

“We must have love for those against us”

The Purple Bird and the good intentions of Bonnie “Prince” Billy

Erik Schreiber
19 March 2025

For his latest album *The Purple Bird* (2025), singer-songwriter Will Oldham (who records under the name Bonnie “Prince” Billy) decided to do something different. He traveled to Nashville, Tennessee, to work with David “Ferg” Ferguson, who produced the album and cowrote most of its songs. Though he has collaborated with many artists over the years, Oldham has generally avoided working with producers.

The result of this new joint effort is a warm and unpretentious country album that seems tailored to Oldham’s voice and sensibilities. At a time when the ruling elite is promoting bigotry and violence, Oldham expresses welcome compassion. Yet the significant weaknesses in the singer’s outlook are readily apparent as well.

Oldham was born to middle-class parents in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1970. While attending Brown University, Oldham sought to establish a career as an actor. He has appeared in films such as John Sayles’ *Matewan* (1987) and Kelly Reichardt’s *Wendy and Lucy* (2008).

At Brown, Oldham also began writing and recording songs, and his style has modulated between country, folk and indie rock. His debut album *There Is No-One What Will Take Care of You* (1993), *Viva Last Blues* (1995) and *I See a Darkness* (1999), were well received. Artists as diverse as Johnny Cash, Marianne Faithfull and Spanish pop star Rosalía have covered his songs.

Oldham sings in a thin, worn and wavery voice that is never demonstrative but often quietly emotive. On *The Purple Bird*, he is backed by seasoned Nashville session musicians. Although the songs are full of violin, pedal steel, electric piano, accordion and

trombone, the mix is quiet and subdued, perhaps so as not to overwhelm Oldham’s voice. The album’s humorous and optimistic songs alternate with somber and reflective ones.

The slow “Turned to Dust (Rolling On)” is a meditation on mortality and an appeal for solidarity. It establishes many of the album’s recurring themes and serves as a manifesto of sorts. “Right is right, wrong is wrong, / No matter what side you’re standing on,” Oldham sings. “When I see the things that man can do, / It makes this poor heart break,” he laments in the first of the album’s references to man’s inhumanity to man. “Tempted by the lure of a liar / Who preys upon the foolish and the weak,” he continues, in an implicit reference to President Donald Trump, “If we rely on love to lift us higher / Things’ll be all right for you and me.” In the chorus, Oldham recommends trust in God.

This opening song reveals Oldham’s sympathy for others’ suffering and his yearning for fellowship. His veiled allusion to Trump indicates an engagement (albeit tentative and limited) with current social and political questions. These are admirable qualities. But the song also illustrates why Oldham has difficulty grasping the causes of cruelty and violence. The singer tends to see conflict and misfortune in moral terms—and to see morality itself as fixed. This perspective fails to account for historical development or the class struggle. Trump, for example, is certainly a pathological “liar,” but the more fundamental question is which class interests his lies serve. Oldham’s orientation toward idealist and moral considerations instead of objective and materialist ones leads him to prescribe love and religious faith as the solution to the world’s problems. History has not been kind to this perspective.

The return to nature is another recurring theme of the album. On songs like “The Water’s Fine,” Oldham praises the pleasures of swimming holes, sunsets and nights spent under the stars. As attractive as this pastoral idyll may be, its frequent repetition suggests a desire to escape from the contemporary world and its crises. This impression is reinforced on the Appalachian waltz “Our Home,” a paean to rural life, when one of the musicians sings, “Do it by hand and screw the machines.” This is not helpful.

The jarring “Guns Are for Cowards” tackles the subject of violence much more explicitly than the other songs. The oom-pah waltz not only departs from the country style of much of the album, but also contrasts with the gravity of the lyrics. Oldham acknowledges revenge fantasies by provocatively asking, “Who would you shoot in the face? / Who would you shoot in the brain?” The song turns darker still when Oldham mentions a friend who was shot and killed. Those who resort to violence are “cowards created by fear and withholding of love,” he sings, adding pessimistically that “there’s no way to change” this situation.

Other songs are more humorous or personal. In the upbeat, self-deprecating “Tonight with the Dogs I’m Sleeping,” Oldham runs afoul of his significant other by staying at the bar too long. Anchored by electric piano, “Boise, Idaho” is a song of regret and resignation at the end of a romantic relationship. Balancing it out is “One of These Days (I’m Gonna Spend the Whole Night with You),” in which Oldham winsomely puts the ball in his love interest’s court.

A standout is the gently plaintive “Is My Living in Vain?” Oldham has recast the Clark Sisters’ gospel song as a folk lament with fingerpicked guitar, cello and mandolin. Voicing basic human doubt, the song asks questions such as “Is my labor in vain? / Is my singing in vain?” Oldham’s fragile voice adds poignancy to the song. The response to these questions is “of course not … because up the road is eternal gain.” This refrain echoes Oldham’s other appeals to spirituality, which reflect his difficulties in understanding and responding constructively to the world’s challenges.

The Purple Bird is an appealing, multifaceted album with many memorable songs. Oldham’s singing is by turns charming and affecting, and the musicians support it sympathetically, adding texture and shading.

Oldham’s self-presentation as a sensitive everyman with ordinary human weaknesses is convincing and easy to identify with. He seems motivated by a desire to express the human experience in his songs, offering solace, empathy and humor to his audience. These are admirable qualities that strengthen his work.

While Oldham’s engagement with violence and injustice is welcome and necessary, his treatment of these issues reflects distinct pressures and historical problems. The singer began his musical career in the early 1990s, at a time when the American ruling elite was proclaiming the “end of history” and the final triumph of capitalism. One of the aims was to intimidate and paralyze opposition, to neuter it in every possible way. Even many of those who disagreed with the official version of things were damaged by the promotion of postmodernism and identity politics on the campuses and beyond. These ideological difficulties, along with the lack of a broad-based socialist movement, have weakened the efforts of many musicians over the past several decades.

Oldham, along with other artists, has suffered from this cultural atmosphere. Nor is he the only artist expressing a healthy desire for a more equal society. A more direct engagement with the struggles and problems of the working class can help these artists develop their perspectives and enrich their work.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact