

developed characters, but the theme song that runs over the opening credits. It's an updated version of Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man," sung by Captain Beefheart. The lyrics are new, but this version is probably more significant for what Beefheart doesn't sing: the title itself. In an environment whose aural motif is the incessant banging of metal against metal at deafening volume, "I'm a man / Spell m-a-n" could never be the boast that Bo Diddley made it. This bludgeoning backbeat doesn't have that resilient sense of after-hours freedom and good humor anyway. It's a lockstep that makes maintaining a sense of humanity all but impossible. And when I heard it, it was like looking down at that gun again, knowing this time that it was only a message from home.

Rolling Stone, 1978

The Lonesome Death of Florence Thompson

When I began working on Fortunate Son, I knew there were two unlikely subjects that I wanted to talk about: Dorothea Lange's photography and the music of the Stanley Brothers, or at least their greatest song, "Rank Strangers." So in a sense, the juxtapositions in this article were foreordained, but it wasn't until Thompson died that it struck me how clearly they fit together.

Sometimes, I wonder whether future critics and historians will look back upon the eighties and wonder why so much agonized, desperate art was created in these times. (Presuming there are still historians and critics—that is, presuming there is still civilization rather than atomic rubble.) But even for those of us who've tried to develop some sense of hope and joy, the sight of so many newly destitute—homeless, shivering, hungry, driven mad by callousness—created an extremely depressing emotional climate. This piece is my gesture at describing the period.

Its sixth paragraph also contains the strongest, or at least the most direct, statement I've ever written about the roots of rock, and the value of them, and the purpose of the whole exercise of writing about it.

Florence Thompson was thirty-two years old in 1936, a widowed mother of six children, living in a migrant farmworkers' camp in San Luis Obispo County, California. The Thompsons lived in a shabby lean-to, not even a tent, from which they ventured to pick peas for wages that added up to less than starvation. They were so poor that they'd sold the tires off their car for food. When the photographer Dorothea Lange, on assignment for the Farm Security Administration, came into the camp, Florence Thompson was feeding her children vegetables that had frozen in the fields and a few birds that the kids had killed themselves.

"I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her," Lange later wrote, "but I do remember she asked me no questions . . . There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it."

The photo that Lange made of Florence Thompson's haunted face, wearing a cloak of weariness and worry that offered no more protection from the camera lens than from the elements, staring with dignity while cuddling children who averted their faces, was entitled "Migrant Mother." Sometimes referred to as "The Madonna of the Depression," it became one of the most powerful and painful symbolic images of its era.

As the epitome of Dorothea Lange's penetrating, humane style, "Migrant Mother" was by far her most famous photo. Yet it tells us nothing like the "truth" of Florence Thompson's life. In the other shots from the series Lange took that night, we see the environment in which it was taken: the pure squalor and filth of the camp, the full shabbiness of the lean-to tent, the utter lack of anything as tidy and green as the camp depicted in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*. (The pictures are reproduced in *Photographs of a Lifetime* [Aperture, 1982], with a loving essay on Lange and her work by Robert Coles.)

That doesn't mean Lange's camera lied. She saw (or used) what was needed to make plain the dignity of the ravaged, not the fact of their misery. It's only today, when the reroutings of American streets and highways have made the poor and their pain invisible to us that the mere facts of the matter have become crucial. The real point is that we know almost nothing about how Florence Thompson felt that evening, or in the months and years afterwards when her face became famous.

We don't really expect to know, which is shameful. I've always felt that one of the secret strengths of rock and roll was that it provided a voice and a face for the forgotten and disenfranchised. In a way, Florence Thompson's serves for all the others. At least in its beginnings, rock was one of the few ways that poor people, country people, black people and

Southerners had of making themselves visible in a country whose media increasingly depict it as solely urban, affluent, white and northern. Rock's threat to spill the beans about such fictions is one reason why it remains so dangerous today in the minds of James Watt, Albert Goldman and their ilk.

Yet you can stare for long into the face of Florence Thompson without encountering a suggestion of the abandon and recklessness that rock expresses. And that doesn't mean that there is no music that tells her story. Although it often seems to think itself British, rock grew from a tradition of American music which had something special to say for "Migrant Mothers" and their kin: bluegrass, gospel music, all sorts of blues. And in these days of renewed Depression, I have found—often to my surprise—that these forms speak as eloquently as rock. As history unravels, this becomes more the case.

So when the news of Florence Thompson's death in early September 1983 came to me, I immediately turned to the music of the Stanley Brothers, to my mind the finest bluegrass singers, and to their greatest song, "Rank Strangers," which seemed to say everything necessary about a life such as Thompson's—about its consequences and the consequences the rest of us pay for not paying more attention. "Rank Strangers" is about the scariest song I know, more chilling than the blues of "Voodoo Chile" or the cold-blooded "Nebraska" or even Dylan's "Percy's Song." It shares with those stark numbers a sense of doom that is not so much immediate as eternal—constant not as a possibility but as a promise.

The Stanleys' songs are filled with death and imprisonment, like the Scotch-Irish ballads from which they derive. But "Rank Strangers" takes what's scary about such tunes into a new dimension, closer to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* than "Matty Groves." Carter Stanley sings in accents so stately that it's hard to believe the song and performance were created after World War II. But the concept—desolation more complete than that surrounding the Thompsons' labor camp—is as contemporary as Belsen, Nagasaki or Palestinian refugee camps.

I wandered again to my home in the mountains
Where in youth's early dawn, I was happy and free
I looked for my friends, but I never could find 'em
I found they were all rank strangers to me

Florence Thompson may not have known those lines, but she surely would have understood each syllable of that song. Until just before her

death, she lived not in luxury but in a trailer park. So does America honor genius and beauty.

Record, 1983

The Electrifying Mojo

Since this column was written, I've heard Mojo wreak radio magic on a much more regular basis, using everything from a hand-out, prerecorded Michael Jackson interview to brilliant segues of tracks as various as Stevie Nicks, the Gang of Four and Afrika Bambaataa and Soulsonic Force. By now there exists in Detroit a sort of Mojo fan club, the Midnight Funk Association, which has more than 60,000 members. Most of them are lucky enough to hear him every night, as I am not, but I try to get friends to send out airchecks every so often. It helps me stay in touch, not only with the best in radio and the best in music but also with the reasons why it's worth bothering.

Slip those cassettes in a portable cassette deck, stick it under your pillow and sweet dreams are guaranteed. At its best, pop radio offers the truest sort of confirmation that our best ideas and instincts are not operating in a vacuum. And Mojo is that best more often than anyone else around at this moment.

I listen to the radio mostly in the summertime, when I'm not home much. The rest of the year I hear radio in snatches, in shops and offices and taxis. But unless I'm in an automobile, I don't pay much attention. Until summer, when it's back behind the wheel, with one hand always on the dial.

At first this return always seems blessed. A few records, compressed as heavily as they are, make more sense over the air than they do on the turntable or tape deck. Even suffering from Loverboy to Kajagoogoo, while punching buttons looking for something decent, has its virtues. The suf-