

Hardcover: US

Baracking our world

'The Bridge' digs deep into the experiences that shaped Barack Obama before he became the first black president of the US

BY JEFFREY BURKE
BLOOMBERG

Some have seen Barack Obama as shape-shifter, world-class networker, memoirist, savior or putz.

In *The Bridge*, David Remnick, editor of the *New Yorker* magazine and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Lenin's Tomb*, examines Obama's life before the presidency "and some of the currents that helped to form him."

For Obama, born on Aug. 4, 1961, to a black exchange student from Kenya and a white Kansas woman living in Hawaii, the currents are many. Remnick traces the political rise and fall of Obama's father in Kenya after he abandoned his wife and child, the few years Obama lived in Indonesia with his mother and her second husband, and the boy's return to Hawaii to live with his Kansas grandparents after fourth grade.

His education came at elite schools, including Columbia University and Harvard Law School, where he was the first black president of the *Law Review*.

Yet Obama avoided the enriching legal and financial stewardships popular in the late 1980s. He went to Chicago's gritty South Side after Columbia and began honing his networking skills as a street-level community organizer. After Harvard he began the memoir *Dreams From My Father*, and married Michelle.

In the spring of 1992, he led a highly successful voter-registration drive in Chicago that brought him connections with wealthy Lakefront Liberals, important fund-raising sources.

He won a seat in the state senate and lost badly in a congressional race. He was a lousy speaker: "stentorian, professorial, self-serious — a cake with no leavening," Remnick writes.

He got better. His dazzling oratorical performance at the Democratic convention in 2004, along with imploding rivals, eased Obama's way into a Senate seat. There he was bored.

"The job was too small for him," explains a helpful aide quoted by Remnick.

The book's title refers to a 1965 confrontation on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, between civil-rights demonstrators and state troopers that turned violent and became known as "Bloody Sunday." It also alludes to Obama's role as a link between the generation of Martin Luther King Jr that fought the race wars in the 1960s and the present, when the president stands as perhaps the greatest beneficiary of the struggle.

The book makes the point visually with front endpapers showing a photo of the 1965 face-off and those in the back offering a panoramic shot of the crowds on the Capitol steps for Obama's inauguration.

Remnick avoids hagiography. He's keenly familiar with the cult of personality and its perils. His Obama benefits as much from uncommon



PUBLICATION NOTES
BY DAVID REMNICK
672 PAGES
KNOPF

gifts, hard work and lucky breaks as he does from the missteps and misfortunes of adversaries.

Obama gained most, perhaps, from the extent to which the country had grown desperate for a glimpse of eloquence, intelligence and clarity after years of former US president George W. Bush — whom Remnick delights in denigrating as "a national and personal embarrassment — an incurious, rash, flippant, pampered, dishonest leader."

Remnick's epilogue acknowledges that after a year of the Obama presidency, "the sense of dissatisfaction ran deep" for many Americans. For some, so did the sense of absurdity, stirred not only by the national amnesia about how much of a mess Bush bequeathed his successor, but by such moments as Obama being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize not long after committing 30,000 new troops to Afghanistan.

What Remnick brings to a complex story are the tools of an exceptional reporter: persistence, curiosity, insight. He weaves in hours of on-the-record interviews with schoolmates, teachers, mentors, advisers and scholars.

In one, Obama's University of Chicago Law School colleague Geoffrey Stone, out of frustration, calls Obama a "putz" for choosing politics over a career as a law professor. "What a waste," Remnick quotes him saying.

The Bridge is rich in such reflections and refractions, as well as lighter moments.

"At times, Obama's celebrity definitely had an erotic edge to it: The character Grace on the NBC sitcom *Will & Grace* dreamed that she was in the shower with the new senator from Illinois — and he was 'Baracking my world!'"



Erykah Badu
New Amerykah Part Two
(Return of the Ankh)
Universal Motown

BY TAYLOR BRIERE
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

According to Erykah Badu, *New Amerykah Part One* (4th World War) was a left brain record, dealing primarily with themes affecting society at large, such as drug addiction, racism and urban decay, while *New Amerykah Part Two* (*Return of the Ankh*), her latest release, represents the right side of her brain, the loving, emotional side.

That split extends deeper than lyrical content. The production on *Part One* was all digital slickness, cold and calculating. *Part Two* is all analog warmth, blanketed with funky bass lines, angelic harps and the crackle and pop of sampled vinyl. Even the theremins add to the sense of intimacy, here sounding like bubbles of soothing noise.

