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Magnum Opus: A Satirical Rock Opera

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Magnum Opus: A Satirical Rock Opera

Alynn Sobolik

HNRS 490

Fall 2017

“Magnum Opus” Youtube Playlist:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTSiQDbYPtQBLGS3BnR64fFGIWLKHhKe2>

This album wasn't the first time I considered writing something like a Rock Opera. The first song I ever wrote (back when I was sixteen), “Black Dog,” told the story of a wild dog, revered among his pack, taken from his home by a man, and turned into a pet. The first attempts at expanding this story happened when a couple of my friends and I wrote songs based on the motif and less on the characters. I later developed the story between the dog and the man more in Honors 356: Writing about Animals. I finished writing most of the songs for this future album, so writing an interconnected Rock album wasn't unfamiliar territory for me.

I didn't originally plan on writing an album, but I conceded after some prodding from my advisor and realizing I had to create something “big” for my final project. “Magnum Opus” came to mind because of my status as a student: on the cusp of graduation. The idea of finishing school after being in the system for sixteen or so years brings up questions for what will happen afterwards and if a college education will better my chances in the world. Predictions come through in the last four songs, in which I return to old summer jobs full-time because of my student loans and the realization that there aren't many jobs demanding English majors. By the end, the character (a cockier, trigger-sensitive, passive-aggressive version of myself) finds himself trapped in a job he doesn't like, each paycheck used up for student loans and other expenses, until he comes to the nihilistic conclusion that his creative aspirations won't come to fruition and he “gives up.”

The main aspect of “Magnum Opus” is that it's a satire, and this comes through in a couple of ways. While some critiques are blunt and obvious, I allow the character to embrace the college culture more than I normally would. For example, the problems I point out in “Scholarship Season” and “Bleed You Dry” are blunt critiques and my real thoughts, but the songs “Safety” and “P.A.B.” side with the culture of “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings,” aspects with which I don't agree. Satire comes through here, for the character embraces these beliefs in the extreme, only to assist his downfall. The title of the project provides a satirical detail, as well. “Magnum Opus” implies that this project—and everything that happened in college—will be the highest point of the character's (i.e. my) career. Therefore, nothing I can do will ever come close to the greatness of this album.

Another major aspect I had to consider when writing this piece concerned how small events in earlier years would lead to the dramatic conclusion of the album. In other words, how would the decision to take out student loans my freshman year affect me after graduation? I originally wrote “Give Up” in high school or early college, long before I even considered writing the rest of these songs, so I had the end in mind the entire time. From there, I filled in the details that would justify this downfall. Having small details in multiple songs—like the talk of student loans in “Bleed You Dry,” “Job Market,” and “Trapped,” or how passive-aggressive behavior only worsens the character’s condition in “Trapped”—helps connect ideas and practices within the college institution and demonstrate their effect in the “real” world.

(One final detail, lending to even more satire, comes from the process of trying to record this album. Of the thirteen songs written and having the timeframe of May to November to record, only three songs were recorded with a full band. This is because I hoped the Fairhaven audio program would assist me in this project, but not a single individual came forth. Instead, I managed to record “Give Up” in my friend’s basement and “Bleed You Dry” and “Magnum Opus” at a small local studio. I’m not even wholly satisfied with these three tracks, and if three “finished” songs and a bunch of guitar/vocal demos constitutes my “magnum opus,” my work won’t last two seconds in the real world.)

All these details describe the project as a whole, but what follows will examine each song individually. A brief paragraph explains the meaning and intent of each song, the process of writing it, and expanding ideas previously mentioned.

1. New Possibilities

With the opening track, I wanted to start off happy, like my own initial experience. Excited to start anew, I expressed this feeling through the lyrics and the pop-rock music of the beginning. However, the transition of “Grandpa died yesterday,” (a detail based on my real first-week experience as a college student) kicks off the turmoil of the rest of the song. When I decided to finally write this album, I wanted to incorporate multiple tunings and styles, so this song (as well as “Trapped”) features a Dropped-B tuning, where the low E is tuned down to a B. This creates a more sludge/doom metal sound by nature, and I decided to roll with it for the rest of the song, writing gloomy lyrics to accompany it. The ending, expressing hope in the future, serves as a warning that more horrible things will occur.

