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'The West Memphis Witch Trials':
Writing and Recording a
Concept Album

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield
Supporting a composition portfolio for the MA by Research degree

Supervisor: Dr. Toby Martin

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Introduction

I wanted to gain a deeper knowledge of concept albums through carrying out practice-based research, primarily focusing on the composition and recording of my own concept album. Researching academic sources, learning the history of and listening to concept albums in general would provide me with a background knowledge of this art form. I could then put this knowledge into practice during the processes of composing and recording my own coherent concept album.

The album was to be narrative-driven, based on the three 'Paradise Lost' documentary films, directed by Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky. The first of this trilogy ('Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills') recorded the 1994 Trials of Jason Baldwin, Jessie Misskelley and Damien Echols who were convicted of the 1993 murders of three innocent boys in West Memphis, Arkansas. The second and third films ('Paradise Lost: Revelations' & 'Paradise Lost: Purgatory') captured the widespread national interest of the case following the first film's broadcast on HBO in 1996, with the latter documenting the eventual release of the three teens convicted, who became known as 'The West Memphis 3'.

This album is designed to capture the perspectives of many of those involved with the murders, from the victim's family members, to prosecutors, police, as well as the WM3. I wanted to ask questions of the case in this album, and to encourage those who might stumble across it to ask similar questions themselves. This involves looking at the potential innocence of the WM3, considering different suspects, and observing the perceived injustice of the Arkansas legal system. In this sense, the secondary aim of the project was to discover the extent to which a concept album can facilitate the artists perspectives and views in an effort to connect with and influence their audience.

Concept Albums

Roy Shuker offers the basic definition of a concept album, stating that a concept album is "unified by a theme, which can be instrumental, compositional, narrative, or lyrical". (Shuker, 2002, Pg. 5) Wollman notes that by the latter part of the 1960s the LP "was transformed from merely a medium" to "a potentially fully integrated work on which all the songs could be conceptually or thematically related." Wollman further states that "the Beatles' Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band is often cited as one of the earliest and most influential." (Wollman, 2010, Pgs.76-77) This was due to the album's stature, as it had attained huge sales, as well as being highly rated among critics. There were no single releases from this album, reflecting The Beatles' view of the album as a single entity, rather than a collection of unconnected songs.

Letts argues that concept albums can be placed into "two broad categories: narrative or thematic" and that "narrative concept albums attain their cohesion through presenting a more or less straightforward plot with characters" while "thematic concept albums may further be divided into those that rely on lyrics and those that employ musical elements for their unity". Furthermore she states that a "lyrically thematic album is similar to a collection of poems on a given topic, whereas a musically thematic album could be likened to an opera or symphonic work". (Letts, 2011, Pgs. 214-

215)

Stimeling reinforces Letts' argument stating that "the term 'concept album' is used to describe long-playing records or, more recently, compact disks that are marked by narrative unity and large-scale musical structure." He argues that the form of a concept album allowed rock musicians to gain "control over the composition...as they worked to create more unified, large-scale musical compositions" and that it became a musical symbol of "artistic aspirations". (Stimeling, 2011, Pgs. 389-340) Borders notes that "the sequence of related songs that became known as "the concept album" had "revealed itself a literary rather than a musical form." Borders further considers Frank Zappa's band, The Mothers of Invention's "Freak Out!" as "a song cycle with a unifying sociological theme", based on "the Los Angeles scene of the mid-sixties, with its freak counterculture and racial tensions.". (Borders, 2001, Pg. 125)

The use of the song cycle in concept albums is a key element that I implemented in my own album, and this is explained in the composition section. For now, this write up focuses on academic reading. With reference to song cycles, Graz cites Wicke and Ziegenrucker, arguing that "the most common type of concept album is a song cycle in which the song sequence contains a thematic and musical thread and in which the last song refers back to the beginning of the album." (Graz, 2001, Pgs. 227-228) Schubert's *Winterreise* is an early example of a song cycle, which tells the story of a hard winter journey, eventually resulting in the death of the protagonist.

