

## NAMING THE UNNAMEABLE AND COMMUNICATING THE UNKNOWABLE

a review by Christy  
Alexander Hallberg

Michael Gaspeny. *A Postcard from the Delta*. Livingston Press, 2022.

Michael Parker. *I Am the Light of This World*. Algonquin Books, 2022.

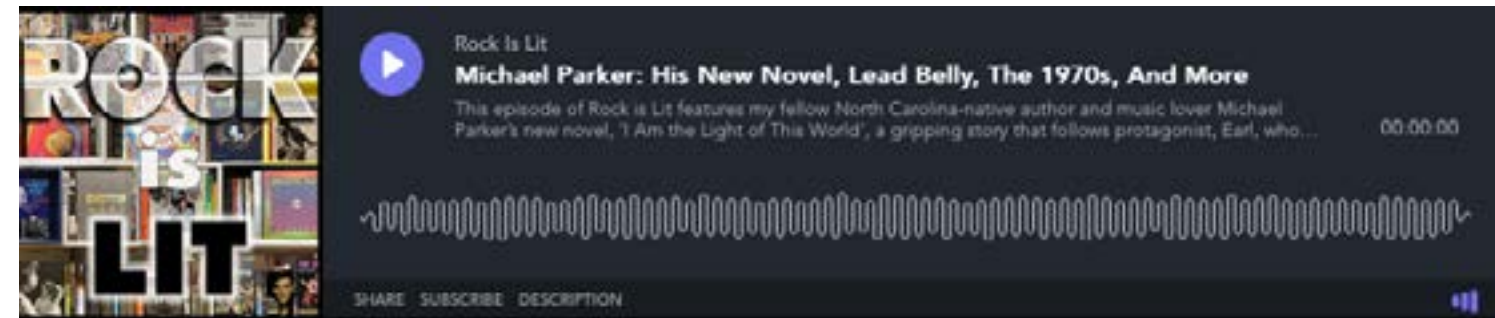
**CHRISTY ALEXANDER HALLBERG** wears several vocational hats: Teaching Professor in the English Department at ECU, Senior Associate Editor of *NCLR*, author, and, donned recently, podcaster. Following the publication of her own rock novel, the award-winning *Searching for Jimmy Page* (Livingston Press, 2021), Pantheon Podcast Network invited her to host *Rock is Lit*.

Full disclosure: I'm obsessed with rock novels – stories as feral as headbangers in a mosh pit or as sweet with melody and harmony as the most earnest singer-songwriters or as rife with mystery and lore as the whiskey-soaked voice of a bluesman. When rhythm and backbeat collide with prose, the result is often explosive, or at least worthy of a Largehearted Boy playlist. Two of my most recent favorite rock novels just happen to have been penned by fellow North Carolina natives: Michael Parker's *I Am the Light of This World* and Michael Gaspeny's *A Postcard from the Delta*. Like the protagonists of their books, both Michaels are rabid music fans. "Music is everything to me. I am distrustful of people who don't listen to music," Michael Parker proclaimed when he was a guest on my podcast on rock novels, *Rock is Lit*, in the fall of 2022. This is a sentiment echoed by Michael Gaspeny when he too appeared on *Rock is Lit* that fall.\* And it is the creed by which their main characters live their fictional lives. *I Am the Light of This World* and *A Postcard from the Delta* explore myriad themes and topics – socioeconomic issues and the criminal justice system, homophobia, and the transformative power of water in the former; racial tensions, absentee mothers, alcoholism, and toxic masculinity and high school football in the latter – but it's the role music plays in the stories that I've chosen to focus this review on. As Leon-

\* Hallberg's *Rock is Lit* podcast featuring Michael Parker, episode 11, 17 Nov. 2022; Michael Gaspeny, episode 12, 24 Nov. 2022.

ard Bernstein once said, "Music can name the unnameable and communicate the unknowable." Add a compelling plot and cast of characters, and you've got something even more elusive and, dare I say, ethereal.

