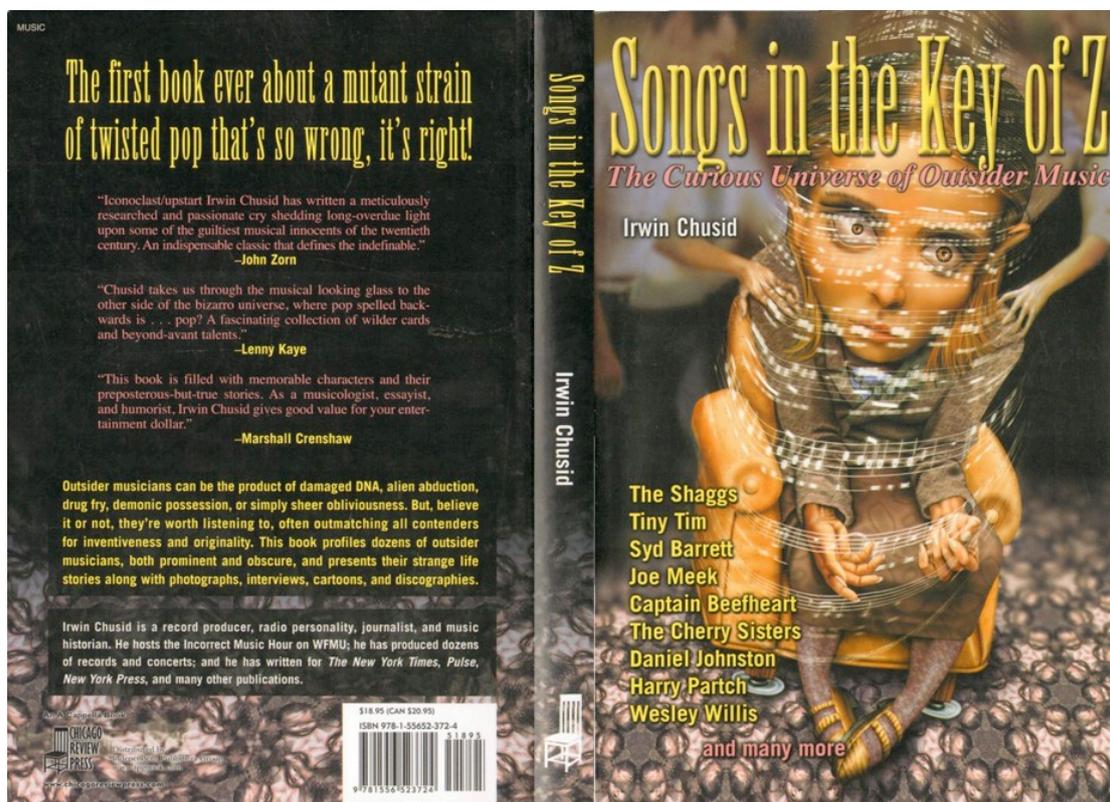


Songs in the Key of Z - The Curious World of Outsider Music, Irwin Chuswid [Cherry Red books]



"What were they thinking?" a comment often solicited to outsider musicians, a catchball term for musicians often dismissed as eccentrics, odd balls or lunatics. Unlike outsider art, a label for much that is also called folk art, Author Irwin Chuswid tells us outsider music isn't necessarily related to folk music yet it is a term related more pacifically to the fringes of pop that are naïve to the idea of good music and its techniques.

The book contains 20 in depth case studies of outsider musicians and 50 shorter overviews, some examples are famous such as captain Beefheart, Syd Barret, Tiny Tim ,some have gained noriety through the underground community such as Wesley Willis, Daniel Johnston ,B J Snowdon and Wilman Fischer. The funny thing about most of the music detailed here is that it "doesn't aim to be weird but the end result inevitably gets received that way".

This is a nice book to pick up and put down again, with 10 page chapters on each artist and an array of quirky photos and illustrations- it seems Chuswid has struck the fine

balance between light and informative reading. With a discography spanning over a dozen pages bibliography and online links Chuswid effectively documents the artist's histories with interviews, eyewitness reports and comments from enthusiasts.

In line with the informal presentation -Chuswid's narrative voice is light-hearted, asking the reader to see the funny side of this eclectic bunch. His informal tone makes good light reading but seems somewhat insensitive to the artists at times, for example Jandek and B.J Snowdon are described in terms of "imbecile" and "freak". When describing artists as having "ambition over technical ability and self awareness" as readers we are faced with an ethical dilemma: are we supposed to perceive the work of these artists in terms of "post 90s ironic condensation to those less than savvy", or are we as the book hints to enjoy "an uncalculated musical purity not tainted by the dirty hands of society"

Journalist Joe Hagan draws parallels between this publication and the launch of the theology of American folk music of the 1920's and 30's [which also revealed equally disturbing examples of madness and isolation]. He comments "Those of us searching for a thread of that rich unknowable music often lament the loss of some idyllic and unself conscious world whether it existed as we conceived is debatable".

The main fault of this book is Chuswid's persistent laxness of definitions- he often falls into the "everyone is an artist" trap without ever feeling the need to justify his opinions. If you found tapes of your grandmother singing 51 popular songs of the 20's it would automatically be by definition outsider art regardless of what it is textually or texturally, if there was something in the grandmother voice that captured the mind or heart then and only then can the discussion begin.

Not a complete and definitive exploration by any means, yet a study that manages to combine progressive attitudes towards musicality whilst being extremely accessible and entertaining to the average reader, throwing open the door to this beautiful intriguing and awful stuff. History as the director Tony philpott points out in the introduction is

"also made by losers". Chuswid has given them a microphone and cranked the amp up to 11. Finally the music world is catching up.