

*“Drink to the dawn, we’ll be home ...”* Listen to the first song “Life Is Beautiful” long enough and two things happen. One, you see yourself at Jonestown, Guyana in 1978, staring down a cup of that infamous Kool-Aid. But some time before that, you’re singing along. It’s a key track to open the new album by Shayfer James, presenting at the same time a dark, desperate dimension of experience and the hypnotic affirmation that life is beautiful anyway.

Diverse as the owl and the elephant, these songs inhabit the wild within what it means to be human—loss, seduction, the impulse toward destructive abandon; but also sacrifice and the beauty of deep encounter. With soundscapes to match: “Bayonettes” begins like a rusty squeezebox, an organ grinder under distant church bells who’ll share something with you about these two who learn that their fairy tale is also their nightmare. Contrast that with “When Heaven Closes,” a waltz escaped from a nineteenth-century ballroom, lirting about why and when to break accustomed rhythms.

Distinctive vocal and instrumental arrangements mark the terrain of the album. Intense yet supple singing ranges growl to nightingale. Lean, hard piano grooves permeate, blending into rich orchestral textures with deadly percussion. *Kalimba* (African thumb piano) and gong spike the anarchic frenzy of “Tombstone Road,” while death rattle and cello conspire in devastating bass with the taunt “Grind My Bones.” “Every Fallen Feather” is the only unrelentingly elysian record in this Divine Comedy. With a violin playing cameo as angel, every little thing she does is not, of course, magic—though sometimes it feels that way.

The hooks draw you in, but the lyrics keep you. Listen to the volley of “*arrows*” and “*hours*” in “Your Father’s Son,” the album’s psalm on the agony of influence between generations. Sound and sense interlock and syncopate like family throughout: “*If every second has a fiddle/ Does every razor have a wrist/ It fits so well?*” The antagonist of “Siren Song” (who knows we seduce ourselves) isn’t the only tribute to the poetry of the past; Homeric similes abound in “Insincerely Yours”: “*While I spin you like an ancient carousel/ Where the old engineer wears a gold bandoleer/ And bewilders the horses with whistles and bells ...*” Turn it up and listen to the words, for they are well made.

A bonus track, the funereal dirge “For Now, Goodbye” bids farewell by a voice “*equal parts criminal and king.*” Why don’t I believe him? Because he leaves us wanting more.

—Peter Horn, m.a.