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English 146: Distracted Reading

Research Report: Mark Ronson's *Uptown Special*

Abstract:

Uptown Special, artist and producer Mark Ronson's fourth studio album, mixes the sounds of early R&B, funk and soul with the lyrics of Pulitzer Prize winning author Michael Chabon. Chabon, who has written such works as *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, pens the lyrics of all but two songs on Ronson's latest album. Ronson began writing his new album when he solicited Chabon's help upon realizing that he wanted lyrics that were "more ambitious, that were about more than heartache or the dance floor and actually told stories" (Guardian 2014). With this collaboration of written word and auditory sensations, listeners will experience a combining of the senses and a sort of consumption of writing that is non-visual. Listeners will also benefit from being well read, as Chabon's lyrics allude to works such as T.S. Elliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the biblical story of Samson and Delilah, locations from his novel *Telegraph Avenue* in Oakland, California, and other musical compositions like 20/20's "Yellow Pills" (Rolling Stone 2015). Listeners can experience the album via iTunes and other music sharing sites or may purchase a physical copy of the album, adding visual sensations to their overall experience.

Description:

The album has eleven tracks, nine of which Michael Chabon either contributed to the lyrics or wrote them entirely. There is also a lyric booklet available for listeners that names Chabon as the primary contributor and is purchased separately from the album. The album, which was released January 13th, 2015, became number one on the UK Albums Chart and debuted at number five on the US Billboard 200 list. The album sold a total of 76,727 copies within the first week. The album was widely well received, with critics noting how the album is drastically different from Ronson's previous three records. Critics have also pointed to the influence of Chabon's contribution, with Annie Galvin of *Slant Magazine* claiming, "Chabon's lyrics lend a novelistic shape to the rest of the album" (Slant 2015).

Listeners can access Ronson's album by purchasing a physical copy, listening on sharing sites (but many require subscriptions), torrenting online, or buying the vinyl record. More specifically, listeners can access Chabon's lyrics with the official booklet, free lyric sharing sites online, or in the additional written packet that comes with the physical copy. Although Chabon's contribution is not clearly stated in some of the platforms, listeners can easily find out about Chabon's work and analyze the lyrics with context.



Figure 1: Album Front Cover



Figure 2: Album Back Cover



Figure 3: Mark Ronson and Michael Chabon

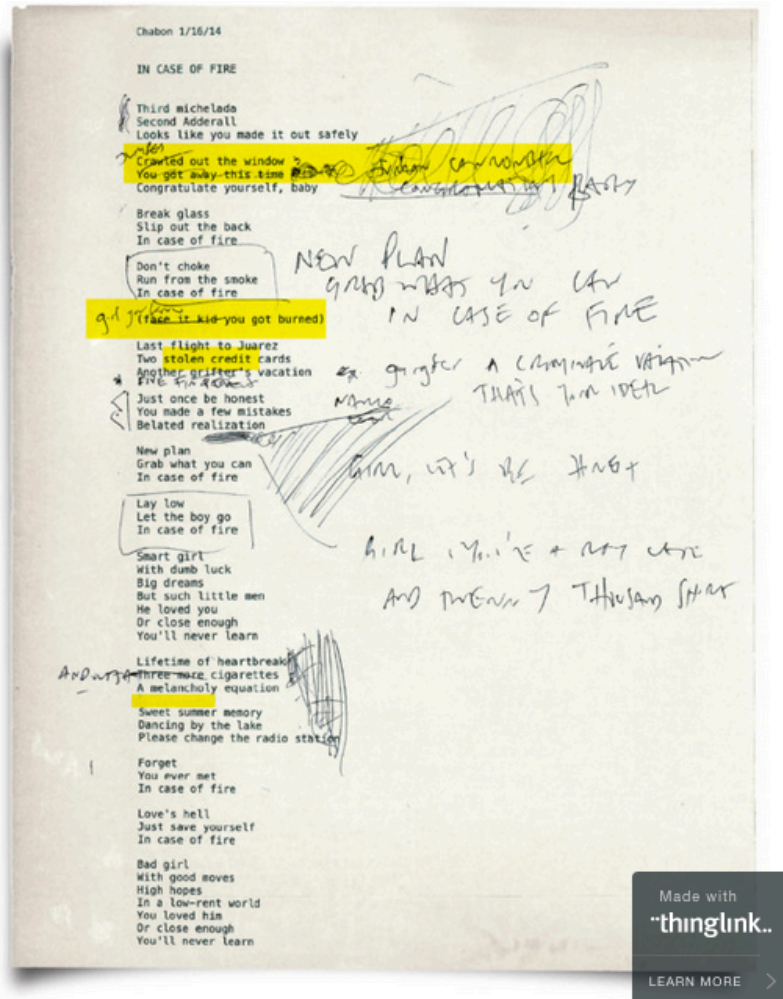


Figure 4: Annotation of Song, "In Case of Fire"



