Speaker: Carol Camp Yeakey

I just have a few points, and I’ll be brief. I think what occurred with the hurricane and the aftermath of the hurricane is that it laid bare society’s massive neglect of the least fortunate. It showed callous neglect by our government—callous and passive indifference for the sufferings of those who are most unfortunate in our society. If we look at the individuals who are most affected, most affected in terms of those with poor housing, those with inadequate schooling, those with inadequate health care, and those with a lack of vehicles and means by which to evacuate the city, we have seen that those individuals were not just left alone after the hurricane but that our society had left them by themselves and left them vulnerable many decades ago.
Speaker: Donald Nichols

Yes, I will talk briefly about the economic impact of the storm. Obviously, in the short term there is a huge amount of poverty that was there before and that will affect those who were already poor and those who were actually working, but on the margin of poverty. There will be a shortage of positions for these people in the labor market. They will be unable to maintain their lifestyles or take care of themselves. This will produce enormous tasks for the government, public agencies, and public policy individuals to devise ways we can take care of these people. So, in the short term there is obviously some extreme impact on the lifestyle of these individuals. There are also impacts on the general U.S. economy. As we have already noticed, particularly in the southeast, the oil refineries and gas production have obviously impacted a lot of individuals. I know my parents who live in Tennessee saw gas prices shoot up and actually had gas shortages in the weeks after the storm, but in addition to what we think about as being immediate, which is the gasoline, there are going to be other economic impacts on prices for other goods, such as coffee, bananas, and things that we import into the U.S. because New Orleans is a major port. There will be impact on our exporting abilities as well. In terms of the long-term impact of the storm, there are going to be some economic ups and downs. Everyone mentions that New Orleans will have to be rebuilt. It does not have to be, but more than likely it will be rebuilt and therefore that will increase labor market participation, particularly the individuals who are in those rebuilding fields, and so that part of the economy will do really well as a result of this storm, but then again there are other individuals who, in the long term, after being unemployed may not be able to find employment again. So it is going to be important that as a long-term goal when we’re rebuilding New Orleans we look for those individuals who are originally from New Orleans and perhaps try to employ them in these industries first as we go through the reconstruction of New Orleans.

Speaker: T. R. Kidder

I lived in New Orleans for nearly 20 years and it’s sort of hard for me to begin to even think about exactly where to start. A famous urban geographer by the name of Pierce Louis called New Orleans the ‘Inevitable City’ and he was talking about the intersection of history, geography, economy, and culture; if New Orleans was the inevitable city, then of course, Katrina was the inevitable storm, which I think is one of the things that has shocked all of us because this was not an unexpected phenomenon. I think it was Bob Herbert in the *New York Times* who also pointed out that this was a hurricane that took 3-5 days to cause its impact, but it was a storm that is 300-400 years in the making in one sense, and it is I think important that we recognize that it is not a storm that just hit a particular racial group in a particular city. There are issues of class here that we also need to grapple with. There are these forgotten people in St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes, over 120,000 people, who may never be able to return their homes. So, we should not forget that. The only other comment I want to make, and it is a comment that concerns me very much, is that I hope we can have this discussion in a year from now and two years from now and three years from now, because this is not a problem that is going to go away; it is not a solution that is particularly tractable. The physical issues, the rebuilding issues, the settlement issues, the human costs, are going to be protracted. But this is also in one sense, at least in America, a global issue. This is an issue that should pertain to each and every one of us, and I hope that, from the ramifications of this event, as terrible as they are, that we can draw some hope by having a real national dialogue and being able to recognize that every one of us in this room has a measure of responsibility for this event or these events. And if we fail to internalize that, and if we have fail to recognize the role that we play as members of this society, as participants in our government, as participants in governments in general, we will do a disservice to the people of whatever race, whatever class, whatever social or economic position.

Speaker: Robert Francis Dymek

So, I ask myself what can a geologist contribute to this particular discussion and I answered ‘a lot.’ I hope people listen to geologists because there is lot to be learned, not only for New Orleans, but for several other major metropolitan areas in the United States and also throughout the world. Let’s start with some other metropolitan areas. Let’s talk first about Los Angeles and San Francisco. New Orleans is a relatively small metropolitan area. There are 20 million people living in the L.A. basin. What would happen if a bigger earthquake hits Los Angeles and all the pipelines that deliver water from Northern California to Southern California are broken? There is no water to fight fires. All the gas lines are broken. All the electricity is down, sparking fires all over the place. Is there any evacuation plan for that? What infrastructure exists to support 20 million people? Call them people who are fleeing, call them refugees; I think the name is not that important. It is the plan that is intact to deal with them that is important. San Francisco is a land-locked area. San Franciscans escape to the south, but again you have the San Andreas Fault, one of the most active and more dangerous fault systems on the planet striking right through the heart of a major metropolitan area. Closer to home, some of you, maybe many of you were in this area in 1991 when a stockbroker/erstwhile meteorologist name Ivan Browning made a prediction about a major earthquake in the northern hemisphere and predicted that the New Madrid fault zone would break and there would be a major earthquake. I venture to guess that more than 90 percent of the population in this area had never heard of the New Madrid zone and also that none of the people from St. Louis think of this area as a target or prone to earthquake. While the fact is that the single largest earthquake ever to be documented in North America happened in the New Madrid zone in 1811-1812. There were a pair of them, so violent
that they rang church bells in Boston. So, the seismic energy that was dissipated with that earthquake was phenomenal. Do we have a plan to take care of people in St. Louis should a major event like that happen? Go a little bit farther south, what about the city of Memphis, which sits right on the all the muds of the Mississippi River, on the bluffs above the Mississippi River. An earthquake of magnitude 8 such as happened in the early 1800s would cause those bluffs to collapse, would cause the river muds to liquefy. The catastrophes associated with these are dire phenomena and what kind of plans are in effect to take care of these? We do not even have a plan to evacuate our building, let alone evacuate the 2.5 million people in the St. Louis area. So these are some of the issues.

We sit on bedrock in St. Louis, so we are okay, but we also have thousands upon thousands of un-reinforced brick buildings. Lord knows what would happen to them. Even our beloved Arch: I have no idea what that is anchored in. But, anyway, this is a problem that deserves more and more attention, and hopefully the disaster that has befallen New Orleans will allow for a more broad-based discussion of these kinds of problems. One last comment regarding New Orleans: I first visited there in 1975, visiting a former roommate who lived in a duplex, and I stayed in an upstairs bedroom. I was looking out the window and up above me I saw boats sailing and I said “What is going on here?” And he says, “Oh, well, the city is below sea level.” And later that day we went over to Jackson Square, we were walking along the river levey, and there was the river and the city, below sea level. Well, it’s not surprising when a levy is breached the way it happened, that the entire city floods. So I raise the question: Is it really worthwhile to rebuild a city that is entirely below sea level? You cannot build levees that are strong enough to withstand the surge of the force of the water. They [the levees] weren't knocked down by the pressure of wind; they were undermined by the surging of the currents, so you cannot build because you cannot anchor those things in bedrock; they’re struck in mud. And not only does that apply in New Orleans but many other coastal cities. They even apply here in the St. Louis area; we saw that in the 1993 floods, where the levees were not overtopped, they were undermined by the pressure of water. These are really hard decisions. Should we rebuild the city that is below sea level because this is going to happen again, and again, and again. Maybe not next year, but in five years, ten years, half a century later. These are the problems. I will stop there, I have talked too much.
Let me add one other thing historically. From the 1870s forward, among the black population in urban areas and among the white population, too, women have always outnumbered men. We think that men left the women on the farms and went to the cities to work. Actually African-American women and white women both could find work in the cities more easily than men; so the cities have always been dominated by women. They have always been women spaces. So as we talk about poverty and urbanization, we also need to talk about the way that poverty affects women and children differently than it affects men, perhaps. Or at least take into consideration that when we are talking about women, we are often talking about children, and then think about how much we are going to hold those children responsible for the woes they suffer. And until we address this as a problem of our young people, of our youth, 22 percent of whom are poor in America, then we are really not dealing with the legal system, at least in that, but we are being professional today.

Speaker: Chris Bracey

Okay, well I am the lawyer of the bunch. Obviously there has been a huge amount of devastation in the Gulf Coast region. As a lawyer and a former litigator, we look at these situations first and see the calamity, but then second we see litigation opportunities, and so what I want to talk about briefly are all of the sorts of legal claims that you might see implicated as a result of the storm, and there is a whole range of them. I just want to touch on a few briefly. As a threshold matter you have to keep in mind that the entire legal system, at least in the city of New Orleans, and certainly for a portion of the Gulf Coast, was wiped away. We are talking about entire courthouses flooded, every file in the courthouse destroyed. These are civil cases. These are also criminal cases. Imagine trying to prosecute someone for a crime that he committed before the storm, but the case file is now gone. Police reports—gone. Witnesses—unable to locate them. Now, such an individual may be charged for something as petty as, say, larceny, or it could be something as serious as homicide. These are cases that existed prior to the storm that now have become tremendously difficult as a result of the storm.

Now you have also seen reports of lawlessness that occurred during and after the storm. Those cases need to be prosecuted. How do you prosecute them? The entire litigation bar has been largely displaced from the city. How do you get these lawyers in to argue a case? Where are they going to argue the case? Where is the court supposed to convene? Say you need to transfer somebody who was held, prior to the storm, on criminal suspicion. Well, the jails were flooded. You might have heard that a lot of inmates were transferred to makeshift jails in bus stations, in hotels, in various locations, that were made as secure as possible, but some of them were less effective than others. How do you get these peoples back into a courthouse? Can we get them all back into the courthouse? Do you drop all of those cases, and just move on? That is just the criminal side of things. One other point, you’ve seen lots of evidence of looting and those sorts of things. There was obviously police presence, in many instances standing right next to the looters, watching them as they went in and out of stores. They are eyewitnesses to criminal activity. In some instances, aiding and abetting criminal activity. Are every one of these police officers going to be prosecuted? If so, what do you prosecute them for? That’s the criminal side. But that is not where the money is. That is just basic law and order.

Now we can talk about the civil side of litigation. That’s where the money is. Think about all of the claims for loss of life, loss of a job, damaged personal property, commercial losses, insurable risks that have been lost. Think about who you might sue for these things. Obviously, the storm caused some problems, but the breach of the levees caused a lot of problems too, right? It is the flooding that caused a great deal of damage; who is responsible for that? The Army Corps of Engineers? State and local officials? Federal officials? Maintenance entities that were charged with maintaining the levees? What about the architects and design firms for the levees? And the lists go on and on. There are already rumblings about class action suits, seeking to go after these very entities for money.

Now some of you may have heard about FEMA* funds and Congress allocating billions of dollars here and there that are supposedly dedicated to rebuilding the region. What is interesting is that none of those monies actually go to personal losses. They may go to institutional and structural losses but not losses sustained by individuals. These aggrieved individuals can still file a lawsuit. But where can they file these lawsuits? Who knows, but they can file a lawsuit.

Now let’s compare the disaster of 9/11. After 9/11, the federal government took an interesting course of action. They decided to intervene and Congress allocated an additional $10 billion for relief. You might have heard about this fund—a fund set up to give, I want to say, pro-rated shares, but they valued the lives of the victims that died in 9/11 differently, depending on what role they played in society. Instead of filing a lawsuit, these people could just take a check that could be cut from the federal government out of this fund, a $10 billion fund. That is an option that is available in New Orleans. Is there going to be a common fund to preclude a great deal of litigation?

There are plenty of other issues that are out there as well. You can imagine people who are receiving social security benefits and welfare benefits, how they have been displaced. How will they get benefits on a forward-going basis? Welfare, in particular, because that is a state benefit, meaning every state has a different set of rules deciding who can get welfare and how much they receive. Say you are a New Orleans resident that has been relocated to Texas. Texas laws say that you receive a comparatively smaller welfare benefit, all other things being equal, simply because you are a resident of Texas. As you are a displaced New Orleans native, are you stuck with the Texas rules that pay you less per month, or is there some way for you to retain the money that would be owed had you remained in New Orleans?

There are other issues—like payment of taxes. Is there a tax exemption? Rental agreements. What happens if you were renting an apartment and you signed a long-term lease? The apartment is no longer there. You have been relocated to Massachusetts. Do you still have to pay your rent? What about mortgage contracts?

*Federal Emergency Management Agency
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You have recently bought a house in New Orleans. It is flooded. The banks still want their money. What do you do with that? There is going to be litigation going both ways on this and it is going to be a mess, and there are going to be new rules set up, because this is in many ways a new world order—the aftermath of the largest flood disaster, at least that I can think of, in recent American history.

Speaker: Wayne Fields

One of the most frustrating things for me about this event is the redundancy of previous events, whether it is Johnstown flood of 1899 or whether it is the Mississippi River flood of 1927. There is in each instance, a brief moment at least in which the social and political protections are stripped away and something essential about American society is revealed, but these are sooner or later all made into issues about how we handle disasters, how we deal with catastrophic events. These are always fundamentally about how we deal with one another and these are always in one way or another about class relationships in America. They are about the relationship that the rest of the society has with those who are most vulnerable, regardless of color and sometimes it is clearly built around age as well as around impoverishment. The discussions that we have had so far in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina have in lots of ways repeated discussions, particularly those of the 1920s. The more serious discussions about whether some kind of social contract has been broken, I think, slightly misses the point that the real nature of the social contract in America has been revealed. That nothing has been changed, just been exposed. And the two things that we can also see between the 1920s disaster and this one is that what is often expressed as contempt for government, clearly looks in moments like this equally like contempt for the vulnerable. When you see those areas in which government is being urged to withdraw or retreat, they almost always are areas in which we failed to meet the catastrophic demands of a society in terms of protecting or serving its most vulnerable members, and I think that is what's happened once again now.

It is not whether we have the right director of FEMA or whether Homeland Security can locate the homeland. It becomes an issue more than anything else, it seems to me, about our responsibilities to one another, what we assume about one another and who is going to protect those who are not going to be protected simply through a volunteerism program. They're not going to be protected by the interests of corporations. And the ultimate indignity, it seems to me, is when regularly on Fox News or some place else you can urge for a shoot-to-kill order for somebody carrying a television set out of Wal-Mart, and Kenneth Lay, who has looted corporations of millions of dollars, is still risk-free in a very secure Houston suburb. There is something outrageous about that kind of inconsistency, and I think those who are looking at television reports on all of this can see the discrepancy between the way these situations are handled. It is clear that the distinction basically is built around the issues of class, and I think that is what we are going to have to deal with, just as clearly we are going to have to deal with the issues of reconstruction and rehabilitation. We are going to deal honestly and creatively with the fundamental problems within the society or we will do what we did at the end of the 1920s and quickly add a few band aids to the old body politic and hope that the next catastrophe doesn't happen on our watch.

Speaker: John Baugh

I am inspired by everything that I hear thus far and I want to take my prerogative as moderator to make a couple of points. I am a newcomer to your city. I grew up in Los Angeles, which has a great deal of ethnic diversity and the poverty is not concentrated exclusively among African Americans or primarily among African Americans in ways that it is for a lot of major cities along the Mississippi River, of which St. Louis is one. I agonize over this event as an American patriot who is concerned about the welfare of my country, to say nothing of my role as director of an African and African American Studies program, who saw those horrific images on the news. I find myself in a very special position, in that I have very, very strong disagreements with the current administration and yet the Secretary of State is a personal friend. I've known Condoleezza Rice for many, many years. She has helped me professionally and personally. Our families get together socially. Her father is a deacon, or was before he passed away, a deacon in the Presbyterian Church. My father is a deacon in the Presbyterian Church. So, it is a strange situation when you have such strong philosophical disagreements with someone whose friendship you cherish as much I do. And because I have some insights based on this friendship, I was concerned about how I saw the administration handle this particular event, and I am concerned about the political patronage that we see displayed here by the incompetence and negligence in evidence at FEMA. It is clear from some of the things that President Clinton said very diplomatically, in conjunction with the first President Bush, that he was trying not to unravel things too quickly, but it was obvious from President Clinton's remarks that he felt strongly that FEMA should not be fully integrated into Homeland Security in the way that it is. To say nothing about political patronage. I got calls from colleagues in Paris and Cape Town, who said this is a global problem. It is not just that they do not care about black people in the United States. They do not care about black people all around the world. And they pointed to, my Parisian colleagues pointed to the Malayans who are guest workers in Paris and who found themselves victim to a tragedy. My colleagues in Cape Town pointed out that many of the economic and political pressures that we see here still exist there in post-apartheid South Africa, and based on all the comments that I have seen and heard here on the panel thus far, reconciles the historical with public policy. And contemporary discrepancies that face American citizens from diverse backgrounds will remain a tremendous challenge as we move toward the future. I can remember as a younger man traveling abroad and being so very, very proud of our country and what it had accomplished and
now recently in travels abroad, you really need to try to play down the fact that you are an American because of all the hostile feelings that people have. From a global prospective, I think this incident has been one that shows so many vulnerabilities in the weakest of our society that we really need to take positive steps whenever possible to advance opportunities for all of the citizens in the country. And so what I would like to propose at this point for the rest of the panel is for everyone, based on what they have heard so far in the panel, to make one more round of comments.