Pink Floyd's "The Dark Side of the Moon", exhibits use of musically-rich material within an overall well rounded structure. This overall cohesiveness and completeness of the album was accomplished through a combination of tracks smoothly transitioning into one another through the use of segues, recapitulation of musical ideas and recurring themes, as well as the use of thematically driven lyrics. These musical ideas include the chord sequence heard at the end of 'Breathe', which is reimplemented at the end of 'Time'. Furthermore the major to minor chord sequence of 'Breathe' is also used emphatically in 'The Great Gig in the Sky', featuring vocal improvisations from Clare Torry. Indeed, all the tracks are about certain themes which have a profound effect on life in general. These include "Time", "Money", death ("Great Gig in the Sky"), as well as mental illness as demonstrated in "Brain Damage". (Pink Floyd, 1973) Phil Rose cites an interview involving David Gilmour who, before recording the album, recalled Roger Waters coming up "with the specific idea of dealing with all the things that drive people mad". Rose argues that "it is these things that are dealt with throughout all the songs on the album and that...culminate in "Brain Damage". (Rose 2015, Pg. 14)

This cohesiveness of ideas and lyrical material, all pursuing an end goal or message, was one of the fundamental characteristics that I wanted to accomplish with my own concept album. However as 'The Dark Side of the Moon' tackled general themes, in order to accommodate my WM3 concept, lyrically I had to focus on a narrative, while musically I could acknowledge the behaviour and structure of 'The Dark Side of the Moon'.

In this sense Pink Floyd's use of segues enhance the overall dramatic and cohesive nature of the album. This realism also provides the album with a cinematic feel. Holm-Hudson argues that these segues "work to enhance the dramatic effect", and cites Leydon's application "of film editing to account for transitions in the music of Debussy", meaning that this same application of film editing could also account for the transitions in 'The Dark Side of the Moon'. This isn't to assert however that Debussy or Pink Floyd were influenced by film, as the relationship Leydon forms between film-

editing and the transitions in the music of Debussy involve film theory analysis of Debussy's music. In this sense, Holm-Hudson argues that the cinematic feel of Pink Floyd's segues "coupled with the dramatic unity" of the concept album "combines to striking effect" (Holm-Hudson, 2006, Pgs. 69-70).

The "film editing" link is crucial here, as film editing is done with the purpose of allowing a moving picture to maintain momentum, unity and continuity. Although the content of a film can potentially have drastic changes throughout, whether it is a plot, narrative or location, it is all glued together through the smooth transitioning of individual shots and scenes. With my album being heavily inspired by a documentary trilogy, I analysed the documentary film "Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father" (Kuenne, 2008) which Stanley Kauffmann from New Republic referred to as having "cutting-edge cinematic style." (Kauffmann, 2008) Although it was a solo project by Kurt Kuenne, and filmed on a low budget, this cinematic style was achieved through intensive editing. This involved the use of cross-cutting for filmed interviews in conjunction with overdubbing from the audio of other interviews, allowing the film as a whole to sustain continuity until certain points where these techniques are toned down in order to create dramatic moments.

In terms of consulting concept albums that tackled specific ideas or narratives, I listened to "Hospice" by The Antlers. (The Antlers, 2008) This album tells the story from the perspective of a Hospice carer who forms a close relationship with one of his patients who suffers from terminal cancer. The song "Kettering" for instance, describes the carer's first impressions of the patient, who is described as a "hurricane thundercloud", and although the patients tells the protagonist that he "had to be leaving", the carer decides to stay on and look after the patient. The album's narrative continues in a chronological manner until the penultimate track "Wake" which segues into "Epilogue".

'The Downward Spiral' by The Nine Inch Nails is another album I consulted, with a narrative focusing on the gradual 'downward spiral' of a disturbed man, who eventually attempts to kill himself. The song 'Piggy' features the lyrics 'Nothing can stop me now, Cus I don't care anymore'. 'Heresy' refer to the protagonist's distaste for Christianity and religion, singing that 'God is dead' and loosely refers to his impending suicide attempt with 'If there is a hell, I'll see you there'. 'Hurt' involves the protagonist's sense of abandonment with 'Everyone I know, Goes away in the end'. (Nine Inch Nails, 1994) The way in which the album gradually unfurls the state of this downward spiral is something I looked to in my own album, as I looked at the possibility of organising the album's narrative in a chronological fashion, coinciding with the 'Paradise Lost' documentary trilogy.

