

The Franchise Reboot of Roger Waters

Is This The Life We Really Want?

(Columbia)

“I wrote it and sang on it but *he’s* made the record.”

- Roger Waters, from an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* dated 5/23/17

In consideration of an artist who has garnered worldwide acclaim for his work with a legendary band and respect for his solo work though not quite on the same level of popularity, who has now spent more years of his life out of that band than in it, how would you attempt to bring him back to that precipice where he surveyed a world which largely revered him?

Well...you *can’t* of course, not truly.

But producer Nigel Godrich (who has become known much as Rick Rubin has for revamping the careers of legacy artists) had some ideas regarding how to reboot Roger Waters for the 21st Century with his first album in 25 years, and as befitting their partnership on this project, both their names appear on the hype sticker for the shrinkwrap, though one slightly bigger than the other.

Chief among those notions are: no narrative or specific unifying concept (I wholly disagree with *Rolling Stone’s* characterization of a “dystopian concept LP”) and no guitar solos. These are two elements which have defined nearly all of Roger’s work, as a songwriter and performer who prefers to invoke a conceptual type of structure for his albums and who has utilized guitar solos as a foil and additional “voice” in his songs. But sure, okay, let’s assume that these bold decisions are meant as a tonic to revive an oeuvre which Godrich had deemed “impenetrable” according to a recent interview in *The Economic Times*. So this is a reboot which Godrich likened in another interview with *Uncut* to *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* to reclaim Roger’s legacy for the fans. Fair enough. But I believe there’s an inherent irony to realize that *SW: TFA* can be viewed both as a new installment and also as an entirely nostalgic callback to the movie which birthed the franchise, *Episode IV: A New Hope*. It’s also ironic that Godrich’s goal to restart Roger’s solo career as a songwriter of merit involves making a Floydian album *his way*, which is to say: appropriating those same tropes previously created by others. However, a GenXer such as himself knows very well we are living in the era of franchise/revival culture and therefore it’s not wholly surprising Godrich would take that path with this album.

It could be said *Is This The Life We Really Want?* is an album built on the bones and the backs of everything which represents Roger Waters as an artist, while claiming to eschew all which is not considered relevant or palatable. Of course the phrase “reboot” has, like many terms, strayed from its’ original meaning with colloquial usage. Although in this case the primary definition of shutting down and restarting does fit with Godrich’s agenda of a new beginning in Roger’s solo career. It remains to be seen if Roger will ever work this way with a producer

again or if this was only an interesting experiment for him. But the majority of the material on this record is brand-new, written within the last six months of the project. So it is a unique listening experience even as it does invoke familiar elements both sonically and thematically. The focus on world issues, the considerations of war and peace, love and hate, the disenfranchised and the unaffected - these are all concerns which dominate Roger's songwriting and always have.

This type of strategy is nothing new to Godrich; when commenting on his role as producer for Paul McCartney's 2005 release *Chaos and Creation in the Backyard*, he stated: "My job - from my perspective, anyway - is to make a record that I would want to listen to. Which means, you know, one has to be a mild fascist about it." The echoes of Godrich's opinion regarding McCartney can be heard in his comments assessing Roger's legacy as well as his inherent talent and creativity. Both men, it appears, required saving from themselves and this is clearly an agenda Godrich appears to favor.

In the interests of context, the reason I'm starting off this review with a focus on Godrich is simply because Roger has stated the album embodies more of Godrich's desire than his own vision. As Roger noted in a recent interview with *Entertainment Weekly*: "He has a fan's deep attachment to the oeuvre[...]He's enjoyed having the opportunity to do it himself, if you see what I mean. Because *that's* what he's done." But although there are definite sonic references to Pink Floyd as stylistic unifier as well as specific quotations of songs and albums, there's also a sense of Roger Waters as viewed through the lens of Godrich's particular production discipline, with simmering, pared-down arrangements and a sound thick with compression.

Primarily a particularly cinematic songwriter and performer, this album represents franchise property Roger Waters as cast in an indie production of *Great Songwriter: The Return*. If one is aware of the agenda to make Roger palatable not only for whatever audience this album is meant to appeal to, but also the people who actually created the album, then it makes sense in context. It may or may not appeal to a long-time Pink Floyd fan - the people who actually comprise the bulk of Roger's fanbase - but then again some may appreciate a work which aspires to the Floydian oeuvre even if it never quite reaches those heights because the DNA is missing a few crucial nucleotides. As example, the string arrangements by David Campbell appear to evoke Michael Kamen's sensibilities just a little too closely. There is an attempt, with the use of sound effects and crossfades, to weave these songs together and they do make more sense when taken as a whole rather than listened to as discrete pieces. But this strategy serves to be wholly derivative. In my estimation there is a decided sense of kitchen sink inclusiveness to the tracks even as some of them are indeed reduced to just a few elements to frame the message and emotion of the song.