*I Am the Light of This World* by **Michael Parker** is a gripping story that follows Earl, a music-loving dreamy teenager who serves time in a Texas prison for a heinous crime he didn't commit, then, upon his release some forty years later, has to navigate a whole new world he can barely comprehend. The novel, which begins in the early 1970s in a small east Texas town, takes its title from the song "I Am the Light of This World" by blues and gospel singer Blind Gary Davis, who was a fixture on the Piedmont blues scene of Durham in the 1930s but rejected "the Devil's music" in favor of gospel tunes after he became an ordained Baptist minister, then experienced a career rebirth as part of the American folk music revival that peaked during the 1960s. The lyrics of the chorus, "Just as long as I'm in this world, I am the light of this world," resonate with a young Earl, who struggles to create meaning and a sense of belonging in his life, and he often quotes these words when he finds himself in precarious situations. For example, when Earl is at a party in Austin shortly before the crime occurs for which he will be arrested, someone asks him what he's good at, and "Earl said he was



the light of the world" (71). Later, when he is sitting in the police station with his lawyer, Arthur, following his arrest, he thinks, "If he had time and means to leave his mark, he'd say, I am the light of this world. He'd say, Tell everybody in this world" (44).

Earl's passion for music begins with his capricious father, who teaches him the words to "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" by Hank Williams when Earl is a child. When his father would disappear for weeks at a time, leaving Earl in the care of his indifferent mother and delinquent brothers, Earl would listen to his father's 45s and find not only solace but also a purity and truth in the music that eluded him elsewhere in his life:

Earl couldn't even remember who was singing or about what. He just remembered lying on the floor watching the warped vinyl hiccup and here came an ample solo of what he would learn was pure pedal steel. Earl felt draped by a blanket and shocked by a cattle prod. The pedal steel both softened and sharpened. . . . Pedal steel could turn a song into what, Earl didn't know, your heart struggling to stay in rhythm and burst out of you at the

**MICHAEL PARKER** is a North Carolina native and retired professor of creative writing at UNC Greensboro. A three-time winner of the O. Henry Award for short fiction, Parker is the author of eight novels and three collections of stories. Over the years, *NCLR* has published several of his essays. A book review on Parker's *Prairie Fever: A Novel* (Algonquin Books, 2019) can be found in *NCLR Online 2020*. Parker was the honoree of the 2015 North Carolina Writers Conference in Washington, NC. His other honors include the Thomas Wolfe Prize and the North Carolina Award for Literature.

same time? Trying to define it made Earl feel foolish and that is how he knew it was true. He would die trying and that is how he knew it was true. (5–6)



COURTESY OF ZOOM READING

Eventually, Earl replaces his biological father with a spiritual one in the form of folk and blues legend Lead Belly, whose songs, such as "Good Night, Irene," "Midnight Special," and "Where Did You Sleep," are American classics. Earl carries a biography of Lead Belly with him everywhere and memorizes whole passages, as though the book were scripture. While he admires Lead Belly's undeniable musical talent, Earl tends to romanticize the artist, who went to prison multiple times for violent acts. After Earl is arrested for an equally violent

act, he tells his lawyer that he was reading *Lead Belly: His Life and Times* at the time he first met Tina, the young woman whose murder Earl witnesses and is convicted of. Arthur quips, "Not a great role model" (35). The correlation between Lead Belly's life and what happens to Earl in the story is not lost on Earl: After Earl tells Arthur and the police all he knows about Tina's murder, Earl realizes that he's following in his hero's footsteps: "What they were writing down right now was *Clothesline: His Life and Times*" (137), referring to Earl's alter-ego, Clothesline, and the Lead Belly biography.

More than just the music of Lead Belly echoes through the pages of *I Am the Light of This World*. Earl is a teenager in the early 1970s, and the radio hits of that decade figure prominently in the novel. Parker's song choices are perfect for the scenes in which they appear, always augmenting the story or adding some other layer of intrigue. "Crystal Ship" by The Doors is playing as Earl snorts crystal meth and cocaine the first time he parties with Tom,

ABOVE Michael Parker presenting "Blackwinging it in the Digital Age" sponsored by UNCG Special Collections and University Archives (*NCLR* published this essay in the 2023 print issue.)

a psychopath who is Tina's real killer and who sexually assaults Earl prior to the murder. "Play 'Crystal Ship,' [Earl] told Tom. You got it, boss. *Before I slip into unconsciousness I'd like to have another kiss*, sang Earl into a plastic spatula he found in a drawer" (71).

"Gimme Shelter" by The Rolling Stones, that quintessential end-of-the-free-love-1960s anthem, plays during a subsequent scene, tense with sex and violence, that reflects much of what Mick Jagger is wailing about in the song:

Ooh, a storm is threatening  
My very life today  
If I don't get some shelter  
Ooh yeah, I'm gonna fade away  
...  
Rape, murder  
It's just a shot away . . .

"Gimme Shelter" propels the narrative into grisly terrain, ramping up the sense of dread and impending tragedy, upping the ante. Earl and Tina are indeed without shelter in that moment. Their very lives *are* threatened.

Even more disturbing is Parker's use of "Walk Away," the jaunty hard rock/funk song by the James Gang about the end of a relationship, which takes on a haunting quality in the context in which it appears in the novel: Tom cavalierly sings it in the shower after he's murdered Tina. "[Earl] had cradled Tina's bloody head and stroked her hair. He still heard the shower running. Tom singing over the sound of the water pelting the

plastic curtain. The James Gang, 'Walk Away'" (166).

Earl's fate is sealed at that point. By the time he emerges from prison as a fifty-something-year-old man and plays *The Zombies' Greatest Hits* for a woman he meets in Oregon, where he relocates after his release, he has effectively become a zombie himself – lifeless, apathetic, and incapable of rebirth – which foreshadows the end of Earl's story.

**Michael Gaspeny's** debut novel from Livingston Press, *A Postcard from the Delta*, cranks the music-as-religion motif hinted at in *I Am the Light of This World* up an octave. The story follows Johnny, a white smalltown Arkansas high school football star whose obsession with the



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALICE OSBORN

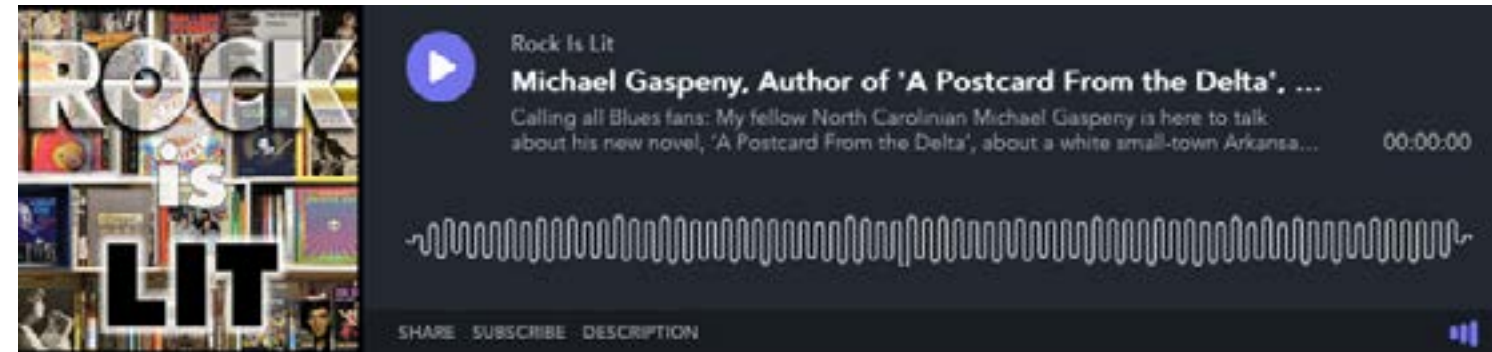
blues threatens to thwart his football aspirations and alienates him from his longtime girlfriend, Missy, and just about everyone else in town. "Every day I go to Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, and Robert Johnson like a fun-

damentalist studies the Bible," Johnny professes at the beginning of the novel. "Their music is sacred to me" (7). As he soon discovers, it's not easy worshipping at the altar of the blues in a town like Spinkville, an Ozark hamlet named for Johnny's ancestors, "where the holy trinity consisted of football, faith, and the fishing report" (37).

Johnny's boyhood dream had been to be a star Razorback at the University of Alabama, a dream he shared with his father, the mayor of Spinkville and former owner of Ozark Poultry, the largest employer in town. Johnny begins to question that dream after his football coach pressures him to run a thousand yards in a single game, a near-impossible feat. Flummoxed, Johnny asks him why a thousand. "It's a magic number," Coach Hurd responds. "It grabs attention! You rack up a thousand, and that record's gonna stand a good while" (17). Coach Hurd's vision of the thousand-yard game soon reaches the townspeople, who latch onto it as though it were the shot in the arm they need to revive the stagnant Spinkville, with its "abandoned homes and scorched-looking trailer parks smack up against churches with landscaped terraces, quaint log-cabin gas stations, and mom-and-pop businesses with pot-holed parking lots and drooping gutters" and "a nursery school [that] sat next to a junkyard, adjacent to the Tanner Family Funeral Home" (20).