The Lyrical Narrative

The secondary aim of this project was to use the concept album as a platform to express my own views and perspectives, with the use of a lyrical narrative allowing me to communicate these. This section will analyse this, but firstly it is important to establish the context of the album with a little background. The first 'Paradise Lost' film trilogy documented the trials surrounding the 1993 murders of three innocent eight year old boys in West Memphis, Arkansas. Subsequently three teenagers, Damien Echols, Jessie Misskelley and Jason Baldwin were convicted of the murders. During the filming of 'Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills' (Berlinger & Sinofsky, 1996) the

filmmakers were granted full access to the courtroom. The second, 'Paradise Lost: Revelations' (Berlinger & Sinofsky, 2000), provided subject matter for the album through the emergence of new information regarding the case, while 'Paradise Lost: Purgatory' (Berlinger & Sinofsky, 2011) documented the final appeals and sudden release of the WM3 under a controversial plea deal, where they pled guilty in exchange for their release. To this date the state of Arkansas has never fully exonerated anybody from a conviction. In order to provide a strong starting point for the album, I further read into Damien Echols' life through his book 'Life After Death: Eighteen Years on Death Row', where he describes his difficult childhood, events leading to his conviction, and discusses his life on Death Row. (Echols, 2014)

Through working with this factual material I was effectively aiming to translate a non-fictional story into a musical and fictional representation, presented and told through different perspectives. As such I heavily immersed myself within the story of the West Memphis Three. Fishkin argues the significance of a journalistic background of famous writers and poets such as Hemingway, Whitman and Twain, arguing that this background “forced him (the writers) to become a precise observer, nurtured in him a respect for fact, and taught him lessons about style” (Fishkin, 1985, Pg. 4). Not everything that happens in this album is true to the facts, but beginning the process with an immersive and factual approach contributed towards the formation of this album narrative. In this sense, using the factual material enabled me to conjure fictional but relatable stories. This came about from playing the part of a grieving parent, or a persecuted human being, with the intended result of distinct lyrics.

This particular approach towards my secondary aim can further be explained using Bormann's symbolic convergence theory. This theory “explains the appearance of a group consciousness, with its implied shared emotions, motives, and meanings, not in terms of individual daydreams and scripts but rather in terms of socially shared narrations and fantasies”. (Bormann, 1985, Pgs. 128-129) The idea of “socially shared narrations and fantasies” is relevant to the overall perspective and message that the album conveys. This is a perspective which can be shared with the audience, allowing them to share the same view. Gary Burns directed me to this idea when he argues that “Popular songs are programmed fantasies which tell stories, directly address the audience, present opportunities to eavesdrop on make-believe thinking” and are also “programmed in the sense that they are written, arranged and recorded”. He argues that lyrics “create a fantasy world in which characters act, plots unfold, and lessons become clear.” Furthermore, he notes that “Such stylistic devices as first person narration...involve the singer directly in the story”. (Burns, 1990, Pg. 129) This is very much applicable to my lyrics as they were written from a first person narrative, and subsequently arranged to fit in with the music i.e. “programmed”. This programming creates an alternate reality, and although it is very much based on a real story, it is told from the perspective of the writer. The narrative at times makes assumptions and connections, very much of my own thinking, in order to communicate from certain perspectives. This approach also aids the formation of a cohesive narrative, benefitting my primary aim of completing a coherent concept album. Essentially, this is a form of “make-believe thinking”, taking the real life events which the album is based on, and interpreting them into a work of imagination.

Burns states that his view is inspired by Ernest Bormann's method of “fantasy theme analysis” which “can be used to affect beliefs, attitudes and behaviour”. The lyrics in my album are resultant of the third part of symbolic convergence theory, which Bormann refers to as “fantasy”, but more specifically “Rhetorical fantasies”, which “may include fanciful and fictitious scripts of imaginary characters, but they often deal with things that have actually happened to members of

the group” (Burns, 1990, Pg. 129) This idea of rhetorical fantasies is further relevant to my lyrics as they involve real “members of the group” i.e. the West Memphis Three, as well as the group of people and victims subject to the consequences of a heinous crime. These lyrics operate in order to “affect beliefs, attitudes and behaviour” through the perspective and rhetoric presented within the album. This is an overall perspective which strongly questions the guilt of the West Memphis Three, while pointing the finger in other directions, asking if one or more of the accusers did, in fact, play a part in these crimes. The gruesome and detailed lyrics are intended to be thought provoking, and operate not only to encourage the audience to consider the writer's views, but also to act on this. That is to change the “behaviour” of the audience, in the hope that as a result of the album, they will research and question certain aspects of the case.

