Album Review

At the Edge of New Meanings: A Critical Review of Flying Lotus's *You're Dead!*

Flying Lotus (Steve Ellison)
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DJ culture is anachronous, yet it is concerned with historical archives. DJs who mix, mash, spin, and signify upon various musics and sounds might risk de-politicizing or de-historicizing original material (albeit a nebulous concept) or styles, but when done with an astute ear, such erudite music-making participates in new musical meanings and epistemologies (or in some cases, as in Sun Ra's, cosmologies). As free jazz bassist William Parker contends, such musicking (a term I borrow from musicologist Christopher Small), opens up music as "sound painting": "A composer arranges sounds in a particular order, alternating between sound and silence. The result is a sound painting. Sound painting over a canvas of silence. The range, shape, and quality of the sounds used to make up a sound painting are limitless. Any sound that exists in the universe can be used in a sound painting" (26). As Parker goes on to suggest, no one owns or even creates music, as music is about kinship and engagement with sonic material. We hear such "sound painting" (like the mélange of styles that meet in a hip-hop cypher) in Flying Lotus's (FlyLo's) latest release, *You're Dead!*—an album that channels ancestors with an ethereal and improvisatory spirit to tackle one of life's most philosophically dense conundrums: death, or the experience of going beyond the horizon.

From Sun Ra to Janelle Monáe, Afrofuturism lets us know where we have been (from griot traditions to Egyptian pyramids to astronomy) and where we are going (mixing culture, technology, liberation, and imagination), particularly as a new generation of artists embodies the movement's philosophy and pushes jazz and hip-hop into new realms. As Afrofuturist Ytasha Womack writes of the movement, "It's a way of bridging the future and the past and essentially helping to reimagine the experience of people of colour" (qtd. in Bakare). Afrofuturists imagine possible futures, as "Afrofuturistic music is music that pushes beyond the norms and standards of our current culture" (Leon Q. Allen qtd. in Womack 56).

Few working DJs in the "beat scene," particularly with mainstream recognition, embody the creative spirit of Afrofuturism as much as experimental electronic artist Flying Lotus, whose aunt is the legendary Alice Coltrane. He is also the cousin of saxophonist Ravi Coltrane and the grandson of singer/songwriter Marilyn McLeod (notable for writing Diana Ross's "Love Hangover" and Freda Payne's "I Get High (On Your Memory).") The Alice Coltrane connection is important and it can be heard throughout Flying Lotus's work. Alice Coltrane was a firebrand in her own right, and like Lotus, she made her own album dealing with death—*Lord of Lords* (1972)—in which she juxtaposed her harp against a dense colouring of melodic strings. Like the Coltranes, the music of Flying Lotus pushes boundaries and finds new ways to sound both within and outside the demarcated lines of a musical genre. As Lotus tells Andy Bater in an interview for the magazine *Fader*, "I just understand that I'm supposed to be one of those people that disrupts the flavor a little bit, instead of being part of the same sound as everyone else." It is precisely in this disruptive (and productive) space that Lotus convenes with his ancestors and finds alternative ways to carry the traditions of jazz and creative music-making onward.

Flying Lotus forges forward, sounding futures and making music that uses the past as a source for improvisation. Flying Lotus first came to recognition by making beats for Cartoon Network's *Adult Swim*, eventually releasing a full-length record in 2006 entitled *1983*. Like its follow up *Los Angeles* (2008), *1983* is a fairly straightforward and accessible beats record, even though it comes from the left field of jazz-based electronica, video game music, and experimental hip-hop. His more recent releases include the albums *Cosmogramma* (2010) and the sparse sounding and critically acclaimed *Until the Quiet Comes* (2012). *Until the Quiet Comes* displays the complexity of Ellison's production, characterized by consonant and dissonant sounds; counterpoint and diverse shifts in tone and feel; and various improvisational modifications in mood, time signature, and overall structure. The psychedelic undertones, a mixture of downtempo jazz and post-rock ethos, add a dream quality (of dreams within dreams) to the album.

