



## **Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste**

*Carl Wilson*

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Non-fans regard Céline Dion as ersatz and plastic, yet to those who love her, no one could be more real, with her impoverished childhood, her (creepy) manager-husband's struggle with cancer, her knack for howling out raw emotion. There's nothing cool about Céline Dion, and nothing clever. That's part of her appeal as an object of love or hatred — with most critics and committed music fans taking pleasure (or at least geeky solace) in their lofty contempt. This book documents Carl Wilson's brave and unprecedented year-long quest to find his inner Céline Dion fan, and explores how we define ourselves in the light of what we call good and bad, what we love and what we hate.

## Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste Details

Date : Published November 23rd 2007 by Bloomsbury Academic

ISBN : 9780826427885

Author : Carl Wilson

Format : Paperback 176 pages

Genre : Music, Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Criticism, Culture, Pop Culture



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## From Reader Review Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste for online ebook

### Sam Quixote says

Celine Dion.

What's your response? Like me, it's probably: ick. Right?

Well, you're not alone as nearly everyone seems to have this response to Dion mostly thanks to her obnoxious monster hit, My Heart Will Go On, from James Cameron's Titanic that won an Oscar and sold bazillions of copies worldwide. But chances are you won't have heard much of her music beyond that song, or know much about her as a person, and yet the response to Dion is still: ick. Why?

That's what Carl Wilson sets out to discover in his look at Dion's album Let's Talk About Love. But unlike the other books in the 33 ? series, Dion's album is barely touched upon as Wilson chooses instead to examine what "taste" is and how people form critical opinions in culture.

What Wilson does in the book is definitely interesting and laudable but I found his conclusions to be a little obvious and his approach a bit too academic at times. He basically comes to chastise himself for being too much of a snob to exclude Dion and pop music in general because he perceives it to be schmaltzy and decides to be more inclusive of his cultural intake - which is fine, but isn't an eye-opening revelation (not to me anyway as this is already my own personal approach to all things cultural) especially when that's what you'd expect in a book that sets itself up the way it has.

I appreciate the extensive research Wilson's put into his book like informing the reader of Dion's life and background, and putting her personality into the context of her Quebec upbringing - if nothing else, you'll come away knowing a lot about Dion as a person. But did we really need an entire chapter on schmaltz? I understand why it was included but some of the topics here have only the most tenuous connection to the basic thesis that my attention was strained at times throughout. As relatively short as the book is - 160 pages - I feel if Wilson had tightened it up a bit, it'd be a more satisfying read that'd be as informative.

But I did enjoy many sections of the book. I liked Wilson's autobiographical notes such as his trip to Las Vegas to watch one of Dion's last shows when she was a resident there and feeling momentarily touched by her singing, and that he wore headphones when listening to her music at home so his neighbours wouldn't know he was listening to Celine Dion. Also as a huge Elliott Smith fan, I appreciated his anecdote about how Smith always defended Dion after meeting her at the Oscars (his song Miss Misery was nominated the same year as My Heart Will Go On and Smith performed it before Dion came out) saying that he may not like her music but he respected her as a person for coming up to him pre-show and showing him a basic level of courtesy that no-one else did at the ceremony.

I think Wilson hit upon a really great idea with this book: take an album you have zero personal connection to and use it to examine music criticism itself, and for that alone it's a standout in the excellent 33 ? series. It's just that at times it's a little long-winded and it's conclusions aren't as inspired as the premise. If you want a thoughtful book that takes a nuanced look at music criticism and its faults, or an intellectual review of Dion's seemingly bland songs, Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste is worth a look.

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## **Mery\_B says**

¿En serio? ¿Un ensayo entero dedicado a Céline Dion?

Sigo sin ver la relación entre la portada y contraportada de la edición española y el contenido del libro, sinceramente. Me siento un poco estafada. Y ojiplática.  
Sobre todo ojiplática.

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## **Shannon says**

Holy Crap. Have I really just spent the last 3 days convincing my friends, loved ones and neighborhood shop keepers how misunderstood and really amazing Celine Dion is?. Thanks to this fantastic book, I have. I have touched those things and they felt so good! This may be my favorite book ever written about music, at least one of my favorites. Carl Wilson manages to drop Fanon and Kant all over the place and not be remotely pretentious! His writing style and perspective about taste and perception are spot on for me. I truly believe that Wilson loves music and I feel his love in this book about something he hates.

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## **John Moran says**

“Let’s Talk About Love” is a studious, A-plus paper on the topic of “taste,” but it’s also very dry, very quote-heavy, and very resistant (to use one of the author’s, Carl Wilson’s, own key words) to its own innate charms -- those charms being its personal touches: the book sparks to life in moments (like when Wilson flashes back to his ex-wife’s performance of Buddy Holly’s “Oh Boy” to express her feelings for her then-beau while in the throes of their infatuation; or when the author is besides himself during a Celine Dion concert, next to a weeping fan behind sunglasses). The author is well-read; the book feels impeccably-researched – but, for all the sourced quotations being thrown at the wall, sometimes it feels like a “whatever sticks” approach – Wilson’s own opinion gets lost amidst his citations. His sojourn to Las Vegas is promising – how he plans to interview Dion fans but finds himself too cowed to do so – but it never resolves itself in any dramatically satisfying way. At the end, he finds himself in a “can’t we all just get along?” posture that is heartening, but not nearly as fun as the early stages of his argument, when he is demarcating the boundaries of why certain groups take exception to certain other groups’ definitions of what defines “good taste” -- or, at least, “good times.”