ABOVE Michael Gaspeny reading at Scuppernon Books Greensboro, NC, 2021

**MICHAEL GASPENY** is the author of a collection of poems, short stories, and this novel, as well as a novella in verse *The Tyranny of Questions: Poems* (Unicorn Press, 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021). During his time as a reporter, he covered President Bill Clinton's first campaign for national office. Before retiring, he taught journalism and English courses at High Point University and Bennett College. His poems have appeared in *NCLR Online* 2020, *Tar River Poetry*, *Kakalak*, and *Cave Wall*. His works of fiction have been published in *storySouth* and the *Greensboro Review*.



The dream is further derailed after Johnny develops a crush on the new girl in town, a brilliant African American named Rae. They bond during a senior class trip, and she asks him what he wants to do with his life. He tells her about his sports ambitions, but then says, "I think what I want now is to find out who I am and not be afraid of myself when I do" (127). This new introspection has its roots in Johnny's love of the blues and his guilt at being a privileged white boy in a world that he thinks doesn't value his musical idols or black people in general. When Rae asks him what it is about this music that speaks to him, Johnny waxes poetic about the artistry of musicians like Muddy Waters and Son House, how "[t]he blues are deeper than other music" (122), but ultimately, he confesses, "[m]aybe it reveals what's deep inside me – for better and worse. Maybe I'm trying to compensate for injustice. Whatever. What Muddy Waters calls 'deep blues' tell the truth about life. They hit me in the heart or the crotch or right between the eyes. I read books, I go to church, I try to crush people on the football field, but the blues are the truest thing I know" (124–125).

Once Johnny makes that proclamation, he is primed and ready to fully indulge the romantic notion he has of the blues – "I wanted to kill my roots. Sick of

my status as an aristocrat and a knight, I wanted to be a twelve-year-old bluesboy hopping freights" (60) – and embark on a literal and metaphorical search for self that results in a pilgrimage to Clarksdale, MS, home of the Delta Blues, a trip author Michael Gaspeny has made himself for similar reasons. "I owe [these blues musicians]," Michael said on *Rock is Lit*. "They have given me so much inspiration and helped me through hard times. It's not exactly like going and bowing down and saying thank you for what you've done for me, but it's not very far from that." Nor was it very far from Johnny's experience in *A Postcard from the Delta*.

On a lark, Johnny ditches school one afternoon, pops one of his many blues mix tapes into his car tape player, and heads South on his holy mission, thinking, "[m]aybe I could wash myself in the Mississippi and become a new person" (133). He drives headlong into the fabled Delta night, eager for transformation, enlightenment, salvation, the sacred music his soundtrack. "Robert Johnson sang 'Crossroads,' his slide guitar vibrating between my eyes. The Mississippi River, 'Old Man' of legend, wasn't far now. Somewhere out in the darkness lay the spot where myth said the Devil had

tuned Robert Johnson's guitar in exchange for his soul. I wondered what Robert Johnson would think if he were around to look at me" (134).

Onward Johnny travels, through Clarksdale, the bleak town seemingly abandoned, a far cry from how he'd portrayed it in his mind. "I had dumbly imagined a picturesque Clarksdale designed for my ease, clubs lit in pastels" (136). The reality is lonely and scary for Johnny, and he begins to question his decision to make the journey. Still, he continues on to the outskirts of town and finally finds a juke joint that's open. What transpires next involves a holy intercession with music as mediator and a violent stripping away of illusion, both of which will change Johnny's life and his standing in his hometown forever.

*A Postcard from the Delta* by Michael Gaspeny and *I Am the Light of This World* by Michael Parker are exceptional examples of how a great rock novel can "name the unnameable and communicate the unknowable." That is the power music has in these two stories, for it is music that drives the narratives, feeds the souls of the protagonists, and stays with readers long after the last beats of the final scenes fade out. ■