

CULTURE



POETRY

# Building The Archives

PENN PROFESSORS BUILD A DIGITAL ARCHIVE OF POETRY PERFORMANCES AND READINGS

Bernstein Hopes People Will Rethink Role Of Live Readings

By NICHOLAS GILEWICZ  
THE EVENING BULLETIN

Elite universities have a reputation, often deserved, of disengaging from the communities that surround them. Poetry often has a similar reputation for being obtuse and disconnected. So, combining the two might seem ill-advised.

But the University of Pennsylvania's new project, PENNSound, has managed to engage the poetry community on a global scale. Launched in January of this year after eighteen months of planning, PENNSound provides MP3 files of poetry, all free, all fully downloadable and shareable, provided that they are used exclusively for personal or noncommercial use.

Under the direction of Penn professors Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis, the project has assembled over half a terabyte of material on its servers — or in iPod terms, the equivalent of about 125,000 songs. Like music files, the live recordings are broken down by poem into "singles," so it isn't necessary to download an entire 40-minute performance to sample a poet's work. PENNSound's technical director Chris Mustazza says that people are downloading about 13 gigabytes of poetry every day — enough poetry to fill the new high-end iPod Nano more than three times over. "Although weirdly, our peak use is Fridays at 3 a.m.," he laughs. "Nobody can figure out why."

Digital rights of course are a concern — but PENNSound has permission from every writer, estate, or publisher for each poem archived on the site. Bernstein says that although he believes "[the major] publishers don't act in the interest of poetry or the public," there haven't been any major issues with rights. In stark contrast to digital music, the lack of a commercial market for poetry recordings, and poetry in general for that matter, is precisely what lets PENNSound exist. Filreis says "It's a wonderful rejoinder to the proprietary values that music people have." And it's surprising what you can get when you ask: PENNSound has just posted a live performance of "Helen in Egypt" by Hilda Doolittle, who is better known by her famous modernist moniker H.D.

Bernstein, perhaps best known for his involvement with poetry's L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement (and for co-founding and editing the eponymous magazine), has a reputation as something of an obscurantist in the artistic sense. But he says that both his own work and his interest in the intersection of poetry and technology evolve from looking at poetry as mate-



ELIZABETH TROST/University of Pennsylvania

Poet Charles Bernstein, co-founder and executive editor of Buffalo's Electronic Poetry Center, came to Philadelphia to teach at the University of Pennsylvania. Along with fellow professor Al Filreis, he is editor of PENNSound, a large archive of poetry readings and performances available for free on the Internet.

rial culture — that is to say poetry is of our times, not outside of them. "I'm interested in poetry as a material medium and how it operates culturally. And so far, people have mostly neglected the performance of poetry — not 'performance poetry,' but the live reading of poems — as primary text."

The claim that live readings are as important an aspect of the poem as the written version is one that some poets would hotly contest, yet at PENNSound, many of the performances do something all too rare in poetry readings: enhance the written word, and make the poems feel more complete. Charles Olson's "Maximus Poems," for example, are regarded as dense, tough reads. But his virile 1957 performance of selections from "Maximus" gives the poems a clarity they don't necessarily possess on the page.

Fed by live reading series and donated recordings from around the country, Bernstein's own vast archive (in his office, one wall is nearly covered with audio recordings), and the regular readings at the Kelly Writers House on Penn's campus, PENNSound has a remarkable diversity of work, including work by well known poets like Kenneth Koch, June Jordan, Robert Creeley, Yusef Komunyakaa and others. Listening to Ted Berrigan's first performance of his "Sonnets" — experimental takes on the form — is a rewarding experience as well, both for the poems and the marginalia of Berrigan's commentary as he wends his way through his work.

Younger poets get a fair shake on PENNSound too, which isn't always the case in the poetry community. Susan Brennan's "Poetic Brooklyn," one of the contributed reading series, fea-

tures some excellent young writers like Steve Dalachinsky, Brendan Downing and Jordan Davis.

While many Penn students work at the project through work-study programs, Mustazza says that the sheer volume of material they have is daunting. "It's not so much like there's a flow of material. It's more like a mountain that keeps growing, even though we're always chipping away at it." The amount of recordings forces Bernstein and Filreis to be discriminating in what they post. They look at a box of tapes, and quickly label them I (for making them available ASAP), II (for loading on the server and getting the rights and the recording live when I is done), and III (to store until I and II are done). "It's a practical way of testing what we value," Filreis asserts.

