Paper music: Reimagining Beck's *Song Reader* as a work of historical fiction

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Abstract: *This paper explores how Beck Hansen's* Song Reader *(2012) is what E L Doctorow calls a 'false document' or a work that improvises on historical fact to bring about a compelling narration of the past. In mimicking the economic and cultural production of the Tin Pan Alley era, Beck pushes the reader to perform a historical fiction. While this 2012 collection of twenty songs, published as a folio of sheet music, mimics the aesthetics of a turn of the twentieth century publishing industry, Beck also asks the reader to engage in the work beyond its retrochic possibilities. To hear the music, the reader needs to perform the music, displacing the ease of access of the recording music industry of today, where streaming music on phones and devices is the norm. Beyond this,* Song Reader *invites the reader to re-enact music production and consumption of the past by sitting around the piano amongst friends in a parlour or in participating in an on-line and crowdsourced version of song-plugging. Ultimately, by revisiting the printing press and exploring the possibilities of a twenty-first-century 'album' being released only on paper, Beck's* Song Reader *paradoxically allows his public to revisit the past via contemporary songwriting.*

Keywords: Beck, historical re-enactment, music publishing, retrochic, sheet music, Tin Pan Alley

Set just before the First World War and brilliantly painting a portrait of an early industrial America, E L Doctorow's novel *Ragtime*, published in 1975, challenges dominant historical narratives by improvising on actual events and historical figures within the stylings of a well-executed fiction. However, this form of historical play was disagreeable to many critics, as it seemed to falsify history by harmonising fiction with fact. Historian Cushing Strout critiques Doctorow's falsifying of history in *Ragtime*. As Berndt Ostendorf puts it, Strout complains that:

> Doctorow mixes 'fidelity to historical details in 1902' with his own inventions. Therefore 'the ragtime era is as frivolously manipulated as if it were only a tune.' (Ostendorf 1991, 582, citing Strout 1981, 188)

Doctorow does not contest this, but offers a defence in his essay 'False Documents' (1983, 16-27). While his approach may be perceived as dubious, and '[t]o offer facts to the witness of the imagination and pretend they are real is to commit a kind of regressive heresy' (1983, 21), it is a necessary act of the imagination to arrive at some semblance of truth. Doctorow concludes that '[t]here is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative' (1983, 26).

Like Doctorow in *Ragtime*, Beck Hansen, through creating a 'false document' of the American industrialised music business in his 2012 project *Song Reader*, creates a counterfeit historical representation of a collection of sheet music. Coined after the kitchen-like sound of out-of-tune pianos heard throughout Union Square and played by numerous ambitious songwriters trying to pen the next big hit (Shepherd 1982, 1-2), Tin Pan Alley defines the heyday of the New York music publishing industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, in the twenty-first century, tinny sounds heard on the streets are less likely to come from upright pianos than from earbud headphones connected to devices streaming Spotify or Apple Music services. Sound recording has replaced sheet song publication as the main mode of distribution and consumption of music. As Reebee Garofolo notes in his socio-historical account of the music business:

> […] technological developments […] enabled record companies to displace publishing houses as the power center of the music business, [because of this] the tendency is to use the terms 'music industry' and 'recording industry' synonymously. Initially, however, they were quite separate and there was little contact between the two. (2006, 319)

Even in the present day, when we think of the music business, we think of the record business or music streaming services, and when we think of a hit song, we think of radio or online plays. Sheet music publication is limited to musical instruction and orchestral or chamber works and is more likely associated with classical music and music education that the popular music industry. For that reason, Beck Hansen's release of *Song Reader*, a songbook collecting twenty original and unrecorded popular songs in sheet music form, is such an anomaly in the popular and industrialised music world.

Song Reader remains an early twenty-first century publication meant to reflect a mode of musical production from one hundred years in the past. While it is feasible to critique *Song Reader* as an example of Beaudriardian simulacrum where there are no faithful copies of a never-existing original work, or an example of retrochic which parodies the past through imitation and appropriation (Samuel 1994, 95), or retromania which appeals to our

compulsive and inescapable desire to revisit and archive the past (Reynolds 2011), it is equally feasible to see this publication as a piece of historical fiction. Moreover, *Song Reader* is an invitation to historical re-enactment as Beck's historical fiction can be experienced only through a performative and ongoing engagement with the text — by buying it, by holding it, by reading it, and by making a sound.

Song Reader is, as noted by many critics and journalists, less of an innovation than a return to form. Its publication is an attempt to recall and fictionalise a bygone music industry before the popularisation of records and radio and where musical commodities were sold as sheet songs by presenting music in an old and obsolete musical format. Through this, Beck recaptures aesthetically the character of Tin Pan Alley in the layout and design for the book, but more importantly, in publishing an 'album' in book format, he samples the mode of cultural production of the period where music publishers were still the forerunners of the music industry. By referencing the late nineteenth and early twentieth century print music publication industry, this article explores how the publication of *Song Reader* mimics the economic and cultural capital of a sheet music industry, as Beck Hansen copies the early twentieth century mode of music production by materialising a text in a time of digital music distribution, using his fame as a brand to create interest and then selling it to the public by enlisting a crowd of song-pluggers. It also explores how these imitations of the past also create narratives and fictions about the music publishing industry, through discourses surrounding the publication and performance of this songbook.

