

A Tattered Canadian Hero

Two more books that try to illuminate “the godfather of grunge.”

MARK DAVID DUNN

Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy

William Echard

Indiana University Press

260 pages, softcover

ISBN 0253217687

Neil Young Nation:

A Quest, an Obsession (and a True Story)

Kevin Chong

Greystone Books

286 pages, softcover

ISBN 1553651162

A heckler once called out during a Neil Young and Crazy Horse concert that all the songs sounded the same. Without hesitation, as if he had given the matter a great deal of thought during his decades in the spotlight, Young answered, “It’s all one song.” The exchange, a joust that many rock stars might have edited out of a live recording, can be heard on the double album *Year of the Horse*, which documents the legendary band’s 1996 North American tour.

It is a criticism heard often of Young’s music, one meant to draw attention to his limited musicianship. But Young wears his limitations proudly, and pushes himself and his fans into strange, uncomfortable territory with each project. A folk-rock icon who has experimented with techno, rockabilly, and rhythm and blues, Young is both an introspective singer of ballads and, as he came to be known during his comeback of the 1990s, the godfather of grunge.

Contradictory and iconoclastic, a star who shuns stardom, Young has made a career out of defying expectations. A spurt of bewilderingly experimental albums for Geffen Records in the 1980s resulted in the singer being sued for making intentionally non-commercial music. Young responded by changing labels, returning to Reprise, where his career began and continues, and by releasing “This Note’s for You,” a brutal attack on celebrity product endorsement. The song’s video, which featured a Michael Jackson look-alike exploding into flames while filming a

Pepsi commercial, was banned by MTV, but went on to win MTV’s Best Video Award the following year. Asked about the video and its unflattering portrayal of his fellow rock stars, Young said, “They all deserved it. Every one of them had it coming to them.” In the same television interview, still on the topic of celebrity endorsements, Young suggested that breweries and tobacco companies should sponsor hospitals in which, “doctors could wear little Molson logos on their uniforms.”



It is his uncompromising vision that keeps Young’s fan base strong, despite some dismal and embarrassing albums. His record sales vary. The most recent, the perplexing yet beguiling *Greendale* (2003), a film, play, book and collectible toy train set, has sold just over 200,000 copies in album form. In addition, after all these years in the mediated psyche, Young has had only one top-ten hit, 1972’s “Heart of Gold.” Yet he remains one of the most consistently successful touring artists and a pet target for rock and roll scribes.

The one-long-song approach seems to be working.

Neil’s father, the late Scott Young, was an early biographer; readers may remember old Neiler as the hero of many of the elder Young’s newspaper columns. With the publication of *Neil and Me*

(McClelland and Stewart) in 1984, Scott Young established a new subgenre in popular music literature: the Neil Young book. More than a dozen books have followed. And yet *Neil and Me* wasn’t even the first book about Neil. Way back in 1971, poet Tom Clark published *Neil Young* (Coach House Press), a collection of short dialogues with Young’s lyrics. The tradition continues this fall as two distinct Neil books wedge their way onto a crowded shelf.

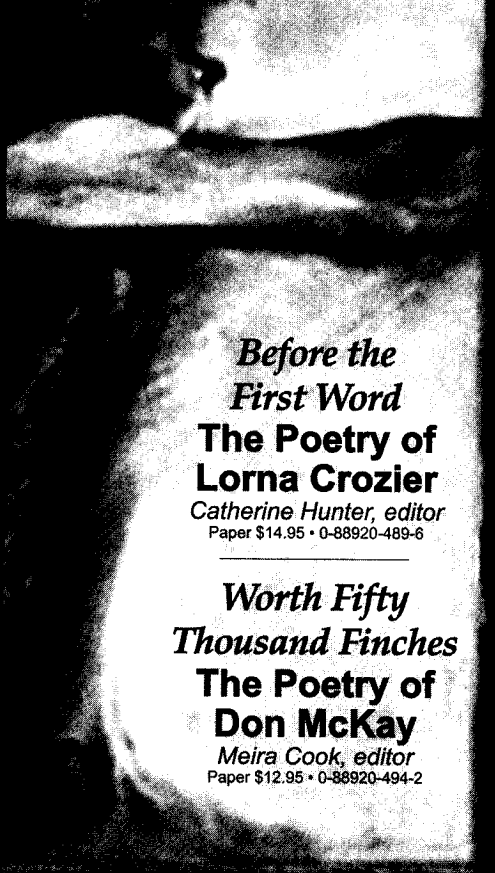
William Echard’s *Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy* is an attempt—perhaps the first—at a scholarly reading of Young’s music. It’s hard to imagine Young—a high school dropout who throughout his career has privileged intuition over intellect, the gut over the brain—as the subject of a PhD dissertation. (Mind you, Young did receive an honorary doctorate from Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, so perhaps it is not so strange after all.) The thought of an academic interpretation of Young’s music brings to mind Eli Mandel’s critique of the scholarly compartmentalization of a phenomenon he called, in *Criticism: The Silent-Speaking Words*, “the ferociousness of the intellect turned loose on the beasts of the field.” Those familiar with Young’s music might hear the lonely line from “Ambulance Blues,” Young’s 1974 requiem for the Yorkville scene: “You’re all just pissing in the wind. You don’t know it but you are.”