Figure 5: Poster of Song, "Daffodils" (Chabon Contribution)

Research Context:

Uptown Special is situated in a multimodal atmosphere where music, text, and images collide. Listeners can also become viewers through the additional writing and artwork that accompanies the physical CD. The project is significant in the analysis of people's responses to multiple, simultaneous platforms of entertainment. Questions can be made surrounding their active versus passive consumption, whether they more heavily relied on auditory or visual stimulation, or if Chabon's lyrics had a greater effect when the physical text accompanied the listener's consumption of the music.

As stated previously, listeners will benefit from being well read, as there are a multitude of allusions and references to both music and literature within Chabon's lyrics. This points to how the multimodality favors the critical thinkers, the academics, and those with a passion for literature. In the era of the iPod and Tablet, people are becoming more accustomed to the consumption of entertainment across multiple platforms. Their expectations of consuming on multiple levels change how producers of entertainment create their artistic products.

Additionally, the multimodality allows consumers of Chabon's work to discover Ronson's music and vice versa. There is an exchange of artistic platforms that gives consumers an opportunity to explore the less familiar. If a consumer is a fan of Ronson's music and they listen to *Uptown Special*, they have the chance to discover the artistry of Chabon's lyricism. This exchange encourages consumers to participate in independent exploration and to interact with the product.

Technical Analysis:

Uptown Special has eleven tracks and begins with "Uptown's First Finale", written in part by Chabon and featuring Stevie Wonder and Andrew Wyatt. Chabon's writing process was multifaceted and was not linear or constant. In some instances, Chabon wrote songs 'cold', "before Ronson had composed music" (The Guardian 2014). For other songs, Chabon was "sent a raw track and came up with lyrics to fit" (Guardian 2014). There is an intimate intertwining of language and music, text and sound that makes the modes reliant on each other.

Chabon additionally used the website Genius to annotate Ronson's tracks. Genius is a public, lyrical annotation site that allows for multiple contributors to a single project and interaction (albeit limited) with the artist. Chabon posted using the name Vanzorn, a pseudonym "frequently employed by Chabon" (Rolling Stone 2015). In terms of the technical aspects of his contribution to Ronson's album, Chabon's Genius annotations "give further insight into his foray into songwriting" (Rolling Stone 2015). Listeners are able to view Chabon's annotations online, giving them a more in-depth look into the making of the album. In this way, listeners are aware of both the production and consumption of the product.

Evaluation of Opportunities:

Ronson's collaboration with Chabon on *Uptown Special* provides an interesting starting point for research on the multimodality of music. Further investigation would be needed in regards to the influence of Chabon's contribution, as it is hard to measure how his lyrics impacted listeners' overall experience of the music. While music critics may be aware of Chabon's songwriting on Ronson's record, many listeners may not realize he penned most of the lyrics, especially if they are listening through a music-sharing site like Spotify. That being said, listeners do have the

possibility of accessing said lyrics through the booklet, online, or within the physical CD. Further investigation would also be valuable in regards to how many purchased the physical record versus how many listened through sharing outlets, although that is difficult to measure and define.

Another significant focus in the study of multimodality is how much consumers utilize the outlets offered. Listeners have the option of limiting the songs they listen to and this has the possibility to affect the way in which they consume the overall product. If consumers only listened to two tracks, would the overall affect of the imagery and novelistic style of lyricism change?

Resources for Further Study:

- Ellis, Hannah. "Mark Ronson Collaborates with Author Michael Chabon." *The Guardian*. N.p., Nov. 2014. Web.
- Galvin, Annie. "Mark Ronson: Uptown Special | Album Review | Slant Magazine." *Slant Magazine*. N.p., n.d. Web. June 2015.
- Kreps, Daniel. "Michael Chabon Annotated His Own Lyrics for Mark Ronson." *Rolling Stone*. N.p., 12 Feb. 2015. Web. June 2015.
- Levesley, David. "Michael Chabon's Pop Songwriting Tips." *The Daily Beast*. Newsweek/Daily Beast, n.d. Web. June 2015.
- Oloizia, Jeff. "Mark Ronson and Michael Chabon on the Making of 'Uptown Special'" *T Magazine* *Mark Ronson and Michael Chabon on the Making of Uptown Special Comments*. N.p., 20 Jan. 2015. Web. June 2015.