

ARCADE FIRE



"I'm living in an age that calls darkness light"

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Personal introduction

In my book, Arcade Fire are not only the single greatest rock giant act of the 2000s — it is not at all excluded that they might be the very last rock giant act, *period*. If this is exaggeration, count me happy; if it is not, do not count me sorry, because there is no better candidate than the pompous, over-the-top, sincere-yet-sarcastic tragism of Arcade Fire to draw the final canonical curtain over the rock age of music.

As is often the case with me, I was quite late to the party: heard **Funeral** for the first time around 2008, was not overtly impressed for the first couple of listens, «got it» eventually, wrote a fairly positive, but not gushing, first review, and went on to other tasks. It was not really until the world at large caught the Arcade Fire virus after the release of **The Suburbs** that it gradually dawned on me how near-perfect **Funeral** was, and how these guys' music is the precise embodiment of all the high hopes and cynical disillusionments of the early 21st century at the same time. This is not the most common feeling in the world — there are still plenty of people out there wondering what all the fuss is, including people with generally immaculate taste, and it is unlikely that for those people my words will make any difference. But here goes nothing.

Genre-wise, what Arcade Fire essentially did was take the stylistics of «post-rock» (in the vein of their own Canadian predecessors and mentors God Speed You! Black Emperor) and re-integrate it back into a traditional rock setting — creating powerful, bombastic, multi-layered and simultaneously minimalistic soundscapes that had time limits, lyrics, verses, and choruses. In doing so, they were obviously not alone: this was quite a popular movement in the mid-2000s that spawned not a few decent bands (remember British Sea Power?). What separated them from the rest was a sincere desire to make all the pomp *matter* — to hunt for that feeling of collective catharsis uniting the artist with the listeners, the kind of vibe that was never properly captured by the overtly willing Pete Townshend, but later found itself in the pockets of Bruce Springsteen and U2 at the expense of gaining them much despal and mockery from the self-appointed highbrow end of musical audiences (myself included).

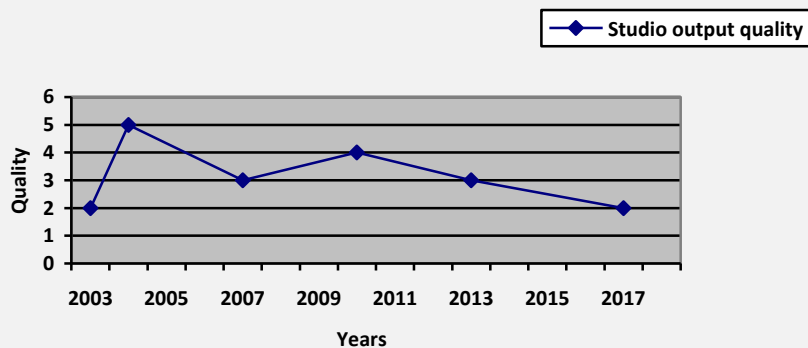
I must say, though, that in that particular respect Arcade Fire have advanced further than either U2 or Springsteen (both of whom are obvious spiritual influences), despite never hoping to even begin matching their commercial success. This has to do with Win Butler being a more «modern» lyricist, as his phrasing tends to avoid anthemic clichés; with the entire band being very cautious about *not* emulating stereotypical «arena-rock god» postures and attitudes; and, most importantly, with the deep psychologism of the music — Butler, like the already mentioned Townshend, has a great knack for flawlessly merging intimately personal stuff with cosmic universalism, a talent that makes even the band's loudest anthems such as 'Wake Up' double-time as strictly personal prayers. This, perhaps, is the key: the fact that Win Butler's personality (as well as that of his colleague, wife, and muse Regine Chassagne, whenever she takes the lead) is never dissolved in Arcade Fire's ocean of sound, but manages to float atop it, carefully supported and amplified by the massive sonic waves — and, in turn, inseminating them with its own thoughts and feelings.

It is, perhaps, the general curse of the 21st century that with all these virtues, Arcade Fire have been nowhere near consistent. Having (as of 2019) released five albums in fifteen years, they managed to evolve, but never managed to surpass or even match the general quality of their

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masterpiece, **Funeral**. Some of the specific reasons for this will be outlined in the reviews below, but the main reason, I think, is that Arcade Fire pretty much said all they had to say in their first two years of existence — almost everything since has largely consisted of saying it over and over again in slightly different ways, ranging from passable to questionable (particularly with them falling in on the common trend of newfound love for Eighties' electropop). **Funeral** offered us both a brilliant summary of everything that might be wrong with the world today *and* some recommendations on how to make changes — no wonder, then, that with the same problems persisting and the recommendations largely unheeded the band's latest offering, **Everything Now**, discusses the same problems and offers the same solutions, only in a much less enthusiastic and a much more clichéd manner.

No matter, though. Even if Arcade Fire had never recorded anything except for **Funeral** (though, arguably, you could probably make a compilation playlist from all their other albums that could *almost* match the quality of **Funeral**), they would still be the quintessential 2000s band for me just on the strength of that one masterpiece. But remember that, in order to «get it», you *probably* have to be able to make room in your heart for both the romantic and the cynic, both the futurist and the traditionalist, both the passionate young enthusiast and the grumpy old whiner. I am not sure myself how this band has managed to honor both these sides for so long — but perhaps it is precisely this balance that has kept them up on their feet so far.






