
Book Review: *Roadrunner*

Joshua Clover. *Roadrunner*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. 144 pages.

Joshua Clover takes readers on a circuitous but fascinating ride in this book on the proto-punk garage rock classic “Roadrunner.” A two-chord paean to joyriding, rock ‘n’ roll radio, and the city of Boston, “Roadrunner” was written by a teenaged Jonathan Richman and later recorded by various incarnations of his band, the Modern Lovers. As Clover explains, “Roadrunner” is a single that exists in multiple versions with a rather confusing release history. It was first recorded with John Cale producing in 1972, then again in 1974 with different personnel (though Richman’s backing band was still called “the Modern Lovers”). Neither version was released commercially until 1976, when the earlier version appeared on the Modern Lovers’ self-titled debut album. Both versions were released on a seven-inch single in 1977, with the 1974 version listed as “Roadrunner (Once)” on the A side, and the 1972 version listed as “Roadrunner (Twice)” on the B side (7–8). “Roadrunner once, roadrunner twice” are lines from the song—they precede two brief moments of stop time that interrupt the otherwise propulsive momentum in both recordings. A live version released in 1977 became “Roadrunner (Thrice).” By the time this song—his most iconic composition—was finally released, Richman had largely abandoned it and his early sound. All three versions are semi-extemporized accounts of driving around Boston at night with rock ‘n’ roll radio as the soundtrack. The songs within the song lend a kind of poetry to the sights Richman points out—the Route 128 beltway around Boston, the Stop & Shop, the neon, the modern moonlight, the suburbs. The radio also keeps the song’s solitary motorist company (“don’t feel so alone”). As Clover summarizes, “The theme is, *What I saw while driving around*” (11). It is also a rock ‘n’ roll song about the transcendent power of rock ‘n’ roll songs, or again, in Clover’s words, a “foundational story for rock & roll, a folktale” (26).

Clover’s account of “Roadrunner” quickly steers readers off the main thoroughfare onto less-traveled byways. One might have expected him to dwell on the influence of the Velvet Underground, a band Richman reportedly saw as many as 80 times live, and briefly followed to New York from his home in Massachusetts. In its harmonic simplicity and list of rearrangeable lyrical lines, “Roadrunner,” it is often pointed out, resembles “Sister Ray.” Jerry Harrison’s prominent organ solo on the Modern Lovers tune recalls Cale’s on the Velvet’s song. Given the Modern Lovers’ influence on early punk, one might expect Clover to dwell on the song’s immediate legacy, perhaps offering a thick

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description of the Sex Pistols' 1979 cover version from *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. One might expect a discussion of what happened to the Modern Lovers' classic lineup: Harrison later joined the Talking Heads, while drummer David Robinson went on to form The Cars. A close read of the latter band's 1984 hit "Drive" would seem an obvious thing to compare to "Roadrunner." All of the information I've just conveyed in this paragraph appears in the book, but Clover is not content to give us the conventional wisdom. He moves past this information swiftly, and then veers in unexpected directions.

