The Song is You

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The Song is You

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Review by Jeffrey Barlow

This work was chosen for review in Interface because of what it suggests about the evolving impact of the Internet, but also for what it tells us about Amazon.com’s new reading appliance, the Kindle. For the latter purpose, see the editorial in this issue. [1]

Arthur Phillips might be termed a noted second-tier author. He has won a number of awards, and his works have all been well reviewed, but his name is certainly far from a household word. His fourth and most recent work The Song Is You, has had excellent reviews. [2] His work is highly varied, including an angst-ridden story of expatriates living in Budapest (Prague, 2002); a mystery, The Egyptologist (2004); and a sort of ghostly story, Angelica (2007), which has multiple Victorian narrators, none of whom see entirely tethered to reality; and now, The Song Is You.

His works have in common the author’s and his protagonists’ shifting voices. He attracts attention of the literary sort and can be said to be a craftsman who creates jewel-like story lines and character studies, all set in lapidary prose. Plot does not seem to be, in The Song is You, at least, a particularly important issue. [3] The work is less the creation and unwinding of dramatic tension than it is a novel of manners, oddly Victorian for all its pop-culture trappings.

For us, the story is about the transformation reality undergoes when it is recorded — in this case, digitized. The novel is about people who live in music. Julian, the protagonist, is a highly successful director of meaningless advertising commercials. His life is held within his iPod, which holds every song he has ever owned.

Julian’s father was obsessed with a Billie Holiday concert which he attended. As it was recorded live, a brief performer-to-audience shtick of Billie’s included the father’s voice. Thus the album, which became increasingly rare and difficult to locate, became a life-long preoccupation for Julian’s father. As a young man, Julian destroyed his father’s only remaining copy, and then in turn Julian becomes obsessed with a much younger female singer.

Julian consciously recognizes this obsession as not dissimilar from his father’s prior one and...
strives to mitigate it by deliberately avoiding an actual meeting with the subject of his attention, Cait. Cait is an up-and-coming Celtic singer crossing over from folk into highly successful and deeply emotive pop.

The novel then unfolds as an omniscient narrator describes Cait and Julian circling around each other, communicating through music, and then via the Internet. Julian, as a director, has ideas as to how her career should be developed and leaves her clues, first on paper, then in email, of responses to her music; she responds by writing songs to him.

Julian is able to “stalk” Cait via the Internet, and simultaneously to keep her at a safely digitized length. Julian clearly has issues with real people, including Rachel, the wife from whom he is separated. She would like to see their relationship work out, providing that they can deal with the emotional tangles caused by the earlier death of Carlton, their infant son.

Cait, too, has her issues with people as to her they are quickly becoming less individuals than tools with which to advance her career. She is becoming lost in her own music. For Cait, Julian is perfect: a seemingly omniscient observer who sends her critical suggestions that contribute to her career.

The novel began, Phillips tells us, in his own experience listening to music. [4] For us, the music is a metaphor for alienation, and we do not see it as a coincidence that Julian’s favorite way of listening to it is to put his iPod—“the greatest of all human inventions” [5] — on shuffle. It then plays at random one of the thousands of pieces he has loaded into it. These usually ignite some fragment of meaning in his mind, perhaps a memory of previous hearings of the piece, perhaps some relationship between the song and current feelings or events. [6]

Some songs appearing at random, Julian believes, even influence events. [7] He has brief and meaningless sexual encounters as a result of some musical reference—other times he resists seduction because of the “mix” which the seductress has tried to use to catch his attention. [8]

Julian, like his father, is the ultimate audience—he exists only as listener. For Cait, the audience is, in turn, the only reality. Yet like singer and audience, it is ultimately the media and the iPod which eternally separate them.

The Internet can, of course, also be interpreted as a metaphor for isolation and alienation. Cait and Julian communicate, at first anonymously, then with familiar email names, but never as individuals. He tracks her via celebrity blogs, with which she meanwhile has her own strange interactions. She is herself most real as her own audience.

It is impossible to reveal more of the plot without spoiling it, but the work is one vast metaphor for the gap between event and playback, whether in memory or on recording. This is a subset of one of the critical tropes dealing with the Internet—that it too often substitutes virtual relationships for real ones.
Here I will indulge myself by quoting a stanza from one of my own favorite singers, John Fogarty. I am sure Julian would approve of both the affectation and the sentiments, though he surely would sneer politely at my questionable taste:

*Nobody here anymore
Nobody mindin’ the store
They’ve all gone
To another dimension
Nobody here anymore* [9]

This work, set in real time, that is in 2009, presents us with a very mature analysis of the Internet and of digitization in general. This digital world is no longer, at least in Arthur Philips’ mind, a looming horror of the gothic sort. It simply now is part of our cultural framework. However, it does have its costs, and we do well, like Phillips, to reflect upon them.

**Endnotes**


[3] I have not read his other works and am dependent on reviews referenced above for descriptions of them.

[4] See [http://www.arthurphillips.info/The-Song-Is-You/History.html](http://www.arthurphillips.info/The-Song-Is-You/History.html) The author has also been a jazz musician, and the novel is full of jazz references which probably are important signifiers, but they escape me.

[5] Location 184.—for the uninitiated this is a reference to the location of the citation on the Kindle version of the text.

[6] The search function on my Kindle tells me that there are 52 references to “iPod” in the novel, whereas to Carlton, Julian’s dead son, there are 60. His dead son is very important to Julian, but only marginally more so than his iPod.


[8] Location 1398-1401


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It’s appropriate time to make some plans for the future and it is time to be happy.
I have read this post and if I could I want to suggest you few interesting things or suggestions.

Maybe you can write next articles referring to this article.
I wish to read more things about it!