**Review of *Aqualung* by Jethro Tull**

**MUSIC**: “Aqualung”, Jethro Tull, intro hard rock riff, medium-loud, softens as narration starts

**Me**

Jethro Tull, legendary English progressive rock band, and this is a review of their fourth and most acclaimed studio album, *Aqualung,* released in 1971. This project contains some of the band’s most renowned material, including the titular title track, the chugging of “Locomotive Breath”, and frontman and lyricist Ian Anderson’s trademark piping flute.

This album is sort of Jethro Tull coming into their own, as earlier albums such as *Stand Up* with it’s blues and jazz influences on tracks like “Boree”, or Benefit with its bluesy, riff-heavy songs. *Aqualung,* in contrast, favors acoustic guitar more throughout its runtime, and the hardrock guitar acts more in bursts of rock riffing. Additionally, the band incorporates piano and keys where before their overwhelming song structure was electric guitar and Anderson’s flute.

Another aspect that makes this album in the realm of progressive rock is its relation, or rather, distance from fantasy and science fiction, which are often deep seated in the lyrics of bands such as Yes, Rush, Genesis, among others. Tull on this album dives into the grimeness of urban living and critics of religious organizations, which have many to believe it is a concept album, another staple of Progressive rock. But Anderson disagrees:

**Ian Anderson - Interview Part 2 - 11/4/1984 - unknown:**

(0:30) - “Aqualung, actually, a lot people think is a concept album, but, in fact, the original-- was the title track derived from some ideas for some lyrics that my then wife had come up…

(0:58) that particular song, and some of the other songs that surrounded the nucleus of the album, once you got four or five song together, you kinda look at it and say ah, something — there are some common denominators in this lyrical material….then you perhaps go and write the extra songs so that they fit in in some way. (1:17) But it wasn’t a concept album, so much as a collection of songs that had a feel about them, what made it look like more of a concept album was the execution of the cover, the liner notes, everything kinda just pointing there being some underlying celestial theme, some cosmic truth about to be unveiled or whatever.

(1:44) Everybody immediately thought it was a concept album, and that surprised me….

I remember the time in all the interviews I did, I said , “no it's not a concept album at all!” but it doesn’t matter whether you say it or not, people get it in their heads they believe it.”

**Me**

So what in this collection of songs struck people as a concept? Let’s dive in.

**MUSIC**: “Aqualung”, Jethro Tull, intro riff

**Me**

The first song, “Aqualung”, details a homeless man in a park from the perspective of an unsympathetic narrator. This narrator says:

**MUSIC**: “Aqualung”, Jethro Tull, verse, medium loud

*Lyrics: Sitting on a park bench, eyeing little girls with bad intent, Snot’s running down his nose, greasy fingers smearing shabby clothes…*

**Me**

The staccato electric riff pairs with these lyrics and shows us the narrator views this homeless man as a threat or filth that needs to be cleaned up. Yet the song softens aftwards, and we switch to a sympathetic narrator, who looks upon *Aqualung* with a guilty conscience.

The song finishes with a return to the unsympathetic view on Aqualung, who will be a thematic through-line throughout the album, although he does not explicitly show up past the second track. His story is of fear and insecurity, and how our society looks down upon those who make us uncomfortable or who we deem lesser. More on that in the religious critique sections.

**MUSIC**: “Cross Eyed Mary” Jethro Tull, flute intro,

**Me**

The remainder of the first half of the record ties into the themes of Aqualung; guilt, grotesqueness, and marginalization. We visit “Cross-Eyed Mary” a school girl prostitute who sleeps with older men and:

*The jack-knife barber, drops her off at school*

**Me**

Which is in reference to a back street abortion. Yet even with these dark themes, Ian Anderson sings the song in a nasally, laughing manner as if that is all he could do in face of the grotesque situation.

**MUSIC:** “Cheap Day Return”, Jethro Tull, light guitar

**Me**

“Cheap Day Return” marks one of the motifs of the album, short, interlude-like songs whose runtimes are barely over one minute, usually stripped down acoustic numbers with some strings sawing in the background. The song itself is about Ian Anderson visiting his father at the hospital, and how the nurse treats him very well, but asks for his autograph. Anderson wonders if they’re treating him well just because he is famous. The theme of guilt returns as Anderson ponders this question at the train station.

**MUSIC:** “Mother Goose” intro riff, verse, medium guitar strumming

**Me**

Then we have the folk inspired “Mother Goose”, a humorous look at a range of downtrodden and seedy characters at the Hampstead Fair, and the narrator seems to take on many different roles depending on who he sees.

**MUSIC:** “Wondering Aloud”, Jethro Tull, soft strumming guitar

**Me**

Another interlude, “Wondering Aloud”, at first appears to be a well intentioned introspection of life and growing old, but reading into the lyrics reveals these musings to be full of cheeky innuendo.

