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Frank Ocean, Harper Lee, and the Reclusive Artist

After *To Kill a Mockingbird*, readers didn't demand more from its author. For fans of the musician behind *Channel Orange*, it's a different story.

Frank Ocean performs at the Oya music festival in Oslo in August 2012.
Norsk Telegrambyra AS / Reuters

EVE L. EWING

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I was 16 when I first became intrigued with Harper Lee. As an aspiring fiction writer, I was fascinated with the details of novelists' lives—how they manage to surmount the seemingly insurmountable task of creating and rendering an entire imaginary world. Lee's biography lured me in before her writing even did: her

father the attorney, the trial of the Scottsboro boys and the influence it had on her, her friendship with Truman Capote. In my teenage exploration, one word emerged over and over: *recluse*.

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Lee refused interviews for decades. As *To Kill A Mockingbird* emerged as one of the most beloved works of fiction in the American canon, she led a quiet life in small-town Alabama, while the second novel she'd hinted at failed to appear. These twin facts—the solitary magnum opus and the life spent hiding from its bloom—coalesced into a kind of mystique, both in my own mind and, it seemed, in the minds of those who studied her from afar. *The Telegraph* referred to Lee as having "succeeded in protecting herself ... and living a life which is of her choosing." PBS called her an "enigma."

A decade later, when I was an English teacher leading my eighth-grade class in study of the novel, I found myself thinking often of Lee on my drive home. How could someone with such an astute understanding of the world apparently want so little to do with it? How could someone craft so perfect a piece of art, only to shy away from the acclaim it produced?

That summer, I received a 3 a.m. email from a student of mine who'd gone on to high school, checking in with me about her freshman year. She told me to listen to a mixtape by a new singer she liked. I looked him up. It's no hyperbole to say I'd never before heard anyone who sounded like Frank Ocean. I'd never heard soul- or R&B-inspired vocals paired with lyrics that moved so recklessly beyond the purview of how I understood those genres—words that emerged from the familiar only to blossom into pathos, surrealism, and irreverence.

Channel Orange, like *Mockingbird,* is an unapologetic masterpiece for people defining themselves at the

intersection of lived experience and possibility.

A week later, a demo version of the song "Thinkin Bout You" began circulating online, leaked via the Tumblr account Ocean (or Frank, as many of us call him, Frank Ocean having earned his way into the esteemed pantheon of black people whom other black people call by first name as though we enjoy a personal relationship) maintains. The song blends a sedated, downtempo beat with Ocean's plaintive vocals—moving at times into a strained falsetto that my grandparents' generation would probably find pitiful, and that my generation seems to perceive as endearing and honest in its limitations. "Thinkin Bout You" would become the opening song when Ocean's first album, *Channel Orange*, was released in 2012. With it, I was hooked. So, it seemed, was everyone I knew.

Listening to *Channel Orange* is sort of like having a sleepover at your best friend's house and hearing them sing in the shower in the morning. It's like driving home late at night from a party where you were kissed by someone you pined after and never knew liked you back, and yell-singing along when the song of the summer comes on the radio. It's at once nostalgic and [afro]futuristic, mundane and bizarre.

The album immediately seared itself into the hearts of a black millennial *vox populi*, becoming an unapologetic masterwork for a group of people increasingly defining themselves at the intersection of lived experience and possibility. And in this way, the work is oddly reminiscent of *Mockingbird*. Lee returns readers to the sleepy Southern hometown in which most of us never actually lived—a place where even the terrorism of a lynch mob and the specter of unjust death are hushed by the charm of childhood adventure and a young girl's steadfast belief in her father's integrity. As *Mockingbird* revisits the racist hierarchies of 1930s Alabama through a hazy lens of make-believe games and pecan trees, *Channel Orange* spins tales of drug addiction, sex work, and class divides between the ache of lost love and the click-whir of a tape rewinding.

Then summer ended, as it is wont to do. And it was cold, and then warm again, and suddenly *Channel Orange* was a year old, and then more time passed and it was two

years old, and at some point the thing that was new and beautiful was no longer new or beautiful enough and people started asking for something else. Somewhere lies an invisible and intangible rubric, by which some works of art are deemed classics—a status that effectively protects the artist from facing slander or even ever having to produce something good ever again. *To Kill A Mockingbird* is in that category. So is *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. *Illmatic*. *The Sixth Sense*. But *Channel Orange*, evidently, is not. Rather than being viewed as a sufficient, self-contained masterwork, Ocean's audiences have taken it as the promise of more. More memories, more beauty, more nostalgia. And Ocean, for his part, has encouraged it—whether or not it's a promise he can keep.

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On April 6, 2015, Ocean posted an image on Tumblr of himself seated in front of two stacks of magazines; one cover is labeled *Boys Don't Cry*. The caption, now infamous, reads "I got two versions. I got twooo versions..." and the post is hashtagged "#ISSUE 1 #ALBUM 3 #JULY2015 #BOYSDONTCRYMAGAZINE."

