

“Neon Bible” by the Arcade Fire: Where to from here?

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Sincere and developed artistic content in popular music remains a fringe phenomenon in both mainstream and ‘underground’ or independent music.

At times it bursts through, eliciting a large public response (in almost every case without the financial backing or support of the music industry), only to be once again supplanted by the largely lifeless and empty fare pushed by the handful of major music labels. A recent example of interesting and serious art rupturing the framework of the ‘Top 40’ institution has been the success of the independent (‘indie rock’) band, the Arcade Fire.

Formed in Montreal, the Arcade Fire first came to prominence in 2004. Their regular line-up consists of 10 members, coalesced around Win Butler and Régine Chassagne, the husband-wife song writing duo. Building a wide fan following in the independent music scene with their passionate and chaotic performances (which spread off stages, onto floors and balconies during concerts), they first experienced success with their 2004 album, “Funeral.”

Dealing honestly with themes of innocence, loss, and childhood, the album spilled over the structural, harmonic, textural and lyrical bounds of popular music. Its songs were arranged in an expansive and haphazard way, including codas and tempo changes where the melody and lyrics demanded them.

The large array of instruments employed (including orchestra bells, grainy synthesisers, violins, piano arpeggios and multiple percussion instruments) not only made the tone colour of the music diverse and unique, but also contributed a great deal to the harmonic structure of the songs. Polychord harmony, the juxtaposition of two or more chords, played an important role in the overwhelming emotional quality of songs like ‘Wake Up,’ ‘Rebellion (Lies)’ and ‘Neighbourhood #1 (Tunnels).’

Alongside these formal qualities were sincere, although at times restrictively introspective lyrics that jumped language barriers (between English and French) and dealt with emotional devastation and reconstruction in personal, subjective terms.

“Funeral,” released by independent record label Merge in the summer of 2004, went on to sell 320,000 copies in the United States and over 100,000 copies in Canada. Factoring in the unknown number of listeners who downloaded the material through other channels, the popular response has been in line with the artistic merits of the album: it was a promising debut by a serious group of artists.

The same record company released the second album by the Arcade Fire, entitled “Neon Bible,” in the spring of 2007. It debuted at #2 on the music charts in the US and the UK, and #1 in Canada, demonstrating the extent of the popular reaction to the group’s extensive touring and previous material. It has been lauded by many

music journalists and fans alike as one of the best albums of the year; significantly, it has provoked a critical backlash by journalists in narrow ‘indie rock’ circles—a sign that a group of artists has made an impact upon large sections of the population rather than staying within the insular (and largely incestuous) music communities of which those critics make a fetish.

The impact and popularity of “Neon Bible” was not achieved by a watering-down of the artistic form or content that marked “Funeral”; the narrow and subjective critic refuses to acknowledge that art can become truly popular while maintaining a high intellectual and artistic level. In fact, the impact and popularity of “Neon Bible” stems from the refinement of the artistic possibilities implicit in “Funeral.”

The album itself marks an advance from the already remarkable form and content of “Funeral.” Most prominent in this advance is the shift in lyrical content—away from the largely personal concerns found in some songs on “Funeral,” towards an appraisal of society itself. The emotional quality found in the group’s previous material is not weakened by simplistic political statements; it is extended by the shift in subject matter towards vital social themes. The content of the songs expresses itself largely through a system of metaphors and symbols. This repeated imagery animates not only the lyrics, but also the formal construction of the music in production, structure, texture, rhythm and harmony.

Win Butler, songwriter and lead singer of the band, described the album as the equivalent of “standing by the ocean at night”, and one of the principal images repeated throughout is that of the sea as an uncontrollable force of nature. In fact, “I walked down to the ocean / after waking from a nightmare” is the first line of the album. The album pivots on the track ‘Bad Vibrations / Black Wave,’ an amalgam of two songs. The oceanic imagery presents itself strongly here; the second of the two songs climaxes: “Stop now before it’s too late / Been eating in the ghetto off a hundred dollar plate. / Nothing lasts forever that’s the way it’s got to be / There’s a great black wave in the middle of the sea.”

In another interview, Butler described the origins of the song, a trip through Sao Paulo in Brazil, in the following manner: “Driving through these slums, miles and miles of shanty towns, and then pulling up to the Hyatt Regency where we were staying, which was a big compound with barbed wire and a guard... Not being able to go outside because they tell you that they’ll kill you to steal your wallet—it was a very strange experience. That was the beginning of the idea for ‘Black Wave.’”

As many reviewers have noticed, this album reveals a turn toward outward observation; as fewer have noted, the observations depict a crisis-ridden society, rife with paranoia, devastated by social

inequality. The first song ('Black Mirror') introduces many of the album's themes, from the paranoia in ruling circles to the outbreak of militarism, as the singer demands of the television screen, "Mirror, mirror on the wall / show me where the bombs will fall."