Chapter 3 turns to the career of Chuck Berry, who, by Clover's own admission, "doesn't appear in 'Roadrunner.' No singers appear, and no songs, not by name" (32). But Berry is convincingly presented as the 1950s ethos named in Richman's lyrics, where "the spirit of 1956" is "patient in the bushes next to '57." Berry left what is arguably the greatest catalogue of automobile songs, two of which—"Maybellene" and "No Particular Place to Go"—Clover considers in some detail. Clover also notes smaller connections between Richman and Berry. Berry opened his 1957 "Sweet Little Sixteen" with a nod to Richman's beloved home city: "They're really rockin' in Boston." Richman covered Berry's "Back in the U.S.A." on the 1976 album *Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers*. In Chapters 4 and 5, Clover moves from influences on Richman to later recurrences of "Roadrunner." Chapter 5 considers the career of British Tamil rapper M.I.A., who opened her 2007 sophomore release *Kala* by quoting the first lines of "Roadrunner." Richman sped around the city of Boston—M.I.A. declares herself a "world runner" in the song "Bamboo Banga," listing international locales. Chapter 4 contains what is perhaps Clover's most surprising detour: a discussion of "Brimful of Asha," the 1997 hit by Britpop act Cornershop, fronted by Tjinder Singh. "Brimful" has no obvious biographical connection or lyrical reference to Richman's song—it is a tribute to the great Indian playback singer Asha Bhosle. But Clover convincingly argues that it is nevertheless "Singh's version of 'Roadrunner' come back as a global idea" (66). Clover links the two songs through their shared use of extemporized lists and call-and-response outros. Richman lists the sights and sounds of Boston's inner beltway, with the Modern Lovers responding "radio on." Singh lists names of Bollywood stars, among other things, with his Cornershop bandmates responding "forty-five."

Clover uses details from each song as portals into larger histories. Richman's account of driving on Massachusetts Route 128 around Boston leads Clover to a history of the city from seventeenth-century English settlement to nineteenth-century textile mills. Singh's titular mention of Bhosle leads to a discussion of playback singers in Bollywood film. A track on M.I.A.'s *Kala* album leads Clover to accounts of twenty-first-century pandemics, beginning with avian influenza (the circulation of these diseases is likened to that of popular song). Clover is eager to point out smaller historical coincidences throughout the book. The Stop & Shop convenience store chain, which Richman mentions driving or walking by in every version of "Roadrunner," was named in 1942, the same year *Billboard* first used the phrase "rock-and-roll" (14). The 128 beltway opened just two years before the 45 rpm format was introduced (22). Clover reasons that the "college out there" glimpsed from Route 128 and named in the live version of "Roadrunner" must be the University of Massachusetts Amherst, whose special collections library now houses Richman's papers (31).

Occasionally, Clover seems to deliberately obscure or temporarily withhold his rationale for including topics, artists, songs, or histories in the book. For example, we're 14 pages into the chapter on M.I.A. before we learn that she quotes "Roadrunner" in one of her songs. What might be considered basic background information is similarly delayed—the clearest description of the Modern Lovers' classic lineup appears on Page III, less than 10 pages before the end of the final chapter. Clover's insights are clever enough and his writing is poetic enough that we're willing to ride along, even when we think he may have gotten off course. It may be that the arguably jumbled arrangement of material in the chapters resembles Richman's delivery—*what I saw while driving around is what occurred to me while writing about these songs*. Indeed, I can hear the long list at the end of Chapter 2—a full paragraph with no sentence breaks—delivered in Richman's voice, with the Modern Lovers shouting "radio on" after each item (28).

Roadrunner is the inaugural title in Duke University Press's new Singles series, co-edited by Emily Lordi and Clover himself. With its modest page count, compact square shape, and focused topic, Singles invites comparison to Bloomsbury's long-running 33 1/3 series of volumes on albums. As I write, volumes by Eric Weisbard on Leiber & Stoller's "Hound Dog" and by Chris Molanphy on "Old Town Road" are slated for publication in the Singles series. According to Duke's website, each will provide "a complex story about a single song."¹ Clover has certainly delivered on this promise. And several of his insights, taken together, might help us to infer a theory of the single: it exists independently of an album, circulating historically through the radio and the 45. That's why those call-and-response outros of "Roadrunner" and "Brimful of Asha" are so significant. For Clover, the single is, paradoxically, "singular in its multiplicity" (22). Its mass replication and circulation enable individual and collective listening. It has the potential to "sew space and time together into the shared experience of everybody in the dark listening to the same thing" (24). Or, in Richman's words, "I'm in love with the radio on, it helps me from being alone late at night."

Great song, great book. Clover has set the bar high for this new series.

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1. Duke University Press. Series Details. <https://www.dukeupress.edu/series/Singles>.