



Lisa Fischer - "protagoniste" of the film.  
Extraordinary back-up singer

## Background Vocalists in a Choreographic Theatre

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During the 2017 [Pantiheatre Chile](#) project in Santiago, we watched the film *20 feet from stardom*, by Morgan Neville, 2014 Oscar and Grammy for the best long documentary <sup>1</sup>. It is a thoroughly Hollywood film, "a poem dedicated to pop and soul choristers ... those singing at the back of the stage, twenty steps behind the stars. Springsteen, Sting, Stevie Wonder, Mick Jagger..." In this film all four have reached a certain age, and I must say, they speak with experienced respect. Not so some of the other figures; some, outright crapulous.



Ray Charles et les Raelettes

I suggested we watched this film as a prelude to the Paris professional workshop on [Voice Performance and Music](#), and make it a starting point to reflect on the chorus, the *background vocalists*, also called *back-up singers*: the voices at the back of the stage, in the backdrop. The proposal was to watch the film from the point of view of a choreographic theater and listen to the voices with *metaphysical ears*, or, as Steven Connor would put it, as a cultural phenomenon of ventriloquism, as a sibylline phenomenon <sup>2</sup>. Where do these voices emerge from? Who are they? What is their role and place? To whom do they belong? What do they say?

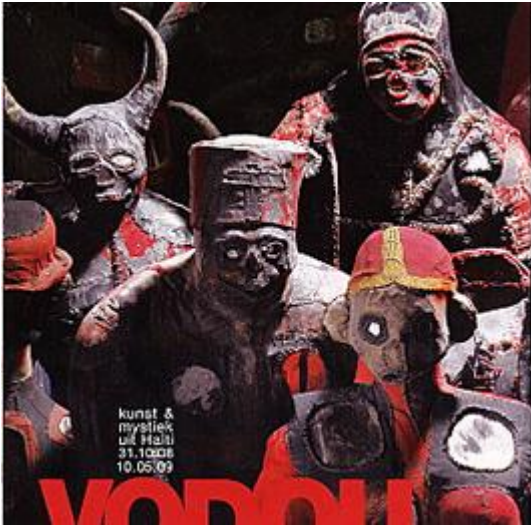
Several singers in the film speak about spirituality, and the film begins with the roots of soul music in gospel singing, in the hymns of what was called negro spirituals. The background to this spirituality is fundamentally Protestant and it was betrayed by the soul music of the 1960s - and I would add: betrayed at long last by the spirits of Africa! The singers who were called *crossover* (implying double-crossers, traitors) were the ones who started using Protestant Gospel hymns to celebrate Eros and sexuality, with the same music, the same hymns, and often even the same words! I am thinking for example of Ray Charles and Sam Cooke - both ex-choir-boys. They were violently taken to task and banished by their religious communities <sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The film is easy to watch on internet – with translations and subtitles.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Connor, *DUMBSTRUCK, A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*.

<sup>3</sup> Music, and especially singing, have been demonized cyclically in Judeo-Christianity history. The Chilean actor and singer, Gabriel Cañas, reminded me that the Bible's Lucifer was the Minister of Singing and chief conductor of the celestial choirs - and that he was banished from heaven for musical insurrection and excessive soloist ambition! I checked and it is in the Bible. The angelic, honey-voice Sam Cooke, the king of melisma, was murdered in "diabolical" and crapulous circumstances.

I have written often about the importance of this schism, crucial in the history of the voice and of singing, and also crucial in relation to the very notion of Soul / Psyche <sup>4</sup>. The subversive reversal of the notion of soul by Afro-Americans has major implications for the "theology" of the voice and of the very notion of singing. "Singing" was also how Roy Hart called his practice and especially his philosophy of the voice; he also often used the notion of soul. The triangle formed by Afro-Soul / Protestantism / Roy Hart is a complex one <sup>5</sup>. In relation to Roy Hart, I have expressed my discomfort with the proposals of a franchise-type school



Vodou petra choir. Haïti.  
Tropen Museum Amsterdam 2009

for his teaching, but also with what I sometimes feel as a spiritual and therapeutic drift - an excessive emphasis and worship of feeling, of a Protestant-evangelist singing kind. I seem to protest against a certain Protestantism! <sup>6</sup>

I propose that the way we listen to the voices of these soul vocalists (who are never very far from vodou), and also to the voices of the tragic choir, to the voices of sirens, of sibyls (very important!), to the voices of spirits, must be not so much in terms of spirituality but rather in terms of spiritism. To this end we must redefine spiritism (and spirituality) to open alternative forms and priorities of listening and of dramaturgical interpretation. I will come back to this, especially in the practice of laboratories. It is crucial to understand the role we are giving to the voice in voice performance and especially in choreographic theater.



