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# HOW TO SOUND GOOD NAKED: IN SEARCH OF THE BREAK-UP ALBUM'S SECRET FORMULA. BY EDWARD RANDELL

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In 1955, Frank Sinatra – bruised from his romance with Ava Gardner, the great love of his life – recorded his first 12-inch LP, a collection of songs about heartbreak and disappointed desire, wrapped up in Nelson Riddle's exquisite arrangements. That record, *In The Wee Small Hours*, did more than any other to invent the concept album, the notion that a record could be more than the sum of its parts, a coherent piece of musical storytelling rather than just a showcase for the artist's latest wares. As if that weren't enough, it was also the begetter and patriarch of one of pop's most enduring forms: the break-up record.

Its descendants form a many-branched family tree of misery and regret, as diverse as the listeners who, over the years, have so often turned to them for kinship or solace. On one lofty branch are those records taking a relationship's failure as the starting point for a set of semi-abstract studies in blue: Beck's *Sea Change* (2002), say, or Bon Iver's *For Emma, Forever Ago* (2008). On a lower bough are the records that get right down to the dirty specifics of divorce: Marvin Gaye on *Here, My Dear* (1978) gripes 'Somebody tell me please / Why do I have to pay attorney fees?' To muddy matters further, the divorce in question was from his label boss's sister, and the album itself was partly intended as a fundraiser for his alimony costs. The knottiest branch of all, though, holds the likes of Abba's *The Visitors* (1981), on which Frida and Agnetha find themselves singing lyrics written by their ex-husbands, about themselves. Got all that? Good.

## Tracks (blood on)

Break-up albums, more than any other form in pop, can make for an uncomfortably personal listening experience. At their worst they can be as self-serving and muck-raking as the latest exclusive with Jordan or Peter; at their best, though, they are uniquely placed to create an intimate rapport between artist and listener, and 55 years after its invention the form is still in rude health. The last year alone has seen the

release of Noah & the Whale's *The First Days of Spring*, *Break Up* by Pete Yorn and Scarlett Johansson, The Swell Season's *Strict Joy* and most recently *End Times* by Eels. It has also brought us Tucker Crowe's *Juliet*, the fictitious album at the centre of Nick Hornby's latest 'rock novel' *Juliet, Naked*. All these albums fit squarely in the tradition – though the goalposts have shifted since Sinatra's time, the biggest difference being that, whereas we might once have been content with emotional interpretations of standards, we now expect original songs in the confessional mould. We want (or think we want) juicy specifics: all the bad habits of the ex catalogued in lyrical form.

This has been the norm of the genre at least since 1975, when Bob Dylan released what *Times* critic Pete Paphides recently called 'The mother of all post-relationship albums': *Blood on the Tracks*. Though not quite the originator of the genre, *Blood on the Tracks* remains the yardstick against which all break-up records are measured. The album was released as Dylan's marriage to Sara Lownds crumbled, and their son Jakob Dylan famously described the songs as 'my parents talking'. From the knowing weariness of 'You're A Big Girl Now' to the spitting rage of 'Idiot Wind' ('You're an idiot, babe / It's a wonder that you still know how to breathe'), one can't help but feel that *Blood on the Tracks* provides a raw and honest insight into Dylan's emotional life.

Except... it's a trick, an illusion. Like all of Dylan's personas, the heart-on-sleeve confessional atmosphere is a careful construction. Moving, resonant and authentic, yes, but also oblique and ultimately opaque. In a cryptic sentence from his memoirs, Dylan seems to deny that *Blood on the Tracks* is about his divorce at all: 'Eventually I would even record an entire album based on Chekhov short stories – critics thought it was autobiographical – that was fine.' This might be a piece of Dylanesque misdirection, but then again it does make sense to think about the album less as a personal outpouring than as a collection of stories, on a



illustration by Abigail Jones.

common theme but stretching from Tangiers to Delacroix, its cast of characters encompassing the Jack of Hearts, a man named Gray and an Italian poet from the thirteenth century. One need only listen to the almost embarrassingly direct 'Sara' (from 1976 follow-up *Desire*) to realise that the success of *Blood on the Tracks* owes a lot to its smoke-and-mirrors approach. And, of course, to the fact that we don't really want it to be about Dylan's relationship. We want it to be about our own break-ups, and in the ambiguities of Dylan's lyrics there is room for us all.

