

JOHNNY CRACKLE SINGS

Johnny Crackle Sings
by Matt Cohen
McClelland & Stewart (1971)
Toronto
paperback

Andy Warhol had said that in the Future, "We will all be world famous for five minutes." This will be made possible by the perfection of mass-media brainwashing techniques, and thus every ego will be permitted five minutes of absolute indulgence, while at the same time ensuring that no one personality is permitted to dominate world consciousness for longer than a specified time: Mr. Warhol, meet Mr. Cohen.

The "five-minute-hero" of Cohen's novel is Johnny Crackle, who is an Ottawa rock singer. He is spotted by a third-rate impresario named Bugsey Stern and is lifted almost into the big-time (Cohen seems to share the Canadian traditions of second-class heroes), before he realizes that being a rock music star is not really what life is all about anyway, and "disappears", ending up out on the west coast with his wife, Sara Lee Cheesecake/Jennie Stern - sounds like a Canadian version of Frank Zappa's Suzy Creamcheese - and their 8 lb. 6 oz. baby boy. Johnny's quick trip up and down is told by way of brief bits of narration, surrealistic scenes from his road tours, and newspaper reports from an entertainment reporter for the *Ottawa Citizen* with the likely name of Frank Shaughnessy.

The novel's characters are a collection of "types", and most of them are well-drawn: Johnny is, at least while he is functioning, the ultimate rock singer - alienated, with some small talent and a lot of ambition, cool, balling his way through the groupies who are themselves "types", likened to slot machines: "she was sitting in the armchair watching TV wearing her silk blouse and her pubic hair she got into bed I put in my nickle and when we were finished the bed was covered with dimes that all right I said keep the change".

Bugsey Stern is getting old, looking for a star to which to hitch his wagon, and he thinks that Johnny might be the one; his daughter Jennie (interchangeable with Sara Lee) seduces Johnny, and Bugsey isn't too worried about it, Jennie's mother apparently liked

to mess around a bit as well. He hustles Johnny through the small dance gigs, into a recording studio where Johnny sweats a lot and does a quarter-tab of acid twice a day "but tried to protect his voice by not smoking too much" - Johnny does a lot of acid, or whatever it is that's in those little blue pills friend Simon keeps bringing up from the States - but finally, it's all just *too much*. As a record reviewer once said about James Taylor, the chief *malaise* affecting today's rock stars seems to be plain old fatigue. Johnny's "European tour" folds up through a combination of poor management - Bugsey turns out to be a sort of King Midas in reverse: everything he touches turns to shit, his musician, his marriage, *everything* and Johnny's inability to stay interested in what he's doing, and Johnny returns to Canada, to spend some time on an idyllic little farm owned by friends of his, Lew and Sally Clinton.

Johnny sees the music industry in a new light now, he turns into somewhat of an ascetic and finally is admitted to hospital, though his manager assures the media that it is "definitely not a case of drug overdose". And that much is true: it's much more serious than that, for Johnny has attained "Condition Zero". "Condition Zero was the point at which everything blended so perfectly that it all cancelled out. In condition zero there was no input and no output. Just the circular rhythms of his own energy flow."

In "Condition Zero", Johnny is able to function on his own, without any ego gratification or stimulants, no chemicals or managers, just his own energy. He is able to make plans which include moving out west, after marrying Jennie (and making love to his friend Lew's wife, Sally - it's just possible that Lew, who lives a very quiet life on the farm and is generally a much more "together" person than is Johnny, and his wife Sally, may be alter egos for Johnny and Jennie, though the book's structure makes it hard to draw parallels of this sort.)

Johnny Crackle Sings is not an easy book to read; good training would be, I suppose bill bissett's poetry, because bissett and Cohen seem to work in the same sort of way, unstructured and unpunctuated, the words as

they appear on the page being as important in many cases as the ideas they express, the same lack of a time sequence. Nevertheless, the book works, particularly if one reads it through at a single setting and allows it to do its work on you. In many ways, there is no other form which so clearly expresses what instant stardom and rock musicians in 1970 are all about.

Critics often find themselves defenders of the *status quo* in literature; since criticism involves the application of a set of standards to a work of art, one supposes that the *status quo* is necessary, else where would the critic stand while pointing his critical finger? But then along comes a book like *Johnny Crackle Sings*, and suddenly all the old yardsticks just will not measure what they are supposed to measure.

Cohen sets out to deliberately disorient his readers, he tries by whatever means possible to break through the reader's presuppositions about the nature of fame and success, the supposed sophistication of the "younger generation", to take us right into Johnny Crackle's mind; once there, seeing things now not so much as we see them ourselves but as Johnny Crackle sees them, we cannot help but understand the pressures and changes which cause him to opt for "Condition Zero".

