

Ben Steele  
November 19, 2006

## Rock in the Art World

Sufjan Stevens is becoming well known for his eclectic blend of songs which primarily stems from the folk and indie-rock traditions. Despite being a musical virtuoso, it may be his lyrics, or rather his subjects that have garnered the most attention. Stevens began his career as a writer, which becomes immediately apparent listening to, or leafing through lyrics. He has become most well known for crafting concept albums regarding states. He has proclaimed an intention to create an album for every one of the fifty states during his lifetime. Stevens researches actual history yet combines it with stories of acquaintances, personal experiences, and imaginings. His subject, the idea of a physical place and group of people, is filtered through a subjective lens, which in turn mirrors our own experience of people and places.

Track one of Sufjan Steven's *Illinoise* is entitled, *Concerning the UFO Sighting near Highland, Illinois*. It invokes an actual historic event, in which residents of both Highland and Lebanon, Illinois reported seeing three large bright lights traveling at incredible speeds in the night sky. Stevens begins, "When the revenant came down... In the spirit of three stars". The entire tone of the song relays a sense of mystic awe bordering on the religious. In this case, Stevens' Christianity seems to color his imagined version of other people's stories. At one point when he sings, "Then to Lebanon, oh God!", he could just as easily be talking about Jesus' travels. This song seems like a strange choice to begin this album with. It is incredibly specific, personal, and religious,

a combination which usually does not go over well with the critical, non-religious, underground scene. Stevens succeeds in many ways because the song serves as a resoundingly clear archetype for the rest of the album. He is not trying to convert his listeners to his own way of thought. He is calling into question whether it is ever possible to achieve an objective record of history. Many would question whether this event happened at all. Those present could not agree on what it was they saw. His own experiences lead him to present the facts in a skewed way. The only identifiably real thing is the subjective reality created by ones own knowledge, senses, and imaginings.

If the first track serves as a prelude to a concept album, the second functions as a rolling of the credits. It is completely instrumental. All the lyrics reside in the title which reads:

*THE BLACK HAWK WAR, or How to Demolish an Entire Civilization and Still Feel Good About Yourself in the Morning, or, We Apologize for the Inconvenience but You're Going to Have to Leave Now, or, "I have fought the Big Knives and will continue to fight them until they are off our lands!"*

The title refers to the Black Hawk Indians, who lived in Illinois, and with the arrival of the white man, suffered the same fate as every other Native American tribe. The music is a triumphant march. It feels like a soundtrack accompanying a battle scene in a film.

The outcome is victory. The horrible truth is that the victory is our own. It is the victory which enables our culture and country to be what it is today. It is the cornerstone upon which all the other songs depend. How do you demolish an entire civilization and still feel good about yourself in the morning?, Stevens asks. As it is in history, the reply can only be: without a word.

At this point in the album we come to the title track:

*COME ON FEEL THE ILLINOISE! Part I: The World's Columbian Exposition.  
Part II: Carl Sandburg Visits Me in a Dream.*

The sheer weight of Stevens' references is staggering. Often they are mentioned in passing without explanation, leaving the listener to research a little history of their own. Part 1 examines the World Fair of 1893, held in Chicago, celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus' voyage. At the time, the planners of the fair believed it would bring about a new utopian era. It introduced the phenomena of electricity along with a great many other technological advancements to a large part of the population. It also suggested a new model for grand urban development based on uniformity and grids. The tragic reality was that, however great these advances were for humanity, the time of change directly following the fair was incredibly difficult for the people. Many were forced off their land and migrated to the cities where they worked in factories. Stevens sings, "Oh great intentions, I've got the best of interventions, But when the ads come, I think about it now". To the prospect of urban planning, Stevens asks, "what would Frank Lloyd Wright say?" Along with any kind of progress, comes the question: At what cost?

This part of the song ends with a triumphant cry, "Columbia!", which embodies all the optimistic hopes of the Fair's architects. It is followed by a swift change in time signature, which overlaps the receding cry, and ushers in an instrumental interlude. Stevens is quite adept at creating moments in which to reflect upon his opus. He presents a musical idea, repeats it, adds another element, repeats that, adds another, and so on in a manner of adding and subtracting that imperceptibly pulls us up to speed with him.