Book

First and foremost, *Song Reader* is a book. However, on 8 August 2012, when Beck announced his upcoming December release via his website, *Song Reader* was advertised as an upcoming album. As the website notice states, '[i]n the wake of *Modern Guilt* and *The Information*, Beck's latest album comes in an almost-forgotten form — twenty songs existing only as individual pieces of sheet music, never before released or recorded' (Beck.com 2012). This 'album' was unique in the sense that it would arrive at the consumer unperformed. It was also available only on paper. This newly rediscovered medium could not be ripped and burned, at least in so far as this terminology is understood to represent the copying and reproduction of digital music, and within a day or two of the announcement, music critics and business pundits were praising this new 'album' as a challenge to the downloading of pirated digital music files common before music streaming services. Furthermore, it would revolutionise the music industry through collaborative performances by normal everyday people. To cite Will Burns, reporter for *Forbes Magazine*:

> [i]t's more than an album. It's an invitation. (2012)

However, understanding Beck's work as an album is problematic. The collection of twenty songs held within a physical package does not make it an album in the contemporary sense of the word, and certainly not in the way we understand his previous two recorded albums, *Modern Guilt* (2008) and *The Information* (2006). *Song Reader* could not be played through the electronic means of a record player, cassette player, 8-track player, CD player, mp3 player, or streaming service, but would require the consumer to play the songs via a musical instrument and sing the melodies with their own voice. Curiously, when it was finally released on 12 December 2012, the exact words in the 8 August 2012 website notice appeared once again in the blurb on the back of *Song Reader*, only the word 'album' had been changed to 'project'.

Perhaps that is because *Song Reader* is only an album if we understand 'album' to mean 'book', as in a photo album. While it has been noted that the publication has been intended to resemble the aesthetic of a gatefold LP design (Maxwell 2016, 8; Maxwell and Mittner 2019, 313), the final product is far too bookish to sit comfortably within a vinyl collection as it does not mimic the 12-inch square dimensions of a record. Furthermore, it was not produced by a record label, but released by book publisher McSweeney's, which 'exists to champion ambitious and inspired new writing, and to challenge conventional expectations about where it's found, how it looks, and who participates' (McSweeny's 1998-2021). Beck himself refers to this collection of songs as a 'book' in the 'Preface to "Song Reader"', when he states, '[w]e've attempted to make a book that's able to stand alone as an object, aside from the music' (Hansen 2012b). This is an important distinction, since *Song Reader* is meant to function primarily, not as a recorded performance, but as a text, and as a visual and material text it is meant to be appreciated for its pretty packaging as much as its contents. As American studies expert Rieke Jordan, notes:

> *Song Reader* can work as a purely aesthetic or gimmicky object that does not depend on an audible interpretation to function or to have value. *Song Reader* speaks to the fault line between the subject position of the creative-industreous reader and its retrochic materialities. (2019, 99)

It is meant to function as a physical book in every aspect including to sit on one's shelf or coffee table, to impress friends, or to start conversations.

Furthermore, Nathaniel Braddock, who teaches *Song Reader* as part of the repertoire for the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago, Illinois, says that it is the physical nature of the project that is one its greatest pleasures. He rejoices in:

> Getting it, actually putting my hands on a copy of the *Reader.* Pulling the sheets out and flipping through the songs, and looking on the back and seeing how they've got gag songs and other fragments […] I remember buying sheet music from this era […] So seeing the *Song Reader* put together in that way, with the attention to detail and craftmanship. It

> continues to delight as I slowly work my way through the different songs. (Thibeault 2014, 46)

Much like receiving a request to attend a costume ball by mail, the physicality of the text is in many ways part of the invitation to re-enact the past. It is a visual cue that sends the reader off to journey through music history, albeit a parodied and reflexive version of this history, as they begin to perform the music-making and modes of musical production of the century past.

In addition to the materiality of the text, the title *Song Reader* itself also suggests that these works were not meant to be listened to but to be read, and a certain amount of literacy, in this case the ability to read musical notation, would be required to be able to make the book work. For those unable to read music, 'A Guide to Sheet Music Symbols' by Bettie Ross is included on the back of the introduction sheet of *Song Reader*. This inclusion is farcical and likely intended to be tongue in cheek, as if reading a cheat sheet on musical notation would enable the reader to immerse themself in the text. Much like handing an illiterate person a sheet with the alphabet on it, and then telling them they have in their hands all they need to know to read, musical literacy does not come naturally; it requires training and practice to acquire this skill.

Writing is also an abstraction. In the liner notes of *Paper Music*, a compilation of classical works conducted by jazz vocal improviser Bobby McFerrin, John Schaefer observes,

> [t]he composer of classical music puts splotches of ink on paper to suggest to performers what they must do to recreate the sounds heard by the composer in his or her inner ear. […] To capture sound in notation is an odd, abstract idea for people whose music exists because they keep it in their minds and hearts. (1995)

Beck himself noted this phenomenon in the first few sentences of the preface to *Song Reader*, and suggests that by beginning with the written text instead of a transcript from the performed text, perhaps literacy is facilitated. He says:

> After releasing an album in the mid-nineteen-nineties, I was sent a copy of the sheet-music version by a publisher who had commissioned piano transcriptions and guitar-chord charts of everything on the original recording. Seeing the record's sonic ideas distilled down to notation made it obvious that most of the songs weren't intended to work that way. Reversing the process and putting together a collection of songs in book form seemed more natural — it would be an album that could only be heard by playing the songs. (Hansen 2012b)

