

Pynchon on Record

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Given Pynchon's penchant for popular music, it is appropriate that his V. inspired at least two musical compositions in the sixties. The earlier is an instrumental entitled simply "V." by Pynchon's Cornell friend Richard Fariña; it first appeared on Celebrations for a Grey Day (Vanguard), which The New York Times' Robert Shelton chose as one of the ten best folk records of 1965. The song also appears on The Best of Mimi and Richard Fariña (1971), a two-record anthology also on Vanguard; both albums are still available. "V." is played on dulcimer with tambourine accompaniment by Bruce Langhorne; the droning dulcimer has a Near Eastern flavor and consequently seems to have been inspired by the Alexandria of V.'s third chapter. In his liner notes to Celebrations for a Grey Day Fariña described his composition thus:

Call it an East-West dreamsong in the Underground Mode for Tom Pynchon and Benny Profane. The literary listener will no doubt find clues to the geographical coordinates of Vheissu, the maternal antecedents of the younger Stencil, and a three-dimensional counter-part of Botticelli's Venus on the half shell. May they hang again on a western wall.

"Esther's Nose Job" is the title of a jazz-rock suite by the avant-garde British group Soft Machine (named after Burrough's novel), and first appeared on Soft Machine: Volume Two (Probe) in 1969. (For some reason only the American issue gives the suite title; the British simply lists the individual songs.) Written by the group's keyboard player, Mike Ratledge (an honors student at Oxford before he joined the band), the suite is divided into five parts: only the second part, entitled "Pig" (after Bodine?), contains lyrics, most of which are undecipherable, except for singer Robert Wyatt's recurring lament for "all the time wasted,/Time we could have spent completely nude,/ Bare naked." The suite is a thrilling composition but

does not seem to owe anything to Pynchon's novel other than its title. An arrangement (sans lyrics) was made for a larger jazz ensemble for a BBC broadcast on 29 November 1969, and this arrangement can be found on Triple Echo, a three-record anthology released in England only in 1977, on the Harvest label. Unfortunately, neither album is still available, though copies can usually be found in used record stores.

It might also be worth noting here, with reference to Gravity's Rainbow, that there was indeed a rock group called The Fool. It put out one record in the late sixties, but beyond that it doesn't fit the description of the group with which Slothrop eventually plays (GR, Viking, 742), in part because the real Fool (whose album jacket is covered with Tarot imagery) consisted of only four members--two men and two women--and are not posed "in the arrogant style of the early Stones, near an old rocket-bomb site" (742). There is, however, an unidentified harmonica player on the album. Hmm.

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