

Giovanni Ippolito

LONESOME JUBILEES TO UNDERSTAND

THE VOICE OF JOHN MELLECCAMP



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Partly and freely based on “100% American – La Classicità Del Rock Americano”
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Paper In Fire

She had a dream and, boy, it was a good one. So she chased after her dream with much desire but when she got too close to her expectations, well, the dream burned up like paper in fire. [...] Paper in fire, stinkin' up the ashtrays. Paper in fire, smokin' up the alleyways. Who's to say the way a man should spend his days. Do you let them smolder like paper in fire?

I take the chance to briefly mention an often forgotten or undervalued item of musical language, that is the perception of “implicit” or “tacit” notes. Jazz players know well what it is. There is no need to play certain notes, because, as an effect of musical acculturation, we can hear them anyhow because implicit, implied by the context. The reason why I say it is that, even if with structure and melody that are minimal at all, *Paper in Fire*, the opening track of THE LONESOME JUBILEE by John Mellencamp, communicates the airy and, even romantic if we will, sense of a song with wide musical development. The propulsion and the polyrhythm of the drums, the substantially pentatonic phrases in the melody, the flaming images evoked by guitars, banjo and fiddle (the Irish violin), that even simulate, in the intro, the “chuff-chuff” of a train (a typical symbol of the blues), and the voice, that embellishes it all with the microtones in the extinction of the sung tone and with the dynamics in the attack, are sufficient. In this respect, John Mellencamp's voice, blacker than that of the black, can be read as the one of the big jazz instrumentalists, who used to have each his own *quid* differentiating him from the others, an indefinable and fundamental feature we use to call, exactly, “voice” and substantially deriving from the specific and unique musical feeling of the single musician and performer.

It's interesting to observe that, in rock, the idea of iteration, development and variation of classical music transfers from melody/harmony to rhythm. This track is a very good example of it. The track ends with an open finale, as it is easy to expect, considering its form, substantially that of a primitive blues deformed and modernized, a little bit in the manner of Dylan's *Maggie's Farm* and *Leopard Skin Pill Box Hat*, for instance. I'd like to mention also the “formulaic” attitude of the guitar (also slide), of the violin and of the banjo, that use phrases with a flavor of blues and folk (the white archaic folk rediscovered in the communities of the Appalachians). The lyrics suggest in a delicious way different meanings, some of them eventually coming also to the minds of my patient reader, as a result of what I've written until now. I'd like to report the obvious recall of the Icarus myth and of the one of the “rebel without a cause” (namely “burning youth”, as the title of the movie with James Dean was translated for its versions in some other languages).

The same elements emerged from the previous analysis can be more or less found also in *Down and Out In Paradise*, where funky is added to the vocabulary of the album, *The Real Life* and *Cherry Bomb*, that signalize (as *Paper In Fire*) also for the

r'n' b inserts and riffs executed by the violin and the accordion instead of the horns (as in rhythm 'n' blues), *We Are The People* (with doubling feminine soul voice) and *Empty Hands*. The rhythm 'n' blues elements are even more evident in the rousing *Hard Times For An Honest Man*, while *Rooty Toot Toot*, the closing track of the album, is a bluesy and funky rock with flaming guitar riffs in the style of Rolling Stones' Keith Richards and Caribbean/African percussions.

The two remaining songs are *Check It Out* and *Hotdogs And Hamburgers*, two rock ballads in fast *tempo*.

Check It Out

A million young poets screamin' out their words to a world full of people just livin' to be heard. Future generations ridin' on the highways that we built. I hope they have a better understanding. Check it out. Goin' to work on Monday. Check it out. Got yourself a family. Check it out. All utility bills have been paid. You can't tell your best buddy that you love him. So, check it out, where does our time go? Check it out, got a brand new house in Escrow. Check it out. Sleepin' with your back to your loved one. This is all that we've learned about happiness...

