Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste

Carl Wilson

NEW and EXPANDED EDITION

Bloomsbury
LET'S TALK ABOUT LOVE
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Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste

CARL WILSON
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In 2007, Continuum published the 52nd volume in the critically-acclaimed 33 1/3 series. Its title, *Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*, seemed to suggest that it would be a book about Céline Dion. But it turned out to be so much more. *Let’s Talk About Love* uses Dion as a test case and thought experiment to prompt the reader to second-guess the way we think about everything we like and dislike, what we value and what we scorn. Soon, the praise poured in and many reviewers immediately identified *Let’s Talk About Love* as their favorite book in the 33 1/3 series, even though it was about what was perhaps their least-favorite album.

The book sparked debates about taste not just in the music-writing community, but in English and Cultural Studies departments on university campuses around the world, on blogs and podcasts, and even on TV’s *The Colbert Report* (where Wilson appeared on March 4, 2009).

Given the great response, Bloomsbury and Wilson decided to create an expanded, standalone edition: What follows in Part One is the original text of *Let’s Talk About Love* from the 33 1/3 series in 2007. (Very tiny mistakes have been corrected for your reading pleasure.) In Part Two is gathered a set of essays on the book’s themes contributed by a wide range of prominent writers, musicians and scholars. Finally, Carl Wilson returns to his initial questions and updates what has happened in the worlds of both popular taste and Céline Dion since the book’s publication, in a new Afterword – all to deepen and enrich further what it means to talk about love.
PART ONE

LET’S TALK ABOUT LOVE: A JOURNEY TO THE END OF TASTE

Carl Wilson
"Hell is other people’s music," wrote the cult musician Momus in a 2006 column for Wired magazine. He was talking about the intrusive soundtracks that blare in malls and restaurants, but his rewrite of Jean-Paul Sartre conveys a familiar truth: When you hate a song, the reaction tends to come in spasms. Hearing it can be like having a cockroach crawl up your sleeve: you can’t flick it away fast enough. But why? And why, in fact, do each of us hate some songs, or the entire output of some musicians, that millions upon millions of other people adore?

In the case of me and Céline Dion, it was Madonna’s smirk at the 1998 Oscars that sealed it. That night in March, the galleries of Los Angeles’s Shrine Auditorium were the colosseum for the latest gladiatorial contest in which art’s frail emissaries would get flattened by the thundering chariots of mass culture. And Empress Madonna would laugh.

Until that evening, I’d done as well as anyone could to keep from colliding with Titanic, the all-media juggernaut that had been cutting full-steam through theaters, celebrity rags and radio playlists since Christmas. I hadn’t seen the movie and didn’t own a TV, but the magazines and websites I read reinforced my sureness that the blockbuster was a pandering fabrication, an action chick-flick, perfectly focus-grouped to be foisted on the dating public.

Now, I realize this attitude, and several to follow, probably makes me sound like a total asshole if, like millions of people, you happen to be a fan of Titanic or of the woman who sang its theme. You may be right. Much of this book is about reasonable
people carting around cultural assumptions that make them assholes to millions of strangers. But bear with me. At the time, I thought I had plenty of backup.

For instance, Suck.com, that late 90s fount of whip-smart online snark, called Titanic a “14-hour-long piece of cinematic vaudeville” that “had the most important thing a movie can have: a clear plot that teaches us important new stuff like if you’re incredibly good-looking you’ll fall in love.” It was contrasted with Harmony Korine’s Gummo, a film about malformed but somehow radiant teenagers drifting around rural, tornado-devastated Xenia, Ohio – as if, after the twister, Dorothy’s Kansas had been transformed into its own eschatological Oz. Suck said that Gummo evoked “the vertigo we encounter when people discover and make up new standards of cool and beauty,” a sensation resisted by mass society because those standards could be “the wrong ones, and we can’t allow ourselves to look at that too hard or long.”