Speaker: Carol Camp Yeakey

I just like to reiterate what I said before: it is not that the individuals, those most vulnerable in New Orleans were abandoned after Hurricane Katrina. They have been abandoned by our society for decades. We are talking about the impoverishment of schools, the lack of housing, the lack of any kind of social safety net, which exists in theory only. And, with respect to John Baugh’s comments, yes, we can make similar connections with respect to dire circumstances happening in London, England, and Paris, France and Cape Town or Johannesburg, South Africa, etc. But my problem, our problem is more immediate. That is, what do we provide or fail to provide for those individuals among us, who are tax-paying citizens, who do not receive the same kind of protections that are given to the richest of Americans? For example, let us look at the most recent public policy initiative that President Bush is trying to shore up, and that is the estate tax. If you look at the estate tax, that tax literally applies to roughly 1 percent of our population. Now whether we do, when we repeal that estate tax, it will remove about $24 billion from our coffers. When you look at the poor people, the impoverished people in the Gulf States, when you look at those individuals, there are perhaps 1,200 persons of means, who will be affected by the repeal of the estate tax. This represents our government’s disproportionate concern with the wealthy as opposed to those who are the most vulnerable in our society. If you want to look at what happened relative to the levees, whether we want to look at the legal issues, or whether we want to look at historical consequences and the like, we must first turn to the public policies, which got us in this mess in the first place. The answer is either callous indifference or passive indifference to what is happening to the least fortunate in our society.

Speaker: James Herbert Williams

I was actually very inspired by all of my colleagues and what they had to say. It was a wonderful display of lots of different ways of thinking about this. I want to go back to a couple of issues: one is that there are a few specific things about the southern part of the United States of America. One is that many African Americans in this country migrated from that area. All of us, almost every African American, and most that were born here (and Leslie will probably contradict me), either their family came from Charleston, South Carolina, or through New Orleans as a part of the slave trade. I know my family came through Charleston, South Carolina, so that and the fact that the majority of African Americans still live in the South are important. Many of us have been in New Orleans, and drank and partied and involved ourselves in the great food and the culture, and the music and what it’s all about. But then if you pull the curtain back, most of the African Americans and most of the poor people who live in New Orleans are either living on some type of entitlement benefits or they are working at service, substandard types of jobs. They’re the ones who are shucking your oysters or they’re the ones working behind the scenes and cleaning all those thousands of hotel rooms. Those jobs are no longer there. They may not be back for a while. So we will rebuild, but what will happen to that population for the next two years? For the next three years? So we begin to think about how they will resettle into some type of valuable occupation. And it was not just New Orleans, and I agree with my colleagues, it was the Gulf Coast. So, if you look at Biloxi, Mississippi, Gulf Port, and Mobile, and you look at some of the other towns farther north like Jackson, Mississippi, and Baton Rouge, there are still those types of issues. Another thing that we have not talked about is that New Orleans, and Louisiana as a state, have one of the worst reputations for environmental protection laws. It was not just that there was flooding in New Orleans, it was what was in the water and the concerns about the exposure to toxic chemicals and those types of things. So, do not just look at the intersection of race and class and those types of things, but let’s look at the intersection of race, class, and environmental issues as they relate to our society. And so those are the types of things that we need to really address. On one hand, we are cutting Medicaid benefits and, on the other hand, what are the needs for the next three years of services going to be? There are people now, the working poor, who are not getting Medicaid, who will need it even more now. So, as we begin to address these issues of human service needs, the cost factor is probably going to be even larger than what it will cost to rebuild the structures, the bricks and mortars. I am not sure if we (and I’m hoping as a society, as we begin to have this conversation), that we truly have the stomach for it, as taxpayers, to know what that cost will be like, because our current administration has not shown that we’ve had the guts and the stomach to really deal with these costs. And I think, this is putting it right on the table because these types of reconstruction in the area of social human services will not take place unless we truly have the stomach to do it and this cannot be done totally by the nonprofit sector of our society, which has been sort of the way we have been going.
**Speaker: Donald Nichols**

In our follow up I want to reemphasize the rebuilding of the economy and New Orleans, obviously, and the Gulf Coast also. It is a very touristy type area, so one of the things I think is going to be really important for those individuals who are foreseeing, or planning the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast, particularly the touristy areas, is that we not continue down the line of disparities that we have in our country. This is a great opportunity where those disparities can actually be greatly reduced in this Gulf Coast region. A lot of individuals were either renters or home owners, home owners without necessarily any type of insurance that will provide them with money to rebuild their homes, or those individuals who are renters don’t own anything to return to, and so this will actually leave a lot of vacant property and vacant land, which corporate America will more than likely have the opportunity to take advantage of. And so it’s going to be very important as we rebuild the economy that we are careful not to increase the disparities that we already see or that were displayed in this tragedy.

**Speaker: T. R. Kidder**

I am struck when I think about this event or these events. There are a number of phases that have happened that we will all be going through and certainly reconstruction of some fashion, that is rebuilding, is going to happen. While I do not want to ignore the human dimension of the historical events or current problems, I do think that it is necessary to ask an important question, one that the Speaker of the House of Representatives deserves credit for raising as an issue. I think that Dennis Hastert asked the wrong question. It is not ‘Should we build New Orleans?’ and this is what Donald Nichols is saying, it is ‘How should we rebuild the Gulf Coast of the United States?’ We have a number of issues and one of these that goes back to both rebuilding the Gulf Coast and thinking forward about the rest of this country, and other colleagues have mentioned this is, to some extent: What risk are you willing to accept? Los Angeles has 20 million people and San Francisco multiple millions of people. You know St. Louis. We have to accept that there is some form of risk in this and this leads us then to a question to some extent, which is a fascinating conversation and one that I certainly welcome, which is what is the role that we are going to play and what is the role ultimately that our government is going to play?

And again I would stress, and I had been trying to think about this myself, is I am the government too. I am a taxpayer, what I am willing to pay? Because, I think we have to be very careful not to play what I call the politics of deflected responsibility, which is what we as a nation have to address because this is a national issue. There are economic dimensions and there are clearly social dimensions. I, for one, because I have such strong connection to New Orleans, firmly believe that it will be rebuilt. There are people who are going back, who are literally running around the National Guard in order to get back because they are going to reclaim their lives, whether we want it or not. They are going to reclaim their lives, whether FEMA wants it or not. And again we have to proceed here with thoughtfulness. The Federal Emergency Management Agency right now is proposing to fundamentally bulldoze the entire 9th ward of New Orleans. This is a historic district of remarkable cultural, architectural, culinary, and personal history, and their response is simply, because it is cheaper and easier to do so, to bulldoze it and start anew and start fresh. And that I do not think is ultimately the answer, but we do need to have this conversation. I am, and maybe even my daughter, who is only 16 right now is, going to be paying for this and it is not something that we are going to do cheaply or on the fly. So what I simply would try to point out again is that we need to ask ourselves what we are going to be doing as individuals, as members of civil society, and as members of a governmental body in a democracy.

**Speaker: Robert Francis Dymek**

I agree with everything the panelists have said about the societal implications of the events in New Orleans. Let me add to it that as 9/11 was a wakeup call about the potential for man-made disasters, Katrina is a wakeup call for natural disasters. The issue of National Geographic magazine that was published two or three months ago had an article in it, interestingly, about hurricanes. Somebody there must have known something. It focused principally on hurricanes that affected Florida last year, and it pointed out that one of the things to be concerned about were long-term changes in surface water temperatures, not only in the Gulf of Mexico, but in the southern part of the Atlantic. And we now happen to be in a long-term trend of high water temperatures in the Gulf Coast, and one of the reasons why Katrina became the monster that it did, if you all remember, everyone, except apparently the White House, watched the Weather Channel and watched this tiny little hurricane work its way across Florida, then turn north and blossom into this giant super storm. One of the reasons it did so is because it spun over warm water, and there is historically warm water in the Gulf South. What we are looking at is the potential for more and more of these storms to hit, and not only to wipe out southern Mississippi and Alabama, but the Florida Panhandle and parts of Texas, the east coast of the U.S.
So, I think we really have to pay attention to disaster plans. Do we rebuild New Orleans only to have it be destroyed yet again? I just do not know. There are people who are smarter than me who have to make these decisions, but somebody has got to continue to call to their attention the problems that are related to the environment. Maybe some of the things going on are related to this concern of global warming that people talk about all the time; but it is a fact that right now, the surface waters in the Gulf Coast are warm and that promotes conditions for the development of these storms. An interesting point about this is that it was not the hurricane that took out New Orleans; it was a breach of the levees, and New Orleans dodged a bullet. The storm made its way east of New Orleans. If the storm had made its way 100 miles to the west, if either the hurricane passed 100 miles west or maybe 50 miles, forget the exact amount, it would have wiped out the city and then they would have had the flood on top of that, and the order would have made the magnitude worse than what it is now. So, there is a lesson to be learned here about what nature can do and we have to take steps to take care of that.

Thank you.

Speaker: Leslie Brown

I want to go in two different directions. One, I want to pick up Carol Camp Yeakey’s point on domestic policy issues and the ways that these have exacerbated race and economic problems. My favorite Bush program is No Child Left Behind, which I heard someone once call No Child’s Behind Left. The logic of this does not make sense to me. The weakest of schools that receive federal funding, if they fail to meet their criteria, then we remove their funding. So, we take a weak school and we give it less money, because it has not done a good job, what is the likelihood that it is going to do better with less money? And if those parents could pull their children out of that school… [Lost part of Professor Brown’s comment here] …the parents were punishing the children to do that and we forget that in this kind of logic of policy. The other end that I wanted to go to is actually a personal end because this has been very hard for me to watch. Like most African Americans, my family was from the South. Like most African Americans, my family was poor. And the people that I saw at the convention center, the people that I saw at the Superdome, the people I saw on the streets, on the roofs, in the trees, on porches, and walking through dirty water are the people who look like my friends, my cousins, my aunts, my uncles, my nieces, and my nephews. Maybe they were the people in New Orleans, and I have done some research of the history in New Orleans, but you know they looked an awful lot like the folks even in my current neighborhood in South St. Louis. So, when I hear the kind of harsh comments coming from the media, they hit me pretty hard. Some folks, and I am sure you have heard lots of ridiculous things about those who sought food and those who were looting, but there were other kinds of things. I actually heard someone on CNN say, looking at the crowd in a very sympathetic way, ‘all these people and they are so poor and they are so black, what are they going to do?’ And I think that articulated really the whole problem or the way that we got paralyzed by issues of class and race. They were so black. That did not sound like something that was…that something good would come out of a comment like that. So, I want to just kind of leave all of you with what you might think of a comment like that.

Speaker: Chris Bracey

Well, Wolf Blitzer meant well, when he did say that. He meant well. It is so difficult, you’re right. You know last time I talked to you all, I said, okay here are the promises that law provides in terms of providing relief to people who have been hurt. This time, I want to sort of play off a little bit on what Leslie was saying, and others, about the limits of what law can do. Law is a blunt instrument. Law is reactive. You have to be aggrieved in order to be provided with a remedy, and the idea behind a legal remedy is for you to be made whole.

Now, this presents an interesting issue in the Gulf Coast, because the people who are aggrieved are disproportionately poor and in a minority. And so you have to ask yourself, what can the law do for these folks? Or, what is the expectation at best? The expectation would be, from a purely legal perspective, to return to status quo ex-ante. In other words, basically put people back into the position that they were in before the storm. You might ask yourself whether that is desirable. When it comes to rebuilding, this is something that we have not talked about yet. Do we rebuild and put people back in the position that they were in before the storm: disproportionately poor, disproportionately minority, doing really not the best kind of work that you can do for yourself, not having the best health care, and not having the best education. And if you want more for people, how do you go about doing that? What is the theory? How do you get political will behind that? How do you begin to speak about dignity and equality, in meaningful senses beyond that which law can provide by way of a remedy?

In some ways, this particular catastrophe provides a unique opportunity to reengage with an idea of social citizenship and reimagining of the welfare state and what we think the minimum standing in American society should be. What kinds of things do you do to enable people to exercise freedom not in some abstract sense, but have the material wherewithal to exercise freedom so that they can exercise mobility, for instance, and avoid these sorts of catastrophes. It provides an opportunity to re-imagine bureaucratic structures, local government, state government interactions, and the role of the federal government when it comes to disaster relief. Do you begin to speak in terms of greater transparency or
accountability for public officials? What does this mean for purposes of representation? What I am speaking of is the other side of the law, the non-litigation side. But this structural side of the law is vitally important if we are going to come up with a strategy for not only rebuilding New Orleans, but really building a new model of social citizenship that enables these folks to reengage with society in a way that they perhaps could not have done before the storm.

I am anxious to see whether or not this sort of conversation takes place. I was watching Meet the Press on Sunday and I was also on the cell phone with one of my conservative colleagues. He was lamenting the fact that the Republican revolution is over. It's nothing but New Deal politics here, going forward. And then I saw Newt Gingrich say something really interesting. He said, “Well I like the idea of allocating lots of money to disaster relief, billions of dollars to rebuild the Gulf Coast. But I think that half of it should go by way of a tax credit.” And you have to ask yourself, who is going to receive the benefits of that tax credit? Who is he talking about allocating half of the money to? It's a very scary proposition. I wonder if electoral politics is in a position to make the kind of shift that we imagine should be made. I really do wonder about that.

Speaker: Wayne Fields

I have spent almost my entire life close to a river and everybody who grew up in a river town in the United States understands what we used to call ‘flood plane politics.’ Social and physical geography in the United States are inseparable. And we can debate what we do at the federal level or the state level, but a lot of flood plane politics is about the local level. Flood planes always have stuff on them. They always have stuff on them in spite of the fact that we know that the river is going to rise and take that stuff away sometime. The stuff it has there is the stuff the larger community sees as most expendable. It’s trailer parks and constructions like that. When you evaluate the property loss afterwards, almost every community breathes a sigh of relief and says the flood did not get to the good houses. It did not get to the good building stock. Anybody who grew up in the flood plane on the Mississippi River knows that there is not even a minor flood in which somebody does not die. And afterwards the discussion about why they did not leave almost always misses the point. They did not leave because they were too old or they were too sick or they had too little to give up the little they had. So that there is always, you know, one, two, or three victims. Flood goes down, levy is restored, and you rebuild exactly the same kinds of things that you had before. There is an interim period of talk about how much we learn from this and how much we will change the social design, but the social design comes back and it comes back for a very simple reason. It is cost-effective for the people who live there and it is cost-effective for the community that they serve. It is the cheapest land, so they can have a piece of it. It is the cheapest land, so it does not take anything more valuable of the stock that the larger community is exploiting the best ways that it can. I wish I could believe something tremendously different was going to happen in the aftermath of this, but I am too old to really believe in very much change. So the real question, I think for us, is a larger, more complicated one. My first impulse is to blame the Bush administration because that is my first impulse. But this flood simply represents what is reenacted in almost every local community, regardless of size, from St. Paul to New Orleans. And it is a reality that is redundant. All along that stretch it is more exciting and traumatic when it happens in New Orleans because it happens, even though it is a relatively small community, on a larger scale, than when it is Davenport or it is Muscatine. But it has happened repeatedly, that whole length, and there has been no clear indication of any intention to change the relationship between social and physical geographies, because it serves the larger community pretty well.

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Editor’s Note: In 1940, folksinger Woody Guthrie recorded a song called “Dust Bowl Refugee,” about the people who migrated from Oklahoma to California because of the terrible dust storm of April 1935.

Editor’s Note: See Daphne Spain, How Women Saved the City (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
Why We Need a Reporters’ Shield Law Now

Reporters under subpoena in Missouri are unprotected before the court. They have no law, federal or state, with which to cloak themselves and their confidential sources. First Amendment attorneys once believed that two legal precedents provided sufficient protection. But the increase in the number of subpoenas and contempt of court charges against reporters, especially dramatized in last summer’s Plamegate, makes it clear that journalists need special laws to shield their confidential sources.

“The frequency of subpoenas in this state has really convinced me that we need a state shield law. Recent developments nationally tell me that we need a federal one, too,” says Jean Maneke, of the Maneke Law Group, in Kansas City. As the hotline attorney for the Missouri Press Association, Maneke says she receives about a call a month from reporters and editors holding subpoenas in their hands.

Why the recent flurry of subpoenas? Some trial attorneys suffer from LLS, Lazy Lawyer Syndrome. Others represent a litigious culture. “Attorneys have gotten lazy about doing discovery [the research for trial evidence] and subpoena reporters rather than doing the actual digging they need to do to make their cases,” Maneke explains.

“Litigants who feel they can’t get a fair shake suing the media now think they can subpoena them to death,” says Bernard “Bernie” J. Rhodes of Rhodes, Lathrop and Gage, in Kansas City, a 21-year veteran of the First Amendment wars who has represented media outlets in 15 confidentiality cases, including the Kansas City Star, the Kansas City Business Journal, and KCTV, in Kansas City. Plaintiffs’ lawyers often ask for television out-takes and reporters’ notebooks, he says.

What frightens reporters should scare all citizens. “Our Bill of Rights establishes the media as a watchdog for our institutions,” Mark Sableman of Thompson Coburn LLP in St. Louis points out. “The First Amendment protects the public, too.”

He is a past president of the American Civil Liberties Union–Eastern Missouri.