"Universities generally treat writing as visual and textual — PENNSound adds sound" to the mix, says Filreis. And in fact, he sees PENNSound as an outgrowth of the ideas behind the Kelly Writers House, where programs are free and open to the public. "The Writers House was founded outside of the curriculum, using university resources to make programs available to both the university and community and the community at large, which is why I think it has been successful as an educational tool and community resource. I'm interested in an open pedagogy. And what Writers House does for Philadelphia, PENNSound does for everyone."

PENNSound is located at <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/>. The Kelly Writers House is located at 3805 Locust Walk. For more information about PENNSound, or the Kelly Writers House, please call 215-573-WRIT.



TELEVISION

# Mrs. President

GEENA DAVIS STARS AS FIRST FEMALE PRESIDENT IN ABC'S 'COMMANDER IN CHIEF'

Awkward Series Could Find Its Footing Down The Line

By DAVID BLUM

With the arrival of *Commander in Chief* on ABC, the United States of America will have three presidencies to follow — the Jed Bartlet administration over on NBC, the Bush White House in Washington, and now the Allen team taking over for recently deceased President Bridges in Rod Lurie's well-meaning new drama about the first female to hold the nation's highest office. There's no question that President Bush remains the most dramatic and interesting one to follow; unlike his television counterparts, Martin Sheen and Geena Davis, Mr. Bush manages to bring to his daily duties a sense of uncertainty and theater that makes a presidency realistic. His human failings make Mr. Bush, if nothing else, the most compelling of the three; he may not be the most likable, but at least he doesn't run his presidency to ensure that a network executive will pick up his administration for more episodes.

Still, I can't deny that I like the idea of a gorgeous president. Geena Davis has been a stunning Hollywood presence ever since she turned up in Dustin Hoffman's dressing room in *Tootsie*, wearing nothing but a negligee and a toothy smile. With that broad, expressive face, she brings to this righteous role a dimension that expands on Mr. Lurie's script — she's tough, decisive, and even a little nasty when necessary. But she can't escape the earnestness that pervades this enterprise; everything in *Commander in Chief* is designed to get our vote, and the result feels less like a drama than a paid political message. The conflicts raised before one commercial break are resolved by the next, and by the pilot episode's end, all is right with the world. Why should I tune in next week — to watch her fix more of the nation's problems in 42 minutes?

Mackenzie Allen (she's vari-

ously called "Mac," "Ma'am," and "Madam President") served as a member of Congress and the chancellor of a major university before Teddy Roosevelt Bridges asked her to be his running mate; once she became vice president — the first woman, and the first political independent, to reach that level — we're led to think President Bridges froze her out. When he lands in a hospital with a bleeding aneurism, it's expected that the vice president will resign to allow Nathan Templeton, the speaker of the House, to assume the presidency. We're told that Templeton's politics more closely resemble those of Bridges, though we're given little clue what those beliefs might be — an early and significant failing of *Commander in Chief* — in contrast with the clearly liberal leanings of President Bartlet over on NBC. Instead we get a taste of Templeton's snarky disposition; played with an unexpected lack of subtlety by Donald Sutherland, a future battle of wits seems less likely than a fight over who has the superior haircut. (I'd vote for Mr. Sutherland's mane over Ms. Davis's bob.)

The new president also has to contend with the question of what to do with her husband, Rod Calloway, who had previously been her chief of staff. Scenes of the new first gentleman (Kyle Secor) touring the White House kitchen and bemoaning the pink furniture of his predecessor's office seemed out of place in the pilot, where time could have been better spent fleshing out more provocative matters of policy. Among other things, *Commander in Chief* appears to be struggling for a proper tone; The balance between humor and portent seemed off in the first episode. So did the presentation of the new president's family life, with her three children coping in predictable ways to their mother's new role. ("You'll be John-John and I'll be Patti Davis," says Allen's eldest daughter to her brother at one point.)

Writer Rod Lurie created last season's quirky and terrific crime drama *Line of Fire* for ABC; he has great storytelling talent, and an ear for vivid and powerful dialogue. Perhaps the pressure from ABC to develop another hit drama for the newly empowered *Desperate Housewives* network led him to make so many obvious choices here; it's much harder to develop bold programming for a successful network than a struggling one, where innovation can often prove the only solution to a ratings crisis. Let's hope that if *Commander in Chief* finds an audience on Tuesday nights, Mr. Lurie will find his footing soon afterward, and a way to deliver an ongoing series with more complexity and vision than the pilot. He's got the skill; now all he needs is the imperative. THE NEW YORK SUN

## Quick Take: 'Lost'

Last week's season premiere of *Lost* demonstrated what we all knew before the second season even started — that the creative minds behind ABC's amazing show have more entertainment value to offer than the producers of *Threshold*, *Invasion*, and *Surface* combined. It's still the best show on network television. Contrary to its producers' promises, "Down the Hatch" (or whatever the episode was actually called) answered no questions at all. It merely raised a whole new set of them — deepening the mystery and adding layers of complexity to the show's mystical mythology. My personal favorite new mysteries: Why was the "Quarantine" sign on the inside of the hatch door? And why does Desmond seem partial to the music of Mama Cass? I can't wait for Wednesday night.