The publishers seem to be aware of the contraposition of subject and form, and have played it for all it is worth. The front cover features the most audacious photo of the singer one could imagine. It is a concert shot in which it appears that Young, crouching in a red plaid shirt with the sleeves torn off, his gaping mouth revealing a row of oversized choppers, is about to bite his electric guitar in two. *Excuse me, Dean, who let this man into the dining hall?*

Echard is aware of the hazards he faces with such a project and offers the best criticism of his book. “It is inevitable,” he writes in the introduction, “that parts of the work will be too academic for some fans and other parts too casual for some academics.” Echard identifies himself as both fan and scholar, and chooses to inhabit an intermediate space that allows for both identities. One of the problems with *Neil Young and the Poetics of*

Mark David Dunn, a poet and essayist, likes to hang out at the Farmer’s Market in Sault Ste. Marie.

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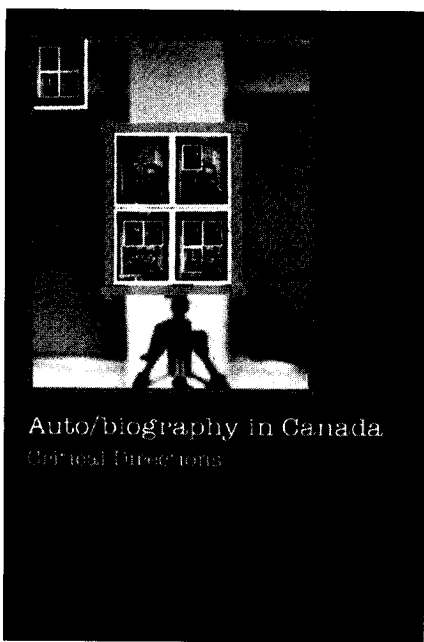


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Energy is that this space, in which both fan and scholar might coexist, is also an unwelcoming space that leaves both fan and scholar wanting.

It would be interesting indeed to know what Young would make of this passage:

When we speak of Neil Young mobilizing signifiers of particular traditions, we may be speaking of stylistic or generic codes on a variety of levels—musical, lyrical, behavioral, ideological etc.—and we emphasize that he not only signifies a tradition in this way but he brings himself into some kind of active relationship with it.

Truly, “an ambulance can only drive so fast.”

That Echard is a Neil Young fan and a formidable scholar is clear. He displays an exhaustive understanding of Young’s musical techniques and delves into a protracted discussion of the modal and melodic “cellular structures” of the songs themselves. Echard also gives his readers a lesson in reception theory by examining how listeners respond to Neil Young’s music and to music in a broader sense. And, as a good scholar, Echard goes to great lengths to define his terms—“centripetally” and “centrifugally”—even when that term is rock. On Young’s famously wild electric guitar style, what Echard calls Young’s “improvisational vocabulary,” he writes,

There is no virtuosic playing in Young’s solos, but a density similar to that created by virtuosic scale or arpeggio passages is produced by stretches of what I call *frenzy*, which combine rapid pick movement with deep vibrato and seemingly random note choices within certain boundaries.

In other words, Young’s playing is wild. “Like a Hurricane” will never sound the same again.

As difficult as *Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy* is, for fan and scholar alike, it is a fascinating and unique reading of Neil Young’s music. Echard is likely a dynamic and popular professor at Carleton University and the academy needs more adventurous scholars like him.

Kevin Chong’s *Neil Young Nation: A Quest, an Obsession (and a True Story)* is a completely different take on the Neil Young phenomenon. The premise is simple. Approaching the big three-oh, novelist Kevin Chong and his three pot-smoking buddies take to the road for one last trip before the responsibilities of middle age make accountants of them. Chong’s mission: to follow the route Neil Young, his one-time hero, took almost four decades previously from Winnipeg to

Toronto, then from Toronto to California, with some modifications made for expediency. Along the way, Chong visits significant Neil Young sites—including Omemee, the “town in North Ontario” where Young spent his boyhood, as well as the Winnipeg high school Young abandoned for a life of rock and roll—and chats with fans and folks who knew Young before the world knew him. The task Chong sets for himself is no less than to find “the meaning of Neil Young.”

Chong’s is a pleasant voice, and just edgy enough to be an interesting travel companion. His whiny complaints (he complains a lot) recreate the experience of a long trip with friends. And to make the trip complete, Chong indulges in detailed and repeated discussion of road food and digestive discomfort.

Neil Young Nation is not so much about Young, although it includes a ton of information culled from the Neil library, as it is about how people relate to the idea of Neil Young. On his journey, Chong meets a group of avid fans known as Rusties. The Rusties are an internet-based community that follows Young on tour and holds an annual convention known as RustFest. Chong finds himself welcomed by the Rusties. “Unlike everyone else in the world,” writes Chong, “Rusties didn’t need me to explain why I wanted to take a hearse to Blind River or L.A. These people understood.”

Young’s unflinching dedication to a personal vision, his determination to make it on his own terms—qualities that are seldom rewarded in the real world—have inspired millions of fans. If we ignore for a moment his immense wealth and fame, Young appears to be quite ordinary. He is only moderately talented and not especially good-looking. One can picture him sitting at a barstool or driving a tractor along a dirt road. In many ways, Young is the average person living large, and the media love to track his movements. Diagnosed with a brain aneurysm earlier this year, Young delayed surgery to record a new album. While touring across North America in a caravan of buses and semis, Young switched to biodiesel fuel. From his work with Farm Aid, to his advocacy for the verbally and physically challenged through the Bridge School, Young is an immovable centre in an unstable world. Integrity amidst corruption is the true mark of the Neil Young brand. As Kevin Chong writes, “in my mind, he’s fifty feet tall and made of gold.” In tracing his hero’s journey across North America, Chong explores his own place in the world and learns that one can grow old without giving up. ☐



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