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The Most Gigantic Lying Mouth Doesn't Always Lie
(Thom Yorke and Radiohead's evolving messages within their work)

It's one thing for rock critics to praise a band for deeper meanings within their music and then tout them as artistic geniuses or the voice of a generation. It's an entirely different thing when a band so clearly excels in this area that it prompts the general public to shamelessly recognize their genius.

Case in point - Radiohead and lead singer Thom Yorke. Look Yorke up on the popular web site UrbanDictionary.com (where anyone can submit their "definition" of what a term means on the streets) and you will find the following:

Thom Yorke (n.) - Freakishly creative genius to the point where it's kinda sexy. Lyrics don't make any sense until you wake up at 2AM on a Tuesday realizing that what was written was so deep ("Thom Yorke").

It's isn't just fans praising Radiohead. Yorke and the band also have plenty of media credibility for their songwriting. SPIN Magazine declared the band the 15th best of all-time in 2002 and named OK Computer the greatest album of the last 20 years in 2005 ("100 Greatest Albums...", "SPIN's 50 Greatest..."). Rolling Stone also placed three of the band's albums in their All-Time Top 500 in 2003 and then selected two of their songs to include in their All-Time Top 500 in 2004 ("The RS Greatest Songs...", "The RS Greatest Albums..."). The band's work speaks to a variety of people on a variety of different levels. It's due in large part to the band's ability to continually write compelling work on a wide variety of relatable topics.

The first real themes to emerge in Radiohead's early work were self-focused. They developed from the band's rapid rise to superstardom after their first single "Creep" shot up the charts and made Radiohead a household name overnight. The success of the song (and the corresponding sales for their debut album "Pablo Honey") created a conflict of interest for the band. Pressure from the record label pushed them towards creating more of the same and making their second album some form of "Creep II." Radiohead on the other hand had more grandiose plans and wanted to continue growing and experimenting with their musical creations. Those two forces combined to produce a clear theme of music industry commentary that manifested itself in the band's second album, "The Bends" (Ethington).

"The Bends" isn't the only place where Radiohead allowed their thoughts on the industry to manifest in their music. They would later write songs like "Karma Police" (with lyrics like "buzzing like a fridge" referring to Yorke's distaste for his contemporaries' music) and "Like Spinning Plates" (about the effort it takes for the band to uphold its creative, progressive reputation) to name just a few. Their actions in the Grant Gee documentary also showed them growing tired of the music media while their famous "No Logo" tour and the self-release of "In Rainbows" further emphasized their distaste for business as usual. However, the "The Bends" was the first and perhaps most powerful message the band would send on the subject.

The title of the album itself refers to a medical condition of intense and potentially damaging pressure resulting from ascending too fast when underwater ("The Bends – Definition"). That itself can be seen as a metaphor for the band's rise after "Creep" and the pressure put on them from the label and critics to produce more of the

same. However, the album features songs that emphasize the band's distaste with the industry.

Take for instance the songs "Just" and "My Iron Lung." The tracks appear back-to-back on the album. "Just" features a video infamous for a man who simply lies down in the middle of the street as onlookers try to figure him out and eventually ask (resulting in all of them joining him). Director Jamie Thaves has said, "to tell you [about his reason why] would deaden the impact, and would probably make you want to lie down in the road too," but carrying on with the anti-industry interpretation perhaps the video shows the absurdity of choosing to remain stagnant (lying down on the pavement or musically producing the same sound over and over) ("Just (song)"). Lyrically, the chorus (later dubbed one of the greatest indie anthems of all-time by NME) hauntingly repeats the phrase, "You do it to yourself, it's true. And that's what really hurts. | You do it to yourself it's true. You and no one else" ("The Greatest Indie..."). With Yorke and the band's documented frustration with the industry existing opposite Yorke's desire to propel the group to stardom, the lyrics seem to describe Yorke's inner struggle with these opposite forces pulling him. He wants success, hates playing the game the industry has created, yet continues to do so while self-inflicting that agony.

Moving on from "The Bends," Radiohead continued to produce commentary on the industry but started to display more and more political messages in their work (reminiscent of a theme potentially starting from the "Pablo Honey" track "Stop Whispering"). They produced a short film portraying Hitler wearing a George W. Bush mask complete with dancing enemies of the U.S. (Hussein, Jong-Il, etc.) in 2004 ("Homeland Hoedown"). They also became involved with progressive organization such

as Amnesty International (promoting equal rights) and W.A.S.T.E. (promoting sustainability). Musically, there were tracks exploring these ideas off “OK Computer” (the demonic “Fitter Happier” criticizing how society’s progress may be eliminating identity) and “Kid A” (“Idioteque” warning of how dangerous technology, specifically nuclear, can be). The crowning achievement of Radiohead’s political views would come from 2003’s “Hail to the Thief” however.

The album’s release date and title in relation to the U.S.’s 9/11 tragedy had many critics immediately labeling it as Radiohead’s anti-Bush political album. The band was quick to dismiss that notion, but Thom Yorke couldn’t help but acknowledge the work with at least some political messaging within it.