It is a rock ballad, with a form halfway between folk ballad and song-form, that first of all is characterized by a melodic theme of the violin starting with an upbeat that is rhythmically dubbed by drums. This theme of 10 bars serves as intro and is repeated three other times during the song. The first time at the end of the first chorus, the second (performed by the electric guitar to launch a solo with substantially rhythmical-noisy connotation) at the end of the second chorus, the third *ad libitum* in the open finale that ends with a fade out. The theme is made of *legato* tones (as obvious, since it is performed by a violin) from the major scale that, starting from the 7th, lead to the fundamental, after some flourishes, in order to launch the sung verse, that is also melodically tonal in major mode. The structure, though having a lower level of complexity, is in the model of the rock-ballad par excellence, the gorgeous masterpiece by Jackson Browne *For Everyman* that I consider at the top of this type of compositions. *Check It Out's* form is a bit more folk rather than song, since the refrain is actually a gradual development of the verse, from which it departs without so much of discontinuity (not by chance, as I generally prefer to do, I've used the word "chorus", that is generally used in the jazz jargon to indicate the entire section, verse plus refrain for instance, that is repeated). John Mellencamp's voice is full of soul, as usual. What else can we say other than this superb piece is really brilliant? A maybe futile but amusing curious observation: as we all know, "check it out" indicates both the gesture of pointing out on a list some activities that have been completed, as when you go for grocery shopping for instance, and the action by the cashiers of a store, when purchased products "pass through" the counter.

Hotdogs and Hamburgers

Drivin' down on a dry summer's day, old Route 66, and I was just a kid, met a pretty little Indian girl along the way, got her into my car and tried to give her a kiss. I'll give you beads and wampum, whatever it takes, girl, to make you trade. She jumped into the back seat and she kind of flipped her lid. She said "you're tryin' to get something for nothing like the pilgrims in the olden days". We rode for a while till the sun went away and I realized it was sort of an honor bein' around this girl. I felt embarrassed of what I tried to do earlier that day. She was the saddest girl I ever knew. [...] Now everybody has got the choice between hotdogs and hamburgers. Every one of us has got to choose between right and wrong and givin' up or holdin' on...

I'll conclude with a brief observation about the word "understand", having the same meaning as "comprehend", which is also characterized by an additional flavor of a sense of inclusion and comprising. "Understanding", "better understanding" says *Check It Out*. Etymologically speaking, this verb has the meaning of standing under something or downwards, implicitly recalling the concept that significance is underneath (the superficial perception of things). THE LONESOME JUBILEE, from downwards, exactly, that is to say from the roots of American Music, where real meanings stand, develops a language that comprehends (the sense of comprising and incorporating is specially relevant in this case) all the beauty of music. Devil of a Mellencamp.... Done.

CHECK IT OUT

But, when the matter of the times we live comes to INCLUSION and to the subject of DIVERSITY in general, the devil is in the details and not only in a rock ballad. The details hidden in each and everyone *persona*, the result of the complex mix of individual stories, origins, experiences, formal and informal cultural traits and education and financial conditions facing up the spirit of the times, In one word, each individual *destiny*, as we all discover during the course of our lives that somebody we don't know must have written for us a sort of a plot, a narration where we, the character, wander through unknown fields of self-unconsciousness towards an unavoidable end (or more than one ends) in ways that we feel predetermined though we consistently struggle for happiness and try to protect our free will and to stand up for liberty

EVERYONE HAS TO CHOOSE BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG AND GIVIN' UP OR HOLDIN' ON

Is this a real choice? Do we have on the table all the options among which to choose? Does the world around us certainly INCLUDE us as a PERSONA with his/her VOICE, similar in its function to that of a great singer or instrumentalist, or does it only need another item of double-faced producer-consumer, just a physical

representation with no real understanding, both in the meaning of “comprehending” and of “including”?

Everyone should have its own song to sing but, since there is no inclusion without understanding, it could sound with the tunes of hate, violence and discrimination as those of all the others around.

Eventually the dream may burn up like paper in fire.