**MUSIC:** “Up to Me” Jethro Tull, flute intro

**Me**

“Up to Me” finishes the first side of the record with a trouble-making flute riff, paired with a rocking bass line give a sort of joyous, mischievous groove while the lyrics detail a man making a mess at a bar, breaking his cousin’s glasses, and fighting people when the cops are away. Ultimately is a song about personal freedom, with its refrain:

**MUSIC:** *Woah it's up to me…*

**MUSIC:** “My God”, Jethro Tull, soft guitar riff

**Me**

The second half of the record begins Anderson’s deeper musings on god and religion, and the accusation of the concept album becomes clearer. “My God,” begins with its imposing acoustic guitar riffs, slowly paired low piano chords, and Anderson sings:

**MUSIC:**

*People, what have you done? Locked him in his golden cage, golden cage,*

*Made him bend to your religion*

*Him resurrected from the grave, from the grave*

This line refers to how the church bends the meaning of god and religion to better suit their agenda and wants. Further on, Anderson gives concrete examples of this with the lines:

**MUSIC:**

*...Don’t call on him to save you from your social graces, and the sins you used to waive, you used to wave…*

**Me**

This line in particular highlights that if people “waive” sins they’ve committed, but after joining the church, they ask for salvation only because the church condemns such acts. I think one of the most famous example of this is Televangelist Jimmy Swaggart’s apologizing to god for cheating on his wife with a prostitute:

# **Jimmy Swaggart's apology (1988) - Swedish subtitles**

#### (1:13-1:47) “...I have sinned against You, my Lord. And I would ask that Your precious blood would wash and cleanse every stain, until it is in the seas of God’s forgetfulness, never to be remembered against me anymore.”

**Me**

Swaggert, of course, was caught three years later with another prostitute. If he really cared about the sin he wouldn’t have done it again, but since the church condemns such activities, Swaggert had to put on a show and ask for forgiveness in a way that absolves him of any blame: “never to be remembered against me anymore.” Yuck.

“My God” creeps on, musing about those who prayed to god in tragedy, thinking they have committed some sin, will cry out for his help and forgiveness:

**MUSIC**: “My God”, Jethro Tull

*Confessing to the endless sin, the endless whining sound, you’ll be praying till next Thursday,*

*To all the gods that you can count!*

**Me**

Then, Anderson points out the idotly of Christianity and how it violates the commandment of making graven images:

**MUSIC**:

*And the graven image you know who, with his plastic crucifix, he’s got him fixed*

**Me**

The song finishes out with a haunting flute solo backed by vocal harmonies that would be at home in a cathedral or in a symphony hall.

**MUSIC:**

Song quiets and ends

**Me**

Then “Hymn 43” kicks in.

**MUSIC**: “Hymn 43” Jethro Tull, heavy piano, guitar, loud

**Me**

Hymn 43 acts as a heavy hitting critique of committing ‘sins’ without a care in the world because these characters can claim “Jesus save me,” and they will be forgiven. Violent acts, money games, genocide, the glorification of violence; if you pray it willl go away. This best exemplified in the refrain:

**MUSIC**:

*If Jesus saves, well He’d better save himself, from the gory glory seekers,*

*who uses his name in death, oh!*

**Me**

This is a criticism of people who justify violent acts with the belief and word of God. A common object of Chrstian violence is the LGBT community, and the following clip exemplifies this. Skip this section if you have an aversion to this sort of hate speech. Its on a Pastor Jimenez commenting on a shooting in a gay nightclub that left 49 people dead.

# **Pastor refuses to mourn Orlando victims: ‘The tragedy is that more of them didn’t die’**

(0:10-0:35) “People say, aren’t you said 50 sodomites (bigoted slang for homosexuals) died? Here’s the problem with that, it's like the equivalent of asking me, hey, what if you asked me, hey are you sad that fifty pedofiles were killed today? Um, no, I think that's great. I think that helps society. You know, I think Orlando Florida is a little safer tonight. The tragedy is that more of them didn’t die. I’m kinda upset that he didn’t finish the job.”

**Me**

Such disgusting views are perpetrated in the name of purity, god and Jesus. Bigots use the church as a strong arm for their ideas to push violence on the marginalized, and they shield themselves with the veneer of the word of Jesus. Anderson thinks of this as a doubled edged interaction, saying he saw Jesus on the mountains of the moon, and:

**MUSIC:**

*His cross was rather bloody, oh!*

*And he could hardly roll his stone, oh Jesus save me!*

Jesus being unable to perform the feats and miracles detailed in the bible is Anderson’s way of showing the corruption of Christianity. What he stands for, in theory, is being used for bigoted means.

