

Background information for Songs of the Anthropocene III

You are encouraged to listen and make up your own mind. Music should speak for itself. Everybody who listens to it owns it. All interpretations are valid as long as you acknowledge them as your. For those of you who want to know what the songs mean to me, I have written this document. I am curious about your take too.

AGE OF BANANA

I wrote Age of Banana in 2019 to serve as a concert opening. I had pre-recorded the keyboard, and was playing a cajon for rhythm. When it was time to record the album, I rewrote some of the lyrics to match the essence of the album, and asked Thomas if he wanted to provide a 'real' drum track. Thomas immediately vibed with the material. He plays a unique composition that complements the different levels in the song.

Lyrics and music: Age of Banana refers to the Anthropocene, a time when old paradigms die. We used to rely on common sense, but now we worship random gods. We used to believe in progress, now we lose our minds in a race to the bottom. We used to follow our hearts, now we follow whoever is loudest. Blue Dog incites his flock to stand crescent like the fruit from the title and relinquish the truth once and for all. Later on the album, we find out that even though our old world is no more, we may still fight to preserve our humanity, our love, and our sense of humor. First though, Age of Banana does away with all hope and cleanses the palate for what's to come.

WE STERVEN UIT (We're going extinct)

I had long wanted to write an arabesque-like song, and I had sketches lying around for a while before one evening I wrote a poem with a sea-theme. I like water as a theme, because I'm Dutch, and because rising sea levels are an important threat to my country. I also included the metaphor of the Titanic, for obvious reasons. The piano-motive fitted the poem like a glove, and I let the melody meander with the piano.

Lyrics and music: the music portrays the motion of the sea. The lyrics go from the image of the out-of-control Titanic and people's unwillingness to act, via politicians who only care for their careers, to the image of a burning world in which there is no more hiding from the unavoidable. I had written the poem up to that point before deciding to add the music. The three verses that I had didn't feel like a complete song. The song needed a proper climax, wave-like motion in the energy. It needed lyrics about something we could do, so I extended the third verse to reflect that. The composition takes a different, more climactic, turn and crests at the death knell. Then we are offered an alternative: to make space for mourning. Even though it's hardly the most comfortable of emotions, the very fact that we can still allow sadness to permeate our being saves us from the real death that is cynicism and apathy. Originally the piece ended on a solo instrumental, but my producer suggested repeating the title, as a kind of final warning. The four-beat melodic pattern echoes the title.

HELLO EVERYBODY

The first song I wrote during the corona lockdown, Hello Everybody is nothing more than an excuse to yodel. Yes, it's about what abuse of power can do to our interconnectedness as a species, but that deeper meaning shouldn't distract from the yodeling.

Lyrics and Music: Blue Dog has worked with hoompah motives before. It kind of comes with the territory when one does satire. However, the harmonies are atypical and the inverted chords that allow for a 'walking bass' are derived from early romantic music (Beethoven). In the middle part, just before the yodeling, one of Blue Dog's biggest concerns is addressed: can we work together on an empty stomach? Is mankind inherently good or is the concept of inherent itself an illusion? But again, that is not the point. The last verse is about Blue Dog planning to arm himself and hide in a bunker, after which he yodels off into the distance.

BIGGER THAN US

Bigger than us refers to the process of growing beyond anxiety - and childhood trauma - to once again love, and to feel sadness, for the planet, for everything we have loved and lost over the years. Climate change is what's sometimes referred to as a hyperobject: the idea is simply too big for our minds to encompass. There is too much to put together. The song describes how we can only undergo, shed a tear, and marvel at the magnificence of it all. This is the oldest song that's on the album.