The video for *Window Seat* sees Badu stripping off her clothes piece by piece while walking in Dealey Plaza, Dallas, Texas, site of John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, before herself being gunned down by an unknown assassin. It is a visual representation of the record's greatest strength and the reason why it succeeds: Badu's swagger. Throughout *Part Two*, her voice oozes confidence, even as she bares all to the listener with lines such as, "I'm a recovering undercover over-lover/Recovering from a love I can't get over."

The Dallas police took notice of Badu's stunt, with kids among the witnesses, and she has been charged with disorderly conduct, a misdemeanor that carries a fine of up to US\$500. But after listening to the record, you get the feeling that this was all a part of the plan and that somewhere, she is smirking.



Beach House
Teen Dream
Sub Pop

Beach House's music is often described as "dream pop," a genre that began in the 1980s as an intermingling of ambient post-rock sound textures and bittersweet pop-hooks, but any genre label falls short of fully capturing the forces at work on the band's third album, *Teen Dream*.

It's easy to get lost in the meandering chord progression of the opening track *Zebra*, which trots along for a full two minutes with only a metronomic kick-drum and shaker before the snap of the drum machine's snare propels it into a second round of verse and chorus, this time digging its heels in, with vocalist Victoria Legrand proclaiming, "Anywhere you run, you run before us" atop triumphant, crashing cymbals.

Nine more songs follow, each gushing emotion without ever sounding affected. Crystalline chord arpeggios and soaring synths drive *10 Mile Stereo* to a stunning climax on what is Legrand's most impressive vocal performance, stretching all the right notes as she announces with absolute certainty that "The heart is a stone and this is a stone that we throw." Yet just as a teenager's poetry can only take wings in the heart of its acned author, the lyrics here are often impenetrable on paper. "Seven figures leap the hungry maws/The beast he comes to you," she croons atop a bed of eerie watery guitar on *Norway*.

Considering the emotional breadth of the record, which runs the gamut from detuned psychedelia to unbridled pop (sometimes within the space of a single track), the elements of each song remain remarkably consistent: reverb-drenched vocals, relatively clean guitars, haunting synths and simple drum machine beats. Whereas many other bands have to rely on studio innovation to sound fresh, the magic of *Teen Dream*, what imbues it with such a grandiose feel, is the songwriting itself. Even though it's only April, *Teen Dream* is without a doubt one of this year's gems.

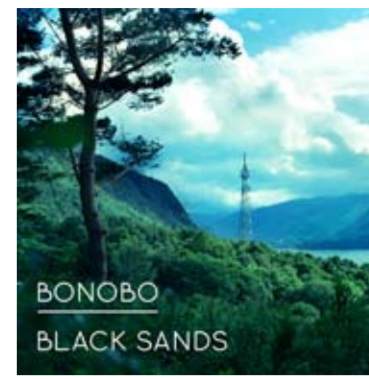


The Moving Dawn Orchestra
Dials EP
Fluid Audio

On its Web site (www.movingdawnorchestra.com), Guy Andrews' new project The Moving Dawn Orchestra describes its sound as "contemporary classical and electro-acoustic folk music" — a mouthful to be sure, but the music is not half as convoluted as the description suggests. The Moving Dawn Orchestra's sound is created by laying down acoustic instruments such as strings, guitars and pianos alongside synthesized and digitally manipulated sounds. As the songs work their way through different musical motifs, they often build and release tension by adding or removing layers of sound. Although this may sound far out, the music isn't particularly experimental and for the most part the sounds are carefully crafted and arranged to be beautiful, not difficult.

The *Dials* EP, The Moving Dawn Orchestra's first release, consists of a suite of four songs, each running around eight minutes and representing one of the four seasons. The EP explores themes of warmth and cold, comfort and isolation. *Spring: Hymn/Hymn* opens with a sad slow descending piano melody that calls to mind winter's chill, accompanied by pleasantly chiming bells anticipating spring's arrival. Fittingly, *Summer: Keep Still* gives us the warmest moment on the record: a folksy guitar picking out a happy melody accompanied by breathy vocals pleading, "Please don't stop this summer to be." In *Autumn: Between Hands*, the promise of summer's sunny days fades into a melancholy autumn's falling leaves and encroaching cold. And as you would expect, the album's most desolate and dissonant moments are brought to the fore during *Winter: Silhouettes*. The suite ends here with inky black harmonic drones.

