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ARTS & CULTURE

ABSURDITY OF HUMANITY

THIS MONTH AFFAIRS

THE WHITE ALBUM

JOAN DIDION

PURE COMEDY

FATHER JOHN MISTY



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Joan Didion

“WE TELL OURSELVES STORIES IN ORDER TO LIVE”

JOAN DIDION'S 'THE WHITE ALBUM' (1979)

CLARA PEREIRA

In April 1968, a British quartet seeks transcendental inspiration from a guru in a northern Indian province, the product of which would be the spiritually charged and disconcertingly cacophonous White Album. On August 9th 1968, the Charles Manson Family murders 8-month pregnant Sharon Tate Polanski and four other women on 10050 Cielo Drive, leaving the phrase 'Helter Skelter' traced in blood on the refrigerator door. That same morning, as Joan Didion soaked in her sister-in-law's swimming pool just a few miles away, the phone rang with the previous night's news, which would ultimately inform the author's 1979 collection of essays 'The White Album'.

One could try to frame these seemingly disparate but inevitably interconnected events in a chain of causality and consequence, the logic of which we can never really decipher but in which we blindly believe in. But this, as Didion shows throughout her personal, perceptive and paranoiac account of California in the Sixties, would be a task in the absurd – in the light of incongruous and tumultuous times, “all connections [are] equally meaningful, and equally senseless”.

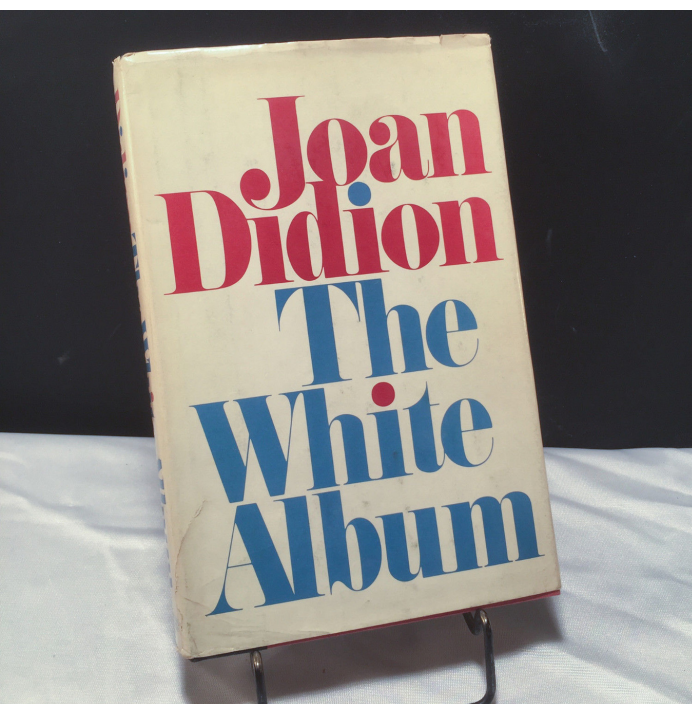
Student Protests at San Francisco State, 1968



In this rejection of a narrative congruence to both personal and societal experience lies the timeless lesson of the Sacramento-born author's book, whose opening statement enticingly accuses our futility:

We tell ourselves stories in order to live. (...) We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely (...) by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.

Didion reported about a time which could have been drawn up by a madman. Visionary politicians and activists – Martin Luther King, Malcom X, Jack and Bobby Kennedy, among many others – kept dropping like flies; over-the-counter medication was leaving thousands of babies deformed; unjustifiably deadly wars were being waged abroad in the name of freedom and capitalism; university campuses and cities became battlegrounds for civil causes heralded by mobs of disaffected people; young adults killed their alienation and disillusionment with Woodstock and LSD. In the wake of such entropy, the author describes a society in which events could not be composed into a coherent plot but consisted more of disparate snippets of video in a director's "cutting room" where no movie could ever be incepted.