Music and lyrics: around the time when I wrote this song, many listeners still criticized the harsh nature of my lyrics. This criticism has dissipated over the last couple of years, due to the ever-growing effects of climate change and the big disillusion that was the Covid19 pandemic. The lyrics are more affable than those on the previous album, and the song as a whole reflects how Blue Dog has grown out of the anger that was so prevalent in S.O.T.A. II. The importance of community and friendship is addressed. We need them more than ever on this dying planet. The first verse turns inward to look at broken dreams and personal failure. The second verse is about a world that changes so rapidly that we can't keep up, so we end up being 'devoured'. The bridge reminds us to be amazed, and the third verse is about love. The coda is a repetition of the introduction, but with lyrics that are about letting go. Bye bye! Bigger Than Us is a personal summary of what was, what is, and what may lie ahead.

DE AARDE IS EEN PRACHTIG DING (The Earth Is a Beautiful Thing)

Every song starts out differently, but most start with a simple line that nestles into the mind, like "De aarde...". It is a simple line, and the song as a whole is about simplicity. I wrote a viola part for Oene which grounds the emotions and puts them at the forefront.

Music and lyrics: the music reminds me of the theatrical ballads that I grew up on. At times the language is poetic and dreamy, but the beauty is cut through by harsh language in the chorus ("economic value"). The song contrasts natural beauty with the reality that people

impose on nature. The final half-verse is a later addition. Like with more songs, I felt that there was something constructive and inclusive that needed to be said.

RI CHUN HEE

When my uncle gave me a book by Sebastian Haffner about the rise of fascism, I was immediately intrigued. My grandfather was an Auschwitz survivor from Chechia, and both fascism and communism were and will always be an integral part of the history of my family. It was also a short book, and the ways in which people are driven towards strongmen are surprisingly simple. I decided to write up that process, setting the scene in current day North Korea. Ri Chun Hee is the famous North Korean newsreader, and the song describes the process of 'nazification' through the eyes of an ordinary person who watches Ri as she vehemently supports the regime. After initial doubts, the antagonist slowly falls into the trap. This song took me about a year to complete, and it's one of the most 'composed' pieces on the album. I felt kind of sad that in the end I only needed about 5 minutes to tell the whole story.

Lyrics and music: the octave can be divided into harmonic scales and equal parts. Ri Chun Hee plays with multiple tonal systems, some of which are 'equalising' (the whole-tone and twelve-tone scales, and the divisions of the octave in 3 and 4 equal parts) while others are 'harmonizing' (standard western 7-tone scales). The pentatonic scale stands in between as glue, and to remind us of that impressionist image of the East. In a democracy, we strive towards harmony through respecting each other's differences. In fascism, we lose our individuality to the collective, and the music plays with that idea. The lyrics describe the trappings of fascism. But if we don't stand up for our individual liberties, in the end we lose ourselves, which is in its own weird way a liberation. "Dearest Ri Chun Hee, won't you set me free from the shackles of regret and that which I call me". The loss of individuality is emphasized by the last verse being in Korean. Here the protagonist has surrendered and is willing to give up everything for the regime. The song derails and ends with a chromatic glissando, after which the performer should imitate a nuclear explosion.

ELEGY

Blue Dog writes instrumental pieces sometimes. This interlude breaks the tension of the album. Coming off nuclear destruction, Elegy (a "lament for the dead") provides a little breathing room for those who want to subject themselves to the album as a whole, which is warmly – pun intended – recommended. The piece originated as an accompaniment for a song I wanted to write, but it turned out that the existing melody carried the piece just fine. The song-like qualities of the piece make it fit in nicely with the other material. The listener can take a short break after this piece.

OLIJKE KROKODIL (Jolly Crocodile)

As with “De Aarde...”, this piece originated from the title plus a fitting melody. This meant that it was composed almost entirely backwards. A happy tune hides a dark truth about our predicament.

Music and lyrics: the musical style refers to post-war jazzy tunes, and it was interesting to dive into this bar-like style of playing for the first time. The lyrics call out the differences, both real and imagined, between people and animals. If we put ourselves above the natural world, we will destroy it. Only those animals that have the biggest evolutionary advantage will survive this onslaught: the rat, the cockroach, and the crocodile. Let us not forget how briefly our own species has been around compared to these powerhouses of evolution. We shouldn't get cocky.