Before long, Stevens slips back into the shoes of narrator. This time, however, he speaks of personal experience. "I cried myself to sleep last night, And the ghost of

Carl, he approached my window”. Carl Sandburg was a poet of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a fellow writer, and in the dream asks Stevens, “Are you writing from the heart?” Dreams often echo our own anxieties. Thusly, Part 2 can only be about Steven’s apprehension regarding his own work. His current work, and possibly self-believed upcoming masterpiece, is *Illinoise*. This song is a record of the album’s making, and a perfect distillation of the moment an artist loses faith. Stevens finds the ultimate manifestation of his fears made real in the history of his own project, and casts himself as the architect of the world’s fair, the great new utopia, with all the same optimistic hopes and visions for his own project. In the midst of an indefinite past, he perceives an even less definite future.

The fourth track of *Illinoise* is titled, *JOHN WAYNE GACY, JR.*, and tells the story of one of the most notorious serial killers of all time. Gacy would dress up like a clown to attract young boys, sexually molesting them before disposing of their bodies beneath his house. Stevens sings, “He dressed up like a clown for them, With his face paint white and red...He took off all their clothes for them, He put a cloth on their lips, quiet hands, quiet kiss on the mouth”. The lyrics are shocking, as they betray a sympathy towards the killer. Gacy is described as doing things for people, at the same time as doing things to them. It is quite possible that this is how the psychopath perceived his own actions. No one believes that they themselves are evil. Stevens even offers a possible reason for the illness, “His father was a drinker, And his mother cried in bed, Folding John Wayne’s T-shirts, When the swing set hit his head”. The story of Gacy, as presented by Stevens, bears a relation to that of Judas Iscariot. The man who betrayed Christ has forever been demonized, relegated to the lowest pits of hell, and devoured by a

three headed demon for eternity in Dante's Inferno. He is a constant reminder of humanity's imperfection; however, it is an imperfection we all share. Stevens admits, "In my best behavior, I am really just like him, Look beneath the floorboards, For the secrets I have hid."

As mentioned previously, Stevens' references are staggering. Thus far we have covered only four songs of a twenty-two song album. Of note, is the multitude of other instrumental tracks. Some titles are:

*A Short Reprise for Mary Todd, Who Went Insane, but for Very Good Reasons.*

*To The Workers of the Rock River Valley Region, I have an Idea Concerning Your Predicament.*

*A Conjunction of Drones Simulating the Way in Which Sufjan Stevens Has an Existential Crisis in the GREAT GODFEY MAZE.*

*Riffs and Variations on a Single Note for Jelly Roll, Earl Hines, Louis Armstrong, Baby Dodds, and the King of Swing, to Name a Few.*

The titles require that the songs be listened to within a certain context. At the same time, the songs take on a life of their own. This in itself mirrors the relationship between personal and historic meaning found within the lyrics. Stevens effectively invokes all of the great jazz men from Illinois by repeating a single note, if only because that is what he claims he is doing. Similarly, the title *CASIMIR PULASKI DAY* refers to a holiday that celebrates the life of a revolutionary war hero from Poland. The song, however, tells of how Stevens finds out an ex-girlfriend had cancer on this very same day.

One last song that deserves mentioning is *CHICAGO*. It is the largest city of Illinois, and the track that managed to break into underground radio. This is noteworthy simply because it is further proof of Stevens' intimate relationship with his subjects. Naturally the song *CHICAGO* holds the most universal appeal. Similarly, in Steven's 2003 release, *MICHIGAN, DETROIT* became the radio favorite. *CHICAGO* is also a song of redemption, and seems to follow the train of thought left in track four. Chicago represents the idea of "The Big City", and in fact stands in for them all. In first person, Stevens narrates the migration of young adults to city centers in hopes of redefining themselves and leaving the past behind. He sings, "I fell in love again, All things go, all things go, Drove to Chicago, All things know, all things know." He sings of this rebirth as if it is an act of a creator, "You came to take us, All things go, all things go, To re-create us, All things grow, all things grow." Here again, we see Stevens interpreting events through his own religious beliefs.

Sufjan Stevens is a poet for this generation, a generation that has grown up amidst countless definitions of what reality can be. There is no one truth. Each subjective view is more accurate. That which an individual creates, is more real and valuable than the original, if that original is still even identifiable. Stevens references history, yet history itself is a construct. He organizes his albums around the idea of states, which are nothing but constructed ideas connecting a people and a place. Unlike revolutionary folk singers of the past, he does not challenge the authority of existing powers, rather challenges the notion of authority itself. He manages to accomplish all this while remaining completely self-absorbed. Stevens' genius lies, however, in compiling and presenting. His own perceptions are simply an ingredient, and bear no more validity than those of anyone else.

They are a testament not to his own greatness, rather the greatness of an individual's power of perception.