ARCADE FIRE (2003)

1) Old Flame; 2) I'm Sleeping In A Submarine; 3) **No Cars Go**; 4) The Woodland National Anthem; 5) My Heart Is An Apple; 6) **Headlights Look Like Diamonds**; 7) Vampire / Forest Fire.



 ['Headlights Look Like Diamonds'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Humble lo-fi beginnings by a band that has already discovered honesty and sincerity, but not power and energy.*

Nobody remembers much about Arcade Fire's humbly self-titled EP debut from 2003 — for quite a good reason: there is very little here to suggest that, in less than a year from then, they would begin topping critical lists and gain recognition as the musical (and perhaps even spiritual) saviors of their generation. Most of the key ingredients of their classic sound are already present — Win Butler's shy, paranoid, bullied-boy-takes-last-stand-in-the-corner vocals; Regine Chassagne's naughty-excited-girl-defying-prescription stabs at singing above and beyond her range; multi-layered arrangements where each instrument plays something that is as tremendously enthusiastic as it is tremendously simplistic; and, of course, that starry-eyed idealism which penalizes you for daring to borrow from your ancestors in a smartass-ironic post-modernistic manner (although it is still permitted to maintain your sense of humor as long as it comes packaged together with a solid dose of catharsis).

The difference is that these seven tracks are very clearly tentative. The best way to ascertain this is to compare the original version of 'No Cars Go' — easily already the most memorable track here — with its masterful reworking on **Neon Bible**, where it happens to be just one out of several highlights. The lo-fi production (everything was recorded in some cheap barn somewhere in Maine) is violently at odds with the band's already towering ambitions, and does not allow the senses to be properly overwhelmed; nor is the barely-in-tune accordeon capable of stirring up the same emotions as the corresponding strings on **Neon Bible** (actually, the lack of strings on this EP is one of the few really important differences: the addition of Sarah Neufeld and other string players for the **Funeral** sessions may just have been *the* move to propel the band to absolute uncompromising greatness).

God only knows how many of the other tracks could benefit this much from being re-recorded a few years later; my own personal bet is on 'Headlights Look Like Diamonds', the first of many orgasmic tour-de-forces from Regine Chassagne, whose half-lulling, half-howling harmony line deserves a whole lot more vibrations out of your speakers, and whose depiction of the loving relationship between the band's founders defines the kind of «atypical romanticism» to which we have since become so used from these guys.

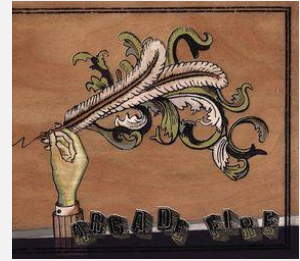
On the other hand, several other songs sound like un-fleshed and, possibly, un-fleshable demos, hardly enough to convince the hardened skeptic about the capacities of indie rock in any setting: 'The Woodland National Anthem' is more like 'The Ragged March Cat Anthem' with the appropriate musical accompaniment from a band of drunken hobos, and the closing 7-minute number works out the style, but not the essence of true anthems-to-come like 'Power Out' and 'Rebellion (Lies)'. The songs just do not bother to find the proper underpinning musical hook, or do not take

enough care with the musical buildup, or just do not hold that rhythm nearly as steadily as they would eventually be able to. Most importantly, the band simply does not have the proper *muscle* here — much too often, they sound like a loose band of friends, hugging a couple acoustic guitars and an accordeon around the campfire, generating enough fun to warm themselves, but hardly enough to infect everybody else. And as much as I might be a sucker for sincerity and earnestness, overdoing this at the expense of musical ideas or sonic power can be annoying — Win's "I'll admit I'm full of shit / That's how I know I love you" ('My Heart Is An Apple') could be a great couple of lines, but not in the context of a limp, lo-fi acoustic ballad whose tearjerking potential could never be redeemed with such an arrangement.

In short, **Arcade Fire** is not so much a proper debut as a bit of a training camp, and, in retrospect, should not be anybody's first point of acquaintance with the band; once Win Butler and his friends get in the history books and stay there, everyone who cares about past sounds will want to visit this departure locus (it is still, after all, a matter of spending thirty minutes in a moderately pleasing way), yet it is not deserving of much on its own. The most important thing about the EP is just how amazing a leap in quality they would make in less than a year's time.

FUNERAL (2004)

1) [Neighborhood #1 \(Tunnels\)](#); 2) [Neighborhood #2 \(Laika\)](#); 3) [Une Année Sans Lumière](#); 4) [Neighborhood #3 \(Power Out\)](#); 5) [Neighborhood #4 \(7 Kettles\)](#); 6) [Crown Of Love](#); 7) [Wake Up](#); 8) [Haiti](#); 9) [Rebellion \(Lies\)](#); 10) [In The Backseat](#).