CNN.com’s review, on the other hand, described Gummo as “the cinematic equivalent of Korine making fart noises, folding his eyelids inside-out, and eating boogers,” and the director as a punk-ass straining in vain to be a punk. For cred, the writer namechecked the Sex Pistols, saying that unlike theirs, Korine’s rebellion came down to making fun of the hicks.

I knew which argument I bought, and it wasn’t just because the same CNN reviewer called Titanic “one swell ride.” After all, Korine was a lyrical enfant terrible who’d gotten fan letters from Werner Herzog; Titanic director James Cameron made Arnold Schwarzenegger flicks. Korine was New York and Cameron was Hollywood. And just consider their soundtracks: Gummo had a soundscape of doom-metal bands, with an alleviating dash of gospel and Bach. Titanic had Celtic pennywhistles, saccharine strings and … Céline Dion.

Living in Montreal, Quebec, made it impossible to elude Titanic’s musical attack as neatly as the celluloid one. Dion had been intimate with the whole province for years, as first a child star, then a diva of all French-speaking nations and finally an English–French crossover smash. Her rendition of James
Horner and Will Jennings’s “My Heart Will Go On” had come out first on her bestselling 1997 album *Let’s Talk About Love*, then on the bestselling movie soundtrack and then again on a bestselling single. (Ten years later, by some measures, it’s the fourteenth-most-successful pop song the world has ever seen.) I hadn’t listened regularly to pop radio since I was eleven, and I got agoraphobic in malls, but that tin-flute intro would tootle at me from wall speakers in cafés, falafel joints and corner stores, and in taxis when I could afford them. Dodging “My Heart Will Go On” in 1997–98 would have required a Unabomber-like retreat from audible civilization.

What’s more, I was a music critic. I hadn’t been one long: I’d done arts writing at a student paper, veered into leftish political journalism and then become the arts editor at one of Montreal’s downtown “alternative weeklies.” I wrote profiles and CD reviews on the side for the rakish punk-rock guitarist who edited the music section (when he dragged himself into the office in the mid-afternoon). I championed experimentalists and the kinds of unpopular-song writers I was prone to calling “literate.” I would not have deigned to listen to an entire Céline Dion album, but it was a basic cultural competency in Montreal to know her hits well enough to mock them with precision. In Quebec, Dion was a cultural fact you could bear with grudging amusement – a horror show, but *our* horror show – until *Titanic* overturned all proportion and Dion’s ululating tonsils dilated to swallow the world.

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With “My Heart Will Go On,” Céline-bashing became not just a Canadian hobby but a nearly universal pastime. Then-*Village Voice* music editor Robert Christgau described her popularity as a trial to be endured. Rob Sheffield of *Rolling Stone* called her voice “just furniture polish.” As late as 2005, her megahit would be ranked the No. 3 “Most Annoying Song Ever” in *Maxim* magazine: “The second most tragic event ever to result from that fabled ocean liner continues to torment humanity years
later, as Canada’s cruelest shows off a voice as loud as a sonic boom, though not nearly so pretty.” A 2006 BBC TV special went two better and named “My Heart Will Go On” the No. 1 most irritating song, and in 2007 England’s Q magazine elected Dion one of the three worst pop singers of all time, accusing her of “grinding out every note as if bearing some kind of grudge against the very notion of economy.”

The black belt in invective has to go to Cintra Wilson, whose anti-celebrity-culture book A Massive Swelling describes Dion as “the most wholly repellant woman ever to sing songs of love,” singling out “the eye-bleeding Titanic ballad” as well as her “unctuous mewling with Blind Italian Opera Guys in loud emotional primary coloring.” Wilson concluded: “I think most people would rather be processed through the digestive tract of an anaconda than be Céline Dion for a day.”

My personal favorite is the episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer in which Buffy moves into her freshman university dorm and her roommate turns out to be, literally, a demon – the first clue being that she tacks a Céline Dion poster up on their wall. But the catalogue of slams, from critics to Sunday columnists and talk-show hosts to Saturday Night Live, could fill this book. I’ve mostly seconded those emotions, even when a blog ran a Dion joke contest that produced the riddle, “Q: Why did they take the Céline Dion inflatable sex doll off the market? A: It sucked too hard.”