The question remains: is written music more 'natural' than its recorded performance? Rousseau answers this with a rhetorical question in his 'Essay on the Origin of Languages': '[a]n orator uses ink to set down his writings: does that mean that ink is a most eloquent liquid?' (1990 [1781], 279). Rousseau goes on to further note:

> Writing, which might be expected to fix [or to stabilise] language, is precisely what alters it; it changes not its words but its genius; it substitutes precision for expressiveness. One conveys one's sentiments in speaking, and one's ideas in writing. In writing one is compelled to use every word in conformity with common usage; but a speaker alters meanings by his tone of voice, determining them as he wishes. (1990 [1781], 253)

While Rousseau may not have been referring to the writing and performance of music *per se*, he does make a valid point about written and performed texts, noting that the oral intonation remains an integral part of the performed text. Therefore, releasing sheet music instead of a conventional album is something of a cold and elite offering. It reduces readership only to those who can decipher musical notation and, as Rousseau notes, privileges intellectualisation over sentiment.

Yet those who can read *Song Reader* are not meant to be read it passively or privately. It was intended for engagement and public performance. In closing the preface, Beck remarks that:

> […] not so long ago, a song was only a piece of paper until it was played by someone. Anyone. Even you. (Hansen 2012b)

This sort of commitment to the text is like the one lamented by Nicholas Carr in 'Is Google making us stupid?', where he criticises the postmodern attention span's inability to accomplish a 'deep reading':

> I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I'm reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do (2008).

Yet music lovers no longer meet in a parlour to gather around a piano for a sing-along. Even the days of gathering around a television set as a family to passively consume the latest sitcom are of a bygone era. Today, many plug through computers and portable devices to engage with text, video and music completely isolated from real human presence. Pleasures are private and fleeting and consumers can quickly click onto the next stimulus through their laptops and mobile devices. Sven Birkerts in 'The Time for Reading' attributes this loss of engaged reading in part to distraction, disappearing traditions and a lack of pursuit for higher goals (1996). Yet, Braddock notes that *Song Reader* may represent 'a renaissance of community music making' by replicating music consumption of the early twentieth century where 'if you wanted music, you would play it yourself, and families would play and sing together' (Thibeault 2014, 47). *Song Reader* invites the consumer to participate in a public, focussed

and individualised way of engaging with the reading, producing and performance of music.

But does this offering constitute innovation? The critics and speculators are conflicted in presenting that endeavour as revolutionary. Will Burns defends the innovation of *Song Reader* by stating:

> Beck's innovation does not lie in the sheet music itself, of course. It lies in the fact that a recording artist like Beck would NOT record his album at all but invite the world to record it themselves (using the sheet music provided). The genius of this innovation is in Beck's sensitivity to the modern digital age and finding a novel way to light a viral fire. (2012b)

Shortly after the release date of *Song Reader*, some covers of the songs had 'gone viral' online. Furthermore, the viral video rests not on the laurels of the composer of the song (although, songs covered usually have had some fame or notoriety) but on the innovativeness of the performance. Beck's refusal to record the work would appear in some respects to do the opposite of innovation; it merely serves as a blueprint for other people's innovation.

On the other hand, *Song Reader* has also been dismissed as novelty or kitsch. Wallace Wylie, blog journalist for *Collapse Board*, pans the project by stating:

> I think it's bullshit. […] there's nothing interesting about releasing sheet music, even in this day and age. It happens all the time. (2012)

Wylie is correct in some ways. Printed sheet music has indeed been around since the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Ottaviano Petrucci first published *Harmonice Musices Odhecaton* in 1501 (2003). Furthermore, the inexpensive single song sheet was introduced at the end of the seventeenth century by Tom Cross and had become a popular way of distributing music by the eighteenth century (Kidson 1907, 303). However, what Wylie fails to note is that in recent years, the published popular songbook or sheet music has come after the release of a recorded work and has been made available mainly to music students interested in learning their favourite songs that they have heard on internet or traditional radio. The function of modern sheet music is not as a principal means of music distribution, but for instruction. If there is genius in *Song Reader*'s release, it is that Beck Hansen is revisiting sheet music as a means of music production.

Wylie further criticises *Song Reader* by stating the following:

> Beck selling sheet music is like McDonald's selling a recipe book. 'Hey, we're not going to sell you the Super-Ultra-Mega Big Mac, but you can buy our recipe book and make your own version.' Those recipes might even look complex on paper, but that doesn't mean you aren't consuming garbage. (2012)

Theodor Adorno, in his 'On Popular Music', critiques popular song of the twentieth century as standardised and piecemeal, where its parts are interchangeable without affecting the entire composition. 'The promoters of commercialised entertainment exonerate themselves by referring to the fact that they are giving the masses what they want' (1990 [1941], 310). This 'Big-Macification' of popular music is a common critique, and in has value in the sense that the popular song is a commodity, but also leads to elitism by creating a discourse of 'serious' music as having more artistic value over commercial music. As Nicolas E. Tawa notes in *The Way to Tin Pan Alley*:

> Songwriters did indeed work to fashion a saleable product, but in their finest products is also evidence of creative imagination. The usual definition of composer is one who writes music. A popular-song writer, however, fits a more expanded definition of the composer, one who orders and resolves conflicts within and between people (even as he hopes to resolve them in himself), one who eases tension in the senses and nervous system. None of these composers is or aspires to be a Bach or Beethoven. In an unassuming way the composer reaches out to the millions left untouched by the mighty ones of music. (1990, 35)

Neither 'bullshit' nor innovation is a sufficient term to define what *Song Reader* represents. 'Bullshit' reduces it to a modern sheet music publication like any other — a by-product of the sale of a recording. However, *Song Reader* is not a secondary text but the primary text itself. Innovation, like the use of the word 'album', is used to elevate the cultural status of the product — to exaggerate its importance and to make believe it more significant than it actually is, and what it actually is, is a book.

