

Spike Jones and Lotion: Connected by a Fragile Pynchon Thread

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Spiked!: The Music of Spike Jones, by Spike Jones. Catalyst/BMG Music, 09026-61982-2, 1994.

Nobody's Cool, by Lotion. SpinArt, 9 24643-2, 1995.

This is a typical music review: if you read it closely, the subject you'll learn the most about is me, the reviewer. It concerns two periods of music—one before me, the other after me. It's also about my opinions of two compact discs: one a slick historical review of a creative musician who became a star trying not to be taken seriously, the other a funky rock album showcasing the current songs of a New York quartet trying to get taken seriously and become stars in today's over-filled marketplace. There is no reason to discuss these two musics and two albums in the same review—except, of course, that both albums have program notes by the same author. Yep, that's right—why else would I be writing this for *Pynchon Notes*?

The before-me musician is Spike Jones—'40s swing-band leader who decanted equal parts of country hokum and classical music snobbery into a supremely humorous satirical sound that amazingly manages to hide just how much sheer musical talent it took to pull it off. Most of the cuts date from before my birth in 1951, just about the time popular music started leaving Jones behind. This music may be chronologically before my time, but for me—a classically-trained musician with a fondness for memorable tunes, old radio and silly humor—personal experiences and Jones's music intersect in uncountable ways. Yup, I love this stuff.

The after-me musicians are a band called Lotion—four guys from New York who write songs together and have put out two full-length CDs and a couple of singles. These obviously talented guys are about twenty years younger than I am and well outside my musical event horizon. Okay, I admit it: I'm totally devoid of referential points with which to critique their music. When they are compared to R.E.M. and Hüsker Dü, I draw only blanks. I'll just fess up to my ignorance on the subject. Sure I've got opinions. Sure I'll tell them to you. But then I'll

go right back to listening to—well, almost anything before I put on an R.E.M. cut.

The first album in question is *Spiked!: The Music of Spike Jones*, on Catalyst Records. “Catalyst” is no mere misnomer; according to their philosophy, they have catalytically paired Spike Jones’s music with detailed, informative program notes by Pynchon and cover art by Art Spiegelman (who did the comic *Maus*) presented in a booklet cleverly designed to look like one of Jones’s country yokel suits. You gotta give ‘em credit for one thing: this is one high-budget album. Maybe this combination of widely diverse talents does produce some unique results. Then again, maybe not.

The other album is Lotion’s *Nobody’s Cool*, on SpinArt: twelve tunes plus a slim insert adorned with various New York and not-New York pictures and four paragraphs of Pynchon’s notes. Internet lore has it that the drummer’s mother works at a bank where Pynchon is a customer; he saw Lotion’s first album, *full Isaac*, on her desk one day, became intrigued, and volunteered his services. He also attended several of their concerts and did an interview with the band that was published in *Esquire* in June 1996. The combination of Lotion and Pynchon seems like a match made in a random-number generator. It makes the Jones/Pynchon pairing seem tame.

Spiked! clocks in with over seventy minutes of music, divided into three unequal parts. The first fifteen cuts are mostly parodies of pop tunes from the ‘40s, Jones’s staple output. David Rose’s “Holiday for Strings” stands out, as does “Pal-Yat-Chee,” an opera parody (sung by Homer and Jethro with references to Aram Khatchaturian). I also like Paul Frees impersonating Billy Eckstine on “Deep Purple.” Many of these cuts are available elsewhere in other, better, live versions, complete with uncanned audience laughter. None of them are Jones’s most famous show stoppers. (“Der Führer’s Face,” referred to as “Right in the Führer’s Face” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* [678], is not here.) If the album ended after track 15, *Spiked!* would be just another undistinguished Spike Jones survey.

But there’s more. Part two of *Spiked!* is two tracks (“Frantic Freeway” and Raymond Scott’s “Powerhouse”) recorded in 1961, four years before Jones’s death, but never completed. Every other Spike Jones track I’ve ever heard has vocals on it; these don’t, and it’s intriguing to imagine how he intended to finish them. It’s also interesting that Jones was using cutting-edge recording techniques—overdubbing and recorded *concrète* sound—a natural extension of his characteristic work with tuned percussion and unusual vocal techniques. We can only dream of what vistas he might have opened

up with a modern recording studio had he remained productive during the '60s or beyond.

But there's still more. Part three of *Spiked!* is a twenty-minute version in the style of Spike Jones of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*. For Jones this must have been a massive undertaking, but it strikes me as maudlin and sentimental. It's disappointing to discover that something was sacred enough to Jones that he didn't do it as full-blown satire. At the end, when the album closes with his classic tagline, "Thank you, music lovers," it's almost as if he means it seriously, rather than as a code for "you can't be real music lovers if you listen to me."