Perhaps it is just not possible to write sanely about an insane world: when the "straights" like Frank Shaughnessy are seen to be totally screwed up - in one of the funniest scenes in the book, the reporter (who is on tour with Johnny in France) writes letters to his wife apologizing for his impotency on the night of

his departure, while at the same time Johnny writes to Jennie that Frank is balling some young girl he has met "ten times a day" - Johnny's actions in staying stoned and finally giving up on the rock music scene altogether are seen to be completely correct and highly commendable. The novel's disjointed style reflects its disjointed subject perfectly, and through all the interviews, letters, acid trips and bummers Johnny Crackle emerges as just the sort of "five-minute-hero" who so often comes briefly on the music scene with a million seller and then quickly fades. We've often wondered what happened to old so-and-so: Cohen has the line on at least one of them here.

Sid Stephen

Phyllis Webb, noted Canadian poet to read in SUB Art Gallery tonight

Phyllis Webb, one of Canada's best-known poets, will read from her work in the SUB Art Gallery this evening at 8 p.m.

While Miss Webb is certainly "Canadian", her poetry falls into a category which is not restricted by nationality; she attended UBC during the late 1940's, where she studied with and was doubtless influenced by Earle Birney and Roy Daniels, and through her political affiliations with the CCF, became acquainted with Frank Scott, who was a founding member of that Party. In 1950, she moved to Montreal, where she met Irving Layton, AJM Smith and Louis Dudek. It was Dudek who published Miss Webb's first collection of poetry, from Contact Press (1954).

After a year in England, she returned to this country and in 1956 McClelland & Stewart published her second collection, *Even Your Right Eye*. An Award from the Canadian government made it possible for her to return overseas, this time to Paris, France for eighteen months. On her return in 1959 she accepted a teaching post at UBC, where she remained until 1963. In 1962, Ryerson Press published *The Sea Is Also A Garden*, and after

being awarded a Canada Council grant in 1963 she went to live for one year in San Francisco, where she was further in touch with the "San Francisco school" of Robert Olson, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Creeley; she had met many of these poets while teaching at UBC, and some of the poems in *The Sea Is Also A Garden* show their influence.

Miss Webb enjoyed somewhat of a reputation as a free-lance broadcaster at this time, and on her return to Canada she was employed for four years with the CBC in Toronto, where she was involved in the program *Ideas*. Also, in 1964 her fourth book of poetry, *Naked Poems* was published by Takao Tanabe in Vancouver.

When her health forced her to leave the CBC in 1967, Miss Webb moved to Salt Spring Island on the West Coast and began work on a new collection of poems, which she refers to as the "Kropotkin Poems". She also managed to visit Russia at this time, and finally, in 1969, she resigned her post with the CBC in order to devote her full time to living on Salt Spring Island and writing poems, with the assistance of a major Arts grant from the Canada Council.

Phyllis Webb's *Selected*

Poems have just been published by Talon books of Vancouver. As usual, David Robinson has taken the care and attention one has come to expect from his press, and has packaged Miss Webb's poetry in a neat, unpretentious form - lots of white (off-white, really) around the shorter poems, to set off their sparse, tight-rigged construction, and heavy paper which seems to make the reader want to hold the pages in his hands just for the pure tactile sensation of handling something so substantial.

And the poems, of course, do justice to the presentation. Included are poems from her earliest collection through to *Naked Poems* and an intriguing selection of "Some Final Questions" which indicate that if this is the direction Miss Webb is taking just now, out on Salt Spring Island, her next book will be one to watch for. With any kind of luck, we may hear some of these "Kropotkin Poems" at the SUB reading; I'm told by a friend from Vancouver that she is an excellent reader of her own work, and it appears that tonight's reading is one not to be missed by anyone interested in good poetry.

Sid Stephen

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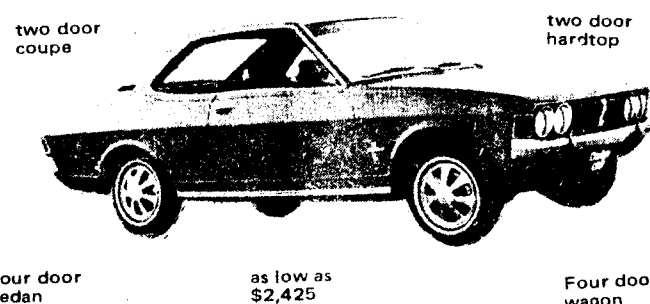
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