Bind

In purchasing *Song Reader*, the consumer acknowledges that they are participating in an obsolete and outmoded method of commercial music distribution. While still a book, *Song Reader* is not a traditionally bound codex songbook. Instead, it acts as a folio which houses twenty individual pieces of sheet music, an introduction by Jody Rosen and a preface by Beck. Both the introduction and the preface are individual sheets designed to have the appearance of sheet music. All the enclosed songs have been adorned with the images of one of a dozen artists whose illustrations both parody and reflect the lithographic prints on the music covers of Tin Pan Alley. The paper used for the music is matte finished, weighty and durable. What is produced through *Song Reader* is both eye-catching and tangible. Most importantly, it presents a counter-narrative to a contemporary music production discourse of online released recordings. By privileging the composition over performance, the consumer of Beck's project agrees to enter a time warp of sorts where they enter a discourse of and adopting a means of interacting with popular music which at

once dominates a classical and historical understanding of music and simulates music-making from the past.

Historically, and as a matter of intellectual property, the publication of the song holds a more sustainable economic capital than the sum of any of its performances. In 1908, Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes ruled in the case of *White-Smith vs. Apollo* that publishers had no legal right to prevent player piano manufacturers from creating mechanical reproductions through piano rolls, as they were not subject to copyright (Cummings 2010, 663). As Lisa Gitelman notes in 'Media, materiality, and the measure of the digital':

> Holes in a music roll, in other words, were not 'a varied form of symbols substituted for the symbols' used in music. It was not the perforated paper that published the composer's conception but rather the mechanical action of the player piano, of which the paper roll was adjunct, that made the music publicly available. (2005, 221)

In other words, not all paper was created equal under the law, as perforations were not considered to be the written word. Due to this ruling, song publishers in the early twentieth century made their money from the sales of sheet music and phonograph records (another mechanical reproduction), whereas piano roll companies profited from the sales of the performance. However, a year later, the 1909 Copyright Law would address the issue of mechanical reproduction rights, or simply 'mechanicals', by introducing a compulsory license where the songwriters and publishers would enjoy a couple of cents for each copy rendered (Garofolo 1999, 322; Cummings 2010, 664). Conversely, it wasn't until 1971, when the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) lobbied and won compulsory licenses for recorded works, that royalties would be granted for the mechanical reproduction itself (Cummings 2010, 673).

Yet, in many ways, traditional notation functions in the very same way that the holes in a player piano roll do. Both indicate which notes are supposed to be played. As David Suisman states in his article 'Sound, knowledge, and the "Immanence of human failure"':

> […] the musical education of pianists, opposed to that of composers, generally focused on standardized execution and submission to the authority of the composer's score. […] This stage of mechanization presupposed an extremely high degree of skill, but the point of the player's labor was, just as it would be later with increasingly mechanized technologies, reproduction of sounds determined earlier, by someone else. (2010, 21-22)

This 'standardized execution', brought about by piano lessons, creates for many a literal reading of the text. The function of the text is simply to instruct, not interpret. As Suisman goes on to note:

> [w]ith the piano, music was written into the dots and lines of musical notation; with the player-piano, inscription took the form of perforations in a paper roll; with the phonograph, sound was inscribed into a spiral groove on a cylinder or disc. (2010, 23)

For Suisman, there is no hierarchy of medium by which the text is presented; whether on paper, wax or vinyl, and whether the mechanism performing the function of creating the sound is a needle, a hammer or a human, all are used to produce a desired sound.

Furthermore, the printing press used to publish sheet music is also a mechanised process. Gutenberg's invention, even in its beginnings over 500 years ago, allowed for the written word to reach the masses efficiently and effectively. As Elizabeth Eisenstein notes:

> [a]fter printing […] both the hope of achieving lasting fame and the sense of losing control were intensified. In addition, the number of intermediaries who handled the text increased. (2011, 21)

The widespread distribution of the printed word made it possible for writers to become immortal, and gave them a chance to popularise and market their works. Yet by having the work go through editors, publishers, printers, booksellers and even pirates, the author also feared the loss of the authenticity of their text. Walter Benjamin refers to this authenticity as an 'aura' and attributes the destruction of the aura in the age of mechanical reproduction primarily to:

> […] the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. (1992 [1936], 669)

As Benjamin suggests, there is a desire to hold a material text in one's hand, even if it not the original but a copy. There is a heightened willingness in the digital era to accept the material reproduction as authentic when much creative content is dematerialised and dispersed over the World Wide Web. There is not only a loss of commercial value through digital reproduction but a symbolic loss as well.

