ROADRUNNER

JOSHUA CLOVER

A SONG BY **JONATHAN RICHMAN & THE MODERN LOVERS**

SINGLES ▶ A SERIES EDITED BY JOSHUA CLOVER AND EMILY J. LORDI

Jonathan Richman around 1972, with Modern Lovers. Department of Special Collections and University Archives, W. E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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01 Rock & Roll Radio, 1980

THEY WERE JUST ANOTHER BAND out of Boston. Private Lightning were local heroes at the end of the seventies who got their shot at the big time with their 1980 major label debut, self-titled as unwritten law demands. They were just another band out of Boston but there were worse starting positions right around then. The Cars' self-titled debut from 1978 would move six million copies. Boston's self-titled debut from 1976 is presently the twelfth best-selling album of all time. Private Lightning never broke nationally. Perhaps it is obvious why.

"Christopher Sky is the afternoon DJ on rock & roll radio," begins "Song of the Kite," one of their lead singles. No one but Prince could get away with that name for a character in a song. Reader, I do not want to mention this but I feel compelled to note that the opening line is perfect dactylic hexameter, the verse meter of epic poetry. *The Iliad*, *The Aeneid*, *Metamorphoses*. It is almost never used in English. Adam Sherman hits the weighted sylla-

bles in "*rock &* roll" and "*ra*dio" fervently because those things are what matters. Rock & roll is the epic now, meaning then. Or maybe it was already lost as the epic is lost. "Do you remember rock & roll radio?" asked the Ramones in the spring of 1980, possibly on the same channel that would play "Song of the Kite" later in the set, second line of "Kite" again tracing epic meter but more loosely: "His voice is like velvet, everyone knows he was born for the studio." No one could get away with that hackneyed simile. The story develops quickly. One day while Christopher is lying in a field, he sees a beautiful kite, which rhymes with "beautiful sight" and "vision of light." He hears in his heart "an unforgettable song." This is the song of kite, the song within the song. The vision leaves him mute for seven months during which he vanishes from the airwaves and everywhere else, finally returning amid great rumor and excitation. Everybody listens in. But he does not speak, does not play recorded music in the darkened studio, "the turntables still and the tape players off." Instead he gives voice to a single song, his rendition of the song he heard that day, the song of the kite, the song that we too get to hear for the first time. Hold onto that, it bears repeating as it will repeat throughout, we are listening to the radio where someone is listening to the radio. Christopher Sky, voiced by Sherman, sings, "There is love in the world," and then he sings it again and then again. Chorus, cut.

There is no stripping away the allegory from the kite, "the color of crimson, the crossbar of wood, a tail a mile or more long." We get it. Even though the character is named Christopher, which

means the exact same thing here as when Prince gave his characters and sometimes himself that name, it is the kite itself that is Christ upon the old wooden cross; the tail is the blood, the absolute and endless mark of the crucifixion across the sky of history (Elias Canetti memorably describes Christianity as "an infinite dilution of lament, spread so evenly over the centuries that scarcely anything remains of the suddenness of death and the violence of grief"[1]). Christopher's vision is followed by seven months in hell or in the desert or on the road to Damascus, the double exile that features regularly in redemption songs, both an exterior exile from society and an interior exile into ascesis, into ascetic silence and contemplation, all the saints and the lesser Christs, everyone does it and you know the drill, they eventually return from exile with a message of love. There is love in the world there is love in the world there is love in the world there is love.

It would be something if this anagogic disaster were the only Private Lightning song remembered outside the band's family members. But "Song of the Kite" was only half of a double A-side single. The track on the flip side is called "Physical Speed." This song is also interested in the radio but in a more secular register. It sounds a bit more like the Cars and it is about driving. "Physical Speed" is Private Lightning's biggest hit and it begins, "My heart is in neutral, this motionless summer." As night falls, our narrator makes the only possible move to escape his restless boredom: "I tune in my AM radio, I turn the key and I go." There's the radio.