### Triangles (love)

*Blood on the Tracks* is an especially sophisticated example of the multiplication of voices in every break-up album, for they are all based on a set of relationships that is, at its simplest, triangular. These are the relationships between The Singer and The Ex; between The Singer and The Listener; and between The Ex and The Listener. There will typically be a mixture of 'you' and 'he/she' in referring to The Ex, as The Singer attempts simultaneously to conduct a 'private' conversation (with The Ex) in the public medium of performance, and to make his/her 'public' conversation with The Listener seem private and confessional. Of course The Singer is the only true participant in either of these conversations. While on The Swell Season's album each of the two Singers is the other's Ex, this is a remarkable exception in an often solipsistic genre. More usually The Ex is an abstraction, variously idealised or vilified. In the film that accompanies Noah and the Whale's *The First Days of Spring*, Charlie Fink's ex Laura Marling has been replaced by Daisy Lowe. On Pete Yorn's *Break Up* album she is voiced by Scarlett Johansson. These stand-ins (perfect examples of the form's opportunities for wish fulfillment) also allow The Ex to become EveryEx, a canvas for both singer and listener. As Fink sings on 'Blue Skies', these albums can be 'for anyone with a broken heart', but only after this artifice, this fictionalizing process, has been introduced.

Nick Hornby's *Juliet, Naked* has this point at its heart. Hornby introduces us to Duncan Thomson, a superfan who believes Tucker Crowe's 1986 album *Juliet* to be 'a darker, deeper, more fully realized collection of songs than the over-rated *Blood on the Tracks*'. Since Crowe's mysterious disappearance from the limelight shortly after the release of *Juliet*, 'Crowologists' such as Duncan have had to make do with creepy pilgrimages to the home of his hero's former muse Julie Beatty (Hornby well understands how powerful The Listener's fascination with The Ex can be). When, out of the blue, Crowe's label decide to put out *Juliet, Naked*, a collection of unadorned demos for the album, Duncan posts a wildly gushing review on his website. His girlfriend Annie sees what Duncan cannot – that the 'naked' version is not a patch on the end product – and when she posts a dissenting review, she receives an approving email from none other than Tucker Crowe himself. The rest, as they say, is reasonably diverting rom-com history. But Hornby is at his best here when writing about the complex relationships between The Singer and The Listener, between the personal and the artificial, that the break-up album illuminates more than any other pop form.

### Triggers (creative)

In constructing Crowe's fictitious break-up album Hornby has drawn heavily on *Blood on the Tracks* and the aura that surrounds it. The novel includes a mocked-up Wikipedia page for *Juliet* in which Crowe is quoted as saying: 'Yeah, people keep telling me they love it. But I don't really understand them. To me, it's the sound of someone having his fingernails pulled out. Who wants to listen to that?' And sure enough, the Wikipedia entry for *Blood on the Tracks* throws up this quote from Dylan: 'A lot of people tell me they enjoy that album. It's hard for me to relate to that. I mean ... people enjoying the type of pain, you know?' The notion of a 'naked' version of the album also reflects the ongoing debate among 'Dylanologists' as to whether Dylan was right to abandon his original versions of the

*Blood on the Tracks* songs, recorded in New York with just an acoustic guitar in open-E tuning, and decamp to Minnesota to record the more worked, more diverse arrangements found on the finished album.

Underlying one side of this debate is the assumption (widespread since the singer-songwriters knocked Sinatra and his peers off their perch) that, in the case of an album as apparently personal as *Blood on the Tracks*, the rawer and more immediate the better. This view sees writing and performance as part of the same confessional process; if a song is 'raw' or 'naked' it is closer to the creative and emotional wellspring. This partly explains Duncan's preference for *Juliet, Naked*, but there is also a voyeuristic impulse involved: this is The Listener as Peeping Tom. When Duncan breaks into Julie's home, it is part of his inability to separate the genuinely personal from that art which relies on an illusion of the personal. Annie's appraisal of *Juliet, Naked* is more insightful:

*There wasn't really any music to it yet... none of the texture or the detail that still contained surprises, even after all this time. And there was no anger that she could hear, no pain. If she were still a teacher, she'd have played the two albums back-to-back to her sixth-formers, so that they could understand that art was pretending.*

Annie hears the emotional weight of Crowe's songs increasing, not diminishing, with distance from the real-life trigger. 'Of course Tucker

Crowe was in pain when he made *Juliet*, but he couldn't just march into a recording studio and start howling... he had to dress it up so that it sounded more like itself.'

### Tragedy (stuff of)

Similarly, Charlie Fink has described how, when recording *The First Days of Spring*, he had to 'force [him]self into a horrible moment and bring up that emotion again'. Fink calls the process of making the album 'cathartic', and though he may not be thinking of the word's associations with classical tragedy, there is a link: a great break-up album should inspire pity and fear by enacting a kind of drama. Just as Greek tragedies deal with gods and kings, an album like *In The Wee Small Hours* endures because its emotional canvas is larger than life. Its majestic winds, strings, harp and celeste provide the backdrop while Sinatra plays the great tragic actor, using the advances in microphone and recording technology to bring out every nuance, every tremble, every crack in his voice. Indeed, this close-mic intimacy may just be Sinatra's most enduring bequest to the genre, allowing subsequent vocalists (up to and including Fink, and The Swell Season's Glenn Hansard and Marketa Irglova), to find an all-important vulnerability at the centre of complex, textured arrangements; allowing The Singer and The Listener to be just a whisper apart. For while we may not want our break-up albums naked, we've come to expect them to be, in one way or another, revealingly dressed •

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