David Janssen and Edward Whitelock. 2009. *Apocalypse Jukebox: The End of the World in American Popular Music.* Berkeley: Soft Skull Press/Counterpoint LLC.

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While any attempt to characterize a nation and "a people" is bound to expire in dubious generalization, claims about the essence of the United States and constitution of the "American character" have often been marked by *especially* outlandish and totalizing rhetoric—by American and non-American writers alike, both affirmatively and critically.[1] One example is Jean Baudrillard's 1986 book *America*. Poised as the postmodern successor to Alexis de Tocqueville, Baudrillard, perceiving American culture simultaneously as pre-civilized (an old trope) and as the paradigm of hypermodern simulacral "spectrality," characterizes the nation as both "*the only remaining primitive society*" and as "a giant hologram."[2] If representations of the United States from the last half-century are inflected by the post-World War II phase of American exceptionalism, this has affected not only imperial apologists and vulgar nationalists but even, residually, writers on the left, like Baudrillard. More generally, the United States has always been a strongly symbolic nation, whether imagined as the singular beacon of democracy or as the paradoxical no-place/no-face of late capitalism.

For this reason, critical studies of the American mythos are important, and, as Greil Marcus realized some decades ago, popular music serves as a good lens through which to view the agglomerated fragments of "America."[3] Clearly indebted to Marcus, David Janssen and Edward Whitelock, professors of English at Gordon College and authors of *Apocalypse Jukebox: The End of the World in American Popular Music*, take as their entry point into the American imagination a perceived deep relationship between rock and apocalyptic thought. Although forsaking Baudrillard's shimmering, overtly hyperbolic style, Jannsen and Whitelock nevertheless exhibit a more muted version of his tendency to paint American culture in overly broad brush-strokes. This is seen in the book's thesis of sorts, found in the authors' introduction. Quoting Frank Kermode, the authors observe that in examining the history of apocalyptic thought "the end is immanent rather than imminent," and go on to explain:

> The difference between an imminent and an immanent apocalypse is the difference between "The end is near" and "the end is here." *We will show that apocalypse is a permanent and central part of the American character.*

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> As rock and roll is a reflection of that character, apocalypse remains one of the most consistent and evocative threads in the development of the musical form itself. (3, italics mine)

But what does it mean to speak of a "permanent" part of an "American character"? From the outset it is unclear whether Janssen and Whitelock are attempting to complicate and deconstruct the idea of the "American character" or simply reify it. If this thesis raises eyebrows, it does, at least, gesture toward answering a primary question about the book: Why apocalypse . . . now? By positing the "permanence" of apocalyptic thought in American culture, the authors would seem to foreclose the question of relevance. I will return to questions of the book's historiographic specificity in my conclusion.

Throughout the volume, Jannsen and Whitelock attend mostly to rock–from Elvis to Sleater-Kinney–but also to other genres, energetically tracing the theme of apocalypse through American musics and musicians as diverse as gospel, country, and John Coltrane. Proceeding roughly chronologically, the book is organized in four parts (with two to four chapters apiece, most of which concern a single band or album): Part 1 – "Apocalypse USA" sets the stage; Part 2 – "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" discusses Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, and the music of Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen; Part 3 – "Artifacts From the Blast Zone" covers Love's *Forever Changes*, Devo, and R.E.M.'s *Murmur*; Part 4 – "Apocalypse After 9/11: The End is Still Here" examines Laurie Anderson, Sleater-Kinney, and Green Day's *American Idiot*. The authors write that in selecting exclusively American music (including the Canadian Leonard Cohen), they "are not imply[ing] that other countries lack apocalyptic themes in their popular songs or are less deserving of treatment" (6). But other than that it be American, they never explain their criteria for selecting the music they have. It is somewhat perplexing, for example, that the most iconic apocalyptic rock genre, metal, is entirely absent from the study.