“Thom Yorke of course has his own particular take on the new album’s controversial contents: ‘We don’t have to stand on a soap-box and preach because hopefully we’re channeling it through the new record. We didn’t start out to make a protest record at all. That would have been too shallow. As usual, it was simply a case of absorbing what’s going on around us. The title of the record goes so much deeper than just being some anti-Bush propaganda. If we got into a situation where people start burning our records, then bring it on. That’s the whole point. The gloaming has begun. We’re in the darkness. This has happened before. Go read some history’” (Capitol Records).

Many songs off “Hail to the Thief” hinted at political messages with intentionally ambiguous lyrics (“2+2=5” for instance) but the track that stands out as explicitly political is “The Gloaming.” The song title (also the subtitle for the album) refers to a Old English term for dusk (“Gloaming”). That’s the period of day as light begins to fade away into an all-encompassing darkness and can be interpreted as a metaphor for the state of the global community in 2003 (potentially on the brink of war, the last bit of light before the darkness). Lyrics in the song refer to justifying murder (“Murders, you’re murders. We are not the same as you”), nuclear threats (“your alarm bells, they should be ringing”)

and a time of deceit and evil (“It is now the witching hour”). The song was adopted as such a piece of political commentary that a remix done by DJ Shadow utilized audio clips of George W. Bush speeches and was circulated even by SPIN Magazine (“Songs You Need to Hear...”). Whether or not the band intended the song to be critical of current events at the time almost doesn’t matter in retrospect. Their acknowledged political commentary together with public perception of the world conflict combined to make it the pinnacle of Radiohead’s political work.

As of “Hail to the Thief,” Radiohead gradually allowed dominant themes from their work to move from the personal (their struggles with the music industry) to the social (their commentary on politics). In this sense, it’s almost logical that Radiohead dove into the spiritual with what appears to be the dominant theme from their current album “In Rainbows.” The band may have shifted gears towards discussing ideas surrounding life, death and religion.

Like with other dominant themes from Radiohead’s work, the topic in question isn’t confined to just one album. Radiohead has blogged about their supportive views on situations involving Tibetan monks as recently as this year (“Tibetans...”). They utilize imagery reminiscent of famous Christian themes in videos (Yorke suspended in air like he was hanging from the cross at the end of “Street Spirit”) and album art work (statues of Jesus in “OK Computer”) (Donwood, Glazer). They’ve explored themes surrounding life and death several times within their music previously (“Pyramid Song,” “Life in a Glass House” or “No Surprises” for instance). Thom Yorke has even been quoted as saying he believes in the use of Buddhist techniques (specifically “bardo,” an intermediate state of meditation to unify you with all) during his song writing (Draper).

“In Rainbows” appears to be a culmination of these ideas however. It was released in 2007 – nearly four years after the previous album (and also four years after the birth of Yorke’s son, appropriately named Noah, one of the earliest biblical figures) (Ross). The creation of the album, its self-produced and self-released approach, and the overall sound of the album, much brighter and softer with some acoustic material, is a dramatic change for the band. This could be seen as a new birth for the band in respect as they move on from their previous lives as members of the traditional music industry and a harder verging on electronic rock band (“new births” or “new beginnings” by the way are themes rampant in baptisms across many religions). The chances of those physical changes being a conscious metaphor for the band are slim, but a closer look at the songs show that Radiohead definitely had the intent of placing spiritual themes within the album.

A song like “Weird Fishes” at the top of the album deals with the ideas of crossing over from the physical world into the unknown (“I follow to the edge, off the earth and fall off. Yeah, everybody leaves if they get the chance and this is my chance”). “Reckoner” takes this idea and builds upon it by introducing the notion of a life lived for a greater purpose (“Reckoner, you can’t take it with you...Dare not speak his name, dedicated to all you, all your needs”). The song that stands out as the most spiritual track though is the final song, “Videotape.” Consider some of the lyrical stanzas:

When I'm at the pearly gates
 This will be on my videotape, my videotape
 Mephistopheles is just beneath
 and he's reaching up to grab me

The “pearly gates” are a traditionally Christian view of heaven and Mephistopheles refers to an incarnation of the devil popularized by the tale “Faust” (which is referenced in the title of an early track on the album). Later in the song:

This is my way of saying goodbye
Because I can't do it face to face
I'm talking to you after it's too late
From my videotape

Yorke speaking as if he was an angel communicating with selected individuals back in the physical world (or for a more straightforward reading, perhaps from a last goodbye or living will recorded for his family and loved ones).

No matter what happens now
You shouldn't be afraid
Because I know today has been the most perfect day I've ever seen

Finally, Yorke assures his individuals in this world that there is nothing to fear about what lies ahead beyond. Today (his day of moving on, of death) being the most perfect day he's seen could be the theme of a utopian afterlife that occurs in many religions. The theme of spirituality is clearly present in this song and the album as a whole and was intended to be there. While it may not be a theme as thoroughly explored as the industry or politics for the band, it could be the beginning of a new idea (with sporadic previous appearances) that could become the focus of the band's next album.

Just like the band's well document musical evolution (from unfocused multi-genre to rock to electronic to “In Rainbows”), Radiohead has continually shared new themes with their music culminating in albums that strongly showcase these ideas. From personal (distaste with the industry) to social (political views) and now spiritual (life, death and religious ideas), Radiohead's messages are as intentional and thought-out as their music. That's saying something considering the band's success but that's exactly

what they want everyone to realize. When it comes to Radiohead's song catalogue, they're *really* saying something.

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