2. Major Decisions

This is the shortest song on the album (less than one-and-a-half minutes), and the short length lends meaning in the act of declaring my English major. When I first started out, I didn't know what I wanted to major in. However, I came to Western with thirty-five credits from the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme, so I got e-mails about declaring my major by the start of my sophomore year. Because of my shorter deadline and "the star on my desk" (an award I won in high school—based on merit alone—of being most likely to be an author), I decided to declare an English major. I've always liked writing, and I thought a creative writing major would, at the very least, improve my songwriting. (Though it's led to the beginning of a novel.) However, the short length of the song suggests that not a lot of time or thought went into the "major decision" of choosing a major, which serves as the first problem that leads to the ultimate downfall of the character.

3. Dormitentiary

This song deals with the transition from living in the dorms to living off-campus and paying rent for the first time. The idea to move was partly due to expenses, but mostly by my undesirable experience of living in Edens Hall for my second year. I didn't have many problems my first year, but I received more noise complaints in the first quarter of my second year than I did for the entirety of my first year. This inability to play my music how I wanted served as the main driving force to leave. I also set up the expectation that "my new house will be so swell," only to realize how awful it was in "College Slumlord Blues." This song is also an example of incorporating different musical styles, for this funk-based song stands out among the more Rock- and Metal-based songs.

4. Scholarship Season

A prime example of my more blunt writing style, this song pretty much tears apart the system behind scholarships. For all the scholarships I applied for, I never received a single one. Aside from loans, I only ever received grants, a tuition waiver, and the President's Scholarship my freshman year, even though I never applied for it. I received decent financial aid, but even one scholarship would have been nice to have. This song in particular features a riff I came up with a couple years ago, first known as "The Good Die Young," but I thought the lyrics were too preachy, so I scrapped them. I had this riff in mind when I wrote these lyrics, thus shaping the words around the music instead of the other way around.

5. Safety

This was originally meant to be the only acoustic track, emphasizing the soft, “safe” nature of the song. “Trigger warnings” and “safe spaces” come up for the first time here, but instead of bashing them as I bashed scholarships, I decided to have the character embody these cultural practices. I originally came up with the trigger warning/gun metaphor in a poem, so I brought it into this piece to expand the idea. Empty firearms with the safety on was an image I thought poignant enough to state the somewhat absurd notion of “trigger warnings,” for nothing lethal or dangerous is present, “but the safety must be on.” The end of the song features ideas of trivial matters I thought an uptight college student would worry about (e.g. the issue of having a Viking as a mascot, the number of gender-neutral bathrooms, etc.).

6. College Slumlord Blues

This song could be pretty much any off-campus student housing, as most property management companies and private landlords (as far as I’m aware) don’t take care of the building unless it’s absolutely necessary. I lived in a tiny “bedroom” with a slanted ceiling in the attic of a shoddy house for my junior year, and as this song demonstrates, problems abounded with this house. We had a tarp over the skylight in our bathroom from October to July, all because of a small leak. The landlord always said he’d fix it on a dry day, but there were plenty of dry days in-between this time period. Likewise, it wasn’t until after a housing inspector viewed the property that the landlord installed handrails to the stairwells, larger windows for emergency escapes, and a slew of other improvements to make the house up to code.

7. Bleed You Dry

Another blunt critique, more sarcastic than satirical, I wrote this song based on the true incident of me getting a ticket for parking my car on campus on a Sunday, in a lot that said a permit was required Monday through Friday. When I appealed it, the institution tried saving face, saying student permits were required all hours, even though they wouldn’t have known I was a student had I not appealed. But that’s how business works, right? (Another “BS” word comes to mind...) The other verse covers book expenses, where my roommate said some physics books could cost up to six hundred dollars. Not only that, but the bookstore buys them back for a fraction of the initial cost. “Business.” The bridge brings up student

loans for the first time, which figures in more prominently in “Job Market” and “Trapped.” This song is also an example of using an old riff and writing lyrics around it, though the bridge was added to accommodate the lyrics of that section.