That's the pre-chorus; then the chorus: "and I ride, and I ride, physical speed is just what I need, and I ride, and I ride, what can I do, I'm so lonely for you." The second verse circles back, repeats the scene: "out on the highway, the radio's blasting, the engine is racing, as fast as it goes." The song is not a particularly innovative retelling of rock mythology, of its old building blocks, but it is admirably efficient at setting all the elements in place and in motion within about ninety seconds: *car*, *highway*, *aimless circularity*, *loneliness*, *nighttime*, *rock & roll radio*. Get it, got it, go.

I have omitted one obscure detail. In the first verse, before he launches himself onto the road, our nameless driver has been busying himself otherwise: "I write all these letters to drop in the mail." We never find out to whom. Out on the highway during the second verse, a descant repeats much of the first verse in the background, with a small change: "I write *you* these letters to drop in the mail." He is driving around, the song intimates, to post a message or perhaps to hand-deliver one. But this never happens, he just rides. Nothing is delivered . . . unless the song itself is the letter he has written, the letter that someone will hear coming out of the darkness, out of the radio, the message that you will one day receive.

This leads back around to "Song of the Kite," before we leave Private Lightning behind for good, they were just here to set us in motion toward the song in the title of this book. There is another reading of the song. This reading is barely allegorical at all. It's

just . . . the story. It is also an old story, a different one but one that can be combined with the story of physical speed—and is not snapping together old stories our way of being new? Is not the multiple the origin of the single? And it is this that will yield what I am going to call the ur-story, a folktale, shared and social, different in different moments, the song that is ten thousand songs.

This book is about all of them and one in particular.

The story is this: There is a fan of such enthusiasm that their life is devoted to the music of others; they are, not to be overly technical, *adjacent to the radio*. One day they encounter an ordinary object. It could be a kite but it could just as well be a neon sign or a chewing gum wrapper, we could call this object common or trivial or proletarian, *popular* in the old sense, *of the people*, but in any regard the object is a commodity because that's the fate of objects in the modern world, to be commodities and then to be their remnants, and anyway this person, this lover and curator of others' music, sees that this object is not abject and degraded but rather that it is beautiful even if it is trivial, or beautiful because it is trivial, that the world is in fact filled with such beautiful things, that the world comprises these things and is thus itself beautiful, and they need to tell you about this, they need to drive around the world to deliver their message about the extraordinariness of the ordinary, about how they are in love with the modern world. They put all of this into a song, their own song for once, they put it into a pop song because that is the disposable commodity to measure

all other disposable commodities, the pure thing, the paradigm for the kite or the neon sign or the chewing gum wrapper, and although they have the radio on, or because they have the radio on, they begin to sing.

It is the most ordinary single of all time.

NOTES

Chapter 1. Rock & Roll Radio, 1980

1. Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 155.

Chapter 2. Faster Miles an Hour, 1972

1. Mitchell, *There's Something about Jonathan*, 20.
2. Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 177.
3. Mitchell, *There's Something about Jonathan*, 20.
4. Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, 60.
5. Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, 21.
6. Stop & Shop, "Our History."
7. Mitchell, *There's Something about Jonathan*, 20.
8. Lees-Maffei, "Men, Motors, Markets and Women," 363.
9. Stephen Bayley quoted in Lees-Maffei, "Men, Motors, Markets and Women," 368.
10. Sagan, *Aimez-vous Brahms*, 11.
11. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 222.

Chapter 3. That Highway Sound, 1955

1. Barton, "The Car, the Radio, the Night."
2. Christgau, *Any Old Way You Choose It*, 144.
3. Powers, "Bittersweet Little Rock and Roller."
4. Walsh, *Astral Weeks*, 120.
5. Hans Thomalla, personal correspondence, April 4, 2017.
6. McNeil, "Modern Lovers Bassist Ernie Brooks."
7. L. Robinson, "New Velvet Underground," 90.
8. Quoted in Mitchell, *There's Something about Jonathan*, 72–73.
9. Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, 19.
10. Smucker, *Why the Beach Boys Matter*, 16.
11. Christgau, "Ain't That a Shame."
12. Mitchell, *There's Something about Jonathan*, 26.
13. Smucker, *Why the Beach Boys Matter*, 21.
14. Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, 39.
15. Flink, *Car Culture*, 211.