

DAYS OF FUTURE PASSED:
PAUL BOWLES AND THE
HEYDAY OF HIPNESS

M I C H A E L L . S H U M A N

*Re-creating Paul Bowles, The Other and The Imagination:
Music, Film, and Photography*

By Raj Chandarlapaty

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PRAISE FROM NORMAN MAILER IS HARD-WON. In *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer at one point comments on twenty-one contemporary writers in ways that made his typist-sister nervous. J.D. Salinger, for example, is criticized for choosing comfortable subjects in an uncomfortable world; James Baldwin is too “charming” to be a major author, and Jack Kerouac, “lacks discipline, intelligence, honesty and a sense of the novel.” (468, 471, 465). J. Michael Lennon notes that Mailer’s observations are “obscene and prickly. . . . The praise given is grudging as often as not; and the criticisms are a mixture of shrewd insight based on careful reading and ad hominem jibes” (248).

Paul Bowles, expatriate author, composer, and translator, does not entirely escape Mailer’s verbal drive-by. Bowles seems bored by his characters, Mailer maintains, and they remain lifeless, “a miasma from the author.” But Bowles also is praised for his “adventurous and pure” themes, and especially for “Pages from Cold Point,” “one of the best short stories ever written by anyone.” But Mailer’s most resounding compliment, quoted again and again

in short reviews and longer studies, is that “Paul Bowles opened the world of Hip. He let in the murder, the drugs, the incest, the death of the Square . . . the call of the orgy, the end of civilization,” all good things to express, go figure, in an unhip and exhausted culture (468).

Raj Chandarlapaty, Assistant Professor at American University in Afghanistan and a contributor to *The Mailer Review*, invigorates scholarly interest in Bowles’ cultural import, this Hipness, by examining his multicultural and interdisciplinary work in music, film, and photography. *Re-creating Paul Bowles, the Other, and the Imagination*, is perhaps the first significant full-length study of the artist’s work since his death in 1999 and certainly the most comprehensive evaluation, to date, of Bowles’ eclectic output.

Chandarlapaty explains this critical neglect as a reasonable consequence of Bowles’ obscurity on the newsstand: as an author removed from the Western mainstream both temperamentally and geographically, Bowles saw most of his works go out of print in the 1970s. Not only was the author an “Outsider” in theme and form, he also felt removed from a post-modernist literary culture that no longer celebrated dislocated syntax, historical imagination, and unrestrained literary ecstasy. As Chandarlapaty maintains, the ascendancy of a “post” identity and structure in literature de-intellectualized the creative role of the artist. “Where early and provocative fables of terror such as [Bowles’ short stories] ‘A Distant Episode’ and ‘The Delicate Prey’ had ensured a vicious functioning of the Other in American imagination, later works pair the absurdity of interpreting folk culture in the modern age within the framework of military/government supremacy” (3–4).

Bowles responded to the dislocation of his fiction in a defiantly slipstream way by composing music emphasizing folk idioms and reflecting the popular culture he experienced in his adopted home country, Morocco, and around the world. His operetta “The Wind Remains” (1945), for example, adopts the Spanish *zarzuela* genre alternating dramatic spoken-word scenes with music and dance. The main characters are dependent upon Nature, Chandarlapaty maintains, and derive their identity neither from a Christian God nor from primitive superstition. The collective result “is a recurring hybrid of sounds, songs, and folk themes, which allowed Bowles to save himself from nationalism’s suffocating intensity and realism” (45). Such compositions also support Bowles’ role as a post-modern Outsider as well as thematically supporting his skewed post-modern literary works. As with his earlier Great Depression-era recordings and compositions, his later musical

work “thoughtfully anticipate Kerouac’s essential thesis of an American counter-history arising from poverty and dislocation that sweeps the pates of critically acclaimed books such as *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*” (47).

While influenced by his musical mentors, Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson, Bowles went beyond those composers’ individual styles to anticipate the form and conventions of rock music. Chandarlapaty points to the structure and content of orchestral recordings such as The Who’s *Tommy*, Led Zeppelin’s *The Song Remains the Same*, and The Moody Blues’s *Days of Future Passed* as particularly evocative of Bowles’ work in form and import. In Bowles’ compositions, “[t]he ambitions and persona of man remain simple, while modern life’s essential dynamic means to shock, to stir, to mislead us into comic moments of questioning absurdity” (58).

Bowles’ connection with rock music of the late twentieth century also is more personal and direct. Indeed, some of the most striking photographs in *Yesterday’s Perfume*, Bowles’ collaboration with photographer Cherie Nutting, include members of The Rolling Stones during their 1989 three-day stay in Morocco while recording parts of their album *Steel Wheels*. Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, and Ron Wood seem in lazy camaraderie with Bowles as the author watches the rock icons record with Bachir Attar and The Master Musicians of Jajouka. Chandarlapaty cites his own excitement, aged nineteen, at watching a revitalized Stones open their set with “Continental Drift,” a drumming exposition developed during their visit to Bowles’ adopted home. These photos may be a superficial and unconvincing link between Bowles and late-era rock music, but they remain fascinating cultural artifacts nonetheless. “Without considering any relationship between the Stones and Bowles,” Chandarlapaty maintains, “all that needs to be refreshed is the common interest, and the continuity of that interest, from across generations with very different social impacts. Bowles would downplay such liaisons, yet Nutting’s keen eye for ‘fame’ nails a hinge on the development of worldwide musical evolution and its performance to an audience of growing social and anthropological awareness” (11).

