

# AIR GUITAR

DAVE HICKEY

Unfortunately, since some of these deadlines were *very* short, there is probably a surfeit of candor in this book, occasionally at the expense of felicity. I have tried to smooth out some rough spots in revision, but the fact remains that some of these pieces end in places that I should never have gone, had I not started out in the direction that I did. Some of them conclude on notes that I should never have played, had I not begun with the simple little riff that I did. So understand that I have not set out to shock or offend, only to speculate on the consequences of my own experience, the shape of it; and be assured, as well, that all of these essays began in innocence, in extremely simple, even childlike questions that begin with “Why?”

The real heart of this book, in fact, lies in a little “why?” During the nineteen seventies, when I was writing rock criticism and pop songs, and playing music, I used to wonder why there were so many love songs. More specifically, I wondered why ninety percent of the pop songs ever written were love songs, while ninety percent of rock criticism was written about the other ten percent. My own practice complied with these percentages. When I wrote songs, alone or with cowriters, I wrote love songs—happy ones and sad ones, mean ones and sweet ones, hip ones and square ones: hundreds of them. When I wrote about music, I wrote about other things, mostly about music history, politics, drugs, hanging out, and playing the guitar.

*Why?* I wondered—and I wondered all the time, because it’s disquieting to be doing something and not know why you’re doing it. I came up with a provisional answer on a cool, windy afternoon in the *zocalo* of a little town on the slopes above Mexico City. I was sitting in a shady arcade with my old friend Brownie, who isn’t called that anymore, since he is presently in the Federal Witness Protection Program. We were down in Mexico on a nefarious errand that doubtless contributed to Brownie’s uncomfortable accommodation with the Feds, but, on this afternoon, nothing very nefarious was going on. We were just sitting at a lit-

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the table, shooting nothing but the breeze and enjoying the air. Brownie was drinking a beer. I was drinking coffee. At one point, Brownie reached over and touched my arm, nodding at something in the square behind me. I turned around and beheld a perfect Latin American tableau.

On the edge of the curb, on the other side of the square, three people were standing in a row. There was boy of about seventeen, wearing a cheap black suit, a white shirt, and a narrow black tie. Beside him was a beautiful girl of about the same age, in a white lace dress, and, beside her, a duenna in full black battle-regalia with a mantilla over her hair. The duenna was a large woman, and looked for all the world like Dick Butkus in drag. The three of them had been about to cross the street into the plaza when they found their way blocked. Now, they were just standing there, at a loss, lined up on the curb with two dirt-brown dogs in the street in front of them.

It was a scene deserving of Murillo. The boy was biting his lip, full of antic life but holding onto his composure, trying not to grin at the ludicrous spectacle. The girl had lowered her eyes demurely to gaze at the tips of her black patent-leather shoes. The duenna was discombobulated, agitated. Her eyes were darting about. First she would glare at the offending canines, who showed no signs of stopping, then she would glance sideways at the young couple, policing their responses, then she would scan the square with her social radar, hoping against hope that no one was seeing them seeing brown dogs. Brownie and I, being gringo, were cracking up, and suddenly it occurred to me (probably because I had written a nice melody that morning) that these kids, having a duenna and a lot of other structure besides, did not require a wide selection of love songs. Then, perversely, it occurred to me that the dogs didn't need any love songs at all.

That was my answer. We need so many love songs because the imperative rituals of flirtation, courtship, and mate selection that are required to guarantee the perpetuation of the species and

the maintenance of social order—that are hardwired in mammals and socially proscribed in traditional cultures—are up for grabs in mercantile democracies. These things *need* to be done, but we don't know how to do them, and, being free citizens, we won't be *told* how to do them. Out of necessity, we create the institution of love songs. We saturate our society with a burgeoning, ever-changing proliferation of romantic options, a cornucopia of choices, a panoply of occasions through which these imperative functions may be facilitated. It is a market, of course, a job and a business, but it is also a critical instrumentality in civil society. We cannot do without it. Because it's hard to find someone you love, who loves you—but you can begin, at least, by finding some one who loves your love song. And that, I realized, sitting there in the *zócalo* with Brownie, is what I do: I write love songs for people who live in a democracy. Some of them follow.