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## **Paul Austin says**

The 33 1/3 series would seem to be pretty much bulletproof in terms of hipster cred. In the Aeroplane Over The Sea, OK Computer, Pink Moon, Rid of Me, Paul’s Boutique, Loveless, Meat is Murder... even if your own choices for an “essential/seminal albums” list are different, these titles all have a lot going for them. Older albums covered — Music From Big Pink, Forever Changes, Court and Spark, Dusty in Memphis — have for years been hailed by the new kids on the indie block as favorites. If Conor Oberst loves The Band and Calexico is covering Love, consider them vetted - and safe for display on your shelf. Even the 33 1/3

titles that would seem plum targets for the irony game — ABBA Gold, for one — have passed through the karaoke vortex and been certified cool. Stephin Merritt loves ABBA, so it's okay. No need to call it a guilty pleasure anymore — that reflexive defense can be retired and you can just call it pleasure.

But Celine Dion? And, more specifically, Let's Talk About Love, her plutonium-selling mega release that has "that Titanic song" on it, the one that clobbered Elliott Smith at the Oscars? I can't recall anyone name-checking Celine as an influence, likely because there isn't anything to be influenced by in her music. It's melodrama to the nth power, delivered by a voice so powerful it's almost a freak of nature; the songs are without a shred of subtlety and slickly produced by a large committee of hitmakers. "Music critics" ignore her; with nothing to disassemble and examine, and nothing inventive to shed light on, she's simply of no use to them.

But here she is selling scads of CDs; her fans are devoted and there sure are a lot of them. Obviousness? The experience for her fans is much simpler, and they don't worry such things; they just love the music. If you took an exit poll outside Dion's recently wrapped four-year residency in Vegas (four years of sold out shows, by the way), it's a fair guess not many of them know who Robert Christgau is, or why he might recommend they listen to a Pavement/Ornette Coleman/Daniel Johnston mixtape instead.

Whether you do or don't like Celine Dion's music, Carl Wilson's book is a terrific read; the subtitle on the cover (a nice pun on that "other" Celine), *A Journey to the End of Taste*, pretty much sums it up. Why do we like what we like? We all want to believe we have good taste, and to have our pals recognize that. "Taste," writes Wilson, "is a means of distinguishing ourselves from others, the pursuit of distinction. In early twenty-first-century terms, for most people under fifty, distinction boils down to cool." He's drawing from a lot of sources here — Pierre Bourdieu, Immanuel Kant, Walt Whitman and Naomi Klein are just a few of the high profile eggheads he brings into the mix.

To Wilson's credit, he's much more interested in the people who love Celine Dion's music than the people who hate it, and that's what drives the book. He's not calling anyone wrong, just trying to get a bead on why we like what we like. What social factors reinforce it? Studies show that males keep sentimentalism at bay, we're told, which is one reason why Dion's bombastic heartstring-tuggers appeal to a predominantly female audience; she also has a large gay following.

When Wilson attends a Celine Dion concert himself as part of his research, he admits the power and beauty of the music made him a bit misty eyed ("What was the point again of all that nasty, life-negating crap I like?" he wonders), and the fans he talks to aren't nearly as culturally "limited" as he might have supposed. They just like what they like, and they don't sweat the details. Come to think of it, that sounds pretty nice.

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## Abel says

Difícil de puntuar. ¿Lo dejamos en 2,5?

El caso es que 'Música de mierda' es por momentos un ensayo muy divertido en el que el bueno de Carl Wilson trata de encontrarle algo de sentido a ese (aparente) atentado estético que es el que alguien se decide a escuchar a Celine Dion sin que haya violencia de por medio. Pero a medida que avanzan las páginas a uno le empieza a entrar la sensación de que se puede justificar cualquier cosa sobre el papel, aunque esas afirmaciones luego no se sostengan en el mundo real.

De algún modo, y aunque no tenga nada que ver en su temática, me recordó al libro 'Filosofía zombi' de Jorge Fernández Gonzalo. Aquel era un ensayo muy bien trabado, interesante y con conclusiones bien justificadas, pero que tenía un pequeño problema: el autor parecía tener clara la que iba a ser su conclusión desde la página 1 e interpretaba las diferentes fuentes a las que iba recurriendo del modo que más pudiera favorecer a esa conclusión tomada a priori.

Me parece que Carl Wilson hace lo mismo, pero de forma mucho menos fluida. Me recuerda a esos críticos (esos críticos que también puedo ser yo, esos críticos que también he sido yo) que, tratando de hacer de la iconoclastia virtud, dicen que el mejor disco del año ha sido el del folclórico de turno antes de hablar de la música que más atrae a sus lectores.

