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"BRILLIANT"

ALEX ROSS, author of *The Rest is Noise*

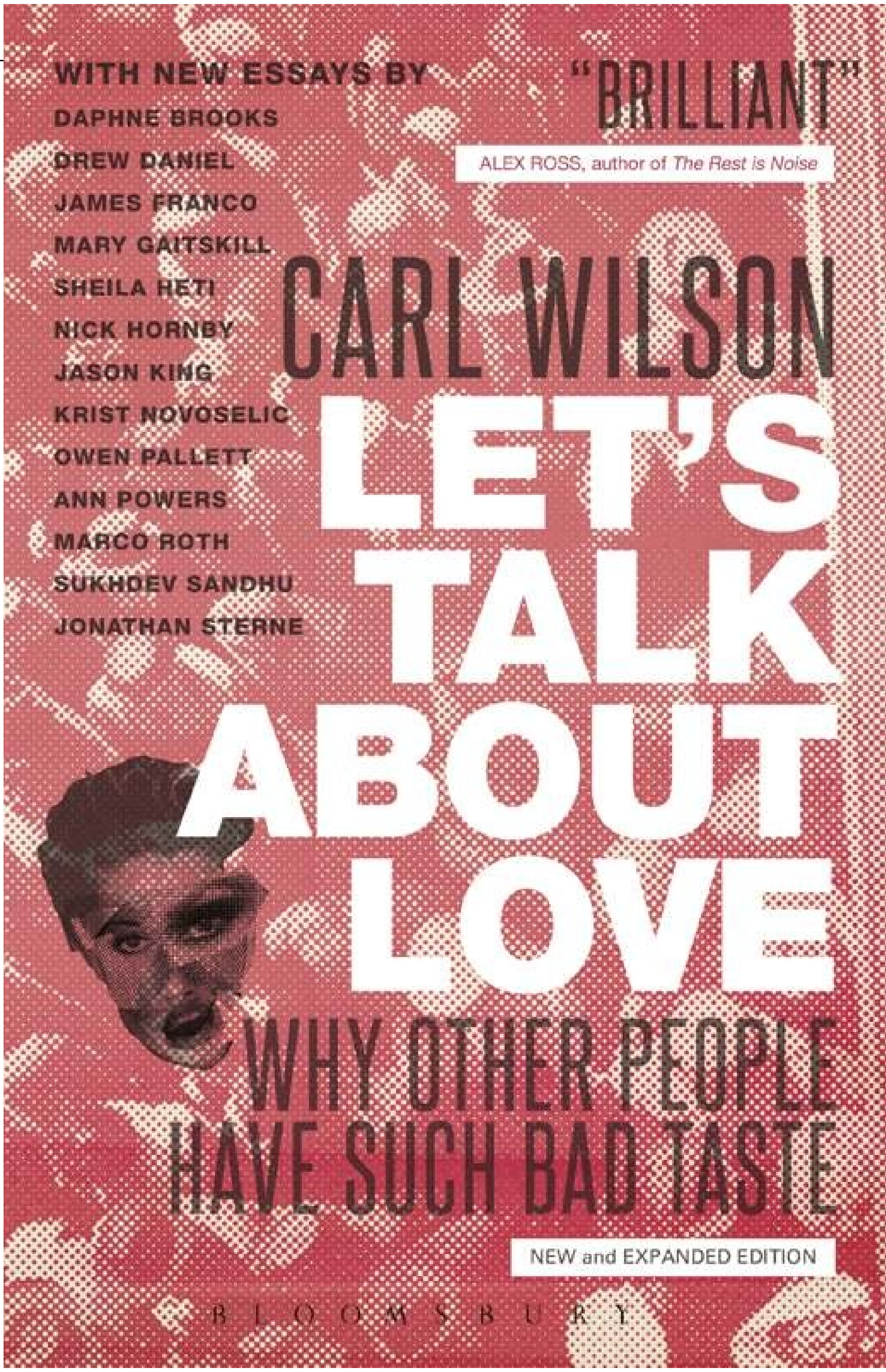
CARL WILSON

# LET'S TALK ABOUT LOVE

## WHY OTHER PEOPLE HAVE SUCH BAD TASTE

NEW and EXPANDED EDITION

BLOOMSBURY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# LET'S TALK ABOUT LOVE

## *Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste*

**CARL WILSON**

B L O O M S B U R Y
NEW YORK • LONDON • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

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# A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

In 2007, Continuum published the 52nd volume in the critically-acclaimed 33 1/3 series. Its title, *Let* *Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* , seemed to suggest that it would be a book abo Céline Dion. But it turned out to be so much more. *Let's Talk About Love* uses Dion as a test case an thought experiment to prompt the reader to second-guess the way we think about everything we lil and dislike, what we value and what we scorn. Soon, the praise poured in and many reviewe immediately identified *Let's Talk About Love* as their favorite book in the 33 1/3 series, even though was about what was perhaps their least-favorite album.

The book sparked debates about taste not just in the music-writing community, but in English ar Cultural Studies departments on university campuses around the world, on blogs and podcasts, ar even on TV's *The Colbert Report* (where Wilson appeared on March 4, 2009).

Given the great response, Bloomsbury and Wilson decided to create an expanded, standalon edition: What follows in Part One is the original text of *Let's Talk About Love* from the 33 1/3 seri in 2007. (Very tiny mistakes have been corrected for your reading pleasure.) In Part Two is gathered set of essays on the book's themes contributed by a wide range of prominent writers, musicians ar scholars. Finally, Carl Wilson returns to his initial questions and updates what has happened in th worlds of both popular taste and Céline Dion since the book's publication, in a new Afterword – all t deepen and enrich further what it means to talk about love.

# PART ONE

# LET'S TALK ABOUT LOVE: A JOURNEY TO THE END OF TASTE

## Carl Wilson

# 1

# Let’s Talk About Hate

“Hell is other people’s music,” wrote the cult musician Momus in a 2006 column for *Wired* magazin He was talking about the intrusive soundtracks that blare in malls and restaurants, but his rewrite Jean-Paul Sartre conveys a familiar truth: When you hate a song, the reaction tends to come spasms. Hearing it can be like having a cockroach crawl up your sleeve: you can’t flick it away fa enough. But why? And why, in fact, do each of us hate some songs, or the entire output of som musicians, that millions upon millions of other people adore?

In the case of me and Céline Dion, it was Madonna’s smirk at the 1998 Oscars that sealed it. Th night in March, the galleries of Los Angeles’s Shrine Auditorium were the colosseum for the late gladiatorial contest in which art’s frail emissaries would get flattened by the thundering chariots o mass culture. And Empress Madonna would laugh.

Until that evening, I’d done as well as anyone could to keep from colliding with *Titanic*, the al media juggernaut that had been cutting full-steam through theaters, celebrity rags and radio playlis since Christmas. I hadn’t seen the movie and didn’t own a TV, but the magazines and websites I rea reinforced my sureness that the blockbuster was a pandering fabrication, an action chick-flic perfectly focus-grouped to be foisted on the dating public.