The Composition and Arrangement

I initially composed and recorded the compositions on piano, building a rough musical sketch for the entire album. Since these recorded performances were improvised, I then began the process of refining the pieces into a more definite structure, while also being able to consider the album as a whole through having a rough album guide to work with. In an interview with Paul Zollo on songwriting, Lou Reed states that he spends his “time removing the things that get in the way of it. The impediments that block it.” (Zollo, 2003 Pg. 683) This is a common approach to songwriting, but was all the more crucial in terms of working with improvised material. This improvisational approach to the album's initial creation was taken with the intention of keeping the music open-minded, maintaining a fresh perspective for repeated composition revisits. Burnard refers to John Cage's performances, “some of which used improvisation in order to re-establish the uniqueness of music-making.” She further argues that Cage's “improvisational creativity was embedded in the sounds made and played out in real time and, the bounds of the structures that branch out in multiple directions”. (Burnard, 2012 Pg. 152) This was another occurrence I had encountered during the composition process, which involved individual playing sessions of the early compositions reaching different musical conclusions. I ensured the recording of each performance, and would listen back to play-throughs that I felt worked well, prior to focusing on the refinement of these pieces.

The use of jazz and blues within my pop style compositions was exerted in order to add to the musical richness of the album. Auslander analyses Bowie's second self-titled album from 1969 focusing on “Unwashed and Somewhat Slightly Dazed” where he acknowledges a folk style that changes “with a shift to rock”, consisting of “a spirited blues-rock jam”, which further evolves to a “Bo Diddley beat”. Auslander argues that this song “reflects the priorities evident in psychedelic rock, whose practitioners often felt hemmed in by pop conventions and wanted to express themselves in longer compositions” (Auslander, 2006, Pgs. 117-118). This form of counterculture is further reflected in the progressive rock genre with which my album gradually identified throughout the composition. Macan argues that “virtuosity played an important role in psychedelic music and in a number of styles such as progressive rock...that stemmed from it”. He further notes that the genre's “attachment to dense arrangements, complex mazes of shifting meters, and spasmodic solos created...unpredictability, tension and non-conformity” (Macan, 1996, Pg. 51). This is evident in 'Robin Hood Hills', which evolves into an extended and hectic instrumental mid-section, featuring a minor to major chord sequence with distorted guitar scales, before modulating to “Michael will never know...” while a lead guitar continues to play a classically-driven solo in the background. The lyrics here focus on the victims, and how they'll “never know, That mother misses him so”. This chord sequence gradually modulates in a descending fashion

before concluding to a repeat of the bridge, with the lyrics resolving in conjunction with (“They will never know”) “That Mother has to take those pills, Every time she drives past Robin Hood Hills”. This composition was influenced by Jethro Tull's 'Aqualung', with a keen focus on the introduction of 'Cross-Eyed Mary' which features a similar minor to major chord sequence before evolving into a hard rock style. (Jethro Tull, 1971)

In terms of creating the album's song cycle the unelaborated piano construct allowed me to refine the 'freedom' musical motifs that are heard in 'The Long Road Ahead', towards the end of 'Life on Death Row, Part 3' and 'Finale'. I took these initial ideas and rearranged the songs to accommodate the inclusion of these motifs through modulations and chord changes. For example the ending of 'Hollow Abyss' which ends with the words “Welcome to my hell”, involves the inclusion of an F then G major chord, this follows the D minor seventh where the last chorus ends. The addition of these major chords allow the piece to smoothly transition into 'The Long Road Ahead' where the motif provides a significant contrast. It is worth noting here that the tempo slows down, which was similar to the way I played the piano pieces. This helped accommodate the slower tempo of the motif, while also allowing the transition to sound natural. The music here also provides a contrast with the bleak lyrics through the more uplifting nature of this major chord sequence.