8. P.A.B.

This song is based on an encounter my friend had at the Underground Coffeehouse. After someone played guitar, he opened his stand-up set by saying how the piece reminded him of his Grandpa and how he could never go fishing with him because he was an alcoholic. He finished the bit with something to the effect of “Thanks for reminding me, asshole” as a joke. Then, as we left, the guy walked outside and said, in a tough-ish tone of voice, “Hey, man, I think that was uncalled for.” From there, I wanted the track to start with an inoffensive joke that the audience takes way too seriously, leading to hurt feelings and a kind of “left-wing censorship.” “P.A.B.” is an acronym for “passive-aggressive behavior,” a trope I connected to “Safety” via the gun metaphor and the desire not to offend. I also connected them by making this song the only other acoustic song on the album. Originally, I intended to play it on electric guitar, but I decided to connect the two songs on a musical as well as a lyrical level, and I think it turned out okay. This passive-aggressive behavior also comes into play in the end, where the character doesn’t want to offend or act too angry, and therefore can’t change his way of life.

9. Magnum Opus

When it came to the title track, I wanted a huge, audacious, cocky sound. Songs like “Diary of a Madman” by Ozzy Osbourne and “Hallowed Be Thy Name” by Iron Maiden have “epic” riffs I wanted to somehow mimic. So, following the triplet-like quality of the former, I came up with the main riff of “Magnum Opus,” and I fell in love with it. Being the magnum opus, I wrote cocky lyrics, declaring it the greatest project ever created and the ticket to graduating, as is the case in the end. The softer parts came about since those lyrics weren’t part of the performance (starting with “Feast upon” and ending with “my child”). Another key detail to this piece is a recurring riff or chord progression. I only encountered this before with reprising songs, like my reprise of “Black Dog” and a couple other examples in possible Rock Operas. However, the first transition from the beginning to the main riff (the first chorus of “This is my Magnum Opus”) echoes the main riff of “Give Up,” the last song. This use of parallel riffs between songs connects them thematically, so the first hint of

“giving up” occurs in “Magnum Opus.” This same chord progression occurs in the bridge of “Job Market” and, to a lesser extent, “College Slumlord Blues.” (The riff works up to G instead of down to D, kind of echoing the “Give Up” riff, only backwards.)

10. Job Market

This song features Open-G tuning instead of standard, Drop-D, or Dropped-B tunings (DADGAD with “Safety”), continuing my desire to incorporate different tunings and sounds throughout the album. This song serves as the transition from college to the work world, where there’s still hope of getting the dream job and publishing stories. The student loans of “Bleed You Dry” come back into play in the bridge, serving as the guiding force for why the character works less desirable jobs (construction, cleaning parks, etc.). This bridge, as stated earlier, bears the “Give Up” riff, making a connection between that song, student loans, and the job market for creative writers. The character still has high hopes in getting the dream job, but soon realizes this won’t happen as we transition into...

11. In Cash We Trust

The other Open-G song, this features slide guitar. In addition to experimenting more with different tunings, I wanted to mess around with techniques and styles I didn’t usually use, and having a piece feature slide guitar fed this desire. I originally wrote these lyrics a couple years ago, but I never found absolute satisfaction in them, so I never “finished” it. When I decided to create this project, I thought this song fit in with the overall theme, so “In Cash We Trust” found its home here (much like a dumping ground for lost riffs and weak ideas). This song features second-person instead of first-person, suggesting the perspective of an older coworker of the main character, stating how all the dreams he had don’t matter in the capitalist economy. Either that, or after some time in the work force, the character has a sort of epiphany and tells himself this in the second person.

