

GUEST EDITORIAL

Sarah Pinsker

THAT'S FAR OUT, SO YOU READ IT TOO?

Sheila asked me to write an editorial about science fiction and music, the two subjects that are always on my mind. It's good timing, too. I've just returned from Worldcon, where I was on a panel on SF's influence on David Bowie and David Bowie's influence on SF. We actually didn't get to the second half of the question at all; we didn't get much past 1974. Now I'm sitting in my living room in Baltimore, listening to the dog day cicadas contract and relax their tymbrals, vibrating their abdomens to create a sound that is at once song and biology.

Music is science fiction, science fiction is music. I can say this at a base level. I don't only mean that there is rhythm in sentences, that there is melody in word choice and paragraph and phrase, though I do believe that applies to any genre. I don't only mean that David Bowie synthesized the pulps and novels he read as a kid into songs that were at times almost verbatim retellings ("Karma Man," "We Are Hungry Men"), but eventually found his own science fictional story to tell, and then moved from there into writing songs that were as science fictional in their composition and arrangement as any of his lyrics ever were. I don't only mean that we as consumers of these works feel a kinship with those who created them, or that sometimes we make the mistake of elevating those creators. I don't only mean that the works exist in concrete form, but the creators are part of a community of creators, a community that overlaps with a community of fans, which itself gives birth to new fans and new creators.

Here are the ways music is science fiction:

Music is math. It has a basis in fact. The 1-3-5 notes that make up a major chord have the same relationship to each other no matter the root, the octave, the key, the instrument. The relationship between any two notes can be expressed in numbers. They are law, unchanging. It's those laws that tell us where we have room to explore.

Music is experimentation. The laws have been established, but there's room between them. Can I play that note over that chord? Where can I go within the structures? How can I create something new? What if new is too new? What if what I think is new has been said before? Does it matter that it is being revisited in my voice and my hands? How do I move from this note to the next, and which is the next anyway, and how can I turn a mistake, a sour note or flubbed chord, into something that works with the piece rather than fighting against it?

Music is math, but you don't need to know the math to make music. A good melody exists on its own, independent of the notes composing it or the emotions those notes stir in combination. Tell me a good story and underpin it with science. Tell me a good story and make me think it is underpinned with science. Make me forget science exists. Gravity is overrated; stories, like songs, can be weight or wings.

Here are the ways science fiction is music:

Science fiction is variation on a theme. It takes an idea and twists it, turns it, holds it to the light. The idea can be new or old; what counts is how you explore it. You can change the key, the instrument, the mode from major to minor to Phrygian. You can invert it, divert it, revert it, subvert it. Sharpen its claws or render it toothless. Send it to space. We all know the tropes by now, know where we expect a piece to go; it's the unexpected variations that render us breathless. "How did she do that?" we still wonder. We live to be amazed.

Science fiction is in conversation with itself. Like every musician in every genre of

music, SF writers study what came before. We don't necessarily call it study; we read, we listen, we absorb. We are drawn to our genres because we are fans of our genres, because at some point we read something that resonates like a bell, like a cicada's tymbal, calling to us from tree to tree. Sometimes we are drawn for the opposite reason, because a piece begs to be repudiated. We accept the established works or reject them, we build upon them and modulate them and respond to them. We dig into the unexplored corners, and once again hold them up to the light.

Science fiction constantly reinvents itself. It endures because we challenge it. It needs new voices alongside the established ones. It changes and changes again, then welcomes back its pioneers.

Science fiction as a genre is still composed of individual stories, individual novels, individual authors. The term is an umbrella. When we say we love a certain genre, part of what we mean is there are specific voices that speak to us over and over again. Their works become part of us.

Science fiction is built upon short works. The short works make up longer wholes. They play roles as lead-off or connective tissue or a closing statement. Good editors and savvy producers knit them into a cohesive whole. They can be recombined, put into new compilations or greatest hits collections, but most stories appeared first in the context of a magazine like this one.

Science fiction is music is science fiction. The kid who narrates Bowie's "Starman" is listening to the radio when a voice reaches out to him in a literal interpretation of the way music and storytelling have rescued us throughout human history. Every time we come to something new—an album, a live set, a magazine like this one—we renew our hope that the works contained will inspire and transport us, or just teach us something new about being human.