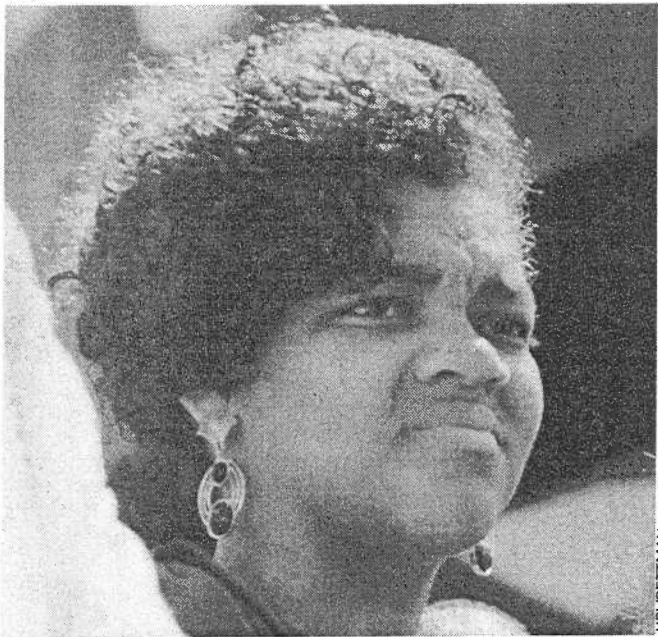


Brief Encounters



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Facts Machine

Outrage:

The Story Behind the Tawana Brawley Hoax

By Robert D. McFadden, Ralph Blumenthal, M. A. Farber, E. R. Shipp, Charles Strum, Craig Wolff
Bantam, \$21.95

's take the long view and con-
er what to tell our grandchil-
n about Tawana Brawley and
journey from shy teenager in
ppingers Falls to the center of
tatewide controversy. Will we
in "Once upon a time...?"
"In November 1987, Tawana
wley fabricated a tale of ab-
ction and rape by white
ists"?

'd try it as allegory, a post-mo-
n tale that jump-cuts from a
ked-out family to a govern-
nt that could not see, let alone
ress, the needs of black people
ng on the edge of white soci-
. On the other hand, six *New*
York Times journalists will tell
ir grandchildren about their
rch for THE TRUTH, as if there
ld be one unified account of
; sad epic.

o come up with truth they've
ced together information from
ousand interviews, police re-
ts, grand jury evidence, a cabi-
of newspaper clippings, and
ens of videotaped press con-
ences. Their work is the typical
rid of reporting and sleuthing;
succeeds at producing a narra-
e with a coherent point of view.
t after reading *Outrage*, I still
t know why the case was sig-
cant, who the Brawleys are, or
nature of the world they live
I do know a lot about Mario
omo, Attorney General Robert
rams, the workings of the
nes hierarchy, and a Brooklyn
fee shop called Edgar's. *Out-*
e begins and ends at Edgar's, a
t where middle-aged black
n gather and, evidently, pro-
e quotes that illustrate the pro-
bial black point of view.

he reporters do attempt recon-
ctions of the girl's disappear-
e that are supposed to be au-
entic, but the crucial scenes are
ely based on the recollections
one source—Tawana's ex-boy-
nd, Daryl Rodriguez. The au-
rs claim that Tawana told the
th to Daryl, who passed it on to

them. In a court of law, that's
called hearsay and ruled inadmis-
sible; elsewhere it's called gossip.

Throughout the 399 pages of
their book, the authors follow a
vague standard in determining the
credibility of sources. Al Sharpton
is vilified for making groundless
accusations that an assistant D.A.,
a state trooper, the IRA, and the
KKK raped Tawana, but his opin-
ions suddenly become plausible
when he discusses the motives of
Alton Maddox and C. Vernon
Mason, Tawana and her mother.
A few anonymous sources—all
from officialdom—are described
as heroes for leaking information
that furthered the official line,
while Maddox and Mason are cast
as opportunists for using Tawana
to advance their own causes. And,
of course, the *Times* writers be-

lieve Rodriguez, even though his
opinions simply rehash what he
says Tawana told him—and
Tawana herself is not to be
believed.

The Brawley tale had an amaz-
ing ability to blur the distinctions
between fact and fiction. Among
other things, what was fact to
whites was often fiction to blacks,
and vice versa. As in *Rashomon*,
point of view was more impor-
tant, and more revealing, than
narrative. But the reporters have
written a detective story, and one
that misses many clues. For exam-
ple, they spend only three sen-
tences on a lovesick Tawana try-
ing to hold on to her boyfriend by
claiming she was pregnant and ar-
ranging an abortion, and less than
two paragraphs describing the
black grand juror who voted
against the report that denounced
Tawana's tale.

These oversights are glaring
when put beside the reporters' in-
dulgence concerning white politi-
cians and journalists. We see
Cuomo as a concerned father,
contemplative politician, shrewd
negotiator, and skilled orator.
Prosecutor Abrams is the epitome
of a good liberal, determined to
use government to guarantee fair-
ness, while John Ryan is the
tough, persistent investigator. As
for the media, the reporters cast
the *Times* and its newsroom as
key actors. Thoughtful city editor
John Darnton assembles his team
to crack the case, while managing
editor Arthur Gelb earns high
praise for giving the reporters
enough space.