12. Trapped

The last song I wrote for this project, “Trapped” features the ending riff of “New Possibilities,” in a sense bringing everything full-circle to that awful first year. This was more because I came up with the Dropped-B riffs of “New Possibilities” and “Trapped” (verse and chorus) pretty much in the same day, and I liked both enough to use both. Since this was the last song I wrote, I wanted to wrap up every possible motif and show how each led to this climax of failure. The student loans in “Bleed You Dry” and “Job Market” make

the character work a job he hates, each of his checks bled dry. Because of his grueling job, he doesn't want to write by the time he gets home, contradicting his initial hopes of writing in "Major Decisions," "Magnum Opus," and "Job Market." His passive-aggressive behavior—learned in "Safety" and "P.A.B."—leaves him trapped in a world he can't change. In the end, the song climaxes with the realization that his time in college was his "magnum opus," leading to questions of what he can do now. "What now?" Give up.

13. Give Up

As I stated in the beginning, I wrote "Give Up" around my senior year in high school or early college, which more or less guided my writing of the other songs. I knew this would be the ending, catering to my somewhat nihilistic perspective on my college experience. The song is about how I write songs that probably won't be produced, or produced but not known by the general public. I didn't change anything about this song, knowing I'd keep it in my repertoire while the rest of this album may never reach the shelves. Despite the lack or revision, this message can apply to writing within the context of "Magnum Opus," in a way insisting that no matter what the character would write, he wouldn't "get the chance" of seeing his work published. Therefore, it's not worth wasting the time and effort for little-to-no acknowledgement of one's work. I don't entirely agree with the beliefs of "Give Up," but I wrote it as a nihilistic perspective on how to view the world. (However, with the amount of rejections I've received from publications, scholarships, jobs, and the like, it's easier and easier to believe this final message.)

Aside from writing the songs, this project sucked in the long run. However, there were many folks who helped me accomplish what I did, and they deserve particular recognition. I'd like to thank my advisor, Elizabeth Colen, for helping me settle on this idea and Scott Linneman of the Honors Program for greenlighting it. Thanks to Lucas Witte for laying down the drums on "Give Up" and "Magnum Opus" as well as the djembe on "Magnum Opus." Thanks to Alex Crape for playing bass on "Bleed You Dry." Thanks to Sam Morgan for recording "Bleed You Dry" and "Magnum Opus" and for playing drums on "Bleed You Dry." Thanks to Ben Waight for recording "Give Up" and playing the bass on it. Thanks to Doug Homeyer for providing the stand-up material in the introduction of "P.A.B." (they didn't boo you, so you still have a chance!). Thanks to Peter Beithan for the photography work.

Thanks also to Jerry Daniels for his generous donations of musical equipment over the years, including my Lyle guitar heard in “Scholarship Season” (my first electric guitar!). Thanks also to my father, Perry Sobolik, for buying and helping me buy most of my equipment. Not only would my gear not exist without you, but I wouldn’t, either!

Very special thanks go to Dave Brown for letting Sam and I use his studio to record “Bleed You Dry” and “Magnum Opus.” Without his compassion and trust in us, these two songs would have remained in demo stages like the rest, and I’m glad these tracks were finished, especially “Magnum Opus.”

Lyrics:

New Possibilities

I feel unbound
In this college town
Endless possibilities in this new scene
With no parents around

First day of class
Psych, Honors, and Math
Used to have six back when I was a kid
But that's the distant past

Turning nineteen this fall
Wait for my birthday call
Dad's on the phone back at my old home
With well wishes and all

"Happy birthday
Hope class is okay
But there's no other way, I feel I gotta say
Grandpa died yesterday"

Fuck. Oh, fuck!
No! This can't be!
Couldn't say goodbye
To ease his misery

It's just the first week
And what a way to begin!
But maybe all four years
Won't be as bad as this

Major Decisions

Shall I be in the theatre?
Or maybe focus on history?
Choices overflow in my mind
But the deadline's approaching

Musician at heart from head to toe
It's all I want to do
Maybe a music major
But Classical? No thank you

Look at the star on my desk:
"Most Likely to Be an Author"
I do like to write songs and stories,
Thus I shall declare an English major

Dormitentiary

Living in the dorms was okay
The beds are small, but there's pretty good space
My RA was an awesome guy
And Edens Hall is pretty nice