MUSIC

# 30 Years Later, Big Star Returns With 'In Space'

By MAX WATMAN

The first Big Star record in 30 years, *In Space*, opens with five seconds of the coolest music I've ever heard. Two guitars shimmer in, one in each speaker, and someone in the background yells "Oh!" The guitars are chiming, jangling, and pulsing, and even before the crash cymbal, it is clear Big Star is back.

The song brings a smile to my face every time: It's just right. I don't mean that it sounds as if nothing has changed, and I don't mean that it sounds like Big Star imitating itself. But that "Oh!" sounds honest. The band, it seems, is just as excited as we are.

Big Star certainly went into the studio with a lot to live up to. Big Star is the kind of band that made its fans start bands (The Replacements, R.E.M.), and the group is credited with inventing power pop, wherein the guitars are big but the songs are pretty. It is consistently referred to as the second most influential rock band ever after the Velvet Underground.

Armed with the knowledge that their fans refer to them as "groundbreaking" and "inventive," the group's members had to come up with a record knowing that if they broke any new ground, everyone would hate them for not sounding like they used to. And if they sounded like their old selves, they'd fail if only because they're not drunken 20-year-olds anymore — and everyone would say they lacked imagination. But all you can legitimately ask for is that the band not forget the phrasing and the choices that made us love Big Star in the first place. And on that, this record delivers. It's also got some very weird — perhaps even groundbreaking — moments.

The band is so popular right now that the cognoscenti will repudiate them momentarily — that's what you get for having one of your songs become the theme for *That '70s Show*. But back in the 1970s, Big Star was honest, vivid, and heartbreaking. The band's first two records were desperate,

sad music about teenagers, with soaring harmonies and chiming guitars. This was troubled love, troubled self, troubled youth: boredom and loathing. Not idealized, not romanticized, just there.

Singer-guitarist Alex Chilton had been in the Box Tops as a high school kid — that's him singing "Gimme a ticket for an aeroplane" in "The Letter" at 16. He was no stranger to soul music and the Memphis sound, but Chilton turned his attentions across the pond and began singing with a clipped voice in a high register. This was one of Big Star's major contributions. Along with Lou Reed, Chilton handed this nasal American Englishness to a whole generation of rockers — funny, since the Brits had been pretending to be Southern and emotive, and now all these Southerners were pretending to be English and affectless.

Ardent/Stax blew it big time with the Big Star records — many albums never even made it to the stores. Even if people had wanted to purchase *#1 Record* or *Radio City*, they couldn't find a copy. But even this obscurity couldn't tarnish the band's ascending reputation. Big Star was the band people traded tapes of. They were collector's items, badges of connoisseurship. The Replacements even cut a song called "Alex Chilton."

Now, original Big Star members Chilton and Jody Stephens (drums) have been joined by guitarist Jon Auer and bassist Ken Stringfellow of the Posies (who also tours with R.E.M.). This iteration of Big Star, although only now releasing its first record, has clocked far more hours together than the original band, which began falling apart when Chris Bell left after the first record, and was dissolved by 1975 (when the third album came out in 1978, there wasn't even a band to support it). This foursome has been playing shows for over a decade. But no record, until now.

And what an album it is. The first three tracks of *In Space* (Rykodisc), which comes out today, really sound like Big Star,

and they are wonderful songs that get better with each listen. Track 4, "Turn My Back on the Sun" is a grower — starting with a wonderfully hackish, sloppy version of the intro to the Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice." At first, I thought it was a dull song, but soon I found myself singing along. This is where this record begins to reveal its true character: raw, weird, funny.

And it doesn't get rawer, weirder, or funnier than "Love Revolution," a flat-out disco funk riff on Andre Bell and the Drells. "February's Quiet," on the other hand, sounds like the Jayhawks at their best (which is just the Jayhawks sounding Big Star, after all), brilliant in its simplicity. The lyrical hook is one of the most pleasing things I've heard in a year.