While *Apocalypse Jukebox* includes endnotes and numerous references to literature (especially American Transcendentalism and English Romanticism) and literary theory, it is written in a highly conversational style with many anecdotal passages about the musicians under discussion. Likewise exploring pop music and national mythologies from a background in literary studies, Greil Marcus is, again, perhaps the most obvious precursor and model for the authors. And like Marcus, Janssen and Whitelock attempt the difficult task of writing for both general music fans as well as academics or others interested in more scholarly literature. A cursory search through blogs and online customer reviews revealed that of the (apparently) former

group, some found the theoretical passages tiresome. If I am quite critical in this review, it is because I have taken the theory seriously.

The authors open with an overview of apocalyptic moments in the American consciousness: a meteor shower widely interpreted as the opening of the Sixth Seal in 1833; the disappointment of would-be prophet William Miller and his followers when his millennial predictions of the 1840s failed to manifest; the awe and horror surrounding the atom bomb during the mid-century; the shock of the World Trade Center/Pentagon attacks of 2001.[4] Music is a significant force in this history, the authors argue, both reflecting and helping to produce the American apocalyptic psyche. Concluding this first chapter, they frame their project through a musical narrative that brings to light the perverse ambivalence of the apocalyptic imagination–salvation and destruction in equal measure. From the influence of gospel on Elvis to the cult violence of Charles Manson and David Koresh (both were aspiring rock musicians), a distinctively American relationship to apocalyptic thought supposedly pervades the story of rock and roll. Janssen and Whitelock write: "As twisted and tragic as their effects were, the apocalyptic visions of Manson and Koresh are perhaps the only things that place them in the mainstream of twentieth-century American life. That and their rock and roll dreams" (28). While this grand tale is striking, ultimately it reads as a kind of fable, far too neatly traversing disparate moments in US history in search of an overarching apocalyptic essence.

With its much narrower focus, the second half of the book's expository set-up, titled "Are You Ready For That Great Atomic Power?," is more effective. Following a succinct overview of American commercial culture's disturbing, ecstatic obsession with all things "atomic" in the immediate postwar years, Janssen and Whitelock examine popular songs about the Bomb from 1945 to 1965 (the year of Barry McGuire's hit "Eve of Destruction"). The authors propose an affective trajectory in these years from an initial (sacred) awe, or alternately (profane) libidinal excitement vis-à-vis the atomic bomb, to an increasingly fatalistic dread following the USSR's first successful nuclear test in 1949. On the affirmative religious side is Hawkshaw Hawkins' 1947 country song, "When they Found the Atomic Power," with its preposterous take on the invention of the Bomb at Los Alamos: "In that zero hour seeking out some heavenly power/ While the Star Spangled Banner was being played." Perhaps the most shocking sexualization of the Bomb is Wanda Jackson's 1957 rockabilly song "Fujiyama Mama" (with lyrics by Earl Burrows): "I've been to Nagasaki, Hiroshima too!/ The things I did to them, baby, I can do to you!" Throughout their discussion the authors pay more attention to lyrics than music.[5] Nevertheless, there are some nice interpretive flourishes in the writing. On the Louvin Brothers' performance of the lines "Are you

ready for that great atomic power?/ Will you rise and meet your Savior in the air?," Janssen and Whitelock observe that "the brothers sing in a harmony so pure that listeners might suspect the bombs have dropped already and these are the voices of the angels welcoming them home" (40).

Following this introduction, the bulk of *Apocalypse Jukebox* consists of single-chapter studies devoted to individual musicians/bands (Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Devo, Laurie Anderson, Sleater-Kinney) or specific albums (Harry Smith's 1952 compilation *Anthology of American Folk Music*, John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* (1964), Love's *Forever Changes* (1967), R.E.M's *Murmur* (1983), Greenday's *American Idiot* [2004]). All these bands and albums have received prior attention by scholars, authors of trade books, and music journalists. Janssen and Whitelock's contextual discussion draws extensively on these sources.[6] The authors' original contribution lies not so much in new research but in a project of interpretive consolidation, in the contention (as noted) that apocalyptic strains pervade these repertories, reflecting distinctive aspects of American culture and character.

