

# Holy Hell! The Soft Bulletin Turns 20

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For all its sci-fi bluster, what comes through most poignantly on The Flaming Lips' 1999 masterpiece is sadness. *The Soft Bulletin* is as wrenching a sustained portrait of lost innocence as anything since *Pet Sounds*, which shares a fixation with lounge music and a pervasive feeling that its best lessons were learned in an altered state. Wayne Coyne does not sound wise, though perhaps he's suffering the wounds that harden into wisdom later in life. With each song, he regains innocence and loses it in real time, stuck in his own apocalyptic *Groundhog Day*. Recall the moment on "Caroline No" where Brian Wilson sings *that's not true* like a child losing his pet for the first time. Then blow it up and shoot it into space. That's *The Soft Bulletin*.

So many of these songs are about disappointment. Superman wants nothing more than to save the world; he just can't. In reality, there was no reaction. You come home from the grocery store and the world ends. We never find out if the scientists on "Race for the Prize" find the cure that saves mankind. Yet *The Soft Bulletin* isn't a bleak vision of an irreparably fucked world. Its poignancy comes from Coyne's blinding hope. He is convinced that the universe is essentially positive and that the chemical reaction that gives us love is written into the DNA of existence itself. This cosmic good hovers like an angel over the overwhelming fact of mortal pain.

Just as fantasy worlds create their own gods and believe in them, Coyne spins his stories against a high-camp backdrop where the existence of such a force is more plausible than on our dreary little plane. It takes away nothing from the underlying emotions of "The Spiderbite Song"—in which Coyne *desperately* needs his loved one to live—that its setup is so fanciful. A spider has bitten his loved one, but what matters is that he'd be absolutely destroyed if they died. The scenario is specific, the feeling universal. This isn't magic realism. This is magic.

"Waitin' on a Superman" is so sad precisely because its stakes are unfeasible in real life. What's at risk is the earth itself, which Superman cannot save. Because we know Superman would never compromise the safety of the world, we understand how much he hurts. We imagine him looking at the disappointed faces of those he let down. We imagine the tears in his own eyes. Then it all ends.

It's possible the songs here are interconnected. "A Spoonful Weighs a Ton" tasks a ragtag team with lifting up the same sun that threatens the world on "Superman" (their success, punctuated by a ridiculous swell of Hawaiian steel guitar, is one of the most grin-inducing moments

in the indie rock canon). The same song proposes an alternate origin of love as "What is the Light?" or maybe it's just a different gospel. Maybe the apocalypse implied on "Suddenly Everything Has Changed" is the one Superman can't stop. But it would be dreary if the album could be reduced to a puzzle. I think what Coyne's suggesting that is all of this is happening in the same world.

*The Soft Bulletin* seems self-contained, a massif rising above the flatlands of the Flaming Lips discography. It has little to do with anything else in their catalog, save perhaps its 2002 successor *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*. Though the second half of that record is slathered in strings and seems a sequel to *The Soft Bulletin*, the anime sass of its first half defines the Lips' latter-day image. Today the band is something of a big-tent vaudeville troupe, at least as known for its music as its crowd-pleasing stage shows featuring plastic bubbles and rainbow confetti cannons.

It might surprise new fans to know the best Lips record is so crushingly sad. As such, it's not so easily recommendable. It's also one of those albums, like Kanye's *Life of Pablo* or the Rolling Stones' *Aftermath*, that has no definitive form. The Australian version excludes "The Spiderbite Song." Some versions contain radio-friendly remixes from Peter Mokran. Which version is best is subjective and usually corresponds with the one you hear first (for me it was the Australian one, as it was available on iTunes). But the final song should be "Sleeping on the Roof," whose title implies both a moment of peace and a stargazing awareness of the universe's crushing size.