The band is going to get a bit of grief for some of the R&B on this album, but I think it's the important stuff. "Mine Exclusively," a cover of an Olympics song, absolutely leaps out of the speakers. The backup vocals, the incessant riffs, the tambourine: This is when I started to think that perhaps this is an astonishing album.

Some of the new music — think the Blues Brothers without the virtuosity of Steve Cropper — might rub folks the wrong way. The first time I heard them do it, I sat back and uttered a "What the ...?" It's white for one thing, it's definitely blue-eyed soul, but hot, and rough, and infectious. Motown harmonies on the backup singing, tambourines. Where bluesy funk rockers like Mooney Suzuki and John Spencer have turned to Hendrix for their inspiration, this is more along the lines of the Muscle Shoals band, or Booker T: laid back, controlled, and pumping. It will eventually prove to be the most forward-looking stuff on the record.

Just like the first Big Star records, this sound is going to make people want to start bands. Garage soul: Can't you see it? The Supremes with loud electric guitars? Sam and Dave with crash cymbals? Where else could we be headed? THE NEW YORK SUN

## A&E BULLETIN

### Bacon, Buscemi Go To Woodstock

WOODSTOCK, N.Y. — Kevin Bacon will talk music and Steve Buscemi will be honored as a maverick at the Woodstock Film Festival.

The sixth annual festival, which runs today through Sunday, includes *Winter Passing*, starring Zoey Deschanel, Will Ferrell and Ed Harris; Atom Egoyan's *Where the Truth Lies*, starring Bacon and Colin Firth; *Lonesome Jim*, directed by Buscemi and starring Casey Affleck and Liv Tyler; and *Fatless*, a historical drama about Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust.

Bacon will appear on a movie music panel. Buscemi will receive the Maverick Award for creativity and independent vision.

While countless regional film festivals have cropped up in recent years, Woodstock has managed to leverage its countercultural cachet and proximity to New York City to continued success.

AP

## Viewers Flock To ABC

By DAVID BAUDER

NEW YORK — Viewers flocked to old favorites *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and *Desperate Housewives* and tried out new fare *My Name is Earl* and *Everybody Hates Chris* in the first week of television's new season.

Intense interest in *Desperate Housewives* (28.4 million viewers) and *Lost* (23.5 million) led ABC to its best first-week performance in five years. It was the first time since 1995 that ABC won the first week among the 18-to-49-year-old demographic.

ABC had five of the week's 10 most popular programs.

CBS is still the top network but, like NBC, its household ratings were down 7 percent compared to the first week last year. CBS' Monday lineup lost potency with the end of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, while *Survivor* hasn't started out as strong as usual.

NBC's *My Name is Earl* was a bright spot, the most popular sitcom of the week. But the network had a disastrous Thursday — the night its "must-see TV" lineup once dominated — with *Friends* spinoff *Joey*, *The Apprentice* and *ER* showing erosion.

It was a tough week for Martha Stewart. Not only did her NBC version of *The Apprentice* debut to a tiny audience of a little more than 7 million, but fewer than 7.5 million were curious enough to see CBS's movie dramatization *Martha Behind Bars*.

UPN's *Everybody Hates Chris* had a terrific first week. It beat *Joey* head-to-head with 7.8 million viewers, numbers almost unheard of for UPN.

### This week's top ten

Here are the ratings for the top 10 prime-time television shows for Sept. 19 to Sept. 25.

Network • Share • Millions of people	
1. <b>CSI (P)</b>	29.0
CBS • 24	
2. <b>Desperate Housewives (P)</b>	28.4
ABC • 22	
3. <b>Lost (P)</b>	23.5
ABC • 20	
4. <b>Criminal Minds Preview (SP)</b>	19.6
CBS • 18	
5. <b>CSI Miami (P)</b>	19.2
CBS • 17	
6. <b>Grey's Anatomy (P)</b>	19.0
ABC • 17	
7. <b>Survivor: Guatemala (P)</b>	17.0
CBS • 15	
8. <b>Law and Order: SVU (P)</b>	16.8
NBC • 16	
9. <b>Invasion (P)</b>	16.4
ABC • 15	
10. <b>Extreme Makeover: Home ED (P)</b>	16.4
ABC • 13	

One rating point represents 1,096,000 TV households. The share is the percentage of in-use televisions tuned to a given show.

(P) Premiere (S) Special  
(R) Rerun (C) Complex  
\*Includes multi-segment programs

### Overall Network Ratings

8.3	8.0	6.6	4.1

SOURCE: Nielsen Media Research AP