Now, I realize this attitude, and several to follow, probably makes me sound like a total asshole i like millions of people, you happen to be a fan of *Titanic* or of the woman who sang its theme. Yo may be right. Much of this book is about reasonable people carting around cultural assumptions th make them assholes to millions of strangers. But bear with me. At the time, I thought I had plenty o backup.

For instance, Suck.com, that late 90s fount of whip-smart online snark, called *Titanic* a “14-hou long piece of cinematic vaudeville” that “had the most important thing a movie can have: a clear pl that teaches us important new stuff like if you’re incredibly good-looking you’ll fall in love.” It w contrasted with Harmony Korine’s *Gummo*, a film about malformed but somehow radiant teenage drifting around rural, tornado-devastated Xenia, Ohio – as if, after the twister, Dorothy’s Kansas ha been transformed into its own eschatological Oz. Suck said that *Gummo* evoked “the vertigo w encounter when people discover and make up new standards of cool and beauty,” a sensation resiste by mass society because those standards could be “the wrong ones, and we can’t allow ourselves look at that too hard or long.”

CNN.com’s review, on the other hand, described *Gummo* as “the cinematic equivalent of Korin making fart noises, folding his eyelids inside-out, and eating boogers,” and the director as a punk-a straining in vain to be a punk. For cred, the writer namechecked the Sex Pistols, saying that unli theirs, Korine’s rebellion came down to making fun of the hicks.

I knew which argument I bought, and it wasn’t just because the same CNN reviewer called *Titan* “one swell ride.” After all, Korine was a lyrical *enfant terrible* who’d gotten fan letters from Wern

Herzog; *Titanic* director James Cameron made Arnold Schwarzenegger flicks. Korine was New Yor and ~~Cameron was Hollywood. And just consider their soundtracks: *Gummo* had a soundscape of~~ doom metal bands, with an alleviating dash of gospel and Bach. *Titanic* had Celtic pennywhistles, saccharin strings and … Céline Dion.

Living in Montreal, Quebec, made it impossible to elude *Titanic*'s musical attack as neatly as th celluloid one. Dion had been intimate with the whole province for years, as first a child star, then diva of all French-speaking nations and finally an English–French crossover smash. Her rendition James Horner and Will Jennings's "My Heart Will Go On" had come out first on her bestselling 199 album *Let's Talk About Love*, then on the bestselling movie soundtrack and then again on a bestsellin single. (Ten years later, by some measures, it's the fourteenth-most-successful pop song the world ha ever seen.) I hadn't listened regularly to pop radio since I was eleven, and I got agoraphobic in mall but that tin-flute intro would tootle at me from wall speakers in cafés, falafel joints and corner store and in taxis when I could afford them. Dodging "My Heart Will Go On" in 1997–98 would hav required a Unabomber-like retreat from audible civilization.

What's more, I was a music critic. I hadn't been one long: I'd done arts writing at a student pape veered into leftish political journalism and then become the arts editor at one of Montreal's downtow "alternative weeklies." I wrote profiles and CD reviews on the side for the rakish punk-rock guitari who edited the music section (when he dragged himself into the office in the mid-afternoon). championed experimentalists and the kinds of unpopular-song writers I was prone to calling "literate I would not have deigned to listen to an entire Céline Dion album, but it was a basic cultur competency in Montreal to know her hits well enough to mock them with precision. In Quebec, Dio was a cultural fact you could bear with grudging amusement – a horror show, but *our* horror show until *Titanic* overturned all proportion and Dion's ululating tonsils dilated to swallow the world.

* * *

With "My Heart Will Go On," Céline-bashing became not just a Canadian hobby but a nearl universal pastime. Then-*Village Voice* music editor Robert Christgau described her popularity as trial to be endured. Rob Sheffield of *Rolling Stone* called her voice "just furniture polish." As late 2005, her megahit would be ranked the No. 3 "Most Annoying Song Ever" in *Maxim* magazine: "Th second most tragic event ever to result from that fabled ocean liner continues to torment humani years later, as Canada's cruelest shows off a voice as loud as a sonic boom, though not nearly s pretty." A 2006 BBC TV special went two better and named "My Heart Will Go On" the No. 1 mos irritating song, and in 2007 England's *Q* magazine elected Dion one of the three worst pop singers all time, accusing her of "grinding out every note as if bearing some kind of grudge against the ve notion of economy."

The black belt in invective has to go to Cintra Wilson, whose anti-celebrity-culture book *Massive Swelling* describes Dion as "the most wholly repellant woman ever to sing songs of love singling out "the eye-bleeding Titanic ballad" as well as her "unctuous mewling with Blind Italia Opera Guys in loud emotional primary coloring." Wilson concluded: "I think most people wou rather be processed through the digestive tract of an anaconda than be Céline Dion for a day."

My personal favorite is the episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in which Buffy moves into h freshman university dorm and her roommate turns out to be, literally, a demon – the first clue bein that she tacks a Céline Dion poster up on their wall. But the catalogue of slams, from critics to Sunda columnists and talk-show hosts to *Saturday Night Live*, could fill this book. I've mostly seconde those emotions, even when a blog ran a Dion joke contest that produced the riddle, "Q: Why did the take the Céline Dion inflatable sex doll off the market? A: It sucked too hard."

~~But it was at the Oscars that things got personal.~~

* * *

The night was the expected *Titanic* sweep, capped by director James Cameron's bellowing sel quotation, "I'm the king of the world!" (Which from that podium sounded like, "My brand has tot multiplatform synergy!") But in the Best Original Song category, *Titanic* – and Dion – had or unlikely rival, and it happened to be Elliott Smith.

Smith was a hero of mine and of the late-90s indie subculture, one of those "literate," bedroor recording songwriters whose take on cool and beauty seemed leagues away from the pop-glamo machine. Pockmarked and shy, with a backstory that included childhood abuse and (though I didn know it yet) on-and-off heroin addiction, he had recorded mainly for the tiny northwestern Kill Ro Stars label, but had just signed to Dreamworks, which would release his next album, *XO*, that summe

Smith wrote songs whose sighing melodies served as bait for lyrics laced with corrosive rag They dangled glimpses of a sun "raining its guiding light down on everyone," but everyone in the got burned. They were catchy like a fish hook. As his biographer Benjamin Nugent later wrote *Elliott Smith and the Ballad of Big Nothing*, "Smith effectively deploys substance abuse as a metaph for other forms of self-destructive behavior, and the metaphor is a handy one for several reasons. Fo one, a songwriter taking substance abuse as his literal subject (even if love is the figurative one) ca easily steer clear of the Céline Dion clichés of contemporary Top 40 music, the language of heart embraces, great divides. [Instead] he participates in a hipper tradition, that of Hank Williams, Johnn Cash and Kurt Cobain – their addiction laments, disavowals and caustic self-portraits."