Although seemingly hopeless and grim, the absurdist thesis of *The White Album* can prove extremely helpful in framing our understanding, and thus helping us navigate, the nature of today. In a way, the late Sixties are not too dissimilar to the world in 2020. The origins, naturally, diverge. Today, our economic, political and mental fabric is torn by a pandemic which has had seismic effect on the way we interact and in the politics which regulate our day-to-day. Today, we protest not for grand accomplishments but, in the face of their quasi-fulfillment, hassle over their details which have different devils altogether. We march against implicit biases in supposedly neutral policing systems; we protest and counter-protest what to blame for climate change; we strike to change small details in sanitary restrictions. Nonetheless, the element of the epic, of morality, of good and evil – the tale, essentially – feels just as momentous and groundbreaking today. In this sense, we are the same in many ways that matter – the politics that lure us have again become ideological and utopian, we are disgruntled but apathetic, and the tumult outside us has made us lose track of time. The attraction lies in society's unceasing and growing requirement for comfort in story – for heroes and villains, travails and salvation. Most importantly, we try to look for deeper meaning in a virus and a moral lesson in a French history teacher's decapitation – events which, much like Didion remembers from the 60s, we have become so desensitized to that “no one was surprised”.

Joan Didion's argument, is, however, more nuanced than this. The way an occurrence is precepted and transformed by human action over time never pertains to the nature of the seismic event in itself, but to a partly innate, partly cultural way in which humans operate. We are “led to believe that the future was always a rational extension of the past”, attributing X or Y causes to shocks to our environment in essentially the same way we take the movement of tectonic plates to cause an earthquake. This is, at the extreme (which can be found in works of absurdist authors such as Albert Camus), a frivolous task, cursed to sempiternal incompleteness.

Didion portrays the Cielo Drive murders as the perverted climax of a peculiar time, but which, even if momentarily, broke the curse. For the first time, she implies, here was an event that did not, and could not, yearn for explanation, and finally induced the most fleeting of large-scale silences. Any rational observer would hold it as unreasonable and unfair to place the blame of these murders on hippies or on the Beatles, or to try to squeeze out of it a grand sociological conclusion. The question then, Didion leaves dangling in our minds: **isn't it *always* unreasonable to do so?**



Roman Polanski at the crime scene on 10050 Cielo Drive

In a world of grand threats and grand issues we are told that if only we agree on a story, weaving together a cohesive thread of all the causes of our current position, we'll be able to turn our attention to the grand solution. I used to think the problem was that humans disagreed on the interpretation of the world like they would on one of a painting. Our experiences and lenses were different – so would be our interpretation. After reading *The White Album*, this seems albeit not discardable, much less relevant. By making you question the fact that any 'painting' exists at all, the book exposes that the problem of the human condition and all our artefacts may just be that we enter "life equipped with an essentially romantic ethic, (...) believing (...) that salvation lay in extreme and doomed commitments, promises made and somehow kept outside the range of normal social experience."

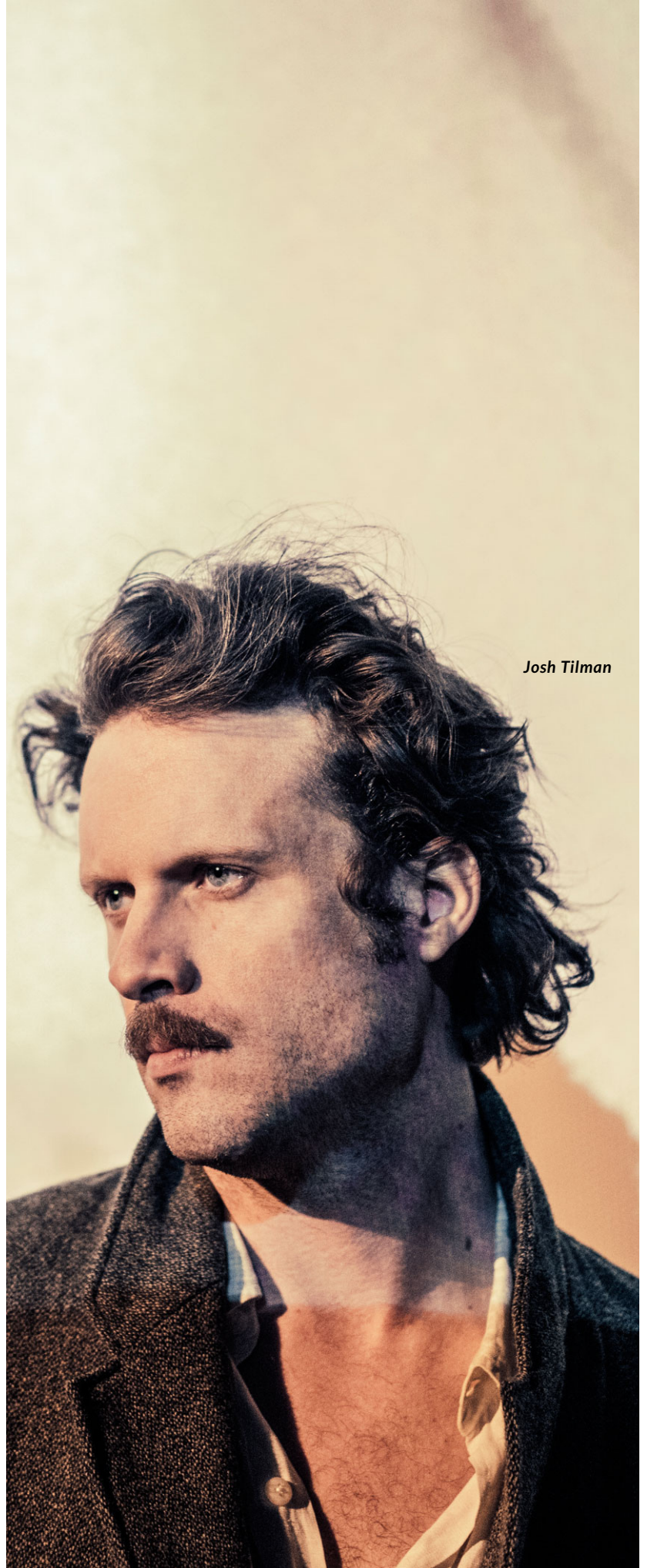
Ergo, the book argues, we lose nothing in stepping back and questioning the premises of all stories which we have told ourselves. In the worst-case scenario, this will be just as superfluous and nonsensical as anything else.