In this regard the album consists of a starting point and ending point which are both glued together with similar musical material, effectively tying the album into one medium. The 'freedom' motif consists of ascending and descending major intervals. McKinney references Vicentino's remarks about the use of major intervals, notably major thirds/sixths, asserting that “the major is tense and imperious”. (McKinney, 2010, Chapter 2.) Within the context of the album, tense is a good way to describe my intentions here, as 'The Long Road Ahead' is implemented just after the context of the album is set in 'Hollow Abyss'.

The sombre change at the end of the 'freedom' motif represents despair and uncertainty. This meaning of despair and uncertainty was implied through the use of an initial C fifth, which is followed with the inclusion of an F#, creating an altered diminished chord. This short idea alternates between diminished and major, before ending on the diminished chord again. This was done in order to signify a prolonged feeling of anxiety, sadness and despair throughout the album.

Schoenberg provides the reasoning behind this, citing the diminished seventh used where “one wanted to express pain, anger or some other strong feeling”. He refers to the usage of this chord in the works of “Bach, Haydn, Mozart...etc.” however went on to lose “the appeal of novelty”. He argues that different chords “took its place” including “certain altered chords” (Schoenberg, Carter, and Frisch, 2010, Pgs. 238-239). Schoenberg's argument hence explains my altered diminished seventh chord, which although features minimal changes i.e. the combination of a fifth chord, followed by the introduction of a flattened fifth, it produces a much more hollow sound than what was heard in the music of the era that Schoenberg refers to. This hollowness essentially represents the hollowness of the concept material, most notably the legal system to which Damien Echols referred to as being “hollow” in his autobiography. (Echols, 2014)

Earlier I mentioned the film 'Dear Zachary' and its use of editing. My own album takes a not too dissimilar approach with its use of segues. While Kurt Kuenne worked within the medium of film where continuity is the norm, he took the approach of creating stops and letting certain scenes linger on screen for dramatic effect. However within the medium of an album, where breaks between songs are the norm, I decided to use segues in key parts, where the main motifs are

present in order to create a similar dramatic effect. In this essence I felt implementing segues consistently throughout the album would undermine the dramatic effect of the main motifs that I initially set out to achieve.

The Instrumental Arrangements

As I performed the piano, keyboards and the vocals in this album, I had the advantage of knowing what I wanted with these specific parts of the instrumental arrangements, therefore I was able to execute my intentions to the best of my ability. On the other hand, the group of session musicians I used could only do their best to interpret whatever information I gave to them. In this sense, Butler refers to Brian Wilson's techniques in working with other musicians during recording sessions for the Beach Boys' 'Pet Sounds'. Butler states that "Wilson would work with musicians individually, singing or playing them the details of their part and experimenting with them to create the sound he wanted." She goes on to argue that this "method of experimenting in the studio and working with the musicians to help realize the sounds...was unique at the time; a combination of mixing live and composing on the spot." (Butler, 2002, Pg. 227) As such, each studio session, from the drums to the bass and guitars featured one on one encounters as each song was constructed one instrument at a time. While working with the drummers, I found it was helpful to tap out rhythms, as well as giving verbal instructions with regards to dynamics and individual drum selections. For example, the chorus of 'The Things Melissa Said...' features a dramatic, repetitive tom rhythm underneath "What makes you say that?", increasing the intensity of the also-repetitive lyrical sequence, which features a mother asking another parent about a strange remark she made during one of the trials. I conveyed what I roughly wanted rhythmically to the drummer by tapping it out on a desk, and told him to keep the rhythm tom-based. When recording guitars, I would have all the chords to the songs written down prior to the session. I would play through the song with the guitarist, and at times gestured using my hands, signifying certain shifts in the music. When the guitarist wasn't playing the right notes, or when I wanted to direct him to other ideas, I would either sing the ideas out (he had perfect pitch) or play them on the piano. Recording guitars for this project similarly featured "a combination of mixing live and composing on the spot" (Butler). In this sense, I controlled the sound of the guitars in the DAW, and at times asked him to play repetitive ideas while tweaking this. I normally went with what I felt suited the song, and sometimes I'd take it further. At one stage, while recording 'Life on Death Row: Part 2', I asked the guitarist to flick the toggle switch on his guitar, providing a slightly duller tone, but richer bass sound. This is heard after the guitar solo in the song, towards the end. This instruction allowed the guitar's repetitive blues-rock riff to sound prominent yet at the same time didn't intrude on the distorted organ notes and diminished chord sequence which acts as the main musical idea.