Smith also dealt frankly, I felt, with one of the ruling paradoxes for partisans of "alternative culture: It might look like you were asserting superiority over the multitudes, but as a former bullie kid, I always figured it started from rejection. If respect or simple fairness were denied you, you build a great life (the best revenge) from what you could scrounge outside their orbit, freed from th thirst for majority approbation. This dynamic is frequently rehearsed in Smith's songs: In "2:45 a.m. a night prowl that begins by "looking for the man who attacked me / while everybody was laughing me" ends with "walking out on Center Circle / Been pushed away and I'll never come back." laments and disavowals were your lot, you would shine those turds until they gleamed. And you spread the word to the rest of the alienated, walking wounded – which, in a late-capitalist consum society, I thought, ought to include everyone but the rich – that they too could find sustenance an sympathy in a voluntary exile.

So how had Smith ended up in center circle at the Shrine Auditorium, smack up against th "Céline Dion clichés," a juxta-position that seemed as improbable as *Gummo* winning Best Picture An accident, really. Years before, he'd met independent filmmaker Gus Van Sant hanging out in th Portland bars where Smith's first band, Heatmiser, played. That friendship led to writing songs fo Van Sant's first "major motion picture," *Good Will Hunting*, and so to Oscar night, featuring ( *Rolling Stone* put it) "one of the strangest billings since Jimi Hendrix opened for the Monkees," wi Smith alongside the pap trio of Trisha Yearwood, Michael Bolton and Céline Dion.

He tried to refuse the invitation, "but then they said that if I didn't play it, they would get someon else to play the song," he told *Under the Radar* magazine. "They'd get someone like Richard Marx do it. I think when they said that, they had done their homework on me a little bit. Or maybe Richa Marx is a universal scare tactic."

(Richard Marx, for those who've justifiably forgotten, was the balladeer who in 1989 san "Wherever you go, whatever you do, I will be right here waiting for you" – threatening enough? But

Dion hadn’t been booked, her name might have worked too.)

~~On Oscar night, Madonna introduced the performers. Smith ended up following~~ Trish Yearwood’s rendition of *Con Air*’s “How Do I Live?” (written by Dianne Warren, who also penne “Because You Loved Me” and “Love Can Move Mountains” for Dion). He shuffled onstage in a brigh white suit loaned by Prada – all he wore of his own was his underwear – and sang “Miss Misery *Good Will Hunting*’s closing love song to depression. The Oscar producers had refused to let Smith s on a stool, leaving him stranded clutching his guitar on the wide bare stage. The song seemed as sma and gorgeous as a sixteenth-century Persian miniature.

And what came next? Céline Dion swooshing out in clouds of fake fog, dressed in an hourgla black gown, on a set where a white-tailed orchestra was arrayed to look like they were on the deck the *Titanic* itself. She’d played the Oscars several times, and brought on her full range gesticulations and grimaces, at one point pounding her chest so robustly it nearly broke the chain o her multimillion-dollar replica of the movie’s “Heart of the Ocean” diamond necklace. Then Dio Smith and Yearwood joined hands and bowed in what *Rolling Stone* called a “bizarre Osc sandwich.”

“It got personal,” Smith said later, “with people saying how fragile I looked on stage in a whi suit. There was just all of this focus, and people were saying all this stuff simply because I didn come out and command the stage like Céline Dion does.”

And when Madonna opened the envelope to reveal that the Oscar went to “My Heart Would G On,” she snorted and said, “What a shocker.”

I liked Madonna, who danced on the art/commerce borderline as nimbly as anyone. But right the I squeezed my fists wishing she’d preserved a more dignified neutrality (“dignified neutrality” bein the phrase that springs right to mind when you say “Madonna”). In retrospect, I realize she w making fun of the predictability, not of Elliott Smith; my umbrage only showed how overinvested was. I wasn’t surprised the Oscars had behaved like the Oscars, that the impossibly good-lookin people had spotted each other across the room and as usual run sighing into one another’s arms. B the carnivalesque reversal that wedged Elliott in there with Céline and Trisha was one of those rips the cultural-space continuum that make you feel anything may happen. I was enough of a populi even then to dream that love might move mountains and heal the great divide.

But when Madonna seemed to chuckle at Elliott Smith, the grudge was back on. And not wi Madonna. With Céline Dion.

* * *

Lamentably, this story requires a coda: Elliott Smith had an adverse reaction to his dose of fam Paranoid that his friends resented him, he distanced himself, relapsing into mood swings an substance abuse, even public brawls. His songwriting suffered, with the so-so *Figure 8* in 2000 an then zip until 2003, when he reportedly had sobered up and was finishing a new album. Then, o October 21, 2003, police in Los Angeles got a call from Smith’s girlfriend in their Echo Par apartment. They had been arguing. She had locked herself in the bathroom. Then she heard a screan She came out to find Smith with a steak knife plunged into his chest, dead at thirty-four.

I hadn’t thought much about the Oscar debacle between 1998 and 2003. I’d moved from Montre to Toronto, from the alternative weekly to a large daily paper, gotten married (to a woman with severe *Gummo* fixation), and settled into a new circle of friends. But the day Smith died, I flashe back to that night when the whole world had gotten to hear what one of its fragile, unlovely outcas had to offer, and it answered, *No, we’d prefer Céline Dion.*

“Tastes,” wrote the poet Paul Valéry, “are composed of a thousand distastes.” So when the ide came to me recently to examine the mystery of taste – of what keeps *Titanic* people and *Gumm* people apart – by looking closely at a very popular artist I really, really can't stand, Dion was waitin at the front of the line.

# 2

# Let’s Talk About Pop (and Its Critics)

I did not hate Céline Dion solely on Elliott Smith’s account. From the start, her music struck me a bland monotony raised to a pitch of obnoxious bombast – R&B with the sex and slyness surgical removed, French *chanson* severed from its wit and soul – and her repertoire as Oprah Winfre approved chicken soup for the consumerist soul, a neverending crescendo of personal affirmation de to social conflict and context. In celebrity terms, she was another dull Canadian goody-goody. Sh could barely muster up a decent personal scandal, aside from the pre-existing squick-out of h marriage to the twice-her-age Svengali who began managing her when she was twelve.

As far as I knew, I had never even *met* anybody who liked Céline Dion.

My disdain persisted after I left the Céline ground zero of Montreal, and even as my enchantme with “underground” cultural commandments weakened and my feelings warmed to more mainstrea music. I can’t claim any originality in that shift. I went through it in synch with the entire field music criticism, save the most ornery holdouts and hotheaded kids. It came with startling speed. new generation moved into positions of critical influence, and many of them cared more about hi hop or electronica or Latin music than about rock, mainstream or otherwise. They mounted wholesale critique against the syndrome of measuring all popular music by the norms of rock cultu – “rockism,” often set against “popism” or “poptimism.” Online music blogs and discussion forun sped up the circulation of such trends of opinion. The Internet pushed aside intensive album listenin in favor of a download-and-graze mode that gives pop novelty more chance to shine. An downloading also broke the corporate record companies’ near-monopoly over music distributio which made taking up arms against the mass-culture music Leviathan seem practically redundant.