For this reason, the rhetoric surrounding the materiality of *Song Reader* is notable. Will Burns observes that:

> [y]ou can't just download this album, you have to buy it. It's not digital, it's paper. Beck has successfully found a loophole in our digital addictions' (2012a).

Jody Rosen, in the introduction to *Song Reader*, notes that:

> [i]n the age of MP3s, music has become even less hands-on. Once we had a tactile *thing* to go with the sound — shellac 78, an LP inside a gatefold

> cover, a CD in a jewelbox. Today, recorded music is disembodied, dissolved into code; it has slipped the bounds of the earth. (Hansen 2012b)

Beck, in an interview with Laura Barton about the release of *Song Reader*, expressed:

> […] in recent years I've been paying attention to how records are affected by [MP3s]. Imagine if you were writing an article and someone was to take out half the words and they were going to put them in a really different font. That's what it's like. And it's a problem, I think. (Barton 2012)

Whether it is over-ease of access, a nostalgia caused by dematerialisation of the tangible qualities of the text, or an alteration of the original through the digitisation of the text, Burns, Rosen and Hansen all express a dissatisfaction of online music distribution and a fetishisation of the physical item. Gitelman observes:

> *[P]aper* was one way (and I think a major way) in which ordinary people experienced the materially diverse economy of meaning that modern communications entail — part of what gets called 'synergy' today. Paper remains vital to the 'social life of information' in our digital era, although the fact has slipped from our awareness in many ways. (2005, 220, emphasis original)

Yet on some level, the importance surrounding materiality is just spin. Paul Duguid aptly observes in 'Material Matters' (1996) that it is not the object, which is dematerialised, only the content. The box remains.

However, what is truly mourned is not really the physicality of the object, but the ownership of it. Burns, from the position of the consumer, comments that *Song Reader* is something that needs to be bought to be possessed. Rosen's list of 'tactile *things*' are all cultural objects that would need to have been purchased and collected to experience them. Beck's concerns surround authorship, where he expresses the slipping control over the artist's creation. There is a value in the object's materiality which is lost in the digitisation of the text and rests upon the shoulders of the person or party who owns the object. As Gitelman further observes, '[t]he specifics of materiality […] *matter* much more to authors, to publishers, to "labels" — that is, to potential owners — than they ever can, could, or will to listeners' (2005, 214, emphasis original). In other words, ownership of the text itself gives it its value. Digitised performances of music were perceived to have little or no value at the time of *Song Reader's* release as they are merely transferred from a laptop, to a tablet, to a smartphone or to an mp3 player. Often the content is acquired for free or for what feels to be a nominal service charge. Music is easily obtained and easily disposed of and MP3s are not owned; they are shared. By rematerialising music in a material form, Beck has provided the consumer with some *thing* to show for their money spent and a chance to own and perform a piece of his catalogue, even if it is only a reproduction.

Beck

Roland Barthes argued in 'The Death of the Author' that '[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' (2006 [1967], 279). In many ways, the performative function of Beck Hansen's *Song Reader* allows for the text to continue without the limits of an authoritative figure imposed upon it. As Beck states in an interview with McSweeney's, '[…] these songs are meant to be pulled apart and reshaped. The idea of them being played by choirs, brass bands, string ensembles, anything outside of traditional rock-band constructs — it's interesting because it's outside of where my songs normally exist' (McSweeney's 2012). In this sense, Barthes is correct. This text has no real connection to its author because the performed music of the author was never released as a recording and has in no way influenced how these songs will be performed by others. As Michael De Certeau notes, '[…] the text has a meaning only through its readers; it changes along with them […]' (1984, 170). Contrary to Suisman's mechanised functional interpretations of sheet music, participants are free to interpret these pieces as they please.

However, freedom of the reader does not completely erase the importance of the author of the text. Imagine for an instant that the author of *Song Reader* was not Beck, but instead an unknown composer who was publishing a collection of well-written songs on sheet music without having released a successful album for which these songs would have garnered exposure. It would likely remain unheard of and it would certainly not sell out by Christmas. Beck's name alone gives weight to this project, and his role as author is important. After all, he had critics and journalists publicising *Song Reader* the day after its future release was disclosed. Michel Foucault remarks on the classificatory function to the author's name when he states:

> […] a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts. (2006 [1970], 284)

Although the release of *Song Reader* may not have necessarily been predicted by Beck's fans or critics prior to its announcement, it was not uncharacteristic when compared to the rest of Beck's oeuvre. Or, in other words, critics may not have been able to foresee the actual release of *Song Reader*, but the notice of its release is in line with the trope of Beck's career.

First, Beck has engaged older modes of production in his past work. Beck's successful career kicked off with the 'slacker' hit 'Loser' from his 1994 album *Mellow Gold.* In the age of multi-track professional recording studios, *Mellow Gold*, which was recorded on an analog '8-track in Beck's living room, speaks of lowered expectations, and yet there's a sense of the empowerment derived from that cheap high technology' (Azerrad 1994). 'Loser' was instrumental in introducing the concept of 'lo-fi' record production to a mainstream audience.