Smith acknowledges "Kramer's notion of songfulness, which is... "the ability of the singing voice to envelop or suffuse melody and text so that their independent existence is obscured"(Smith, 2016, Pg.140) In this regard, my approach towards the vocals focused on capturing the different perspectives throughout the album. The lyrics "My husband standing over him..." in "The Things That Melissa Said" are almost acted out in song, with a purposefully shaken voice of a grieving parent, applying an element of horror to the thought of her husband having something to do with the murders. I found the use of spoken word parts effective in "Life on Death Row, Part 1" when I tried to express Echols' tone while living on Death Row. "What you gotta do for a cigarette?", is performed in an assertive but also in a slightly

edgy tone, reflecting his desensitised demeanour after being stuck on death row for a period of time. The vocals in “Fogleman's Folly” reflect the attitude of an arrogant attorney, especially with the triumphant singing for “I'm the number one attorney”. “May 5th” was a song which needed a lot of emotion. Being written from the perspective of a grieving parent, there are times, for example when the vocal lines move up during “How long were you there for”, where the voice breaks slightly, assuming the pain and grief of the parent. The vocals heard here are also processed with a heavy, lingering reverb. The heavy, echoing reverb is intended to emphasise that the parent is almost communicating cross-dimensionally, conveying to their dead child a profound sense of grief, guilt and regret. The Cure's *Plainsong* from *Disintegration* inspired this idea (The Cure, 1989) where the vocals are enhanced with a heavy delay that overlaps the preceding vocal line, creating a sense of disarray within its own context.

Conclusion

At times the musical mood of the album contrasts with the bleak lyrics. This is the case in “The Things Melissa Said...”, which involves an easy listening blues piano sequence playing to the words “You said you'd chew his skin, You said you were innocent, Melissa”. This song was written from the perspective of one of the victim's parents, questioning if another victim's parent committed the murders. In cases such as this I found that the more uplifting mood of the music was a useful tool in terms of counterbalancing the lyrics, therefore easing the dark nature of the album. The euphoric 'freedom' theme at the end of 'Life on Death Row, Part 3' accommodates the lyrics “They'll beat me 'till I'm pissin' blood, But I won't let that change me”. The last line of lyrics here however exhibit a defiant tone, therefore the euphoric change of this song symbolises a change in the mood of the protagonist. Cope argues that “musical devices, such as key and tempo changes, rhythmic and melodic variation, develop along with the changing mood of the plot and characters” (Cope, 2010, Pg. 131). In this sense, organising the music to compliment the lyrics worked to enhance the messages I was trying to communicate to the listener. However the unity of the album as a whole played a much larger role in terms of accomplishing this goal.

The primary aim of this project was to put together a coherent concept album which would facilitate my views and opinions on the case of the West Memphis Three. In an artistic sense, the concept enhanced my lyrical output as I was given valuable information and inspiration from the stories and materials I consulted. The documentaries combined with Echols' autobiography, providing the album with a chronological narrative which is presented through various perspectives. Furthermore the overall musical structure facilitated this narrative, as recurring ideas and motifs connected the individual songs, therefore connecting the narrative. Grey references Wagner's motivic theory: “The musician, in realising the poet's intent, is thus charged with ordering these motifs now condensed as musical ideas in perfect accord with the poetic intent, so that from their mutually conditioned recurrences there will emerge a perfectly unified musical form”. Wagner further argues that absolute forms of music can “be replaced by a necessary, truly unified, and hence truly intelligible form as it is shaped in accordance with the poetic intent” (Grey, 1995, Pg. 26). There is a connection here between the primary and secondary aims of this project. Primarily, I focused on creating a coherent concept album with a focus on the song cycle and recurring ideas. This would in turn enable the “poetic intent” of the album, which was to question the case of the WM3, while also encouraging listeners of the album to do the same. In this regard, the

album's song cycle is designed to facilitate the lyrical narrative by allowing the album to operate as a "unified musical form". I was able to further refine my own perspectives within the album by using imaginary thinking in order to establish certain opinions for protagonists who in real life might not necessarily share the same views. This generated a large degree of creative freedom, turning the album into a malleable platform for creative expression.

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