

Anohni's *Hopelessness*: A protest against war, drone bombings and more

By Zac Corrigan
6 June 2016

“If I killed your mother with a drone bomb, how would you feel?”—*Crisis*

Anohni is the British-born American transgender singer formerly known as Antony Hegarty. She released five albums between 2000 and 2012 under the name Antony and the Johnsons. *Hopelessness* is her first offering as Anohni.

Anohni's unique and extraordinary singing voice strikes one immediately with its androgynous quality and heavy vibrato, and she is particularly adept at expressing sorrow. This has been the case throughout her career, but the songs on *Hopelessness* stand out for a further reason: many of them directly take up and condemn phenomena like drone bombings, executions without trial, torture, state spying and the persecution of whistleblowers. And on the song “Obama,” Anohni makes no bones about whom she holds responsible.

Not many artists, at present, dare to enter this territory. Powerful social forces are at work, pressuring artists to look inward and ignore the world around them. Performers like Beyoncé, Kanye West and Thom Yorke of Radiohead are lauded relentlessly by established critics and commentators for their laser-like focus on themselves and their own feelings, while PJ Harvey was recently scolded by the same crowd for daring to write about the crimes of US imperialism in Afghanistan, Kosovo and the slums of Washington, DC. One also recalls rapper Lupe Fiasco's removal from the stage of Obama's official second inaugural concert in 2013 during the performance of an anti-war song.

The critic is obliged to ask in every case: to what extent is the artist able to penetrate beneath the surface and reveal deeper truths? Or are we simply presented with the artist's impressions in place of life as it really is?

There are glimpses of rare, important truth on this album, on songs such as “Crisis,” “Obama” and “Drone Bomb Me.” Some songs are stronger than others.

In a wonderful passage toward the end of the song “Crisis,” Anohni, adopting the persona of US imperialism, sings, “If I filled up your mass graves/and attacked your country on false premise / I'm sorry.” She repeats “I'm sorry” several times. At first, it strikes one as a satirical presentation of a war criminal's crocodile tears, but as the line is repeated one can hear that the singer is actually choking back real tears. A transition takes place and what begins to find expression is genuine empathy for the victims of these crimes. It is a powerful moment.

The song that works the best overall is a darkly comedic one, entitled “Watch Me,” about state spying. Anohni sings, “Watch me in my hotel room / Watch my outline as I move from city to city / Watch me watching pornography / Watch me talking to my friends and family / I know you love me because you're always watching me / Protecting me from evil / Protecting me from terrorism / Protecting me from child molesters.” Then, the chorus goes “Daddy, oooh!” One gets the sense of a Big Brother spying on everyone, as if for their own good.

Elsewhere Anohni seeks to evoke an emotional response with mixed results, even as she tackles significant subjects. On “Drone Bomb Me,” she sings as a girl living in the mountains in perhaps Afghanistan or Pakistan, begging a drone in the sky to put an end to her life. The lyrics describe the girl's yearning for her “crystal guts” to be spilled on the ground.

“Drone Bomb Me” is a disturbing and sardonic song in many ways. It focuses on the single instant of a young girl's yearning for death. But what is her life

like? Why does she *want* to die? We are sympathetic for the girl, and disgust at whoever is responsible for her plight, but she remains something of an abstraction to us.

Anohni is no doubt making reference to the fact that children growing up in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen now fear death by drone strikes on a daily basis. The Obama administration's drone bombings and war crimes are directly responsible for such horrific tragedies, which have killed thousands of civilians and traumatized entire populations.

On certain songs, unhappily, Anohni puts forth the view that consumer culture or perhaps human nature is at the root of the world's problems.

On the title track, she mourns the destruction of the environment, but sings, "How did I become a virus? / I've been taking more than I deserve / Leaving nothing in reserve." And worse, "I don't give a shit what happens to you / Now we blew it all away." The song "Four Degrees" likewise is about an ice age that kills off several animal species, but what the consequences are for not just animals but humanity is left unstated.

Over the course of the album Anohni mounts a protest against the endless wars, the Obama administration's crimes and mass spying in addition to environmental destruction. At the same time, there is a degree of pessimism that pervades the work, clearly reflected in the album's title, *Hopelessness*. She seems to take the position that people are perhaps willfully ignorant, or they just don't care about all of these terrible things. They need to "wake up" and stop being so complacent.

As Anohni put it in an answer to emailed questions from the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I want to use my voice to break bones that I fear are healing in deformed ways." In fact, there is no shortage of anti-war sentiment nor a lack of concern about the environment among masses of people. The problem is one of political understanding and perspective. Who is behind these crimes, and what could put an end to them?

The artist doesn't have to provide an explicit answer, but to create the most powerful and enduring work, he or she must have some understanding, even an intuitive one, of the basic social forces at work and also have some confidence in the population itself. In the end, pessimism and quasi-misanthropy are incompatible with advanced aesthetics.

Anohni is backed here by two experienced and creative electronic music producers, Daniel Lopatin (who records as Oneohtrix Point Never) and Ross Birchard (Hudson Mohawke). The music is generally tasteful and well-executed, but the sound palette belongs to the dance club or the rave. It is not immediately clear what relationship these sounds and rhythms have to the victims of war or to the world's threatened biodiversity.

The problems here are not Anohni's alone. The movement in the working class that can take on the great problems is only just emerging. Only in exceptional cases have artists yet taken any note of it. This will only change with the development of the class struggle, and the emergence of a mass movement that is conscious of the political and historical truth of the situation. Art cannot save itself, but by revealing fundamental truths it can contribute the development of such a movement.

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