Unique to Flying Lotus is how much sound he can acquire using a computer and digital production tools. He often performs with live musicians (such as post-bop jazz saxophonist Ravi Coltrane and multi-genre bassist Thundercat), and his complex melodies, syncopated rhythms, and textured productions are largely a product of his own diverse interests. Some of his favourite albums include Alice Coltrane's *Lord of Lords*, Radiohead's *Amnesiac*, Charles Mingus's *Black Saint and the Lady Sinner*, and J Dilla's *Ruff Draft* ("Flying Lotus Interview"): stylistically, Ellison's music reflects these landmark recordings, as his albums contain free-form jazz undertones and jazz-based patterns and time signatures. In 2010, Flying Lotus worked with the Ann Arbor Film Festival in a live scoring of the 1962 avant-garde film, *Heaven and Earth Magic*. It is this creative and improvisatory spirit that allows Ellison to continue to cross-fertilize ideas and manipulate technology in a complex postmodern brew. Like DJ Spooky's hip-hop, electronic, and live jazz sampled *Optometry*—a widely acclaimed collaboration with avant-garde jazz players Matthew Shipp, William Parker, Guillermo E. Brown, and Joe McPhee—Lotus' *You're Dead!* challenges adherence to strict genre classification.

You're Dead!

The album's musical influences range from the spiritual jazz of the Coltranes to the progressive jazz fusion of Weather Report (a major stylistic conduit for Ellison on the record) to the humorous and cosmic tones of Sun Ra. Such a mix makes *You're Dead!* Ellison's most free-sounding album to date; impressively, the record never spirals out of control because it clocks in at 38 minutes. In that time, we encounter a wide spectrum of sounds (and silences) with more live instrumentation than any prior Lotus album. The collaborative cast on the album is diverse, including Herbie Hancock, Kendrick Lamar, Captain Murphy, Snoop Dogg, Thundercat, and Angel Deradoorian, among many others. Given his role at the helm of the fusion movement, Herbie Hancock is well deployed, and his mellifluous keys on "Tesla" and "Moment of Hesitation" add to the jazz feel of the record. The album relies on at least three listed drummers' comping patterns in a bebop style—plus drum programming from Ellison—numerous keyboardists, string musicians, and singers, all filtered through Flying Lotus—who plays bass, keyboards, percussion, and synthesizer, while also sampling and providing both lead (tracks 6, 9, and 16) and background vocals. The album is a cypher of many speaking voices in the way that the most spirited of the fusion albums in the 1970s were, perhaps what Sun Ra and Miles Davis' sonic child would sound like if they birthed an album together under the auspices of hip-hop. *You're Dead!* is a fresh approach to jazz-influenced hip-hop that feels a lot like Miles Davis' *On the Corner* or *Bitches Brew*. In the liner notes of *Bitches Brew*, Ralph Gleason argues, "electric music is the music of this culture and in the breaking away (not breaking down) from previously assumed forms a new kind of music is emerging." It is in this (re)emergence/breaking away (which in Afrofuturist fashion draws from past musics, particularly fusion) that *You're Dead!* is able to take both jazz and hip-hop into new territory.

While *You're Dead!* recalls and echoes other fusion records, its sounds are distinctive and in some ways unparalleled. *You're Dead!* takes the listener on a psychedelic journey into the unknown of the infinite afterlife. The album's exclamatory title signals both the intensity and enthralled irreverence with which Ellison approaches death. Ellison's own singing on the record is both goofy and haunting. Most impressive about this album is the well-orchestrated panoply of ideas, which are channelled through a tapestry of spirits and friends who converse together in the sonic afterlife.

