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NY CULTURE | Updated February 5, 2013, 3:50 p.m. ET

# Pasting His Page Into the Songbook

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

Will Oldham is a singer-songwriter with ears tuned to the earthy and the enigmatic. In his earliest recordings under the name Palace Brothers and especially in his long-running guise as Bonnie "Prince" Billy—the name he'll perform under on Thursday as part of Lincoln Center's American Songbook series—he has developed a unique folk- and country-inflected sound that pays wrenching attention to the present while communing with a distant history of American song. One of his anthems earned a haunting interpretation in 2000 by Johnny Cash ("I See a Darkness"), and his forthcoming album, "What the Brothers Sang" (due out later this month), plays as a full-length tribute to the Everly Brothers.



Enlarge Image

Ross Gilmore/Redfems/Getty Images

Will Oldham, aka Bonnie 'Prince' Billy, will perform Thursday at the Allen Room as part of Lincoln Center's American Songbook series.

For his special performance this week, Mr. Oldham—who is also an actor with more than a dozen roles on his three-decade résumé—will return from his home in Louisville, Kentucky, to New York, where he lived for two short stints around 1989 and 1999, to play a retrospective set of songs from his prolific past. (Also, on Wednesday, he will discuss his new book "Will Oldham on Bonnie 'Prince' Billy" at BookCourt in Brooklyn with its editor, Alan Licht, and

New Yorker pop critic Sasha Frere-Jones.)

Famously reticent with the press, Mr. Oldham, who is 43, spoke with The Wall Street Journal about the various meanings of American song, the gestalt of country music and his feelings about New York.

**As you prepare to perform in the "American Songbook" series, what does the notion of the "American songbook" mean to you?**

I would like to think that certain songs find relationships with other songs in the ear of the listener. I think it means that there's a group of songs that people know or are familiar with outside the context of any particular artist that become ingrained in people's perception of their culture.

**Is there something particularly "American" about it?**

To some extent, the reception of all the songs we've gotten a chance to hear over our

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lives and the lives of people throughout the history of recorded music are commercially recorded releases. So the "American songbook" is characterized by the American music business and how that business has been run over the last 100 years. Of course, the music business reacts to our hybrid culture. I don't think the United States is unique in that its popular music reflects a common denominator of a diverse population. But our diverse population, of course, is uniquely ours.

**New York plays an interesting role in the American songbook, with Tin Pan Alley, jazz, the Brill Building, show tunes and so much else. Is there a quintessential New York record for you?**

That phrase is kind of repulsive to me. I feel like music might come from New York, but once it gets to where a listener's ears are, it's no longer a New York record—and if it is, it suffers for it. It's more like asking your girlfriend to tell you about her great-grandmother—it's an interest in lineage.

**New York just got its first country radio station in 17 years (NASH FM 94.7), and country seems to be getting bigger and more conversant with other sounds. Any thoughts as to why?**

As we get more technologically advanced, the aftershock of having great and powerful distribution systems is that anybody can authentically claim any kind of music as their own, as their heart and soul. Anybody can grow up with country music or with Japanese noise and say, "This is the music of my life. This is what speaks to me." So it makes sense that country could exist anywhere at this point. I don't think there's a vertical association anymore between a performer and a history with a place.

**How do you feel about that? Is it a gain or a loss?**

Not to diminish it or say that it doesn't mean anything, but the shallowest relationship that people have with music is the relationship between a listener and a commercial radio station. It's just something that comes in and out and makes their day ideally a little bit better. But even as regional musics become less and less regional, I still think that some of the greatest and most interesting music that happens now—and will continue to happen—is made by communities of people specific to their regions.

**Your music evokes a sense of place but also an extensive realm of the imagination. Do you identify as especially Southern?**

I relate to aspects of the South that have to do with the privilege of taking certain things for granted. It is not a reach or a kind of escapism to recognize certain [Southern] values that I think are great, musical values and values of community and communication. For example, I don't think of country music as country music—it's just music. I'll listen to Charlie Rich and hear something that's like Leonard Cohen or Lou Reed. One kind of music is not even a kind of music—it's a way of pushing forward ideas. I'm able to take that for granted, but, as you get farther north, when people listen to country music they start to think about the fact that they're listening to "country music."

**A recent review of your new album in an English music magazine mentioned Waffle House without any exposition.**

That's a good example. Waffle House doesn't mean anything to me other than it's a place where you go and get something to eat sometimes, especially late at night. To someone from somewhere else, it's very culturally weighted. The Waffle house is nothing but a place for hash browns scattered, smothered, covered, chunked, topped and diced.

**Is that how you order yours?**

I like the full deal, yeah.

**You don't do many interviews. How did your all-interview book come about?**



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People would ask, "Don't you want to do a book of poetry or write a novel?" People ask lots of questions. But the last thing I would ever want to do is try to write a book. But books I own that are favorites are these cinema books with conversations or writings of movie directors on their own work. The "Cassavetes on Cassavetes" book is a nice companion to movies he was involved with that are so rewarding but also raise so many questions. The book serves not to necessarily answer those questions but to expand the experience that comes with them. I feel more of a kinship with theatrical and cinematic pursuits than I do with music per se. I just happen to translate it into making records.

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*Journal, with the headline: Pasting His Page Into the Songbook.*

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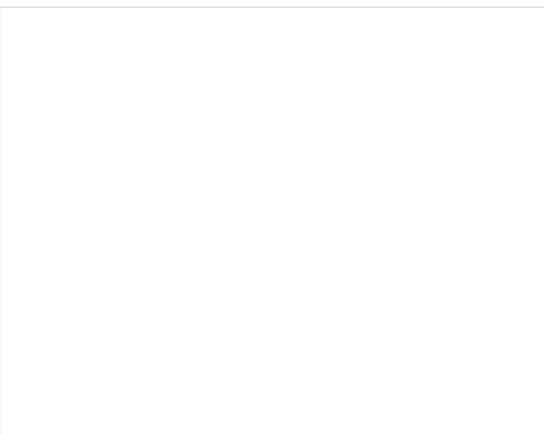
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