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Fiona Apple's Cogent, Untethered Gem

John Amen · Wednesday, April 22nd, 2020

Fiona Apple's new album *Fetch the Bolt Cutters* features bacchanalian swirls and accents, meandering and truncated instrumental lines, and percussive sounds that include stomps, handclaps, and pounding on walls – euphonies and discordances that bring to mind Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica*, Tom Waits' *Swordfishtrombones*, and Mary Margaret O'Hara's comparatively austere yet still pop-transcendent *Miss America*.

While the musical elements on *Fetch the Bolt Cutters* are striking, it's Apple's lyrics and the gestaltic paradoxes they convey, however, that take center stage. Over thirteen tracks, Apple embraces a graphophilic expansiveness, elaborating on themes and tensions that she's explored – less unflinchingly – throughout her career: the desire to love and be loved vs. a Swiftian misanthropy, the cultivation of empathy vs. a contraction into cynicism, faith in human nature and herself vs. a broad-stroke nihilism, the intransigence of resentment vs. the grace of forgiveness, and so on.

On the beat-driven opener "I Want You to Love Me," she blends a garage-y swagger with the suaveness of a wounded chanteuse: "I know when I go / all my particles disband and disperse / and I'll be back in the pulse," alternately asserting, "while I'm in this body / I want somebody to want / and I want what I want." With the title song, she splashes in a jazzy current of bass, percussion, and dog barks, navigating the impact of real and imagined expectations: "I grew up in the shoes they told me I could fill / shoes that were not made for running up that hill." She's concurrently weary of the tolls exacted by longstanding repressions: "And I need to run up that hill, I need to run up that hill."

The phrase “fetch the bolt cutters” itself conjures the impulse to escape a prison, cut chains or padlocks, to actualize a degree of liberation: from cultural, familial, and institutional dictates as well as one’s own egoic identity. With “Under the Table,” Apple expresses indignation for her oppressors and, by extension, her internalized mandates: “Kick me under the table all you want / I won’t shut up, I won’t shut up.” Her declaration is an act of boundary-setting as well as unsentimental self-talk. On “Relay,” the most hook-y and pop-infused tune on the album, she strikes a balance between poet and firebrand: “Evil is a relay sport / when the one who’s burnt / turns to pass the torch,” metaphorizing the way in which envy, ill will, and delusion are karmically perpetuated.

On the relatively unadorned “Ladies,” she encourages non-competitiveness amongst women: “Ladies, ladies, ladies, ladies, take it easy / when he leaves me, please be my guest.” On “Cosmonauts,” she integrates vulnerability and hutzpah, noting the gifts and limitations of monogamy: “You and I will be like a couple of cosmonauts / except with way more gravity than when we started off,” assessing how romantic connection is so often burdened by pragmatic concerns, disappointments, and minor (or major) betrayals. With the closing track “On I Go,” Apple espouses a hard-won equanimity, arriving at a Zenic manifesto: “On I go, not toward or away / up until now it was day, next day / up until?now?in a rush?to prove / but now I only move?to move,” underscoring the possibility of emancipation from world and self.

Throughout her oeuvre, Fiona Apple has channeled a primal and transpersonal rage while probing the complex ambivalences that are part and parcel of the human makeup. With *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*, she offers her most inspired, focused, and finessed proclamation yet, illuminating the myriad ways in which we successfully and unsuccessfully confront our disempowerments.

8.7/10

(Featured photo by Sachyn Mital)

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