But it was at the Oscars that things got personal.

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The night was the expected Titanic sweep, capped by director James Cameron’s bellowing self-quotation, “I’m the king of the world!” (Which from that podium sounded like, “My brand has total multiplatform synergy!”) But in the Best Original Song category, Titanic – and Dion – had one unlikely rival, and it happened to be Elliott Smith.

Smith was a hero of mine and of the late-90s indie subculture, one of those “literate,” bedroom-recording
songwriters whose take on cool and beauty seemed leagues away from the pop-glamour machine. Pockmarked and shy, with a backstory that included childhood abuse and (though I didn’t know it yet) on-and-off heroin addiction, he had recorded mainly for the tiny northwestern Kill Rock Stars label, but had just signed to Dreamworks, which would release his next album, *XO*, that summer.

Smith wrote songs whose sighing melodies served as bait for lyrics laced with corrosive rage. They dangled glimpses of a sun “raining its guiding light down on everyone,” but everyone in them got burned. They were catchy like a fish hook. As his biographer Benjamin Nugent later wrote in *Elliott Smith and the Ballad of Big Nothing*, “Smith effectively deploys substance abuse as a metaphor for other forms of self-destructive behavior, and the metaphor is a handy one for several reasons. For one, a songwriter taking substance abuse as his literal subject (even if love is the figurative one) can easily steer clear of the Céline Dion clichés of contemporary Top 40 music, the language of hearts, embraces, great divides. [Instead] he participates in a hipper tradition, that of Hank Williams, Johnny Cash and Kurt Cobain – their addiction laments, disavowals and caustic self-portraits.”

Smith also dealt frankly, I felt, with one of the ruling paradoxes for partisans of “alternative” culture: It might look like you were asserting superiority over the multitudes, but as a former bullied kid, I always figured it started from rejection. If respect or simple fairness were denied you, you’d build a great life (the best revenge) from what you could scrounge outside their orbit, freed from the thirst for majority approbation. This dynamic is frequently rehearsed in Smith’s songs: In “2:45 a.m.,” a night prowl that begins by “looking for the man who attacked me / while everybody was laughing at me” ends with “walking out on Center Circle / Been pushed away and I’ll never come back.” If laments and disavowals were your lot, you would shine those turds until they gleamed. And you’d spread the word to the rest of the alienated, walking wounded – which, in a late-capitalist consumer society, I thought, ought
to include everyone but the rich – that they too could find sustenance and sympathy in a voluntary exile.

So how had Smith ended up in center circle at the Shrine Auditorium, smack up against the “Céline Dion clichés,” a juxtaposition that seemed as improbable as Gummo winning Best Picture? An accident, really. Years before, he’d met independent filmmaker Gus Van Sant hanging out in the Portland bars where Smith’s first band, Heatmiser, played. That friendship led to writing songs for Van Sant’s first “major motion picture,” Good Will Hunting, and so to Oscar night, featuring (as Rolling Stone put it) “one of the strangest billings since Jimi Hendrix opened for the Monkees,” with Smith alongside the pap trio of Trisha Yearwood, Michael Bolton and Céline Dion.

He tried to refuse the invitation, “but then they said that if I didn’t play it, they would get someone else to play the song,” he told Under the Radar magazine. “They’d get someone like Richard Marx to do it. I think when they said that, they had done their homework on me a little bit. Or maybe Richard Marx is a universal scare tactic.”

(Richard Marx, for those who’ve justifiably forgotten, was the balladeer who in 1989 sang, “Wherever you go, whatever you do, I will be right here waiting for you” – threatening enough? But if Dion hadn’t been booked, her name might have worked too.)