Secondly, much of his career exposes a longing for a more tangible, canonised and permanent cultural era. As Beck told *Rolling Stone* reporter Mark Kemp just off the heels of his second major release *Odelay*, 'People, music, everything in our culture — it's so disposable now' (Kemp 1996). Much of this sentiment is mirrored in Beck's lyrical content, through referencing imagery of decay as in the song 'Dead Melodies' from *Mutations* (1998) where:

> Night birds will cackle
>
> Rotting like apples on trees
>
> Sending their dead melodies

and dated technology as in 'Devil's Haircut' from *Odelay* (1996):

> Something's wrong 'cause my mind is fading
>
> Ghetto-blasting disintegrating
>
> Rock 'n' roll, know what I'm saying

Thirdly, the idea of initiating musical collaboration to bring original readings to a text is not a new concept to Beck. In 2009, Beck started a project called 'Record Club' where he recorded five classic albums (*The Velvet Underground & Nico* (1967), INXS's *Kick* (1987), *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1967), Skip Spence's *Oar* (1969), and *Yanni Live at the Acropolis* (1994)) with other recording artists, including Leslie Feist, Nigel Godrich (producer for Radiohead amongst others) and Thurston Moore (of Sonic Youth). Songs from the albums made available for free on the 'Beck's Record Club' website in video format, at a rate of one track a week. Finally, it is not the first time Beck has invited the consumer to participate in the production of his work. His album *The Information* (2006) contained graph paper as cover art, where the listener was enabled to develop their own album artwork with the stickers enclosed in the CD jewel case. Considering these four attributes of his work as an artist, one could argue few musicians could have pulled off a sheet music release, and that this project was a perfect fit for Beck Hansen.

Although generational research is problematic in categorically stereotyping and creating broad generalisations of a large group of people, in many ways Beck is the quintessential Generation X artist. Don Tapscott in his book *Grown Up Digital* almost completely dismisses Gen-X. In what could be easily regarded as comparative study between the Broadcast Generation (Baby Boomers) and what he calls 'The Net Generation' (children of Baby Boomers), Tapscott only dedicates half of a page to the group sandwiched between these two generations. The same dismissiveness in Tapscott's own work is what defines Generation X. Tapscott even notes this when he offers the following definition of X: '[…] a group that feels excluded from society and entered the labor work force only to find that their older brothers and sisters have filled all the positions' (2009, 14). Tapscott's ambivalence towards Gen-X suggests a lack influence in

this new technological era. However, Generation X were coming of age on the wake of change when what Tim Berners-Lee coined as the World Wide Web was launched in 1991 (Silicon Valley Historical Association 2012), and were a group who spent their formative years in a pre-online visceral state. In their early adult years, Gen-X played catch up with new technologies that would become so much a part of everyday life. This disconnect and reconnect contributes to this feeling of exclusion that Tapscott refers to. Perhaps this is what was at the forefront of Beck's mind when he optimistically said to Kemp in 1997:

> […] there were possibilities within the limitations of everyday life, with the things that we look at that are disposable. Our lives can seem so limited and uneventful, but these things can be transformed. We can appoint ourselves to be alchemists, turning shit into gold. (Kemp 1997)

Song Reader, a self-professed idea from the 1990s, is the actualisation of such an alchemy, offering everyday people a chance to revisit the past through forgotten material culture and transform the music from the page into a real sonic space.

Buzz

On the back of the individual sheet music in *Song Reader*, Beck simultaneously parodies and pays *homage* to old advertisements. The layout mimics the advertisements on old sheet music and features samples of fictional songs, such as 'There's a Sarcophagus in Egypt with your Name On It' by Teddy Nefertiti, and made-up collections such as *Prison and Mountain Songs (For Boys)*. The ads reference imagined publishing houses and include taglines such as 'Songs you won't be able to get away from and otherwise inescapable melodies' [Hansen 2012b]. Jody Rosen, in the introduction to *Song Reader*, recognises these as some of the collections 'funniest moments'. Yet, advertising in the time of Tin Pan Alley was a serious business indeed, and the quality of the advertisement could make or break a song. However, it became apparent that print advertising alone was insufficient for a music publisher to push copies of sheet music. After all, '[…] the public also had to hear and become familiar with the music' (Tawa 1990, 49).

'Song plugging' was introduced and became the most effective way to promote the sale of sheet music in the time of Tin Pan Alley. Tawa gives some examples of plugging:

> A plug might mean loudly singing a song on a major urban intersection or in front of a music store displaying the title in its window. A plug might be the sending of a singer-pianist to perform on a raised platform in a department store, in the midst of sheet-music counters. […] A plug might be negotiating with an Italian *padrone* to have his organ grinders push the song on the streets. Around the turn of the century, publishers might plug a song by recording it on a player-piano roll or on a phonograph cylinder or flat disk, then offering it for free to influential performers or at a competitive price to ordinary customers (1990, 49).

A 'plug' was a means of advertising on street level by which a song is publicly performed in hopes of making known a song to a potential buyer so they could later take the sheet music home and play it for themselves. Pluggers were in fact professional salesmen, and sometimes even professional entertainers, who would market songs '[…] in much the same way as Coca-Cola, clothes and carpets' (Sheppard 1982, 11). Often colourful antics would be performed to pitch a song. Jack Robbins, a professional plugger, sang 'It's an Old Horse That Knows Its Way Home' riding through town on the back of a hay wagon in farmer's garb (Sheppard 1982, 11). 'Stooges' would be placed, who were staged to get so carried away with a song that they would immediately break into song themselves (Tawa 1990, 52). At times a 'claque' or a professional audience would be used to applaud energetically at the end of a song (Tawa 1990, 52). The intent of these performances would be to create a 'buzz' around a certain piece of music, much like how the use of YouTube and social media can make a song 'go viral' today.

