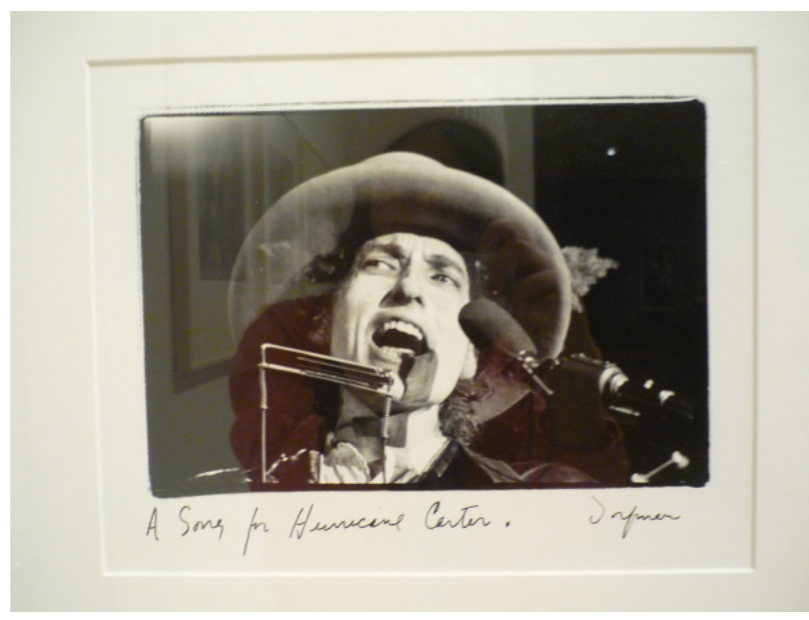




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A Contemporary Outlook: Seeing Songs at the MFA Posted by: Staff | 10.26.2009

NAJWA ASWAD '12



Welcome to a new era. Enter a contemporary outlook from a dimension where the human soul is manifested with oil on canvas to casted bronze. No, here time is either suspended in moments from the lives of at least a dozen people from the Acid Age of San Francisco- Janis Joplin, Jefferson Airplane, Grace Slick, Taj Mahal, to icons of eighties glam rock, pop, R & B, seventies folk, and rock n' rock like Bowie, Dylan, Aretha, Springstein, and Lil' Richard on silver gelatin prints and video.

This is what it is like to enter the contemporary gallery of the MFA. This exhibit is called "Seeing Songs," and was drawn mainly from the museum's collection, but also claiming to draw on music "as a source". On one wall Jefferson Airplane poses for the cover of "Surrealistic Pillow," all smiles against the backdrop of a wall adorned with ancient hieroglyphics. In complete contrast, the adjacent picture depicts a solo Grace Slick glaring into distant space from under her dark hair making a less-than-friendly gesture with her right hand. That particular picture seemed to have brought forth various memories.

"I loved Grace Slick during her psychedelic days," one woman said to her friend while looking at the photo like she couldn't believe it. "Did she ever change her daughter's name from 'God'?" she asked me, and when I admitted I didn't know, she dismissed me saying that I'm far too young to remember. The woman's friend also reminisced that once for an interview with Seventeen Magazine, Grace Slick was asked what her eye color was, and she said, "plaid."

One of the most innovative parts of the exhibit was a wall composed of television screens, each one featuring a different individual doing a variety of different things like dancing, dawning strange outfits, or playing with what looked like favors from a seven-year-old's birthday. However, they were unified in one activity- they were all singing the hits from Madonna's Like A Virgin. Originally an Italian advertisement for the pop singer's second studio album, it was both brilliant and intriguing. It was just so interesting how hardly any of the people on the television screens spoke English fluently and were yet able to belt some of these hits by Madonna with hardly a trace of an accent. To me, this was an example of how music, especially American pop music, could go beyond the boundaries of culture and touch people for what it is- music, a melody, a sound.



In this exhibit, there was an underlying theme of how music, in some twisted, could better express what the poet, writer, or actor was trying to say, more often than not without using words. The seventies, for instance, was portrayed as a collage of album covers (Patti Smith's Horses, Lou Reed's Transformer, and others) that also served as a retrospective of the decade, highlighting punk fashion as well as other formative cultural revolutions for those who lived through them. There actually was a quote on the wall by the writer Victor Hugo that said, "Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent." It truly made me realize what the exhibit was about: all the dimensions of human expression. One could think a thought, write it, but even that's not enough. One can be moved by a melody, but there was something about moments filmed, photographed, manipulated into works of art that touched the human soul in the most fundamental way, for the writer is mostly inspired by the sights of the world around him.

Music is a source here. Everything is inspired by it. I feel immersed in music even without music, though that seems impossible. Music is everywhere. Music is culture and has inspired everyone in ways public and private, from a rock concert to one's personal playlist. To refer to yet another quote written on the walls of the exhibit by Bryan Ferry, former lead vocalist for Roxy Music, it said, "you can never get enough silence nowadays." For the sake of our society moving forward with the evolution of music, I hope that stays true.

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