Senator Christopher Dodd, D-Connecticut, agrees. “This is not about conferring special rights and privileges to the media. This is less about protecting journalists than it is about protecting ourselves,” he told Associated Press. Say, for example, some USDA inspectors take bribes to approve tainted meat. An honest inspector might hesitate tipping off an investigative reporter for fear of losing his job. It is not just the reporter who suffers, losing his shot at a Pulitzer Prize; consumers lose, too.

“Reporters need a shield law as an essential tool. We need one in Missouri because a national law would only cover the federal courts, not our circuit courts,” continues Sableman, a media lawyer for 26 years representing KMOV-TV, the St. Louis Business Journal, and the Missouri Broadcasters Association. “We need those laws now,” he says, “on state and federal levels.”

What was once a journalism issue became headline news last summer with Plamegate. Federal appellate judges upheld contempt of court charges against Judith Miller then of the New York Times and Matthew Cooper of Time magazine when they refused to name their secret sources to a federal grand jury investigating who outted Valerie Plame. Cooper finally cooperated while Miller sat in jail cell for 85 days until her old friend and news source, Scooter Libby, released her from her promise of confidentiality.

“The climate for journalism has shifted,” Rhodes explains. “A couple of years ago, the big concern was Janet Jackson exposing her breast and the FCC.

“Now, the conservatism emanating from Washington has had an effect on news gathering in the heartland. TV producers and news directors have seen the tone of the federal government and of the federal courts. They [the reporters] view themselves as targets. I have sat in on meetings with news directors, producers, and reporters who decided not to do a story because of what we’d get dragged into afterward,” he says.

There are two strong reasons for the media to be intimidated. The color of money and the weakening clout in court. “Fighting a subpoena can cost thousands of dollars. Only the big papers [and broadcast stations] can afford to have attorneys on retainer,” Maneke points out. “There are probably cases of small town papers where the reporters have been subpoenaed to come to court with their notes and the publishers have made the decision to send them because they cannot afford to spend the money to fight the subpoenas,” she says. Reporters wrapping themselves in the First Amendment no longer impress some judges. “Even before the Miller and Cooper cases, the media have been hurt by recent judicial decisions, such as Judge Richard Posner’s 2003 ruling in McKevitt,” Sableman explains.

To understand McKevitt, one first must understand its underlying precedent in Branzburg.

Branzburg v. Hayes

The landmark U.S. Supreme Court opinion, Branzburg v. Hayes, 1972, can be difficult to interpret. While all nine Supreme Court justices found that reporters are entitled to some First Amendment protection, they ruled 5 to 4 against the journalists in the co-joined cases. Justice Lewis Powell concurred with the majority, yet wrote an opinion that seems to agree with the dissent, that is, for the reporters. “Justice Powell was the Sandra
Day O’Connor of his day,” Sableman points out. “The media lost the case, but nonetheless the courts have generally interpreted Branzburg as a media win.”

Indeed. Without Branzburg, there would have been no Pentagon Papers, no Watergate stories, because both were based on anonymous sources, Floyd Abrams, the esteemed First Amendment lawyer, told the Senate Judiciary Committee. He made his remarks during his testimony on the proposed federal shield law. Abrams initially represented Miller and Cooper in Plamegate. As a young attorney, he worked on the amicus curiae, friend of the court, brief in Branzburg.

The courts have interpreted Branzburg to mean three conditions must be met before a judge can order a reporter to turn over his confidential notes and tapes, and, or to testify: 1) There must be a viable case. 2) The reporter’s information goes to the heart of that case. 3) The opposing party has exhausted all other sources to obtain the information.

The Missouri Court of Appeals, Western District, gave the first precedent in a Missouri appellate court of a qualified reporter’s privilege in Classic III Inc. v. Ely, in 1997, a quarter of a century after Branzburg. Writing for the unanimous three-judge panel, Judge Laura Denvir Stith applied a four-factor test, similar to Branzburg, to determine whether the protection would apply in a libel suit. The courts should consider, she wrote: 1) Whether the person seeking the identity of a confidential source has exhausted all other means of discovering it. 2) The importance of protecting the source’s identity. 3) Whether the information sought is crucial to the plaintiff’s case. 4) Whether the plaintiff has presented sufficient evidence for a libel suit.

Stith wrote that if journalists were forced to reveal the names of their confidential sources, “their credibility would be seriously harmed and their sources of information would be irreparably damaged. The press’ function as a vital source of information is weakened whenever the ability of journalists to gather news is impaired.” The well-regarded Judge Stith now sits on the Missouri Supreme Court.

McKevitt v. Pallasch

The judges on the Washington, D.C., federal appellate court who ruled against Miller and Cooper based their decision on McKevitt v. Pallasch, a 2003 ruling from the 7th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, in Chicago. In the majority opinion, Judge Richard Posner wrote, “We do not see why there need be special criteria merely because the possessor of the documents or other evidence sought is a journalist.” He noted that the confidentiality extended by Branzburg does not apply to a book author’s unpublished taped interviews. Posner reprimanded those who “audaciously declare that Branzburg actually created a reporter’s privilege.” He chided his colleagues who dissented in McKevitt by saying that they “may be skating on thin ice.”

“Posner’s opinion was a turning point,” Sableman explains. “It cast doubt on the prevailing pro-media interpretation of Branzburg.”

Rhodes says the Miller and Cooper cases have forced him to alter trial strategy. “I had just geared up for battle in Kansas, and I wasn’t about to cite federal case law knowing the opposition could blow me out of the water with the Miller-Cooper cases where the U.S. Supreme Court denied cert (certiorari, Latin for review). Normally, I’d rather be in federal court because I find federal judges more sympathetic to the First Amendment. But now the opposition could cite the D.C. federal circuit where the judges said there is no privilege,” he says.

Miller is far from the first reporter to be imprisoned for refusing to name names. The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press Web site “rcfp.org” lists 17 journalists who have been jailed since 1972. St. Louisans will recall how Richard Hargraves, a reporter at the Belleville (Illinois) News-Democrat, made headlines in 1984 when he spent a weekend in home confinement until his source came forward in his libel case. Hargraves later lobbied for a broadening of the reporters’ shield law in the Illinois legislature so that it would cover libel suits which until then had been exempt from the Illinois shield law. Vanessa Leggett, a Houston author researching a true crime book, was jailed for 168 days, in 2001, for remaining silent about her sources to a federal grand jury. She was freed only when the grand jury’s term expired. Jim Taricani, a Providence, Rhode Island, television reporter spent four months in home confinement in 2002 for declining to reveal a source’s identity.

The Free Flow of Information Act

The United States lags behind other nations in protecting journalists from overzealous prosecutors and lawyers. France, Germany, and Austria give full protection to their journalists, while Japan, Argentina, and New Zealand provide some.

Congressmen of both parties have proposed legislation in both houses for a national law protecting journalists and their sources. U.S. Representatives Mike Pence, R-Indiana, and Richard Boucher, D-Virginia, and Senator Richard Lugar, R-Indiana, have
The United States lags behind other nations in protecting journalists from overzealous prosecutors and lawyers.

Senator Dodd also has introduced a shield bill with no exceptions to confidentiality even when not promised by the media. Dodd has also signed onto Senator Lugar’s bill.

Joseph Martineau who represents the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Belleville News-Democrat, and other Knight-Ridder papers in Southern Illinois, and, on occasion, Fox-2 News, is not convinced such new legislation will help. “Unless the statutory privilege is absolute, I am concerned whether the situation will be any better. What a legislature gives, it can later take away,” he says. “They seem to provide no greater protection than existing court precedent.”

Abrams summed up the need for protecting confidential sources in his Senate testimony: “We have a genuine crisis before us. In the last year and a half, more than 70 journalists and news organizations have been embroiled in disputes with federal prosecutors and other litigants seeking to discover unpublished information; dozens have been asked to reveal their confidential sources; some virtually at the entrance to jail. It is time to adopt a federal shield law.”


introduced the joint bill, the Free Flow of Information Act. This would give journalists and authors absolute privilege in protecting their anonymous sources with one exception: When all other sources are exhausted and disclosure “is necessary to prevent imminent and actual harm to national security.”

Plamegate refers to the federal grand jury investigation into who blew the cover of CIA operative Valerie Plame to reporters. Intentionally revealing the name of a covert agent violates national security law. Vice President Dick Cheney’s Chief of Staff I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby was indicted on charges of lying to FBI agents and to the grand jury about his conversations with reporters in which he discussed Plame. Some people believe Plame was outed in retaliation after her husband, diplomat Joseph Wilson, wrote an Op-Ed piece in the New York Times critical of the Bush Administration’s use of intelligence leading to the Iraqi war. Plame has since left the CIA, Libby has resigned, and Special Prosecutor Peter Fitzgerald is continuing the investigation with a second grand jury.

He also sent her in jail a bizarre poem, quoted in the Times, about aspen trees turning colors and how she should “come back to life.” Miller’s tale ended with her leaving the Times and Vanity Fair magazine reported that she was known to sleep with her sources.


For more on Branzburg, see caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.

Law runs in her family: Yale Law Professor Kate Stith is married to Federal Appellate Judge José A. Cabranes; Rebecca Stith is an attorney for the Equal Opportunity Commission in St. Louis; the late Carter Stith covered the courts for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch; and Richard Stith is a law professor at Valparaiso University in Indiana. Their late mother was a former newspaper reporter.

For Abrams’ full remarks, see http://judiciary.senate.gov/testimony.
A
braham Merritt’s 1919 book *The Moon Pool* is perhaps the most famous forgotten novel of American science fiction. This fact does not trouble Michael Levy, the editor of this (the eleventh) volume of Wesleyan University Press’s admirable Early Classics of Science Fiction series, so much as it affords him an opportunity to discuss a writer that most of us have never encountered.

Even for science fiction scholars such as myself, Merritt’s work is mythical in the same sense that Atlantis is mythical: for years you have heard the vague, half-formed rumors of its existence, you agree with true believers that it sounds fascinating, and you vow to look into it one day. You never do, of course, because that day is nothing more than the idyllic, impossible dream that all bibliophiles carry with them of a place where the obligations of family, friends, work, and achievement disappear so that we may indulge in the books that form our personal bestseller list.

I suspect that Merritt’s fiction occupies a similarly fantastical place in the lives of many science fiction aficionados, who can barely keep pace with the prolific output of the genre’s current authors, much less investigate its early practitioners. This suspicion, if true, does those readers a great disservice, for *The Moon Pool* is, as Levy claims in his meticulously researched and lucidly written introduction, one of the most fascinating American novels of the early 20th century. As a piece of genre fiction, *The Moon Pool* is an astounding pastiche of themes, character types, and plot devices that will recur in later science fiction stories, novels, films, and television series. The foreboding atmosphere, archaeological mysteries, lurking danger, and bizarro science that fill nearly every page of *The Moon Pool* have indirectly influenced everyone from Isaac Asimov and Philip K. Dick to Ursula K. LeGuin and Octavia E. Butler. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* (1952) and *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) now seem impossible to consider without thinking about *The Moon Pool*, while Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), although a totally different type of narrative, contains passages that resemble Merritt’s novel so closely that I wonder if Pynchon had a copy of *The Moon Pool* on his writing table.

Why, then, has this intriguing book been lost in the mists of literary history? Levy attributes its critical and popular invisibility to two forces: 1) Merritt’s use of “purple prose,” meaning the self-consciously ornate language that the author employs throughout his strange novel, and 2) the critical evisceration visited upon Merritt by science fiction writer and critic James Blish. Blish writes: “*The Moon Pool* . . . is almost unreadable now—stuffy, empty, and dated. [. . .] Its magic, whatever it may have been forty-five years ago, has vanished with time. The style is both windy and cliché-ridden, as well as being ungrammatical with great frequency.” As bruising as this assessment seems, Blish is just getting started. Merritt’s major problem is, to Blish’s mind, far more basic: “*The Moon Pool* appears to be purely a private work, written out of Merritt’s dream life and using images which may have had pith and system for him—though even that concession is difficult to defend in the face of the deadness of the novel—but which the reader cannot share.”
Blish was a proud science fiction writer, supposedly part of the same club as Merritt. We can begin to understand how, with colleagues like these, Merritt has been retired into literary anonymity (and, if you trust Blish’s assessment, infamy). Levy, the editor chosen by Wesleyan Press to rehabilitate The Moon Pool’s image, agrees with Blish that Merritt’s prose certainly has its failings, but Levy argues that Merritt wrote in a style that, by the 1950s, had gone out of fashion in American science fiction, and so cannot be entirely disparaged for writing as many of his contemporaries did. Clean, clear, and transparent prose may have begun supplanting Merritt’s more rarefied language by the early 1910s, a time when literary modernism was doing away with the excesses of Victorian diction, and its Elizabethan echoes.

Merritt, on the whole, produced lyrical, sensual, and occasionally wonderful writing, such as the following passage:

*It was one of Papua’s yellow mornings when she shows herself in her sombrest, most baleful mood. The sky was smouldering ochre. Over the island brooded a spirit sullen, alien, implacable, filled with the threat of lament, malefic forces waiting to be unleashed. It seemed an emanation out of the untamed, sinister heart of Papua herself—sinister even when she smiles. And now and then, on the wind, came a breath from virgin jungles, laden with unfamiliar odours, mysterious and menacing.*

This paragraph—the second of the entire novel—establishes The Moon Pool’s mood so expertly that Merritt spends the remaining 274 pages living up to its promise. He succeeds only 60 percent of the time, but the precision of his language here evokes a colorful nostalgia for lost places that only unabashedly romantic novels indulge.

However, despite the lushness and occasional grace of Merritt’s prose, he often gets lost in the wonder of his imagined environment, leading to passages of tremendously long descriptive detail that call out for plot movement, character interaction, or dialogue—anything really, as long as it is not a disquisition on the bullet pace of modern thrillers. Merritt’s prose, he often gets lost in the wonder of his imagined environment, leading to passages of tremendously long descriptive detail that call out for plot movement, character interaction, or dialogue—anything really, as long as it is not a disquisition about volcanic rock or tropical grass. This is not to say that The Moon Pool is mind-numbingly slow, because Merritt includes scenes of spectacularly exciting violence, but readers accustomed to the bullet pace of modern thrillers may harbor the common, but somewhat inaccurate, impression that The Moon Pool’s languid pace makes it dull. One must give Merritt a bit of time and effort, and both will ultimately be rewarded.

The Moon Pool is a lost-world novel in the tradition of Jules Verne, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. Rider Haggard, and James Hilton that manages to be spooky, spiritual, and silly all at once. The novel’s foreword claims that the entire text is a detailed report written by famed botanist Dr. Walter T. Goodwin for the Executive Council of the International Association of Science. This mammoth report details the strange circumstances of Dr. David Throckmartin’s adventures on the island of Ponape, in the Caroline Islands. Throckmartin has discovered the ruins of the city of Nan-Matal’s ancient inhabitants, but, in the process, has lost his associate Stanton, his wife Edith, and Edith’s childhood nurse Thora to a mysterious creature known only as the Dweller of the Moon Pool. Throckmartin, having escaped the Dweller’s captivity, meets Goodwin by chance on the steamer *Southern Queen* and quickly enlists Goodwin’s aid in returning to Ponape to reclaim his wife (Stanton and Thora, Throckmartin reveals in an emotional outburst, are already dead).

Goodwin has barely comprehended this news when the Dweller appears, chasing the ship along a path of moonlight that conveniently follows the vessel’s wake. Goodwin’s description explains both the appeal and the absurdity of Merritt’s novel:

*Now the Thing was close to the end of the white path; close up to the barrier of darkness still between the ship and the sparkling head of the moon pool. Now it beat up against that barrier as a bird against the bars of its cage. It whirled with shimmering plumes, with swirls of lacy light, with spirals of living vapour. It held within it odd, unfamiliar gleams as of shifting mother of pearl. Coruscations and glittering atoms drifted through it as though it drew them from the rays that bathed it.*

Nearer and nearer it came, borne on the sparkling waves, and ever thinner shrank the protecting wall of shadow between it and us. Within the mistiness was a core, a nucleus of intense light—veined, opaline, effulgent, intensely alive. And above it, tangled in the plumes and spirals that throbbed and whirled were seven glowing lights.

These lights are only one of the many mysteries that Goodwin and Throckmartin investigate when they return to Ponape to reclaim Edith from the Dweller’s clutches. My characterization of the Dweller’s description as absurd is not a negative judgment, either, but rather a simple acknowledgment that The Moon Pool happily departs from the conventions of realism in its opening pages. Merritt’s lyrical (some would say overblown) language is on full display, so he invests a great deal of narrative energy in grounding his fantastic premise in reality. The author succeeds, I would add, more often than he fails. Ponape and Nan-Matal are actual places, as Levy helpfully informs us in one of his useful footnotes: Ponape, now known as Pohnpei, is the capital of the Federated States of Micronesia, and Nan-Matal, now known as Nan-Madol, is a prehistoric city whose many canals have gained it the nickname the “Venice of the Pacific.” Throckmartin, more importantly, is so distressed by his wife’s abduction that he, after telling the horrific story of their expedition into the Moon Pool and a fatal encounter with the Dweller that owes a great deal to H.P. Lovecraft, persuades Goodwin to return to the island to search for Edith in touchingly humane entreaties.