On Oscar night, Madonna introduced the performers. Smith ended up following Trisha Yearwood’s rendition of Con Air’s “How Do I Live?” (written by Dianne Warren, who also penned “Because You Loved Me” and “Love Can Move Mountains” for Dion). He shuffled onstage in a bright white suit loaned by Prada – all he wore of his own was his underwear – and sang “Miss Misery,” Good Will Hunting’s closing love song to depression. The Oscar producers had refused to let Smith sit on a stool, leaving him stranded clutching his guitar on the wide bare stage. The song seemed as small and gorgeous as a sixteenth-century Persian miniature.

And what came next? Céline Dion swooshing out in clouds
of fake fog, dressed in an hourglass black gown, on a set where a white-tailed orchestra was arrayed to look like they were on the deck of the Titanic itself. She’d played the Oscars several times, and brought on her full range of gesticulations and grimaces, at one point pounding her chest so robustly it nearly broke the chain on her multimillion-dollar replica of the movie’s “Heart of the Ocean” diamond necklace. Then Dion, Smith and Yearwood joined hands and bowed in what Rolling Stone called a “bizarre Oscar sandwich.”

“It got personal,” Smith said later, “with people saying how fragile I looked on stage in a white suit. There was just all of this focus, and people were saying all this stuff simply because I didn’t come out and command the stage like Céline Dion does.”

And when Madonna opened the envelope to reveal that the Oscar went to “My Heart Would Go On,” she snorted and said, “What a shocker.”

I liked Madonna, who danced on the art/commerce borderline as nimbly as anyone. But right then, I squeezed my fists wishing she’d preserved a more dignified neutrality (“dignified neutrality” being the phrase that springs right to mind when you say “Madonna”). In retrospect, I realize she was making fun of the predictability, not of Elliott Smith; my umbrage only showed how overinvested I was. I wasn’t surprised the Oscars had behaved like the Oscars, that the impossibly good-looking people had spotted each other across the room and as usual run sighing into one another’s arms. But the carnivalesque reversal that wedged Elliott in there with Céline and Trisha was one of those rips in the cultural-space continuum that make you feel anything may happen. I was enough of a populist even then to dream that love might move mountains and Heal the great divide.

But when Madonna seemed to chuckle at Elliott Smith, the grudge was back on. And not with Madonna. With Céline Dion.

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Lamentably, this story requires a coda: Elliott Smith had an
adverse reaction to his dose of fame. Paranoid that his friends resented him, he distanced himself, relapsing into mood swings and substance abuse, even public brawls. His songwriting suffered, with the so-so *Figure 8* in 2000 and then zip until 2003, when he reportedly had sobered up and was finishing a new album. Then, on October 21, 2003, police in Los Angeles got a call from Smith’s girlfriend in their Echo Park apartment. They had been arguing. She had locked herself in the bathroom. Then she heard a scream. She came out to find Smith with a steak knife plunged into his chest, dead at thirty-four.

I hadn’t thought much about the Oscar debacle between 1998 and 2003. I’d moved from Montreal to Toronto, from the alternative weekly to a large daily paper, gotten married (to a woman with a severe *Gummo* fixation), and settled into a new circle of friends. But the day Smith died, I flashed back to that night when the whole world had gotten to hear what one of its fragile, unlovely outcasts had to offer, and it answered, *No, we’d prefer Céline Dion.*

“Tastes,” wrote the poet Paul Valéry, “are composed of a thousand distastes.” So when the idea came to me recently to examine the mystery of taste – of what keeps *Titanic* people and *Gummo* people apart – by looking closely at a very popular artist I really, really can’t stand, Dion was waiting at the front of the line.
Let’s Talk About Pop (and Its Critics)

I did not hate Céline Dion solely on Elliott Smith’s account. From the start, her music struck me as bland monotony raised to a pitch of obnoxious bombast – R&B with the sex and slyness surgically removed, French chanson severed from its wit and soul – and her repertoire as Oprah Winfrey-approved chicken soup for the consumerist soul, a neverending crescendo of personal affirmation deaf to social conflict and context. In celebrity terms, she was another dull Canadian goody-goody. She could barely muster up a decent personal scandal, aside from the pre-existing squick-out of her marriage to the twice-her-age Svengali who began managing her when she was twelve.