The Rolling Stones  
Mick Jagger and Liza Fischer  
Voodoo Lounge

The principle of the chorus is, of course, inherent to the notion of a "choreographic theater" - although the term *choreography* is a relatively recent invention (18th century) and refers mainly to dance - a silent choir, one which, historically, danced in emphasis or illustration, at any rate to the cadence of music. This is far from what we practice, as is much of contemporary dance performance.

There are two other notions that often come up in the film's comments, both relating to the 20 feet, the twenty steps that separate the choristers from the stardom of the soloists: ego and narcissism. Bruce Springsteen even speaks, at the very beginning of the film, of a "conceptual difference" between the front stage and the 20 steps back. We need to analyse these hierarchies in order to redefine them in our own (very different) artistic set-ups and priorities.

<sup>4</sup> See the titles and résumés of the May and June 2016 seminars : [Soul-Anima-Esprit-Psyche](#) // [Who-and-What-is-Psyche ?](#)

<sup>5</sup> See : [La Voix, Le Chant et le Protestantisme](#) (with English translation)

<sup>6</sup> I wrote, on request, an abridged, polemical proposal on the philosophy of Roy Hart: "Singing as defined by Alfred Wolfsohn and Roy Hart is an extraordinarily idealistic and demanding proposition. I am particularly interested in his Talmudic foundations. Since his death in 1975, Protestant enthusiasm has often taken over: its cult worship is also called singing. Dixit a baroque and neo-pagan goy. For those who do not know, goy is the Hebrew term for a non-Jew (a Christian). Roy Hart once referred to me as a goy - of the Catholic baroque, "neo-pagan" type... which was correct. Judaism was very important to him, as was the question of Israel, but this would take us too far from our subject...

I invited us also to watch the film without dwelling on the political injustices and emotions of the star system, on the sociology of celebrity, of machismo in the world of rock, or the abuse of the "anonymous workers of the voice", which for the most part were women, and black, an important factor for our purposes. The idea was, as mentioned, to listen with metaphysical ears, or, as Steven Connor would suggest: on the principle of ventriloquism. Where do these voices come from? To whom do they belong?



Milan Laboratory

A vocalist is a chorister, and the background referred to is the horizontal one: these voices emerge from behind, from the backdrop: twenty steps back. My proposal is to broaden these reflections to other dimensions - especially, of course, to vertical "drops" to what we call depths. And more generally, the opening is to all the different depths and funds: the hidden treasures, the vaults, the undeclared funds, the occult shadows, the invisible shallows, the cultural funds and foundations, the concealed deals, etc... In fact, the proposal is that these choir voices, are the voices who carry the dramaturgical "background" power in a choreographic theater –perhaps the most important voices, the one that gives depth to performance.

The idea is, therefore, that of an analogical transfer of the role the choristers play in popular music to choreographic theater. Especially in rock and soul (but also in opera and tragedy) the vocalists sing mostly in echo and sybilic modes – with subtle undertones, from emphatic support to underhand ironies to diabolic takeovers. In choreographic theatre the choice is wide open, including what I call disjunctive redun-dance: dissociation, counterpoint, war, indifference, divorce between stage and orchestra, reaching for new definitions and interplays between the voices of dance, text and music.

We arrive at alternative principles and forms of listening, to definitions of the voice as in-depth manifestation of thought, or even of identity - echoing, this time philosophically, the notion of voice as used by Derrida, among others. Echoing also Alfred Wolfsohn and Roy Hart, who were particularly fond of the romantic quotation: "The voice is the muscle of the soul". For our purpose, such an amplification of the voice of the background vocalists is part of listening to the voice of music – that is, to figure out who is the music, figure out its identity, and from there perhaps to figure out what it is telling us<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> For my part, and I often say so, I particularly like a quote from Giorgio Agamben, reported by Jean Luc Nancy: "Listening to the voice in speech is what thinking is all about." We are in the line of Husserl and Heidegger, a line taken up by Jacques Derrida, notably in *La Voix et le Phénomène*. These are all philosophers of the voice - and of music.



Milan Laboratory

Again, and to finish, it is a matter of personifying the voice and music of the chorus, discerning its identity, and figuring out what it has to say. The background voices may sound twenty steps behind, so near to the here and now of the hero's present, but they carry messages that come from the historical and mythical past, maybe light years away in the mysteries of time, past and future. It is this oracular understanding of the chorus that makes me say they are the most powerful voices, the ones who know better. The hierarchies reflects a scale of knowledge, or call it conscience, or foreknowledge, similar to that of the chorus in Greek tragedy, where it tends to be more actual-political, even realistic (the elders, the family, the village women, etc.). Such a chorus has a more detached or

shared-enough voice, to be able to comment, warn, console or "back-up" the protagonist, the hero, the soloist. In choreographic theatre the chorus is given even more oracular power – divine, divinatory rank. The sequential journey of its voices would be one that goes down from background to underground, and from underground to underworld. The voices rise from this *nekyia* – descent sequence. They bring up messages from the underworld depths, up to the underground movements (cryptic, rebellious, obscure), all the way up to those 20 feet – right behind the heroes<sup>8</sup>.

