

Veteran musician Ian Anderson comments on right-wing populism with Jethro Tull's *The Zealot Gene*

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The British progressive rock band Jethro Tull released *The Zealot Gene* on January 28, the first recording of all new music by the group in more than twenty years. With words and music written by founder-leader Ian Anderson, the new record is a legitimate addition to the discography of the band, which started in Blackpool (a seaside resort on England's northwest coast) playing the blues in 1967 and went on to become an internationally successful progressive rock group in the 1970s.

The new album contains a mixture of acoustic songs and heavier rock tracks featuring the eclectic blend of musical styles and influences that are central to Jethro Tull's sound. Also, the lyrics demonstrate Anderson's affinity for storytelling and commentary on current and historical social phenomena from unique, not to say eccentric, points of view.

In keeping with progressive rock's "concept album" format, *The Zealot Gene* is comprised of twelve songs that reference Biblical text as inspiration for an exploration of human emotions such as compassion, tolerance, loyalty, love, jealousy, greed and hate.

As Anderson explains in the liner notes, he is not "a man of faith when it comes to conventional, organized religions," but the Bible verses "fueled my songwriting" and were the starting point for elaborating examples of extreme feelings from different vantage points. While he typically finds images like photos or paintings to prompt his observational lyrics, the trigger this time was, "immortal words from 1611 [King James Bible] which, for me, immediately conjure visual images" that can be used to "interpret and vocalize the subject matter."

If listeners have occasionally been baffled in the past by Anderson's sometimes abstruse metaphors and colloquial adages, they will welcome the supporting material in the CD packaging. The words for each song appear along with the associated Bible verse and track notes explain what the songs are about. Listeners can also watch a series of video interviews with Ian Anderson on the band's YouTube channel where he reviews the creative process, the album concept and the production process, which were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Studio work on the album began in 2017 and, due to touring

and other project obligations, seven backing tracks were recorded, and four tracks were completed before the pandemic hit in early 2020. The balance of the album was produced long distance with members of the band—David Goodier on bass, John O'Hara on keyboards, Florian Opahle and Joe Parrish-James on guitar and Scott Hammond on drums—recording their parts separately from their home studios and sending them in to Anderson for the final mixing and mastering. Longtime Jethro Tull lead guitarist Martin Barre does not appear on the new album, having departed the band for a solo career in 2011.

The title track of *The Zealot Gene* unmistakably references would-be American dictator Donald Trump, with the lines, "*The populist with dark appeal / The pandering to hate / Which xenophobic scaremongers / Deliver on the plate.*"

Anderson writes in the track notes, "As a song lyric; it sums up, for me, the divisive nature of societal relationships and the extreme views which fuel the fires of hate and prejudice ... Perhaps you think you know who I might have been thinking about here but, in reality, there are probably now at least five prominent dictatorial international figures who could fit the bill."

We have, needless to say, significant problems with the idea that humans are genetically preconditioned for "extremism," whether in the form of contemporary right-wing populism or in the referenced biblical verse from Ezekiel about the slaughter of idolators with battle axes in Jerusalem. For one, it incorrectly attributes the source of ideological and political conflict to biology instead of socio-economic interests.

However, Anderson seems to be using the "zealot gene" as a device to advocate for middle-of-the-road political moderation and to warn of unintended consequences when social media is used uncritically or made a barrier to political discourse. He writes in the liner notes, "It is almost as if we have some genetic component driving us toward that sub-intellectual graffiti for which the outlet, these days, is let loose by the aerosol spray of social media."

While opposing, "prejudice, xenophobia and hard right conservatism," he also takes a swipe at "wokeness," calling it a "trendy and overworked" viewpoint that "can all-too-easily

stifle the process of the direct exchange of views.”

The other tracks on the album are less problematic. The opening song, “Mrs. Tibbets,” was inspired by the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:24-28. The song examines the barbaric bombing of the Japanese city of Hiroshima by the US Air Force on the morning of August 6, 1945. Brigadier General Paul Tibbets flew the heavy bomber, a Boeing B-29 Superfortress called the Enola Gay, which he personally named after his mother the previous day.

