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THE POP MUSIC REVIEW

Elvis Dreams of 9/11

And other brilliantly strange concoctions from the elusive pop genius Scott Walker.

By [Ben Williams](#)



Courtesy of Beggars Group. Illustration by Anders Mutzenbacher.)

On *The Rising*, Bruce Springsteen wrote about 9/11 from the point of view of firefighters and horrified bystanders. Toby Keith ("Courtesy of the Red, White, & Blue [The Angry American]"), Neil Young ("Let's Roll"), and the Wu-Tang Clan ("Rules") gave us the outraged, ass-kicking-patriot perspective. The Beastie Boys ("An Open Letter to NYC") rallied to celebrate New York. Scott Walker writes about 9/11 as a nightmare Elvis Presley is having.

On "Jesse," the third track on Walker's new album, *The Drift*, Elvis is sitting on the Memphis prairie in the moonlight,

talking aloud to his stillborn twin brother, Jesse—as he would often do “in times of loneliness and despair,” according to Walker’s sleeve notes. Elvis is dreaming about the planes smashing into the Towers.

It starts with an ominous drone. A bass guitar throbs darkly (which, says Walker, represents the planes approaching). Then Walker slowly, deliberately whispers, “Pow, pow” (which, he says, represents the planes hitting the Towers). A disembodied guitar riff from “Jailhouse Rock” floats menacingly. Drums never arrive. At last, Walker floats into the song with his deep, rich baritone: “Nose holes caked in black cocaine . . .”

(“Pow!”)

(“Pow!”)

After six more minutes, and images of Elvis crawling around on his hands and knees, “smoothing out the prairie / All the dent and the gouges,” the music dies, and he’s left wailing: “Alive / I’m the only one / Left alive / I’m the only one / Left alive.”

It is devastating. And, against the odds, convincing: By the end of “Jesse,” Walker has somehow fused his unlikely subjects. You imagine the Towers as a stillborn twin: the ultimate phantom limb, an ever-present void in the skyline, an ache that never goes away.

Walker, who is 63, has one of the greatest voices in pop history, and in his younger days, when he battled orchestras as part of the sixties pop group the Walker Brothers, he was not afraid to use it. What he has lost—not much—in fullness over the years, he has more than compensated for by developing a unique, quasi-operatic style. He will twist a word, and a line, inside out, stretching vowels, leaving syllables to die in the air, gliding imperceptibly up and down his register. It is theatrical, designed to wring shades of meaning from diamond-hard lyric fragments. And also purely musical—if meaning remains elusive, and it often does, well, confusion still sounds gorgeous.

If it is rare to find artists working at their creative peak into their sixties, it is rarer still to find one releasing his most radical work yet. *The Drift* is Walker’s first album in ten years and third in 30, after 1984’s *Climate of Hunter* and 1995’s *Tilt*. It will be followed by a documentary, *Scott Walker: 30 Century Man*, in which everyone from Radiohead to Brian Eno lines up to sing his praises. This extraordinary trilogy exists entirely in Walker’s own, self-invented musical world, and it is not an easy world to enter. The music is dark, velvety, and almost motionless, yet full of tension. Sometimes, it sounds like an aria; at others, like industrial noise.

On *The Drift*, Walker has pared this sound to the point where he barely needs melody anymore. Instead, there are whirring synthesizers, great orchestral blocks of sound, noises of unknown provenance—a recent BBC interview showed studio technicians whacking a great side of meat—a donkey braying, and, at one point, a malevolently quacking Donald Duck. Yet this is not experimentation for experimentation’s sake. Everything Walker does has a purpose, and his songs unfold like carefully scripted dramas, even if we’re not sure what the plot is.

It has taken him a long time to get here. The Walker Brothers left Los Angeles to make it big in England in 1965, as American acts felt compelled to do for a couple of years in the wake of the Beatles. They succeeded on the back of a Spector-esque wall of orchestrated sound: “The Sun Ain’t Gonna Shine Anymore” remains a pop classic.

Teenybopper stardom didn’t suit, and in 1967, Walker went solo, discovered Jacques Brel, and released a string of albums—*Scotts 1* through *4*—that reinvented his persona as an existential balladeer. Listening to these records, you picture him wandering the boulevards of Europe, talking about avant-garde film and literature in cafés, obsessively analyzing his last

affair even as he begins the next.

If that sounds overripe, often it was. In order to enjoy this music, you need to develop a taste for sweeping string arrangements, plaintive reed instruments, and maudlin self-dramatization. *Scott 4* is the cult object (the first real sign of Walker's experimental ambitions, it tanked), but *Scott 3* is the best and most balanced of these albums. The buzzing strings on "It's Raining Today" sound like a Bernard Herrmann Hitchcock score.

Walker's philosophical leanings meant he occasionally succumbed to pretentiousness, but they were also what made him more than just another crooner abusing the great American songbook all the way to Vegas. Which is pretty much what he became in the following decade, releasing a string of mediocre cover albums that dipped into country and cabaret.

It was not until 1978 that he picked up the threads from *Scott 4* songs like "Angels of Ashes" and "Boy Child"—fragile, lambent otherworldly—on the ill-fated Walker Brothers reunion, *Nite Flights*. "The Electrician," in particular, prefigured his later work. Again, those psycho-movie strings, now wedded to an ominous bass line and a lyric about an executioner in South Africa sung in a sluggish slur: "If I jerk the handle / You'll die in your dreams / If I jerk the handle / Jerk the handle / You'll thrill me and thrill me and thrill me."

Two things happened here. First, Walker ditched his doomed romantic persona and started writing characters. This was crucial: It allowed him to retain his tragic mood while divorcing it from self-indulgence. Secondly, he began to write about the world as a horror show—the first Iraq war ("Patriot [A Single]"), the Holocaust ("The Cockfighter"), drugs ("Dealer"), and, on *The Drift*, the public stringing up of Mussolini ("Clara").

This is not the commemorative, self-glorifying style of "political music" practiced by U2, or even the empathetic reportage of Springsteen. Instead, Walker speaks from inside the events he writes about. If he sings about an executioner, he sings about the turn-on of killing someone. If he sings about a junkie, he verbalizes the drug experience. And makes it sound like an agonized rhapsody.

Without Walker's occasional hints, we might have no idea what any of these songs refer to. Even when we do, much remains opaque. Yet this is what makes them more than simply topical. The images burrow down into your subconscious anyway. Mystery is part of the point.

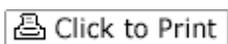
It's also part of the persona. In that BBC interview, Walker's interlocutor peppered him with variations on "You're a bit of a weird recluse, aren't you?" Walker responded with infinite calm and sanity. He chooses to retreat behind the work, to resist autobiography. In an age where branding your personality is the preferred art form, he couldn't be more out of time.

The Drift

Scott Walker. 4AD. May 9.

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