Last year was fine, so what changed?
The music I play is all the same
Yet noise complaints come flooding in
"Enjoy your music" they say with fake grins

Chorus:

Gotta get outta here
Gotta get outta here

This new RA is kinda lame
Stick in the mud; deeply ingrained
So many folks living on my floor
Are passive-aggressive, and such a bore

I can't do what I want
Speakers are dusty; my headphones are shot
Too many people I have to please
Better stay quiet, or pack up and leave

Chorus

My life-blood is quarter notes
Fed to me through the ears
These Rock haters want me dead
Cuz silence makes me sear

Goodbye stuck-ups; I found a place
Far away from this hell
Dorm life will come to an end
And my new house will be so swell

Chorus

Scholarship Season

Should I even try?
Every other time
My attempts have been in vain
My family's struggling,
Just above poverty
Yet I can't get financial aid

Chorus:

Scholarship season
Is upon us once again
Scoffing applications
And money they won't lend

I'll do anything,
Legal or obscene
Just to pay tuition
Busking in the streets,
Selling booze to teens
Bleed myself for education

Chorus

Since I'm a white man,
And I'm not gay,
And instead of looking to the future,
I live day by day,
And I don't serve obscure
Organizations specifically defined,
And I don't kiss ass
(I still got some pride)
All these things factor in
When I ask for funds
So I'm not special enough
When scholarship season comes

I'll do anything,
Legal or obscene
Just to pay tuition
Busking in the streets,
Selling booze to teens
Bleed myself for education

Chorus

Safety

Diction must be scrutinized
 To create the right effect
 But the better word shall be shelved
 For I must not offend

Chorus:

So many guns in the room
 More than I ever saw
 Not a bullet in any one
 But the safety must be on

Pistols and rifles covered in skin
 Disguised to look like Man
 But this is a safe space
 So don't call them that

A thought appeared in my mind
 That deviated from the norm
 But someone might think badly of me
 So I must smite it with scorn

Chorus

Sticks and stones can break bones
 But words cut deep and wide
 This is a safe space
 Keep quiet: that's how to be nice

Comedy's offensive and Vikings are racist
 And the fire station still says "Indian Street"
 And not all the bathrooms are gender-neutral
 And that poem was just a little too bleak
 And he said "women" instead of "lovers"
 And she used the wrong pronoun for "it"
 And they assumed something that wasn't true
 And I think he wanted to start some shit
 And everything is so oppressive
 And I just feel a little uneasy
 And I think I might have depression
 And I demand that the world meets my needs
 And I didn't know I was a gun
 But college is a place for learning
 And I've got a real sensitive trigger
 So next time you best use a warning

College Slumlord Blues

Please Mr. Landlord, can you make this house a home
Please Mr. Landlord, can you make this house a home
Things be falling all apart, and yet you leave it all alone

Stuff myself up in an attic
The room ain't up to code
Loose wires, cracks in walls,
And the ceiling's far too low
Please Mr. Landlord, can you make this house a home
Things be falling all apart, and yet you leave it all alone

The door is off its hinges
The ceiling's full of holes
Got lights that don't work
And I can't feel my toes
Please Mr. Landlord, can you make this house a home
Things be falling all apart, and yet you leave it all alone

Can't take it anymore
Wanna tear up this lease
But I ain't got no job
So it's this or hit the streets
Please Mr. Landlord, can you make this house a home
Things be falling all apart, and yet you leave it all alone

Bleed You Dry

It ain't enough that I'm a student
My car needs to be enrolled
Couldn't take the bus just this once
But now I got to pay the toll

\$23,000 is just not enough
So I guess the ticket's justified
First offense gets a discount, though
So I'm not bled completely dry

Textbooks in mass quantities
For classes that are required
Hundreds shall buy this GUR guide
But at prices not desired

\$600 for a single book
Just seems like an outrageous price
But I can sell it back for 30 bucks
So I'm not bled completely dry

I don't have the cash,
But I gotta take this class
So I can graduate

That's why there's student loans
Don't have to pay alone
And their payments can wait

\$80,000 ain't asking much
Just want to educate you right
You'll go on to be a huge success
So be glad they didn't bleed you dry

P.A.B.

