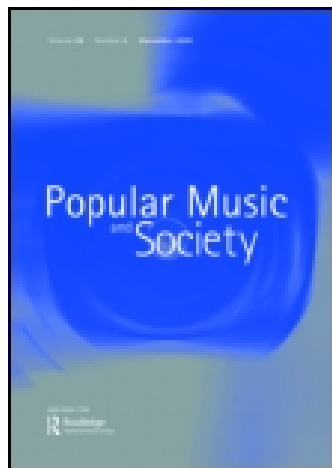


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Musical Autobiographies: An Introduction

Daniel Stein and Martin Butler

Crack open *Mo' Meta Blues: The World According to Questlove*, and you'll find yourself in the middle of a conversation between the subject of this autobiography, Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson, the drummer with the hip-hop band the Roots, and his amanuensis, Ben Greenman. After labeling the ensuing narrative a "memoir"—"[a] life story, told by the person who lived it"—Ahmir veers off into a lengthy probing of what he calls the music memoir genre:

[A]s a reader of music memoirs, I never begin where I'm told to start. As a rule I find myself starting at chapter 3 or 4, because before that, every music memoir has the same shape. It starts off with a simple statement about childhood: "I was born in this city, in this year. My dad did this." But I don't want to start that way. I can't start that way. I won't. Then, after that, there's a predictable move. The main character discovers music. Dude's walking past a window and hears a symphony that turns his head, or he's at a favorite uncle's house and someone puts Louis Armstrong's *Hot Fives and Sevens* on the record player and, just like that, *bam*, it's like he's been struck by lightning. His life is changed forever. That's an exciting moment, but it's also predictable and oversimplified, for sure. (Thompson and Greenman 1–2)

This passage identifies many staples of music memoirs, or musical autobiographies, as we will call them in this issue of *Popular Music and Society*. It does so by training a metareferential gaze on a particular subgenre of autobiography: a subgenre that has long been commercially successful, has actually been more diverse than Ahmir lets on, and has rarely been studied in any more than a cursory way. We picked this passage as our opening because it announces what may be taken as a *metareferential turn* (a term we borrow from Werner Wolf) in the history of autobiographical life writings of musicians: a turn in which these writings are becoming increasingly aware of their own generic conventions, traditions, and topoi; a turn which might at least be partly induced by both an ever-growing corpus of musical autobiographies and a broad public discourse about both their entertainment value and their cultural relevance.¹

Of course, autobiographies by musicians have been around at least since the beginnings of a professional music industry that uses modern marketing techniques in order to promote music through the persona of the musician. Think of publications such as Paul Whiteman's *Jazz*, Rudy Vallee's *Vagabond Dreams Come*

True, Louis Armstrong's *Swing That Music* and *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*, Benny Goodman's *Kingdom of Swing*, Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory*, or Billie Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues*, not to speak of classical composers like Hector Berlioz (*Mémoires de Hector Berlioz*) or Richard Wagner (*Mein Leben*), who put authorized versions of their life stories into print in the second half of the 19th century. Today, however, there hardly seems to be any popular (and sometimes not so popular) singer or musician who has not published an autobiography, and so assembling a comprehensive overview of this booming field of literary production would go beyond the limitations of an introduction such as this one. The Wikipedia site for "music autobiographies" lists as many as 101 texts, and that is not even close to what is actually out there (we have counted roughly 100 jazz autobiographies alone). In addition, lists provided by online sites like Consequence of Sound that identify the ostensibly best music autobiographies can only begin the task of mapping this extensive corpus; they also tend to be more or less idiosyncratic. The Consequence of Sound site selected, in ascending order, Morrissey's *Autobiography*, Henry Rollins's *Get in the Van*, Questlove's *Mo' Meta Blues*, Charles Mingus's *Beneath the Underdog*, Bob Dylan's *Chronicles: Volume One*, Mötley Crüe's *The Dirt*, Neil Young's *Waging Heavy Peace*, Johnny Cash's *Cash*, Patti Smith's *Just Kids*, and Miles Davis's *Miles* as the Top 10 musical autobiographies—by no means a flawed list, but still one from which significant works such as Jelly Roll Morton's *Mister Jelly Roll*, Mezz Mezzrow's *Really the Blues*, Loretta Lynn's *Coal Miner's Daughter*, Snoop Dogg's *Tha Doggfather*, Marilyn Manson's *The Long Hard Road Out of Hell*, Keith Richards's *Life*, and many others are conspicuously absent.

