



## NELLY FURTADO ♦ I'M LIKE A BIRD

**O**h, of course I can understand people dismissing pop music. I know that a lot of it, nearly all of it, is trashy, unimaginative, poorly written, slickly produced, inane, repetitive and juvenile (although at least four of these adjectives could be used to describe the incessant attacks on pop that you can still find in posh magazines and newspapers); I know too, believe me, that Cole Porter was “better” than Madonna or Travis, that most pop songs are aimed cynically at a target audience three decades younger than I am, that in any case the

golden age was thirty-five years ago and there has been very little of value since. It's just that there's this song I heard on the radio, and I bought the CD, and now I have to hear it ten or fifteen times a day...

That's the thing that puzzles me about those who feel that contemporary pop (and I use the word to encompass soul, reggae, country, rock—anything and everything that might be regarded as trashy) is beneath them, or behind them, or beyond them—some preposition denoting distance, anyway: does this mean that you never hear, or at least never enjoy, new songs, that everything you whistle or hum was written years, decades, centuries ago? Do you really deny yourselves the pleasure of mastering a tune (a pleasure, incidentally, that your generation is perhaps the first in the history of mankind to forego) because you are afraid it might make you look as if you don't know who Harold Bloom is?

Wow. I'll bet you're fun at parties.

The song that has been driving me pleurably potty for a while now is "I'm Like a Bird" by Nelly Furtado. Only history will judge whether Ms. Furtado turns out to be any kind of artist, and though I have my suspicions that she will not change the way we look at the world, I can't say that I'm very bothered: I will always be grateful to her for creating in me the narcotic need to hear her song again and again. It is, after all, a harmless need, easily satisfied, and there are few enough of those in the world. I don't even want to make a case for this song as opposed to any other—although I happen to think that it's a very good pop song, with a dreamy languor and a bruised optimism that immediately distinguishes it from its anemic and stunted peers. The point is that a few months ago it didn't exist, at least as far as we are concerned, and now here it is, and that, in itself, is a small miracle.

Dave Eggers has a theory that we play songs over and over, those of us who do, because we have to "solve" them, and it's true that in our early relationship with, and courtship of, a new song, there is a stage which is akin to a sort of emotional puzzlement. There's a little bit in "I'm Like a Bird," for example, about halfway through, where the voice is double-tracked on a phrase, and the effect—especially on someone who is not a musician, someone who loves and appreciates music but is baffled and seduced by even the simplest musical tricks—is rich and fresh and addictive.

Sure, it will seem thin and stale soon enough. Before very long I will have "solved" "I'm Like a Bird," and I won't want to hear it very much anymore—a three-minute pop song can only withhold its mysteries for so long, after all. So, yes, it's disposable, as if that makes any difference to anyone's perceptions of the value of pop music. But then, shouldn't we be sick of the

"Moonlight Sonata" by now? Or *Christina's World*? Or *The Importance of Being Earnest*? They're empty! Nothing left! We sucked 'em dry! That's what gets me: the very people who are snotty about the disposability of pop will go over and over again to see Lady Bracknell say "A handbag?" in a funny voice. They don't think that joke's exhausted itself? Maybe disposability is a sign of pop music's maturity, a recognition of its own limitations, rather than the converse. And anyway, I was sitting in a doctor's waiting room the other day, and four little Afro-Caribbean girls, patiently sitting out their mother's appointment, suddenly launched into Nelly Furtado's song. They were word-perfect, and they had a couple of dance moves, and they sung with enormous appetite and glee, and I liked it that we had something in common, temporarily; I felt as though we all lived in the same world, and that doesn't happen so often.

A couple of times a year I make myself a tape to play in the car, a tape full of all the new songs I've loved over the previous few months, and every time I finish one I can't believe that there'll be another. Yet there always is, and I can't wait for the next one; you only need a few hundred more things like that, and you've got a life worth living.