

Heroes and Villains – The Fall and Rise of Daniel Johnston and His Apocalyptic Pop Star Life

When Daniel Johnston played London's Institute Of Contemporary Arts a few years back, by all accounts it was painful to watch. In the throes of the illness that arguably fuelled his creativity, here was a real life mental breakdown in words and music, live on stage. Onlookers reveled in the freak-show. But then, onlookers always have and always will love a freak show, especially one they can sing along to.

When Johnston's artwork appeared in a group show of cartoonists at The Royal Edinburgh Hospital, which provides 'acute psychiatric and mental health services', the freak-show, it seemed, had come home to roost. Shaky-handed felt tip splodges had long let loose the visions cluttering up Johnston's head. Weaned on an overload of trash culture pop iconography, here was Johnston's very own bug-eyed take on comic book Super-Heroes.

As well as creatures drawn from his own hyper-fertile mind, there were other, more familiar manifestations. Having already sang about Casper The Friendly Ghost, the cartoon boy spirit who just wants to be everyone's best friend but ends up scaring them away, on his 1983 cassette, 'Yip Jump Music,' Johnston now flexed his muscles with more monstrous fare. Larger-than-life creations such as Godzilla and King Kong, both scaled-up to gigantic proportions on screen by Ray Harryhausen's stop-motion animation technique, but actually only doll-like models several inches high, marauded their way through city streets.

Saving the day was Captain America, Marvel Comics' star-spangled Super-Hero patriot, who appeared with his original World War Two sidekick, Bucky, an early sighting of a teenager before teenagers existed and moulded in the image of a far darker dynamic duo, Batman and Robin. Staying true to his obsessions, Johnston made boxers, Kung Fu fighters and other idealised tough guy archetypes equally immortal.

Here was an instinctive and unfettered outpouring of idealised nostalgia for some mythical age of child-like innocence, where all the Scary Monsters and Super-Creeps could be vanquished by whatever muscle-bound force-field special powers were going. With a ZAP!, a POW!, and even a WHAAM!, things could be put right again, and the world would be made safe once more. In a world where good and evil were as black and white as the blue collar morality plays of professional wrestling, it was that simple.

Go deeper, read in-between the pages, and beyond the Caped Crusaders, Masked Mystery Men and All-American Boys, Johnston's world was the same as any other sensitive kid with an over-active imagination who lost themselves in fantasy fiction. It was a world of Charles Atlas cartoon muscle-men kicking sand in eight-stone weaklings faces before the puny guy goes on a ten-day programme, takes revenge on the big lug and has all the micro-bikinied beach babes come crawling back; of smiley Sea Monkey families setting up some kind of picket-fence goldfish-bowl domestic-bliss homestead by mail order; of

X-Ray Spex, wireless kits and rockets to the moon. It was a world shaded in vivid primary colour flourishes and wobbly, imperfect perspectives, and everything approved in triple-A fashion by the Comics Code Authority.

But the times they were-a-changing, and even in the parallel universes of the Golden Age and Silver Age comic-book heroes, things weren't quite so black and white anymore. Suddenly Super-Heroes had private lives and all the neuroses that came with them, and hiding their insular, independent and oh-so-secret identities behind a mask became a very obvious metaphor for split personality. ZAP! and POW! just weren't enough anymore.

Here were fractured, dysfunctional lives weighed down by the responsibility of saving the world and dictated to by their own self-made myth. Literally, the contemporary, grown-up superhero, spaced-out terminal adolescents with far-off galaxies on their minds and the allure of the dressing-up box to define themselves with, didn't know who they were anymore. Spider-Man was an angst-ridden geek with girl trouble, and The Silver Surfer wandered the universe's expanse alone, pondering the meaning of existence.

Even Captain America, the doyen of apple-pie, All-American values, had moved on. Revived from suspended animation after being preserved in a block of ice, stars-and-stripes outfit and all, he was recast, according to Bradford W Wright in his 2001 study, 'Comic Book Nation: The Transformation Of Youth Culture In America', "haunted by past memories, and trying to adapt to 1960s society." Bucky was dead, and in the 1970s, high on civil rights and Watergate, Captain America embraced multi-culturalism via The Falcon, one of the first African American Super-Heroes to go mainstream. In the new publication there was even a letters page headlined 'Let's Rap With Cap.'