If the Brawley case were simple,
Outrage would be a terrific book.
But race relations, domestic vio-
lence, the workings of govern-
ment, and the egos of politicians,
preachers, lawyers, and journalists
are often complicated things. The
authors of *Outrage* repeatedly
substitute facts for analysis, what
happened for why. Or, to para-
phrase an old newspaper adage,
they let the facts—and only some
of those—get in the way of a great
story.

—Rick Hornung

New Music Man

The Voice of New Music: New York City 1972–1982

By Tom Johnson
Het Apollohuis Eindhoven, \$20

"A disaster for the new music
community": that's how one afi-
cionado described Tom Johnson's
resignation from *The Village*
Voice. A legend surrounds the
critic some downtown musicians
call "St. Tom," the critic who was
always supportive, who always
understood, who wrote more than
400 new-music articles for the
Voice from December 1971
to January 1983—not one of
them, as myth has it, negative.
Though Carman Moore had writ-
ten pointed new-music pieces in
these same pages in the '60s, it
was Tom Johnson who cast the
long shadow.

The publication of 179 of John-
son's *Voice* articles in a collection
titled *The Voice of New Music* of-
fers a chance to dust away a de-
cade's revisionist memory and
look at what Johnson actually
wrote. The selection focuses on
downtown experimentalism; other
facets of Johnson's activity—up-
town concerts, ethnic music, and
European visits—are largely omit-

ted. The most oft-mentioned com-
posers, according to the index, are
Robert Ashley, John Cage, Philip
Corner, Philip Glass, Meredith
Monk, Gordon Mumma, Phill
Niblock, Pauline Oliveros, Char-
lemagne Palestine, Steve Reich,
Frederic Rzewski, and La Monte
Young.

Johnson's enthusiasms are con-
tagious, even couched in what his
Voice editor Robert Christgau has
aptly called "the flattest good
prose I've ever read." Freed to
invent a new critical style and cre-
ative enough to do it, Johnson re-
sponded to a period of unprece-
dented musical experimentation
with a method startlingly original
in its offbeat subject matter
(Johnson gained notoriety by re-
viewing birds and pinball ma-
chines) and its frank subjectivity.
Humility is a distinguishing fea-
ture of his critical persona, a will-
ingness to acknowledge subjectiv-
ity in the face of confusing
aesthetic revolutions. He some-
times reviews his reaction to mu-
sic rather than the music itself,
and more than once follows a neg-
ative comment with "but perhaps
I missed the point."

In review after review, Johnson

conjures up the feel of '70s Soho
without any self-conscious at-
tempt to evoke atmosphere. His
most arresting device is a present-
tense stream-of-consciousness.
"The little steel bar in his right
hand trembles erratically against
the instrument," he parenthesizes
in a classic review of William Hel-
lermann's *Tremble*. "The resulting
rhythms are more biological than
musical, and fascinating to listen
to." Scorning Virgil Thomson's
advice, he eschews adjectives in
favor of verbs. He asks Transit
Authority employees what they
think of a Max Neuhaus installa-
tion, and their answers tell us
more than any review could have.
By minutely detailing what every-
one *does*—performers, audience,
casual onlookers, himself—he
puts you into the action.

Not surprisingly, given his own
conceptual compositions, the mu-
sic Johnson loves most displays
the austere extremism of early-
'70s conceptualism and minimal-
ism. The book's first review is of
Steve Reich's *Drumming*; seven
years later Johnson wrote, "If I
was asked to choose one piece,
above all others, which could be
presented as a genuine master-
piece of the Soho avant-garde, I
would choose *Drumming*." In
part, his descriptions were evoca-
tive because the music he re-
viewed was so logical. When
Charlie Morrow counts permuta-
tions of the numbers one through
six in various microphones, or
when Nigel Rollings squeaks his
fingers on a wet pane of glass,
Johnson is brilliant at intuiting
the thought processes involved
and reporting their exact effect.

Though he understated his the-
ories, he captured some of the de-
cade's deepest philosophical con-
flicts. "Does one fully believe in
one's intuitive process?" he asks.
"Or is it preferable to rely on
some higher logic outside oneself?
Isn't it awfully egocentric to feel
that... one's personal intuitions
can produce something profound?
But isn't it a kind of cop out to
resort to number systems, dice, or
logical formulas?" Though sup-
portive, he was never blind to
downtown's pitfalls. He pinpoint-
ed the scene's clubby insularity
and reverse elitism as problems
that kept the music from reaching
a wider audience. "It is un-
healthy," he warns, "when young
musicians end up playing time af-
ter time for a few friends. Inde-
pendent listeners decide for them-
selves when to clap, when to
complain about the amplification
level, and whether to go back to
the next event. This kind of input
can be especially valuable, and all
too often it is missing."

As early as 1974 Johnson la-
mented the weakening of new mu-
sic's intransigence. He wrote
about the "decline of minimal-
ism," and wondered why compos-
ers were no longer brash and rev-
olutionary. Later articles bear
headlines like "The Years of In-
novation Pass On" (1976) and
"Whatever Happened to the
Avant Garde?" (1979). (I was sor-
ry to see his iconoclastic essay on
"New York City Provincialism"
omitted.) Pessimism surfaces with
increasing frequency in his re-
views from the late '70s, but John-
son resigned, he says in a foot-
note, partly because "the music I
had been writing about was pretty
well established and didn't need
me anymore." We need his book
now, though, for an incisive ear-
witness account of a musical era
that's hardly documented else-
where.

—Kyle Gann