MÉNÉALITÉS is one of those terrific contemporary French terms that suavely reduce to a word what remains difficult to say in an ungainly English sentence or two. When employed, mostly by cultural historians, it is meant to convey a given society's worldview and sensibility, along with the more inward habits of thought and feeling as they develop among ordinary men and women during particular historical moments. In a way, these historians are doing the work we have come to expect from good novelists: delineating the cultural manifestations, practices and shifts of a given epoch through the detailed stories of individuals, and exploring how those manifestations, practices and shifts -- fairy tales, joke telling, the rising importance of newspapers -- shape interior life.

A hundred, two hundred years from now, a historian of our mentalité might well want to investigate the role played by recordings of popular music. How did those four-minute songs, listened to while driving or walking, at gatherings or in the privacy of a bedroom, by youths especially (or those wishing to feel youthful); heard over and over again and then abandoned (but never forgotten) for new songs (and what heralds newness, exactly?); these songs, the tens of thousands of them: how did they bind people together culturally, and how did they resound in the deepest reaches of the self?

That historian's work will be made a whole lot easier if...
Nick Hornby is still in print. Hornby's "High Fidelity," published in 1995, is a great English comic novel, but also an extraordinarily perceptive inquiry into the ways pop music can shape and bend being. From the book's first sentence, it's frighteningly (and hilariously) clear that Rob, the 30-something narrator, has gravely internalized the habitudes of rock: he's essentially reduced the failed romances of his youth to "my desert-island, all-time, top five most memorable split-ups." Records are more than his job, though he does own a not-quite-for-profit north London shop for the discerning collector of vinyl, and they are more than what keeps him company, though he is lonely enough to spend too many evenings reorganizing his own vast collection. Listening to records day in, day out, has, in a very real sense, reordered his temperament, as Rob himself comes to understand: "Maybe we all live life at too high a pitch, those of us who absorb emotional things all day, and as a consequence we can never feel merely content: we have to be unhappy, or ecstatically, head-over-heels happy. . . . Maybe Al Green is directly responsible for more than I ever realized." That, as any music freak would acknowledge, is a No. 1 all-time insight.

Rob is an extreme case, true -- how many guys find it comforting that no one can figure out that their records are arranged according to the date of purchase? -- but it's the intensity of his syndrome that is rare, not its instance. That, essentially, is the theme Hornby develops variations on in the 26 brief essays, each devoted to a pop recording or two, that constitute his small, singular and delightfully passionate new book. "Songbook" is a kind of prose equivalent of a mix-tape -- as the cover, with its evocation of a hand-labeled jewel-case insert, beautifully imparts. The writing isn't music criticism: Hornby isn't all that interested in trends in music, or the unfolding careers of the artists making the music, or the discourse, such as it is, about music. He is interested in -- no, taken by -- songs.

He hears Nelly Furtado's "I'm Like a Bird" on the radio, buys the CD and listens to it 10 or 15 times a day. He is sure he will be tired of it in a few weeks, tops, but for now its sheer freshness, the sense of change and possibility that it conveys, is enough: "The point is that a few months ago it didn't exist . . . and now here it is, and that, in itself, is a small miracle." Then, as he sits in a doctor's waiting room one day, another miracle: four Afro-Caribbean girls sitting across from him begin singing the song together. He felt for a moment "as though we all lived in the same world" -- which is not pop criticism but pop theology.
Actually, more than once in "Songbook" Hornby writes of records as vehicles for approaching something like the divine: "I try not to believe in God, of course, but sometimes things happen in music, in songs, that bring me up short, make me do a double take." What will the "explicit content" scolds make of that?!?

But back to earth: songs, Hornby observes, can make you aware of your complacency (Led Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker"). Songs can reinforce your ignoble sense of self-pity (Aimee Mann's "I've Had It"). Songs don't tend to remind you of specific places or lovers, unless you are someone who doesn't care enough about songs. All songs remind you of, if you love them, is of themselves, and of yourself -- "that is to say, of nothing much and too much." The song that especially does that for Hornby is Bruce Springsteen's "Thunder Road," which he has listened to, he figures, about 1,500 times.

The subtext of "Songbook" is that Hornby has entered middle age, and still wouldn't think of hauling his records up to the attic. He can't stand it when his friends start going on about how they've tired of pop and discovered the oh-so-grown-up satisfactions of classical music -- "shouldn't we be sick of the 'Moonlight' Sonata by now?"

He goes through a painful divorce, and Jackson Browne for the first time sounds bearable to him -- more than bearable, soulful. Intimations of mortality provide an excellent reason to consider what recording he'd like to have played at his funeral: Van Morrison's "Caravan," the version on "It's Too Late to Stop Now," that is, though he does worry whether the string-section bit will be taken by those friends of his as a sign of a deathbed conversion to classical.

His one profound worry, in truth, is his young son, Danny, who is autistic and can barely communicate. (Proceeds from the book benefit children's educational organizations in London and San Francisco.) Danny's relationship to music is different from his dad's, but, not surprisingly, no less intense: he has to listen before he goes to sleep at night, he wanders the house with a portable cassette player, the volume cranked, and he goes to his room sometimes to listen to songs more carefully, his head lowered onto his player's speaker. What can he be hearing? What can the music be saying to him?

Perhaps, Hornby suggests, what Danny is listening so intently for is that something everyone longs for from a song -- that "something in him that he wants others to articulate."
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