This search becomes the novel’s primary story. Goodwin and Throckmartin team up with a Norwegian sea captain named Olaf Huldricksson and an Irish adventurer named Larry O’Keefe before discovering that the Moon Pool is the doorway to an underground continent that hosts its own civilization. The simi-
larieties to Verne’s 1864 novel *Journey to the Center of the Earth* become even more pronounced when Goodwin encounters the strange flora and fauna of this new world. Here, the novel’s descriptive passages strain the reader’s patience for, after 75 pages, each spectacularly beautiful cliff that affords a panoramic view of yet another magnificent waterfall looks very much like every other.

The heroes then encounter a subterranean society that includes many different types of beings: enormously strong (and colorfully dressed) dwarves, a race of frog people whose women are expert warriors, and, both a golden-eyed priestess named Lakla and a gorgeous woman name Yolara who rules an enormous underground metropolis known as the Dweller’s City that boasts an elaborate public-transportation system of hovering cars. The creakiness of Merritt’s plot and characters (at least to today’s readers) becomes more evident here. Lakla almost immediately falls in love with the roguish O’Keefe, and once he reciprocates this love, Yolara, who also fancies the charmingly loquacious Irishman, cannot help but be jealous.

The novel’s gender, ethnic, and racist stereotypes are undeniable, although they are equally unremarkable for an American novel published in 1919. This is not to dismiss their objectionable content, but many of Merritt’s most florid insensitivities are, by 2006 standards, less offensive than they are quaint and humorous. The worth of the novel as literature is not contingent on these flashes of racism and sexism.

The most notable aspect of *The Moon Pool* is the great erudition that Merritt brings to it. As Levy, the editor, notes, Merritt had a talent for picking the losing side of nearly every great scientific debate of his day, but his engagement with scientific, religious, and philosophical ideas is evident on every page. Merritt, who was one of the highest-paid journalists in America, knows how to distill reams of disparate information into an understandable whole. *The Moon Pool* combines the Hollow Earth theory and Theosophical principles into a nifty extrapolation of how a subterranean world might look and function. If this world seems familiar to us, it is because Merritt, who drew heavily from lost-world novelists Verne and Doyle, has himself influenced (even unknowingly) many of the science fiction and fantasy writers who followed him.

The greatest contributor to this re-issue of *The Moon Pool*, however, is Michael Levy. His terrific introduction is an astute piece of literary scholarship that combines extensive manuscript research, rigorous textual analysis, and historical perspective about the possibilities and parameters of science fiction. Levy’s footnotes are amazingly thorough, while he explains Theosophy’s fundamental belief system and literary history better than any critic that I have ever encountered. Levy writes in a precise and engaging style that, while characteristic of Wesleyan Press’s Early Classics of Science Fiction series, is far superior to the turgid, name-dropping prose that passes for contemporary literary scholarship.

*The Moon Pool*, therefore, is a much better book than James Blish admits. Its story is odd, its structure meanders back and forth across a fantastical landscape, and its language—even when hopelessly outdated—is often a pleasure to read. Merritt’s enthusiastic readers (and he had many of them) called him the “Lord of Fantasy,” and the novel is a fascinating generic amalgam of science fiction, Gothic romance, realist character study, and absurd humor. We are far enough away from Merritt’s day to appreciate his writing as colorful, inventive, and playfully serious, and far enough away from Blish’s to respect his opinion without assenting to it. *The Moon Pool* is not a conventionally good novel, but, given the proper effort, can become a good reading experience. Audiences willing to suspend their disbelief while overlooking Merritt’s paternal attitudes will certainly enjoy the novel despite its excesses and casual bigotries. *The Moon Pool* proposes an unreal world that often seems disturbingly plausible, which, I hasten to add, is a difficult narrative feat. Abraham Merritt (1884-1943) will never be a canonical author (and perhaps shouldn’t be), but he and his book reward attentive and adventurous readers with the type of good-old-fashioned entertainment that is now largely out of fashion.

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1 Editor’s Note: Euphuism is a literary term used to describe a highly ornate style of writing popularized by John Lyly’s *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) and *Euphues and His England* (1580).
Review of

Reading Michael MacCambridge’s saga of the National Football League, a tale that turns the NFL into the Land of Hope and Glory, reflected much of my own life, as a good portion of my professional career dovetails with the growth of the NFL. Even as I enjoyed this well-researched, smoothly written work that lionizes Pete Rozelle as the man who led the conquest spoken of in the title, I kept saying, mostly to myself, sometimes out loud, “Hey, I remember that! I was there for that!”

The Chicago Cardinals moved to St. Louis in March of 1960, and I covered the team for the late, lamented Globe-Democrat from the day of the approving vote by owners until I left the newspaper in October 1961 to join the team as its public relations director, a post I held until July 1972. So I was on hand for much of the turmoil and a great deal of the fun that MacCambridge writes about in a breezy, fast-moving style.

I talked to MacCambridge a couple of times, and I’m quoted in the book, reflecting on the raw, gray November afternoon in 1963 when the Cardinals and New York Giants squared off in Yankee Stadium only hours after Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald and two days after a stroll on Fifth Avenue was interrupted by a wave of pain that rolled down the street and caught us up in front of display-window television sets, watching Walter Cronkite weep.

MacCambridge is brief as he touches on the first 25 years of pro football, but begins with some events in the late 1940s and 1950s that truly changed the game—the formation of the All-America Conference and the vital on-field influence of Paul Brown; Dan Reeves’ move of the Cleveland Rams to Los Angeles as the NFL became the first nationwide sports league; the growth of television and the impact of the Giants-Colts NFL title game in 1959; the arrival of “The Foolish Club,” a group of very wealthy men who founded the AFL.

And, of course, the arrival of Alvin Ray (Pete) Rozelle in early 1960 as the ultimate compromise candidate for commissioner to succeed the late Bert Bell, who died on Oct. 11, 1959. The volume largely credits Rozelle as the man who made the league into the sports, television, and merchandising behemoth it became in the 1960s and 1970s, with expansion, billion-dollar television contracts, slick promotion and merchandising techniques, and the merger with the AFL that brought the world the Super Bowl, the single biggest sports day—and betting bonanza—on the American calendar.

The “war” between the NFL and AFL led to some impressive confrontations, moments of extreme skullduggery, scenes of large amounts of money changing hands and some humorous times as “hand-holders,” usually friends of owners, courted and signed and stayed with prospective players in remote hunting lodges while the draft was going on. Great stories by MacCambridge, and I can attest to the truth in many of them.

I had met Pete Rozelle while covering the Cardinals; I covered the team’s loss to Cleveland one week, was their public relations man when we played the Eagles the next. A smart remark about the officiating was overheard in the press box and printed by the Philadelphia Bulletin’s Hugh Brown, so my welcome-to-the-NFL letter from Rozelle included a strong warning to keep my remarks, no matter how smart, to myself.

In those days, when the NFL had only 12 teams, the annual meeting of p.r. men was held in a small conference room in the Manhattan
Hotel (now the Milford Plaza), just west of Times Square. Pete was a regular attendee for a number of years and, as a former p.r. man for the Rams, an active participant in barroom bull sessions. My first meeting featured a presentation from Ford about the new Punt, Pass and Kick program, a concept to attract young fans but some additional work for the p.r. directors, who already considered themselves overworked. The Ford executive finished and left. Pete addressed us:

“By the way,” he said, “Ford also has promised to provide each of you with a new Ford every year to help you do the work you will be doing. Each team will get two cars, a station wagon for the team and whatever model you want for yourselves.”

That was the way he worked.

MacCambridge deals with the most important games both before and during Rozelle’s tenure. Mostly, he shows what a great bargainer and diplomat the slender San Franciscan was. From his L.A. days, he was close to a pair of Rams’ staffers he had worked with—Tex Schramm, later Dallas general manager and one of his closest advisers, and Tex Maule, senior pro football writer at Sports Illustrated. Both helped give the league a voice that was not necessarily the same as Rozelle’s, but which showed his influence and usually supported his point of view.

In fact, Rozelle was such a lion that the book suffers after his death, partly because Paul Tagliabue, his successor, has had fewer major difficulties and seems bland, and partly because the NFL itself no longer has the Paul Browns, the Vince Lombardis, the Lamar Hunts, the Bobby Laynes, the Sam Huffes, the Tom Landrys, a few of the men who personified the raw power that the NFL had, and which Rozelle brought to the fore with NFL Films, NFL Enterprises, and other tools that gave the league its voice and its look. The commentators like Red Smith, Howard Cosell, even Don Meredith also are gone.

MacCambridge, who now lives in St. Louis, did a fine first book in The Franchise: A History of Sports Illustrated (1997), and has repeated in America’s Game. Both show good writing and exceptional research and grasp of events.

Joe Pollack, a retired St. Louis Post-Dispatch columnist and critic, writes about restaurants and wine for the Web site saucecafe.com, and is the theater and film critic for KWMU.
Before his death on April 21, 1973, Merian C. Cooper, the World War I pilot, prisoner of war, and filmmaker who is most famous for having directed the original *King Kong*, reportedly told his wife, Dorothy, that “Death will be a new adventure.” These words, if true, perfectly encapsulate the life of a man who created one of the greatest adventure films in American cinema.

Such is the theme of Mark Cotta Vaz’s *Living Dangerously: The Adventures of Merian C. Cooper, Creator of King Kong*, which bills itself as the first comprehensive biography of a man who, despite his reputation as a notable Hollywood figure during the heyday of the studio system (Cooper, for instance, was not only head of production for RKO, but also founded Argosy Pictures with John Ford, one of the legitimate geniuses of the American film tradition), has all but been forgotten by 21st century audiences. Merian Cooper does not have the stature of directors of the 1930s such as Josef von Sternberg, George Cukor, or Frank Capra, although Vaz does his best to rehabilitate Cooper’s public image in a biography that succeeds in documenting his subject’s life while failing to examine that life’s full significance. Since Vaz’s book was released to coincide with Warner Brother’s admirable two-disc special edition of the original Kong and Peter Jackson’s soulful 2005 remake, the excitement of *King Kong* returning to the forefront of public spectacle inflects nearly every sentence that Vaz writes.

Vaz is certainly correct to remind us of Cooper’s imagination, tenacity, and contribution to American film. Born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1893, Merian Caldwell Cooper led a privileged life from the start. His father was a well-known lawyer with money and political influence, while Cooper himself, in Vaz’s description, “was the latest in the line who’d first established cotton plantations north of Jacksonville.” This unproblematized assertion is the first sign that Vaz will celebrate Cooper’s achievements rather than analyze the difficult historical events that influenced the man’s early life. The fact that Cooper’s ancestors were slaveholders does not condemn Merian as a racist, but Vaz’s breezy acknowledgment of this fact informs the reader that the author, in writing a comprehensive biography, will not often pause to ponder the deepest historical implications of his subject’s complicated life.

Vaz’s biography is best when recounting Cooper’s amazingly busy existence. After being kicked out of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Cooper joined the Georgia National Guard, helping in the hunt for Pancho Villa, before learning how
to fly airplanes. Serving as a fighter pilot in numerous World War I sorties, Cooper was shot down by German fighters on September 26, 1918. Quick work by a German doctor saved Cooper’s badly burned hands, allowing him to spend the rest of the war in hospitals and prison camps until Armistice Day, on November 11, 1918. Vaz is particularly good at conveying how risky a technology early aviation was and how well Cooper projected an attitude of fearless competence in flying “America’s Liberty plane,” a British De Havilland 4 aircraft with a Liberty motor and two machine guns attached to it. By citing Cooper’s many letters home, as well as the correspondence of Cooper’s friends and squadron members, Vaz reveals Cooper’s courage, fortitude, and ambition to make a name for himself after the humiliation of being dismissed from Annapolis in his senior year.

Cooper’s story, however, is only getting started. After World War I, Cooper, unsatisfied with not finishing the war as a combat aviator, made his way to Poland to offer his services in that country’s struggle against the Soviet Union. Although Poland had achieved independence in 1919, its leaders, fearful of Vladimir Lenin’s intentions for their newly freed nation, launched a strike against the Ukraine in April 1920. The Red Army repulsed this attack, and then entered Poland to continue the fight. Cooper initially went to Poland as part of a humanitarian relief effort spearheaded by Herbert Hoover, but eventually offered his services as a pilot to Poland’s highest official, Marshal (later President) Józef Piłsudski. Cooper then recruited a group of American aviators known as the Kosciuszko Squadron, personally flying several missions against Russian forces before being shot down over Eastern Galicia, on July 13, 1920. Held in several prison camps around Moscow, Cooper endured frightful conditions and unhappy treatment by his captors, which fueled his lifelong opposition to Communism. Cooper and two other prisoners eventually escaped from a forest prison camp by paying a smuggler to guide them through “a thick, fetid, seemingly impenetrable swamp where the slightest misstep would suck the unsuspecting traveler down to a suffocating death in the quicksand-like muck.”

If that description strikes the reader as being more appropriate to an adventure novel than to a biography, then you will understand why my recommendation of Living Dangerously is qualified. Vaz fluidly leads the reader from Cooper’s wartime exploits through his early years as a documentary filmmaker trekking all over the globe to film, in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, two of the most innovative movies of the 1920s: 1925’s Grass, a sincere documentary of the Persian Bakhtiari tribe’s seasonal migration across the peaks of the Zardeh Kuh mountains, and 1927’s Chang, a “natural drama” filmed entirely in Thailand (then known as Siam) that followed a local villager who leaves his community to make a home for his family in an unforgiving jungle. Vaz then recounts, with precision and admiration, how Cooper gestated the idea for King Kong over several years before making, in a period of intense creativity, the final 1933 film, which became an enormous box-office success. Vaz also reveals many other fascinating tidbits: how integral Cooper was to the formation of Pan American Airlines (he was a founding board member), how Cooper served with distinction in World War II (he became chief of staff to General Claire Chennault, leader of the China Air Task Force, and flew several bombing missions), how Cooper’s business and creative partnership with John Ford resulted in two of Ford’s best pictures (1952’s The Quiet Man and 1956’s The Searchers), and how assiduously Cooper promoted cinematic technological innovation (he approved the first movie filmed in three-strip Technicolor, 1935’s Becky Sharp, and was a driving force behind the widescreen process known as Cinerama).\(^1\)

The problem with Living Dangerously is neither Vaz’s impressive, extensive research nor his desire to recount Cooper’s entire life. Both pursuits are laudable and necessary goals if we are to understand how this creative man produced such a valuable body of work. Vaz’s book, however, is occasionally so hagiographic that the reader can be forgiven for feeling unimportant next to the example of Cooper’s cinematic brilliance, unshakable personal integrity, and consequences-be-damned drive to succeed: “Through his heart’s desire [Cooper] molded his very existence like a potter at the wheel, dreamed his great dreams of adventure and made them come true. In a way, natural-born showman that he was, his own life story was his greatest production, and he burnished his own legend to a shining luster with each dramatic exploit.” Reading overwrought encomia such as this one informs Vaz’s reader that Cooper and his heirs have no need to romanticize the great man’s image. Vaz does it all for them, in prose that too often sounds like it comes directly from the Cooper estate’s publicists. Vaz, consequently, too easily excuses his subject’s more problematic aspects without subjecting them to rigorous historical analysis, including Cooper’s early white-supremacist attitudes and his strong support for Senator Joseph McCarthy’s questionable tactics in exposing Communist influence in American society. Vaz, for instance, notes that Cooper’s feelings of racial superiority—best emblemated by a passage in Cooper’s 1927 book Things Men Die For that reads “The lust for power is in us, white men. We’ll sacrifice anything for the chance to rule. And I believe that it is right that black, brown, and yellow men should be dominated by whites”—may have been commonly held by most white Americans of the early 20th century, but Vaz then claims that these attitudes were attenuated by Cooper’s travels in foreign lands: “Ultimately, to Merian Cooper the gravest sin was to be boring, and his fascination with the native peoples overcame some of the ingrained prejudices of his time.” As an explanation for why Cooper believed as he did, Vaz’s analysis is only barely passable as psychology, but, in terms of historical probity, it borders on intellectual irresponsibility, an absurd evasion of the fact that Cooper will be perceived, by many of Vaz’s readers, as a racist whose restless energy, we are supposed to believe, negates his colonial disregard for the full humanity of “black, brown, and yellow men.”

Vaz could have pointed out that the tone of Cooper’s statement questions (albeit mildly) the lust for power that it simultaneously ennobles, or he could have contextualized the state of American race relations during the Great Depression to bring...
Cooper's comment much needed nuance. Instead, he clumsily sidesteps the issue, hoping that, by moving quickly to other topics, the reader will, once again, be overwhelmed by Cooper's genius. This pattern recurs not infrequently throughout Vaz's book. Since Cooper lived through some of the most contentious decades of the 20th century, and, as Vaz admiringly notes, wasn't shy about sharing his opinions, learning about Cooper's reaction to America's changing racial dynamics would help fully examine a topic that Vaz introduces, but seems unwilling to confront.

Vaz, of course, is writing biography, but biography does demand historical rigor and dispassion. More consideration about the context of Cooper's times might have sobered the author's tendency to celebratory excess. Vaz presents a wealth of information about his subject that makes the book valuable for film scholars, but the author's zealous editorializing obscures Cooper's human failings, and perhaps reduces the complexity of his humanity. This tendency, however, has an unexpectedly positive effect in that Vaz manages to capture Cooper's energy, formidable intelligence, and relentless creativity to provide a fascinating explanation, without really intending it, of how Cooper became a successful film producer. Vaz, despite his almost boundless enjoyment of King Kong, demonstrates that Cooper's cinematic achievements as a producer were, if not more significant than his stints as director, at least as notable.

This recognition brings us to Cooper's most famous creation. King Kong is unquestionably a classic film, an exciting adventure tale, and an unexpectedly moving depiction of the uncivilized actions of civilized men. Whether one reads Kong's capture by film director Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong, in a performance that, many observers have noted, carefully mimics Merian Cooper's behavior) as a metaphor for slavery, as an example of nature despoiled by greedy men more savage than the natives of Skull Island, or as a protest about capitalism's terrible effects on other peoples and species, it provides moments of pathos so touching that, like Ann Darrow (Fay Wray), the actress with whom Kong forms a strangely erotic connection, I found myself a bit misty eyed during its final act. Kong's capture is only eclipsed in its heartbreaking effect by the sight of the giant gorilla toppling to his death from the top of the Empire State Building. And, of course, there's the entire Skull Island sequence, a series of thrilling set pieces in which Ann is offered up as one of many "brides of Kong" before being taken by Kong into a wild island jungle, filled with tyrannosaurs, pterodactyls, and other prehistoric creatures. The long scene in which Kong fights a tyrannosaur to the death is so masterfully animated by stop-motion pioneer Willis O'Brien that I was, during my most recent viewing, still nervously rooting for Kong to survive, even though I've seen the picture at least six times over the past 25 years.

Kong, I'm happy to say, also proves to be, as his cinematic descendant Godzilla became in the 1950s and 1960s, an implacable enemy of unchecked urbanization by wrecking whole blocks of New York City once he escapes from his particularly degrading captivity, in which Denham callously exhibits the beast as "the eighth wonder of the world." This scene is such a parody, with Denham—part creep, part huckster, part villain—descending into ridiculous self-promotion, that I still regret that he wasn't ground underfoot, like so many of Kong's innocent victims. Such is the power of Kong, and of Kong, to stir the viewer's empathy that, on this score alone, the film qualifies as a must-see.
Cooper directed *King Kong* with his good friend (and fellow war veteran) Ernest B. Schoedsack, giving audiences a larger-than-life story that, I’m happy to report, remains as exciting and well crafted as it was when I first saw it at age 8. *Kong* is also a film filled with serious ideas about ecology and compassion that masquerades as a pulp adventure story, justifying the attention that Vaz and several film scholars have given it during the past few years. It is not, however, the perfect film that Vaz apparently thinks it is, no matter how many noted artists—Peter Jackson, Steven Spielberg, Ray Bradbury, and Ray Harryhausen, among them—that *Kong* has inspired. The film’s narrative moves so quickly that it barely has time to catch its breath, leading to a poorly conceived romance between Ann Darrow and Jack Driscoll (Bruce Cabot), the first mate of the tramp steamer *Venture* that transports Denham and his film crew to Skull Island. Cabot’s performance is so stilted that its machismo, full of declara-
tions such as “Women can’t help being a bother…made that way, I guess,” clashes with Wray’s restrained, evocative portrayal of Ann Darrow (which is quite a feat, considering that most of Ann’s dialogue consists of Wray’s justifiably famous screams). I watch incredulously when Driscoll declares his love for Ann, not because the sentiment is fatuous (Driscoll and Darrow have been aboard the *Venture* for six weeks), but because Cabot manifests no passion, charm, or real human feeling. It’s a curiously flat moment that Wray’s flair for comedy can’t redeem, and a false note that, I imagine, provoked more laughter than sympathy even in 1933.

The depiction of Skull’s Island’s natives also demonstrates that *King Kong* is, undeniably, a colonial film. The collection of mammies, pickaninnies, and savage doubletalk is difficult to ignore (“Their language is similar to that of the Anis Islanders,” declares Englehorn [Frank Reicher], the *Venture*’s captain, in the film’s sole laughable attempt at anthropological veracity), even if the film’s larger message is that Kong’s capture and exhibition is more monstrous than the beast himself. Denham’s craven greed is best summarized in the film’s final, most famous line. “It was beauty killed the beast,” Denham proclaims as Kong lies dead on the pavement, totally ignoring the fact that his own colonial ambitions, actions, and impulses have driven every moment of the film’s narrative. This statement is stunning in its moral, ethical, and intellectual bankruptcy, leading to a quick fade-out that forces the viewer to ponder just how despicable Denham has been. Since Vaz identifies Denham as a thinly veiled stand-in for Merian C. Cooper, it’s possible to read *King Kong* as an involuntary exposé of the director’s conflicted soul, even though Cooper himself despised anyone, particularly intellectuals, extracting specific messages from the film. This reaction is the surest sign that *King Kong* is not the simple romp that Cooper always claimed, but, in fact, is an example of early cinematic art that plumbs important fears about the idea of progress. The film is not an intricate character study—other than Denham, only Kong has any real character, since Ann Darrow, after her capture, spends most of the film terrified for her life as Kong carries her around the jungles of Skull Island and Manhattan, slinging her about like a rag doll—or a movie whose surface politics can be taken seriously. It is a problematic masterpiece, which is, of course, why we still watch it. Supposedly perfect films, no less than supposedly perfect people, only offer temporary interest, which is why no one cares much about Anthony Minghella’s *The English Patient* or Fabio anymore.

Remaking a classic film is tricky business, as Dino and Federico De Laurentiis discovered in 1976, when their update of *King Kong*, despite a good cast that included Jessica Lange in her debut performance and an enjoyable, contemporized, tongue-in-cheek story that saw an oil corporation (rather than a film crew) go prospecting on Skull Island, was excoriated by fans of the original (the fact that makeup and special effects artist Rick Baker ran around in an ape suit, rather than attempting stop-motion animation, drew as much ire as any other change to the story). Peter Jackson, however, flush with critical and commercial success after completing *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy with 2003’s *The Return of the King*, received the financial and creative freedom to remake *King Kong* in any way that he pleased. Jackson has succeeded both in recreating the Depression-era world of 1933 (the opening scenes in New York are, as many reviewers have noted, staggering in their detail) and in expanding the story to make *King Kong* a fully realized tragedy, rather than the more supple version that Cooper and Schoedsack directed 72 years before.

A great deal of Jackson’s success lies in his decision to embrace, like Cooper and Schoedsack did in 1933, the most cutting-edge visual effects to bring Kong to life. Willis O’Brien’s stop-motion animation remains a monumental creative achievement, no matter how many teenagers snicker at what they describe as the jerkiness of Kong’s movements. Jackson has used the 21st century equivalent of O’Brien’s process, known as motion capture, in which an actor wears a suit that allows digital-effects computer artists to animate Kong’s skin, hair, and face over actual movement. Fortunately for viewers of the new *Kong*, Jackson selected Andy Serkis, the man who portrayed Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*, to give the gorilla a soul. It’s a marvelous performance, and certainly worthy of the acting nominations that Serkis almost certainly won’t receive. When Kong sits, forlornly watching the Skull Island sunset after saving Ann Darrow (Naomi Watts) from not one, but three, tyrannosaurs, we feel his abject loneliness so poignantly that no dialogue is required.

The new *King Kong* is three hours and seven minutes long, which has elicited howls of disapproval from some audiences. I, however, exult in the fact that Jackson, along with Martin Scorsese, still believes that a good story should take time to develop, and that viewers who find such a commitment too taxing can be damned. Jackson’s film establishes an actual relationship between Ann, an unemployed vaudeville actress, and Kong, an aging gorilla who is also the last of his species. Ann, in one memorable scene, literally dances for her life to entertain, as well as avoid being ripped to pieces by, Kong. Naomi Watts, to her cred-

continued from p. 21
it, infuses her role with empathy and tenderness that never become treacly or maudlin.

The rest of the cast does well by their roles, with Jack Black, the lunatic comedian who made *Shallow Hal* (2001) and *The School of Rock* (2003) more than the sum of their parts, playing Carl Denham as a charming, ambition-crazed filmmaker who simply doesn’t know when to quit. Black’s reaction when Kong escapes his New York City captivity is both horrifying and hilarious, while his exchange with Ann in a New York City diner, tempting her into becoming his film’s star, is both smarmy and credible. Peter Jackson and his fellow screenwriters have also wisely turned Jack Driscoll into a playwright, cast Adrien Brody in the role, and developed a plausible romance between Driscoll and Ann that does not verge into the ridiculous. They also include a marvelous parody of Bruce Cabot’s performance in the 1933 *Kong* by making the original shipboard romance into part of Denham’s fictional film. Kyle Chandler plays Bruce Baxter, a vain movie actor that Denham casts for his good looks rather than talent, as a good-for-nothing pretty boy, and the scene in which Baxter, overacting so much that he nearly hyperventilates, admits his love for Ann nicely incorporates the original film’s weakest aspect into a 21st-century context. I’m also fond of Evan Parke’s performance as Mr. Hayes, the *Venture’s* new first mate, who watches out for his crew, particularly a young seaman named Jimmy (Jamie Bell), with admirable concern for their safety, and Andy Serkis’s second role as Lumpy, the ship’s cook, a throwback to the salt-of-the-earth sailors of films from the 1930s and 1940s.

Naomi Watts, as befits the role that Fay Wray made famous, screams with the best of them, which is a real benefit once the film gets to Skull Island. Jackson’s *Kong* then becomes an out-and-out horror picture (for 67 minutes), as Denham, Driscoll, Hayes, Baxter, Lumpy, and the *Venture’s* crew survive a thrilling brontosaurus stampede in their attempt to recover Ann from Kong’s clutches. The faint of heart (and stomach) may not appreciate the extended sequence in which the ship’s crew falls into a foreboding valley, only to encounter numerous giant insects, but, for the rest of us, this scene is, quite simply, manna from heaven (Lumpy’s unforgettable death is one of the most disturbing and disgusting moments—and, therefore, one of the most satisfying—in recent memory). Jackson takes the Shelob sequence from *The Return of the King*, in which Frodo Baggins (Elijah Wood) and Sam Gamgee (Sean Astin) are menaced by a giant, terrifying spider, then adds so many disgusting bugs and worms that the audience stares at the screen in disbelief, not quite accepting that the sight of men bitten, eviscerated, and crushed by some of the most imaginative digital creatures yet seen on film can be as enjoyable as it is. And Kong’s fight with three tyrannosaurs, ending as it does with them all hanging in vines over a steep drop-off, is worth the price of admission alone.

The film’s third act is also a winner, with Kong’s ascent of the Empire State Building becoming the long, grueling trek that we know it must be. The film’s only false note finds Kong and Ann, just before Kong’s fatal climb, sliding around a frozen lake in Central Park, enjoying the closeness they’ve been denied for so long. I can’t begrudge Jackson this short scene, which is well played by Serkis and Watts, but James Newton Howard’s score is too syrupy for its own good, pulling the audience out of the scene’s intimacy just when viewers should be captivated by the emotion of the moment.

Jackson also repeats Cooper’s embarrassingly stereotyped scene with the Skull Island natives, but in a wholly different context that casts them as actors dancing wildly around Kong during Denham’s “Eighth Wonder of the World” exhibition. Some of these performers even wear the same gorilla costumes that the actual islanders wear in Cooper’s 1933 original, letting us know that Jackson understands the earlier film’s drawbacks without rejecting its pleasures. Jackson’s islanders are still darker of skin than the *Venture’s* crew (with the exception of Hayes) and undeniably savage, but also more interesting in
their language and customs. That’s no excuse, of course, although I imagine it’s impossible to make any postcolonial version of *King Kong* that doesn’t risk stereotyping the Skull Islanders as, at the very least, primitive foreigners.

Despite these caveats, I recommend that everyone who has enjoyed the 1933 *King Kong* go see Peter Jackson’s remake (while giving the 1976 film a second chance). Reading Mark Cotta Vaz’s *Living Dangerously* will also enhance the viewer’s appreciation for just how creative Merian C. Cooper was in bringing this fantastic adventure to the screen. Vaz’s biography is valuable because it covers Cooper’s entire life, offering meticulous archival research and an energetic prose style. With any luck, it will inspire more critical, scholarly writings that focus on specific periods of Cooper’s career to explore his complexities, flaws, and nuances more successfully than Vaz’s book does. *Living Dangerously* is, however, a good read filled with fascinating information that demonstrates just how well Cooper fulfilled his longtime motto of “keeping it distant, difficult, and dangerous.” Death may not have been the adventure that Cooper wished it to be, but life certainly seems to have fulfilled that expectation.

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1 Editor’s Note: Kansas couple Martin (1884-1937) and Osa (1894-1953) Johnson made similar documentaries during the 1920s and 1930s, including *Simba* (1928) and *Baboon* (1935). Both were prolific authors as well: Martin’s books include *Congorilla, Adventures with Pygmies and Gorillas in Africa* (1931) and Osa’s most famous is *I Married Adventure* (1940). The Martin and Osa Ssafari Museum, started in 1961, is in Chanute, Kansas.

2 Editor’s Note: *How the West Was Won* (1963) and *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm* (1962) are two films made using Cinerama.

3 Editor’s Note: Denham is completely redeemed in the 1933 sequel *Son of Kong*, directed by *King Kong* co-director, Ernest V. Schoedsack. Denham even gets the girl! Schoedsack also directed *Mighty Joe Young* (1949), another giant ape epic, which featured actor Robert Armstrong once again playing a Denham-like character, mellowed by age.

4 Editor’s Note: The racial politics of *King Kong* have long been controversial. It has always been rumored that *King Kong* was Hitler’s favorite film. Gail Dines’ “King Kong and The White Woman: Hustler Magazine and the Demonization of Black Masculinity” (*Journal of Violence Against Women*, 1998, Vol. 4, No 3, 291-307), suggests that Kong is nothing more than a metaphor for the sexually demonized black male, in effect, a remake of D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), something that was commonly believed by some blacks for years about the film. Also see Paul Hoch, *White Hero Black Beast: Racism, Sexism, and the Mask of Masculinity* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), pp. 48-49, for more analysis of *King Kong* along these lines. Black doo-wop and R and B humorist Jimmy Castor recorded “King Kong” (1975) as a novelty send-up about the film in a comic retelling of the plot.
The Death and Rise of American Popular Music:

Reviews of the Careers of Sam Cooke, Burt Bacharach, and Johnny Mercer
I write songs that start slowly and then work in little by little to this pounding
beat. That is where the excitement is. But I still have my religious beliefs. Our
forbears thought you couldn’t sing [both] pops and spirituals, but I have
rationalized this. I can do anything I want and still have my religious beliefs.
My philosophy of life is: Do whatever is best for Sam Cooke.
—Sam Cooke, 1962

I’m so weak.

1. The Constant Death and
Life of Rhythm and Blues

Gospel, Rhythm and Blues, and pop
singer Sam Cooke would rate among the
half-dozen most influential black male
vocalists to emerge during the 1950s and
60s, probably just below James Brown,
Otis Redding, Ray Charles, and his friend
and back-up singer Lou Rawls, but above
Wilson Pickett, Fats Domino, Jackie
Wilson, and Little Richard. Perhaps the
man with whom he shares the greatest
similarities is Motown star Marvin Gaye.
Both men were the sons of preachers.
Both men added an “e” to their last
names when they reached a certain stage
in their public careers as if to reinvent
themselves. Both men craved cross-over
success with white audiences and actually
wanted to be crooners like Bing Crosby
or Frank Sinatra. And both men were shot
to death under strange circumstances, each
fatally undone not by their appetites alone
(for Gaye drugs, for Cooke sex) but by how those appetites
betrayed weaknesses that they could not quite overcome or even
fully understand. This was especially tragic in Cooke’s case because
he seemed to have been a man who had his demons under con-
trol, unlike many Rhythm and Blues singers from Johnny Ace to
Frankie Lymon, from Little Willie John to Jackie Wilson, all of
whom met ugly and untimely ends. Cooke had seemingly roundly
banished his tormentors to hell, was poised for the pop success
that he desired and felt he deserved, when he was killed in a cheap
Los Angeles motel, the Hacienda, in the wee hours of December
11, 1964, at the age of 33, enraged because he had been conned
out of his money and his clothes by some two-bit Eurasian-look-
ing whore and, in his violent search for her, was shot to death by
the female motel manager. This is a story of how the American
Dream ended up as absurdist film noir.

Cooke’s death was deeply felt by his fans and by African
American communities around the country not only because it
was so shocking but because Cooke embodied the hope of his
times, the young, clean-cut black man ready and willing to walk
through the doors of integration to white
America as a sophisticated but proud enter-
tainer, not a minstrel or a racial self-parody.
For instance, he was among the few black
male singers of the early 1960s not to wear
aprocess or chemically straightened hair.
(Even such cross-over stars as Johnny Mathis,
Sammy Davis, Jr., and Nat “King” Cole had
straightened hair and R & B singers were
notorious for the most wildly elaborate
“conks,” much on the order of the style of
pimps, which some of them were.) Cooke
first adopted “the natural” hairstyle, in part,
because he did not want to seem to his white
audience as if he were a street hustler. Peter
Guralnick in this new biography of Cooke,
Dream Boogie, quotes Cooke as saying at
the time he stopped wearing a process, in
explaining to his brother that the process
symbolized something alien and unsavory
to whites, “But when they [whites] see me,
I’m the perfect American boy.” A few years

Sam Cooke’s American Dream:
Black Popular Music and the Transformation of American Culture

Review of
Peter Guralnick, Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke, New York:
736 pages including notes and index, with photographs
$27.95

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6. Ella Fitzgerald,
the Johnny Mercer Songbook
later, Cooke, a voracious reader of black history, sees political significance in his hairstyle. “We black, and we’ll stay black. I’ll never straighten my hair again,” Guralnick quotes Cooke as saying. The all-American boy morphs in his self-awareness into the all-American black man.