Though the concept may seem gimmicky, the EP actually works well and warrants a listen from anyone with an interest in contemporary classical music.



Bonobo
Black Sands
Ninja Tune

The buzz surrounding Bonobo's 2000 debut record *Animal Magic* had Simon Green pegged as one of the rising stars of trip-hop and earned him a spot on the respected Ninja Tune label's roster. *Black Sands* is his third LP for the label, and a worthy effort from a man who's been perfecting his craft for over a decade now.

The album begins with a prelude: a Chinese bowed instrument playing a somber melody that leads seamlessly into the rich atmospheric, synthesized bass stabs and compressed beat of the next track, *Kiara*. It's an elegant beginning, and sets the tone for a record that is nothing if not tasteful. Lush beats, smooth production and diverse instrumentation create a sound that is appealing across the board. The most instantly likeable track on the album may be *El Toro*, whose energetic breakbeats, regal strings and brass accents call to mind DJ Shadow's early work. The three tracks on which Andrea Triana is a guest vocalist are some of the album's best, adding some soul to the chilled-out ambience Bonobo creates. Of particular note is the song *Eyes Down*, which buries Triana's subtle, sexy vocals between robotic synths and a warbling drum 'n' bass style bassline.

Bonobo has often been criticized for sounding too generic as a result of failing to take risks with his music, and this album will do little to silence criticism of that nature. But although it may not rewrite the book on trip-hop, it's a solid release from top to bottom.

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Hollywood's psycho obsession

The enduring legacy of Hitchcock's masterpiece is examined in two books published on the 50th anniversary of the film's release

BY PETER BRADSHAW
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Fifty years ago, all America was convulsed by a low-budget, violent movie in black and white, featuring a motel bathroom with a shockingly visible flushing lavatory and a grisly murder scene of unparalleled ingenuity and cinematic flair: *Psycho*.

Nowadays, such a film would be expected to come from a young hotshot, but this was directed by the 61-year-old Alfred Hitchcock, a figure known for elegance and high production values and as the star of a popular TV show, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, but also as someone beginning a gentle career decline. Instead, *Psycho* sensationally jolted Hitchcock's reputation up to a higher level, and as the owner of a profit-percentage in the film, he became staggeringly wealthy as few studio directors could ever dream of being.

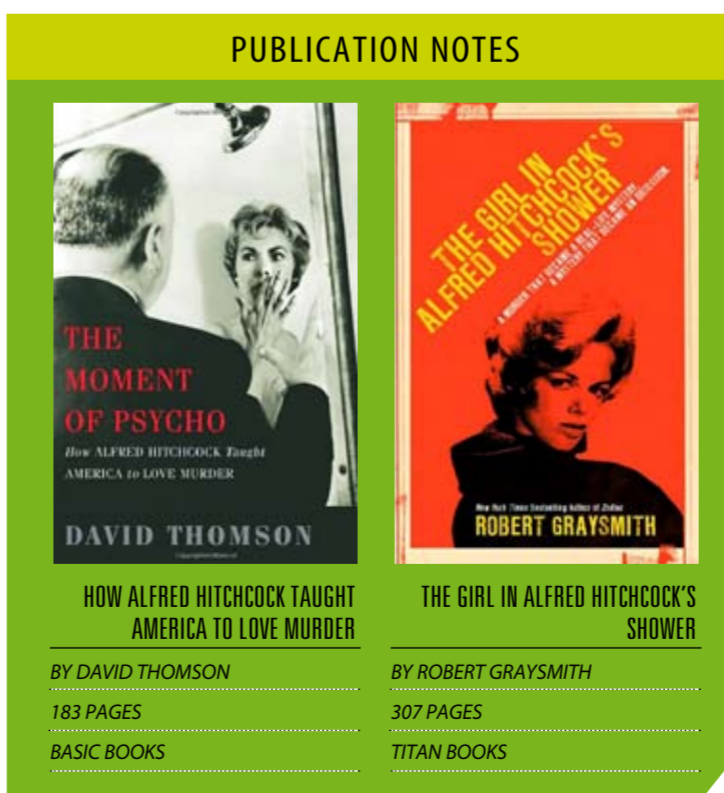
The career of fellow Englishman Michael Powell had been destroyed by his own transgressive chiller, *Peeping Tom*, made the year before, but Hitchcock was the toast of every town. A promotional campaign centering on his reputation for

disarmingly droll black comedy, combined with the stunning fact of the film's commercial success, neutralized any outrage from the beginning. That murder scene in the shower, the masterpiece-within-a-masterpiece — a dizzying succession of images whose explicitly violent effect was created chiefly by the shrieking violin-stabs of Bernard Herrmann's score — took Hitchcock fully seven days to film out of a 30-day shooting schedule. It was a 45-second sequence of 70 camera setups plus one "lost" image: an overhead shot showing Janet Leigh's naked buttocks, withdrawn lest it upset the censor. All this lived on in America's intimate dreams and nightmares, and accelerated American popular culture into its modern age of permissiveness and exploitation.