Significantly, the musical setting suits the content, enhancing and being enhanced by these themes. It opens with an oppressive rumble, which resolves itself into the rolling and consistent bass-line of the song; guitar feedback and pianos present the first chords, alternating between the tonic and a minor subdominant. The second chord reproduces the disturbing notes of an augmented chord in many settings; dissonant and agitated intervals capture the content of the song. The same pianos make chromatic runs upward, introducing more dissonance until they resolve into the tonic (or first) chord.

Special credit must be given to Owen Pallett (of the Montreal solo act Final Fantasy) for his arrangement of the string sections; on this particular song they enter at the climax and rise in a cadence that cuts through the abrasiveness of the earlier portions and then promptly resolves back into the same pattern.

Immediately after 'Black Mirror' ends with the final notes from the muddy bass-line, the light mandolins of 'Keep the Car Running' strum their first notes. It is the second piece of the album's puzzle—here the artist offers us a suggestion of escape from the brutality of society. The song begins "Every night my dream's the same, / Same old city with a different name. / Men are coming to take me away, / I don't know why but I know I can't stay."

The low and driving rhythm of the song evokes the motion of a car away from these forces; however the implications of the song do not end there. The final bar of the song is marked by a jarring stop, an unresolved chord struck hard and ended quickly by the entire band, a final hard beat on the snare and bass drums.

Escape is offered again on the second-to-last song, an early composition reinterpreted for this album called 'No Cars Go.' It's unrelenting rhythm and chanted lyrics again promise escape, this time in childhood fantasy: "We've found a place / where no cars go / ... Hey! / Us kids know, / No cars go!" However, this recording of the song adds an extended coda involving Pallett's orchestral arrangements and a large choir. Both were recorded in Hungary, with the Budapest Symphony Orchestra. The song climaxes in an oppressive and chaotic mix of voices, strings, horns, and drums. It is clear that these attempts to rectify society's problems through escape and fantasy come to sudden and tragic ends.

"Neon Bible" is indeed a tragic work; 'Antichrist Television Blues', one of the most sensitive and musically impassioned songs on the album, details the descent of a religious, working class father into the depths of television culture and (not coincidentally) mania. Trapped in a dirty job and horrified by events around him, he searches for security and wealth by promoting his daughter's singing ability in contests: "Dear God I'm a good Christian man, / In your glory I know you understand, / That you got to work hard and you got to get paid, / My girl's thirteen but she's old for her age. / She could sing like a bird in a cage, / Oh Lord if you could see her when she's up on that stage."

The song at its base level conforms to the traditional structure of the blues; its verses are in the I / IV / V structure. Using strings and various guitar overlays, the harmony is extended not in the direction of the blues, but in the tradition of independent rock music. For example, the IV chord in the blues progression is several overlapped chords, resulting in a Major 7 9 11 13—seven unique notes in total, although comprised of a multitude of overlapping chords and melodic

lines.

This feature of the harmony produces a strongly yearning and overwhelming feeling—paralleling the desperation and concerns of the father. It would be easy for the artist to take the path of misanthropy, considering the way the song ends (a modern day Abraham-Isaac dilemma, the transformation of the father into his own 'antichrist'). Certainly, others have taken this path before. However, the portrayal of the characters in the song is humane and sympathetic, focusing more on the poison that mainstream religion and popular culture represent in contemporary society.

The album comes to a close with little resolution in sight; the third-to-last song, 'Windowsill,' presents the problem succinctly: "World War Three, when are you coming for me / Been kicking up sparks, set the flames free. / The windows are locked now, so what'll it be, / a house on fire or a rising sea?"

"Neon Bible" must be defended as a sensitive and impassioned work, demonstrating high levels of song-writing ability and musicianship. However, its final moments reveal a certain demoralisation. The last song, 'My Body is a Cage,' presents one final escape route: death. The second appearance of a traditional pipe organ dominates the song—as it reaches its chilling climax the listener is left wondering: is this the only option? After all the emotion and effort, the meticulous arrangement of instruments and themes, the wide-eyed passion invested in this appraisal of life, does the only hope lie in the end of life?

The Arcade Fire, in their evolution as a group of artists, have shown remarkable growth; from the study of the purely personal to the study of the social. In their work, the tendency remains for the alienated to retreat, to seek escape rather than to confront. It is entirely to their credit that they recognise the futility of this retreat. It is one mark against them (though it should not overshadow the many positive aspects of the album) that they take the easy route of demoralisation in the end. Essentially, the artist is faced with the same question as any other observant member of society: where to from here?



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