Tampoco hay nada de malo en ello, pero esos últimos capítulos en los que Wilson trata de cerrar todas las costuras del ensayo se me han terminado por hacer bastante cuesta arriba. Tal vez por artificiales, quién sabe.

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## Megan says

A warm and thoughtful analysis of cultural influences on Celine Dion, as well as the cultural influences that shape how we view her. I hate the subtitle to this edition, but everything else is pretty great.

The original edition of *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*, was recommended in Nick Hornby's *More Baths, Less Talking*. I wanted to read it, but Ibr, not for the answers it promised. Like, I fully expected the answer to "Why do people hate Celine Dion?" to be "Because humans are classist and sexist, I mean, OBVIOUSLY, haven't you met a human being before??" And that's all here, definitely. And of course Wilson explores the flipside, "Why do people love Celine Dion?", but he admittedly can't completely pierce through or communicate that joy when it's not his, when he comes to the appreciation he does only after study and argument and some letting down of his guard. My favorite parts of this book were Wilson putting Celine Dion in her cultural context and in our cultural consumption context, and his exploration of the history of schmaltz. That was A+ stuff there, and I was hanging on every word as I was learning more about things I hadn't known I hadn't known. And being a political theory nerd, Wilson's use of democracy as a lens for understanding our relationships with cultural consumption were also pretty exciting and thought-provoking.

And Wilson, spoiler alert, advocates a generosity that I find heartening and that I connect with. My favorite passage of the book:

You can't go on suspending judgment forever--that would be to forgo genuinely enjoying music, since you can't enjoy what you can't like. But a more pluralistic criticism might put less stock in defending its choices and more in depicting its enjoyment, with all its messiness and private soul tremors--to show what it is *like* for me to like it, and invite you to compare. This kind of exchange takes place sometimes between critics on the Internet, and it would be fascinating to have more dialogic criticism: here is my story, what is yours? You might have to be ready, like Celine, to be laughed at. (Judge not, as the Bible sort of says, unless you're eager to be judged.) In these ways the embarrassment of having a taste, the reflexive disgust of distinction, the strangeness of our strangeness to one another, might get the airing they need. As Marx once wrote, "Shame is a revolutionary sentiment." Obviously, reforming the way we talk about music is on its own no way to fix social injustice or the degradation of public life--but if we're going to be talking anyway, we could at least stop making matters worse.

All that said, failed art and (one hopes) great art do exist, and it is worth continuing to talk about which is which, however compromised the conversation might be. It is probably totally subjective whether you prefer Celine Dion or the White Stripes, and a case of social prejudice that Celine is less cool than that band's Jack White. But it seems fair to guess neither of them can rival the Beatles or Louis Armstrong--based, for example, on how broadly (one might say democratically) those artists appeal to people across taste divides. When we do make judgments, though, the trick would be to remember that they are contingent, hailing from one small point in time and in society. It's only a rough draft of art history: it always could be otherwise, and usually will be. The thrill is that as a rough draft, it is always up for revision, so we are constantly at risk of our minds being changed--the promise that lured us all to art in the first place.

And because I'm as terrible of a human being as any, I admit that part of my motivation in reading this book was smugly seeking validation. I fully expected to have my own omnivorous ways of media consumption validated, to get pat on the back for not being a snob and for having outgrown being an insecure teenager fretting over their public self-identification. My attitude? I like Harlequin romances and country music and Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals! Unironically! And I like other things! If you dismiss me for that, it's your loss and your problem, I ain't fussed! I place value and experience joy in being able to enjoy a wide range of media!

But Wilson ably discusses where our culture is re: omnivourism, too, and how that kind of taste and the belief of how it's reflective of me~~~ is just as sideeye-worthy. Jonathan Sterne's essay ("Giving Up on Giving Up on Good Taste") also made me consider my practices of exclusion and inclusion. That my own feelings of "My taste is uncontaminated! It's uncontaminable!!" is just as socially constructed and maintained, and there's nothing to do for that except to continue following and finding my own connections and joys, to remember to be thoughtful and open to connection. The conclusions that Wilson and Sterne and the others draw might not be mind-blowing, but they still helped frame my own thoughts and were a kick in the pants to remember to be thoughtful and open and weirdly human. Humanly weird.

Aside from Wilson's excellent half of the book, my favorites of the supplemental essays (Sterne's, Daphne A. Brook's "Let's Talk About Diana Ross" [which omg I hope she expands into its own book I want it I want it], and James Franco's "Acting In And Out of Context") look lucidly at the concepts of performance and self-consciousness and other-consciousness and internal connection as well as external connection. Which is Celine Dion as hell, frankly, and while I wish I had read the Wilson book earlier, I'm glad I did read this edition, with its additional voices--even if some were boring and added little value to the conversation.

