

# Childhood Nostalgia, Escapism and Strawberry Jam

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As a kid I used to pick blackberries with a bucket and raincoat. When I'd get home, my Mom would make us blackberry jam. I feel fondly about those memories, but what's stopping me from doing that today? Do I miss collecting blackberries or do I miss the carefree nature of my childhood? The album *Strawberry Jam* by Animal Collective, is an album born from similar experiences: of nature, of childhood, of loved ones. The trippy, psychedelic lyrics of songwriter Avey Tare, weighs the worth of childhood vs adulthood, and whether the joy we once found in the simplicity of childhood can endure well into adulthood.

Growing up is a major theme on this album in particular, considering the momentous changes the band's members were experiencing in their lives. They were finishing up their contract with Fat Cat (their record label), many of them starting families, and their hectic touring schedule left them very little free time to work on new material. However, from this pressure, *Strawberry Jam* rose from the earth like a diamond, and like a diamond, the album colourfully reflects the inner lives of the band's members, and refracts the strangeness of life through the band's own surrealist lens.

The song "Derek" is about member Noah Lennox's old dog, and all the things he learned about responsibility and taking care of others from owning that dog. Lennox, who at the time of writing this song was still grappling with the early stages of fatherhood, uses this subject matter to process these emotions, expressing anxiety about the future and whether or not he'll be a good enough Dad. Lennox expresses some regret about how he neglected his dog sometimes, but ultimately resolves to not repeat that mistake with his daughter. The backing instrumental is soothing and provides some respite from the darker moments of the album. In an interview with FACT Magazine, Deakin says that they wanted "Derek" to be a nice send off for the listeners. I think this makes sense considering how heartbreaking the preceding song, Cuckoo Cuckoo, is.

The opening track, "Peacebone" has the following line:

"And just a few things are related to the old times  
Then we did believe in magic and we didn't die".

Avey Tare, whose real name is Dave Portner, reflects on the fantastical and consequence-free nature of childhood, when he believed in magic and death was far from his mind. It could also mean that the transition into adulthood for most signals the death of one's inner-child, as they grasp with the responsibilities of adulthood. This idea recurs in "Cuckoo Cuckoo", which begins with the twice repeated line, "How I lost my boy", the "boy" possibly referring to Portner's inner child. The song goes on to describe an afterlife in which Portner sings from the perspective of a dead person. "Life was good, now death's all wrong." This line is interesting because a lot of the album expresses a nostalgia for childhood and a dissatisfaction with adult life. It's as if Portner is

realising that life is still beautiful in spite of this. In fact, I would go as far to say that the song could be read as an allegory for depression. The line:

"Cause you can't feel a thing  
No heart flutters in late spring  
You just drift and pray  
For sun-kissed golden days"

describes the experience of being dead in the world of this song, but could also describe the apathy that one feels when depressed, unable to experience the simple joys of life that others can. Depression also manifests itself as feeling alienated from others. The concept of being unable to interact with others or the physical world conveys this feeling quite well. However, the song's emotional core is the narrator's realisation that life is beautiful and worth living, despite all the dissatisfaction expressed in the preceding tracks. The following song "Derek", represents a second chance, of life after death.

The track "#1" is a strange, psychedelic odyssey, capturing the unique bond between father and son. Avey Tare sings from the perspective of the father, whose vocals are run through a chain of maddening audio effects, creating a voice that sounds alien and flute-like. Contrast this with the reassuring, fatherly lyrics that ooze from it, the song is equal parts absurd, off putting and heartwarming. "Now son.." is the interrupted line that Tare sings in the intro and chorus. Noah sings the response, "I want mine", as if cutting off his father in argument. Noah's voice is higher-pitched and more boyish, representing the son in this familial argument. The father wishes

to impart wisdom and enforce authority on his son. The son wants independence and to be treated as a grown up. He wants his own lot in life.

"It seems like days since you rejected  
Your mom and I  
Will help you dance through your bad weather...  
Young love is fine  
Just please respect the candles as they line"

In spite of the son's conflict with his parents, they will always be there for him through thick and thin; such is the role of being a parent. His parents understand that as an adolescent he will have feelings for others, but asks him to act his age. In other words; "respect the candles as they line". This could be a reference to sex or drugs or other experiences that usually come later with life and are often discouraged by parents of teenagers. The 2nd verse describes a father offering advice to his now adult son.

"I know there will be times  
You wonder why it can't stay simple"

This "simplicity" is a reference to childhood, as adulthood often comes with many responsibilities, an idea expressed many times throughout the album. In the song "Chores", Panda Bear stresses, "I only want the time/To do one thing that I like", that thing being the adolescent urge to get very "stoned" and take a walk in the "light drizzle" of the evening. Compared to childhood, adulthood is a time of stress and unhappiness.

But back to #1...Avey references the things parents do for their children in the following line:

"Your mom and I  
To pet your head and dress your lettuce".

These are things we take for granted when we are young but quickly long for once we reach adulthood. Throughout Strawberry Jam, Avey Tare expresses a desire to return to his childhood. As Tare puts it on the song "For Reverend Green", "A lucky child don't know how lucky she is". Perhaps #1 is a way of comforting his own anxieties about growing up, and in turn the listener's. The father leaves his son with this advice;

"Don't work all night,  
And split your hair and sleep on numbers."

The phrase "split your hair", a likely reference to the loss of hair that results from stress, in this case, the stresses of financial independence and adulthood. In contrast to the earlier line of, "Young love is fine", it becomes "Young love is bright", now that the father believes his son is old enough for that to be a priority. It also stresses the importance of pursuing things of immaterial value like love and relationships, as opposed to "numbers", a sentiment expressed in one of the band's most popular songs "My Girls" off of their follow-up album Merriweather Post Pavilion. Overall, the song represents a common struggle between father and son; the son growing up fast and wanting to be treated more like an adult and the father urging him to be

patient. This is contrasted with an image of the son as an adult in the second verse, who now misses the simplicity of his childhood; his father offering him advice in both stages of his life.

Childhood nostalgia is not the only form of escapism explored on this album. The song "Winter Wonderland" explores the dichotomy of optimism and pessimism. The song describes the fantasyland of an inanimate deer figure. The deer describes its bleak physical reality:

"Mould of the fawn  
I have been frozen here for days  
With headlights reflecting in my face  
I must be cold on your lawn"

The deer then describes the fantasyland it's created as a way of escapism.

"But inside I'm okay  
I can live without your time  
Where snowmen never melt  
Instead they always shine"

The inanimate figure of the fawn is imagined as having its own imagination where it lives outside of reality and instead, inside of its very own "Winter Wonderland". The song also represents the desire to construct a perfect world in our imaginations in which it can't be tainted by the sometimes depressing reality in which we live.

"If you don't believe in fantasy then don't believe in fantasy

But do you not believe in fantasy because it gets you down"

This line confronts the pessimist who puts others down, either for having unrealistic expectations or using fantasy to cope with the unforgiving nature of reality. However, the following line criticises those of a blindly optimistic nature:

"If you don't believe it's raining I won't tell you that it's raining

But do you not believe it's raining because it gets you down"

The person being addressed here is someone who refuses to accept the reality of a situation just because it's not desirable. These opposing lyrics can be seen as a reminder to always keep one foot in reality, but also not to neglect the benefits of imagination.

I find that the takeaway of this album is to appreciate life for all its worth, and to embrace adulthood as a natural part of life, instead of longing for the carefree days of childhood.

However, the album also encourages the listener to retain their childlike traits and not become overly-materialistic and disillusioned.