THE LITTLE THINGS

The Rhodes Mark 1 piano is a beautiful instrument. Though it is clearly electronic, there is a fragility in the sound that I immediately fell in love with. It fits the song like a glove. The sweet sounds almost mask the darkness in the lyrics. The song is about being ignored when you have something important to say, something Blue Dog knows everything about, and how to move beyond cynicism.

Music and lyrics: the sound is always minimal, and the lyrics should be soft-spoken. Blue Dog has a lot of loud and aggressive material, and this song explores the opposite. The lyrics are secretly dark, referring to attention-seeking, sexual frustration and being existentially lonely, but these concepts are present mostly in the subtext. The last line “I'll be there for you, although you never asked me to” is purposely broken in two to hide the darkness. The song as a whole is so sweet and fragile that the listener is tempted to ignore the sinister aspects, because “I don't need you to admit the lie: I feel that pressure too”. So let's forgive ourselves and focus on the beauty in the little things. We can't change the world as a whole, but we can be an example to others (even though they might ignore us).

WALDSCHMERZ (Wood-hurt)

Many Middle and Eastern European forest are subjected to the onslaught of the bark beetle, which turns large swaths of forests to grey dead mass. It is a sobering sight that reminds us that the old stories of this world are no more. Monoculture and other ecological disasters have turned nature into a wasteland. What new stories shall be written on this blank slate?

Music and lyrics: German is the language of the romantic era, in which artists sought to reconnect with nature. Waldschmerz was influenced by the romantic song tradition of Schubert, Schumann and Wolf. The lyrics tell of the old tales that the large impenetrable forests inspired, and how these have lost their meaning in a world of tarmac and ecological destruction. We look at our environment through the lens of utility and profit. We hide behind small-talk and become obese and nasty, while the outside world gradually becomes our enemy. The birds were recorded at 6:30 AM at the Donoperteich nature reserve in

Germany, and they get their solo after the second chorus. A distant chainsaw reminds us of the destruction.

LAND OF BLUE DOG

Sometimes a song just happens, because there's a tune, and because the music that makes you feel good just starts flowing. It is a beautiful process. Some songs take years to finalize. Writing 'Land' took about an hour.

Music and Lyrics: my producer Eric introduced me to The Grateful Dead. What I like about their music is that – unlike his own songs – the Grateful Dead allow us to project our own emotions onto the songs. Nothing is superimposed, there is no existential angst, and even if there is some, the music kindly flows on. The lyrics may go deep, but the experience is always joyful. This song is Blue Dog's search for that feeling. The listener is invited to join Blue Dog in his land, where differences are celebrated, and there's always a way forward. All that's needed is "a little love and an open mind". This land has always existed, in our hearts.

MENSEN ZIJN KUT (People Suck)

Sometimes a song takes years to complete, because there are too many ideas and there's too much to say. For this song, most lyrics never made it to the final version. Likewise, the music went through many incarnations before settling on what they are on the album. It had to go through all of the darkness, yet not become cynical. It had to describe all the beauty, yet never fall into the apathetic trap of hope and self-satisfying. It had to convey a serious message, but with enough levity not to become pretentious. The listener can decide if this scheme worked.

Music and lyrics: the verses are deceptively simple. They paint a picture of ordinary life. But why live an ordinary life? These are extraordinary times. The chorus is more desperation than criticism. Why are we trying to simplify reality? Why live an easy life? There is so much out there, and yes, it is complicated, but that shouldn't keep us from living.. There "is music in so many things, and beauty grows from what you caress". The final verse of the poem refers back to the relation between climate change and fascism, and the threat of our "age of banana". After that, there is nothing left to be said, because no one's listening anyway. The kazoo represents the existential dread for which there is no language. It can also stand for being unable to put the emotions into words. Or maybe it is Blue Dog finally being silenced by the powers that be. After that, the listener is quietly returned to the everyday grind of cliches. A final bell-sound ends the meditation.