

Ned Balbo

Groovy Decay

For Robyn Hitchcock

In part because one Hitchcock was enough
though fascinated by *Groovy Decay*'s
display of candles, fruit, a skull in shades
("groovy" indeed), familiars in your photo
on the album's sleeve, I turned away,
your songs unheard, and bought, instead—who knows?
Probably something used, \$3.95
the era's usual price for LPs crackling
with the noise of endless revolution,
dirty needles, dust. I'd haunt the aisles
of record stores, the best—Plastic Fantastic
on West Lancaster—one place I'd waste
my time and borrowed dollars guaranteed
by New York State, the law, my signature.
The vinyl sold was guaranteed as well,
to play without a skip, or money back.
I loved the album *1999*
in 1982, blaring from Bryn Mawr
dormitory windows as I walked
cross-campus to that white Victorian house
and graduate English program (now defunct)
where Marxist scholars and medievalists
presided in their shared distaste for me.
I couldn't quit—not yet. Where would I go?
At twenty-two, in that recession year
denied by Reagan's henchmen, I'd walk out
of class as if in search of some lost chord
that, struck, would resonate and break the mood
(I found that album in the "used" bin, too),
but nothing did. Not even the escape
of music, self-abuse, and poetry.
I'd pick through sleeves worn ragged at the edge,
split cardboard cracked—LPs not guaranteed,
so cheaper still—while clerks hippie-hirsute,
Cure-coiffed or Banshee-lashed took inventory,
ragged on new releases, or zoned out.
These dregs of discs I held up to the light
(it was allowed), checking for boot-scoffs, cracks,
carved messages to ex-friends, faithless lovers
who'd jilted them, then asked for records back.
No one shook gloves with cardboard Michael Jackson.

Impishly imperial, Elvis stared
in straw hat, scowl, and granny spectacles
from posters masking-taped to sunlit windows
on a world where it would dawn on me—
not soon—that should the wrathful gods, appeased,
allow me to have sex again, someday,
I'd have to wear a condom, probably.
Robyn, you had a bad year, too, I know,
hating the “ghastly” saxophones your songs
were forced to bear, a studio of strangers
hostile to your retrodelic vision
and Syd Barrett squall. You hit the pubs
and shunned recording for the next three years,
convinced black grooves had caught the slow decay
of time and talent, though uncanny moments,
overproduced, still shone. The other Hitchcock
left us movies: fear, the body's weight,
detective work and doublings; small and large,
the soul's transgressions, love, the grave's embrace.
Like you, he'd have agreed: decay is groovy,
wicks burn down, wax melts, a certain skull,
blind-socketed, sports shades; meanwhile, you lift
your gaze to God or glory, Holy Ghost
or yellow logo: entropy takes hold,
and yet, though death's more probable than life
under the best conditions, we receive,
unearned, one second chance after another
till the count-in to the final set.
Gray-haired, fifty-four, touring alone
or with the Venus 3, you're writing songs
as good any in your long career,
and even I, somehow, escaped that year
of failures, pratfalls, and paralysis,
adrift in Pennsylvania, vinyl rippling,
warped, a diamond stylus drawing music
from the grooves it damaged as they spun
beneath its touch, the tone-arm lifting off,
having reached silence, equilibrium.
As for your music, Robyn, I first heard it
six years later in a Midwest bar
locals had dubbed the “Mis-cue,” billiards knocking
hard, percussively, across green felt.
“Who's that?” I said, raising my head to listen
in those pre-grunge days, through beer-mugs banging,
howls, and pick-up lines, while Doug sank balls,
deftly, into their pockets. Debra smiled,
and told me, cue beside her as we stood
waiting for Doug to miss. And miss he did,
finally, though open-mouthed through Debra's turn,
despite her beauty, black bob flung aside
before each shot, I looked up toward the speakers

from which poured the chords of “Chinese Bones,”
as if to make the song more audible,
more charged with loss than it already was.