

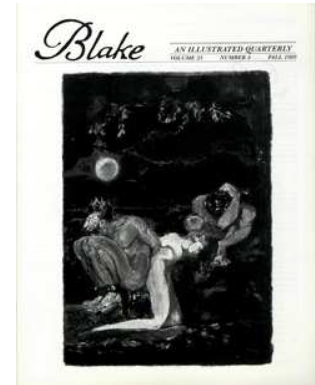
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R E V I E W

Greg Brown, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*

Alexander S. Gourlay

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But this was mostly a dramatic presentation, the three actors flinging themselves about the stage in the kind of ecstatic postures of "William" and "Robert" depicted in *Milton*. Things settled down, though, for the Memorable Fancies which gave them stronger character and more conventional narrative to follow. Isaiah was played as pompous and illusory to the Blakean protagonist, whilst Ezekiel became lying and pretentious. Debatable as these interpretations may be, it did make good theatre. Indeed, considering the drama of much of Blake's work, I wonder how more has not found its way onto the stage.

"Energy," they finally cried, "is eternal delight," tearing away the shrouds to reveal painted fire over all the walls. A powerful and visual performance, then, of Blake's Hell with all its heavenly delights. Corrosive stuff!

Greg Brown, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Red House Records, RHR14, 1986. Cassette, \$9.00, LP \$9.00.

Reviewed by Alexander S. Gourlay

Greg Brown's contributions to the growing number of musical arrangements for Blake's *Songs* will be of interest not only to students and teachers of Blake, but also to everyone who thinks about the relationship between lyric poems and popular songs. Brown is most familiar to national audiences from Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion*, where he appeared as a musical celebrator of small-town midwestern life. He is a singer and guitarist, and writes exceedingly diverse songs on a variety of subjects other than small-town life. These range from jazz ballads to spare country songs in the manner of Jimmie Rodgers to imitations of traditional songs so authentic-sounding that they are sometimes taken by folk purists to be as old as the hills. His biggest commercial hit so far was recorded by Carlos Santana and Willie Nelson in an improbable duet.¹

On this recording of sixteen arrangements of the *Songs* Brown is very ably accompanied by Angus Foster on bass, Michael Doucet on violin, Peter Ostroushko on violin and mandolin, and Dave Moore on button accordion, harmonica, and pan pipes; the last two musicians, both regulars on *Prairie Home Companion*, are also songwriters and solo artists with their own followings. These performances have been arranged only loosely;

Brown's singing and guitar are backed up by accompaniments that sound largely improvised. If Brown followed his usual practice, he and the sidemen settled on ad hoc arrangements in rehearsal, probably in the studio, and then recorded the bulk of the parts together in a single take. This procedure gives the recordings an entirely appropriate feeling of spontaneity and informality, even if it results as well in occasional moments of aimless noodling; these performers are all experts at improvisation, and some of them have worked with Brown for years.

Brown's settings are extraordinary in several respects. For one thing, this seems to me to be by far the most successful attempt ever to put the *Songs* to something like traditional popular melodies (I don't recognize any wholesale borrowings, but the songs incorporate jazz, blues, Irish fiddle tunes and many other things here and there). Brown's background as a popular songwriter is evident in the dexterous weighing of the rhythm, stress, meter, and melody in his phrasing; the results will startle those accustomed to art-song arrangements of these and similar lyric poems, which tend to work against the grain of the spoken word. Although Brown was aware of the work of Ralph Vaughan Williams and others, he reports in conversation that he paid no attention to previous settings; nor did he attempt to be authentic in any historical sense. Most listeners will agree that these performances are not only extraordinarily sensitive to Blake's complexities and ironies, and that some work as popular songs in their own right, but also that they are authentic in spirit, reflecting music in the air today (and relatively modern instrumentation) as well as melodies that were around in eighteenth-century London.