The unusual format of sheet music in the digital age and Beck's name and personality both went a long way to publicise this collection of songs before its release; however, music publisher McSweeney's, in hoping for a viral hit to give Beck's publication notoriety, adapted the song plugging convention for the twenty-first century in order to sell *Song Reader*. McSweeney's facilitated this by launching the now defunct website songreader.net, a collection of hyperlinks that provided access to fans' renditions of Beck's works from *Song Reader*. In this instance, the music publisher was still plugging songs in very much a traditional sense, except they were attempting to move the 'buzz' from the street to the information highway, and instead of hiring professionals, they were crowdsourcing to get the job done. This group of 'fans' were essentially crowdsourced pluggers, who were attempting to make their rendition of the song the one that got known. Some performances were straightforward, others comical, some professional, others amateur and some were simply generated by MIDI software. Yet, most captured the spirit of the antics used to sell a song in the time of Tin Pan Alley. Jackie Dandelion performed 'Old Shanghai' singing along to a recording of the song she made and using a mirrored videoed effect that made her look like a two-headed creature. Steve Wachner performed 'Why Did You Make Me Care?' silently as a card trick. Although it was performed in

a virtual space, the plug functioned in pretty much the same way as in Tin Pan Alley — the performance was offered up for free to sell copies of the publication. Jeff Howe, who is thought to be responsible for coining the term crowdsourcing, comments:

> […] companies grew up in the Internet age and were designed to take advantage of the networked world. But now the productive potential of millions of plugged-in enthusiasts is attracting the attention of old-line businesses, too' (2006, 2)

Music publishers are also taking advantage of the free labour crowdsourcing has to offer.

Crowdsourcing is displacing the need for the professional in the music industry, and marketing teams are not immune. American songwriter Sigmund Romberg remarked in a 1944 essay entitled 'So You've a Song to Publish':

> […] the publication and promotion of a hit take capital. Merely printing a song in the necessary number of arrangements and copies costs at least a thousand dollars; and before a song can become a hit, infinitely more will have to be spent in overhead, advertising, and 'plugging.' It's small wonder that the publishers can't support all the amateurs in the style to which they would like to become accustomed. (1944, 8)

During the time of Tin Pan Alley, a plugger was professional who was paid, and a necessary expense for the publisher to roll in with marketing costs to break in a song. In the digital age, promotion has become free labour. Daren C. Brabham recognises in 'Crowdsourcing as a Model for Problem Solving' that:

> […] crowdsourcing necessarily involves casualties. […] On the micro-level, crowdsourcing is ruining careers. On the macro-level, though, crowdsourcing is reconnecting workers with their work and taming the giants of big business by reviving the importance of the consumer in the design process. (2008, 84)

In the case of songreader.net, the 'fan' got to pick which songs got plugged and how they were presented. Although in a crowdsourcing arena, the fans are essentially exploited volunteers, the success of *Song Reader* depended not only on the purchasing power of the consumer, but also on the participation of the 'crowd.'

Buck

Beck wrote in the second paragraph of his 'Preface to *Song Reader*' on the success of sheet music sales for Bing Crosby's 'Sweet Leilani' in 1937:

> Apparently, it was so popular that, by some estimates, the sheet music sold fifty-four million copies. Home-played music had been so widespread that nearly half the country had bought the sheet music for a single song, and had presumably gone through the trouble of learning to

> play it. It was one of those statistics that offers a clue to something fundamental about our past. (Hansen 2012b)

Was this what Beck had in mind when he published *Song Reader*? Did he really believe that his work would garner this kind of success with the masses? Laura Barton in her interview with Beck suggests he may have when she stated, '[w]ouldn't it be wonderful, he thought, to try and recreate something like that?' (2012). Yet, beyond the initial economic capital acquired through the novelty of this publication, it has either not had the time or has been unable to create a viral success that would increase the cultural capital of *Song Reader*. Bourdieu expresses the opinion that:

> [s]ymbolic goods are a two-faced reality, a commodity and a symbolic object. Their specifically cultural value and their commercial value remain relatively independent, although the economic sanction may come to reinforce their cultural consecration. (1993, 113)

'Sweet Leilani' was a hit song which reinforced both its economic capital at the time and its cultural capital even to this day. Allmusic.com lists over a thousand recordings of this song by artists including Chris Isaak, Frank Zappa, The Platters, Benny Goodman, Les Paul and, of course, Bing Crosby. Nearly ten years later, none of Beck's ditties from *Song Reader* have measured up. As Bing Crosby noted about professional song pluggers:

> They'd come to your dressing room to demonstrate whatever song their company was concentrating on. […] They could sing and dance, they knew all the jokes. It was an amusing interlude. And they always had the same line: 'Bing, I promise you, this is going to be the number one song, there's no question about it.' (Shepherd 1982, 10).

Beck Hansen is a professional plugger capable of doing an entertaining song and dance. However, how many people bought it?

Economic profits for music have their roots deeply seeded both historically and currently in the materiality of an object. Today, Beck would have seen meagre returns on a new recording sold through download and streaming services and physical sales (and nothing from pirated downloads). When it came out, *Song Reader* listed at $39.95 CDN. The sale of *Song Reader* experiences disintermediation for which the money earned goes directly to the publisher and songwriter and bypasses the record label and artist along the way.