Plus, some fantastic pop happened to be coming out, and everyone wanted to talk about it. In Toronto bookstore in 1999, a bright young experimental guitarist caught me off guard by asking if had heard the teen diva Aaliyah’s hit, “Are You That Somebody.” I hadn’t, but I soon would. Tha rhythmically topsy-turvy R&B track was produced by Timothy Mosley, a.k.a. Timbaland, and he an his peers began making the pop charts a freshly polymorphous playground. *Après Timbaland, deluge*: critics started noticing a kindred creativity even in despised teen pop, and by 2007, writers prestige publications like the *New York Times* and the haughty old *New Yorker* could be found praisin one-hit R&B wonders and “mall punk” teen bands as much as Bruce Springsteen or U2.

This was the outcome of many cycles of revisionism: one way a critic often can get noticed is b arguing that some music everyone has trashed is in fact genius, and over the years that process h “reclaimed” genres from metal to disco to lounge exotica and prog rock, and artists from ABBA t Motorhead. *Rolling Stone*’s jeers notwithstanding, the Monkees are now as critically respectable a Jimi Hendrix. Even antebellum blackface minstrel music has been reassessed, its melodies as well its racial pathologies found to lie at the twisted root of American popular song.

This epidemic of second thought made critical scorn generally seem a tad shady: If critics were s wrong about disco in the 1970s, why not about Britney Spears now? Why did pop music have to g old ~~before getting a fair shake? Why did it have to be a "guilty" pleasure? Once pop criticism~~ had track record lengthy enough to be full of wrong turns, neither popular nor critical consensus seeme like a reliable guide. Why not just follow your own enjoyment? Unless you have a thing for whit power anthems, the claim now goes, there is no reason ever to feel guilty or ashamed about what yo like. And I agree, though it's curious how often critics' "own enjoyment" still takes us all dow similar paths at once.

The collective realignment was also a market correction. After the tumult of the early 1990s, whe "underground" music was seized on by the mainstream and just as quickly thrown overboard, man critics and "underground" fans got in a cynical mood. The ever-present gap between critical an general tastes threatened to become an entrenched war of position, in which liking "critics' darling like Elliott Smith and liking pop stars became mutually exclusive. It wasn't sustainable. An academ might be able to dismiss public taste completely in favor of the weird and challenging, but a workin pop critic who did so would be (rightly) out of a job in the long run. And the "underground" thing wa becoming a rut of its own.

However attenuated, though, the gap between critical acclaim and popular success never go away. It's visible every December when critics draw up best-of-the-year lists on which Radiohea Ghostface or Bob Dylan eclipse most of the charttoppers (though no longer all of them). On mov critics' lists, too, summer blockbusters take a back seat to comparative box-office dwarfs: inten domestic dramas, "indie" black comedies, Henry James adaptations. This split is so routine it h come to seem organic. People often say it's just a matter of aesthetic education and exposure greater volumes of material, but that seems to imply critical judgments are more objective and lastin when the record shows us they're not.

In the end, if delight is where you find it and myriad pop pleasures meet the heterodox needs diverse publics, what is the real substance of the dislike I and so many other commentators have f Céline Dion?

Yet Dion remains, as the British critic and sociologist Simon Frith remarked in a 2002 intervie with the website rockcritics.com, "probably the most loathed superstar I can remember, at least b everyone I know, not just critics but even my mother-in-law." He added, "I doubt if she will ever b redeemed, ABBA-style, and what seems to concern everyone is that she is just naff."

And Frith is a Dion *fan.*

* * *

Back when heavy metal got no respect (i.e. five years ago), Deena Weinstein wrote an essay in i defense called "Rock Critics Need Bad Music," which pointed out that critical authority depends the power to exclude, not just to canonize. It hinges on turning your readership into an incrow smarter than some less-discerning audience. Then, when a genre like metal or a band like ABBA resuscitated, everyone pretends they were never one of the people who looked down on it. The ea conclusion would be that critics' tastes are opportunistic. But this fungibility is part of taste's standa wiring.

Everyone has a taste biography, a narrative of shifting preferences: I remember at age twel telling people I liked "all kinds of music, *except* disco and country," two genres I now adore. M hometown was a very white, Ontario-rustbelt city in bad decline. I was a middle-class bookworm wh started with the Beatles from my parents' record collection but soon hit the harder stuff, setting out the great expedition of the avant-garde. It was only after I moved away that I began to grasp that m blind spots were a regional and cultural bias. My tastes were reshaped by social experiences: dancin in Montreal gay clubs where body-rocking techno mixed seamlessly into disco classics; makin ~~friends from Texas or the country-loving Canadian Maritimes; visiting the US South. They were~~ als altered by musical information – by realizing how many hip-hop samples came from disco, f instance, or by following the links from Bob Dylan to Hank Williams to Johnny Cash and the 60 Nashville Sound, and finally back to contemporary country. I realized my easy scorn had betrayed a ignorance of whole communities and ways of life, prejudices I did not want to live with. The epiphan was ethical, but it led to musical enjoyment. Recent talk about pop taste, about unguilty pleasur tends to trace the route the other way around, if it even gets to ethics.

At twelve, my dislike of disco and country didn't feel like a social opinion. It felt like a music reaction. I flinched at the very sound of Dolly Parton or Donna Summer, as unaware that I had an choice about finding them stupid as I was of the frameworks in which they were smart. It seeme natural: I hated disco and country, as cleanly and purely as I now hate Céline Dion.

So how cleanly and purely is that? After all, as I'm writing this, Dion has sold 175 million album not counting the *Titanic* soundtrack. She has five recordings in the Recording Industry Association o America's list of the Top 100 albums by sales, making her the twenty-third-bestselling pop act of a time. Globally she is the most successful French-language singer ever and could be the bestsellin female singer. For four years her legions have tithed their salaries to fly to Las Vegas for her nightl revue *A New Day* in the custom-built Colosseum theater at Caesar's Palace. She is beloved by peop from Idaho to Iraq, who trade news and debate favorites on Internet message boards like any oth group of fans. They cook, work out and date to her music, and when weightier events come, her song are there, for first dances at weddings and processions at funerals.

When the singer herself is asked if her critics bother her, she answers as she did to *Elle* magazi in a 2007 interview: "We've been sold out for four years. *The audience is my answer*."

Which doesn't mean you have to admire her. Unless maybe it does. Certainly a critical generatio determined to swear off elitist bias does seem called to account for the immense internation popularity of someone we've designated so devoid of appeal. Those who find Dion "naff" – British f tacky, gauche, kitschy or, as they say in Quebec, *kétaine* – must be overlooking something, mayb beginning with why we have labels like tacky and naff. If guilty pleasures are out of date, perhaps th time has come to conceive of a *guilty displeasure*. This is not like the nagging regret I have about, sa never learning to like opera. My aversion to Dion more closely resembles how put off I feel whe someone says they're prolife or a Republican: intellectually I'm aware how personal and complicate such affiliations can be, but my gut reactions are more crudely tribal.