Brown's bass-baritone voice might appear to present a difficulty in that it obviously can't cover all the personae called for by the *Songs*, but this is not as serious a problem as it might seem. For example, "The Lamb" must be understood as having an innocent speaker, presumably the boy shown in the illustration. But Brown's performance in deep, rolling tones interposes an inconsequential additional distance, and the effect is successful—far more successful than, say, a formal performance of the song by even the most accomplished child. At the same time, the melody is simple enough that we can imagine a boy singing it to himself, or to a lamb.

This is a consistently thoughtful and sensitive treatment of the *Songs*, even if it was undertaken in a spirit of genial distaste for most Blake criticism and is never merely reverent. Brown sometimes makes minor changes and additions in the individual songs in order to create verses and choruses, but he is mostly careful with Blake's words and the work in general evinces a subtle reader's appreciation of his ironies. Certainly the



choice of songs reflects a better understanding of the contrary states than the typical selection in poetry anthologies. One side of the record is devoted to "Innocence" ("Introduction," "The Lamb," "Infant Joy," "The Chimney Sweeper," "The Ecchoing Green," "Night," "On Anothers Sorrow"), and the other to "Experience" ("The Tyger," "The Angel," "The Garden of Love," "Infant Sorrow," "Holy Thursday," "Ah! Sun-

flower," "The Little Vagabond," "The Poison Tree," "London").

At one point in writing this review I contemplated adapting Coleridge's graphic grading system for the original *Songs*—"Night," for instance, doesn't do much for me, whereas the rollicking "Little Vagabond" seems just right—but listeners can surely make judgments about individual performances for themselves. Not all

the ensemble performances are equally satisfactory, and I sometimes found myself preferring some sparer arrangements that Brown recorded informally a few years ago. But even the songs that don't quite work are illuminating, especially because Brown finds so many ways to complement and complicate the metrical stresses—as I listened to this record, I couldn't help feeling that I didn't know the poems as well as I thought I did.

This should also be a useful tool in teaching. W. J. T. Mitchell reports that he sings the songs himself to his own arrangements when teaching them, and for those with his talents that is probably the best approach. But Brown's performances (and perhaps his arrangements) may help many of the rest of us who teach the *Songs* to students who are not yet comfortable with poetry on the page, especially because these versions are so unthreatening and their idiom is so familiar to students. One runs the risk, of course, of fixing their imaginations upon one interpretation of the poems, but one also gains from having them hear them as songs, and catchy songs at that.

The record is on a minor label, Red House Records, but it is distributed by Rounder Records on the East Coast and can be obtained through record stores almost anywhere. Or, write to Red House Records at P. O. Box 4044, St. Paul, MN 55104.

The song, "They All Went to Mexico," was released as a single (and made the Top Ten in the Netherlands); it appears on Nelson's *Half Nelson* LP on Columbia and on Santana's *Havana Moon*, also on Columbia.

Dan Miller, Mark Bracher, and Donald Ault, eds. *Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1987). \$45.00 cloth/\$17.95 paper.

Reviewed by Anne K. Mellor

It is the argument of this uneven collection of essays that modern critical theory provides us with new and necessary ways to interpret Blake's poetry and art. While no one would argue with that in principle, too many of these essays take this occasion to summarize at length by now familiar critical methods, from the Chicago School

of Aristotelian formalism and Derridean deconstruction through Lacanian psychoanalysis to Marxism and feminism, for their own sakes, rather than using them with subtlety and originality to produce understandings and interpretations of Blake's work that enhance our reading or viewing experience. There are some notable exceptions—fine essays by Hazard Adams, Nelson Hilton, Elizabeth Langland, and David Aers—to which I shall return.

The general tone of the volume is set by Dan Miller in his introduction, a rather florid, impressionistic meditation on methods and divergent paths which says little more than that the criticism of Blake reflects the critical variety present everywhere in the discipline and that all readings of Blake, as of any author, are inherently theoretical and therefore biased. Stephen Cox's "Methods and Limitations" strenuously recovers much of this same ground by insisting that critics must be aware of the ways in which their own theoretical assumptions and

CRITICAL
PATHS



BLAKE
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Dan Miller, Mark Bracher,
and Donald Ault, editors