The lyrics portray the rationalizations given to Mrs. Tibbets to justify the mass murder: “*Don’t feel bad, they said, about the numbers / Don’t feel bad about the melting heat / The burning flesh, the soft white cell demise. / And the shattered ground beneath the trembling feet.*”

The line in the chorus, “Mrs. Tibbets’ little boy,” makes a double reference to her pilot son and the codename for the five-ton bomb. Little Boy was the first nuclear weapon used in warfare and the first of two atomic bombs dropped on Japan as ordered by US President Harry S. Truman. Estimates of the number killed by US imperialism in the two blasts range from 130,000 to 215,000 people.

Of course, a big part of Jethro Tull’s sound is Anderson’s use of the flute as a rock music instrument. While he is not the only artist to do it, he is the most well-known and he has an immediately recognizable style. In crafting songs about intense emotion, Anderson shows that the concert flute can be made to express a variety of feelings and this range is extended by his signature multiphonic vocalizations. The impact of the technique comes through in the portrayal of an angry Old Testament God in the track, “Mine is the Mountain.”

Another method Anderson has used is to play the flute in unison or harmony with the electric guitar. This is done effectively on the opening riff to “The Betrayal of Joshua Kynde,” an allegorical tale about deception among cold war spies. Other instruments such as harmonica, mandolin, Irish whistle, acoustic guitar and accordion make their appearance on the lighter tracks such as “Jacob’s Tales,” “Sad City Sisters” and “Three Loves, Three.”

Using Bible verse to either express agnosticism or question Christian doctrine is not new for the band. Jethro Tull’s most popular album *Aqualung*, released in 1971, has sold more than three million copies and contains a preamble in the liner notes which is a rewriting of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning Man created God; and in the image of Man created he him.”

At that time, *Aqualung* was banned from radio play in Spain by the fascist regime of Francisco Franco and there were publicized burnings of the record in the US by some Bible Belt evangelicals. However, the ideas critical of the Christian church in tracks like “My God,” “Hymn 43” and “Wind Up” also intermingled with the rebellious moods among the youth and contributed to the rising global popularity of Jethro Tull.

Anderson, 74, became the sole leader and creative force of Jethro Tull in 1969 after the departure of founding guitarist

Mick Abrahams. Following the release of their first album *This Was*, the two clashed over the artistic direction of the group. Abrahams wanted Jethro Tull to remain a blues-based band and Anderson, influenced by the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* and Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention, wanted to move in a more experimental direction.

Following the success of *Aqualung*, Jethro Tull rode a wave of mass progressive rock popularity with bands like Pink Floyd, Genesis, Emerson Lake and Palmer and Yes, and released a studio album every year through 1980. The albums were followed by world tours, with live performances before sold-out crowds at arenas on five continents. During these years, Ian Anderson’s stage antics and costumes played directly into criticisms of progressive rock as pretentious and bombastic.

Among the more remarkable accomplishments of Jethro Tull during those years was that two concept albums with 45 minutes of continuous complex music and dense lyrics—*Thick as a Brick* (1972) and *A Passion Play* (1973)—both rose to number one on the US charts. While the rock music press generally panned these records, listening audiences embraced them.

Later in the decade, the band pursued a folk-rock direction and with *Songs from the Wood* (1977), *Heavy Horses* (1978) and *Stormwatch* (1979) that melded ethnic acoustic instruments and Scottish musical themes with heavy electric guitar riffs and rhythms. The lyrics on these records articulated Anderson’s concerns about industrial society, population growth and dwindling natural resources.

While the popularity of progressive rock faded in the 1980s and beyond, many of the most popular groups were able to continue by making new music and/or performing live concerts for their fans. The onset of the pandemic disrupted these cycles and, with most of the musicians now in their mid-to-late 70s, they have had to find new ways of interacting with audiences and to figure out what they will do in their later years.

With *The Zealot Gene*, Ian Anderson and Jethro Tull have released an engaging album. Whether listeners choose to enjoy the music or become involved with the conceptual elements, the album provides both new and old audiences with an opportunity to learn about one of the more thoughtful and significant artists of the era.



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