

BOOK REVIEWS

A Mercy

Hanif Abdurraqib, *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to a Tribe Called Quest* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 207pp, ISBN 978-1-4773-1648-1

Hanif Abdurraqib, *A Little Devil in America: In Praise of Black Performance* (London: Penguin Random House, 2022), 283pp, ISBN 978-0-141-99579-3

Hanif Abdurraqib is always alert to those moments when ordinary life gets inhabited by the presence of something larger. Perhaps this is why his writing on music and pop culture in the US is furnished with words like grace, mercy, prayer. Consider for instance how an otherwise ordinary domestic scene is transformed into something holy in the poem, ‘When We Were 13, Jeff’s Father Left the Needle Down on a Journey Record Before Leaving the House One Morning and Never Coming Back’. Abdurraqib recasts this episode from his childhood in Columbus, *Ohio, in the 90s*, as a religious experience, an exorcism. In the poem’s climactic scene, Jeff’s mother throws her wedding ring out of the window of the ‘powder blue Ford Taurus’,¹ and instead of a gathering of the faithful sitting in church pews, as witnesses, we have ‘four boys packed in/ the backseat tight like the tobacco in them cigarettes’;² and in place of a hymn, we have Journey’s 1981 single, ‘Don’t Stop Believin’. Abdurraqib concludes the poem with an aside on music as a saving grace:

and so maybe this is why grandma said a piano can coax even the
most vicious of ghosts out of a body.

And so maybe this is why my father would stare at the empty spaces
my mother once occupied, sit me down at a baby grand and
whisper *play me something, child*.³

‘When We Were 13, Jeff’s Father Left the Needle Down on a Journey Record Before Leaving the House One Morning and Never Coming Back’ also showcases

1 H. Abdurraqib, ‘When We Were 13, Jeff’s Father Left the Needle Down on a Journey Record Before Leaving the House One Morning and Never Coming Back’, *The Crown Ain’t Worth Much* (Minneapolis: Button Poetry, 2016), 5.

2 Ibid..

3 Ibid..

something of Abdurraqib's nature as a writer: the conversational tone and ruminating asides ('in the 1980's, everyone wrote songs about someone leaving/ except for this one cuz it's about ...'),⁴ the riffs, digressions and parenthetical insertions ('nothing knows the sound of abandonment like a highway/ does, not even God').⁵ His two most recent books (under consideration here) – *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to a Tribe Called Quest* and *A Little Devil in America: In Praise of Black Performance* – are works of cultural criticism that unfold in much the same way as his poetry. In other words, meaning here is not arrived at by the diligent drawing out of argument and counter argument, held together by a unified theory. Abdurraqib's writing is much closer in form and spirit to free jazz in the way it eschews the linear progression of an idea in favour of loose associations and improvisation. The results of this jumpiness are not always successful, but both *Go Ahead in the Rain* and *A Little Devil in America* are full of revelatory surprises.

A case in point are the opening two chapters of *Go Ahead in the Rain*, a love letter to *A Tribe Called Quest*, a New York hip hop group whose star burned for 'just a handful of bright years,'⁶ from their emergence in 1990 with the LP, *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* (Jive Records), to their sixth and final studio album released in 2016, *We Got It from Here ... Thank You 4 Your Service* (Epic Records). Abdurraqib begins the book by flashing back to the slave codes enacted in the south of North America in the mid-1700s to prohibit the enslaved from the 'using or keeping of drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs or purposes.'⁷ Abdurraqib signposts this history to clear the ground for a discussion about the insurrectionary power of Black music and its policing; a discussion that links Article 36 of the Slave Code of South Carolina (quoted above) to a 1989 letter penned by Milt Ahlerich, from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's public affairs office, in response to hip hop group N. W. A.'s protest anthem, 'Fuck Tha Police'. It also serves to situate the musical exploits of *A Tribe Called Quest* within a much older tradition and lineage of 'music created by people obsessed with their survival in a time that did not want them to survive.'⁸

Still, one of the most absorbing passages in *Go Ahead in the Rain* is about the early years of *A Tribe Called Quest*'s rise to prominence in the late 80s and early 90s. The executives at the helm of the big record companies at the time, according to Abdurraqib, imagined hip hop would come and go and so paid scant attention to the nascent genre. This allowed artists and producers like Q-Tip, *A Tribe Called Quest*'s frontman, to dig through back catalogues in search of a new sound that could speak to both the present and the past. 'A lot of the music being sampled was rooted

4 Abdurraqib, 'When We Were 13', 6.

5 Ibid..

6 H. Abdurraqib, *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to a Tribe Called Quest* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 190.

7 Slave Code of South Carolina, 1740, Article 36.

8 Abdurraqib, *Go Ahead in the Rain*, 2.

in past political moments, finding its way to newer political narratives,'⁹ Abdurraqib writes. 'Sampling created a dialogue between past and present and helped bridge a gap between the music a rapper was first introduced to and the music they desperately wanted to share with the world.'¹⁰ But a succession of lawsuits for copyright infringement closed the floodgates and led to recording companies charging exorbitant fees to clear the music being sampled.

There are several thematic threads running through *Go Ahead in the Rain*: the complicated brotherhood between Q-Tip, and his sidekick, Phife Dawg; the seismic technological changes – from the Walkman to digital streaming – that took place during the three decades of the A Tribe Called Quest's rise and eclipse; racism and police brutality. But all of this is held together by Abdurraqib's belief in the redemptive power of Black music to imagine ways of living otherwise. Structurally, the book is anchored on either side by two major episodes in US history: the 1992 Los Angeles riots that rose in the wake Rodney King's violent beating at the hands of the police, and Donald Trump's election as the 45th US president in November 2016. The despair and rage that accompanied each of these episodes is inextricably linked in Abdurraqib's mind to a corresponding A Tribe Called Quest album – *The Low End Theory* and *We Got It from Here ... Thank You 4 Your Service* – that held his hand through the darkness. 'All this is about mercy,'¹¹ Abdurraqib writes in the elegiac closing passages of *Go Ahead in the Rain*. 'I'm talking about what it is to be from a place that promises to love you while holding a gun to your neck. I'm talking about what it feels like to have the gun lowered, briefly, by the hands of some unseen grace. Sometimes, it is a protest that stretches long into the night, or sometimes it is a reading where a room hears familiar words and cries along with you as you read them out loud. But sometimes, it is a perfect album that arrives just in time to build a small community around you. To briefly hold a hand over your eyes and make a new and welcoming darkness of the world outside, even when it is on fire.'¹²

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A Little Devil in America is a more expansive work in terms of scope. Instead of a homage to a single hip hop group, the book is an ode to various Black performers (and various modes of Black performance) in the US, from the jazz composer and bandleader, Sun Ra, to Ellen Armstrong, a magician who toured the country performing for Black audiences in the early to mid-twentieth century. Abdurraqib's praise song is dedicated to dancer, singer and actress, Josephine Baker, and it is from Baker's speech delivered at the March on Washington in 1963 that the book gets its title. Because of what she represented in the white imagination as a Black woman and

9 Ibid., 83.

10 Ibid..

11 Abdurraqib, *Go Ahead in the Rain*, 186.

12 Ibid., 186.

as a dancer, 'I was a devil in other countries,' Baker told the crowd of 250 000, 'and I was a little devil in America, too.' To use a musical metaphor, if *Go Ahead in the Rain* is Abdurraqib's solo LP, *A Little Devil in America* reads more like a compilation album. The book is not meant to be an exhaustive survey of Black performance in the US – such as on stage, in music videos and television sitcoms – but its expansiveness nevertheless makes this the lesser work of the two. *Go Ahead in the Rain* obsessively treads the same ground, the tracks deepening with each go around, while *A Little Devil in America* is at times only able to skim the surface.

This is not to say that there aren't moments of brilliance or surprise in this collection of essays. 'On Marathons and Tunnels,' for instance, starts out as a discussion on the craze of dance marathons that swept through the US in the 1920s. Contestants danced for hours and hours 'toward the edge of death,'¹³ and although they were allowed breaks, they had to report to the floor immediately once the break was over. So much strenuous labour for so little reward: a measly pay packet offered by the unscrupulous promoters. Midway, the essay pivots to a different kind of promoter, Don Cornelius, the creator of the television show *Soul Train*, which premiered in 1971 and aired on Saturday nights. 'Cornelius,' Abdurraqib writes, 'had a vision for Black people that was about movement on their own time, for their own purpose, and not in response to what a country might do for, or to, them.'¹⁴

Similar juxtapositions take place throughout *A Little Devil in America* – a meditation on blackface in the mid-1800s ('Sixteen Ways of Looking at Blackface') segues into an aside on 'white people [...] pretending to be Black on the internet';¹⁵ a discussion on voice and what it means to 'talk white'¹⁶ pivots to the character of Carlton from the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and 'how we are all outside the borders of someone else's idea of what Blackness is'¹⁷ – and sometimes, as in the essay 'Nine Considerations of Black People in Space,' Abdurraqib teases out as many associations to a single word as his mind can conjure:

Moon as in Michael Jackson's moonwalk

Moon as in Sun Ra, *Space in the Place*

Moon as in Patti Labelle in a space suit

Moon as in a 2009 picture of Trayvon Martin at Experience Aviation in Florida, 'just three years before he was murdered.'¹⁸

13 Ibid., 9.

14 Ibid., 13.

15 Ibid., 70.

16 Ibid., 89.

17 Ibid., 109.

18 Ibid., 126.

The Irish poet, Michael Longley, once said ‘part of writing is adoration’¹⁹ and that holds true for Abdurraqib in *A Little Devil in America*. He admits to being haunted by the radiance of his ancestors²⁰ and, in a public exchange of letters with the sociologist, poet and sometime collaborator, Dr Eve L. Ewing, Abdurraqib wrote that ‘If there is anything that has kept my people alive for longer than they might have been alive otherwise, then I believe it is worth honouring.’²¹ *Go Ahead in the Rain* and *A Little Devil in America* – despite the latter’s faults – do just that. Read together, this is a story of how a people still found a way ‘to speak to each other across any distance placed between [them]’²² even when they had their drums taken away.

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19 Michael Longley interviewed by Krista Tippet on *The On Being Podcast*, ‘The Vitality of Ordinary Things’. Original air date on 3 November 2016. <https://onbeing.org/programs/the-vitality-of-ordinary-things/>.

20 Abdurraqib, *Go Ahead in the Rain*, 19.

21 E. L. Ewing and H. Abdurraqib, ‘Echoes on the Internet’, *The Spectacle*. <https://thespectacle.wustl.edu/?p=1264>.

22 Abdurraqib, *Go Ahead in the Rain*, 12.