

JOHN HODGEN

Bootleg

It's a song called "Silver Mantis" that T Bone Burnett sings
on an old bootleg Bob Dylan CD from a Rolling Thunder Revue concert
down in Fort Worth, Texas, over thirty years ago. In the song,
which tells the tale of a lowly servant a thousand years ago
who saves the daughter of a Japanese warlord from a kidnapping,
but who then is thrown into the dungeon because the warlord is jealous
and enraged,
Burnett makes a mistake, a minor one, simply transposing the name of
the servant
for the name of the princess (the rough equivalent of a Shakespearean
actress saying
"O Juliet, Juliet, wherefore art thou Juliet?"). And to the casual listener,
or the uninitiated,
or the drunk or lazy, the moment in the song might go completely
unnoticed, no harm done
either way, but to the devotee, the sentimental, or the lowly servants
among us
(who are always in danger of being thrown into dungeons by our own
rough equivalents
of warlords, jealous and enraged), it makes us love the song even more.

I say maybe T Bone was a little drunk or a little lazy that day.
Or maybe he was caught up in his own moment, maybe playing before
the largest crowd
of his life because Dylan had loved the song too and had asked him to
join the revue
(although even Dylan himself made a mistake, introducing the song with
the wrong title
and mispronouncing the name of the Japanese princess).
Or maybe T Bone just knew somehow, like some silver mantis in his heart,
what all artists know over time, that art is one endless mistake after
another,
that architects sometimes make intentional mistakes, turning the last
piece of tile
upside down in the floor of ten thousand tiles to show no pride before the
face of the Lord,
that the part of the song where the singer loses control is the heart's true
song,
the essence of all that is holy in love, that lovers when they freely exchange
their hearts

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with the other exchange their names as well, that they know in the room
they make
of their love that each name is sacred and the same, that Romeo is Juliet
and Juliet is Romeo,
that the heart of a lowly servant can be the heart of a princess, that there's
no mistake about it,
that love may be the greatest mistake of them all, that love is the rough
equivalent,
the bootleg version of the perfect song of our lives.