

# King Tuff: The Other

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Daniel Bromfield

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*The Other* is a protracted sigh of exhaustion from a character whose creator by this point despises him. After kicking around in various bands since 2005, Kyle Thomas hit it big with King Tuff, a glam-rock party goblin who shrieked about sex and weed over riffs that knew the ridiculousness of this sort of lunkhead rock but appreciated its visceral power. “Alone and Stoned” was a great song, never mind that Thomas didn’t drink or do drugs. He became a festival staple, took King Tuff to its logical excess on 2014’s *Black Moon Spell*, completed a grueling tour and laid low for a while. On *The Other*, King Tuff plummets to earth with a painful thud.

It’s surprising Thomas used the King Tuff name for this record. Though “Raindrop Blue” and “Ultraviolet” twinkle with psychedelic mischief, *The Other* is grounded in the real world. The effeminate squeak that made his Tuff vocal takes so lecherous is gone, and he’s singing in something a little closer to his real voice. The rip-roaring guitars are quieter now, the margins twinkle with electric pianos and horns and the songs trudge along at a pace similar to Bob Seger’s weariest road ballads. It’s the lighters-in-the-air kind of classic rock, not the devil-horns kind, and even that cliché seems like the kind of thing this King Tuff would abhor.

*The Other* casts Thomas as the Seeker, searching low and high. Throughout are references to some unknowable, unfindable astral plane, which goes by many names: “The Other,” “The Infinite Mile” or a place “*where there ain’t nobody else around.*” The search for answers that may not even exist is one anyone can relate to, and though the ruminative strums of the title track might lead listeners to worry he’s gone all “authentic” on us, it soon becomes clear that Thomas is just sad and tired. This isn’t the kind of album happy, well-adjusted people make but rather one people make when they’re unsure of their place in the world.

It’s tempting to praise *The Other* for its honesty, but it’s a sad fact that Thomas is a lot more engaging when he’s in character. Though he’s gained some new emotional dimensions and broadened his sound palette considerably, he’s lost a lot more in his search for truth. The tracks don’t zip forward but plod at the turgid pace of an exhausted traveler. The focus on his voice means his rock-accent affectations stick out awkwardly (“forgottayeeen”). And while earlier albums like *Was Dead* and *Black Moon Spell* showed an instinctive mastery of rock-song structure, the songs here are more formless and content to wallow in atmosphere.

Furthermore, no Tuff album has ever contained anything as wretched as “Circuits in the Sand,” the worst anti-phone polemic since MGMT’s “TSLAMP.” “*All of us are digitized but no one will be saved*” he sings, flipping off anyone with the gall to own a phone. Or at least that’s the takeaway, as he gives no reason why he hates them other than the usual shit about how they stifle real human connection. Never mind that they foster real and lasting connections between those for whom face-to-face communication is a chore. People with disabilities, for instance, for whom the easygoing pace of text or Internet chat is less stressful than the trial-by-fire of a real conversation. Or queer folks in close-minded communities, who seek connections they would never dare make in public. There are plenty of good reasons to be wary of our techno-society, such as the wanton use of data by companies like Facebook, or the environmental effect of our love-affair with resource-devouring devices. But musicians aren’t making these arguments regarding phones; for them, phones are more often a Big Bad we’re supposed to unquestioningly hate.

Why would anyone make a track like this? Does Thomas expect we’ll listen to it once and drop our phones, raw from the scolding? Does he know how bad this attitude makes him look? It’s not like he’s writing about a pressing issue like the rise of fascism in the U.S. More likely this is an arm of his misanthropy lashing out at a world in which he feels alone and confused. “*We were only butterflies, all we did was play/ Our senses have been numbed, we can’t enjoy the taste,*” he spits on that song. Ironically, that sounds a lot like Thomas’ evolution as an artist.