Musical subcultures exist because our guts tell us certain kinds of music are for certain kinds people. The codes are not always transparent. We are attracted to a song's beat, its edge, its warmth its idiosyncrasy, the singer's *je ne sais quoi*; we check out the music our friends or cultural guid commend. But it's hard not to notice how those processes reflect and contribute to self-definition, ho often persona and musical taste happen to jibe. It's most blatant in the identity war that is high schoo but music never stops being a badge of recognition. And in the offhand rhetoric of dismissal "teenybopper pap," "only hippies like that band," "sounds like music for date rapists" – we bar th doors of the clubs we don't want to claim us as members. Psychoanalysis would say our aversions ca tell us more than our conscious desires about what we are, unwillingly, drawn to. What unpleasa truths might we learn from looking closer at our musical fears and loathings, at what we consider "ba taste"?

The Céline Dion fan-club roster that many non-fans picture was outed with bracingly open elitis by the *Independent on Sunday* in the UK in 1999, in the paper's "Why are they famous?" serie "Wedged between vomit and indifference, there must be a fan base: some middle-of-the-road Midd

England invisible to the rest of us. Grannies, tux-wearers, overweight children, mobile-phon salesmen and shoppingcentre devotees, presumably."

Reading that, my heart swells for these maligned wearers of inappropriate tuxedos, the poignantly tubby prepubescents pining away to the strains of songs of love sung by a pretty lady wi the best voice in the whole world. And far more than I hate Céline Dion, I hate this anonymous staff from the *Independent on Sunday*. But he's only fleshing out the implication in, for instance, my use the phrase "Oprah Winfrey-approved." If his portrayal of Dion's audience is accurate, it includ mostly people who, aboard the *Titanic*, would have perished in steerage. If my disdain for her exten to them, am I trying to deny them a lifeboat?

The *Independent*'s bile demonstrates why the critical redemption of abject music tends to com years after its heyday: lounge exotica stops sounding like a pathetic seduction soundtrack on the hi- of a smarmy insurance salesman and starts to sound charmingly strange, governed by a lost and thu beguiling musical rulebook. In the present tense, submerged social antagonisms and the risk of bein taken for one of the "tacky" dullards make it less attractive to be so allembracing – to hear Célin Dion as history might hear her.

* * *

This book is an experiment in taste, in stepping deliberately outside one's own aesthetics. It has to d with social affinities and rancors and what art and its appreciation can do to mediate or exacerba them. At a time when the whole issue of the meaning and purpose of art has grown very murky, th exercise might open a few windows. Primarily, though, the question is whether anyone's tastes stan on solid ground, starting with mine.

One condition, I think, is that the dislike in question has some personal bite. A random targ won't do. While I generally give a wide berth to any epic pop ballad, the fact that Céline Dion is Canadian makes her more grating than Michael Bolton: shots at her come with collateral damage my entire country, as in the *South Park* movie anthem, "Blame Canada," which crows, "When Canad is dead and gone / There'll be no more Céline Dion." I feel implicated: "Hold on," I want to protes "we hated her before you did!"

My test case will be *Let's Talk About Love* , the album that includes "My Heart Will Go On." It not her bestselling release (that would be 1996's *Falling Into You*), nor the most esteemed among h fans. But it was huge, and came out at the peak of both Dion's fame and my animosity. Besides, wh better title for a study of cultural passions and antipathies?

Along with immersing myself in this record, I'll examine Dion the same way I do any artist I g interested in – her background, career and influences, the genre she belongs to, what sensibility sh expresses. But I'll also look at taste itself, what has been said about it, its role in aesthetic theory an the research that's been done scientifically and not-so-scientifically. Will I find my inner Céline Dio fan? The goal isn't to end in a group hug. If I end up warming to her music, that will be one lesson; if don't, we might draw others.

As a goodwill gesture, let's proceed on a first-name basis, the way her fans do: Hi there, Céline.

The exercise isn't as far as it seems from my usual critical leanings, toward knotty music like a rock, psych-folk, post-punk, free jazz or the more abstract ends of techno and hip-hop. I write abo such sounds in the belief that "difficult" music can help shake up perceptions, push us past habitu limits. As Simon Frith wrote in his book *Performing Rites*, difficult listening bears in it the traces of "utopian impulse, the negation of everyday life" – an opening toward "another world in which [th difficult] would be 'easy.'" And isn't Céline Dion, for me, actually more "difficult" music than an postmodern noise collage? It sure is more uncomfortable. It could turn out to be more disorientin than the kinds of “difficulty” I’ve come to take for granted.

~~Whatever Céline’s merits, after all, they are not sonic innovation, verbal inventiveness,~~ soci criticism, rough exuberance, erotic charge or any of the other qualities I and a lot of critics listen fo Her fans must hear something else. What is it, and in what language might it be addressed? Hard as is to admit, part of the answer could lie in the music’s very mundanity. After years of pursuing musi in which the “difficulty” carries intimations of “another world,” sonic forecasts of transformatio I’ve begun to wonder whether “easier” music might contain hints for reconciliation with the wor into which we’re already thrown. Maybe it deals with problems that don’t require leaps of imaginatio but require other efforts, like patience, or compromise. There may be negations there, but not the on I’m used to.

At the same time compromise is what worries me: Maybe I am heading down a relativistic rabb hole. If even Céline can be redeemed, is there no good or bad taste, or good and bad art? If I decid not to condemn the sleek musical baubles of Céline Dion, would I also have to reconsider the faci decorations of glass sculptor Dale Chihuly, or the kitsch paintings of Thomas Kinkade, “Painter Light”? Kinkade is the most commercially successful painter of our time, whose nostalgically purifie landscapes, untouched by trouble, humor or irony, command hundreds of thousands of dollars fro followers outside the art scene. What about mediocre books, or the doublespeak of conservativ punditry? Maybe if you don’t stand for something you’ll fall for anything.

Maybe if hating Céline Dion is wrong, I don’t want to be right.

Whatever the perils, it turns out I have an unexpected ally.

* * *

In refreshing my memory about the 1998 Oscars, I came across a story I had never heard: Ellio Smith admitted to the music zine *Comes with a Smile* that he arrived that night “prepared to keep a l of distance from Céline Dion. I thought she’d blow in with her bodyguards and be a weird superstar everybody,” he said. “But she wasn’t like that at all.”

“She was really sweet,” he added in another interview, “which has made it impossible for me dislike Céline Dion anymore. Even though I can’t stand the music that she makes – with all du respect, I don’t like it much at all – she herself was very, very nice. She asked me if I was nervous an I said, ‘Yeah.’ And she was like, ‘That’s good, because you get your adrenaline going, and it’ll mak your song better. It’s a beautiful song.’ Then she gave me a big hug. It was too much. It was to human to be dismissed simply because I find her music trite.”

