

Why is the Flaming Lips' *Oczy Mlody* so disappointing?

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27 February 2017

The Flaming Lips have achieved uncommon notoriety for an “indie” or “alternative” rock band whose origins date back to Oklahoma City in the early 1980s. Today their extravagant concerts, complete with costumes, elaborate stage props and confetti, draw large numbers of people. More recently, perhaps to the surprise of their fans, they have begun regular collaborations with pop superstar Miley Cyrus.

Their beginnings were far humbler. After years of releasing quasi-underground albums, the Flaming Lips' first breakthrough hit was the 1993 novelty song “She Don't Use Jelly,” a quirky tribute to non-conformity, released not long after Nirvana made alternative music mainstream.

Hardly anyone who heard them then could have predicted the music still to come on the band's more interesting albums, *The Soft Bulletin* (1999) and *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* (2002). These were innovative pop albums, musically expansive and unpredictable—though this was not always the case lyrically. Lead singer Wayne Coyne's voice has never been the band's greatest strength, but on these albums it proved capable of communicating a certain sweetness and compassion, as on the group's romantic anthem “Do You Realize?.”

Why, then, is the Flaming Lips' new album *Oczy Mlody* so disappointing, so flat and uninspired? And not just their latest, but their last several recordings? Their more recent efforts mostly feel withdrawn and insular, like pet projects worked over in the group's own little corner far removed from the major concerns of the world.

The title song “Oczy Mlody” (an attempt at the Polish for “eyes of the young”) is a dreamy instrumental which sets the tone, or puts the shackles on the rest of the album. Few of the other songs will

depart from its sleepy tempo, or fail to make use of the same shimmering waves of psychedelic sound effects.

The Flaming Lips have always embraced psychedelia, with its surreal imagery. More recently they have also embraced its tendency toward meandering long-form musical performances. The pop sensibility of their earlier work and the songwriting chops evident on *Soft Bulletin* and *Yoshimi* have gone missing.

“There Should Be Unicorns” is intended to be a satirical take on someone, presumably wealthy and out of touch with reality, who rattles off a demanding wish list for an event he or she is hosting. The requests include mythical creatures, strippers and a repositioning of the moon. The song, which ought to be funny, floats on without much effect. The stream of consciousness turns out to be a placid, still lake, going absolutely nowhere.

The straining, self-conscious weirdness in many of the album's lyrics reaches a breaking point on “Galaxy I Sink” when Coyne sings “I saw the universe in your giant eye/I want to touch your mind hole and go inside.” This is pretty adolescent stuff. Just the titles of certain other songs provide a sense of their general direction: “One Night While Hunting for Faeries and Witches and Wizards to Kill” or “Listening to the Frogs with Demon Eyes.”

More interesting is “The Castle.” Written about a friend of Coyne's who committed suicide, the song's childlike imagery reveals a much deeper sadness lurking beneath it all. It appears as a moment of clarity which the rest of the album is all too eager to paper over.

“We a Family,” featuring Cyrus, comes closest to the sweetness and sincerity of the band's best work. But the song about two people separated by a distance of one kind or another, eager to be returned to one

another, isn't quite the open embrace of a song like "Do You Realize."

There are already too few great singers in so-called indie rock or pop, where the less confident and presumptuous your voice is, the better. Amateurism is perceived as more authentic and sincere. Coyne's voice has always been a liability. In the past, when called upon to sing sweet and simple love songs, he has gotten away with it. With the ideas running particularly thin on this album, his voice appears even thinner. Now at the age of 56, the arch-innocence, the cracking voice, the proud displays of naiveté feel silly and contrived.

In a recent interview with the *New York Times*, Coyne was asked whether there was anything on the album intended to invoke "Donald J. Trump, or the state of America in the last year." Coyne's reply is worth considering.

"Our music isn't about that," he told his *Times* interviewer, "I remember the year my father died. I had no idea what happened in music or politics, because it didn't matter. It didn't have impact on the real life that you have to live. And it *does* matter what Donald Trump says, but if you're really immersed in the struggle and the pain of life, those things just don't matter to you. So I try to go to that area, and say, 'If you really need Flaming Lips music, if it can help you, you're beyond caring about who the president is, or what scandal is going on between Kanye and the Kardashians.'"

"I am caught up in it, absolutely," Coyne continued, "in my everyday frustrations. But in our music, we've tried to say, this is deeper than that. Four years from now, Donald Trump will be done, and this music will still be there."

The truth of real life becomes obscured in the Flaming Lips' surrealism, not elevated and clarified by it. For Coyne, the political and social questions may matter, but not all that much in the end. Real life is the small and personal, and has no connection to the great social, political and historical questions of our times. He is content to make his music and wait out the Trump administration, presumably for the next Obama to come along. His music is correspondingly weak and uninvolved. The problem, however, extends beyond the Lips' own catalogue and into "indie" music and artistic works more broadly. Some of these groups will need to open their eyes to the world, and soon.



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