

Roger Waters' *Is This the Life We Really Want?*: An angry, depressed protest against war and nationalism

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9 June 2017

It is unusual today for a major recording artist to reference—let alone take on—the big issues confronting billions of people around the world.

The music and entertainment industries are dominated by a handful of conglomerates obviously not interested in funding or promoting artistic commentary on phenomena such as endless war, social inequality and the reemergence of far-right and fascistic politics.

The stifling creative environment is also sustained by the outlook of more than a few artists themselves. For the most part, the multimillionaires at the top of the *Billboard* charts are more concerned with building their brand, signing licensing deals and launching merchandising lines than they are with the conditions facing their own mass audience and fans.

To the extent that any “criticism” emerges at all from the self-satisfied pop music elite, it often takes the form of race or gender politics.

In this context, the June 2 release of British musician and songwriter Roger Waters’ new studio album, *Is This the Life We Really Want?*, has a certain significance.

In 12 tracks and 55 minutes, Waters paints a picture of a desperate world and he issues an angry protest—if also a disheartened outburst—against the things that make it so: drone warfare, targeted assassination, “black site” torture, the refugee crisis, global warming and wealth inequality.

Beginning with the album artwork—the track list is presented as a redacted classified document—Waters and designer Sean Evans attempt to convey the repressive character of the secret surveillance state. As in a work of dystopian fiction, a mood of dark and impending catastrophe permeates the recording through

disturbing sound effects, echoes and voiceovers from old radio broadcasts. However, much of what Waters is depicting has either happened already or is going on right now somewhere in the world.

Using various poetic devices, Waters’ lyrics focus on the human cost of much that is wrong with the world. For example, on the second track “Déjà Vu,” he takes on civilian casualties from drone strikes from a unique perspective, singing:

If I were a drone
Patrolling foreign skies
With my electronic eyes
For guidance
And the element of surprise
I would be afraid
To find someone home
[Explosion]
Maybe a woman at a stove
Baking bread, making rice
Or boiling down some bones
If I were a drone

On the third track, “The Last Refugee,” Waters uses a recurring theme—the love that a father feels for his daughter—to express the horrifying pain experienced by families that have lost loved ones at sea during the refugee crisis:

And you’ll find my child, down by the shore
Digging around, for a chain or a bone
Searching the sand, for a relic
Washed up by the sea
The last refugee

Roger Waters has carved out for himself something of a niche among his contemporary aged rock music stars who began writing and performing in the 1960s.

At 73, he is well known—going back to his years as the bassist and primary creative force of the rock band Pink Floyd—for works touching on contemporary political themes, historical references and appeals for peace, liberty and human solidarity.

Among the most iconic images of the 1970s is the cover of Pink Floyd's *Animals* (1977) showing a giant inflated pig flying over the Battersea Power Station on the south bank of the River Thames in southwest London. The album, loosely inspired by George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, uses different animals as metaphors for the destructive ruthlessness of the ruling elite.

Waters was influenced in his early years by left-wing politics. Like many British artists of the 1960s and 1970s, he came into contact to one extent or another with the Socialist Labour League, the Trotskyist movement in the UK. Along with the other members of Pink Floyd, Waters worked in 1970 with Roy Battersby, Ron Geesin and Vanessa Redgrave on the soundtrack for an experimental film entitled *The Body*.

Also, Waters knows something about 20th century history and he is not afraid to bring it up. As he has explained in many interviews going back to Pink Floyd's *The Wall* in 1979, much of the musician-composer's creative inspiration derives from the death of his father in World War II. Eric Fletcher Waters perished at Anzio, Italy in 1944 at the age of 31 and his body was never recovered. Having been born five months earlier, Roger never knew his father.

On the new album, there is clearly an attempt by producer Nigel Godrich to invoke the Pink Floyd of the 1970s. Using a combination of strings, acoustic guitar, synthesizers, heavy bass, female backing vocals and overdubbing Waters' vocals an octave apart—and all in minor keys—the tracks recall Pink Floyd's best works of that period.

The album is weakest when referring to Donald Trump, although not by name. There are several references to the US president as a “nincompoop” and “a leader with no f**king brains.” While these statements are true, they reveal something of the limitations of Waters' outlook. In the end, like so many others, he winds up holding the collective “we” responsible for the crisis so vividly presented on the record.

He criticizes the supposed popular “indifference” he

sees to the death and destruction, singing:

So like ants, are we just dumb?

Is that why we don't feel, or see

Or are we all just numbed out on reality TV

The reference to television is important as it sheds light on some of Waters' unfortunate ideological influences. His previous studio album *Amused to Death* (1992) was based loosely on the conceptions of American media critic and academic Neil Postman. In the 1980s and 1990s, Postman wrote several books about mass media and its impact on public consciousness. Like many rather superficial media critics of the time, Postman argued that television, in and of itself, simplified facts and rendered the viewing public unable to act and “numb” to reality.

In discussing an artist like Waters, it is impossible to disregard the impact of four decades of social and ideological reaction—encompassing much of his intellectual development—on even quite sensitive artistic personalities. The absence of the working class from active political life, suppressed by the trade unions and the various Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies, has had severe consequences for popular music and every artistic genre.

There is no other way to account for the combination of astute observations and rather puerile pessimism in Waters' work. Bitterly opposed to the establishment, the singer-composer sees no way at present of halting the descent of society into dictatorship, national antagonism and war.

For what is best in it, nonetheless, *Is This the Life We Really Want?* is a valuable and important album.



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