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### Chris says

Have you ever laughed at someone who claimed to actually enjoy Celine Dion's music? Have you ever felt like you were better than those people who love *The Kite Runner* or Mitch Albom's books? Have you ever forced all of your friends and family to watch a movie you loved because you were convinced that they needed to see it for their own good? My answers a few weeks ago would have been absolutely, of course, and who hasn't? but after reading this book, I would most likely nod sheepishly.

Wilson decided to write a book about Celine Dion after watching the Academy Awards the year that Celine and the *Titanic* juggernaut steamrolled over one of Wilson's favorite singers, Elliott Smith (who sang "Miss Misery" from *Good Will Hunting*). What started as an attempt to grasp how human beings could actually like

Celine ("her music struck me as bland monotony raised to a pitch of obnoxious bombast -- R&B with the sex and slyness surgically removed ... Oprah Winfrey-approved chicken soup for the consumerist soul, a neverending crescendo of personal affirmation deaf to social conflict and context.") turned into a interesting exploration of the nature of taste, "coolness," cultural capital, sentimentality, and musical criticism without devolving into some ironic hipster switcheroo where Wilson (a music critic) becomes even more hip by championing the cause of someone as unhip as Celine Dion.

My former self would have been inclined to guarantee that this is the best book about Celine Dion that you'll ever read, but now I'm hesitant. Maybe one of Celine's fans has written (or will write) a wonderful biography about her life. Maybe Celine herself will write a moving memoir. Who knows, right? I guess, for now, I'm hesitant to declare that anything is better than anything else. I'm sure I'll get over it soon enough, but for now I'll just say that this was a delightful little book that at least belongs on the same shelf as the best books about Celine Dion.

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### **Paul Bryant says**

This is a beautiful meditation on art, one of the best I've ever read. Why do people like this kind of stuff and not that kind of stuff? Why do they then go further and say "My kind of stuff [be it novels, movies or pop music] is actually *better* than your kind of stuff – because I, you see, have really good taste, and you, well, now, I'm never going to tell you to your face, you understand, but your taste is... not the best, shall I say. I mean, you think *The Shawshank Redemption* is the best movie ever made, and you refuse to watch anything in black and white, you think that *Maria Carey* is a good singer, you've never even *heard* of *Jacques Brel*, and when I come round to your place I have to avert my gaze from your bookshelves, the sight of so many *Clive Cussler*, *Robert Harris* and *John Grisham* hardbacks nearly makes me go blind. Darling I love you and all, but really, you're hopeless."

The peg this mediation is hung upon is Celine Dion, who apparently is much reviled by some and much loved by others, and who I had heard of but never heard, except the *Titanic* song.

I've now checked up some Celine love on youtube. Okay, she's a belter. Is she worse than all the other contemporary divabelters? She tends to come across as a person who has forgotten there's a microphone in front of her and who is trying to reach the 100th row. The only time she dials it down is when she's lying in bed in a Parisian nightie whispering a few lines about how her lover has been killed or maimed, but then quickly she bounds forth from the four-poster and lets rip with some mighty howling about eternity and forever and things more important than death.

The issues you get into when you think about taste are profound and confusing. Carl Wilson has read up some high faluting theoreticians – Daniel Levitin, Hume, Kant, Clement Greenberg, Adorno, Pierre Bourdieu to name only the main ones. He dissects the great question of taste through the great throat of Celine Dion in the following chapters – you have to love this :

1. Let's talk About Hate : "Hell is other people's music" said Momus in 2006 in *Wired* magazine. How Celine Dion and Elliott Smith collided on Oscar night and how she was really nice to Elliott.
2. Let's Talk About Pop (and its Critics) : why did our author grow up hating country and disco?
3. Let's Talk in French : Celine's odd background (poor white French Quebecois trash).

4. Let's Talk About World Conquest : Celine eats the world country by country (except Germany).

5. Let's Talk About Schmaltz : yes, I do want to talk about schmaltz. See below.

6. Let's Sing Really Loud : power ballads and Phil Spector recordings.

7. Let's Talk About Taste : the belly of the beast.

8. Let's Talk About Who's Got Bad Taste : the second belly of the beast.

9. Let's Talk with some Fans : our author surveys online Celine geeks and goes to a Celine show (and is overawed and slinks away).

10. Let's Do a Punk Version of My Heart Will Go On (or, Let's Talk about our Feelings) : ironic metal versions of Celine. Nooo!

11. Let's talk About Let's Talk About Love : he finally sits down and reviews the album.

12. Let's Talk About Love : the wrapup.

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EVERY TIME I PUT MY FINGER ON IT, IT SLIPS AWAY (or, A Few Random Points to Ponder)

Critical taste in rock music remains fairly stable. A canon has been created. Rolling Stone did an all time album list in 1987 and again in 2003 – 12 of the top thirty were the same. You couldn't call them elitist lists either – aside from Velvet Underground & Nico and Astral Weeks, they were all big sellers. Compare this to a poll of polls listing greatest ever movies – most of the top 30 were classic film buff stuff like 8 ½, Battleship Potemkin, Sunrise and Tokyo Story – yes, elitist if you will. I had never thought of this before, but the fanboy critics of music who I had thought of as impossibly sneery are a whole lot more democratic than their movie (and book) equivalents.

