

# Hardy Fox: Rilla Contemplates Love

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The late Hardy Fox's swansong, *Rilla Contemplates Love*, is a circular, impenetrable album that approximates the thought processes of a kept gorilla. Or does it? Lyrics about touching one's crotch and peeing in a pool seem consistent with the behavior of a great ape. Lyrics about sharing condoms and owning cars don't. Maybe it's meant to simulate how unknowable the brain of an animal truly is, even one so closely related to us. According to W.G. Sebald, "Men and animals regard each other across a gulf of mutual incomprehension." Would an ape understand this album better than us? Or a child? Is there really anything to understand?

Fox passed away in October 2018 from brain cancer at age 73, not long after revealing himself as the primary composer in the Residents, the Bay Area-based art collective known for protecting their identities with massive eyeball masks and other whimsical accoutrements. He departed the band in late 2016, he says, citing a conflict with the more live-centric, theatrical ambitions of the "singing Resident" (most likely one Homer Flynn). This year, he released two autobiographical albums on top of this cipher. What a way to go out. David Bowie and Leonard Cohen anticipated their deaths with grim swan-songs, but Fox gives us an album about a gorilla.

*Rilla Contemplates Love* suggests a hermetic profile. This is grim, downcast music with a lot of lounge-funk drum patterns and minor-key *win Peaks* pads. Though it's hard to say how much modern music Fox was listening to when he made it, there's some kinship with vaporwave in the way it sounds like detritus gone to seed. A lot of these sounds could come from PBS documentaries (it ends with a vapid closing-credits theme) or even dusty old new-age tapes. It's not improbable to suggest that had Fox not taken such pains to protect his profile, this record would find a small following among the crowd that listens to music like *Amnesia Scanner*.

Fox's voice echoes throughout the many movements that comprise its single meandering track, filtered through a dilapidated effect that might be meant to simulate the brusque barking of an ape or the insubstantiality of a less complex brain's thought processes. It's hard to understand most of what he's saying, which may or may not be deliberate. What comes through typically takes the form of existential quandaries ("a pool serves no purpose/ it is not a tool"), toilet humor, or both at once. Though *Rilla* is light on the theatrical killer-clown glee that defines so much of the Residents' work, Fox can't resist chronicling his protagonist's pissing and ejaculating habits.

The album doesn't come packaged with any press material or artist statement. The artist is dead and tells no tales. Thus it must be taken at face value. It's not unreasonable to suggest that it's designed to confound, taking delight in tormenting its consumers from behind a wall of anonymous silence. That'd be consistent with Fox's behavior: He prematurely announced his own death seven weeks before it actually came,

raising questions about whether or not "Hardy Fox" even existed and if this wasn't just the offspring of a fictional character. Wrapping one's finger around *Rilla Contemplates Love* seems as foolhardy as, well, communicating with a great ape.



<https://youtu.be/hr8QmwJYK2A>