As for the Super-Villains, the Arch-Nemeses, Evil Masterminds and plain old Bad Guys, well, they had their own problems, and it seemed even they weren't all bad after all. It was something, it seemed, to do with Society. Worlds had well and truly collided.

Some of these new complexities were explored in Science Fiction novelist Philip Jose Farmer's fantastical 1973 study, 'Doc Savage – His Apocalyptic Life,' a fictionalised biography of the 1930s pulp hero and his team of genius misfit outsiders. Today, in glossy TV appropriations of Super-Heroes such as 'Smallville', which looks at the teenage years of Superman as he comes to terms with his powers amid a hormone-driven emotional torrent, and the eponymous 'Heroes,' identity crises are the norm.

But how to heal the fragmented self in such schizophrenic times? This was the question an entire generation, Daniel Johnston's generation, born into an uncertain if mind-expanding era, had to face. The solutions to such unsolvable problems varied. Some blasted off and became cosmonauts of inner space, the finest minds of their generation blitzed, bent out of shape and all too often obliterated by psychedelic hallucinogens.

Others reached for the stars in more unconsciously productive ways. Johnston's ethos of wannabe-Pop Star fantasy-wish-fulfillment was similar in spirit to Minging Mike, the Vietnam deserter who, between 1968 and 1977 'made' more than fifty albums on thirty-five imaginary record labels. Mike's make-believe career as a soul singer, songwriter and producer was elaborately drawn out on cardboard, with grooves drawn in and the whole package wrapped up in intricately hand-designed gatefold sleeves complete with liner notes and including 'soundtracks' to dreamt-up Kung Fu flicks. With Mike's entire back catalogue stumbled upon at a flea-market in 2003, he too has become a cult figure, and in 2007 a coffee table book of his album cover art was published.

The difference was, while both Minging Mike and Daniel Johnston were Pop Stars in their own heads, and while Mike too recorded some of the 4000 songs he'd written straight onto cassette, Johnston kept it real and took it straight to the top.

So, are Daniel Johnston's drawings and songs therapy? A not-so silent scream from an inside-out pop cartoon pop-up world made in his own wonkified image? Kind of. But, like a Saturday morning serial from an allegedly more innocent age, that's not the whole story.

With a simplistic, naïve optimism, Johnston resembles a real life embodiment of Booji Boy, the character created by Devo's Mark Mothersbaugh to sing the Johnstonian titled 1981 single, 'Beautiful World,' as a satire of what the band saw as the infantile regression of Western culture. Significantly, perhaps, Mothersbaugh also composed music for Pee Wee's Playhouse, featuring manic man-child Pee Wee Herman, and for the Rugrats cartoon series. Devo had appeared too in an episode of early 1980s outsider-teen high school sitcom, 'Square Pegs.'

Today, Daniel Johnston sits in his house in Texas that was built right next door to his parents on the proceeds of his art and album sales. He hasn't had a real job since 1986 when he worked shifts at McDonald's, pre-dating the slacker culture of Douglas Coupland's 'Generation X' by half a decade.

Inbetween watching horror movie DVDs – strictly the old-school Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi variety, not modern day Slasher stuff - he's racked up five albums worth of unreleased songs, is building a recording studio with his brother, tours with his occasional band Danny and the Nightmares and draws and draws and draws. The freak-show, it seems, is over.

In a way, the rest of the musical world has only just caught up with Daniel Johnston's DIY sensibility. When he paved the streets, handing out home-made, customised copies of his 'Songs Of Pain' cassette, for all its naked self-expression was a need to connect, the notion of seizing the means of production was probably the last thing on his mind. More than a quarter of a century on, artists releasing their own lo-fi howls on cottage industry micro-labels in limited presses on vinyl, cassette and CDr is all the rage. It's perfectly possible today to eke out an existence to distribute one's wares in

such samizdat fashion without any need for big budget studios and corporate record executive bullshit.

Then again, these days Daniel Johnston is beyond such activities. Cult Status is fine, but he's a Major Artist, after all. A real-life Pop Star. And, ZAP!, POW!, WHAAM!, how Super-Heroic is that?

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