The results are uneven: some analyses work well while others seem forced.[7] In one of the most successful chapters, Janssen and Whitelock survey the cast of grotesques pervading Bob Dylan's songs, convincingly arguing that his is a song-world of the apocalyptic carnivalesque. But the authors overstate the case and find apocalyptic thought in spurious places: indeed almost *everywhere*. For example, the authors quote Dylan's cryptic response when asked in 1995 whether the United States was better or worse off than it was in the 1960s:

> I see pictures of the '50s, the '60s and the '70s and I see there was a difference. But I don't think the human mind can comprehend the past and the future. They are both just illusions that can manipulate you into thinking there's some kind of change. But after you've been around awhile, they both seem unnatural. It seems like we're going in a straight line, but then you start seeing things you've seen before. Haven't you experienced that? It seems we're going in circles.

Janssen and Whitelock's analysis is this: "Dylan is saying that a circular view of history makes an apocalyptic aesthetic possible" (126–7). Although it isn't clear exactly what Dylan *is* saying, it strikes me that the authors are conveniently putting words in his mouth.

In the case of Leonard Cohen, an artist frequently compared to Dylan, the apocalyptic resonance of his work is explicit. Nevertheless, Janssen and Whitelock do a fine job of illuminating the intertwined erotic and religious disaster haunting his lyrics. Cohen is not just a poet (although it was his initial vocation) but a singer and songwriter, and I wish that more was said about the significance of his voice and music. (For me the doomed world

that Cohen presents in his 1988 album *I'm Your Man* seems to connect the timeless space of myth with postmodern '80s affect through the weird pairing of his gravelly, prophetic bass voice with the cheesy, over-produced soundtrack of synthesizers and disco-ish back-up singers.) Janssen and Whitelock display a greater sonic sensitivity in their chapter on Love's *Forever Changes*. On the wonderfully deranged song "The Red Telephone," the authors keenly describe Arthur Lee's peculiar delivery of the opening couplet: "Sitting on a hillside/ Watching all the people die."

> He let *i* in *side* glide across an entire measure, as if to suggest the expansiveness of his vision. By contrast, he hits *die* with one short, sharp beat, like a punch line. There is something of the madman in the tone of his voice through this song as well, making it difficult to discern whether his observations on mass death are a condemnation or just a mad kick. (171)

Their characterization of the "zombified chorus" chanting at the song's conclusion (171–2) also seems like an appropriate and sensitive read of Lee's singular take on black bohemianism in Los Angeles at the height of the hippie movement.

Other chapters are less successful. The decision to include an album from outside of the rock tradition is a fine idea, but the apocalyptic reading of Coltrane's landmark *A Love Supreme* is not convincing. Janssen and Whitelock run into difficulties because the album is (mostly) instrumental, while the authors seem far more comfortable analyzing lyrics. Moreover, since musicological analyses of the album have, they say, already been "definitively accomplished" by Lewis Porter and Ashley Kahn among others, the authors choose to base their argument not on the music but on a discussion of the album's "conception, reception, and cultural influence in an apocalyptic context" (80). The result is a series of anecdotes that yield the unsurprising conclusion that Coltrane had conceived of the album as deeply spiritual, and that others heard it that way. It is not so clear what is apocalyptic about the context. "Apocalypse," as the authors note early on, originally signifies an "unveiling of mystery" and "revelation of hidden truth"—and not solely the doomsday scenarios of movies (3). It is not logical that everything spiritual is apocalyptic, and the authors fail to convince even as they employ the term "apocalyptic" repeatedly to support their argument.

Likewise strained is the attempt to decode the apocalyptic message in the notoriously incomprehensible lyrics from R.E.M.'s *Murmur*. It is not only the meaning of the lyrics, but the very identity of the *words* Michael Stipe mumbles, that has baffled fans. The authors' admittedly original solution to this dilemma is to assemble a "pastiche poem" culled from the lyrics that they *can* make out (212–13).[8] Well aware that this "exercise in the heretical"

is open to objections of arbitrariness, Janssen and Whitelock nevertheless carry out a reading. I actually like the idea, but, as elsewhere, the authors' madness for all things apocalyptic leads to over-determined interpretations. They plausibly observe that in the song "Catapult" R.E.M. sings about "kid fears" in order to comment on the basic desire for security, but, by the time the authors write about "bedtime as personal apocalypse" I was skeptical of the argument once again (221).