Cooke, along with Ray Charles, Chicago-based Curtis Mayfield of the Impressions, Motown Records, and Aretha Franklin, was a part of a generation of transformation in black popular music, a generation of redefinition, a generation trying to declare its independence. He saw the beginnings of this transformation but he didn’t live to see how it would end.

Peter Guralnick, author of a highly regarded two-volume biography of Elvis Presley, and one of the most knowledgeable and insightful writers around about Rhythm and Blues music, has produced one of the lengthiest and most thoroughly researched biographies ever of a black R & B singer. Despite its length, though, it essentially tells the same story as You Send Me: The Life and Times of Sam Cooke, written by Daniel Wolff in collaboration with S.R. Crain, the founder of the Soul Stirrers, the group with which Cooke sang gospel for most of the 1950s, and Clifton White, Cooke’s guitarist and bandleader in the 1960s. You Send Me was published in 1995. Although Guralnick’s book is twice as long, surprisingly, in a few instances, it is less comprehensive than You Send Me, such as in providing background on the early career of Cooke’s father, a traveling preacher in Mississippi, and in examining all the circumstances surrounding, rumors about, and subsequent investigations, into Cooke’s death and what happened to the people connected to it. To be sure, biographers write long biographies, in part, to show the world the fruits of their years of tedious research, or to produce the “definitive” life, the tour de force book that scares “poachers” off the subject for years.

Yet Guralnick’s book, while it may be a definitive model for writing a book about the R & B singer, notoriously hard subjects to research, does not really replace You Send Me but rather complements that book. Both books are very dependent on different sets of informants (Crain; Zelda Sands, who worked for Cooke’s independent SAR label for a time; Jess Rand, one of Sam Cooke’s managers; and Clif White are quoted far more in You Send Me than in Guralnick’s book, which is very dependent on J.W. Alexander, who was Cooke’s partner at SAR records; Bobby Womack, one of the youngsters Cooke developed for his label and who, shortly after Cooke’s death, married his widow; and Leroy Crume, a guitarist with the Soul Stirrers), but neither set of informants is more important or revealing than the other. The daunting length of Guralnick’s book, which might work against it with casual readers, seems more a sign of respect than an expression of hubris, informing the public that someone like Sam Cooke is worthy of this sort of treatment that might be expected and reserved for a biography of a musical figure like Toscanini or Richard Rodgers or Duke Ellington. It is a tribute to Guralnick’s considerable abilities as a writer that he is able to hold his reader’s interest for such a long narrative covering such a short life, although the book is, it almost goes without saying, repetitious and the attention of even the most ardent reader can flag a bit. Yet one cannot help but admire this book as something of a monument.

2. Hoss Singers and the Sweet Kid

Samuel Cook was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi, on January 22, 1931, the fifth of eight children. He grew up in Chicago, his father “preached his way” there in search of new opportunities. The Reverend Cook was a successful preacher and proud of it, always driving the latest model car and managing to put plenty of food on his family’s table even during the dark days of the Depression. Sam Cooke did only one thing in his life: sing. It was the only thing he wanted to do. He never worked any other job and he never really thought singing was a job. He may have thought it was a hustle, he may have thought it was a way to serve the Lord, he may have thought it was something of an art, he may have thought it was a way to advance the fortunes of Sam Cooke, an intensely ambitious young man, but singing was never a job.

He might still have become a great gospel singer had he grown somewhere other than Chicago, as, after all, black people had a network of churches and church singers in a number of cities but Chicago in the 1930s, during his childhood, was the center of the black gospel movement. Thomas A. Dorsey (1899-1993), a former blues pianist and composer of racy tunes like “Tight Like That,” became the creator of the black gospel sound with songs like “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” and “Peace in the Valley.” He wrote his music for female singers like Sallie Martin, Roberta Martin, and, particularly, Mahalia Jackson.
arguably the most influential and vocally accomplished of all
gospel singers. Chicago also had a highly developed black com-

munity with sufficient audience and institutions—teen clubs,
churches, public performance venues, and schools—to seriously
support gospel music and those who aspired to careers in it.

Cooke began singing as a child when his father organized his own
children into a gospel group called the Singing Children that vis-
ited various churches in the Chicago area. As a teenager he
became the lead voice for a group of teens called the Highway
QCs, who modeled themselves after the foremost male gospel
quartet in the country, the Soul Stirrers. With the QCs (the ini-
tials didn't stand for anything), Cooke became the lead and the
creative center of the group, as the group made limited tours on
the gospel circuit. (Gospel “quartets” usually consisted of five to
six men singing, at times, fairly complex harmonies.) By the time
Cooke was 19, he was such a distinctively attractive and remark-
able voice that he was invited to join the Soul Stirrers, which he
did, leaving the QCs in a rather messy and less than honest way,
which was to mark his subsequent professional departures from
associates as he grew more famous.

He had difficulty adjusting to the Soul Stirrers at first, not to
the problems of life on the road where professional gospel singers
live for most of the year, but to the fierce competitive, cock-of-
the-walk antagonism of black gospel singing. In effect, male
gospel shows were both cutting contests between lead singers
and sex shows: who could bring the women in the audience to
orgasm quickest, with sex appeal disguised as “crying holy” for
the Lord? Which singer could, as it was called, “wreck the
house”? Singers like June Cheeks, who sang for a time with the
Stirrers after Cooke joined, Kylo Turner, and Archie Brownlee
were what I call Hoss Singers, virile, full-throated, sweat-
drenched, show-stopping shouters, capable of even preaching
sermons when they performed. They and many of Cooke’s other
peers dismissed him as a lightweight, a pretty boy, a sweet voice
in a slim body. But in a few years Cooke became one of gospel’s
biggest stars. He learned to survive in this tough performing
world, taking his share of lumps in the beginning but learning
what he could from his competitors while steadfastly refusing to
imitate them, something that stood him in good stead when he
crossed-over and began to sing Rock and Roll shows on the same
stage as highly competitive singers like Jackie Wilson, Little
Richard, and Clyde McPhatter. Cooke never changed his stage
approach with black audiences. He could not dance (nor could
Marvin Gaye, something else both men shared), or do the kind
of gyrations that many R & B artists were famous for. He had to
win his audiences purely through the power of his voice. He did,
more times than not.

3. How I Got Over

Cooke had a number of strengths: first, he was one of the
youngest leads in black gospel, and he attracted a great many
young people who normally would not have listened to gospel
music. Second, he had, as detractors observed, a soaring, angelic
tenor voice that was different from the usual male leads in gospel.
He had a young voice, a “pop” voice that could generate tremen-
dous fervor. Third, he was not only good-looking, (there were
other good-looking gospel singers) but he exuded charm, inno-
cence, and optimism, a sweet sincerity, all the very qualities that
made him a successful pop singer when he decided to cross over
in 1957, much to the chagrin of his fellow Soul Stirrers, who
thought gospel was the ultimate for any singer. But Cooke real-
ized that gospel music had a limited audience; successful record-
ings sold perhaps 40 or 50 thousand copies, and one had to
depend solely on life on the road to make ends meet until one’s
voice failed or one’s health broke down. Gospel was, for a man of
Cooke’s ambition, back-of-the-bus stuff. His first big pop hit was
a very simple, almost simple-minded tune he wrote called “You
Send Me,” which wound up selling more than a million copies.
(Cooke was not a trained musician and could neither read nor
write music, but he had a good ear and a strong intuition about
what people liked.) What made this crossover easier was the fact
that Rock and Roll, which was just beginning to emerge in the
1950s, and Rhythm and Blues, a black urban music that started
in the late 1940s, were both stealing from gospel music because
gospel had pronounced, dramatic vocal harmonies and emotional
power, the two stocks-in-trade of the new popular music that
white teenagers were buying. The secularization of gospel music,
led by people like Ray Charles, condemned “the real thing” to
being a marginal art. In the early 1960s, when Cooke was a suc-
cessful pop singer with tunes like “Wonderful World,” “Chain
Gang,” and “Twisting the Night Away,” only the ardent black
gospel followers were familiar with the music of the Five Blind
Boys of Alabama, the Pilgrim Travelers, the Dixie Humming-
birds, the Mighty Clouds of Joy, the Bells of Joy, and other
black male gospel groups.

Cooke understood the business end of music, realizing that
money came from ownership, not from performance. He formed
his own record company and his own music publishing firm. The
record label, SAR, had a few modest hits, the most significant
being “Looking for a Love,” by the Valentinos, a former family
gospel group, whose lead singer was Bobby Womack, who mar-
rried Cooke’s second wife shortly after the singer’s death. But it
was not that much of a presence in the R & B or pop music
scene. And his publishing company, KAGS music, basically had
only one writer, Cooke himself. Nonetheless, Cooke knew his
way around the highly treacherous landscape of the popular music business. Some of his self-assertion was doubtless fueled by the civil rights movement, as his career and the movement were developing simultaneously. He admired Martin Luther King; was friends with Muhammad Ali, who, in return, idolized him; hated playing segregated venues and often stood up to white cops when he was on the road; and had his share of white groupies. (As he once told a white cop in Memphis in 1961 who told him to push his car when it ran out of gas, “You push the fucking car. You may not know who I am, but your wife does. Go home and ask your wife about me.” Such an imperially masculinist statement was likely to confirm for many racist whites of the period their belief that the civil rights movement was really about interracial sex, after all.) He wrote and recorded one of the great R & B anthems to the civil rights movement, “A Change is Gonna Come,” in 1964, probably the song he is most known for today.

What he desired most was the nightclub cross-over success of Harry Belafonte and Nat King Cole. Cooke understood quickly that the Rock and Roll and R & B circuits were little better than the gospel circuit, with almost no opportunity for a performer to achieve anything except winding up a broke “oldies” act with ruined vocal chords and, if a man, a string of illegitimate babies in various ports of call. Cooke had his share of illegitimate children, as he seemed virtually a sex addict, and two failed marriages. (Curiously, he married women he did not seem to love.) But he generally did not fall prey to the kinds of destruction that met many singers of his type: he was not controlled by the mob, he was not addicted to dope, he was not an inveterate gambler. He had a sunny, genial personality, by and large, and a hugely attractive belief in himself. People liked him. He was easy to be with. And he was gifted with a great voice. That makes his sleazy death all the most stunning. Cooke was no choir boy, but by the standards of his performing peers, he was not nearly as dissipated as many. Indeed, there was much to admire about him, as Guralnick makes clear throughout the book but particularly on the last page when he writes of Cooke’s “almost invincible optimism and beguiling good humor” and of his life as a “kind of enlightenment,” and in his positive subtitle, “the triumph of Sam Cooke.” In the end, Sam Cooke’s life, unlike the lives of many of his peers, was not about weakness, hedonistic surrender, or merely being a co-opted victim but about a certain kind of moral and artistic strength built on a sense of pride that was simultaneously sinful and glorious, political and selfish. I cried when I learned as a 12-year-old boy that Cooke had died. The death of no other R & B artist—from James Sheppard to Otis Redding to Philippe Wynne to David Ruffin—affected me in that way.

Guralnick’s book provides in-depth examinations of Cooke’s relationship with the older men of the Soul Stirrers as well as a detailed reconstruction of the black urban gospel scene of the 1940s and ’50s. We learn as well much about independent record labels and their owners (mostly Jews) like Art Rupe who owned Specialty Records of Los Angeles, where Cooke recorded with the Soul Stirrers, as well as about such influential West Coast R & B singers of the 1950s as Charles Brown and Jesse Belvin, much about life on the road with Rock and Roll shows in the late 1950s and early ’60s including segregation in the South and how these shows were affecting race relations. The biography naturally gives us much about Cooke’s relationship with his second wife, Barbara, whom he knew far longer than with his first wife, Dolores, as well as his relationships with record producers Bumps Blackwell and, as they were professionally known, Hugo and Luigi, and managers Jess Rand and Allen Klein. The writing style is lively; the author often permits the tone of his informants to bleed into his own prose, thus, producing the effect, on occasion, of obliquely writing from that person’s point of view. It is a fine book and what the author convinces, at least, this reader of, in the end, is that Sam Cooke was a man of such stature that someone has now finally written a book worthy of him.

Gerald Early, Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters, Department of English, Washington University in St. Louis
Review of
Michael Broken, Bacharach: Maestro! The Life of a Pop Genius, Surrey: Chrome Dreams, 2003, 319 pp., 16 b&w illustrations

When I was a teenager in the 1970s, my primary impression of Burt Bacharach was formed by his role as a commercial spokesman for Martini and Rossi. Casually but elegantly attired, seated at either a pool or a piano, and with wife Angie Dickinson draped over his shoulder, Bacharach sang a brief jingle in each spot: “Martini and Rossi on the rocks. Say yes!” For an impressionable teenager, these spots seemed to be a perfect evocation of the Hollywood lifestyle. As a historical counterpart to the conspicuous consumption frequently found in contemporary hip-hop videos, the lounge chairs, the cocktails, and the beautiful blondes that surrounded Bacharach were “blingbling” for bland, white suburbanites. As a shill for a popular brand of vermouth, Bacharach epitomized both the beauties and the horrors of this brand of ‘70s sophistication. Was Martini and Rossi the social lubricant that facilitated casual conversation, relaxation, and fun? Or was it the prelude to the key parties, wife-swapping, and quiet desperation that undoubtedly occurred just after the image faded to black? For a youngster like me, whose developing musical tastes ran more toward Elton John, Aerosmith, and Led Zeppelin, Bacharach seemed all too “squarely” a part of the adult world, a figure who appeared to be Perry Como, Pat Boone, and Mantovani all rolled into one.

Flash forward 30 years. As a 41-year-old college professor, I find myself the proud owner of several Burt Bacharach albums, including Painted from Memory, his collaboration with British protopunk Elvis Costello; McCoy Tyner’s What the World Needs Now; and The Look of Love, Rhino Records’ excellent three-disc overview of Bacharach’s career. What happened to me in those three intervening decades? Am I simply older and therefore a more receptive listener for Bacharach’s unique brand of suburban angst? Had Bacharach simply become “cool” again as a result of a younger generation’s ironic appropriation of 1960s lounge music? Had my musical tastes (gasp) actually matured?

The brief moment of existential horror caused by this cursory self-examination passed quickly, however, as I realized that my musical tastes remain defiantly and resolutely adolescent. Anyone who appreciates the bubblegum punk of Green Day’s terrific “rock opera,” American Idiot, can hardly be said to have mature musical tastes. Moreover, as a scholar specializing in the film music of the 1960s, I also realized that my research agenda played no small role in nurturing this incipient interest in Bacharach’s career. As the composer of the film scores for Casino Royale (1967) and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1968), Bacharach’s works remain key cultural touchstones of the era, a situation reflected by the songwriter’s appearance in two of Mike Myers’ Austin Powers films. Like other pop icons, Bacharach has a characteristic, but nonetheless peculiar, Janus-faced appeal. On the one hand, Bacharach’s songs are a staple of classic adult contemporary music, a style associated with frequent Bacharach collaborators, such as Dionne Warwick, B.J. Thomas, and Patti Labelle. On the other hand, Bacharach also is a figurehead of the “loungecore” movement, a retro-kitsch subculture that ironically celebrates the sweet and smooth ear candy of easy listening and elevator music. The bastard children of the Stepford wives, loungecore adherents embrace the placid textures and untroubled surfaces of “beautiful” music, and in doing so, discover a kind of subversive weirdness in its combination of conformity and exoticism. (Indeed, much of this interest stems from “lounge” music’s environmental qualities, its attempts to create ambient musical soundscapes to represent, among other things, South Seas islands and Brazilian carnivals.)
In *Bacharach: Maestro! The Life of a Pop Genius*, Michael Brocken attempts to deconstruct the Cartesian dualism that constitutes the composer’s current persona. In this critical biography, Brocken attempts to transcend this seeming divide by reminding readers of Bacharach’s art and craft as a songwriter. For Brocken, the reason for Bacharach’s appeal to both aging baby boomers and young rock stars, like Oasis’ Noel Gallagher, is pretty simple: the man wrote some damn fine tunes!

The strongest chapters of Brocken’s biography are undoubtedly the early ones, which attempt to situate the composer’s work within the contexts of popular music history and criticism. At the outset, Brocken argues that Bacharach has received short shrift in popular music scholarship due to the latter’s investment in “rock-ist” ideologies of authenticity, which themselves are bound up in larger notions of class, gender, and emotional expression. In disciplinary debates about rock and pop, rock’s association with “authentic” expressions of working class masculinity is usually valorized over the more transient, bourgeois, feminine pleasures of pop. Because of this disciplinary orientation, Bacharach’s considerable contribution to popular music culture has been ignored, and few, if any, popular music scholars appreciate the emotional and musical complexity of Bacharach’s work. Recent attempts at canon formation would seem to support Brocken’s assessment here. In a recent collector’s issue of *Rolling Stone* devoted to the 500 greatest rock songs, Bacharach’s work was cited only once for Dionne Warwick’s recording of “Walk on By.” In comparison, 24 songs by the Rolling Stones made the list as well as 14 songs from the Rolling Stones.

