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Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste. By Carl Wilson.
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When I used to produce records for other people, a singer friend once called me about an album he was about to start work on: would I be interested in producing it? 'Who do you want this album to sound like?', I asked him. His reply was 'Céline Dion', and the ensuing silence was enough to stop the conversation dead: I couldn't understand why anyone would want their album to sound like Céline Dion, let alone expect me to accomplish such an epic task. A similar lack of comprehension lay behind Carl Wilson's 33 1/3 volume on Céline's 1997 album, *Let's Talk About Love* (I'll refer to the singer by her first name, as Wilson does throughout), which has now reappeared in a slightly revised and considerably expanded edition, appending a 'cocktail party in prose' of short essays by guest writers in response to the original text.

Wilson's aim was to write critically about music for which he had little initial sympathy, employing the same approach that he would take to music that he cared about or identified with, and the questions that this threw up led the book to become an exploration of the nature of aesthetic taste, an embodiment of Simon Frith's (2004, p. 17) observation that labelling music as 'bad' is a matter of argument as well as of aesthetics. Wilson's personal quest to comprehend and appreciate Céline's overblown sentimental pop balladry wrapped in what he calls 'conspicuous production' (p. 71, more of a clever pun than a description really) was one of the most successful and thought provoking of the long-running 33 1/3 series of short books about individual albums.

Wilson leads the reader around a welcome variety of approaches, working the Québécois relationship to mainstream US culture, the subtleties of international marketing at Sony, biographical background about Céline herself, and personal encounters with her fans, into a very entertaining but also thoughtful and well-read discussion about how musical taste is formed, developed and viewed. The 'cocktail party' appendix, including contributions from big names like Krist Novoselic and Nick Hornby, ranges from perceptive and well-crafted reflections to the written equivalent of being stuck in a corner with a pub bore, and on balance it doesn't add much to the thrust of the book other than enlarging its heft to that of a standard paperback. However, one of the better essays, by Drew Daniel, makes the excellent point that after Wilson's work, the question to ask about bad music is not just 'bad at what?' but 'bad for whom?' (p. 226).

The new edition could have fixed a few things in the original. The throwaway gags don't always work seven years on, and a cheap joke that conflates social awkwardness with autism should have been removed at the editing stage, as should another contributor's inexcusable use of the word 'spaz'. And for all the genuine sincerity of Wilson's epiphany in coming to understand how Céline's music works, the tone of patronising condescension in the book's original closing chapter is still rather sour: 'she seems to [...] have made a much-belated discovery that she has a self' (pp. 160–1). Ouch.

But the glaring omission from the book is that Wilson doesn't attempt to explore the musical processes involved in the making of the recordings, as though the end product was summoned into existence by an act of will. This lack of knowledge about the mechanics of an 'uncool' musical practice does his criticism no favours: suggesting that Céline's music is 'lousy music to make aesthetic judgments to' (p. 159) as he does, is to imply that no aesthetic judgements or negotiations were made in the course of its formation in the first place. As my singer friend demonstrated, the expertise required to make such uncool aesthetic judgements has its own cultural value – otherwise, he wouldn't have wanted his album to sound like one of Céline's – and Wilson's canny account of the operations of Sony's international A&R staff shows that these aesthetic judgements also carry major financial clout. Wilson describes

George Martin's work on 'The Reason' as 'bogglingly accomplished prestidigitation' (p. 146), a phrase which itself tries to wave a magic wand over the author's ignorance of what Martin actually did. Production studies (or in old musicology parlance, analysis) can be useful to reception studies, and the shying away from a detailed discussion of the actual music is a weakness.

A few years after the success of *Titanic* and its ubiquitous Céline-voiced 'My Heart Will Go On', the film music broadcaster Tommy Pearson and I visited its composer, the late James Horner, at a movie-tracking session, and what was striking from the conversation was his Romantic lack of distance from the emotional content of his work. Describing his initial act of sketching musical material in response to picture, he said 'That's when I cry'. It seemed almost absurdly melodramatic. But half an hour previously, he had been conducting a 93-piece orchestra to picture in his own 10-minute music cue, hitting every streamer and spot exactly, and getting a round of applause from LA's most hardened session players. I would love to know whether the production process of Céline Dion's music included similar juxtapositions of high-end craft and shameless heart-on-sleeve sincerity, and to hear about the social circumstances of how these modes interacted. If we were there in the studio, would our judgements of taste force us to cringe in horror, or would they allow us to gaze in admiration at these people at work?

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Reference

Frith, S. 2004. 'What is bad music', in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. C. Washburne and M. Derno (New York, Routledge), pp. 15–36.