As far as I knew, I had never even met anybody who liked Céline Dion.

My disdain persisted after I left the Céline ground zero of Montreal, and even as my enchantment with “underground” cultural commandments weakened and my feelings warmed to more mainstream music. I can’t claim any originality in that shift. I went through it in synch with the entire field of music criticism, save the most ornery holdouts and hotheaded kids. It came with startling speed. A new generation moved into positions of critical influence, and many of them cared more about hip-hop or electronica or Latin music than about rock, mainstream or otherwise. They mounted a wholesale critique against the syndrome of measuring all popular music by the
norms of rock culture – “rockism,” often set against “popism” or “poptimism.” Online music blogs and discussion forums sped up the circulation of such trends of opinion. The Internet pushed aside intensive album listening in favor of a download-and-graze mode that gives pop novelty more chance to shine. And downloading also broke the corporate record companies’ near-monopoly over music distribution, which made taking up arms against the mass-culture music Leviathan seem practically redundant.

Plus, some fantastic pop happened to be coming out, and everyone wanted to talk about it. In a Toronto bookstore in 1999, a bright young experimental guitarist caught me off guard by asking if I had heard the teen diva Aaliyah’s hit, “Are You That Somebody.” I hadn’t, but I soon would. That rhythmically topsy-turvy R&B track was produced by Timothy Mosley, a.k.a. Timbaland, and he and his peers began making the pop charts a freshly polymorphous playground. Après Timbaland, la deluge: critics started noticing a kindred creativity even in despised teen pop, and by 2007, writers at prestige publications like the New York Times and the haughty old New Yorker could be found praising one-hit R&B wonders and “mall punk” teen bands as much as Bruce Springsteen or U2.

This was the outcome of many cycles of revisionism: one way a critic often can get noticed is by arguing that some music everyone has trashed is in fact genius, and over the years that process has “reclaimed” genres from metal to disco to lounge exotica and prog rock, and artists from ABBA to Motorhead. Rolling Stone’s jeers notwithstanding, the Monkees are now as critically respectable as Jimi Hendrix. Even antebellum blackface minstrel music has been reassessed, its melodies as well as its racial pathologies found to lie at the twisted root of American popular song.

This epidemic of second thought made critical scorn generally seem a tad shady: If critics were so wrong about disco in the 1970s, why not about Britney Spears now? Why did pop music have to get old before getting a fair shake? Why did it have to be a “guilty” pleasure? Once pop criticism had a track
record lengthy enough to be full of wrong turns, neither popular nor critical consensus seemed like a reliable guide. Why not just follow your own enjoyment? Unless you have a thing for white-power anthems, the claim now goes, there is no reason ever to feel guilty or ashamed about what you like. And I agree, though it’s curious how often critics’ “own enjoyment” still takes us all down similar paths at once.

The collective realignment was also a market correction. After the tumult of the early 1990s, when “underground” music was seized on by the mainstream and just as quickly thrown overboard, many critics and “underground” fans got in a cynical mood. The ever-present gap between critical and general tastes threatened to become an entrenched war of position, in which liking “critics’ darlings” like Elliott Smith and liking pop stars became mutually exclusive. It wasn’t sustainable. An academic might be able to dismiss public taste completely in favor of the weird and challenging, but a working pop critic who did so would be (rightly) out of a job in the long run. And the “underground” thing was becoming a rut of its own.

However attenuated, though, the gap between critical acclaim and popular success never goes away. It’s visible every December when critics draw up best-of-the-year lists on which Radiohead, Ghostface or Bob Dylan eclipse most of the charttoppers (though no longer all of them). On movie critics’ lists, too, summer blockbusters take a back seat to comparative box-office dwarfs: intense domestic dramas, “indie” black comedies, Henry James adaptations. This split is so routine it has come to seem organic. People often say it’s just a matter of aesthetic education and exposure to greater volumes of material, but that seems to imply critical judgments are more objective and lasting, when the record shows us they’re not.

