

'Spoke,' 'Prince: The Coloring Book,' 'Message to Our Folks,' 'Riding With the Ghost' and 'Evolution of a Cro-Magnon,' reviewed

DC Punk | The Purple One | Art Ensemble of Chicago | Jason Molina | Cro-Mags

By Matthew Moyer

Let's start off this summer's master class in musical outliers and rule-breakers with a hefty dose of visual iconography and a primer on the importance of local scene-building. *Spoke: Images and Stories From the 1980s Washington, DC Punk Scene* (Akashic, February 2017) accomplishes both of these aims handily. As a visual record, the coffee-table book succeeds commendably with page after page of gorgeous, oversized, black-and-white images of the prime movers in D.C. punk circa the Me Decade. So you get the expected – Bad Brains, Minor Threat, Fugazi – but also a hefty dose of the underdogs – Fire Party, Beefeater, Nation of Ulysses. The photos tell the story better than accompanying texts – all kinetic action, the pages are almost humid with sweat and spit.

Photos of Afropunk godfathers the Bad Brains going off in *Spoke* provide a natural link to the next installment of our visual survey course. *Prince: The Coloring Book* (Feral House, April 2017) is a new spin on the adult coloring book released by the malcontents at Feral House. The third in their coloring book series behind David Bowie and Lemmy Kilmister, *Prince* is a psychedelic visual tribute to the much-missed Purple One in the form of heartfelt and abstract musings on the many personae of The Artist. With contributors including Tony Millionaire, Jeffrey Worman and Casanova Frankenstein down through delightfully eccentric fan-art renderings, this is as touching a tribute to Prince as we've seen in awhile. Make sure you have plenty of purple crayons.

A direct through line can be drawn between the otherworldly visuals, outsized persona and voracious musical dexterity of Prince and the otherworldly visuals, outsized persona and voracious musical dexterity of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Sit down, it's time for some serious musical history with Paul Steinbeck's incredible *Message to Our Folks* (University of Chicago, February 2017).

The core Art Ensemble collective of Joseph Jarman, Roscoe Mitchell, Lester Bowie, Malachi Favors and Don Moya redefined jazz music in their own spectacularly individual image starting in the late 1960s. A supergroup without peer, the Art Ensemble left behind a heady legacy of collective action with their AACM organization, a back catalog of group and solo endeavors that constantly yields new adventures in sound, and a visual image that combines Afrofuturism with rock-star theater on overdrive. The book is heavy on music theory, but this is still an absolutely engrossing entry-level read about a group that is still timely in the way that, say, Lester Bowie namesake David Bowie is – visually, thematically, sonically – and always deserving of another look.

Latterday Joseph Jarman, as a Buddhist priest, would inform you that the First Noble Truth is that all life is suffering, and musician Jason Molina embodied that tragically. The singer-songwriter and leader of well-loved indie outfits Songs: Ohia and Magnolia Electric Co. gets the memoir treatment in Erin Osmon's *Riding With the Ghost* (Rowman & Littlefield, May 2017). Osmon digs deep into Molina's oeuvre and interviews close friends, lovers and collaborators to piece together a portrait of a relentlessly creative musician who shared everything in song but very much kept his own counsel in life. The latter portions of the book – detailing Molina's descent into alcoholism and mental breakdown – are particularly harrowing.

On the other hand, if the best revenge is living well, then Cro-Mags vocalist and punk survivor John Joseph stands as proof of that old saw. The man's seemingly seen it all and done it all, and his sprawling doorstep-sized memoir, *Evolution of a Cro-Magnon* (2nd ed., Punkhouse, April 2017) tells it all. After a youth filled with abuse and trauma, Joseph lands in New York City in the epicenter of the infamous NYHC hardcore scene and ends up fronting perhaps the most infamous band of them all, the unrelenting Cro-Mags. *Evolution* is as much a first-person history of that influential and combustible band as it is a love letter to a New York long gone and a tale of spiritual renewal in Joseph's embrace of the Krishna faith. Aside from the occasional bumpy tangent, Joseph's writing voice is refreshingly original and this is, at its core, essential primary source material. And once you've worked your way through these two biographies to finish, you've passed summer school with flying colors.

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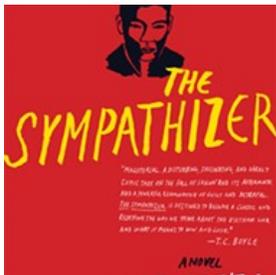
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