Celine's main audience is : older females. Surprise!

Now me, I like Dusty Springfield. (And a host of other great female singers that aren't around anymore.) But once I got round to listening to a little bit of Celine I thought : what's the difference between Dusty and Celine? Why is Dusty beloved by many critics and Celine despised (I don't think that's too strong a word)? They're very similar, except that Celine made a giant success of her career and Dusty imploded and crashed and burned horribly. Is that it?

When Carl Wilson goes to Vegas to see a Celine show he found he was just a little outside of his comfort zone :

*I was a stray member of the cultural-capital tribe reported to a gaudy prison colony run by a phalanx of showgirls who held hourly re-education sessions to hammer me into feeling insignificant and micro-penisized.*

At the concert :

*The songs of devotion began to probe at the open sore of my own recent marital separation, and even coaxed*

*a few tears. For a few moments, I got it. Of course, then Celine would do something unforgiveable, like a duet with an enormous projection of the head of the late Frank Sinatra.*

Sometimes you read a sequence of books that connect together brilliantly, and you didn't plan it, it just happened – serendipity. From a recent consideration of my dodgy relationship with experimental novels, to an actual experimental novel (10.01) which I disliked, to an experimental graphic novel (Acme Novelty Company 20, which I loved) to this long essay about the nature of taste.

Well, do I have good taste? I mean, I think I do, but I seem to like an awful lot of kitschy music. All that doo wop, it's not Schoenberg you know. Then all that syrupy 50s stuff I've been whistling along to recently – Memories are Made of This, Shrimp Boats are A-Comin', Little Things Mean A Lot – there's tons of it! Is this me enjoying kitschy music as others collect kitsch art like black velvet paintings, Elvisiana and early girly mags? Or is this me wishing to rehabilitate Kitty Kallen, Jo Stafford and Manuel and His Music of the Mountains and elevate them to the level of folk art? Or is this me agreeing that yes, it's bad all right, but bad kitchy songs can still be done well and artfully? E.g. Art and Dotty Todd's original version of Chanson D'Amour?

Well, we could rabbit all day about the fascinating issues Carl Wilson's little book drags into the white heat of our frontal lobes. I haven't even mentioned the whole argument which says that your taste is what you use to distance yourself from your class inferiors and cuddle up to those you aspire to be. So I'll stop now and just say : wonderful stuff! Recommended for everyone who knows what bad music is when they hear it.

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### **Rachel says**

ATTENTION EVERYONE THIS IS NOT A JOKE: Please read this book. It is completely excellent in every way, and is possibly the best thing I have read since "Dave Barry's Book of Bad Songs" and "Anna Karenina." (That was also not a joke.) Everything I believe about what it means to have musical opinions is talked about in here, with great intelligence, humor, and heart. DO IT! BUY IT! It makes an excellent holiday gift for hipster d-bags and also normal people.

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### **Buck says**

In *Let's Talk About Love*, Carl Wilson does something brave and—alright, I'll say it—noble. He takes Céline Dion seriously. Yeah, that's right, Céline Dion: for many of us, the biggest block of cheese in the pop culture *fromagerie*. If this book doesn't make you feel thoroughly ashamed of yourself for ever having put down Céline—and you know you have, you heartless snobs—then you're beyond help and deserve to die under a huge pile of John Cage records.

Wilson's bracing little pamphlet is part of the 33? series of books, in which prominent rock critics get to analyze an album of their choice. Not surprisingly, most of the other contributors opted for safely canonical works—think *Trout Mask Replica* and the like—but Wilson purposely chose the most uncool album he could think of: Dion's 1997 classic, *Let's Talk About Love*.

This could very easily have degenerated into an exercise in condescension, with the smarty-pants writer

coming on like some trust-fund kid sashaying through Wal-Mart. But Wilson's sincerity is disarming: he really does want to understand Céline on her own terms, and he treats her with the same respect he would give the Pitchfork-friendly artistes he normally traffics in.

One sign of this respect: he works hard to contextualize Dion, doing the scholarly legwork on her that nobody else has seen fit to do. If middle-class American critics don't get Dion, Wilson suggests, it may be because they lack the cultural competence to 'read' her correctly. As a blue-collar francophone girl from insular, backwoods Quebec, Dion is so far off the ethno-cultural map of American society that she might as well be from Moldova. Consequently, her big, inclusive gestures are routinely misinterpreted as hubris:

*When Céline talks in the first-person plural—we achieved this, we hoped for that, we decided to make this record—she is speaking of herself, Rene, her producers...and all of what's called "Team Céline", but symbolically it includes Quebec's extended family. Where she comes from, collectivity counts, and her gains are the gains of a people. It is a recognizable trait in an African-American star, but in Céline it doesn't read: she represents an opaque referent, rendering her meaning illegible.*

That's a heaping plate of insight right there, if you ask me. (Wilson is equally perceptive—and sympathetic—about Dion's 'meltdown' on Larry King in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when she appeared to condone the looting of New Orleans with the infamous phrase, 'Let them touch those things.' Wilson's verdict: 'every second was quintessentially québécois').

