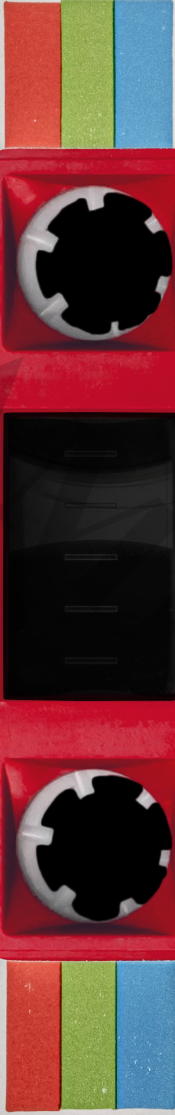



SOUNDTRACK



a lyric memoir

MICHAEL V. SMITH



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Book*hug Press
Toronto 2025

FIRST EDITION

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Soundtrack : a lyric memoir / Michael V. Smith.

Names: Smith, Michael V., author

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20250205815 | Canadiana (ebook) 20250205823

ISBN 9781771669498 (softcover)

ISBN 9781771669542 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCGFT: Autobiographical poetry. | LCGFT: Poetry.

Classification: LCC PS8587.M5636 S68 2025 | DDC C811/.6—dc23

The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Book*hug Press also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.



Canada Council
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Parallel Lines

There can only be one Debbie Harry in a white cocktail dress on the black-and-white striped album cover, standing akimbo

between smiling, shaggy-haired men oblivious to her best bitch face, fists on her hips. The first I remember

from the handful of records in my parents' collection that included *Grease* released that same year, Meatloaf's

Bat Out of Hell, and Cheech & Chong's *Los Cochinos*. 1978, when I skip through eight-tracks to replay songs

so often Mom will yell, *Stop fast-forwarding, you'll wear the tape out*. When my father and his brothers still comb

their hair straight back like Danny Zuko channelling the king, Elvis, whose death the previous year made my father sob

at the kitchen table; when Rubik's Cube launches officially at Studio 54; when Pope John Paul II is inaugurated in

St. Peter's Square while I have lunch with Grandma Cooper
in the Brookdale Mall's Miss Cornwall Restaurant; when

*Dallas, Taxi, Battlestar Galactica, Diff'rent Strokes, Mork
& Mindy, and WKRP in Cincinnati* all premiere on television.

When the news breaks that Polanski has skipped bail
and America arrests John Wayne Gacy with thirty-three

dead boys in his basement. When my older sister Leica and I
concoct potions with PoP Shoppe cola, lipstick, dead flies,

crayon shavings, dust bunnies we pinch from under the bed; when
the Montreal Canadiens beat the Bruins to win a third

Stanley Cup in a row, when my father pounds the arm
of his La-Z-Boy hard enough to finally loosen it

into its mythic wobble. When I start bowling five-pin
with my lifetime friend Michael Payne; when Jim Jones

orchestrates a mass suicide and Harvey Milk—whose big gay legacy
I won't know for two more decades—is murdered

in San Francisco City Hall. When HIV is rumoured
to have first penetrated North America. When we are trained

to crouch under our desks at school in nuclear-war drills.
When my neighbour Scott McG and I play a game

of smelling each other's farts. When unbeknownst
to us Blondie plays the El Mocambo in Toronto

on my mother's birthday; when Leica and I dance
in our pajamas in the living room trying not to skip

the needle as we flop our staccato limbs one way
or another, elbows everywhere. When Dad rolls

the car and Mom chains the door to lock him out, again;
Dad begging on the other side of the glass for my sister

or I to unhitch the gold lock and let him in, please
unlock and let him in, please just open the door. When

he punches a hole in a pane and undoes the lock without us,
blood on the window, blood on the floor, blood

on the outside door handle. Before my parents break up
the first time and we sell this house where I learn

a trick to keep myself alive, to not move, to lie perfectly
still, to dissociate, to disappear into every Nancy Drew and

Hardy Boys mystery I can find. When I discover music
drowns the noise too. Music, music in my headphones.

Thriller

arrives with the body
of my sister's brief
new boyfriend

Jesse
who brings the cassette over
after school—
cassettes being the new
big deal
because
they're way smaller
than eight-tracks,
have songs on *two* sides
and can be rewound.

Leica met Jesse at General Vanier,
grade nine, two years ahead of me.
I've just turned eleven, so Leica
is pushing thirteen.

Jesse probably has the first mullet
I've seen, well before
they'll become a small-town conformity
for hockey jocks.

All those loose curls kissing
the back of his neck.

Though he and my sister don't date
more than a few weeks—I think
they break up over a call
on the rotary phone—
a lot of info about that guy
still rattles around in my head.

Jesse in his denim jacket
with the upturned collar
at our particleboard
kitchen table. My parents
out for the night.

Jesse burns
a small blob of thick shiny black paste
between two knives he's heated up
on the red coils of the stove.

What's that, I ask, and he,
with the shell of a BIC pen
between his lips
says, *Motorcycle grease*.

His wisp of a moustache,
pierced left earlobe

—when the right ear
signals gay, though lots of folks
in '83 think any man
with an earring
is a fag.

Jesse sports a dangly
sterling pair of handcuffs
because, my sister explains,
Jesse has moved from Toronto
where all the big city kids
wear an earring.

Not a week or so into school
some thug rips the mini-handcuffs
clear through his earlobe —
conformity violence
a strategy
small-town men use
as social control.

I'll be too afraid
to get my own
George Michael hoops
until thirty-one.

Nobody has seen anything
like *Thriller's* music
video, its large ensemble
dance numbers, zombies
of small-town men
and women.

How MJ
rebrands as a solo artist
moonwalking
into culture

a.k.a. white culture
a.k.a. prime time TV

a red leather jacket
white socks
under tight black pants
short at the ankle

one white glove.

Metonymies
to outlast the hard news stories
that will follow
about boys my age.

I learn to dance watching videos
from that album. I thrust
my knees forward and flip
onto the ends of my shoes

in a signature
Billie Jean ballerina
redux, balancing
on a dance floor

at the edge of my body
like I might hold
the world at bay

with the same exquisite tenderness
I imagine Jesse holds
in his denim-clad arms.

SAMPLE