In light of their number, diversity, and longevity, it is surprising that little sustained scholarship of musical autobiographies exists. The life writings of musicians remain largely untapped by critics working in fields whose research objectives would seem to include an interest in musical autobiography: autobiography studies, intermedia studies/word and music studies, musicology and music history, popular music studies, and cultural history.² We can only speculate about the reasons for this critical neglect. Musical autobiographies tend to be grouped under the rubric of star/celebrity autobiography, a rubric that evokes simplistic assumptions of shallow mass entertainment and a lack of literary value, which, in turn, seems reason enough not to take these writings into scholarly consideration. What is more, the majority of musical autobiographies are produced through processes of collaboration that range from an "as told to" format to shared writing credits between musician and amanuensis to cases of ghostwriting. This, then, is often seen as a problem by scholars who, despite the turn in autobiography studies toward performative analysis of life narrative across media, seem to regard co-authored works as somewhat inauthentic and as a threat to autobiography's investment in truthfulness (also in the sense of Philippe Lejeune's notion of the autobiographical pact).

We obviously do not wish to suggest that autobiographies of musicians are necessarily "literary" (however defined) or that they would grant any "true" access to the musician's thoughts, sentiments, and memories. Rather, we (and the contributors

to this special issue) are interested in the production of popular personae through autobiographical narrative, in the kinds of interventions musical autobiographies launch into ongoing discourses about the musician and his/her music, and in the many interfaces between written autobiographical narrative and different musical and visual modes of self-performance.³

We cannot offer a fully fledged theory of musical autobiography here but instead wish to formulate some crucial assumptions that frame the essays collected in the following pages. First, we believe that it makes sense to understand autobiography as a particular mode of life narrative and musical autobiography as a particular realization of this mode, perhaps even a genre.⁴ The opening of Questlove's *Mo' Meta Blues* suggests exactly this, urging us to read musical autobiography as a body of texts that share certain narrative tropes and perspectives despite the diversity that results when musicians narrate their life stories across time, genres, and media. Second, we want to retain the term autobiography instead of the more open concept of life narrative precisely because it is the Western enlightenment notion of the autonomous individual and the self-determined subject that continues to serve as a much-desired signifier of high cultural legitimacy, notably in works such as Morrissey's programmatically titled *Autobiography* (published to great public acclaim by the Penguin Classics imprint). In other words, it is a sense of autonomy and respectability that many musician-writers seek to attain when they turn to autobiographical writing (even if its production and dissemination are the result of an intricate interplay of a number of different actors involved), indicating that they have a life worth telling and a concomitant desire to set the record straight (presenting the man or woman behind the music; telling the true story behind the popular façade). However, the fact that many musical autobiographies are collaboratively written and tell stories about careers that have depended substantially on the forging of interpersonal connections and the creation of musical communities complicates any account of personal autonomy and individual genius. Third, we have consciously chosen the term musical autobiography over other possible labels (such as musician's autobiography; musician's memoir) in order to propose a focus on intermedial interfaces between written text and the autobiographer's musical oeuvre and suggest that many (but certainly not all) autobiographies by musicians strain to communicate a particular, often heightened, sense of musicality in writing. The dialogic nature of *Mo' Meta Blues* is one example of such heightened musicality; discussions and email correspondence with Questlove's amanuensis as well as recurring playlists, in which the autobiographical narrator connects his favorite recordings with recollections about his own life, rework the verbal aesthetics of hip hop into autobiographical form; occasional footnotes, which sometimes question the narrative of the text proper, detailed descriptions of musical performances, and a generous sampling of personal photographs (which constitute the kind of paratextual communication that Matthew Sutton theorizes in his contribution to this issue and that Nassim Balestrini analyzes in connection with the visual aesthetics of hip-hop autobiographies) further underscore this effect. Fourth, the term musical autobiography—as opposed to

possible alternatives such as music autobiography or musician's autobiography—allows for an inclusion of narratives that are not confined to prose narratives printed in a bound book. Indeed, musical autobiographies frequently incorporate (or are constituted by) a range of different media and genres. Filipino-American rapper Bambu, for instance, constructs his autobiographical persona through song lyrics, as Roderick N. Labrador illustrates in his article; singer and guitarist Jack White develops such a persona through the transmedia creation of a fictional autobiography in music, videos, live performance, and interviews that Kimberly Mack analyzes in her contribution.

