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Robert Cooperman. *Youth's Joyful Noise*. American Fork, UT: Kelsay Books, 2023. Softcover, 38 pp. ISBN 9781639803521. \$17.00.

ANDREW SMITH

With *Youth's Joyful Noise*, longtime Deadhead poet Robert Cooperman brings readers another gritty and gorgeous collection, an effort that is alternately tender and tenacious, humorous and hopeful, mournful and ecstatic. This volume complements Cooperman's already extensive bibliography with a collection of twenty-six poems, rooted in the author's disciplined talent and the whirling signifiers of an inclusive Grateful Dead subculture. Over the chapbook's thirty-eight pages, Cooperman invites his audience on a personal journey that fuses a storied past with a fraught present, COVID-19 pandemic allusions reminding us from the outset that the "Touch of Grey" refrain of "we will get by" remains a steadfast slogan for life as well as tour, for hard times as well as happy ones.

This is the sixth and, according to its author, final collection of Dead-themed poetry, along with *Not Too Old to Rock and Roll* (2003), *A Tale of the Grateful Dead* (2004), *Saved by the Dead* (2018), *All Our Fare-Thee-Wells* (2020), and the recently completed *Beggar's Tomb*. While Cooperman's stunning collection could be appreciated as the culmination of his decades-long career as a poet and Dead aficionado, when recognized as part of an ever-expansive library of poetry about music, its significance only intensifies. The relationship between poetry and rock and roll boasts a vast and storied lineage, most notably "the poetry of rock" tendency heralded by Dylan, celebrated by fans and critics, and practiced by Dead lyricists Robert Hunter, John Perry Barlow, Robert M. Petersen, and Peter Monk. Thus the center of the Deadhead's poetry canon might be *The Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics*, edited by Alan Trist and David Dodd, a robust text that fuses lyrics and poetry but does so in such a way as to validate their status as overlapping and interlocking genres.

That view is as old as rock music, as David Morse's *Grandfather Rock: The New Poetry and the Old* (1972) and Joseph Bruchac's *The Poetry of Pop* (1973) argued a half-century ago. The discussion continues to evolve, however, as the groundbreaking new book *Poetic Song Verse: Blues-Based Popular Music and Poetry* by Mike Mattison and Ernest Suarez demonstrates, a welcome intervention that helps scholars, musicians, and fans understand how the stories of the lyrics printed on a page are more fully embodied when performed in their complete context, the song. But rock poetry is also much more than simply lyric or lieder: the overlapping and invigorating evidence of "poetry about rock" serves as a reminder that the communal poetics of the totalizing rock experience extend far beyond the boundaries of stars and stages. Recent anthologies such as the Dead-specific *Poetry is Dead: An Inclusive Anthology of Deadhead Poetry*, edited by P. W. Covington, and the geographically-grounded *RESPECT: The Poetry of Detroit Music*, edited by Jim Daniels and M. L. Liebler, both make that point, cataloging an effervescent and eclectic array of scribes in seats who channel the muse in poems that capture the experience of the music from the audience's perspective.

Although the settings of Cooperman's poems are as timeless as time-bound, several pieces sing to our troubled moment, hinting at the politics, tragedies, and quarantines of America during the past few years. Others look back longingly at the genesis of the author's identity in rock's most notorious hippy community. The signs of that appear throughout the book. Deadheads take their iconography quite seriously and wear their fandom proudly, deploying cultural signifiers and delighting in communal codes as veiled and valid as any secret handshake. Whether sporting a Steallie tailored to one's specific geography or the ever-glorious Skull-and-Roses updated to a new t-shirt design, Deadheads know fellow fans by their icons. So it is not the least surprising to read not one but three consecutive poems about Cooperman's socks with dancing bears. In one, the bears act as a shield and companion during serious grief, becoming a tribute to the author's uncle whose passing spins stories from memory "like circus bears." Later, the bears become "talismans" and "amulets" as the author chants the refrain of "Touch of Grey" again, as a prayer for protection intoned en route to a medical appointment. Whether in moments of

mourning or in spaces for healing, icons—like lyrics—serve as supplications of the dedicated and psalms of the poet.

When the weight of the pandemic years becomes too tragic or just too much, Cooperman excuses himself from the present day to deploy a long strange time-machine trip, taking the reader back to the hallowed origins of Dead fandom. One stop is the Fillmore East in 1969; another is dedicated to a single performance of “Dark Star.” In these, the poem itself transports, becoming a time machine and spaceship following the sonic wonders of the Dead concert experience through a “brief cosmic tide,” a journey that just “rumbled and roared” and winds up, ever so tangled, in “a galaxy-soaring guitar.” Like a first-rate concert or album review, this brief, image-dense poem peers from the Big Bang to black holes, and is both specific and cosmic in its understanding of everything that the Grateful Dead are capable of.

Along with “Touch of Grey,” “Dark Star” is a song that shows up in more than one poem, leaving its galactic imprint on the volume as a whole. In a later poem that also stops at the Fillmore East, Cooperman transports us back to the heyday of the East Village, when concert tickets were cheap and the smell of marijuana filled the summer air. Billed as a “fantasy,” this poem fulfills that promise by taking readers through a rock and roll escape hatch to seek out the “folktale of generosity and redemption” that Jerry Garcia stumbled across in a dictionary in 1965, finding a name for the band that also built a communal mythology to provide salve when “the world threatens to crush us now.”

History is both metaphor and motif for Cooperman, and a pair of poems take us to 1995, connecting Garcia’s death with tragedies as monumental as the Holocaust and the anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki. Here Cooperman stakes out a subtle but stirring thesis of his entire collection, and indeed his entire oeuvre, of Dead-inspired and inflected poems. As he deftly makes clear, the band offers lyrics for living and hymns for grieving, song-poems that serve as prayers for celebration at every interval of this human existence, both the tragic and ecstatic. The “dead” themselves, writ large, walk these pages.

If this is Cooperman’s last elegy to the Dead, it makes a thought-provoking and powerful close to the most sustained and accomplished

contribution to Deadhead poetry to date. As scholars increasingly recognize the ways that the Dead influenced and inspired other artists, Cooperman's work will command attention and repay analysis. Those critics will join other readers in appreciating a fine poet and a luminous body of work whose debt to the Dead challenges, inveigles, and invites reflection. In *Youth's Joyful Noise*, we know that the words did glow.

ANDREW SMITH is Senior Instructor in English at Tennessee Tech University. He is a publisher, poet, ex-preacher, blogger, and deejay whose recent poetry collections include *Don't Touch Your Face: Poems From a Pandemic* (2021) and *Cardboard Amphibian: Selected and New Poems, 1987–2022* (2023).