Thus began the spiraling period I can only imagine Ocean historians will one day refer to obliquely as The Wait, or perhaps The Age of Acrimony. After July came and went with no album to speak of, Ocean's every action—or, more often, inaction—was met with indignation from those who'd previously declared their adoration for him. "Frank Ocean is a liar" became as reliable a sentiment on social media as tweets about television or the weather. There are variations, depending on the day: a "certified platinum liar," a "disgusting liar," a "liar and a fraud," a "compulsive liar." Ocean granted no interviews and offered no commentary on the rumors that would crop up via other artists, assuring journalists that the album would manifest itself eventually. "I feel like he's working harder than he's ever worked in his life," the producer Malay told *Pitchfork*. "I know he's away making a masterpiece," Chance the Rapper told *Complex*. And when Ocean did emerge from obscurity in brief fits—sitting in the audience at Kanye West's Madison Square Garden release party for his album *The Life of Pablo*, appearing in a Calvin Klein commercial—fans responded to his presence with angst and rage.

That angst was amplified this past week when Ocean launched a livestream from his website … of himself, viewed from a distance, engaged for several hours in what appeared to be a woodworking project in a large, empty room. The startling visual of a vast, empty space—in contrast to the cacophony represented by, say, a livestream from Madison Square Garden—puts me in mind of something Lee once said in an open letter to Oprah Winfrey.

Rather than keeping us almost entirely out of the empty room, as Lee did, Ocean chose to let us in through hints and ephemera.

"75 years later in an abundant society where people have laptops, cell phones, iPods, and minds like empty rooms, I still plod along with books … Now we are three in number and live hundreds of miles away from each other. We still keep in touch by telephone conversations of recurrent theme: 'What is your name again?' followed by 'What are you reading?' We don't always remember."

What happens to an artist when other people are allowed to see inside that empty room, to watch the quiet and slow and plodding work of construction that is happening therein? For Lee, who gave only a single recorded interview about the novel—in 1964—it seems that it was safer to adhere to the words of the poet Gwendolyn Brooks: "Art urges voyages. And it is easier to stay at home." In continuing to quietly, privately live her life with the fog of fame safely on the other side of her door, Lee made a choice about self-determination at the cost of public presence. Of course, it helps that those who have adored her over the decades have been mostly content to let that choice ride itself out without condemnation.

This week, Ocean was supposed to release his album. As of this writing I have no way of knowing if it will really happen or not. What I do know is that Harper Lee eventually published a second novel, but not until she was at the eve of her death and beset with a dementia that some say enabled her attorney to take advantage of her and publish *Go Set a Watchman* against her wishes. The existence of the novel

was the stuff of rumors for decades. And yet, no one called Lee a liar; no one said they could never love or trust again because her career was built on broken promises. No one ever seemed to tire of *To Kill a Mockingbird* even as the trope of the white savior moved into the realm of the socially distasteful in a way that might turn contemporary readers against the beloved Atticus Finch. It was a classic. And that was quite simply enough, even without a subsequent masterwork or public performance from the author. It was enough.

There's a deep intimacy that seems to underlie the fury directed toward Ocean. Sharing the news of the alleged new album on Facebook this week, my friends' reactions were so personal that it would have been impossible for the uninitiated to guess that they were talking about someone other than a dear friend. "Francis, I swear to gawd if you're playing with my emotions..." "I heard you bout to lie again on Friday. Say it to my face this time." "Good thing I have therapy on Monday, just in case." I find these sentiments a little odd, even within myself, but still unsurprising. It's the frustration we reserve for those we love, those who disappoint us time and time again but draw us into their orbit—through bonds of love, trauma, family—such that we know we will stick around to be hurt again and again, and will never stop believing in them nevertheless. *Why are you doing this to us?*

But what about that invisible rubric? That is, why can't *Channel Orange* be enough in the way that *Mockingbird* is? Is it because rather than keeping us almost entirely out of the empty room, as Lee did, Ocean chose to let us in through hints and ephemera? And more broadly, what are we owed by an artist whom we profess to love? Why does the quiet deliberation of one soft-spoken Southern Gothic artist with a widely adored debut inspire awed respect and deference, while another inspires bitter disappointment? How do we maintain an earnest interest in and desire for art we love, while respecting the autonomy of the person who creates it and the fact that creating anything at all is the most excruciating of human endeavors?

I haven't read *Go Set a Watchman*. Maybe it will take me all the years that *To Kill a Mockingbird* did, or maybe I will die without having read it the way Harper Lee

almost died without ever seeing it enter the world. It seemed, for years and years and years, that she was just fine with that possibility, and thus so am I. And I think that if I had to, I could accept that living in a world that includes *Channel Orange* is enough, just enough. I wonder whether maybe, if Frank Ocean decided that he never again wanted to allow us entry into his inner life of errant indoor tornadoes, high-school football player crushes, and ancient palaces, we could forgive him. Whether maybe we could even love him again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

EVE L. EWING is a sociologist, poet, and essayist based in Chicago. She is the author of the forthcoming collection *Electric Arches*, to be published by Haymarket Books.