Insensitive man up on stage
Hurt my feelings; spews opposing beliefs
With guns cocked and safety on,
It's time he knows what we think

Chorus:

Passive-Aggressive Behavior
Attack, but do not offend
Passive-Aggressive Behavior
That's what will work in the end

"I think that was uncalled for"
That oughta get him to change
One must be stern when making a point,
But never, ever show your rage

Chorus

It's you I despise, but I must be nice
I can't express how I feel
"Beliefs are wrong; you don't belong"
These thoughts remain concealed

The thoughts that fail to escape the veil
Are kind-hearted suggestions
You understand? I'm the better man
For I control my aggressions

You white, cis, racist, homophobic asshole!

Magnum Opus

All good things must come to an end,
And my, what a journey it's been!
Studying, partying, jamming and rocking
The best four years I've ever lived!

The final touch for the final year:
The greatest project by Man
Bigger than Babylon, precise as the Pyramids
Forever it shall stand

This is my Magnum Opus

“Feast upon this work of art
That stole my blood and tears
And used them in extravagance
To craft what you see here:

“Songs that make love to your ears
With lyrics truthful and wise;
Melodies of the highest quality
That only gods could devise”

This is my Magnum Opus
This is my Magnum Opus

“Spectators, roar with applause!
But only if you so desire
Don't want to force or impose
Just know this project is my child”

I made the grade and now it's time
To leave this college town
Degree in hand, pens at the ready,
I'll be the best writer around

This is my Magnum Opus
This is my Magnum Opus
This is my Magnum Opus

Job Market

Fresh out of college; what will I do?
How shall I put my degree to use?
Maybe be a poet, or write a book
Creativity will not be overlooked

Voted most likely to be an author
One step closer with my bachelor's
Examine catalogues to see
Who shall publish my masterpiece

Wait, I need to get some cash
Those student loans are catching up fast
Need a writer? No such luck
Job market for the liberal arts really sucks

Going back to construction sites
Cleaning parks; I guess it's all right
But once these loans are paid and gone,
Full-time writer will be my job

In Cash We Trust

What happens in the land of dreams?
You'd be surprised: it ain't what it seems
All you do is abet their schemes

Remember all your dreams? They've been sacked
You can't do what you want, and that's a fact
It's all about the money you attract

You think you're free? You got no clue
Capitalism always tells you what to do
The dollar sign controls both me and you

Trapped

I'm working grueling hours
For a job that I despise
But I can't quit cuz student loans
Won't decrease in size

And rent is due yet again
The cycle just won't stop!
Each check I get disappears
Bled of every drop

Bow down to King Capital
Obey his every call

I haven't written a single thing
Since I graduated
An English degree just to work
A blue-collar occupation

Come home late, exhausted, weak
There's just no time to write
The notebook is covered in dust
As the stories escape my mind

My novel would see the light of day
If I only had my way

Exercise my passive-aggressiveness
But nothing in this world seems to change
Can't take action, lest I offend
Trapped inside my padded cage

In this lonely world outside of school
My voice don't mean a thing
A whisper to a thunderstorm
With my pointless arts degree

In college, I wasn't so hopeless
But that was my Magnum Opus

That was my Magnum Opus

So what now?
I said what now?
What can I do now?
Just what now?

Give Up

Everybody wants to change the world
You better step aside
Very few people get the chance
Don't ask why
You got a message to say?
Don't waste your time

You shout out for all to hear,
But they don't listen
Message that could change the world
It's the audience you're missing
Got one goal in life,
And they failed your mission

I've got a song I sing,
But not out loud
Want to get discovered
Leave it up to the crowd
But nobody in this world
Is gonna wanna hear this sound

Everybody wants to change the world
You better step aside
Very few people get the chance
Don't ask why
You got a message to say?
Don't waste your time

You got a message to say?
Don't waste your time

You got a message to say?
Don't waste your fuckin' time!