Yes, while superbly produced in every sense and intended as "an appropriate homage," *Spiked!* depresses me a little each time I listen. Without audience clues to the visual gags, I rate this album as a flat academic overview. If you're truly interested in Jones's music, get the 2-disc *Spike Jones Anthology* (Rhino, 1994), or *Cocktails for Two* (Pro-Arte, 1990). Spirit actually lives in those discs.

Lotion's *Nobody's Cool* is a completely different animal. The band is two electric guitarists (Tony Zajkowski and Jim Ferguson) who both sing, a bass player (Bill Ferguson) and a drummer (Rob Youngberg). The album seems to alternate between light and dark—between clear, unreverberant, with understandable lyrics, and loud, with fuzz-tones obfuscating the vocals. Hard to say if this is an intentional contrast, but the effects relieve each other throughout the album.

A couple of tracks caught my ear. The off-beat drum accents of "Rock Chick" are an exceptionally good hook to hang the rest of the song on. An occasional dropped beat in "Juggernaut"—which itself contains that light/dark contrast—served well to hold my attention. "The Enormous Room" is a ballad of powerful sparsity.

A big part of the key to Lotion's music may be in the vocals. I felt their quality to be variable, occasionally remarkably good. I even thought the wrong notes were sung intentionally (a charitable attitude unusual for me). However, after reading the lyrics, which some fan has posted on the Internet, I am still mystified. What *are* these guys singing about? Maybe you have to be from New York to understand. Here in Los Angeles, *Nobody's Cool* has found its way into the 99¢-cutout bins.

The conventional wisdom would be that Spike Jones and Lotion do not belong in the same review. What's more, neither of these albums is going to set the world on fire. So, it's time to face up to the real glue of this review: Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon makes countless musical references in his novels—and they are always pertinent and descriptive. It makes good sense for him to write about music in a non-fiction setting.

Pynchon is in fine form in the Spike Jones notes. He deals with each cut, describes Jones's talented sidemen, and includes abundant anecdotes, each revealing a well-honed point. He even acknowledges his source materials. Most interesting to me are comments about social currents of Jones's time that this music either reflects or offends against. The first paragraph begins with a casual salutation ("Welcome, music lovers") and runs pleasantly along until it careens perilously into a list of all the groups of people likely to be upset by one or another cut on the album, continues with a disclaimer that times were different then, and ends with a suggestion of possible references to opium. From that point on, there are revelations aplenty—even for a fan like me.

His Lotion notes are much simpler and shorter—and still there are references: to cruise-ship combos and lounge chords, *Love Boat*, *The Jetsons*, "Monster Mash," Snapple and Chee-tos, Times Square. But these hardly illuminate any of the music for me. Pynchon does give me hope that Lotion's music and his notes might actually fit together somehow when he writes:

Every night, somewhere on the outlaw side of some town, below some metaphysical 14th Street, out at the hard edges of some consensus about what's real, the continuity is always being sought, claimed, lost, found again, carried on. If for no other reason, rock and roll remains one of the last honorable callings, and a working band is a miracle of everyday life. Which is basically what these guys do.

The *Esquire* interview answers a few more questions. Like why did Pynchon decide to hang with Lotion? He briefly alludes to his discovery of *full Isaac* and then says: "I've been trying for forty years to learn to play the ukulele. All my wanna-be instincts kicked in." Imagining that you're a 20-something again and that you have a shot at rock 'n' roll stardom has to be intriguing for anyone, even a famous recluse.

There's a lot of talk in the interview about covers the band has done, and the musicians tell about the time they recorded in the original Sun Studio. They tell lots of touring stories (which prompts Pynchon to ask about drugs) and finally discuss how current pop music draws upon historical music styles. They talk about '50s music (the stuff that supplanted Jones's) being redone in the '80s, and then '60s and '70s music being redone into the '90s. Then they suggest that eventually the '80s revival of the '50s will be re-revived, as will every subsequent revival—and how the process will completely consume itself:

Rob: It's okay. Ten years from now, we'll just be doing ten minutes earlier.

Tony: Yeah. "Remember this morning when we were really into that other stuff? Hey! Let's bring some of that back. Breakfast for lunch!"

All this makes me think that maybe before and after are not so different. In a world of musical revivals, re-issues, original recordings, covers, samples, oldie radio stations and an unmentionable fear of silence, terms like "then" and "now" start to lose meaning. Music just keeps getting churned faster and faster, more and different sounds, styles and artists jumbled together unpredictably. I guess I can't think of a good reason Spike Jones and Lotion shouldn't be juxtaposed—just as I can't think of why they should be. There's nothing to be done but to close my eyes and listen.

—*Pasadena, CA*