

Fetch the Bolt Cutters: One small step for Fiona Apple

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After an eight-year silence, US singer Fiona Apple has released a new album, *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*. The album's broad sonic palette sounds refreshingly distinctive in a period of autotuned and compressed pop music. Apple (born 1977) also has broadened her lyrical themes somewhat beyond romantic relationships and their attendant problems to include coming of age, depression and friendships with other women. The title song expresses the desire to escape confinement that many of us feel during this time of quarantine, and the album has resonated with listeners partly for this reason.

But as encouraging as Apple's turn outward may be, it does not extend much past the affluent, self-centered circles she now inhabits. At moments, the album includes attitudes common in this environment. The new work is a mixed success that nevertheless points a way forward for Apple.

Born in New York to two Broadway performers, Apple received classical piano training as a child and soon began writing her own songs. Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and Kate Bush became early influences. After being raped at age 12, Apple developed anxiety, depression and an eating disorder. When a demo tape she gave to a friend ended up in the hands of a Sony Music executive, Apple was offered a record deal. Her debut album *Tidal* (1996) was released to critical and commercial success before she had turned 20. Other successful albums such as *Extraordinary Machine* (2005) and *The Idler Wheel ...* (2012) followed.

Apple is an accomplished keyboardist, and her articulation and command of dynamics make her singing impressive. Her arrangements are unconventional by the standards of pop music and sometimes include unusual elements like shuffling feet. Her lyrics are noteworthy for their assonance and

occasional striking images, but are more evocative than insightful. Indeed, Apple's manifest self-possession sometimes shades into self-consciousness. Her occasionally mannered delivery lends an air of artifice to her work, which at times recalls musical theater. As a devotee of the cult of the tortured artist, Apple can indulge in self-pity or self-dramatization. Yet she communicates enough intelligence and genuine humanity to make her an artist to be reckoned with.

Percussion is central to *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*. We hear drums, claps and drumsticks beating on objects such as a stove top and metal butterfly, according to Apple. Swing and shuffle rhythms propel these songs. Apple's prominent keyboard playing often reminds us that piano, too, is a percussion instrument.

Competing with the percussion for dominance is Apple's voice, which she uses to great effect. Her basic approach is a straightforward, everywoman style with clear articulation and occasional melisma. But she recognizes and exploits a broad dynamic range that includes whispers, eerie falsetto, blues belting and shouts. Overdubbed harmonies and countermelodies help create, with an economy of means, the rich palette of timbres and textures that is the album's primary aural pleasure.

On Apple's last album, she cried, "All I do is beg to be left alone." On the opening song of *Fetch the Bolt Cutters* she declares, "I want you to love me," dragging out the "you" for emphasis. Though she acknowledges human mortality and expresses doubts about what her life will mean when she's dead, Apple insists on her desire for love "while I'm in this body." During the coda, she celebrates this psychological advance playfully by quickening the tempo and singing in a constricted, feral falsetto that recalls Yoko Ono.

Apple lightheartedly recounts childhood

embarrassments in “Shameika,” including her attempts to be cool and look tough. Though she attracted few friends, she consoles herself with the memory that “Shameika said I had potential.” Her flat, unaccompanied delivery of this comment implies, without demanding, an ironic reading.

“Fetch the Bolt Cutters” continues the coming-of-age theme more frankly. “Girls could roll their eyes at me and kill,” Apple remarks. Yet she also describes finding her voice and seeking her own path. Alluding to a Kate Bush song, she asserts, “I need to run up that hill. / I will! I will!” Playing quiet electric piano chords, Apple sings, “Fetch the bolt cutters, I’ve been in here too long,” as dogs bark to be let out.

Apple asserts her independence, and reveals a certain parochialism, on “Under the Table.” She may consent to go to a boring social event, she cautions her boyfriend, but “that fancy wine won’t put this fire out,” and she will still speak her mind. “Kick me under the table all you want. / I won’t shut up.” The resistance to stifling convention is laudable, but it would be nice to hear Apple sing about an environment outside of the world of dinner parties and “fancy wine.”

In “Newspaper,” Apple shows her desire to improve her relationships with women, including those whom she might consider rivals. She addresses her ex-boyfriend’s girlfriend, whom he has just dumped, with compassion. “I too used to want him to be proud of me,” Apple commiserates. “When I learned what he did, I felt close to you.”

The following song, the slow, gospel-tinged “Ladies,” develops this theme. Apple repeats its title as though chiding or marveling at a group of women. Although she often delights in wordplay, she is more plainspoken here. “When he leaves me, please be my guest,” she says, inviting women to take clothes that she has left behind at her boyfriend’s house. “No love is like any other love, / So it would be insane to make a comparison,” Apple sings. The song’s freedom and generosity are refreshing, but its message, although perhaps based on Apple’s recent experience, will not be a revelation to many listeners.

The final three songs are the album’s weakest. “For Her” undergoes several shifts in rhythm, tempo and mood in a bravura performance of an unfocused composition. It includes the accusation, “You raped me in the same bed your daughter was born in.” The 2018

confirmation hearings for Justice Brett Kavanaugh and Apple’s conviction that women who allege sexual assault should be believed inspired this line, according to a *New Yorker* profile. “Drumset” is a banal expression of romantic disappointment in which Apple sings, “I understand, you’re a human, / And you got to lie, you’re a man.”

These songs imply that women are simply victims, and men simply liars; the presumption of innocence only applies to women. The songs suggest the baleful influence of the #MeToo movement and its ideological orbit.

Along those lines, she has urged comedian Louis C.K., one of the movement’s targets and a former boyfriend, to “apologize” for his past behavior toward women. Apple told *New York* magazine, “I know he’s got such a great brain and he understands why he did that shit,” she said. “I feel robbed that he’s not giving us what he thinks about that.” This indicates that at the very least the singer is not thinking about the important issues.

She never mentions social inequality, war and the crimes of the rich. Has she thought about her donations to the campaign of Barack Obama, whose administration continued the illegal wars in the Middle East and Central Asia and presided over the further enrichment of the top 1 percent? In her focus on gender issues at the expense of much else, Apple unfortunately reflects the contemporary music world’s self-righteousness and insularity.

Fetch the Bolt Cutters marks a positive, but partial, turn toward the social world. If Apple looks beyond her privileged, gender-focused circle to the concrete reality facing the rest of society, she will make an even greater advance.



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