By definition, then, musical autobiographies cross medial and generic boundaries. They conjure up and intervene in a network of sounds, images, and verbal narratives already circulating around the figure of the popular musician. To compose a musical autobiography means to tell a life that has already been told—in interviews, but also by journalists and (in some cases) biographers as well as in the constructions of a musician's public image (cover artwork, booklets, posters, ads, video clips, online promotion, live performances). It means to enter into a space that can be theorized as “autobiographics” (a term we borrow from Leigh Gilmore): a space where a musician's autobiography is always contested and always in flux, always in need of being performed by those who seek investment in the popular persona.⁵ Frequently, autobiographers challenge previous versions of their life story in journalism and biography. Louis Armstrong is a particularly interesting case in this regard, as is blues composer W. C. Handy, who, as Mario Dunkel shows in his article, contested both the mainstream conception of jazz as proposed by bandleader Paul Whiteman throughout the 1920s and his editor Abbe Niles's occasionally patronizing views of Handy's life and music (a contestation that eventually led to Handy's autobiography *Father of the Blues*, edited by Arna Bontemps). What is more, as Jeremy Thackray's account of writing his biography *Nirvana: The True Story* (under the *nom de plume* Everett True) in this issue indicates, the line between the journalist's role as a subjective participant observer and a musician's autobiographical agency is a very tenuous one indeed.

If musical autobiographies are intermedial, they are also relational (a concept we take from Paul John Eakin). They relate the life story of the narrating musician to a whole network of people and institutions that have supported and promoted the writer in his/her musical and literary endeavors (and often continue to do so, as many musical autobiographies are written in mid-career), but also to the musician's music and its different forms of delivery, from sound recording to video clip to interviews and magazine coverage to live performance. Think of cases in which several band members write accounts of their lives and compete with each other over which account may be considered the most truthful—Ozzy Osbourne's *I Am Ozzy* and Toni Iommi's *Iron Man* (Black Sabbath) come to mind, as do Fieldy's *Got the Life* and Brian “Head” Welch's *Save Me From Myself* (Korn) or Bill Wyman's *Stone Alone* and Keith Richards's *Life* (Rolling Stones). We have already mentioned Mario Dunkel's analysis of the relational dimensions of W. C. Handy's efforts to transform his life story into print, and we find a similar dynamic in Paul Devlin's assessment of jazz autobiography in American Cold

War culture. As Devlin argues, jazz musicians and promoters like Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Teddy Wilson, George Wein, and Hampton Hawes transmuted their dissatisfactions with American foreign policy into narratives of close personal encounters and friendships beyond the overtly political sphere. Finally, Oliver Lovesey's reading of Beatles manager Brian Epstein's *A Cellarful of Noise* emphasizes the relational dimensions involved in the life of a homosexual male in a culture—postwar Britain—where homosexuality was outlawed and socially condemned.

Obviously, this special issue cannot offer comprehensive coverage of musical autobiography. We realize that the articles collected here focus largely on American musical autobiographies (the exceptions being Sutton's article on paratexts in musical autobiographies and Lovesey's piece on Epstein). This focus is not meant to suggest that musical autobiography is an exclusively American or Anglo-American phenomenon. Musical autobiographies have been and continue to be published across the globe. Yet we do think that American and British music occupies a particularly prominent place in 20th- and 21st-century musical culture (at least in the West) and that it makes sense to limit the area of inquiry (at least for this publication) to autobiographies produced by American and British authors. We do, however, hope that the work on musical autobiography presented here will serve as discussion starter for further research and analysis.

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Notes

- [1] This is not to say that self-reflexive musical autobiographies are a phenomenon of the present; Artie Shaw's *The Trouble with Cinderella* and Charles Mingus's *Beneath the Underdog* are two examples of self-reflexive autobiography from the early 1950s and early 1970s, respectively.
- [2] Scholarship on musical autobiographies includes (but is not limited to) Farrington, "Narrating the Jazz Life"; Fox, "Recycled 'Trash'"; Harlos, "Jazz Autobiography"; Stein, *Music Is My Life*; Stein, "Performance." In Smith and Watson's *Reading Autobiography*, musical autobiographies play almost no role despite the fact that the authors speak of "a veritable barrage of narratives [published in 2007] by musicians whose fame was earned in the 1960s and 1970s" (162). Smith and Watson mention Bob Dylan's *Chronicles* as a representative of a "contemporary commodification of culture" and a "growth industry in self-advertisement" in which many musical autobiographies "satisfy readerly desires for gossip and vicarious immersion in a fantasy world of drugs, sex, and rock and roll" and "are written only to capitalize on fleeting fame and possibly rejuvenate it" (163). As the articles assembled in this issue indicate, there is much more to be said about musical autobiographies both in terms of their formal aesthetics and their agency in contemporary media and musical cultures and in the historiography of musical genres.

- [3] For a performative approach to autobiography, see Smith, “Performativity”; Stein, “Performance.”
- [4] On autobiography, life writing, and life narrative, see Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*.
- [5] See Gilmore, *Autobiographics*. For an application to musical autobiography, see Stein, *Music Is My Life*.

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