It is not an end in itself to extract apocalyptic allusions and imagery through textual analyses of songs, and indeed Janssen and Whitelock assemble musical anecdotes, excerpts from literature, and summaries of theoretical work in an attempt to contextualize the music under discussion. Fundamental questions remain. If it is in fact true that the concept of apocalypse pervades rock and roll, it is not clear what this means. On the one hand, there are obvious historical formations in the twentieth century that might condition an end-of-the-world fascination and fear. From the early chapter on atom bomb songs on, much of the music is discussed in this context, including the repeated line "Combien du temps" (How much time) on *Murmur* (219). However, while death by nuclear warfare was certainly not only an American fear, the book's basic contention is that there is a distinctively American *tradition* of apocalyptic thought. Never fully explicated, the authors' argument seems to be that reflections in American culture of modernity in general, and the threat of secular doomsday in particular, were already *conditioned* by a specifically American apocalyptic worldview. Its origins lie in nineteenth-century religious movements, and even earlier—as far back as seventeenth-century Puritan imaginings of the new world as a New Jerusalem.

Janssen and Whitelock are certainly not the first to propose an American apocalyptic tradition (see, for example, *The Apocalyptic Vision in America*, edited by Lois P. Zamora).[9] Nor should the possibility that apocalyptic ideologies may span a historical *longue durée* be necessarily discounted. However, if apocalypse lurks in American culture it is not statically—as some "permanent and central part of the American character"—but productively, as a mythology (like the idea of the "American character" itself) that is constantly being remade and adapted to new conditions. Perhaps this is what Janssen and Whitelock intend to demonstrate in their examination of the diverse manifestations of apocalytomania in American music. But using Kermode's line on apocalyptic "immanence" to assert something like a (transracialized) American "changing same" is to ignore at least two entwined factors: First, the tactical (political, ideological, psychological) reasons underlying postulations of the "American character" itself. (To invert Michael Eric Dyson's paraphrase of Ernest Becker: The American character

may be a *vital* lie, but it is (still) a lie.);[10] and second, the historicity and deeper political motivations of American apocalyptic thought. (Janssen and Whitelock might have examined another suggestive line from Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* in which he notes that "the mythology of Empire and of Apocalypse are very closely related.")[11] This is certainly not to say that the authors ignore discrete historical events. But it is as if American history is governed by a transcendental signifier, "character," rather than constituting this concept as such, as if the apocalyptic image of *timelessness* became the premise rather than subject of analysis.

While the specific conditions informing the contours of these American apocalyptic representations are too often elided, this problem is perhaps least evident in the chapter on Devo, which I found to be the strongest in the book. Here Devo's "philosophy" of (de)evolution is framed against a backdrop of violence (the shootings at Kent State, where founding members Mark Mothersbaugh and Gerald Casale were students at the time) and situated within the corporate culture of Reaganism. Devo's apocalyptic aesthetic statement appears as both a wryly cynical product of that culture and as a furious, almost deranged revolt against it. But I do not believe that Devo's vision reflects any distinctively American *tradition* of apocalyptic thought. In fact it is the Hollywood mythology of the quintessentially "American" itself that Devo send-up–most notably in their iconic music video for "Whip It," with its beer drinking cowboys (ciphers for Reagan Republicans) watching a rape. Janssen and Whitelock adeptly interpret the anti-Reaganite politics of the video, but as demonstrated by their reification of the American mythos throughout *Apocalyse Jukebox*, they do not take the full implication of Devo's satire to heart.

Notes

1. As something of a parody on this phenomenon, at one point in Don DeLillo's novel *Americana* the character Brand declares, more or less *a propos* of nothing, that America is "the strangest, wildest, freakingest country in history." Don DeLillo. *Americana*. New York: Penguin Books, 1971 (204).

