recorded in 2003 and 2004, and adds them to *Hellbent*, which was first given an airing on the greatest-hits compilation *Total* (2011).

So what does it add to the New Order story? More than you’d imagine. The many completists who slavishly follow the band will rush to buy it, of course, but there is something here too for the fairweather fan of this influential English group.

It opens with *I’ll Stay With You*, a delicious blend of guitars and synth, on which



New Order
Lost Sirens
Warner Bros

Sumner could be singing about the band’s deep schisms (“Were his words cruel?”, he asks, “Were they unkind?, That guy’s a fool, He’s crossed the line”). *Sugar-cane*, its second track, sounds more suited to either Electronic or Bad Lieutenant, the side projects that kept Sumner busy in New Order’s long fallow periods.

Recoil springs the album back into life, before *Californian Grass*, *Lost Sirens’* fourth track, delivers an almost perfect fusion of the band’s many talents. *Hellbent* follows, presenting a hotchpotch of styles – twangy guitars, plaintive keyboards, jangling backbeats – without ever feeling properly resolved. The hopeful sound of *Shake It Up* restores the album to a solid footing, before *I’ve Got a Feeling* trails the restlessness that regularly bubbles away in Sumner’s lyrical meanderings.

New Order have made a habit of providing a stirring finale to their albums and *Lost Sirens* is no exception: *I Told You So*, its closing track, begins with some Velvet Underground-influenced guitars and keeps moving on from there, providing a rousing conclusion to this largely satisfying mini-album from the vaults.

★ Nick March