



I'll Take You There: Pop Music and the Urge for Transcendence

Bill Friskics-Warren

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The urge to connect with that which transcends our experience, be it a higher power, another person or some artistic ideal or aspect of nature, is one of the things that makes us human. People view the object of this quest, as well as what it means to achieve it, differently. Yet regardless of how it is understood, the urge to participate in or belong to something greater and more lasting than ourselves—a feeling born of an awareness of our mortality—is what defines us as spiritual beings.

Though often dismissed as ephemeral or, worse, demonic, popular music has given voice to this quest for transcendence since its beginnings. Pop singers are rarely as outwardly spiritual as, say, their gospel counterparts; they're forever pointing beyond themselves, though, be it to some better future, some higher ideal, or to some vision of deliverance. Fontella Bass's "Rescue Me," the Four Tops's "Reach Out (I'll Be There)," Jimmy Cliff's "Many Rivers to Cross," Afrika Bambaataa's "Looking for the Perfect Beat," and U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" are but a handful of popular recordings from the past few decades that express a longing for something more. What, other than transcendence, is Jimi Hendrix talking about in "Purple Haze" when he shouts, "scuse me, while I kiss the sky"? Or Van Morrison, in "Caravan," when he implores us to crank our radios and sail away with him into the mystic? Heard in the right light, secular and even carnal records have the power to speak to transcendental concerns, galvanizing their historical and cultural moments.

Regardless of their spiritual leanings, all of the subjects discussed in this book (including Public Enemy, Madonna, Sleater-Kinney, Tricky, Johnny Cash, Nine Inch Nails, Moby, Marvin Gaye, Eminem, Polly Harvey, Bruce Springsteen and Sly & the Family Stone) make music that expresses a basic striving for transcendence. Artists' stories and personalities inform these discussions, but only in as much as they illuminate the struggles and concerns that run through their music. *I'll Take You There* is a beautifully written, wide-ranging and illuminating examination of some of the most potent popular music ever recorded.

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