

review #1 music

this week's essential reading

'Music to shoot you by'
by Ted Gioia, The Daily Beast

Here was my hunch: I expected that the spirit of Beethoven would return some day ... But I never, in a million years, would have guessed where musical Romanticism would experience this rebirth'

Up in the clouds



Father John Misty performing in London last month. Gus Stewart / Redferns via Getty Images

Father John Misty, alter ego of the former Fleet Foxes drummer Joshua Tillman, is like a character from the cosmic side of the 1970s, but imbued with a wry intelligence, writes Andy Battaglia

In performance a few months ago, at a stately old theatre in New York for a taping of the TV favourite the *Late Show with David Letterman*, the musician known as Father John Misty zipped and zagged and then some. He sat at a piano, solemn and lit with a spotlight on him alone. The song he was there for is a new one titled *Bored in the USA*, and in the video online, he looks pained and in mourning from the first stirring notes.

"How many people rise and say: my brain is so awfully glad to be here for yet another mindless day?" he wonders in song, before continuing in the imagined mind of a down-and-out fellow American: "Now I've got all morning to obsessively accrue / a small nation of meaningful objects / and they've got to represent me, too." The camera moves in closer as the wistfulness builds, and he goes on: "By this afternoon, I'll live in debt / by tomorrow be replaced by children."

It's grim, so much so as to be almost funny in a dark, gallows-humour kind of way. But it's mostly just grim.

Then he flips the script. A little confusingly, he grabs the microphone off the piano with both hands, turns, crosses his legs like a debonair gentleman and proceeds to sing again, with the camera slowly panning back. The

piano notes persist, and after the non sequitur registers, it becomes clear that the keys are moving on their own, player-piano style.

He gets up, prowls around in his stylish suit, shrugs while he moves through more lyrics that are sad and defeated, and then perches on top of the piano as a string orchestra saws away behind him. Then a laugh track comes out of nowhere, canned laughter of the kind in a sitcom. It goes on, slightly demented and layered in as part of a song that gets weirder and weirder as it goes.

Welcome to the world of Father John Misty, a singer-songwriter with a wild and wry imagination.

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It's an unusual combination for a musician of his sort, and difficult in any case to pull off. But Misty does it with such style and smarts that he makes the absence of it among others glaring.

"I'm well-accustomed with the fact that people's eyes glaze over when they see a white guy with an acoustic guitar," Misty, mindful of his "singer-songwriter" type, said in an interview last year for the podcast *WTF with Marc Maron*. "There's a vernacular, and nine times out of 10 you know what you're in for: you're going to get something that's sentimental, confessional, innately personal."

Misty upends those conventions, or at least gives them a sidelong leer, in songs that sound classically rooted until you start listening a little closer and hear all their whispers and winks. The Father John Misty sound is aligned, more or less, with rock and comic-country from the 1970s, as well as the more recent pastoral indie folk of the band Fleet Foxes, for whom Misty (under his given name Joshua Tillman) used to play drums. His most direct heir on his excellent new album *I Love You, Honeybear*, however, is the incomparable Harry Nilsson, who in the 60s and 70s made a series of singular records that managed to be touching, funny, loving, belligerent, absurd and, above all, bounding with ideas. No phrase

was immune to Nilsson's habit for playing games or cracking a joke where something more serious might be expected. No two songs would ever necessarily sound alike.

Misty functions in a style akin to that, or he is certainly working on it. So little music is funny unless funniness is its sole goal, like, say, "Weird Al" Yankovic or peddlers of novelty songs through the ages. Likewise, so little music with aspirations is anything but stolid and serious, all the time and forever.

But some of Misty's material is funny in addition to being sharp and shrewd. In *The Night Josh Tillman Came to Our Apt*, one of *Honeybear*'s 11 wordy, wandering songs, he grouses over a woman who thinks her voice sounds like Sarah Vaughan – "I hate that soulful affectation white girls put on," he sings – while also finding time to make a joke about misuse of the word "literally".

In another cut, he seeds the ground of a love song with sweetness and abstraction – "maybe love is just an economy based on resource scarcity / what I fail to see is what that's got to do with you and me," he sings. In that same interview for *WTF*, Misty said: "I'm not really a musicians' musician. I consider myself more of a writer." His songs sound like the product of a slightly skewed disposition like that, like songwriting entered

into through a different door.

On the subject of how he got started in his Father John Misty guise, after having made several more traditional albums under his own name, he went out on a limb. "I was sitting naked in a tree," he said, recalling an episode on hallucinogenic mushrooms. "I was kind of laughing at myself, this albino ape sitting in a tree and trying to have heavy thoughts. More or less, everything was birthed out of this one instance."

Remnants of that might well have played a role in the cover art for *I Love You, Honeybear*, which is a psychedelic riot of a scene populated by a demon beast in high-top sneakers eating the torso of a woman in nylons and heels; a wolf-like creature biting a baby; a gargoyle flying free while swiping the screen on its smartphone; a couple in rabbit-masks slow dancing; and a whole lot more. The CD packaging works like a pop-up book when you open it, and a deluxe vinyl version (on swirled coloured vinyl) was so deluxe that the packaging ended up warping the records. An apology from Misty's label, Sub Pop Records, reads: "In our efforts to replicate the 'wow factor' of such legendary album packages as the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* zipper cover by Andy Warhol" – which featured a real working zipper on an image of a pair of trousers – "we wound

up accidentally replicating the 'defect factor' of the same. We promise to be less ambitious in the future."

Misty wouldn't bear it, though, judging by the ambition between his new album and his last, 2012's *Fear Fun*. There's a widescreen scope to his writing as well as his sound, which steers guitar-guided songs through some surprising detours: horns seemingly lifted from a sweaty Mexican cantina, programmed electronic drums, swells of would-be gospel and soul. It's music full of manic and messy life and love, with the latter its main theme.

I Love You, Honeybear is evidently an album devoted to Misty's wife, the filmmaker Emma Elizabeth Tillman. But as should be expected, it's not a conventional devotional. In the album-opening title song, sweet and bracing at once, Misty sings: "I love that you're the one I want to watch the ship go down with," while also saving kind words for how nice it is to be "getting high on a mattress while the global market crashes". How's that for love?

"Everything is due, and nothing will be spared," he continues. "But I love you, honeybear."

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Frieze*, *The Paris Review* and more.

the playlist three more albums to situate Father John Misty

Fleet Foxes

Helplessness Blues

Fleet Foxes made a big impact on indie rock with a sound that peered back to the lushness and sweep of old 60s/70s folk, with long hair and beards that would prove at least as influential too. Joshua Tillman's drumming can be heard here.



Harry Nilsson

Nilsson Schmilsson

Everything Harry Nilsson touched was gold (in some or other way), but his biggest and boldest move was this 1971 album packed with hits by what sounds like six or seven different artists altogether. Plus, he's wearing a bathrobe on the cover.



The Source Family

Directed by Maria Demopoulos and Jodi Wille

This documentary (and accompanying soundtrack) tells the story of Father Yod, leader of a commune in 70s California, whose utopian ideas and eccentricities may well have inspired Father John Misty's patrician-wizard persona.