**MUSIC:** “Slipstream” Jethro Tull, soft guitar

**Me**

Slipstream cools us down with another short acoustic ballad that's here and gone, a song between life and death:

*And you press on God’s waiter your last dime, as he hands you the bill*

**MUSIC:** “Locomotive Breath”, Jethro Tull, intro quiet piano chords

**Me**

“Locomotive breath” starts off with a moody piano ambling its way along until it is shortly joined by electric guitar solo, and then the song kicks full steam ahead into guitar riffs and beats that mimic the sound of a train chugging along the tracks.

**MUSIC:** “Locomotive Breath”, Jethro Tull, main riff, medium loud

**Me**

Anderson himself says the song is about overcrowding and overpopulation, using the motif of a runaway train as the world is running out of control.

**MUSIC:**

*Old charlie’s stole the handle, and the train it won’t stop going, now way to slow down*

**Me**

Old Charlie likely refers to the devil, and thus, the song could be about sin overtaking our society and leaving us like a runaway train. Yet in the next refrain its:

**MUSIC:**

*I said, God, he stole the handle and the train it won't stop going, no way to slow down*

**Me**

So more likely the song is about the nature god put on humans, and with him gone, the whole machine is running out of control. This is further evidenced by Verse 3:

**MUSIC:**

*Oh, he picks up Gideon’s bible*

*Open at page one*

**Me**

Which is a reference to the line, Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply.”

But if more humans means more people on the train, then the book is solving the problems set before the world, as Anderson sees it. Instead the train keeps going, and there’s no way to slow down.

**MUSIC:** “Wind up” Jethro Tull

**Me**

Wind-Up is a fitting conclusion to the album, exploring the nature of Sunday school and following churches. The title is a double meaning, winding up the album, as in finishing it, and also referring to how its message would wind up members of the church.

**MUSIC:**

*I didn’t mind, if they groomed me for success, or if they said that I was just a fool.*

**Me**

Anderson had once blindly accepted what the authorities told him, believing that those above knew better because they said so. But he no longer believes this, and he announces to his old headmaster, and to anyone who cares:

**MUSIC:**

*I don’t believe you. You had the whole damn thing all wrong, he’s not the kind you have to wind up on Sundays.*

**Me**

Dragging yourself to church every Sunday doesn’t make you a real believer, it encourages a routine, or obedience. But Anderson doesn’t care about how the church thinks people should live their lives, even if they’re other family is religious. He sings in the verse

**MUSIC:**

*I’d rather look around me, compose a better song, cause that’s an honest measure of my worth.*

**Me**

Anderson believes people can judge how to best live their lives with their own individual morality, not a rigid doctrine one must follow. The church may feel they have the right answers, but Anderson rebuttals:

**MUSIC:**

*In your pomp and all your glory, you’re a poorer man than me, as you lick the boots of death, born out of fear*

**Me**

People struggle with death, and how to deal with it. Anderson thinks people worship the church as a way to cope with harsh realities. These people may show off their worshipping, believing themselves glorious,but Anderson sees this dedication as an absence of thought and character, making them poor in his eyes. Personal thought and action are more important than authoritarian-group-think.

Aqualung is not an anti-religious album, rather, it holds systemic critiques of mainstream churches and the societal behaviors they encourage, and shows how the idealism of worship and the actual practices of the church are very different. Binding ourselves to the rigidity of the church does not improve our material conditions or ourselves as moral beings as Anderson shows. Afterall, Aqualung and Cross-eyed Mary are still forced out onto the street, and the train is still chugging away. Instead, Anderson wants us to be wary of systems and forces that limit thought, self-expression, for their own personal gain and control. Thus, *Aqualung* holds prescient critiques of our religious institutions to this day.

Check out this classic album if you’re a music fan, or you're looking for something out of your usual listening field.

**MUSIC:** “Wind up” Jethro Tull

*I don’t believe you, you had the whole damn thing all wrong. He’s not the kind you have to wind up on Sundays.*

**PUBLISHED AUDIO FILE SOURCES:**

**Ian Anderson - Interview Part 2 - 11/4/1984 - unknown:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pQ4_klV-d8&ab_channel=Docs%26InterviewsonMV>

**Jimmy Swaggart's apology (1988) - Swedish subtitles:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZ967qGbiBs&ab_channel=VHSkanal1>

**Pastor refuses to mourn Orlando victims: ‘The tragedy is that more of them didn’t die’:**

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/06/14/pastor-refuses-to-mourn-orlando-victims-the-tragedy-is-that-more-of-them-didnt-die/>

***Aqualung,* Jethro Tull:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MslaxkQpTdI&ab_channel=ClassicRock>