In the end, if delight is where you find it and myriad pop pleasures meet the heterodox needs of diverse publics, what is the real substance of the dislike I and so many other commentators have for Céline Dion?

Yet Dion remains, as the British critic and sociologist Simon
Frith remarked in a 2002 interview with the website rockcritics.com, “probably the most loathed superstar I can remember, at least by everyone I know, not just critics but even my mother-in-law.” He added, “I doubt if she will ever be redeemed, ABBA-style, and what seems to concern everyone is that she is just naff.”

And Frith is a Dion fan.

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Back when heavy metal got no respect (i.e. five years ago), Deena Weinstein wrote an essay in its defense called “Rock Critics Need Bad Music,” which pointed out that critical authority depends on the power to exclude, not just to canonize. It hinges on turning your readership into an incrowd, smarter than some less-discerning audience. Then, when a genre like metal or a band like ABBA is resuscitated, everyone pretends they were never one of the people who looked down on it. The easy conclusion would be that critics’ tastes are opportunistic. But this fungibility is part of taste’s standard wiring.

Everyone has a taste biography, a narrative of shifting preferences: I remember at age twelve telling people I liked “all kinds of music, except disco and country,” two genres I now adore. My hometown was a very white, Ontario-rustbelt city in bad decline. I was a middle-class bookworm who started with the Beatles from my parents’ record collection but soon hit the harder stuff, setting out on the great expedition of the avant-garde. It was only after I moved away that I began to grasp that my blind spots were a regional and cultural bias. My tastes were reshaped by social experiences: dancing in Montreal gay clubs where body-rocking techno mixed seamlessly into disco classics; making friends from Texas or the country-loving Canadian Maritimes; visiting the US South. They were also altered by musical information – by realizing how many hip-hop samples came from disco, for instance, or by following the links from Bob Dylan to Hank Williams to Johnny Cash and the
60s Nashville Sound, and finally back to contemporary country. I realized my easy scorn had betrayed an ignorance of whole communities and ways of life, prejudices I did not want to live with. The epiphany was ethical, but it led to musical enjoyment. Recent talk about pop taste, about unguilty pleasure, tends to trace the route the other way around, if it even gets to ethics.

At twelve, my dislike of disco and country didn’t feel like a social opinion. It felt like a musical reaction. I flinched at the very sound of Dolly Parton or Donna Summer, as unaware that I had any choice about finding them stupid as I was of the frameworks in which they were smart. It seemed natural: I hated disco and country, as cleanly and purely as I now hate Céline Dion.

So how cleanly and purely is that? After all, as I’m writing this, Dion has sold 175 million albums, not counting the Titanic soundtrack. She has five recordings in the Recording Industry Association of America’s list of the Top 100 albums by sales, making her the twenty-third-bestselling pop act of all time. Globally she is the most successful French-language singer ever and could be the bestselling female singer. For four years her legions have tithed their salaries to fly to Las Vegas for her nightly revue A New Day in the custom-built Colosseum theater at Caesar’s Palace. She is beloved by people from Idaho to Iraq, who trade news and debate favorites on Internet message boards like any other group of fans. They cook, work out and date to her music, and when weightier events come, her songs are there, for first dances at weddings and processions at funerals.

When the singer herself is asked if her critics bother her, she answers as she did to Elle magazine in a 2007 interview: “We’ve been sold out for four years. The audience is my answer.”

Which doesn’t mean you have to admire her. Unless maybe it does. Certainly a critical generation determined to swear off elitist bias does seem called to account for the immense international popularity of someone we’ve designated so devoid of appeal. Those who find Dion “naff” – British for tacky, gauche, kitschy or, as they say in Quebec, kétaine – must
be overlooking something, maybe beginning with why we have labels like tacky and naff. If guilty pleasures are out of date, perhaps the time has come to conceive of a guilty displeasure. This is not like the nagging regret I have about, say, never learning to like opera. My aversion to Dion more closely resembles how put off I feel when someone says they’re prolife or a Republican: intellectually I’m aware how personal and complicated such affiliations can be, but my gut reactions are more crudely tribal.

Musical subcultures exist because our guts tell us certain kinds of music are for certain kinds of people. The codes are not always transparent. We are attracted to a song’s beat, its edge, its warmth, its idiosyncrasy, the singer’s je ne sais quoi; we check out the music our friends or cultural guides commend. But it’s hard not to notice how those processes reflect and contribute to self-definition, how often persona and musical taste happen to jibe. It’s most blatant in the identity war that is high school, but music never stops being a badge of recognition. And in the offhand rhetoric of dismissal – “teenybopper pap,” “only hippies like that band,” “sounds like music for date rapists” – we bar the doors of the clubs we don’t want to claim us as members. Psychoanalysis would say our aversions can tell us more than our conscious desires about what we are, unwillingly, drawn to. What unpleasant truths might we learn from looking closer at our musical fears and loathings, at what we consider “bad taste”?

The Céline Dion fan-club roster that many non-fans picture was outed with bracingly open elitism by the Independent on Sunday in the UK in 1999, in the paper’s “Why are they famous?” series: “Wedged between vomit and indifference, there must be a fan base: some middle-of-the-road Middle England invisible to the rest of us. Grannies, tux-wearers, overweight children, mobile-phone salesmen and shoppingcentre devotees, presumably.”

Reading that, my heart swells for these maligned wearers of inappropriate tuxedos, these poignantly tubby prepubescents pining away to the strains of songs of love sung by a pretty
lady with the best voice in the whole world. And far more than I hate Céline Dion, I hate this anonymous staffer from the *Independent on Sunday*. But he’s only fleshing out the implication in, for instance, my use of the phrase “Oprah Winfrey-approved.” If his portrayal of Dion’s audience is accurate, it includes mostly people who, aboard the *Titanic*, would have perished in steerage. If my disdain for her extends to them, am I trying to deny them a lifeboat?

The *Independent’s* bile demonstrates why the critical redemption of abject music tends to come years after its heyday: lounge exotica stops sounding like a pathetic seduction soundtrack on the hi-fi of a smarmy insurance salesman and starts to sound charmingly strange, governed by a lost and thus beguiling musical rulebook. In the present tense, submerged social antagonisms and the risk of being taken for one of the “tacky” dullards make it less attractive to be so allembracing – to hear Céline Dion as history might hear her.

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This book is an experiment in taste, in stepping deliberately outside one’s own aesthetics. It has to do with social affinities and rancors and what art and its appreciation can do to mediate or exacerbate them. At a time when the whole issue of the meaning and purpose of art has grown very murky, the exercise might open a few windows. Primarily, though, the question is whether anyone’s tastes stand on solid ground, starting with mine.

One condition, I think, is that the dislike in question has some personal bite. A random target won’t do. While I generally give a wide berth to any epic pop ballad, the fact that Céline Dion is a Canadian makes her more grating than Michael Bolton: shots at her come with collateral damage to my entire country, as in the *South Park* movie anthem, “Blame Canada,” which crows, “When Canada is dead and gone / There’ll be no more Céline Dion.” I feel implicated: “Hold on,” I want to protest, “we hated her before you did!”
My test case will be *Let’s Talk About Love*, the album that includes “My Heart Will Go On.” It’s not her best-selling release (that would be 1996’s *Falling Into You*), nor the most esteemed among her fans. But it was huge, and came out at the peak of both Dion’s fame and my animosity. Besides, what better title for a study of cultural passions and antipathies?

Along with immersing myself in this record, I’ll examine Dion the same way I do any artist I get interested in – her background, career and influences, the genre she belongs to, what sensibility she expresses. But I’ll also look at taste itself, what has been said about it, its role in aesthetic theory and the research that’s been done scientifically and not-so-scientifically. Will I find my inner Céline Dion fan? The goal isn’t to end in a group hug. If I end up warming to her music, that will be one lesson; if I don’t, we might draw others.