After establishing Bacharach’s place within popular music criticism, Brocken then discusses several formative influences on Bacharach’s career, including his tutelage with “Les Six” composer Darius Milhaud; his work as arranger for German screen legend Marlene Dietrich; and his apprenticeship in the Brill Building songwriting factory that produced several hit records in the early ’60s. Of these influences, perhaps the most important was Bacharach’s early work with Milhaud and his attendant interest in early 20th century French music, such as that of Maurice Ravel and Erik Satie. Rejecting the size and excessiveness of German Romanticism, Bacharach expressed a preference for the tone color, melody, and tasteful chromaticism of the French. Working as a miniaturist in the more restricted forms of popular song, Bacharach developed a style that existed somewhere between the boundaries of pop music and classical music, some-


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where between the intimacy of lieder and the scope of Phil Spector’s three-minute teenage symphonies to God.

While at the Brill Building, Bacharach began his longstanding collaboration with lyricist Hal David, a partnership that yielded several dozen Top 40 hits, a successful Broadway musical, and a film—*Lost Horizon* (1973)—that ranks among the worst ever made. Emerging from the shadow of the then dominant songwriting team of Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, Bacharach and David wrote and produced hits for a wide variety of recording artists, including Gene Pitney, Jerry Butler, the Drifters, and even actor Richard Chamberlain. Through a judicious selection of interview excerpts, Brocken offers enormous insight into Bacharach and David’s working methods while also providing background on their finest recordings, such as “Windows on the World” and “I Say a Little Prayer.” In perhaps the most surprising insight into their work, Brocken discusses the way in which these two hits were appropriated as odes to soldiers fighting in Vietnam. For the families and loved ones of these soldiers, “Windows on the World” and “I Say a Little Prayer” captured their feelings of separation, emotional distance, and hope despite the fact that the songs make no topical reference to the war, to the protest movement, or to American geopolitics.

In his concluding chapters, Brocken charts Bacharach’s precipitous decline in the 1970s as well as his somewhat surprising resurgence in the mid-’90s. Though the author clearly wishes to emphasize the composer’s “magic moments” of the ’60s, he offers a sensitive portrayal of the *Lost Horizon* debacle; the professional and legal fallout resulting from his estrangement from Hal David; his legal difficulties with Dionne Warwick, his finest interpreter; and finally, the dissolution of his marriage to Angie Dickinson.

Still, while Brocken’s book makes an extremely important contribution to popular music studies, one can’t help but feel that there are several aspects of Bacharach’s work that elude him. Although Brocken notes that the complexity of Bacharach’s compositions derive from his use of shifting meters, his sensitivity to tone colors, and his expanded harmonic palette, the author never really gets inside any of Bacharach’s songs. To some extent, this might be the result of Brocken’s layman approach to music analysis and his avoidance of more rigorous methods, such as pitch class analysis, Schenkerian harmonic analysis, or even spectrographic analysis. That said, there are still other points where Brocken simply stops short and never follows the implication of these stylistic elements to their logical conclusion. Thus, in what follows, I would like to briefly sketch out some of the reasons that I see for the complexity of Bacharach’s work and for the notorious interpretive difficulties posed by his song structures.

For one thing, Bacharach’s fondness for shifting meters is one of the most obvious oft-discussed aspects of his craft. For example, Brocken quotes Leonard Feather’s analysis of the tricky shifts in “Promises, Promises” in which the famous jazz critic claims that the song “bulges around its midsection with one bar each successfully in 5/4, 3/4, 4/4, 6/4, 3/4, 4/4, 6/4, 3/8, 4/8, and 4/4. Stop already!” Yet neither Brocken nor Feather seems to grasp the overall effect that these frequent shifts have on Bacharach’s approach to melodic structure and phrasing. These irregular meters endow Hal David’s lyrics with a certain intimacy insofar as the rhythmic accents created by these metric shifts
mimic the ebb and flow of ordinary conversation. In contrast to the declamatory style of typical strophic patterns, the shifting meters of Bacharach songs shade them toward confessional drama rather than epic poetry, a style that is ultimately well-suited to David's tales of suburban heartbreaking.

Besides these metric shifts, another important aspect of Bacharach and David's songcraft is their tendency toward a style of melody that uses one syllable per note. This in itself is hardly unusual inasmuch as several earlier songwriters have also used this monosyllabic approach to text setting. Yet, when combined with Bacharach's fondness for shifting meters, these two stylistic traits impose enormous constraints on interpreters. If a singer strays too far from Bacharach's melody, there is a good chance that the singer will mess up the intricate metric shifts of the song. And in disarranging the song's melody, one destroys the song's careful phrasing and structure. In sum, if one deviates too far from Bacharach and David's written text, one risks destroying the song almost entirely.

Perhaps this is the reason why Bacharach's quintessential interpreters have been “cool” singers, like Dionne Warwick and Dusty Springfield. A more florid stylist, like Aretha Franklin or Otis Redding, feels out of place in a Bacharach song, largely because of their freer, more melismatic approach. (For example, compare Franklin's recording of “I Say a Little Prayer” with Warwick's, and you'll know what I mean.) Indeed, even an improvisational genius, like jazz pianist McCoy Tyner, seems utterly defeated by the constraints imposed by Bacharach's shifting meters and nontraditional phrase lengths. Tyner helped John Coltrane turn Rodgers and Hammerstein completely inside out in their famous recording of “My Favorite Things.” Yet, on his recording, “What the World Needs Now,” Tyner's interpretations of Bacharach have a highly schizophrenic quality alternating as they do between extremely straightforward statements of the melody and trio workouts that seem imported from completely different recording sessions.

Still, while irregular phrases and monosyllabic text settings are crucial components of Bacharach's style, perhaps the most important element to his work is its embodiment of a genteel brand of romantic fatalism and masochism. Bacharach and David saw their songs as three-minute mini-movies, and despite the calm and graceful surface of their melodic textures, they often conceal deep feelings of romantic torment. Consider, for example, “A House is Not a Home” and “Always Something There to Remind Me,” both of which capture the uncanny associations that objects take on in domestic and public spaces. Whether a bedroom or a city street, these places all too easily evoke the wounds caused by old flames or unfaithful partners. In “Walk on By,” the song's protagonist urges a past lover to ignore her should their paths cross again. In this, perhaps the quintessential Bacharach and David song, former lovers hide their feelings for one another in order to avoid an emotional confrontation. By failing to acknowledge their past love, the song's subject conceals the “tears and the sadness” that is still felt so strongly, and wallows in—indeed, positively savors—the sweet pain of lost love. “I Say a Little Prayer for You,” on the other hand, explores the soulful heartache of unrequited love. Dramatizing a romantic wish that is so hopeful as to be delusional, Bacharach and David beautifully capture the dualism lying at the heart of unrequited love: winsome and wistful, on the one hand; obsessive and self-defeating on the other. Like the Police's “Every Breath You Take” many years later, “I Say a Little Prayer” is a gorgeous paean to stalking.

As Brocken points out, Bacharach's career went into a tailspin following the devastating failure of *Lost Horizon*. The composer would have a few hits in the '80s, most notably with Christopher Cross' recording of the theme from *Arthur* (1981) and the AIDS charity anthem, “That's What Friends are For,” but his best work was clearly behind him.

Although undoubtedly an icon of the '60s, Bacharach reentered the public spotlight once again in the 1990s. Two events served to generate renewed interest in Bacharach's work. The first was his collaboration with Elvis Costello, a partnership that grew out of Allison Anders' *Grace of My Heart* (1996), a fictional biography of Carole King's rise from Brill Building songwriter to star. For the film, Bacharach and Costello composed “God Give Me Strength,” which later went on to become an Oscar nominee for Best Song the following year. In Costello, Bacharach had finally found a worthy successor to Hal David. Despite their generational differences and the British songwriter's insouciance and fondness for wordplay—two traits that seem wholly outside the Bacharach ethos—Costello and Bacharach shared an interest in the beautiful ache of romantic failure.

Unlike his punk contemporaries, who focused on the social and political aspects of British life, Costello charted the relation-
ship between the personal and the political, a strategy that characterized the obsessions, jealousies, and failures of romantic love as a form of emotional fascism. Written as a backhanded tribute to Abba, Costello’s “Oliver’s Army” begins as whispered entreaty, but rapidly changes to an acid critique of British colonialism.

Whether sexual or ideological in nature, both the individual and the nation employ forms of seduction in Costello’s world. Similarly, on “I Want You,” Costello takes a phrase associated with the pointed finger of Uncle Sam, and turns it into a disturbing exploration of romantic obsession. Though Costello’s vision is much darker, his pathologically jealous hero is merely an exaggerated and updated version of the wistful optimist that sings “I Say a Little Prayer for You.”

With their collaboration on Painted from Memory, Costello and Bacharach create a devastating portrait of contemporary ennui and dissolution. With titles like “Toledo” and “This House is Empty Now,” Costello’s lyrics function as a veritable homage to his predecessor, Hal David. Yet, in other songs, such as “In the Darkest Place” and “Tears at the Birthday Party,” Costello returns to his already familiar tropes of longing and loneliness. Elvis may no longer be the sharp-tongued iconoclast that he was when he debuted, but no contemporary songwriter is better at capturing love’s emotional complexities and perfidies, the happiness as well as the hurt. As Brocken says of Painted from Memory, “It was in many respects the great Bacharach record, and we have Elvis Costello to thank for that.”

The second event in Bacharach’s contemporary resurgence was the release of Julia Roberts’ 1997 comedy, My Best Friend’s Wedding. An updating of the screwball formula, P.J. Hogan’s film makes extensive use of Bacharach’s music from the bubble-gum pink credit sequence featuring ‘Wishin’ and Hopin’” to Cameron Diaz’s laughably awful, but quite sincere, karaoke version of “I Don’t Know What to Do with Myself.” For me, however, the film’s centerpiece is its ebullient rendition of “I Say a Little Prayer for You.” While pretending to be Roberts’ new fiancée, Rupert Everett concocts an elaborate story about their first meeting. In an effort to capture the sense of “love at first sight” caused by his first encounter with Roberts, Everett begins to sing “I Say a Little Prayer” to the other members of his dinner party, much to the chagrin of his nominal fiancée. Soon, other people at the table join in one by one. By the time of the chorus, everyone at the table and everyone in the restaurant is smiling and singing Bacharach and David’s classic tune. As a musical set-piece, this scene is one of the most joyful moments in 1990s cinema, brimming with a verve and dynamism that is all too rarely found in today’s films. Where most films celebrate their own cynicism and irony, this scene celebrates the sense of excitement and Utopia more commonly associated with its old Hollywood forbears. Still, while My Best Friend’s Wedding attests to the contemporary relevance of Burt Bacharach’s music, it nonetheless offers only a limited and partial understanding of the composer’s genius; for while the film captures the suave, refined surfaces of Bacharach’s style, it ignores the lonely and yearning heart that beats within it.

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It is worth noting that despite Oasis’ apparent Beatles’ fixation, the group paid homage to Bacharach on their first album, Definitely Maybe. Bacharach’s photo is clearly visible in the left-hand corner of the cover artwork, a place one might assume would be taken by either John Lennon or Paul McCartney.

Editor’s Note: A group of early 20th-century French composers whose music was a revolt against German Romanticism. Other members of the group were Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, Georges Auric, Louis Durey, and Germaine Tailleferre.
Review of
Philip Furia, Skylark: The Life and Times of Johnny Mercer,

Gene Lees, Portrait of Johnny: The Life of John Herndon Mercer,

What gives Mercer’s best songs their distinctive character is their blend
of urbanity and earthiness, a blend so distinctive that, alone among the
lyricists of Tin Pan Alley, people speak of a ‘Mercer’ song as readily as
they denominate songs by their composer.

— Philip Furia, The Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America’s Great

I tried to be a singer and failed. I tried to be an actor and failed. So I
just naturally fell into songwriting.

— Johnny Mercer

Part 1: I’m Old Fashioned

By the early 1960s, famed lyricist Johnny Mercer was at a career
crossroads. He had been thinking for quite a while that the
world of popular music had passed him by. As biographer Gene
Lees perceptively notes in his Portrait of Johnny: The Life of John
Herndon Mercer, “John was a product of the big band age.” He
was also a product, Lees continues, of everything that made big
bands possible and popular: “the newly formed radio networks,
the Broadway musical theater and Hollywood musical movies,
the country’s countless dance pavilions…” Mercer, when he was
a teenager, was an inveterate dancer and helplessly entranced by
the popular songs of the day. He had sung with a big band, Paul
Whiteman’s, and had a radio show during World War II. He had
written songs for several Hollywood musicals in the 1930s and
1940s. Mercer had come along during the period of a fantastic
intersection of American popular music: Jazz as a dance music
and a musician’s showcase and Tin Pan Alley as a song machine
for Hollywood and Broadway were synergistically fused as youth
fantasy and bourgeois convention, as both artistic innovation and
commercial formula. Never was popular music more technically
accomplished. Never was it more sophisticated in how it said
what it said (although what is said was often banal). Never was
it a better form of social dance music because social dance itself
was far better than it is now. Nothing like it has ever occurred
again in American popular music.

By the 1950s, television had replaced radio as the main elec-
tronic entertainment medium, the Hollywood musical was a
dying form, Broadway was no longer the force it had been, and
Tin Pan Alley had been overthrown by a rash of “indie” music;
that is, music that largely came from independent record compa-
nies: country and western, gospel, rhythm and blues, folk, “pro-
gressive” or art-house jazz, and especially Rock and Roll, now the
engine, the big beat of the culture, the pulse of the young baby
boomers, whose taste, temperament, and tumult ruled the times.
The industry that had formed Johnny Mercer—the centralized
power of a handful of Hollywood studios, a few Tin Pan Alley
music publishers, the “Big Three” record companies, and the
major radio networks that shaped and informed American musical
taste—no longer existed by the 1950s and he felt very much as if,
perhaps, there was no longer a place for him in popular music. By
the 1950s, the man who had ruled the Hit Parade with song after
magnificent song like “Goody, Goody,” “Hooray for Hollywood,”
“You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby,” “Jeepers Creepers (Wher’d You Get Those Peepers),” “One for My Baby (And
One More for the Road),” “Come Rain or Come Shine,” “I’m An
Old Cowhand,” “On the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe,”
“That Old Black Magic,” “Ac-cent-tchu-ate the Positive,” “Too
Marvelous for Words,” “Lazybones,” “Blues in the Night (My
Mama Done Tole Me),” and a score of others was desperately
seeking work, willing to write lyrics at any opportunity. But
Mercer had one last gasp of success and fame in the early 1960s before the lights finally went out on his type of song as a force in popular music forever.

In 1961, he penned the lyrics for the theme song of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, a well-liked film starring Audrey Hepburn. The song, composed by Henry Mancini, who also scored the film, was called “Moon River,” which not only won Mercer his third Best Song Oscar but which became probably the best-loved and most popular of all the lyrics he wrote. (“Waiting ’Round the Bend/My Huckleberry Friend” may be the most exquisite and concise bit of Americana in American letters, pastoral and poignant, evoking the three major romantic components of the American mind: rivers, loneliness, and home.) Mercer was probably especially pleased by the fact that even blacks liked the song as Chicago soul singer Jerry Butler, formerly of the Impressions, recorded a version of the tune for Vee Jay, the major African-American record company of the day as it was far bigger than Motown, and it reached number 14 on the R & B chart. Covers of movie themes did not hit the black chart with great frequency. (Butler’s “Moon River” was number 11 on the pop chart, matching Mancini’s own recorded version of the song.) Neither biography mentions this but as an African American, who grew up listening mostly to black radio, I never heard Andy Williams’s version of the song, which has become the most famous. Indeed, I didn’t know who Andy Williams was in 1961. And I didn’t see the movie until I was in my 30s. Yet as a child, “Moon River” was one of my favorite songs, thanks to Jerry Butler and the black elementary school teachers who taught it to me and about 200 other kids. It is important to note that the social dynamics of this country have often played a significant role in how and where people hear music. In any case, Mercer liked being appreciated by blacks, and he was always delighted that blacks often mistook him for a black singer when he was singing fairly regularly on the radio back in the 1930s and ’40s. As biographer Philip Furia points out in his biography, *Skylark: The Life and Times of Johnny Mercer*, “… Johnny Mercer, alone among the great songwriters of his generation, was, from the day he was born, influenced by the music of blacks.” Mercer had social interactions with blacks from the time of his childhood. He even spoke Gullah or Geechee, a black southern dialect. Being a white southerner of patrician gentleman background gave him something of a different perspective on American music than many of the other people he came to work with during his career in both New York and Hollywood.

