



Merritt, Stephin (b. 1966?) and the Magnetic Fields

by Matthew D. Johnson

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Featuring an openly gay singer-songwriter and an openly lesbian accompanist and chanteuse singing songs about love in all its permutations, the Magnetic Fields have produced some of the most critically acclaimed queer-themed popular music in recent memory.

Front man, composer, and lyricist Stephin Merritt was born in Yonkers, New York, likely around 1966, though his biographical details are sketchy and he will not publicly reveal his birthdate. A classically trained musician, he also had experience recording his own music on a four-track by his early teens. He attended film school and has even scored films.

Around 1990, while living in Boston, Merritt teamed up with college friends Sam Davol (cellist and flautist), John Woo (guitarist), and Claudia Gonson (pianist and drummer, as well as sometime vocalist and band manager) to form the Magnetic Fields as a vehicle for Merritt's prodigious songwriting talent. Their first record, *Distant Plastic Trees*, was released in the United Kingdom later that year.

The Fields' initial outings also featured vocalist Susan Amway interpreting Merritt's often brooding and vaguely confessional lyrics. On later records, Merritt began singing his own material, though he still frequently has other vocalists interpret his work.

Indeed, such vocal variation is a significant feature of his recorded output. On the album *Wasps' Nests* (1995), recorded by the 6ths (another band of Merritt's), twenty different singers interpret twenty different songs. Merritt, meanwhile, regularly covers other artists' work live as one-third of The Three Terrors, who give annual concerts in New York.

In his passion for song-craft and technical perfection, Merritt has cited ABBA, Irving Berlin, and Glenn Gould as among his most important influences. His compositions tend to use thin sounds to build up a "wall of sound," characteristic of producer Phil Spector's early 1960s outings with "girl groups" such as the Ronettes. This technique, along with the Fields' extensive use of electronic instrumentation on their earlier recordings (notably *Holiday*, 1993; *Get Lost*, 1995), had the effect of muting the range and richness of Merritt's voice, as well as obscuring his eloquent and often bitterly humorous lyrics. On more recent albums, which are characterized by their reliance on sparser arrangements and more acoustic sounds, notably Merritt's signature ukulele, these problems have been less noticeable.

By 1995 the members of the Magnetic Fields had moved from Boston to New York, where Merritt worked as a copy-editor for *Spin* and turned out acerbic and incisive music reviews for *Time Out New York*, and Claudia Gonson became a doctoral student in English literature at the City University of New York. Through several releases on minor labels, the Magnetic Fields as well as Merritt's other ensembles--the 6ths, the Gothic Archies, and Future Bible Heroes (the last featuring Gonson on vocals)--had received some critical attention but rather limited exposure.



Stephin Merritt in London in 2008.
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The breakthrough for the Magnetic Fields came in 1999 with *69 Love Songs*, a triple album that showcases Merritt's formidable talent and breadth as a songwriter. It also sheds a good deal of light on the enigmatic Merritt's preoccupations. Running the gamut of moods, from ardent to horny to ironic to pathetic, *69 Love Songs* covers (and even satirizes) genres from punk rock to experimental music, country-western, gospel, blues, and jazz. Its sixty-nine tracks (from whence the album's signally irreverent title is derived) contain paeans to Hollywood movie musicals of the 1930s ("Busby Berkeley Dreams"), murderous fantasies about linguists ("The Death of Ferdinand de Saussure"), and possibly the only love song ever written about Washington, D. C.

The entire songbook is underscored by the narrator's ambivalent stance towards love, sentimentally embracing its redemptive possibility on the one hand, yet cynically remarking upon its ephemeral nature on the other. It was voted album of the year by the *Village Voice*; its critical popularity led to the Fields' performing the album in its entirety live at Lincoln Center.

Like the work of many other gay popular musicians, Merritt's compositions rarely specify the gender of the object of affection (or for that matter, scorn). While only a few of the *69 Love Songs* are explicitly addressed by a man to a male lover as is "When My Boy Walks down the Street" ("Amazing / He's a whole new form of life / Blue eyes blazing / And he's going to be my wife"), nearly all the songs are directed at an anonymous "you" and readily lend themselves to appropriation by listeners of various sexual persuasions.

Merritt's open acknowledgment of his sexuality in the press has led to some fairly specious critical readings of his songs. Many critics have interpreted Merritt's mentions of marriage in his lyrics as the songwriter stumping for this institution to be extended to same-sex couples. Merritt has categorically rejected such interpretations and perennially plays down the influence of his sexuality on his compositions.

Yet in a 2000 interview with Barry Walters in the *Advocate*, Claudia Gonson negated such pronouncements by Merritt. She insisted that the sexual identities of the band members are intrinsic both to their work and to their audience. "I was straight when Stephin met me, and I'm gay now, which may have been influenced by the openness of hanging around with so many gay people," she reflected. "When we started Magnetic Fields we purposely had one lesbian, one gay guy, one straight woman, and one straight man. The audience could identify with whomever they wanted"

She added: "Regardless of what Stephin Merritt may say in an interview, his songs seem to be about loneliness, isolation, and the need to be recognized by another person. . . . I get tons of letters with people saying, 'As a young gay person who is developing an identity in the world, I would go to the Magnetic Fields for words of wisdom.'"

Additionally, the playful attitude with which Merritt selects vocal performers to interpret his compositions disposes them to be interpreted as queer. Gonson's vocals on "Acoustic Guitar" render it a self-indulgent lesbian folk manifesto ("Acoustic guitar, you can have your own car / Just bring me back my girl"). Meanwhile, Merritt supplies his own tremulous baritone for "Underwear," an encomium to both the "pretty girls" and the "pretty boys" who don it. And on the Magnetic Fields' most recent album, *i* (2004), Merritt sings "I Thought You Were My Boyfriend," a song musically and even thematically redolent of New Order's early work.

In 2005 Merritt collaborated on an adaptation of the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen with Chinese opera director Chen-Shi Zheng to be staged at Lincoln Center, and penned original songs inspired by the Lemony Snicket series of children's books. While critical reception of *i* was perhaps inevitably less overwhelmingly enthusiastic after the triumph of *69 Love Songs*, Stephin Merritt and the Magnetic Fields continue to enjoy considerable recognition and success.

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