Bowles’ own photography, like his music, emphasizes the essential otherness of life in a post-colonial, developing-world country. *How Could I Send a Picture into the Desert?*, a collection of photographs published in 1991, includes traditional yet somehow essentially outré pictures of Beat Generation notables Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Gregory Corso, along with Bowles, all well dressed and holding cameras; muscle-flexing Moroccan

boys on Merkala Beach; Bowles' gray-haired parents, on that same beach, comfortable in chairs; and an insidiously subversive photo of two mainstream notables, socialite Barbara Hutton and fashion photographer Cecil Beaton, raving it up at a 1949 cross-dressing costume party. The essence of otherness rarely appears so remote yet so close-at-hand. Equally revealing is a 1972 photo of Mohammed Mrabet, an author and artist, with archenemy Mohammed Shukri, a libertarian writer whose autobiography famously was prohibited in Morocco due to its depictions of sexuality and drug abuse. "The profile and general ethos of the two men," Chandarlapaty observes, "could not have been more different and their personal mode of expression even more so" (16). Bowles' caption is coy, explaining that Shukri consumes alcohol while Mrabet is a teetotaler, but ultimately the photograph reveals the schisms separating developing-world citizens who otherwise share a common colonial experience. In Chandarlapaty's analysis, "the process of photoduplication assumes the obvious about two worlds, one that will be less appreciated and recognized because it belongs to the past, and the other that is clear, focused, and healthy in the communicative rationality of the text" (17).

Bowles clearly understood Moroccan life with depth and compassion, and his exploration of developing-world culture, its challenges and conundrums, should be a revelation to post-colonial critics and scholars. How revealing, then, that Western culture's foremost understanding of Bowles comes from a popular film directed by an Italian, scripted by a British screenwriter who studied at Oxford, and starring that most ubiquitous of American actors, John Malkovich. Bernardo Bertolucci's 1990 rendition of Bowles' novel, *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), misrepresents its source in an attempt to appeal to contemporary cinematic expectations and the perceived tastes of a Western box office public. The result, Chandarlapaty maintains, is an Orient that is safe and cleansed, more in line with popular adventure films than developing-world reality. The illusion suggests a land of people and dwellings "stripped of their poverty to refresh the region's dynamic moment," and so supportive of cultural cohabitation "that Maghreb subcultures could interact with American characters without ruining or harming the individual's self-conception of life" (155-56). Without the vocal musings of the film's characters, "we are led to an illusion that Bowles hardly intended: that Americans could decide freely which health precautions and mobility in the Sahara would be appropriate. Producing this complete super-

session of colonial *aegis* and authorial terror might engage us during the post-modern era, and thus dismiss the two-thousand-year-old spindling of East-West relations" (156). Ultimately Bowles rejected the film as a dramatic failure. "It never should have been filmed," he maintains in a segment of *Let It Come Down: The Life of Paul Bowles*, a 1998 documentary. "The ending is idiotic and the rest is pretty bad."

More successful is independent filmmaker Sara Driver's 1981 adaptation of the Bowles short story "You Are Not I" (1948), a fifty-minute *tour de force* co-written by Jim Jarmusch, a director with his own outstanding body of rogue work. Although the setting is rural California, the landscape is more funereal and oppressive than Bertolucci's sanitized Orient, and the premise includes a series of accidents leaving the hinterland littered with bodies. Chandarlapaty notes the apparently-intentional similarity of these scenes to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the importance of cinematic symbolism as the protagonist, Ethel, a young woman who apparently survived the catastrophes, moves from corpse to corpse, placing a rock in the mouths of the victims. "Presumably meant to mark the deceased's memory," Chandarlapaty writes, "the rocks carry with them a parable of meaning evident only from the woman's isolation and superimposition of society's normal, daily characteristics" (110). Driver reinterprets Bowles' evocation of Otherness and cultural removal as an amalgam of woman's place in a post-Modernist society. "Ethel is the architect of 'new' modernity," Chandarlapaty explains, "manipulable and antisocial in its focus on the primary senses. Without men to guide or protect her, she manifests a moment of hypnosis to negate ties of sisterhood and family, reducing them to a pathetic anarchy while maintaining 'the rock' as her guiding understanding of story and meaning" (112).

Mailer's qualified praise cites one short story, but Bowles' hipness and revelation of post-modern, cross-cultural exhaustion and isolation is inseparable from his extra-literary expression. Examining the work of an artist productive in diverse media, especially an expatriate Outsider who assumed the guise of a recluse, is a tough task for any scholar, but Chandarlapaty succeeds in showing how Bowles' music, film, and photography both supports his fiction and conveys his perception of disjointed now, when we are post-everything and apparently pre-nothing. The days of future are indeed past, as The Moody Blues suggested nearly fifty-years ago, and Bowles' contribution to that popular existentialist awareness is both direct and undeniable.

Chandarlapaty ultimately regrets that Bowles' photographs have not reen-

ergized interest in the Beats, thus further illuminating the role of the Outsider in technological culture, but after all missed opportunities are the hallmark of an intellectualism at odds with the predominate political and social structure. Kerouac and Burroughs, like Bowles himself, are perhaps more meaningful in their cultural absence than they would be as popular icons, their obscurity effectively certifying their essential Otherness. "Film, music, and photography bring the literary author into a new vision," Chandarlapaty maintains, "and in many ways reconfigure primary authorial and intellectual-philosophical ideas. . . . For Bowles, reticent and sour to modern life's touch, the collections vaunt a true find, and pose a rare opportunity for critical inspection precisely because of the recent fact of his life and work" (180). Chandarlapaty's ambitious study provides focus and depth to this opportunity, allowing scholars, Hip or Square, further access to Bowles' eclectic art.

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