In 1962, Mercer and Mancini hit the jackpot again with the theme song for the film *The Days of Wine and Roses*, starring Lee Remick and Jack Lemmon. The song was a pop hit, though not nearly as popular as “Moon River,” and it, too, won the Oscar that year for Best Song. How could Mercer have possibly thought he was passé? He had to be, without question, the most recognized, respected, and honored lyricist in American pop music history. And it was for a few moments in the early 1960s that he was energized, hoping to realize the great dream that had eluded him of writing the great Broadway musical. He was right. He was passé. His moment was gone. He continued to write musicals but never a truly successful one, never one like “Guys and Dolls” or “My Fair Lady.” He continued to write songs for movies for a while but no more great ones. Sometimes not even good ones. He might have come to realize himself in the exact terms of the lyrics he wrote many years earlier for Jerome Kern:

I know I’m old fashioned  
But I don’t mind it  
That’s how I want to be  
As long as you agree  
To stay old fashioned with me.

The world, as is its wont in the modern age, chose not to stay old fashioned.

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Part II: This Will Be My Shining Hour

Nothing can stop me,
Fate gave me a sign.

John Herndon Mercer was born in Savannah, Georgia, on November 18, 1909, the fourth son of a successful banker and real estate developer. Mercer always had a kind of “aw, shucks” attitude about becoming a songwriter and he may very well have preferred becoming a singer and actor like his idol Bing Crosby. But he was always interested from childhood not just in music but particularly in popular songs. He loved popular music, memorized dozens of songs, and tried his hand at writing lyrics when he was an adolescent. He never learned to play a musical instrument and he never learned to read music. But he had great instincts for the sense and sensibility of creating popular music. He understood from the time he was very young that, as Furia wrote, “[a] song was not just something to listen to. It was a crafted creation with a structure, a pattern of repetition and variation; it worked” (italics Furia). So songwriting was not just something Mercer happened into or something that came along by way of compensation for a failed singer and actor. (He was, in fact, a fairly successful singer.) By the time he was in his early 20s he had thought about songwriting as much as any professional musician at the time might have, and he knew a great deal about the popular music of his day.

Mercer was ticketed to go to Princeton and probably become a lawyer, but the family fortunes dried up when Mercer was in high school as his father’s business failed, although his father refused to go bankrupt as a point of honor. So, Mercer’s formal education ended upon prep school graduation. Mercer, who had done some amateur acting to good notices, decided to go to New York and try his hand. He got small parts, lived in cold water flats with other starving actors, and seemed destined for instant and permanent obscurity. At this time, he was also writing song lyrics. He started hanging around the offices of music publishers and the haunts where the Tin Pan Alley songwriters hung out. He began to publish a few lyrics, get tutored by a few of the old heads in the business who mostly loved drinking and playing the ponies while trying to grind out something that might have the makings of a hit. He eventually became a staff lyricist at Miller Music. He wrote lyrics for an undistinguished musical called Paris in the Spring that did well in San Francisco but never made it to New York. He was learning about the cutthroat nature of the popular music business in the United States where song pluggers relentlessly promoted songs anywhere they could. (He had naively thought that songs became hits become somehow singers and the public intuitively understood them to be worth being hits.) The money in songs was the selling of sheet music to the public. Recorded music was important but it must be remembered that during the Depression, which is when Mercer began his rise as a songwriter, records nearly disappeared from the market and record companies nearly folded. During World War II, a severe shellac shortage made it impossible to produce records at the rate that the public, now flush with wartime wages, might have been willing to consume them, although record sales, despite the shortage, were robust. Records became the driving, indeed, primary force of the public consumption of music after World War II. Therefore, the song pluggers were necessary to get sheet music sold and later radio was a major force in creating the market for popular music. Mercer learned about kickbacks to singers who would perform songs, sharing writer’s credit with someone who had nothing to do with the creation of a song but was instrumental in getting someone noteworthy to sing it. Thievery of all sorts went on. He learned, as most do who enter this profession, that music is one thing and the music business is quite another. Commercial music has never been a game for the faint-hearted or for people who aren’t sharp and shrewd. Perhaps that is why one finds a disproportionate number of gamblers who are in this industry.

Mercer came from a highly respected and established Savannah family, so going into show business could have been looked upon with skepticism, even as scandalous. To some degree, his career path was a bit rebellious. The fact that he decided to marry a Jewish chorus girl, Ginger, in 1931 was certainly so. And she was never fully accepted by his family, nor comfortable with them. But Mercer was no angry young man.
or a rebel against his tradition. He loved being Southern, loved the traditions of the South, and loved his family. As he wrote in his unpublished autobiography, "If you should ask me what makes me tick, I would say that it is that I am from Savannah. Savannah really is about all that's left of the Deep South. Two or three more wars, high-speed transportation, 'progress' and social change have altered almost unendurably the old way of life. I am aware that a lot of people like the change. Materially there has been vast improvement. But so much has been lost. I miss so many of the old ways, the old days. Maybe it's just being a kid I miss. But I remember Savannah in the old times, and I am overcome by a nostalgia nearly too strong to bear" (quoted in Lees). He might have felt a little differently when he was younger and Savannah might have seemed a bit stifling. His family, particularly his father, for the most part, was supportive of his ambitions. They, and Savannah itself, were very proud once Mercer achieved considerable success.

Mercer eventually collaborated with Hoagy Carmichael producing "Lazybones," Mercer's first real hit, which, at its height was selling 15,000 copies of sheet music a day. He got a job singing with Paul Whiteman, the best-known bandleader of the period and, in some ways, the most important in spreading jazz or something like it to millions of people, and who often employed some of the most talented musicians he could find. The job with Whiteman led to an offer in 1935 from RKO to come to Hollywood to act and to write songs for the musicals that Hollywood was cranking out at a dismaying rate. Hollywood had an inexhaustible appetite for songs and, of course, needed all the decent songwriters it could find. Mercer acted in a few movies but never made much of an impression with either Hollywood studios or the public. But he had an enormous talent for writing song lyrics. In Hollywood he found his calling, as he was paired with a number of gifted popular composers like Richard Whiting (whose daughter became a noted singer encouraged by Mercer), Jerome Kern, Harold Arlen (who had done the music for 1939 film version of The Wizard of Oz with Yip Harburg), and Harry Warren, arguably the finest of all Hollywood musical composers. Like most genius commercial artists, Mercer then went through a period of staggering creativity, an extraordinary fertility of imagination. He wrote a lot, and most of what he wrote was remarkably good, fresh, poetic, stunning, not merely clever. He rose instantly to the top ranks of American songwriters.

In addition to his songwriting, Mercer, along with song writer/movie producer Buddy DeSylva, exclusively as a backer, and Glenn Wallichs to keep the books and watch over the technology, started Capitol Records in 1942. It was thought foolhardy at the time as there was a war going on and a shortage of shellac to make records. Besides, no one thought an independent record company could stand up to the majors—Columbia, Decca, and RCA. Mercer could have, indeed, called these years between, say, 1935 and 1948, after title of a song he wrote with Harold Arlen for the Fred Astaire film musical The Sky's the Limit, “My Shining Hour.” Few artists are ever this good for this long. He had become, for a time, the Great God of the American pop lyric, of the American song.

Part III: Autumn Leaves

Since you went away the days grow long
And soon I’ll hear old winter’s song.
— Johnny Mercer/Joseph Kosma,
"Autumn Leaves," 1950

Don’t bring a frown to old Broadway
You’ve got to clown on Broadway
— Arthur Freed/Nacio Herb Brown,
"Broadway Melody," 1929

Capitol inadvertently, ironically, led the way toward the downfall of Tin Pan Alley pop, to the downfall of the very music that Mercer loved so much. Capitol showed that an independent could stand up against the majors and survive, even thrive. (Mercer eventually sold his interest in the company for a handsome profit.) After World War II, independents were to proliferate madly all over the country. Philip Furia also believes that the ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers) strike against radio broadcasters in 1940, denying
them the use of any music made by an ASCAP member, also led to the downfall of the Great American Songbook. The radio networks created Broadcast Music Incorporated and signed its own songwriters, from a wide variety of fields—country and hillbilly music and, later, rhythm & blues. Indeed, as Furia notes, “[by] 1952, BMI would license 80 percent of the music played over the radio.” As nearly all the great Tin Pan Alley songwriters were ASCAP members, BMI effectively broke the dominance of that group over American popular music and American musical taste.

Mercer had an unhappy marriage, an on-and-off affair with Judy Garland of such intensity that he asked his wife for a divorce so he could marry Garland. Considering Garland’s instability, his wife probably did him a favor by refusing to give him one. (Both biographies provide us with the titillating fact that Garland was proficient at fellatio and was sexually aggressive.) Mercer also had his share of affairs with starlets and the like, the dubious prerogative of the influential and the famous: to share bodily fluids with goofy, admiring strangers who want something from you. He was cruel to his wife, a cruelty sometimes tainted with the whiff of anti-Semitism, and she endured it to have the privilege of being called Mrs. Johnny Mercer. Neither of the biographies is kind to Mercer’s wife, Ginger, but Lees’s book, with its long diatribes by various of his informants against her at the end, seems especially harsh and will strike many readers as just settling scores of some sort. Why all of that denunciation of Ginger is there is a mystery as none of it furthers an understanding of Mercer and his art.

He and Ginger adopted two children. He was also a nasty drunk who was capable of saying unspeakably cruel things to people when he was under the influence. He would remember these episodes when he sobered and would invariably send the injured person flowers and a note of apology. There was something odd about this entire ritual, and one is inclined to think that Mercer used the drinking as a pretext to be able to say things to people that he actually wanted to say but could not afford to say when he was sober. Perhaps he was a better actor than he knew.

He wrote several stage musicals including *St. Louis Woman*, with Harold Arlen, based on a book by African-American writers Countee Cullen and Arna Bontemps that was, in turn, based on a novel by Bontemps called *God Sends Sunday* (Lena Horne, pressured by the NAACP over race image issues and the book’s structure and movement of a solid biography told in a straightforward manner.)*

**A History of America’s Great Lyricists.** Gene Lees is himself a songwriter, who has written lyrics for such compositions as jazz pianist Bill Evans’s “A Waltz for Debbie” and Antonio Carlos Jobim’s “Quiet Night of Quiet Stars,” the latter a highly successful and much performed song. He is a former editor at *Downbeat* magazine (1959-1962), and has, since 1981, published his own monthly entitled *Jazzletter*. He is the author of a fine biography of jazz pianist Oscar Peterson. Lees also had the advantage of knowing Mercer personally, having interviewed him on several occasions. Both men are qualified to write a biography of Mercer. If anything, one would think that Lees’ work would be more promising, as he comes to it with such impressive credentials. In the end, with very minor exceptions, both books provide almost identical information, quoting the same source material and many of the same informants. Indeed, many of the quotations from written sources, such as Mercer’s letters and unpublished manuscripts are identical. Lees’s book has moments of insight, insider views of the music industry, and insider information about the art and craft of writing songs. (English is one of the hardest languages in which to create good rhymes, Lees tells us.) From Lees, the reader learns much about certain intricacies in the history of the American popular song. But his book never attains narrative traction. There are long quotations from letters and unpublished sources that simply bog down the flow. The narrative is lumpy and snarled by its own detail. Lees himself is sometimes a bit too much of a presence in his book, and this can lead to a concern on the reader’s part that the book appears a little self-serving. Moreover, the book falls between the structural chairs of trying to be arranged both chronologically and thematically and never quite succeeds either way. Furia’s book is more readable, less burdened by long quotations, less inclined to wear truculently its research on its sleeve, having the narrative structure and movement of a solid biography told in a straightforward manner.

I am not so sure that the passing of Tin Pan Alley was the death of American popular music as we know it. Certainly, Tin Pan Alley, coupled with jazz, gave us a rich musical heritage, a highly influential and highly accomplished art, probably the
most harmonically challenging popular music we ever had. But there is a tendency for fans of the old school of American popular music to compare the best of Tin Pan Alley with the worst of everything else. There are a lot of bad Tin Pan Alley songs out there—just watch a bunch of old Hollywood musicals or listen to the recordings of a lot of Broadway shows. In the 1960s when Mercer complained about Rock and Roll, Smokey Robinson of Motown was penning some of the best teen songs in America, “Tracks of My Tears,” “You Beat Me to the Punch,” “My Guy,” “My Girl,” and a dozen more. And what, on the surface, makes Mercer a better songwriter than Robinson? Neither man can play a musical instrument or read music. They are both just high school graduates who liked to sing and liked songs. They both wrote instinctively. What would have made Johnny Mercer’s lyrics better, than, say, the lyrics of Roger Miller, an untrained songwriter from Texas who left school after the eighth grade but went to write such memorable tunes as “Chug-a-Lug” and “King of the Road”? In other words, a good deal of American popular music has been a kind of amateur hour where the unschooled and the untrained have tapped deeply and compellingly into our psyche as a people. Any democratized art form always teeters on the brink of declension. Bad taste and kitschy fraud, Barnum-like puffery and arty pretension are prices one pays for democracy. And a popular song functions as nothing so much as a kind of hyper-text that diagnoses our emotions as it intensifies them, making it possible for us to feel what we feel. Great popular songs are about making the obvious a profound yearning of transcendence. Popular songs, finally, in our culture, are our last nod to an oral tradition as they are all about the construction of memory, how well we can remember what the song evokes in us.

It must be remembered that, despite the chasm between Tin Pan Alley and Rock and Roll, there may be more of a connection than is immediately apparent. (I am not even thinking here about the major hits that Doo-Wop groups like The Flamingoes and The Marcels had with songs like “Blue Moon” and “I Only Have Eyes For You” or the fact that Rock and popular dance singers like Linda Rondstadt, Rod Stewart, Carly Simon, Queen Latifah, and others have recorded the Great American Songbook.) Ozzie Nelson had a popular band in the 1930s that played a lot of sweet jazz and Tin Pan Alley fare. Along with his wife, Harriet, a good vocalist, Nelson managed to create a solid fan base among those of the Mercer generation. When Nelson established his television show, he introduced his young son, Ricky, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as a weekly performer, not as a Tin Pan Alley singer, but as a Teen Idol rockabilly star. Indeed, Ozzie Nelson had more to do than virtually anyone else in getting Rock and Roll accepted by middle America, by white bread America, and by that generation of Americans that grew up on his music and whose children were now attracted to the music of his son. What is sorely needed is a major biography of the Nelson family to explain how the continuum between Tin Pan Alley and Rock actually informs America’s musical sense of itself. Or perhaps, as in the words of the famous Freed/Brown, all American popular music, from minstrelsy to Rock, is about a certain aspiration for success, for optimism, for youth, for urban modernity, for the sheer possibilities of life itself that ironically are so compellingly captured in the very obsolescence of the song itself, the awful and awesome superficiality of it all:

Your troubles there are out of style
For Broadway always wears a smile
A million lights, they flicker there
A million hearts beat quicker there.

Ricky Nelson, during his heyday as a teen singer, recorded “Fools Rush In” (1963), a Johnny Mercer song. But I wonder if Mercer liked the way Nelson sang it. Mercer always wondered why the younger generation did not follow the example of Antonio Carlos Jobim, clearly a better songwriter than most who were doing Rock and Roll or popular dance music in the 1960s. But then again, as jazz guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli pointed out, the younger generation of songwriters he knew like Paul Simon, Phil Spector, Carole King, and the Brill Building crowd that so changed pop music in the 1960s simply heard music differently. Besides, how bad is Rock and Roll? On the one hand, there was a possibility in early 1970s that Mercer might collaborate with Paul McCartney, an ardent admirer. But Mercer felt ambivalent about McCartney’s work. He thought the lyrics to the James Bond theme song, “Live and Let Die,” were horrible. On the other hand, one of Johnny Mercer’s friends recalled that one of the happiest days in Mercer’s life was when he was driving down a road in the early 1960s “in this crazy red convertible” with singer Blossom Dearie as a passenger, banging on the side of the car and singing lustily along with Chuck Berry’s “School Days.”

All Hail Rock and Roll, sooner or later.

Gerald Early, Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters, Department of English, Washington University in St. Louis.
Center for the Humanities Announces Its Second Class of Faculty Fellows

The Center for the Humanities in Arts & Sciences announces its Spring 2007 Faculty Fellows: Patrick Burke, assistant professor of music; Gerald Izenberg, professor of history; and Akiko Tsuchiya, associate professor of Spanish, all in Arts & Sciences. Each will spend a semester in-residence at the center, researching a new book project while attending a variety of presentations and delivering one formal, public lecture about their work.

Burke will conduct research for “Come in and Hear the Truth: Jazz and Race on Manhattan’s 52nd Street, 1930-1950,” an examination of New York’s 52nd Street nightclub district from the Great Depression into the postwar era. Burke argues that jazz of the period both reflected and helped to create U.S. notions of racial identity.

Izenberg’s “Identity: From Individual Crisis to Collective Politics” will explore the modern concept of identity-as-self-definition. In particular, Izenberg will focus on how the concept has evolved from its beginnings in the 1920s down through the present, in both European and American thought and culture.

Tsuchiya’s “Gender and Deviance in Nineteenth-Century Spain” will examine fin-de-siècle literary and visual representations—as well as medical, anthropological, and political writings on women—to contextualize female deviance and explain how social deviance of any type was often characterized as “feminine” in discourses of the period.

The faculty fellowships are designed to provide both physical and intellectual environments for innovative, interdisciplinary scholarship, and teaching. The fellowships are open to all tenured and tenure-track faculty in Arts & Sciences.

For more information, visit http://cenhum.artsci.wustl.edu or send an e-mail to cenhum@artsci.wustl.edu.

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