

“Ode to Billie Joe”—Bobbie Gentry (1967)

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Essay by Steacy Easton (guest post)*



Bobbie Gentry

“Ode to Billie Joe” by Bobbie Gentry was a surprising hit in the summer of 1967--charting on the R&B, Adult Contemporary, and Country charts--beating out the Beatles, a rare accomplishment, especially for someone who was relatively green, and from the Mississippi Delta. Since then, it has been covered by everyone from the Supremes to Sinéad O’Connor. It has become so much a part of the American imagination that it even inspired a movie almost a full decade after its release.

The song rests on a mystery, and it is less interesting when critics try to solve it. It’s a Southern Gothic tale, one which features popular neighborhood boys jumping off of bridges, overheard half-whispered conversations in churchyards at night, a father getting sick from a mysterious virus, the purchasing of some real estate with ambivalent capital, and, most importantly, mysterious objects being thrown from trellises.

The questions are obvious--what was the bag that went over the bridge, why did Billie Joe McAllister jump off the Tallahatchie Bridge, did the narrator and Billie Joe love each other, what virus did papa have which caused him to die, where did the money come from for the brother to buy that store front in Tupelo? And: what is the narrator doing up on Choctaw Ridge, where she is picking flowers? Then, there are complications to these questions--somewhere between the questions and answers.

There are people who think that the song, like Parton’s “Down from Dover,” is a dead baby song, that it was a fetus, or a baby, perhaps stillborn, perhaps killed, that was thrown. The narrative here is clearer than--the baby died, and Billie Joe died, and then the narrator spent her life mourning, the Ridge taking the place of the more conventional gothic moors. However, there are other deaths which the narrative does not include, connections which are implied but aren’t considered, exactly.

The song is told via gossip, hearsay. It’s the narrator overhearing, while eating black-eyed peas (literally: “And papa said to mama, as he passed around the black-eyed peas”) and biscuits, a set of activities which happened--people not blaming her directly, but saying that she might be responsible, via inference (and it is a subtle inference: “And wasn't I talkin' to him after church last Sunday night?”). It is a story that is told, after there is motion of 40 more acres left to plow. The juxtaposition of the domestic, and the parental, and the extreme violence, and the refusal to discuss the extreme violence over dinner, over small-town life, to note how it disrupts that life, is central to all the unanswerable questions.

The actual violence is described abstractly, the musical bridges overtaken by overwrought instrumentals, upending the whole enterprise even further. This can be heard when a cello breaks out from the string sextet which dominates the whole sound. The cello, most likely played by Jesse Erlich, descends fast and quick, overpowering the rest of the instrumentation, mirroring eerily the sound of a body crashing from a bridge into the water below.

The song's last verse, and the last break, with the body already under the water, and the sextet turning over the water, the cellos then become placid, further complicating the song.

There is a live version of the song that Gentry sang for the BBC in the late 1960s. She introduces herself—saying “when I was six, I moved to a region of the Mississippi called the Delta, and we lived between two rivers, one was called the Yazoo, and the other was called the Tallahatchie.” As she says the name of the second river, she drops straight into her performance --an acoustic performance, mostly--though there are some strings which are audible, likely played live.

The Delta, thick with myth, was a fascination for English musicians throughout this time who were all actively stealing from American Blues musicians who had come from the region, telling stories out of their control. Gentry, singing this song, taking on the voices of families, positioning it almost as a first-person narrative, placing herself as part of all those stories. She makes the tales of the Mississippi--of ghosts (“a person who looks a lot like you”), preachers, and the sudden illness of family, fits into a gothic mode, a mode that argues that the land itself is cursed.

The syrup-thick accent, and slowness of Gentry at her best deepens her subject choice--she often sings of the Mississippi, and how it will destroy you—see, for example, her song “Fancy,” the tale of a small town girl whose mother pimps her to middle class respectability; or how greasy the guitar intro is to “Mississippi Delta,” with its chorus of almost indecipherable regional appetites, which sort of sound like food, and sort of sound like sex: “....drop my line down a crawdad hole/Do him in with a scaly bark” or “eat a peppermint stick on Sunday”; or the song “He Made A Woman Out of Me,” where the narrator's father worked for the county, and her mother is most likely a madam (or at least she owns the “big house”). For Gentry, it's not only that the land is cursed, but the cursed land is a burlesque where lurid family dynamics and half-masked violence intersect, a gothic which sold well and has been a conventional pulp form for most of the region's history--and a form which was easily adaptable, to novels, to songs or films or television shows.

That Gentry succeeded in the form, and made it international, might be partially responsible for her success, but it is a success which is marked by an absence. Gentry recorded the song in Los Angeles. She had moved to California when she was 13, and was a burlesque dancer in Vegas in her early 20s, moving back to California to record the hit which made her famous. Gentry's success comes from abstracting, making a persona of her childhood: she could say she was from that place, because she left it. The song, like many constructions of the South then, becomes the idea of a thing as much as the thing itself. But who listens to pop for reportage? We listen for vibe or mood; and nothing sounds as ominous as 1967 must have felt, as this long tale of talking, maybe sex, and definitive violence.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.