

Print Run

New music books and publications

A Is For Anarchist: An ABC Book For Activists
Billy Woods & M Musgrove
Universe Hbk 48 pp

If you approached the average Billy Woods fan and told them that the New York rapper had written a book, I doubt there would be much surprise. The depth and expanse of Woods's lyricism suggests that he has got at least one book in him. Instead, the surprise might come from the fact that he decided to write a children's book. In 2022, I reviewed UK hip-hop artist Lee Scott's *Swan Songs* (*The Wire* 456), in which I labelled him as the first rapper to debut with a fiction novel. Well, this time round, I think I'm right in saying that Billy Woods is the first rapper to debut with a children's book.

As surprises go, this one makes a lot more sense when you get to grips with the book itself. The son of a Zimbabwean revolutionary and a Jamaican intellectual, Woods wanted to write something cool to read to his children, and what could be cooler than a comically cynical and subversive take on the more conventional ABC format? It's a method that manages to repackage the same energy that populates Woods's music onto a platform for a less mature audience, but without any hint of condescension.

From the outset, *A Is For Anarchist* conveys what are still considered radical notions (but shouldn't be), in a much more digestible form for younger readers. The titular anarchist is described as someone who doesn't like rules, or being told what to do, before pointing out that you, the reader, are already an anarchist. Match this up with M Musgrove's illustration of a monarch's legs poking out of a bonfire and you have the recipe for a delightfully entertaining book that should bring as much joy to any adult playing the role of narrator, as it will to the children themselves.

M Musgrove is the perfect partner for Woods on this adventure, having previously collaborated with him on various projects, including an award-winning music video for "Stonefruit" by Armand Hammer and The Alchemist, and some artwork for Woods's solo album *Hiding Places*. Her illustrations are easily adjustable to the needs of this literary world, their whimsical nature making them the perfect counterpart to the definitions put forward in Woods's prose. Two parts amusement to one part abstraction, Musgrove's drawings further capture the reader's fascination.

If a lot of the letters in *A Is For Anarchist* follow along the same direct lines as the title – C is for communism, F is for fascism, and so on – there are also more subtle moments. W explains that walls are all around us, then asks if they are made "to keep people out or to trap us inside"; and elsewhere K defines knees as things that help us run, jump or stand up, for

example if you need to stand up to a racist police state. Rap music gets a mention too, thanks to I, standing for Nas's *Illmatic*, aka "the best rap album of all time".

All in all, I couldn't think of a better plan and execution for a contemporary children's book. It is certainly the kind of book I wish I had been exposed to as a child, and it will be one I share with my own son in a few years' time.

Tim Fish

A Licence To Rock And Pop: An Inventory Of Attitude

James Fry
Slimvolume Pbk 272 pp

This step by step guide to how to be a rock 'n' roll cliché is not so much a manifesto as a child's first primer, offering illustrated chapters including "How To Swear", "Do You Like My New Hair?" and "Yes, Smoking". At the back of the book is an exhaustive 18 page form, featuring knowingly invasive questions on the reader's recent experience of sex, witchcraft and terrorism. Submitting this to the publisher will result in the licence of the title being issued or withheld.

The body of the book is self-consciously modelled after Marshall McLuhan's mosaic books (most obviously, *The Medium Is The Message*) and tonal tactics follow the textual. McLuhan promoted amusement over anger, escapism via alienation. Which is presumably why every point here feels so blanketed in irony that it's hard to know if Fry cares, or indeed whether we're supposed to. But, where McLuhan's illuminated texts are designed to be opened at random and microdosed, Fry explicitly demands we consume all of his in "their natural order". Of course, the meta-game here is surely that no one with any attitude would follow such instructions – any who do will fail the test. A decent joke, if so.

After laying the book down, I've found I do care. I ask myself why the advice – however tongue in cheek – seems to belong to another pre-internet world. I've wondered how iconic images of old school rock attitude have informed BIMM seminars on Stadium Stage Presence or the hyper-styling of state-sponsored K-Pop. I've tried to imagine whether there's an audience for such widescreen postures, when even *The X-Factor* (built around 'star quality') lies in pixelated ruins.

The fact is, today's Alexanders, Alexandras (and maybe even Alexas, if we're dragging vocaloids into it) weep because they have no more mainstream to conquer. A shared, top-down culture didn't entirely capsize so much as list sideways – pluggers and chroniclers alike eclipsed by algorithms endlessly injecting eerily accurate playlists (new and old) into our taste bubbles.

And, in a multi-dimensional world – where a Schrödinger's cam model can be both famous and utterly obscure at once – the kind of bombast perfected for big stages is pure

cultural cringe. Today's exciting technologies – from generative software to prescription meds to queer theory – swerve aspirations to imperial fame precisely because the centre didn't hold. Likewise, all listeners and fans are floaters, without the sunk-cost loyalty of album ownership.

It takes an industry to raise a star, and music – out-competed by gaming – is ever more DIY. Seizing the means of (micro) production has helped many musicians, though being their own manager, PR, (bedroom) producer, etc, also diffuses their identity, making most of them (rightly!) more spectral than spectacular. And, in creating inner spaces where fans become patrons, where feedback becomes synthesis, artists turn thrillingly inside out – streaming knowledge via 'making of' documents, giving lessons, listening back. Fantastical memes cum biomes result.

Ultimately, micro-expressions mix better than propagandist posturing. Attitude was always armour; intimacy is where things really happen. If there's hope for rock and pop, it's in the wormholes – where light from dead stars is not required.

Neil Noon

Going Out: Walking, Listening, Soundmaking Elena Biserna (Editor)

Q-02 Pbk 580 pp

At 11am on Saturday 16 May 1970, The Scratch Orchestra disrupted Richmond High Street in West London. Following scores composed by members Judith Euren and Psi Ellison, the group set out to break the "claustrophobic spell of capitalist normalcy". To that end, a diverse array of tactics were employed. "Either shout or whisper in conversation", ran one set of instructions. "As a group stand and stare in a shop window – humm automatically."

At one point, the group held hands in a long chain across the length of a shop floor in order to "sever Marks And Spencer's". A balloon popping in the middle of another department store succeeded in producing "imbalance" in a branch of Dickins & Jones. It was, in orchestra member Stefan Szczelkun's recollection, "quite harmless but unbelievably dramatic in its effect". The group made a quick exit, heading up the Vineyard Passage and on, following an itinerary which took this movable concert from Richmond Park to Kew Gardens via the River Thames.

Walking, by May 1970, was already a fairly established part of artistic practice. In 1921, André Breton had led a Dada Excursion through the Latin Quarter of Paris, offering nonsense commentary along the way in a parody of the city tourist guide. In the early 1960s, Fluxus artists Benjamin Patterson, Yoko Ono and Dick Higgins had all composed instructional pieces for walkers, albeit not always strictly practical or even possible. Later in the decade, land artist Richard Long had trampled a straight line through a meadow,

Two new histories
a movement that
Four' composers
By Louise Gray

On Minimalism: Document
Kerry O'Brien & William F.
University Of California Press P
The Names Of Minimalism
Historiography In Dispute
Patrick Nickleson
University Of Michigan Press H

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