THE EXISTENTIAL COMEDY BEHIND MODERN MAN AND EVERYTHING HE BELIEVES IN

A DISSECTION OF FATHER JOHN
MISTY'S TRACK *PURE COMEDY*

BY JOÃO OLIVEIRA

Josh Tilman, better known as Father John Misty, has a solidified spot in the modern singer-songwriter elite. He has displayed his undoubtable skill in albums such as *I Love You, Honeybear* and *God's Favourite Costumer*, where his story-telling abilities allow him to craft powerful personal cuts, full of comedic cynicism and witty metaphors, yet, never incapable of exposing a deep reflection on society and the human nature, in standout takes such as *Bored in the USA*. Though the beautiful love songs written to his wife have a gorgeous heart-warming sentiment to them, the magnum-opus of this artist is most likely assigned to the 2017 album, *Pure Comedy*.



Josh Tilman



Tilman found himself struck by the **absurdity of humans around him**. We have become so deeply encapsulated in the walls around us – hit with constant streams of culture, ideology, entertainment, community, and values – that we fail to capture the potential ridiculousness of our lives. FJM felt the decisive need to point that out. The result was no other than a dense 13-track piece of art, packed with stunning lines about human condition and the elements that may give purpose to our life. Tilman composed songs that reflected on the rottenness of men, the purpose of our lives (or better yet, questioning the existence of such) and asserted powerful allegories on the **day-to-day normalness that might after all not be so normal**.



Pure Comedy album cover

To go through the whole album would be a lengthy effort, and quite honestly, a tiring one for both the writer and the reader. The title track, which opens up the album, might be a summary, or perhaps, an entrance of everything Tilman approached throughout the project. The following piece is therefore a concise scrutiny of the track *Pure Comedy*. Essentially, a lyrical and sonic dissection of what Father John Misty created – a **lucid disdainful picture of men**, taken from the outside looking in.

BIOLOGICALLY DOOMED TO MEANINGLESSNESS

*"The comedy of man starts like this:
Our brains are way too big for our mothers' hips"*

As a soft, sombre piano emerges, colourless and focused, Tilman starts off the tune with these words – a straight-to-the-point explanation of our need to shape ourselves with the support of the material reality around us. What becomes so evidently our reality, might as well be a set of empirically absorbed information, outlined by the place we are in, the people around us and the stories we tell ourselves, generation after generation to assert a sense of purposefulness in our existence. And, how often we take this paradigm of culturally self-imposed truths as the divine, objective certainty, might as well be as laughable as the most absurd comedy film we visualize in our TV screens.