Much in the same way it was claimed that *The Endless River* was meant to be a Pink Floyd album for the 21st Century, *Is This The Life We Really Want?* can be considered Roger's new millennium album, yet both were created by outsiders who desired to make their own mark on the legacy - to redefine it and our thinking about it - and both resulted in works which only serve to remind us why the original is entirely inviolate, a height of achievement which can never

again be attained. Because the primary issue with contemporizing one's relevancy is that one then loses the chance to be considered timeless and enduring...a quality which defines the best of what Roger has accomplished from an artistic perspective, in *any* context.

In this review I'm going to divide the album into sets of three tracks given that the last three songs comprise a suite of sorts, so it could be posited there is thematic connection between each set of three.

When We Were Young/Deja Vu/The Last Refugee

The album opens with a spoken word piece which has put some listeners in mind of "Speak To Me" but the construction is different in that Roger's voice is densely-layered with repeating phrases, producing a babble-like effect at first which is then slowly but surely dissected by isolating various phrases in the mix. The voice is backed by ambient texturing, a heartbeat, and the ticking of a clock. It is interesting, and it's the type of idea which suits Roger's style as far as introduction is concerned even as it doesn't appear to directly connect with any other song.

"Deja Vu" is a reworking of the song "Lay Down Jerusalem (If I Had Been God)" and with this arrangement I find it incredibly derivative of so many songs in Roger's catalog ("Mother" meets "Late Home Tonight" for example) and yet that very fact makes it appealing to many, but I feel the song has had its heart eviscerated (even as some welcome the revision). It is Roger speaking as a version of himself, perhaps, but moving from the macro to the micro, as the last verse does, doesn't reveal a true personality behind the stated desires so much as a parody of what someone who is *nearly* a god would espouse. It seems too much was sliced off and the ending is a bit abrupt as the pulse then brings us into "The Last Refugee" which has been compared to David Bowie's "Five Years" and while I concede that is apt, what it makes me think of overall is Godrich taking a crack at *The Final Cut*, but with impenetrability rather than intricacy as a production strategy. There are a few echo spins, but Roger's vocal is primarily unadorned which has the interesting effect of sounding both emotionally affecting *and* awkward as he strains beyond his range and/or ability to phrase the lines at times. For someone who is well-known as a lyricist, it is important we *understand* those lyrics, and it's difficult to do so at times as Roger's vocal becomes yet another texture in the overall construction. This is another irony I find in Godrich's strategy given he's stated the album is "a reaffirmation of (Roger) as a truly great songwriter."

There are some great lines in these songs (as example: *bathing belles, soft beneath hard-bitten shells*), but the overall effect of combining romantic yearning and global corruption is somewhat jarring and I imagine this is purposeful, as one theme of the album appears to be the proximity of terror and misery with the longing for emotional connection. But these songs ultimately become mere snapshots, bankrupt expressions of empathy rather than fully-realized narratives of loss and longing and coming to terms with our own atrocities.

Picture That/Broken Bones/Is This The Life We Really Want?

With an ambient transition which puts one in mind of “Welcome to the Machine” we proceed to the next track and it is in “Picture That” where I find a more assured expression of Roger’s anger, with the music employing a sort of *Animals*-era sharpness, utilizing the list structure for this song, a lyrical trope he has employed for many years. Roger’s list songs are litanies of exhaustion, as the images and elements pile up all around him and the listener, asked to consider so much information, and in this case, so much which is ugly and disturbing.

Picture a courthouse with no fucking laws
picture a cathouse with no fucking whores
picture a shithouse with no fucking drains
picture a leader with no fuckng brains.

That last phrase circles the blocked drain with an echo spin straight out the Floydian playbook. As an indictment of the “pics or it didn’t happen” culture, Roger is clever about demanding those who do constantly picture themselves to look beyond their pixelated reflections at the world around them. The song borrows much from mid-era Floyd but doesn’t contain much musical progression, building to a crescendo around the 4:30 mark and then spending two minutes on a meandering rideout.

“Broken Bones” is a revision of the song “Safe and Sound” which was originally written for Roger’s “radio play” conceptual work, although having no familiarity with the latter I cannot directly compare the two. As with “Lay Down Jerusalem” it was performed publicly in a limited fashion in years prior. Its’ introduction (minus the wail of a loon) is, in my estimation, a direct callback to “Wish You Were Here.” I would say this song is the one which most represents not only Floydian values but also those of Roger’s solo career, with the mix of spare accompaniment and strings to underscore the unvarnished commentary of the lyrics. It evokes the mood and dynamic of *Final Cut*-era Floyd, and there’s even a couple moments of grandeur, which results in a kind of shock value for the listener given that the rest of the album has nothing like that.

The title track borrows its’ name from a poem Roger composed in 2008, a powerful commentary on the gap between those in power and those who bear the burden of their leaders’ avarice and antagonism. It was also inspired by an election with a victory largely undesired and hotly-contested and thus I can understand why Roger named this song after it, which serves as the centerpiece of this work. Moving directly on from the closing lines of the previous song and its’ characterization of “bullshit and lies,” it opens with Donald Trump’s firm declarations, cast in a mocking light by the commentary which follows, but it actually sounds like it could have been on *Amused to Death* in the context of experiencing this equivocation upon the airwaves. However, placing this track beside “Broken Bones” in the running order means that it creates a lull in the overall movement of the work due to the similarity in arrangements. This track is not even the longest-running one on the album but it *feels* like it is, until it abruptly segues into the next track.

Bird In A Gale/The Most Beautiful Girl/Smell the Roses

“Bird In A Gale” seems the most obvious attempt to reframe Roger in a more contemporary context, and I find it interesting from an arrangement perspective but I don’t believe it truly fits him - this sounds like an Atoms For Peace track and that is not who Roger is or who he should be so therefore that style is not suitable for him. The compression truly limits the dynamic range, making it rather painful to listen to for its’ full running time. The collage of voices which is used harkens back to Floyd but these phrases don’t really appear to underscore any appreciable meaning. The section which combines a number of sound effects and voices to create a rhythmic loop is very reminiscent of the bridge between the two parts of “Late Home Tonight.” And like that track this also features an explosion, but one which sounds entirely flat, with no air or echo or rumbling low end.

The next track has a sameness to it when compared with “The Last Refugee” and “Broken Bones” and I would argue that consideration robs the song of its’ potential emotional power having been subjected to a similar arrangement, which is a shame because it contains some of the most poetically-affecting and metaphorically adept lyrics of the entire album.

“Smell the Roses” has an interesting hook, as if the production team put “Have A Cigar” and “Wish You Were Here” plus a dash of “Welcome to the Machine” into a blender on puree. Roger’s vocal struggles to emerge from the bass and synth soup of the arrangement with the compression once again weighing it all down. There’s an ambient kind of bridge blending a number of sound effects which are certainly Floydian, but they don’t really make any sense to me other than “here’s a cool Pink Floyd type of thing for you.” I have read comments regarding how listeners perceive this song as a callback to Roger’s most ire-filled performances but I don’t see it - although I was amused at how he rhymed “phosphorous” with “loss for us.” It seems as if this song *might* develop into something interesting at several points, but there’s something hopelessly low-key about it even as it is attempting to evoke menace within the murk.

Wait for Her/Oceans Apart/Part of Me Died

This song suite really should have been one track, in my opinion. It is an affecting unified expression of what has been stated the album is *really* about, and thus it does seem fitting that it is the last movement of the work. But for me, splitting it up into three tracks takes away from that vibe. It could have been listed as three parts with another title, or simply titled as “Wait for Her” or even, in a nod to “Brain Damage/Eclipse,” sequenced as two parts rather than three, especially given that “Wait For Her” features an outside credit for the lyrical content, as some of the lines are paraphrased/appropriated from the poem of the same name by Mahmoud Darwish. However, eight minutes of this same vamp is perhaps a bit too much to hang on to. From a musical perspective I believe this could be considered yet another version of “Deja Vu” which is likely a purposeful reiteration. I find the mix in “Part of Me Died” to have the same effect as in other tracks where Roger’s voice is not as forward as it needs to be in order to fully absorb the message. The deliberate juxtaposition between love and hatred in the two halves should be more effective and I feel the production sabotages that effect. And as has been noted by other fans, the ending appears too abrupt but listening to the CD reveals there is a recursive loop

same as *The Wall* and *The Final Cut* where the heartbeat and muted voice from the beginning of "When We Were Young" can be heard for about 20 seconds.

Moving from the inside to the outside, when I saw the advance cover art for this album I stated publicly that I hoped the entire packaging design would not be a REDACTED theme but in fact it is, and although I can understand why Sean Evans thought it a suitably bleak and relevant concept, I find it very lazy to embody the entire work thus, even as he co-directed a striking video for "The Last Refugee." REDACTED as a visual metaphor is rather played out now, having been used by more than a few artists, as we find ourselves crawling out of the second decade of this new century.

Despite Godrich's attempts to avoid the perceived pitfalls of Roger's previous solo work, another suitable analogy which occurred to me is what I might call "the Curse of K.A.O.S." Thirty years ago Roger worked with another producer, Ian Ritchie (who is once again playing saxophone in the current touring band), and the resultant release, *Radio K.A.O.S.*, has a contentious history among fans. Beloved by those who do enjoy its' style and story, there are others who find it a rather abysmally dated and overproduced slab of 1980s aesthetic. It would seem to me that whenever Roger compromises regarding his own musical instincts, the result tends to be ultimately unsatisfying. But I imagine *Is This The Life We Really Want?* will appeal to as many people as it alienates (as evidenced by the polarizing reviews, some of which have clickbait headlines asserting their stance in the war of words), which is a familiar outcome as regards Roger's artistic imperative.

...and it feels like *deja vu* indeed.