# Examining Pop Culture's Heroes, and Himself

**By Gideon Lewis-Kraus**
Oct. 28, 2011

It is something of a surprise that one of the best magazine profiles of the last decade is about Axl Rose. But such is the work of John Jeremiah Sullivan, who can take pretty much anything you never thought you'd want to read about respectably (Axl Rose, "Real World") or anything you never thought you'd want to read about at all (a Christian-rock festival, long-forgotten naturalist loons), and make of it the sort of essay-world you just want to dwell inside. Sullivan seems able to do almost anything, to work in any register, and not just within a single piece but often in the span of a single paragraph. Here, for example, is his first sketch of Rose in person, which can only be quoted at length:

"To me he looks like he's wearing an Axl Rose mask. He looks like a man I saw eating by himself at a truck stop in Monteagle, Tenn., at 2 o'clock in the morning about 12 years ago. He looks increasingly like the albino reggae legend Yellowman. His mane evokes a gathering of strawberry-red intricately braided hempen fibers, the sharply twisted ends of which have been punched, individually, a half inch into his scalp. His chest hair is the color of a new penny. With the wasp-man sunglasses and the braids and the goatee, he reminds one of the monster in 'Predator,' or of that monster's wife on its home planet. When he first came onto the scene, he often looked, in photographs, like a beautiful, slender, redheaded 20-year-old girl. Now he has thickened through the middle — muscly thickness," not the larded "thickness of some years back. He grabs his package tightly, and his package is huge. Only reporting."

Only reporting, indeed, but at the same time not at all. Sullivan's collection, "Pulphead," takes its title from a letter of resignation Norman Mailer sent to Esquire in 1960, and frames the work assembled here as bits of pop flotsam. One of his recurring subjects is, well, his own subjects; as he begins one of the essays in this collection, "Last year I was asked to write a magazine story about the future of the human race, a topic on which my sporadic descents to the crushing mental depths of pop-rock culture crit had quite predictably made me the go-to guy." But there's a wink to this anxiety, a modest introduction to stories that aim to invest a celebrity like Rose with persuasively mythic significance. Sullivan seems most interested in that rare cultural nexus where artistry — where something genuinely new, challenging — intersects with commercial popularity. What he writes of one blues scholar could easily be said about Sullivan himself: "He was interested, in other words, in culturally precious things that had been accidentally snagged and preserved by stray cogs of the anarchic capitalist threshing machine."

To take, for example, the Axl Rose description, Sullivan there describes the various moments of a shape-shifting avatar: the Guns N' Roses frontman begins as a parody of himself, then melds with a lonely personal memory (a man alone at a truck stop) to emerge as an absurd, hale, monstrous, comic-monstrous, tenderly girlish, muscled, obscene legend. This is all in keeping with the broader portrait Sullivan sketches, of a rock star who raised himself out of nowhere (" 'Central Indiana.' I'm not trying to say there's no there there. I'm trying to say there's no there") to become the leader of "the last great rock band that didn't think there was something a bit embarrassing about being in a rock band."



John Jeremiah Sullivan Harry Taylor

This is perhaps the book's key line, the moral-aesthetic credo behind Sullivan's reluctant vocation as a magazine writer: he takes a subject on his or her own terms, keeps sacred the premise that his subjects are, unembarrassedly, doing exactly what they intend to be doing. This is argued most beautifully in his elegy for Michael Jackson, in which he explains that to pity the man's batty idiosyncrasies is to deny the artist's proud self-creation; it is argued most forcefully in his profile of Bunny Wailer, in which the aging reggae genius gets righteously indignant about GQ magazine's photographic demands, and in the end gives Sullivan the parting "gift of saying no"; and it is argued with the most

intellectual rigor in his reckoning with the white authenticity-hound “rediscovery” of the great bluesmen. “The noble ambition not to be the kind of people who unwittingly fetishize and exoticize black or poor white folk poverty has allowed us to remain the type who don’t stop to ask if the serious treatment of certain folk forms as essentially high- or higher-art forms might have originated with the folk themselves.” In other words, the bluesman knew himself to be a “profound artist” before we ever congratulated ourselves for calling him that.

The line about not being embarrassed ultimately reflects a set of ideas about self-consciousness. Sullivan’s great magazine-writing antecedent is, along with Mailer himself and Terry Southern, clearly David Foster Wallace, and it doesn’t seem to me any great exaggeration to say that “Pulphead” is the best, and most important, collection of magazine writing since Wallace’s “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again.” But where so much of Wallace, most notably in his extended profile of John McCain and in his tennis appreciations, turns on a distinction between instinctive action and self-conscious paralysis, Sullivan doesn’t find this conflict worth worrying about. His writing about pop musicians gestures toward the idea that there is no heroic self-creation without self-conscious effort, and that just because you’re aware you’re performing doesn’t make the performance any less authentic.

But this emphasis on artistic fiat is ultimately balanced by the thrumming subtext of Sullivan’s own search for roots. Toward the beginning of a moving, personal essay-remembrance of the Southern writer who was his college mentor of sorts, Sullivan writes that he “was under the tragic spell of the South, which you’ve either felt or haven’t. In my case it was acute because, having grown up in Indiana with a Yankee father, a child exile from Kentucky roots of which I was overly proud, I’d long been aware of a faint nowhereness to my life.” (“I’m not trying to say there’s no there there. I’m trying to say there’s no there.”) Sullivan’s own act of self-invention has been not only to write himself into the sentence-level tradition of Southern literature, but to extend it. Where Wallace’s style was so pugnaciously sui generis, Sullivan’s writing is a bizarrely coherent, novel, and generous pastiche of the biblical, the demotic, the regionally gusty and the erudite.

This personal search — for a balance between autonomy and tradition, entertainment and difficulty — runs through all of these essays, and makes of this collection a deceptively personal journey, one where Axl Rose reminds him of a man he saw eating alone in the middle of the night at a Tennessee truck stop. In the piece about the Christian-rock festival in Pennsylvania, a monumental work of tender hilarity, Sullivan takes up with a few beefy believers from West Virginia, eats their fried woodland critters and palavers with them about their faith. By the end of their time with him, Sullivan writes, “the guys had put together what I did for a living — though, to their credit, they didn’t seem to take this as a reasonable explanation for my being there.”

**PULPHEAD**
By John Jeremiah Sullivan
369 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $16.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus’s book, “A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and the Hopeful,” will be published next spring.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Page 26 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Sweet World of Mine