Tilman develops the thought. With certainty and firmness in his baritone voice, he questions the iron-deficiency problem, after the miracle of birth and the consequent need to "(...) go kill something while I look after the kids". The observation is critical of two aspects. Firstly, FJM foolishly boils down our need of hunting and killing to a malformation at birth – questioning the seemingly inherent blood-thirsty nature of men. Secondly, there is a clear insight on the infamous biological justifications of gender roles. The historical hierarchy regarding genders was built under no other than pure convenience of the ancestors, with no rationale or genetically printed explanation to it. Essentially, an occurrence which is taking thousands of years to deconstruct but which nonetheless has made true fairness and equality hard to assert. What Tilman ridiculously states about women taking this initial position – "Ladies, I hope we don't end up regretting this".



One may ask after all, if the assumptions we so certainly build our ideas, our own little words, our own little truths upon are meaningless concepts with no transcendental certainty to it, **HOW AND WHY DO THEY ENDURE?** Comically (no other adverb could finely expose it this well), the answer is present in the question itself. We create these archetypical foundations in order to structure the layers of meaning and purpose to our lives. Ironically, what we find true and inherent to human nature may be nothing more than bubbles – which might put us on the **biological pedestal of all other animals.**



GODLESS ANIMALS

“Just wait until the part where they start to believe

They're at the centre of everything

And some all-powerful being

Endowed this horror show with meaning”

Religion, unsurprisingly to anybody, has always been a powerful means of the transmission of meaning to humans. Tilman's critique here is a more modern one, of how religion has helped solidify the normalcy of questionable behaviours in men. As a soft acoustic guitar grows into the verses and the upbeat demeanour of the drums sets a more cheerful tone, Father John Misty analysis how we have grown to assert the superiority of our religion over the other, whilst above all, the worshiped being is Man himself.

Haven't we justified horrible suffering through the premisses of religion? Take the fundamental duality: religion has served, throughout history as the glorifier and justifier of men heralded as the actors of great deeds, who have heroically and individually striven in their accomplishments. However, the individual triumph rarely comes without the cost of the failures of others. The product of the misery it brings up is the justification of poverty, as temporary suffering becomes the price for eternal prosperity (in the Other Life). Furthermore, Man hold the sayings of religion and the sacred texts to heart, never questioning its design and the circumstances of its designers, or as Tilman calls them “woman-hating epileptics”.

Resultantly, whether we are referring to the Bible, the American Constitution, or any sacred text, what Tilman points out is the hypocrisy. The justifications of the unjustifiable, the detours of the divine, they all lead to the same question – **has God created humans in his image, or have humans created God in their image?** We form the ideology in order to, once again, uphold moral and existential purpose to a sea of purposelessness. In the end, it embarks the reign of chaos – “These mammals are hell-bent on fashioning new gods/ So they can go on being godless animals”.

TRAGEDY OR COMEDY?

As the song twists into a chaotic orchestra, adorned with powerful horns, vigorous piano chords and an overall lawlessness to the harmonies and timbres, Father John Misty howls the compelling final chorus, with mighty lung-forcing energy. There is a sense of pandemonium-like inflection to his words, but never losing the assertion to them. He sings “Their idea of being free is a prison of beliefs/ That they never ever have to leave”, with rage and frustration, along the orderly disorder of the instrumentals underneath him.

In the catharsis of the whole thing, he yells: “Oh comedy, oh it's like something that a madman would conceive!”. Doesn't this succinct description portray the whole image of what our lives are? We are so acutely encapsulated inside our realities that we fail to see everything that is perverse in it, as they are everything that means something to us. The forms of our existence exist in laughable predicaments **which could be written by lunatics, yet we are incapable of visualising it,** we have no choice but to believe these illusions.



Such hopelessness and cynicism are characteristics of a tragedy. However, Tilman portrays this as a **comedy**. It may be unclear why he does so, but everything points out to our cluelessness, a crucial consequence of our tautologies.

Accordingly, we end up living in paradoxical dread – “The only thing that seems to make them feel alive/ is the struggle to survive/ But the only thing that they request is something to numb the pain with.” Whether this “something” is alcohol or prescription drugs, sitcoms or reality TV, social media or cheap politics, the narrative is the same. We crave for healing in a world that hurts us through the truths **we (didn't) choose to believe in**. That is tragically comic. Father John Misty ends the song with the plain statement

“I hate to say it, but each other's all we've got.”

As the volume goes down, and the instruments cool off, letting the soft quiet piano lonely in the mix, Tilman gives a final thought, that the only certainty rests upon the **collective nature of the human being**. The piano fades out, and the listener is at last alone, with nothing but railing thoughts and hopefully more uncertainties than at the beginning.