Smith’s friend Marc Swanson, a visual artist, gave biographer Nugent this account of what cam next: “[After] this, we’d constantly be running into people coming up and talking to him, people wh didn’t know him, and saying, ‘Oh, how’s it goin’, saw you on the Oscars, so how was that?’ An [they’d] make some derogatory Céline Dion comment, and every time they’d do it, I’d be like, ‘gasp and this look of rage in his eyes would come up and he’d be like, ‘You know, she’s a really nic person.’ And they’d always recoil and be like, ‘Oh, no, I’m sure she’s really nice.’ … I thought tha was a cute thing about him: He was defending Céline Dion all the time.”

And Smith only met Céline once. Just think, if we lingered longer, maybe we’d find somethin “too human to be dismissed” even in her music.

# 3

# Let’s Talk in French

Eight of the oddest, most widely mocked minutes of Céline Dion’s career come September 3, 2005, o a Larry King TV special about the wreck of the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina. In the intervie Céline waves her arms, shouts and weeps, blubberingly decries the war in Iraq and cheers on rovi gangs of looters in New Orleans. Then she takes a deep breath and croons a pop aria to God.

Online video clips the next day run under headlines like, “Celine Dion goes crazy!” But actually may be the best glimpse of the “real” Céline most of the world ever gets. To see why, we have to g through the looking glass, into her home province of Quebec.

* * *

Each June 24, Quebec celebrates its version of Independence Day. It has parades, cookouts, firewor and flags. All it lacks is the independence.

Saint Jean-Baptiste Day, the Catholic solstice feast, was secularized by the province in 1977 as L Fête National du Québec, the “national” holiday. Every year I was in Montreal, my mostly anglopho (English-speaking) friends and I would head down to the parade and marvel at how little most of u understood about the culture in which we lived, like expatriates in our own country. Under a invariably bright blue sky, women with big hair and men with bigger hair would stand up convertibles to blow kisses to a roaring throng. And in nine out of ten cases, my friends – who ha come as students at Montreal’s two English universities and then stayed, boots stuck in the swe molasses of the city’s sybaritic lifestyle – had little clue who these objects of adulation were. “I’ pretty sure that guy’s a talk-show host,” Susana might hazard. “And she’s gotta be an actress, right “No,” Gordon might put in. “She’s the books columnist for *Le Devoir*.” There were movie stars a weather presenters, restaurateurs and circus performers, each hailed like a Beatle landing at Kenne airport, if the Beatles also happened to be your second cousins.

This is Quebec’s *vedette* (star) culture, a Bizarro Hollywood’s worth of celebrities who exist hardly anyone but the six million francophone (French-speaking) Quebec citizens to whom they a favorite siblings of a nation in perpetual waiting. And it is from *vedette* ranks that Céline Dion w chosen as princess and guardian angel or, as the press there say, “our national Céline.” To most of th world, Céline is a North American pop singer and maybe secondly a Canadian who speaks French. A home she is a *Québécoise* first and forever, and the implications permeate her career, including wh nonfans stare at her triumphs with the same bewilderment I felt watching the super-unknown sta march by at the foot of rue Saint-Denis.

*Vedette* mania’s strangeness to outsiders – always fashionably dressed, seldom remotely hip – an inspired cultural answer to a political problem, safeguarding Quebec’s character as one of th world’s most privileged postcolonial societies, like Scotland if it still spoke Gaelic but were as wel off as the Swiss. For much of the twentieth century, francophones felt like unwanted guests in th province where they held a majority. Their centuries-old conquest still stung, because the Englis ~~business class – in collusion with the Canadian government and a repressive French Catholic church~~ retained a lock on money and power. Unilingual French speakers were shut out of better jobs, and French education weren't protected by the constitution, the language might have faded from use as did in Louisiana and in most other French pockets of Canada. But the 1960s brought the "Qui Revolution," a series of upheavals to throw off church moralism and English hegemony. There wa even the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ), who committed bombings and ultimately a politic assassination that drove Canada's grooviest-ever prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, quite ungroovily t declare quasimartial law when Céline was a toddler. FLQ leader Pierre Vallières had written a Fran Fanon-style manifesto titled *Nègres Blancs d'Amérique* – "White Niggers of America." While th population overwhelmingly rejected the FLQ's violent self-appointment as Quebec's Black Panther many felt Vallières's analogy was only a mild exaggeration.

The legacy of that era is a nationalist consensus that vacillates between cosmopolitan soci democracy and a harder insularity. It led to two failed referenda on separation from Canada in 198 and 1995. (The separatist party is in government as I write.) But one reason it's never again leane toward violence is that the revolution wasn't really quiet: it was secured by an outspoken cultur wing, with music leading the way.

Quebec pop before the 60s meant variety acts, heirs of Montreal's Prohibition-free, roaring-2 vaudeville heyday. They mainly sang translations of foreign hits. The mid-60s brought the *Yé-Yé* cra of French covers of British Invasion rock – the future Mr. Céline, René Angélil, dropped out of hig school as a minor star with Beatles knockoffs Les Baronets. But by decade's end the province wa peppered with *boîtes à chanson,* clubs where troubadours sang poetry laced with liberation slogan and winter-landscape allegories. By the 70s these *chansonniers* were stars, homegrown Gainsbourg and Dylans (it was mostly guys). Quebec *chanson* was nationalism's soundtrack. Gilles Vigneault "Gens du pays" is so well-loved that in Montreal you sing it instead of "Happy Birthday." It's a bette singalong, too: "*Gens du pays / C'est* à *votre tour / De vous laisser parler d'amour.*" "People of [thi country, it's your turn to let yourselves talk about love." (Can it be accidental when a later Quebe singer titles an album *Let's Talk About Love*?)

Quebeckers are also among the world's most prolific record buyers, so international record labe became eager to sign the *chansonniers*. But this created division in the local music industry, enthusiasm never vanished in working-class and rural Quebec for the older-style "variety-pop interpreters (mostly women) who would inspire the young Céline Dion. Université de Montré communications professor Line Grenier, a scholar of Quebec pop and especially "the Célin phenomenon," illuminated the situation for me: "The milieu was really split in two between th *chanson* – intellectual, leftist-oriented – and the variety-pop. There were two totally differe networks, two different sets of record labels, different kinds of career management."

This brought the sort of pigeonholing, of merely "commercial" singers versus "deepe performers, that we know from everyday music talk. But the consequences were the opposite of mo pop markets: The artistic *chansonniers* not only got the good reviews, citations in political speech and spotlights at Fête National concerts; they also got big corporate deals. Most variety interprete recorded for smaller local labels, and not only critics but music-business bigwigs deplored them throwbacks, as *kétaine,* meaning not only tacky but hickish. When in 1979 the industry launched i own Grammys, the Félix awards (after *chanson* pioneer Félix Leclerc), it had to add a "people choice" slot or no variety singer could have won a prize.