## CODA – Hollywood

My friends know I rarely see films, hardly ever go to the movies, and that one of the things that makes me cringe, sometimes violently so, is the use of "background" music in cinema - especially in the bulk of commercial films produced by Hollywood. Even in those rated as best, I feel the use of music is of very poor quality and often of bad faith emotional manipulation. One thing I would agree with Hollywood is that music has magical power. As mentioned, in the laboratory crafts, I ask the performers to give music, the voice of music, supreme power, or, in a mythological way, to consider that it is the voice of the gods. What God? What goddess? This is the "background" question of the critical, cultural work<sup>9</sup>.

Concerning the film *20 feet from stardom*, I admit, especially in the use of background music (I'm talking about the background music in a documentary film about background music!), that I did not appreciate the film as craft. I think it is an aberration to put background music in a documentary; I even feel it even as an ethical transgression, for instance the music used in animals documentaries. It's like going on safari with selected music and headsets! When will we have music in zoos? I did not appreciate the cadence of the

<sup>8</sup> This is the mythological geography that James Hillman proposes as a preamble to his book *The Dream and The Underworld*, a geography on which I built the foundations of my notion and practice of a choreographic theater.

<sup>9</sup> There is a spicy reverse to the coin: in a laboratory session at the end of the 1980s, I criticized rather harshly a musicians' intervention. I said it was too sentimental. James Hillman who was present – all eyes and ears - jumped. He said, "Yes, but we are fifty here, and Bruce Springsteen, is probably giving a concert, sentimentality and all, for a hundred thousand spectators. Ouch. Since then I speak of "sentimental sophistication" as one of the aims of my work - referring also to the values of the *Second Sophistic*. Hillman, for his part, and very determinedly, especially after the huge successes ("with my ideas!") of two of his former students, Clarissa Pinkola-Estés and Thomas Moore, wrote *The Soul's Code* (1997) and made it to number one on the on the New York Times non-fiction list. The title was imposed by the publisher: in those days it was the word soul that sold! It is true that his psychology has always been described as "soul psychology", by his... neoplatonist friends. (In Italy, long before, his *Pan and the Nightmare*, was a best seller!)

editing either – the constant cross-fades, the changes of rhythm, in fact I did not like the "musical" mannerisms of the film, precisely...<sup>10</sup> I was going to bring up about the socio-psychology of the film, but I heard the voice of James Hillman stirring again, so I stop here my critics.

## POST-SCRIPTUM - The *Cumaean Sibyl*



Pamela & Fernanda Carreño  
*Artica y las Magnéticas*

The first thing I did upon arriving in Santiago (January 2017) was to go to a performance-concert-oratorio by *Artica y las Magnéticas*, a "sophisticated" rock band I had seen two years before and whose proposals I had greatly appreciated. This time it was at the GAM (the main cultural centre in Santiago) and I was impressed.

What is more, the two choristers Fernanda and Pamela Carreño, are background vocalists in more ways than one: Pamela is also a specialist, even an archaeologist of the voice, having done a thesis on the *The Cumaean Sibyl*! One of the fundamental points in Steven Connor's writings on voice (in the articles complementary to his book

DUMBSTRUCK- A Cultural History of Ventriloquism<sup>11</sup>), is his hypothesis that the legends of the oracular multiphonic polysemy of the Sybil's grotto - her mantic voices - have haunted and inspired a great deal of contemporary music composers, from Schoenberg to Stockhausen and up to the present day. The legends, because her voices and even the stories about her voices were repressed and obliterated by Christianity<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> It is in the Paris-Santiago flights (fourteen hours each way!), that I usually watch my two yearly movies. This time they were both exceptional, and both gave music a major role. Pedro Almodovar's *Hable con ella*, where he inserts in the middle of the film the swimming pool scene with Caetano Veloso singing *Cucurucucu*, as a ritual of emotional meditation. Magnificently daring, simple, magical (and apparently off the subject!) The other film is the documentary *Flamenco Flamenco*, by Carlos Saura. Equally magnificent and in a totally different way. This is a movie I would like to see in a cinema with the best quality image and sound system possible. I actually apprehend the emotional and musical power of its "duende" voices. Frankly: I fear for my heart!

<sup>11</sup> See the articles on <http://stevenconnor.com/dumbstruck.html>

<sup>12</sup> Op. Cit, Connor. The great vocal rift occurred with the very first dictate of the Fathers of the Church: "Silence the oracles!" and in particular the *Cumaean Sibyl*. The aim was to silence the background vocalists because they "knew too much" (the future, nothing less!), and they were competing with the voice of the super-soloist, the God of the Bible. In this case, it was worse than with Lucifer because they were women's voices. We are expecting Pamela and Fernanda Carreño at the June 2017 Festival to tell us more about the Sybil and about the background vocalists voices.