2. Jean Baudrillard. America, translated by Chris Turner. London: Verso, 1988, (7, 29). This is at least partially owing to United State's near-hegemony (in the capitalist world) during the second-half of the twentieth century and its accompanying position as the supposed quintessence of modern (or postmodern) culture. Thus the affirmative ideology of American exceptionalism has its aspect of socio-political (if not ethical) truth.

Baudrillard presumably side-steps any charge of national essentialism by maintaining that there is "no truth of America" because it is pure simulation, hyperreality (27–28). Baudrillard's vision of the United States as simultaneously hypermodern, post-historical, and as primitive is prefigured by, among others, Alexander Kojève (before the latter opted for Japan as the new exemplar of modernity). After visiting the United States several times between 1948-58, Kojève writes:

> I was led to conclude that the *American way of life* [in English in the original] was the kind of life proper to the post-historical period and that the presence today of the United States in the World prefigures the future 'eternal present' of all of humanity. Thus Man's return to animality seemed no longer a possibility but an already present certainty.

In: Alexandre Kojève. *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: Lecons sur "La Phénomenologie de l'Esprit."* Paris: Gallimard, 1947, 436–7. Quoted and translated in: Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx*, translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994: 90–91.

3. In particular, see: Greil Marcus. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music.* New York: Plume, 1997 [1975].

4. In fact, the authors trace the connection of the Americas and apocalyptic thought to Christopher Columbus and John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts (16).

5. Additionally, there are some odd omissions, such as Charles Mingus's "Oh Lord Don't Let Them Drop that Atmoic Bomb on Me" from his 1962 album *Oh Yeah* (Atlantic Records).

6. Some of the sources Janssen and Whitelock reference include:

Harry Smith: *Anthology of American Folk Music*

Marcus, Greil. "That Old, Weird America." Liner notes *for Anthology of American Folk Music.* Anthony Seeger, ed. Smithsonian Folkways, 1997.

Released following the publication of *Apocalypse Jukebox* is this important volume on Harry Smith: Perchuk, Ander and Rani Singh, eds. *Harry Smith: The Avant-garde in the American Vernacular.* Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010.

John Coltrane: *A Love Supreme*

Kahn, Ashley. *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album.* New York: Penguin Books, 2002.

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Leonard Cohen

Boucher, David. *Dylan and Cohen: Poets of Rock and Roll.* New York: Continuum, 2004.

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Goldberg, Roselee. *Laurie Anderson*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000.
Hannaham, James. "Laurie Anderson: Media Masseuse." *American Theatre* 12.6 (July 1995): 48–50.
Howell, John. *American Origins: Laurie Anderson*. New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1992.

Sleater-Kinney
Marcus, Greil. "Raising the Stakes in Punk Rock: Sleater-Kinney." *Da Capo: Best Music Writing, 2001*. Nick Hornby, ed. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001.
_____"The Best Band in the World," *Esquire*, April 1999, vol. 131.

Green Day: *American Idiot*
Myers, Ben. *Green Day: American Idiots & the New Punk Explosion*. New York: Disinformation, 2006.

7. For the sake of space, I cannot comment on all of the chapters.

8. Janssen and Whitelock preface this interpretive move with a discussion of ideas from Stanley Fish's landmark work in reader-reception theory: Stanley Fish. *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

9. Lois Parkinson Zamora (ed.). *The Apocalyptic Vision in America: Interdisciplinary Essays on Myth and Culture*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1982. Other books on the representations of apocalypse in American culture include:

Frykholme, Johnson. *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
Robinson, Douglas. *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
Verheul, Jaap, ed. *Dreams of paradise, Visions of Apocalypse: Utopia and Dystopia in American Culture*. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2004.

10. Original: "To paraphrase Ernest Becker, the American character may be a lie, but it's a *vital* lie." Michael Eric Dyson. *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 154.

11. Frank Kermode. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1967], 10.

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