Chances are, if you spend a lot of time on this site, you have what you consider to be good taste in music. If not Satie and Debussy, then Pavement and The Mekons, or Coleman Hawkins and Albert Ayler. At any rate, you like things that are difficult, original or sophisticated rather than simple, formulaic and sentimental. So do I. So does Wilson. The difference between him and me is that he doesn't passively accept his own standards as some Mosaic Code of coolness; he questions them, honestly and relentlessly, until he (and the reader) starts to see how narrow and shrivelled and odious these criteria really are. To do this, he draws heavily on the work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, who basically argues that tastes are counters in an elaborate game of social one-upmanship. Your principled enjoyment of Fassbinder movies and DeLillo novels may be genuine enough, but it's also a way to distinguish yourself from the white-trash rube you'd rather not be mistaken for; at the same time, it helps smooth your entry into the social class you aspire to (and, by the by, potentially gives you access to a higher order of pussy or dick).

For anyone who loves art, this is a pretty depressing theory, but that doesn't mean it's wrong. For his part, Wilson doesn't swallow it whole, but he concedes its broad validity. Don't worry, though: he's not out to rub your nose in your own class prejudice. He just wants to expand your sympathies a bit (and that's always a good thing, no?) You may never come around to Dion's music—Wilson doesn't quite, either, though he's a gamer—but with a little openness and imagination, you can certainly understand how it could mean so much to millions of people not all that different from you.

The key word in the later chapters of the book is 'democracy'. I don't know about you, but this is one of those abstract nouns that get me all choked up sometimes. Like 'love' or 'faith' or 'customer service', it points to an elusive ideal, or (more often) gestures helplessly towards it. I guess that's what makes it so poignant.

Anyway, I'd better not reveal too much of Wilson's argument, but I can tell you it's more moving than criticism has any right to be. If you're not careful, he'll have you blubbering uncontrollably, like the innocent creature you were when you first watched *Titanic*—or like that Filipino lady Wilson saw at Dion's show in Vegas, 'who sat beside me whispering, "Wow. Oh, wow," and occasionally weeping behind the sunglasses

that she wore.' Ridiculous, I know, but then we're all ridiculous, and maybe that's part of democracy too: being ridiculous together. So go ahead and cry. Nobody should be too cool for that.

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## A says

I'm sorry, but no. Please please leave this book on the shelf and instead seek out the 33-1/3 volume on ABBA Gold, one of my all-time favorite books. THAT is where you will find a whip-smart hipster critic using schmaltzy pop as the springboard for funny, impeccably argued, stunning intellectual flights of fancy about aesthetics, music, and society, all wrapped up with a bow of unapologetic love for all things pop culture (high and low).

What you will find here is the opposite -- an utterly specious, rambling, unreadable piece of crap that reads like that time your stoner freshman-year roommate sat up all night raining Doritos dust all over the place thinking he finally had it all figured out because he sat through the first lecture of Intro Philosophy and learned how to spell "Adorno." An insult to the reader, 33-1/3, Celine Dion, Canada, the publishing industry, and humanity at large.

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## Marcello S says

(1) *C'è qualcosa di fuori moda in questo libro, perché la parola «gusto» ormai non la usa praticamente più nessuno. Siamo usciti dal XX secolo senza nessuno dei fondamenti estetici con cui ci siamo entrati, perciò aggiriamo il problema.*

(2) Carl Wilson cerca di investigare il fenomeno Céline Dion attraverso analisi, recensioni, interviste. Si sofferma sull'impatto globale, il sentimentalismo del personaggio, l'identikit del fan medio.

(3) Più che un libro strettamente musicale quella che ne esce è un'opera riconducibile ai cosiddetti *Cultural Studies*. Si parla di teorie della comunicazione, di relazioni tra gusto, interessi e classe sociale, cultura alta e di massa. Si citano Kant e Hume per identificare un'evoluzione della critica sociale del gusto.

(4) *Siamo curiosi di sentire quello che tutti gli altri ascoltano, desideriamo un'appartenenza, vogliamo avere cose in comune di cui parlare. Siamo anche insicuri dei nostri giudizi, e vogliamo metterli a confronto con quelli degli altri.*

(5) *Sappiamo che esiste un gusto oggettivo perché, nel corso del tempo, si è raggiunto un consenso sulle grandi opere del passato.*

(6) Quando si parla di gusti non riesco a non pensare a quella scena in *Alta Fedeltà* in cui Rob, dopo essere appena tornato con Laura, una sera va a cena a casa di amici di lei. E dopo aver passato con loro una serata piacevole a parlare e ridere, dà un'occhiata alla loro collezione di dischi e scopre che è un disastro. E non si aspettava che gente con gusti pessimi - a suo dire - potesse anche essere simpatica.