David Thomson intuitively the secret afterlife of *Psycho* in the American mind, in a short book that is like an inspired, bravura jazz solo. Robert Graysmith, the author whose books on the Zodiac serial killer were themselves made into a movie, composes some strange, pungent, but anti-climactic reportage, footnoting the film's

occult traces in two unknown lives: those of Henry Adolph "Sunny" Busch Jr, the real-life "Psycho" serial-killer reportedly inspired by the beginning. That murder scene in the shower, the masterpiece-within-a-masterpiece — a dizzying succession of images whose explicitly violent effect was created chiefly by the shrieking violin-stabs of Bernard Herrmann's score — took Hitchcock fully seven days to film out of a 30-day shooting schedule. It was a 45-second sequence of 70 camera setups plus one "lost" image: an overhead shot showing Janet Leigh's naked buttocks, withdrawn lest it upset the censor. All this lived on in America's intimate dreams and nightmares, and accelerated American popular culture into its modern age of permissiveness and exploitation.

Thomson attempts to place himself inside the fabric of *Psycho*, floating in its pin-sharp monochrome nightmare, living through its narrative and the narrative of its cultural impact in a sort of subjective real time. Shrewdly, he places it alongside Truman Capote's 1966 true-crime study *In Cold Blood*, as a work that shows that America's hinterlands are not the places of provincial decency quaintly imagined by popular culture, but unpoliced worlds of melancholy and menace. Who are all these lonely men? Good ol' boys? Momma's boys? Thomson playfully asks us to imagine that dutiful son Elvis Presley in the



Tony Perkins role: a disquietingly plausible cine-fantasy and the kind of brilliant flourish that only Thomson could conjure. Hitchcock was of course

adored by Truffaut and the new French generation, and Thomson suggests that the provocative, endlessly deconstructible shower scene ignited the discipline of

film studies itself. (When I was at Cambridge University in the 1980s, Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath were agitating for film to be critically understood, and the gaunt Edwardian villa that housed the university's English Faculty was known as the "Bates Motel.") Thomson is interestingly tough on the unreal, regressive quality of Hitchcock's work: He has a list of films that have inherited the *Psycho* gene, among them Nic Roeg's masterly *Don't Look Now*.

Graysmith's book is an oddity: a shaggy-dog story of great incidental interest, but a letdown in its final moments. He intercuts between the seedy, nasty life of the killer "Sonny" Busch, and the upbeat, cheerful world of Renfro: pinup model, nudist and Vegas dancer who, after the *Psycho* gig, found herself, in a career-move of perfect irony, taking a small part in the young Francis Ford Coppola's wacky sex comedy about a sad-sack voyeur: *The Peeper*. Naturally, the reader expects Busch to make an attack on Renfro, or for there to be some sort of contact. Instead, Graysmith reveals that in 2001, an entirely different man, one Kenneth Dean Hunt, was arrested

for a string of murders including the 1988 slaying of Myra Davis, a model who was a stand-in for the initial camera tests that Saul Bass and Hitchcock carried out for the shower scene. Media reports assumed that Myra Davis and Marli Renfro were one and the same. Graysmith knew they could not be — he tracked Renfro down through the Internet, and the resulting interviews formed the basis of this book. Exasperatingly, Graysmith tells us precisely nothing about Hunt and Davis. Perhaps the book should have been all about them.

For all its problems, Graysmith's book does at least offer something usually absent from any discussion of *Psycho*: a female presence and a woman's perspective. This is a movie popularly supposed to be about the male gaze, and these are very male critical accounts. The subtitle of Thomson's book is "How Alfred Hitchcock Taught America to Love Murder" — an alternative could have been "How Hitchcock Legitimized the Spectacle of Violence Against Women." Perhaps what is most needed for its 50th anniversary is a new feminist reading of *Psycho*.