But the 1980 referendum shook up everything. Separation was defeated narrowly enough to kno out investor confidence in the midst of an international recession. Quebec's economy would not ful recover for two decades. Multinational labels pulled back, dropping everyone but major stars. To pic up t~~he slack, local variety-pop labels were joined by companies created with government fundin~~g, ar music became a made-in-Quebec business: as Grenier explains, the *chanson* and variety camps, snob and *kétaines*, still didn't like each other, but had to unite to rebuild. It was into this disoriente industry that Céline made her debut.

* * *

Céline Marie Claudette Dion was born in 1968 in Charlemagne, a unilingual French-Catholic subu of fewer than six thousand people a half hour northeast of Montreal. Her rags-to-riches story is paragon of the genre: The youngest of fourteen children for Adhémar Dion and Thérèse Tanguay (late well known as "Maman Dion"), Céline was twenty-two years younger than her oldest sister. The kid slept several to a bed. Adhémar supported them on $165 a week as a butcher and later in a factory jo The one relief was music – they all played instruments – and eventually the Dions saved enough lease a piano bar, where the kids waited tables and, between shifts, sang. Including, from age fiv baby Céline. She lived to perform – "for me, singing was the *real* life, not two plus two equals four" and when she was twelve, the family helped her make a demo tape of a song cowritten by broth Jacques and Maman Dion. They mailed it to René Angélil, now known as the manager of the 1970 biggest variety-pop artist, Ginette Reno. After some harassment, he allowed an audition, and at th sound of Céline's pipes, legend has it, he wept and swore to make her a star.

There were no prospects at labels so René, a notorious gambler, mortgaged his house to put h album out. Quebec radio said her syrupy ballads were fit only for nursing homes, but she caught on a novelty in France, which sent her as its representative to the 1982 Yamaha World Popular Son Festival in Tokyo. She won, and as so often in Canada, foreign praise raised her stock *chez nous*. Soo Céline was selling hundreds of thousands of records in Quebec and touring internationally. Th *chanson*-minded elites remained unmoved. When she sang for Pope John Paul II in 1984 at Montreal Olympic Stadium, it brought back bad memories of Quebec's obeisance to the church. As recalle later by Konrad Yakabuski, Quebec correspondent for the Toronto-based *Globe and Mail* (where I no work), "Ms. Dion, with her double-digit, Roman Catholic family … prompted sneers in post–Qui Revolution cultural circles." Even her future husband admits she was not a cute child: her bushy ha and snaggle teeth led *Croc*, Quebec's *Mad* magazine, to dub her "Canine Dion," the picture of th province's "white trash" underbelly, with louche manager and peasant stage mom at her sides. A pollster Jean-Marc Leger told Yakabuski, "She wasn't simply perceived as *kétaine* – she *was kétaine* Years later she would break down in tears on Quebec TV over her early media treatment.

How did she shake off the stigma? By stages. Céline was in a long line of Quebec child stars suc as 70s sensations René and Natalie Simard, whose TV variety show was the province's version o Donny and Marie Osmond. But these ingénues seldom achieved adult careers. Angélil realized Célin would have to make a clean break. In an eighteen-month hiatus in the mid-80s, she got her tee capped, took singing lessons and developed a new repertoire. Her comeback was the breathy 198 dance-pop single "Lolita," a Madonna-ish number not as suggestive as its title, though it foreto events to come with its theme of a teen girl's crush on an older man. In the video she mooned aroun in a leather pantsuit with a belt that seemed to be made out of gold records and gazed longingly ancient castles on hilltops.

Her child-star days were behind her, but it's useful not to forget Céline is that kid who wen directly from a gigantic provincial family into a pop finishing school run by the impresario who, lik starlets before her, she went on to marry. More than nearly any celebrity short of Michael Jackson, sh never had an autonomous phase, never lived in what people call the real world, not even the hothou variant known as high school. She had other weights to carry on her shoulder pads.

* * *

Céline began to study English as a condition of the deal with CBS (later Sony) that promoted her o of the Quebec label system. The timing was not good: her first English-language album, *Unison*, can out in 1990 as the collapse of the Meech Lake constitutional accord inflamed the rift between Quebe and English Canada. It didn't go unnoticed that she jettisoned the accent from her name on the albu cover.

Céline had armloads of Félix awards, but for *Unison* she was nominated as Best Anglophor Artist. In Quebec, those were fighting words, and her response was uncharacteristically pugnaciou she refused the prize on live TV, saying, “I am not an anglophone artist. … Everywhere I go in th world, I say I'm proud to be *Québécoise*.” Some anglophones were offended but the point was wo Quebec was reassured, and the next year the category was renamed to Quebec Artist Most Illustriou in a Language Other Than French – observers joked you could call it the Céline prize for short. Th affair did raise some doubts in the rest of Canada, where her fame was rising with singles like th aptly titled “Where Does My Heart Beat Now?” She calmed that side with another offmessag moment, performing in the Canada pavilion at Expo '92 in Spain, where she announced, “I'm again any form of separation, and if there's anything I can do to help, I'll do it.” Between the tw statements, she neutralized her move into English and adopted the prototypical Quebecker's stance favoring, as comedians often put it, an independent Quebec within a united Canada. Her bonafides as *Québécoise* rarely have been questioned since.

After all, Céline was giving Quebec its first real beachhead in America, where Quebeckers despi the foreign policy but adore Elvis and Mickey Mouse. She and René, like many Quebeckers, becan “snowbirds” with a winter place in Florida. They founded a diner chain called Nickels, who franchises are Googie-style, Naugahyde-interior temples to burgers, bobby sox and 50s rock ‘n' ro with a side plate of Céline memorabilia. The peak came in the 1997 Grammys broadcast when sh delivered a few words in Quebec *joual* slang, incomprehensible even to most other French speaker As Yakabuski wrote, “In front of the United States and the world, Ms. Dion proved to Quebeckers tha they exist.” Then-premier Lucien Bouchard called Céline Quebec's “greatest ambassador.” As Grenie puts it, Céline had attained one of her defining roles in Quebec: “national hero.”

The next year, the domestic industry finally gave its seal of approval by inviting her to host th 1998 Félix ceremony, alongside childhood idol René Simard and *chansonnier* Jean-Pierre Ferlan The highlight was a comedy sketch in which Céline and impressionist André-Philippe Gagno imitated the characters Môman (mama) and Pôpa (papa) from the popular series *La petite vie* – one the weirdest TV hits ever, a working-class family sitcom à la *Roseanne* but more anarchic an grotesque, with actors in stage makeup and false beards, like a live-action *Simpsons*. In the sketc Gagnon's Pôpa said he wanted to “see big” like René Angélil, and make Môman a star. The pres crowed, “Céline as Môman: Who could ask for more?” Grenier argues it was a key moment: th bullying elite was finally able to laugh with Céline, not at her. Quebec's confidence had grown: it wa now willing not only to bare its trashy underbelly, but to give it a big, wet kiss. And Céline's castin as Môman was a nod to the contribution of the skinny little hick who had conquered the globe.

But it wasn't all symbolism. She also elevated herself musically.