(7) È tutto molto interessante e il concetto è trasferibile ai pareri che ognuno di noi ha rispetto a qualsiasi forma d'arte (libri, musica, cinema, arti visive). A volte ancora mi sorprendo su come si possano avere giudizi così distanti, ma alla fine mi rendo conto che è molto più divertente la discussione critica della piena condivisione.

(8) La seconda parte, più o meno il 45% del libro, è un insieme di saggi di autori vari, tra cui Hornby e Novoselic. In buona parte sono interventi piacevoli ma non indispensabili.

(9) Riprendendo il saggio di Hornby, che cita il testo *Psychology Of The Arts*, scritto da Hans e Shulamith Kreitler, si arriva alla conclusione che la spiegazione del motivo per cui persone diverse reagiscono in

*maniera diversa alla stessa opera d'arte dovrebbe «abbracciare uno spettro smisurato di variabili, che comprenda non solo le peculiarità percettive, cognitive, emotive e di altro genere di una personalità, ma anche i dati biografici, le esperienze di vita, gli incontri precedenti con l'arte e i legami personali». In altre parole: non provateci nemmeno.*

(10) Ma se di un libro, col tempo, si dimenticano diversi pezzi e forse anche il senso, la cosa che credo non dimenticherò qui sarà il racconto della notte degli Oscar 1998. Oltre a Céline Dion, che stravincerà, a cantare c'è Elliott Smith. Che va solo perché altrimenti lo avevano minacciato di far cantare il suo pezzo (dalla colonna sonora di *Will Hunting*) a qualcun altro.

*Smith arrivò sul palco strascicando i piedi, in un completo bianco smagliante prestatogli da Prada – gli unici indumenti di sua proprietà che indossava erano la biancheria intima (...). I produttori degli Oscar non gli avevano permesso di sedere su uno sgabello, lasciandolo sperduto a stringere la chitarra tra le mani sull'ampio palcoscenico vuoto. La canzone sembrò piccola e incantevole come una miniatura persiana del XVI secolo.*

*E cosa avvenne dopo? Céline Dion sbucò fuori da nuvole di finta nebbia, indossando una gonna nera svasata, su un palco in cui un'orchestra in frac bianco era disposta come se fosse sul ponte del *Titanic*. Si era esibita agli Oscar già diverse volte, e portò tutto il suo repertorio di mimiche e smorfie, battendosi a un certo punto il petto con tanta forza da rischiare di rompere la catena della collana di diamanti, riproduzione multimilionaria del «Cuore dell'Oceano» che appare nel film.*

Tutto gioca contro Céline. Ma c'è il colpo di coda che non ti aspetti. Smith, in un'intervista, parla della Dion così:

*Anche se non posso sopportare la sua musica – con tutto il rispetto, non mi piace per niente – lei di persona è stata molto, molto gentile. Mi ha chiesto se ero nervoso, le ho risposto “Sì”, e lei: “Va benissimo, perché ti farà entrare in circolo adrenalina che renderà migliore la tua canzone. È una bella canzone”. Poi mi ha dato un grande abbraccio. È stato troppo. È stata troppo umana per disprezzarla solo perché la sua musica mi sembra banale.*

*Marc Swanson, un artista visivo amico di Smith, ha riferito al biografo Nugent il seguente resoconto di ciò che accadde dopo: «In seguito continuavamo a incontrare gente che veniva a parlare con noi, che non conosceva Elliott, e diceva: “Ehi, come va, ti ho visto agli Oscar, come è andata?” e poi faceva qualche commento offensivo su Céline Dion. E ogni volta a lui veniva un lampo di rabbia negli occhi, e diceva cose tipo: “Sai in realtà lei è davvero una bella persona”. E loro facevano sempre marcia indietro, “Oh, certo, sono sicuro che lo sia...”. Pensai che era molto tenero da parte sua. Passava il suo tempo a difendere Céline Dion».*

Ciao Elliott.

[74/100]

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## Patrick says

I don't like talking about my taste in music very much. Not in conversation, anyway. The same goes for books and video games. I always feel as though I've been given a brief moment in which to explain myself, to justify my own choices in a kind of secret language which ends up revealing far more about my personality than I might wish other people to know. And perhaps I do want to reveal something, from time to time, but for the most part I want to express an opinion peculiar to the person to whom I am talking. If a

colleague at work asks what I'm listening to on my iPod, how can I possibly respond by telling them I'm listening to Ice Cube or Jethro Tull or Nine Inch Nails without them getting certain ideas about the kind of person I am? Granted, all of those make for relatively acceptable listening, but what about Céline Dion?

Céline (whose name I will forever carefully accent after reading this book) makes for an interesting example of an immensely successful artist who has never been favoured by critics. To begin with, the author doesn't even know anyone who likes her music, though he soon resolves that in a series of encounters both charming and slightly odd. One highlight is the fellow music journalist who points out that it was so common to hear Céline Dion blasting in the roughest parts of Jamaica that he knew to start running if he ever heard her '*mawking over the airwaves*'. The reason given? "*Bad man have fi play love tune fi show 'dat them a lova too."*"

I found it hard while reading this to bring any of Dion's hit songs to mind – beyond 'My Heart Will Go On', of course – and yet I felt like I knew her stuff pretty well, as though I'd absorbed it through the aether via some kind of osmosis. This might have been a bit unfair of me, like I'd allowed her to become a sort of pastiche of herself even before I'd actually listened to very much of the music. After all, this is supposedly a book about one of her albums ('Let's Talk About Love') but the record itself barely gets a look in until relatively late in the text. The author is far more interested in Céline as a kind of cipher for everything the intended audience of his book would normally hate in pop music.