Wylie is critical of Beck's intentions, stating:

> [if Beck] meant this as a democratic process then surely he would have released the songs as actual sheet music that was available at a reasonable price. $34 is a lot of money. [...] Democracy should be cheaper than this. (2012)

Wylie has reason to be sceptical, because perhaps it is not democratisation that Beck is after, but capitalism. Beck has produced in a published book a format

that cannot easily be shared online (other than by scanning and posting). However, in terms of expense, Beck's *Song Reader* was certainly more expensive than filesharing or downloading through peer-to-peer networks via BitTorrent, where the content is obtained free of charge, but the price per song sheet only works out to $1.70 US a song (or $1.25 CDN as in my purchase through Amazon.ca). This was cheaper than most individual song sheets and just a little more than an iTunes download. As Geeta Dayal observes:

> *Song Reader* is as brilliant as it is obnoxious, a fuck you to the legions of MP3 downloaders who would have otherwise procured Beck's new album for free within seconds. Want to listen to Beck's new record? Too bad — you have to play it yourself. (2012)

'You', and not the author, are responsible for the performance.

It is likely that this or any collection of sheet music released in the twenty-first century will never match the success of the big hits of Tin Pan Alley like 'Sweet Leilani'. Furthermore, it is unlikely that successful performing artists will be hocking their instruments and take up the pen to become the next Scott Joplin or Irving Berlin, despite Will Burns' predictions of aging rock stars '[…] issuing this kind of sheet-music album to keep the flame alive' (2012a). Still, even if this publication is only a moderate success through initial sales and goes no further, it has been a reminder that money can still be made using traditional methods of distribution (or a hybrid of traditional and modern methods) and that a monetary value remains in a physical commodity.

Back

Song Reader's lasting importance to its contribution to historical fiction, if it is to have any, is rooted not only in its representation of a bygone era, but through the creation of lasting material culture that can be used as a medium to recreate the past. In an interview with Jian Ghomeshi on CBC's *Q*, Beck was asked what would happen if someone came across a stack of *Song Reader* songs a hundred years from now. Beck replied, 'if there would be no CD players or MP3s or computers next week, this would be the only thing left of all this music that I made' (2012). This text, freeze framed in time, represents to Beck his mark on history. Writing has permanence, whereas recorded performance is only temporary and bound by playback technologies. As Rousseau notes, '[a]n object, presented before anything is said, stimulates the imagination, arouses curiosity, holds the mind in suspense and anticipation of what will be said' (1990 [1781], 241). *Song Reader* is such an object that has stirred curiosity and the imagination from months before its release, to the reading of the text as a book, to the performance in private and public spaces, to the circulation of both amateur and professional recordings locally and worldwide. It proposes to the consumer a pleasure forgotten by a generation of samplers and MP3 downloaders — the invitation to be an active participant in the reading of a song.

That said, in July 2014, about a year and a half after the *Song Reader* sheet music collection was released, there emerged a recorded collection of the *Song Reader* songs performed by notable artists such as Jack Black, Norah Jones, Louden Wainwright III and even Beck himself. While these recorded performances remain covers or copies of the songs held within the *Song Reader* folio and do not represent original works in themselves, there is an officialness to this release as it was approved of and participated in by Beck and released by Capitol Records, a subsidiary of Universal Music, a predominant music label. As such, this recording offers closure to all previous experiments. In choosing to listen to recorded versions of Beck's compositions over performing them, the publication of *Song Reader* as a written text with historical re-enactment possibilities wanes from the public imagination. The community and private performance of these songs are now not the only option to the consumer and cease to gain foreground in favour of canned performances that can be played, copied and distributed mechanically or digitally. That said, even the recording itself is an homage to the possibilities of *Song Reader*. Ben Rayner, reporter and music critic for the *Toronto Star*, states:

> the best thing about *Song Reader* [the recording] is you could release a different version of this collection with fresh artists every year in perpetuity and wind up with a completely different program every time. Really, this thing only hints at the potential Beck intended his songbook to have in the first place. (2014)

While the CD release closes the project, it opens up the possibilities for revisiting it again in the future.

Therefore, it is not too late for the digital music consumer, with ease of access and an ephemeral and disposable experience with music, to make amends. Nathalie Caple expressed the following about the introduction of the e-book to traditional print publications:

> The amazing thing about the e-book is that it can augment the paper book and highlight what is precious about physicality. It doesn't require a system that replaces your ability to hold a book or to read. It only protects your right to this pleasure. (2011)

Digital or mechanical reproductions of music have functioned in very much the same way. They have not destroyed the ability to enjoy performing a song oneself, and the publication of *Song Reader* has not erased a hundred years of the recording industry, but only presented the possibility of reading the song for oneself and discovering something truly worthwhile. In the foreword of a 1907 collection of 'old time' *Heart Songs*, the editor states, '[t]he yellow sheets of music bear evidence of constant us; in times of war and peace, victory and defeat, good and evil fortune, these sweet strains have bended with the coarser thread of human life and offered to the joyful or saddened soul a suggestion of uplift, sympathy and hope' (Chapple 1907, vi). Much like, and complimentary

to, Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Beck's offering also reveals a 'constant us'. It is at once a glimpse into our past, a reaction to our present and a mark on history for future generations.

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