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Lauren O'Neal on *Language Lessons : Volume 1*

Analog, Again: Jack White's "Language Lessons"

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JACK WHITE has always been a purist. As early as The White Stripes' first album, when the name "Third Man" still referred to his upholstery company rather than his record label, he went to great lengths to achieve a very particular stripped-down sound. The producer of that first album, Jim Diamond, quoted in the unofficial band-bio *Fell in Love with a Band*, recalls trying to use a microphone from the 1950s to help White get a more vintage sound, only to be told, "No, it sounds too much like we're in a studio." To which Diamond responded, "Well you *are* in a studio ... If you want it to sound live, just go record it at the Gold Dollar!"

But White didn't want it to sound live either. After taking various elaborate measures — cutting up an amp head to make it work with a specific speaker cabinet, recording vocals on a decades-old tape recorder, positioning drummer Meg White's microphone "on a set of stairs that leads nowhere" — he got the sound he wanted.

Now that Third Man Records — based in Nashville, Tennessee, where White lives — grants him all the creative control a maniacal auteur could want, he continues to eschew the digital in favor of the honey-grained textures of analog. Famously refusing to use any software to edit his music, he opts instead for tape and razor blade.

Of course, there are plenty of people who appreciate yesterday's recording techniques and production styles, but how do you — how does White — carry on that aesthetic legacy without foundering in the quicksand of nostalgia? How do you innovate sonically without technological innovations in sound? And how can you hope to stay relevant to a generation of listeners who cut their teeth on mp3s and Auto-Tune, who record music on laptops in their bedrooms and sling it around the internet on YouTube and SoundCloud?

For Third Man, part of the answer is producing a sort of *objet d'art* — the record as a beautiful object in its own right. White's latest solo album, *Lazaretto*, was released on iTunes and CD but also as a vinyl "ultra LP" with a floating hologram that appears when the record spins and hidden tracks you can only find by dropping the needle in precisely the right groove. It quickly became the US's bestselling vinyl record in the past 20 years, moving 40,000 copies in its first week alone and proving White's analog aesthetic is, though not exactly mainstream, much less niche than you might assume.

Most of Third Man's releases work this way, if usually on a less flashy scale. You can buy records from their Blue Series (singles recorded by musicians passing through Nashville) or

their Green Series (spoken-word or otherwise non-musical records). You can buy reissues, bundles, limited-edition releases from the vault, photos, and turntables. If you're in town, you can even stop by the record booth in their store, which "records up to 2 minutes of audio and dispenses a one-of-a-kind 6-inch phonograph disc to the user."

That's the Third Man aesthetic. The content may vary from Jerry Lee Lewis to Wanda Jackson to Conan O'Brien improv, but the form always has to do with a unique object. Digital versions are made only as grudging afterthoughts, if they're made at all.

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This year, Third Man set out to conquer a new frontier: publishing. Their first book is an anthology titled *Language Lessons: Volume 1*, edited by Ben Swank and Chet Weise. (Both are musicians whose bands include Soledad Brothers and the Ultras S/C; Swank cofounded Third Man.)

As befits the company's aesthetic, *LL:VI* is a mighty object to behold. It comes in a segmented case (embossed, black on black) with slots for the book, five posters, and a record jacket (embossed, black on black) with two LPs inside. (I admit I had to borrow a turntable to listen to the records, so you know which side of the generational divide I stand on.)

That's the book's form. The content is contemporary poetry and prose — mostly poetry — from writers working in an array of different styles. Some are well established, like Adrian Matejka and C. D. Wright, while others, like Ben Burr and Stephanie Ann Whited, are more up-and-coming. Many of the writers are drawn from Poetry Sucks!, Weise's reading series in Nashville.

Because the book and associated materials are so self-consciously, ostentatiously analog — you certainly can't download any of the words, sounds, or images to your smartphone — a delicious tension between the old and the new runs through them like a livewire. On one page, Russell Brakefield's "I Want to Know About Anything the Way Al Green Knows About Love" evokes exactly the retro revival vibe you'd expect from Third Man. On another page, Sampson Starkweather's "I Sense My Own Limit" gets positively Millennial: "when I die / will someone please / keep me alive / in Second Life / my password / to all things / is *pipedream!*"

Nowhere is this tension thicker than in the juxtaposition of Tav Falco's "Discourse of Rage, Conjunction & Exile" and the poems by Dan Boehl that come immediately after. Falco was a mainstay of the art and music scene in Memphis and New York from the 1970s onward, most famous as the frontman for groundbreaking psychedelic country/blues band Panther Burns. His piece, by far the longest in *LL:VI*, is a chapter

excerpted from his autobiography, and it takes the reader on a gloriously bizarre ramble through the rock clubs and back alleys of 1980s-era Memphis. A fictional first-person narrator observes as Falco, the person actually crafting the narrative, produces art films, smashes TV sets onstage, and moves in next to an illiterate junk scavenger who makes his own bullets. In an interview with *BOMB* magazine reprinted as part of the chapter, Falco discusses his artistic philosophies and geeks out over (analog) gear, all in his trademark grandiose diction:

In Venice one day I saw a strange man in the shadows of a portico playing bagpipes constructed with white flour sacks and with long pitch pipes. Part of the instrument he drove with an extended foot pedal. The Italians were captivated by the atmospheric droning he was generating, as was I. He was not entertaining with his deadpan grinding as much as he was saturating us with ancient, penetrating, and ominously wheezing tonalities that could not be easily evaded or dismissed.

Just when you've settled into Falco's lit-punk odyssey, with its cascading descriptions of "mid-19th century French Symbolists" and its near worship of "the black 1963, violin-shaped hollow body, six-string Höfner with the built-in, push-button active, factory fuzz tone unit," **the chapter ends.** Next up is a poem by Dan Boehl. It's an entire page of emoticons made with Japanese and Greek characters, like (ノ ^o^ノ) and \^(ω^\).

The rest of Boehl's poems use words, but they're explicitly formatted and styled for just about the least analog medium possible: Twitter. For example:

poetry
now
with
more
crying

Or:

gimme
some
tenure
look
punk
is
dad

TV.” But it’s an enchanting addition to the greater aesthetic project of Third Man Records, and a complicated, intriguing development in the power struggle between the analog and the digital.

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