He has a number of theories as to why she is so popular around the world. An early chapter describes her early career as a child star in Quebec where even then she was subject to much the same kinds of critical derision that would shadow her later and current career. He suggests that Dion comes to the world pop markets as a kind of aspirational outsider-upstart, going so far as to say that:

*'Céline Dion's music and career are more understandable if she is added to the long line of ethnic "outsiders" who expressed emotions too outsized for most white American performers but in non-African-American codes, letting white audiences loosen up without crossing the "color line".'*

Is this going too far? It seems doubtful whether Dion ever encountered the same kinds of prejudice as the 'outsiders' the author cites. I wondered why it was necessary to establish the singer as an 'outsider' at all; perhaps this is the author's old music critic training kicking in by re-positioning the 'neglected' artist as one unfairly forlorn by society. How can one be an outcast when they've made quite so much money? At what point does Dion become too popular to be a plausible representation of anything other than her own immense popularity?

The book is at its best as a meditation on what defines our tastes. The author is that rare thing: a music critic dissatisfied with the force of his own convictions. The whole thing reeks of self-consciousness in a way that's mostly good, though the author's restless attempt to explain the origins of cultural taste do end up leading him down one or two blind alleyways (and at the end of one of them, with a wearying inevitability, lurks Jonah Lehrer and his squirting dopamine).

In the end, what it seems to come down to is: we like what we like because of what we're like. The whole notion of taste as something which arrives independently in our brains via some kind of abstract poetic inspiration – even the very idea that we can choose what we like to listen to – is broken down almost to the point of disintegration. This didn't come as a particular surprise to me, but I was impressed by the extent to which the author seemed willing to question himself and implicate his profession in a kind of conspiracy against the public which intentionally divides audiences into marketable tribes which can be defined to an unsettling degree by class, income and race.

The book only really began to lose me again very late on when it begins to try and wrap itself up in a kind of absolution for the author by developing an odd preoccupation with the word ‘democracy’:

*‘For me, adulthood is turning out to be about becoming democratic... (Dion) stinks of democracy, mingled with the odors of designer perfumes and of dollars, Euros and Yen. Far more than most celebrities, she is plausible as a common person catapulted into uncommon status...’*

Really? Even if one accepts that Dion is a common person catapulted into uncommon status, what part of her status exemplifies democracy? If all that’s meant is that she is democratic because she is popular, one could say the same of many other stars. But the author’s definition of ‘democracy’ turns out to be a rather odd one:

*‘This is what I mean by democracy – not a limp open-mindedness, but actively grappling with people and things not like me, which brings with it the perilous question of what I am like. Democracy, that dangerous, paradoxical and mostly unattempted ideal, sees that the self is insufficient, dependent for definition on otherness, and chooses not to accept that but to celebrate it, to stake everything on it. Through democracy, which depends we meet strangers as equals, we perhaps become less strangers to ourselves.’*

I wonder which democracies the author had in mind when he wrote the above, which countries where the electorate are encouraged to grapple with the unfamiliar people and concepts, or even to question their own beliefs in the manner described. Does America really meet strangers as equals – and if not, is that a failure of democracy or something else? If the individual self is inconsequential, doesn’t democracy end up enforcing tribalism rather than a relentless drive towards happy cooperation?

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One last confession: through the wonders of streaming music online, I listened to ‘Let’s Talk About Love’ while writing this review. I don’t know whether it was the book or what but I enjoyed it more than I was expecting. (And of course it turned out that I had heard a few of those songs before.) Sure, there’s schmaltz aplenty, but in retrospect I feel like once the author had decided to set Dion up as an archetype of ‘Bad Art’, they felt they had to give her music a real drubbing in order to justify that. But to be honest, I’ve heard worse. It’s totally fine to like Céline Dion! Probably.

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### **Matteo Fumagalli says**

Videorecensione: <https://youtu.be/nV1Z8-OgOtw>

Un libro che "dormiva" nella mia libreria da anni, ormai. Ho deciso di ritirarlo fuori e, finalmente, di leggerlo. FIGHISSIMO.

Attraverso le domande, apparentemente senza risposta "Perché pensiamo che i nostri gusti musicali siano sempre migliori di quelli degli altri?" e, soprattutto, "Perché la musica di merda vende e piace così tanto?", Carl Wilson snoda riflessioni sociologiche, antropologiche, di musica e di ascolto. Tutto questo analizzando, per filo e per segno, l’immaginario e il linguaggio heartwarming/kitsch di Céline Dion.

Divertentissimo, illuminante, esplosivo.

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