

Randy Newman and the problems of *Dark Matter*

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Dark Matter is the first album of new material from songwriter Randy Newman since *Harps and Angels* in 2008. It finds Newman dividing his time between political satire and songs of love and loss, though the latter tend to be the more convincing.

Born November 28, 1943, Randy Newman began working professionally as a songwriter in the 1960s, but much of his best work can be found on a series of albums that appeared during the 1970s: *12 Songs* (1970), *Sail Away* (1972) and *Good Old Boys* (1974).

Newman's music is a peculiar blend of richly orchestrated ballads, New Orleans-style funk and rock 'n' roll, and something like the music of Louisiana brass bands filtered through 1920s German cabaret. He increasingly owes a debt to German composer Kurt Weill and Italian film composer Nino Rota. On top of this exotic brew, Newman, born in Los Angeles but spending much of his early life in New Orleans, delivers his lyrics in a loose southern drawl.

In the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in 2005, Newman's moving "Louisiana 1927," about the Great Mississippi Flood and originally released in 1974, became an anthem that spoke to the millions who watched in horror as the US government let a major American city drown. Its heart-wrenching refrain could be heard again and again during benefit concerts and recordings: "Louisiana, Louisiana/They're tryin' to wash us away."

Today, Newman is best known not for his work as a singer-songwriter, but as a two-time Academy Award-winning film composer, whose music can be heard in such well-known titles as *Ragtime* (1981), *The Natural* (1984), *Parenthood* (1989), and the *Toy Story* franchise. But whenever he sits down at the piano to sing his own compositions again, something intriguing usually emerges.

Unfortunately, the new album gets off to a disappointing start.

The song that opens the album is "The Great Debate." It is presented as a musical debate between scientists and "true believers"—all voiced by Newman—who take up the subjects of dark matter, evolution and global warming.

The scientists with echo-laden voices are backed by music that is obscure and difficult. The faithful are backed by upbeat, good-time gospel music. When one character comes forward in an attempt to reconcile the opposing views of science and religion, he is dismissed by another true believer who denounces Newman himself as a "communist" before settling back into a chugging gospel tune about the omnipresence of God. In the end, the religious side appears to win, if only because its music is better.

At a meandering eight minutes, "The Great Debate" is a bit of a mess. It ought to be funnier, and Newman usually *is* funnier. But what, anyway, is the joke? Is Newman suggesting that the population will never accept science in the face of superstition and that it's largely the scientists' fault? "We've been knocking people like Mr. Newman down for years and years!" shouts one believer. Perhaps Newman is merely trying to work out his admitted admiration for gospel music despite his own atheism.

If the latter is the case, one need not be religious to appreciate the contributions of gospel musicians like Mahalia Jackson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe or the Soul Stirrers, nor feel guilty about it. If it's the former, there are complex social and historical reasons for the lingering attraction of religion. "The Great Debate" doesn't quite know where to stand, and it comes through in the music.

Next comes "Brothers," in which US President John

F. Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, casually discuss the racism of Washington Redskins owner George Preston Marshall before deciding to invade Cuba in order to “save” singer Celia Cruz and bring her to America. Cruz, incidentally, had already become a US citizen by 1961, the year in which this song is set. Bizarrely, the brothers are given a musical setting which would seem to recast them as laid-back southerners, with a string section sighing wistfully and the reeds showing themselves occasionally like fireflies over the plantation yard. It ends with a kind of rumba as the brothers pay their tribute to Cruz.

In addition to expressing his amusement that a country might be invaded for something as trivial as a fondness for a particular singer, Newman recently told online magazine *Pitchfork*, “What interested me about the song is that they’re brothers, irrespective of who they are.” But they *are* who they are, and they’re preparing to invade another country. If that isn’t the part that interests you, then you have taken your eye off the ball. The music feels trivial because even if Newman can ignore or make secondary the more significant aspects of the characters and history he takes up, the listener cannot. His usual biting satire, which has in the past been so pointed, has dulled considerably on these new recordings.

And what is one to make of “Putin,” a song in which Newman skewers Russian President Vladimir Putin over a too obvious parody of Russian music? He begins like any late-night comedian would, by referring to the now-infamous photos of the Russian president vacationing and shirtless: “And when he take his shirt off/He drives the ladies crazy/When he takes his shirt off/Makes *me* wanna be a lady,” sings Newman. As the song goes on, Putin reveals his desire to acquire various territories around the world. As he wonders nervously whether he can finally put Russia “in the comfy chair,” he reflects on the past: “I don’t know, Lenin couldn’t do it/I don’t know, Stalin couldn’t do it/Now they couldn’t do it/Why you think I can?/You’re gonna lead our people to the Promised Land/You’re right, ’cause, Goddamn, I’m the Putin Man.”

Putin is indeed a repugnant figure, worthy of contempt. To criticize this song is not to sympathize with him. But it arrives on a wave of anti-Russian hysteria drummed up by a faction of the ruling elite that

seeks to redirect US foreign policy in its direction. That Newman traces Putin and Stalin back to Lenin and suggests that Lenin was the first in a long line of Russian leaders who sought to put Russia in the “comfy chair” is historically false and, frankly, ignorant. It reveals the toxic McCarthyite-style character of the whole anti-Russian campaign.

Unlike his classic “Political Science,” which satirized the US drive toward global hegemony, with “Putin,” Newman—whatever he may have thought he was doing—has given us a song that falls in line with that drive.

The songs that follow the three already discussed are much better, but by now one’s impression of the album as a whole has largely been set. Still, there is a richness of feeling that is present in the more personal material that comes as a welcome relief.

“She Chose Me” is a touching love song about a man who can’t believe his luck—the woman of his dreams loves him despite all his flaws. Newman’s piano playing and singing is appropriately fragile here. “Lost Without You” is a beautiful and terribly sad song about the loss of a loved one. It takes an honest look at things and avoids sentimentality, though the temptation must have been great.

Here is a songwriter and an album of contradictions. Newman contributes a few of the best, most moving songs of the year along with some that are no less wrongheaded and contrived.



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