As a goodwill gesture, let’s proceed on a first-name basis, the way her fans do: Hi there, Céline.

The exercise isn’t as far as it seems from my usual critical leanings, toward knotty music like art rock, psych-folk, post-punk, free jazz or the more abstract ends of techno and hip-hop. I write about such sounds in the belief that “difficult” music can help shake up perceptions, push us past habitual limits. As Simon Frith wrote in his book *Performing Rites*, difficult listening bears in it the traces of a “utopian impulse, the negation of everyday life” – an opening toward “another world in which [the difficult] would be ‘easy.’” And isn’t Céline Dion, for me, actually more “difficult” music than any postmodern noise collage? It sure is more uncomfortable. It could turn out to be more disorienting than the kinds of “difficulty” I’ve come to take for granted.

Whatever Céline’s merits, after all, they are not sonic innovation, verbal inventiveness, social criticism, rough exuberance, erotic charge or any of the other qualities I and a lot of critics listen for. Her fans must hear something else. What is it, and in what language might it be addressed? Hard as it is to admit, part of the answer could lie in the music’s very mundanity. After years of pursuing music in which the
“difficulty” carries intimations of “another world,” sonic forecasts of transformation, I’ve begun to wonder whether “easier” music might contain hints for reconciliation with the world into which we’re already thrown. Maybe it deals with problems that don’t require leaps of imagination but require other efforts, like patience, or compromise. There may be negations there, but not the ones I’m used to.

At the same time compromise is what worries me: Maybe I am heading down a relativistic rabbit hole. If even Céline can be redeemed, is there no good or bad taste, or good and bad art? If I decided not to condemn the sleek musical baubles of Céline Dion, would I also have to reconsider the facile decorations of glass sculptor Dale Chihuly, or the kitsch paintings of Thomas Kinkade, “Painter of Light”? Kinkade is the most commercially successful painter of our time, whose nostalgically purified landscapes, untouched by trouble, humor or irony, command hundreds of thousands of dollars from followers outside the art scene. What about mediocre books, or the doublespeak of conservative punditry? Maybe if you don’t stand for something you’ll fall for anything.

Maybe if hating Céline Dion is wrong, I don’t want to be right.

Whatever the perils, it turns out I have an unexpected ally.

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In refreshing my memory about the 1998 Oscars, I came across a story I had never heard: Elliott Smith admitted to the music zine Comes with a Smile that he arrived that night “prepared to keep a lot of distance from Céline Dion. I thought she’d blow in with her bodyguards and be a weird superstar to everybody,” he said. “But she wasn’t like that at all.”

“She was really sweet,” he added in another interview, “which has made it impossible for me to dislike Céline Dion anymore. Even though I can’t stand the music that she makes – with all due respect, I don’t like it much at all – she herself was very, very nice. She asked me if I was nervous and I said,
‘Yeah.’ And she was like, ‘That’s good, because you get your adrenaline going, and it’ll make your song better. It’s a beautiful song.’ Then she gave me a big hug. It was too much. It was too human to be dismissed simply because I find her music trite.”

Smith’s friend Marc Swanson, a visual artist, gave biographer Nugent this account of what came next: “[After] this, we’d constantly be running into people coming up and talking to him, people who didn’t know him, and saying, ‘Oh, how’s it goin’, saw you on the Oscars, so how was that?’ And [they’d] make some derogatory Céline Dion comment, and every time they’d do it, I’d be like, ‘gasp,’ and this look of rage in his eyes would come up and he’d be like, ‘You know, she’s a really nice person.’ And they’d always recoil and be like, ‘Oh, no, I’m sure she’s really nice.’ … I thought that was a cute thing about him: He was defending Céline Dion all the time.”

And Smith only met Céline once. Just think, if we lingered longer, maybe we’d find something “too human to be dismissed” even in her music.