The first four tracks occupy five minutes and 34 seconds and are the fastest and perhaps most intense moments of the album. The opening "Theme" is otherworldly, and "Tesla"—with keys courtesy of Herbie Hancock and bass from Thundercat—sounds like an unreleased track from Weather Report. It is easy to get lost in these sound paintings, and that is largely the point, especially in a track like "Cold Dead" where the playing is rapid and where sounds and ideas (living/dying/ephemeral/eternal experiences) merge and clash. "Cold Dead" and "Fkn Dead" both end with harmonic resolution, as if storm clouds are parting. The most recognizably conventional song is the first single from the album, "Never Catch Me," which features Kendrick Lamar. At 3:55, it is the longest track on the album, and although it feels like "Never Catch Me" verges into popular song material, the song quickly subverts expectations with its one long verse from Lamar and its protracted and dazzling outro that serves as the album's volta moment from embodied to out-of-body experience. As Lamar raps, in a summative statement of the listening experience, "This that out-of-body experience."

Like the dying and resetting of life in a videogame, "Dead Man's Tetris" guides us into other worlds. Ellison has fun while doing so, which is perhaps why we get a verse from Snoop Dogg, who serves as a kind of gatekeeper of the next world. Even the titles are full of signification and play, as in the aforementioned track or in a title such as "Turkey Dog Coma." One of the deepest and most prophetic tracks in the second part of the album is the gospel-imbued "Coronus, The Terminator," which is syncopated with Ellison's signature head-nodding drums and off-kilter arrangements. In "Coronus, The Terminator"—a title that references the god of disorder and time in Greek mythology, as well as the *Terminator* franchise—we encounter a clash with life and death and the possible eradication of life itself: "The days of men are coming to an end." The tracks and subsequent [music video](#) move from confusion to clarity and emulate the album's experience of otherworldly travel. The artwork on the album complements this journey into the unknown. Manga artist Shintaro Kago provided illustrations for each of the album's songs, which are featured on the inner sleeves of the vinyl album.

Album Cover

As we descend deeper into the album, we get more lost, and the titles (like the images themselves) are entry points into such experiential understanding. “Moment of Hesitation,” which features fast jazz drumming and keys by Hancock, blends effortlessly into “Descent into Madness,” which is an interlude of sorts into the hell we are about to enter. The following track, “The Boys Who Died in Their Sleep,” features Flying Lotus’ alter ego, Captain Murphy, who consumes drugs that consume him. There are many haunting moments in the later portion of the record, but ultimately, *You’re Dead!* is about the experience of a journey. The record’s texture is improvisation because it plays with received traditions (it draws from the past while living in the moment) and signifies upon them—both in music and theme. What is perhaps most engaging for the willing listener, however, is that there are moments on the album where we transcend earthly limitations and musical understanding through the imaginative experience that comes from giving into that which defies hermeneutic interpretation.

“The Protest,” the concluding song, makes the record’s most poignant statement, which is that even in death, “We will live on forever.” Somehow, we come out of this experience and (with the spirits gathered) are told that through music we never die. The Japanese and vinyl versions of the album include a bonus track entitled “Protector,” which effectively sounds the ending credits with lulling strings and keys. Even though the running time is short by conventional standards, by the end of the listening experience the listener is likely to feel worn out, given the heavily layered sonic universe and spiritual journey they have just been taken on. To really appreciate *You’re Dead!*, the album should be experienced in a continuous sitting, as the tracks are designed to flow together.

From the intense opening to the ethereal closing, Lotus takes the listener on a cinematic journey that juxtaposes life and death, and sonic versions of heaven and hell. This is cosmic music that is more meditative than consumptive. Yes, it absorbs and incorporates other musical forms, as does the best creative music, but its channelling is transcendental. We are not given a concrete answer to the nature of the afterlife, but I think that is largely the point. The shamanistic journey FlyLo takes us on is Afrofuturistic because it lets us know that our past contains portals to explore a future of unknown horizons. *You’re Dead!* is one of the most exciting and confounding musical experiences of 2014, and it is a reminder that jazz and hip-hop—as musical conduits for life exploration—still have plenty to teach us about where we are going.

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