* * *

If you have never heard Céline Dion in French, it's hard to believe it's the same singer. Her cadence are much more supple and controlled, her interpretations more detailed. Gone is the blank persona th ~~reduces many of her English songs to vocal stunt work, replaced by what can only be called soul~~.

Could her English material suffer from nothing but a comprehension problem? N straightforwardly, as her earlier French music is marred by exactly the same much-of-a-muchnes But over the years, her French song selections and arrangements evolved. The effect, perhaps th purpose, was to blur the boundaries that stood between variety-pop and *chanson*, and between Célin and respectability.

Not coincidentally, it began right after she started her English career. Her next French album, i 1991, was devoted to songs by Luc Plamondon, a respected Quebec songwriter renowned in France f his rock musical *Starmania*. Céline's version of one *Starmania* tune became her first No. 1 in years France, and its subject is far from anything you'd expect: "Un garçon pas comme les autres (Ziggy is about a girl's unrequited love for "a boy unlike the others," but ends happily as she resigns herse just to going dancing with him – in gay bars. Céline had given the world its first hit fag-hag balla Next, on the hugely successful *D'Eux* (1995) and follow-up *S'il suffisait d'aimer* (1998), she paire with Jean-Jacques Goldman, a *chansonnier* often called France's Bruce Springsteen (not a link man anglo listeners would make with Céline). He is credited with demanding Céline learn to *dechanter* undersing, not belt to the bleachers – and he brought new colors to her repertoire with country-fo textures and storytelling. Goldman's topics too can be surprising, including a song about AID ("*L'amour existe encore*") and one about an Algerian-French immigrant, glad to be free of the veil b lonely for the countrywomen left behind ("*Zora sourit*"). These alliances may have been motivate mainly by Plamondon and Goldman's credibility in France, where post-child-star Céline had gotten lukewarm hearing. But no doubt Céline and René are also more sensitive to the nuances of their ow language, especially since lyrical quality often matters more to French success.

The corollary is that musical quality often seems *less* important, as decades of French-rock jok will testify. Literary-minded *chanson* aside, French pop markets have lagged behind even whe French movies, books and art were at the forefront of innovation. Recent French techno has helpe loosen music up considerably, but why Gallic pop is so often so lame is one of those imponderabl (is it the linguistic rhythms?) that serve as fodder for Sunday arts section essays.

Which may help explain why it took only minor adjustments for Céline to bridge *chanson* an variety: the gap was exaggerated. It's not that Céline became a legit *chanteuse* (not writing her ow songs remains a stroke against her) but the differences stopped mattering so much. She could claim a the institutional trappings that *chanson* monopolized a decade before. Slowly, Grenier says, the ter lost its mystique, reverting largely to its generic meaning, just plain "song." That change helped ope up Quebec pop. It is now much more eclectic, with more "world music" influence, more bilingualis (even within songs), diverse modes of rock and a growing hip-hop scene. Céline can't take credit some of these artists would call themselves her nemeses – but she deserves a nod for helping scramb the rulebook.

And the same is true in Quebec culture at large.

* * *

Sneering at Céline in Quebec has never gone wholly out of style. In 1994, there was plenty of backlas to her and René's ridiculously lavish, Princess Diana-style "Royal Wedding" in Montreal. In 200 people got fed up with wall-to-wall media coverage of the twenty-fifth anniversary of her caree enough that one television newsmagazine aired a special asking if it was possible to criticize Célin and René in public anymore. The hip downtown weekly *Voir* long ago declared it would never cov her and the chief arts critic at highbrow daily *Le Devoir* never tires of deriding a performer h considers the worst of globalized homogeneity with nicknames like “Miss Tupperware.”

But as Line Grenier points out, most Quebeckers who detest Céline (including Grenier’s ow brother-in-law) now append caveats: “Yes, but …” But she’s been around so long. But she works s hard. But she’s been treated so harshly.

“They’d like not to care,” Grenier says, “but they can’t help it because she’s always there. I don think a week goes by without a mention of Céline in the mainstream media one way or another, an it’s not just to talk about her career. It’s to talk about all sorts of things. That affects how people reac to whether or not she’s *kétaine*.”

Along with her diplomatic role as national hero, Grenier says, Céline provides Quebec a model the “happy entrepreneur,” not only in her music career and its many spinoffs (fine chocolate sunglasses, perfumes) but in charitable work (particularly for cystic fibrosis, a disease to which Célin has lost a niece) and, more subtly, her self-discipline (going weeks at a time without speaking in ord to protect her vocal cords, for instance). Céline and René’s company Les Productions Feeling employ much of her family and scads of other Québécois, a fact far from lost on her compatriots. Indeed, sh is one of the province’s leading exports, along with the Cirque du Soleil (Céline’s partners in her La Vegas show), and the more avant-garde theater spectacles of director Robert Lepage. These cultur enterprises have cleared a path for “Quebec, Inc.,” a new nationalism concerned less with leg sovereignty and more with grounding Quebec’s autonomy in an outward-bound dynamism. Today how Céline sounds matters less than how a Quebec software firm can emulate her global *savoir-fair* It’s quite a turnabout from Quiet Revolution dreams of a socialist “Cuba of the north.”

But Céline’s ineluctable Quebeckitude remains a block for anglo audiences abroad. When Britis writer A. A. Gill, in a 2003 anti-Vegas diatribe in *Vanity Fair*, attacked her “ungodly French-Canadia glottal accent,” it was remarkable less for its rudeness than for being unusually well informed. T most of the English world, Céline’s Frenchness remains a vague thing, almost an affectation; that represents a whole culture groping its way to self-determination doesn’t translate. She is condemne to a kind of pidgin otherness that gains her little in empathy or exotic allure because few know how place it within standard North American racial and ethnic matrices. If she fails most non-fan authenticity tests, the trouble may be not only her showbiz upbringing but that her person touchstones are off the map. Her commercialism does not get the kind of pass given a rapper wh fixates on “gettin’ paid” or a country singer who thanks God for the hits that rescued her from Southern shack. Since Quebec is a null set in the popular imagination, Céline is judged by middl class standards in which “sellout” is always a handy stick to slap down the overreaching.

When Céline talks in the first-person plural – *we* achieved this, *we* hoped for that, *we* decided make this record – she is speaking of herself, René, her producers, her Charlemagne clan and all what’s called “Team Céline,” but symbolically it includes Quebec’s extended family. Where sh comes from, collectivity counts, and her gains are the gains of a people. It is a recognizable ethic in a African-American star, but in Céline it doesn’t read: she represents an opaque referent, rendering h meaning illegible.

* * *

Which brings us back to the Larry King interview. There’s no denying its spectacle. From the firs Céline, who had just given a million dollars to the New Orleans relief effort, was in tears. She gaspe over explaining the disaster to her son René Charles. She demanded to know why it was hard to sen helicopters to rescue New Orleanians from rooftops when “it’s so easy to send planes in anoth country to kill everyone in a second!” The centerpiece was her paean to the joy of looting: “O sample content of Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste

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