

On “These 13” (Jimbo Mathus & Andrew Bird)

Essayist: Gar Pickering, October 2020

This album is about boundaries. The limitations of reality, that bind and double bind those who see them as concrete and not fluid. Self and other, rich and poor, outside and in. Lost and found, beat down, rising up, and falling out. Boundaries are what define, and definitions are what limit and constrict. Those bound to the definition of meaning and life, what is good and what is bad, find themselves burdened with their own devices, and from there it only gets heavier as society meets their bet and raises the bid. Rivers are boundaries, ropes are boundaries, stone walls are boundaries, and social statuses are boundaries just the same. Caste and casting, everyone knowing their lines and their places, making show business with reality, a cycle of illusion and imitation.

Each one of us are born out of pure potential, though we are born into a world where potential takes on weight, and it becomes a battle against burden to realize the potential from which, and through which, we came into being. In the beginning, the world feels newly created, and our eyes are full of lights. In every person is what religion has called a soul, or an essence, a spark of the divine...but it's just as well to call it a diamond, because all of those words are just words to make a concept more palatable. We make believe about this diamond, and what it does, what it is worth, and how some people seem to have given it away from some other lesser aspiration. The lost souls among us, shut out from the living room window? Criminal, untouchable, mentally ill, dropouts, slackers, ne'r-do-wells, they are sometimes called. These words are just descriptions describing the judgement they've been given by those who forget that they too are poor lost souls. Every lump of coal is a diamond, and every diamond has been a lump of coal. This is not a dichotomy, not a cycle, just the never-ending reality of enough time and pressure. The universe is just a lump of coal, but it has a diamond inside of it.

Heaven or Hell be damned, Oblivion is my hope. Never aging, forever young, denying consequences and living in the moment. The temptation of youthful rebellion, and adult conformity. Playing it safe or giving it hell...the two choices. Forget to get old, and you die young, forget to be young, and you're old for the rest of your life. Society's morals are a seatbelt against an eternity of punishment, and its religions offer the enteral dessert for living the way you're told to live. What is a young soul to do with its carnal years? That's the dichotomy, false as it may be, that leads so many astray, either to a short life of raising hell, or a long life of cultivating heaven. Somewhere there's a crooked path zigzagging between them, and this is where the creative approach flourishes. Like the rootless wizard casting circles, the fool wandering the cliff's edge blindly. The train hopping hobo sage, longing for the sun and chasing it towards the evening's horizon, sometimes while heading the wrong direction. The poor rake who dies alone, the dying craps shooter lays dead and left instructions. I was here and here's how I want to be remembered. Something of a magic spell is written and cast. Encircle my love and kiss it three times before you bury it in a cemetery to cast your spell.

Ashes and dust are the destiny of the universe, and from the dawn to dusk of it, the destiny of our own lives. Dark nights of the soul fill the space between as we all go about learning who we are and why or why not we are here, songs written in romantic settings dreamed up by our own lost, lonely child. Free from any other's chains, and all alone to bask in it. Self-torture a rewarding experiment in feeling. To get low to get high is the way of the lost sorcerer who fell for there the trap in their own double bind on reality. Perfectly free, all alone, and writing a song to a listener who isn't even there. Here's my notes on where I am, let them show you we're you've been. A moment of timeless calm in mindful exploration. The lover encircles their heart and draws a line between them and the one that they love. Your side and

mine. Separateness becomes the pain of being outside of the one who you feel is your only chance at wholeness. Painful fiddles in your mind, caught enthralled to heartbreak. Opposite sides of the aisle, with bedazzling ceremony between us, caught up in the illusion of it all. Forever convinced we will never be whole, we continue to divide against our own self, pushing away at artificial barriers.

The trickster walks between roads on that crooked way, never lost, just there where they find themselves. Refusing to play the master illusion's game, the conqueror takes chances and wins or loses going along the way, playing a small part is a cosmic crap shoot. High John in the ground, waiting to return when he is needed most, to take on false institutions of power, concrete structure, social barriers, and the whole damn cheat. Life is an honest game, but it's the cheaters who want to win at all costs, making life into a rigged game. Good luck, stay limber.

Crossing over the river, we make it to where we've been going. Heading West to Texas, heading to New Orleans from the Trace, crossing the eternal body of water. Some say it is to the West, some to the East, some say it is up or down. Where does the river flow that is told of in the Gospels? Where is the water that divides us from Avalon? Crossing the Danube or the Yangtze, looking for a new home...a recurring chapter in the human mystery that we keep re-reading over and over. Take a break in the shade, rest your weary bones where you are sitting.

Introspective interlude.

For the love of Sophia, specters enchant us. She's walking right up next to me. Fallen Sophia bound to the loving suitor, drunk on philosophy. Fiddle stings tug at his soul, another drink softens his heart. She cries about lying but she knows the truth that you seek, and it can only be told in traps. His only one way out is back through the other door.

The folksinger sings to fisher kings, about heartbreak and hatchets. Times are a changing I heard Coe say of Dylan, and Dylan was only passing it along. Open a bottle, dig up the past, and bury it all in a hole for later. This Zen will cleave your skull. The Fool continues to folly thinking himself a Diamond Jack, still perched on the edge of his errand, dreaming of the Queen of Hearts. The gamblers loss is his gain, the rambler's roam is his pain, and as they say about parting, it doesn't take him long to hit bottom. He awakens but once a day and goes blind every night, dreaming and chasing a dark angel. The Queen of Hearts turned up Spades, all gone to ashes. Que the funeral procession, we have a dying player, po'bet. He died pat, a patsy in a game everyone loses. A slow walk and drumbeats, stings and whistles, a lamentation for all of us. The cemetery gate never closes, the gate-less cemetery never opens. A Danse Macabre to the fiddler's mourn. No longer held to the boundaries of living. The Great Unbinding.