

# *Right Thoughts, Right Words, Right Action*—the new album from Franz Ferdinand

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Scottish rock band Franz Ferdinand have returned with their first new album in four years. The Glasgow-based group, led by singer and guitarist Alex Kapranos, formed in 2002 and first gained international attention with their hit single “Take Me Out” in 2004. The catchy and danceable recording could be heard everywhere that year and remains the band’s best-known song.

Following their first three albums, *Franz Ferdinand* (2004), *You Could Have It So Much Better* (2005) and *Tonight: Franz Ferdinand* (2009), four years passed in which there was some doubt as to whether the band would return at all. The group had considered breaking up following their tour in support of *Tonight*, citing growing disenchantment with demands placed on them by the music industry.

In the end, they decided to press on. Bassist and founding member Bob Hardy recently spoke to New Zealand’s *Stack* magazine, about dealing with the pressures involved with the band and the industry more broadly:

“I like the idea that the key to coping with high stress, is to realize that everything around us, the situations we’re put in, is a social construct. I try to think cosmically about it and see how absolutely irrelevant everything is.”

This “cosmic” outlook finds further expression in the title of the band’s new album, *Right Thoughts, Right Words, Right Action*, which refers to three elements from the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism.

As it happens, however, more-earthly concerns *do* matter and not everything *is* irrelevant. As might be expected, the work of any group of musicians or artists who proceed from the opposite conclusion, whether they take up political themes or sing love songs, is bound to suffer for it.

The first single to appear from the new album is “Right Action.” With its lyrics full of qualifiers and hedged bets, it’s an amusing song about a difficult relationship. “I come home, practically all is nearly forgiven,” sings Kapranos. “Sometimes wish you were here...weather permitting.”

“Brief Encounters,” still another song about the difficult relations of a middle class couple, also has its appeal. “We are bored, we are married, we are young,” sings Kapranos. The problem is, neither song tends to stay with the listener for very long.

There are any number of pop songs, past and present, that express and evoke both in music and lyrics something genuine, something strongly felt about love or the pleasures and pains of human relationships.

The songs found on Franz Ferdinand’s new album and in far too much music heard today are sorely lacking in this regard. Personal relationships are often the *only* subject being sung about, and yet they are sung about so inadequately. There is a stifling, self-involved and insular quality to much of it. At a certain point, one wonders whether many of these musicians--and not just Franz Ferdinand--have lives outside their own bedrooms, phone calls and immediate circles of friends.

Social convulsions are shaking the world right now. How much of it comes through in the music? Where are the textures of real life?

In “Fresh Strawberries,” Kapranos sings, “We are fresh strawberries/Fresh burst of red strawberries/Ripe turning riper in the pole” He adds, “We will soon be rotten/We will all be forgotten/Half remembered rumors of the old.” “Wouldn’t it be easy with something to believe in?” he asks finally. If this is the “cosmic” view of life, it appears terribly bleak.

Much of the remainder of the album blends together into the pleasant enough but all too familiar Franz

Ferdinand sound: the lockstep dance rhythms of the bass guitar and drums and the short bursts of guitar that mostly keep out of the way. Kapranos' casual-cool vocals stroll around somewhere in between.

The band surround themselves with elements of seriousness, but how deep does it all go?

Their name refers to the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand, whose 1914 assassination by a Yugoslav nationalist in Sarajevo, the capital of what was then the Austro-Hungarian province of Bosnia and Herzegovina, touched off the First World War.

Kapranos told an interviewer that the band viewed the assassination as a turning point, "perhaps the real start of the 20th century." And yet another band member tells the media they are trying to "think cosmically and see how absolutely irrelevant everything is"!

In this contradiction, more general cultural problems find expression. The band, talented and intelligent, are instinctively driven toward great events and history, but they find themselves overwhelmed or intellectually ill-equipped to deal with the complex problems.

In their art work, the band utilizes imagery based on the work of Russian avant-garde artists Aleksandr Rodchenko and El Lissitzky, though, again, not for terribly significant reasons. With all the eclecticism of the post-modernists, they refer to and quote from history and works of art, but never assimilate them or make much sense of them.

Their music is similarly fashionable. The songs never really seize you. They're just a little too steady and on the spot. Too clean. They have a slightly mannered and programmed quality about them.

Musically, everything appears in perfect working order. And yet there is that nagging, unsatisfied feeling one is left with.



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