[▶ 'Wake Up'](#) [▶ 'Rebellion \(Lies\)'](#)

More info: [W](#) [🌙](#) [🎧](#)

General verdict: *A post-post-rock portrait of our neighborhood - weird, scary, confusing, but oddly optimistic.*

[This review was formerly part of the short-lived *Great Album Series*. It is reproduced here with minor stylistic and technical changes to help incorporate it into the overall Arcade Fire page.]

Almost by its very definition, «indie rock» is not supposed to be envisioned on a grand scale. Lo-fi production, dirty basements, cryptic lyrics, shocking behavior, worn and torn T-shirts, trying your audience's patience, strong feelings in place of «uncool» professionalism — these are all typical trademarks, but above all, we know that indie people are sort of supposed to be loners who do not give much of a damn about whether the audience likes them or not, let alone actively involving huge crowds of people in their music rituals. Even when Kurt Cobain «sold out the underground», as it is sometimes called, with **Nevermind**, this happened more by accident rather than by carefully calculated pre-planning; and by the early 2000s, «indie rock» had once again stabilized to the degree that huge international success for an indie band became an impossibility almost by definition.

It could be good music, it could even be genius music, but it was always targeted at small, specific niche audiences, unable to or unwilling to procure itself a more common and accessible language (the entire Elephant 6 scene comes to mind as a typical case). Almost to the extent, that is, that it could be wondered if a major breakout beyond the trench lines of Pitchforkmedia and the like was at all possible. A non-specially-marketed, anti-corporate indie outfit that could and would speak out to more or less everybody? In 2004, probably more of a starry-eyed dream than anything close to reality (most of the times when I asked around that question, the typical sarcastic response was along the lines of "and why, exactly, should we actually want something like this, again?").

At the same time, though, just as I myself was being completely in the dark of what was going on, the stars were one more time (one *last* time, perhaps?) assuming a nice configuration. These guys came from Canada, an alleged bulwark of progress at the time. They appeared shortly after 9/11 and the Iraq war, at a time when some people were regaining their senses and realizing that the «end of history» was still nowhere in sight, and that the world was actually a far more dangerous and far less intelligent place than they had sort of assumed it had already become. They were influenced not only by the previous generation of indie bands, but also by the post-rock scene, including «orchestral bands» like their compatriots Godspeed You! Black Emperor, and by arena-rockers like U2 and Bruce Springsteen (not exactly icons of coolness for the indie scene). They consciously took the pop route, choosing simplicity over complexity and accessibility over total enigma, but they could use all those influences to make their pop sound look fresh, innovative, and inspiring — whatever their real motives were, it always seemed like the real reason why they

targeted the masses rather than the select few was idealism, rather than a banal search for fame and fortune.

Out of this configuration, they took a big, daring, gambling leap — and somehow, managed to hit the jackpot. As of today (2018), **Funeral** remains the most highly rated album of the 21st century on the RateYourMusic site, and I really wonder how long it will take for somebody to chase them out of that superplace. Want it or not, the 2000s are still regarded as «The Arcade Fire Decade», and we will try to see why that is (or, at least, why I personally agree with this).

At the time of recording (fall of 2003), Arcade Fire consisted of a six-member core: Win Butler (vocals, guitars, keyboards), Régine Chassagne (vocals, keyboards, drums), Richard Reed Parry (guitars, keyboards, bass), Tim Kingsbury (bass, guitars), William Butler (bass, keyboards), and Howard Bilerman (drums, guitars); all instrument listings are approximate because the band, in the studio as well as onstage, always makes a point of all its members constantly shifting from one instrument to another (in the name of creative spontaneity and rejecting hollow professionalism for the sake of professionalism!). In addition to that core, supporting musicians included Sarah Neufeld and Owen Pallett on violins, Michael Olsen on cello, Pietro Amato on French horn, Anita Fust on harp, and a bunch of musical guests specially for ‘Wake Up’, including GY!BE’s own Sophie Trudeau (because every self-respecting Canadian musical masterpiece has to include at least one contribution by somebody who goes by the name of Trudeau). Band co-founder Josh Deu had already moved to working in the visual arts, but apparently shares some co-credits for a couple of the songs (which, by the way, in the spirit of brotherly love are credited to all the band members). The album, recorded at the Hotel2Tango studios in Montreal, was self-produced by the band, but another GY!BE member, Thierry Amar, was credited for «recording assistance» (he is also one of the co-owners of the studio in question, together with Efrim Menuck)... so, do we see a pattern emerging or what?

People have often commented upon how the album was seriously influenced by some recent deaths in the band’s extended family, namely, Richard Reed Parry’s aunt, the Butler brothers’ grandfather, and Chassagne’s grandmother, although only the last of these deaths is explicitly mentioned in the last track, and despite the title, the thematic scope of the record is much wider than just brooding on the ultimate fate of man — otherwise, it could never have hoped to achieve truly classic status. Ironically, since the band was quite unknown at the time and did not get enough publicity, **Funeral** scored very low on the charts: in the US, it stalled at #123, whereas all of its follow-ups immediately shot to #2 or #1. But the critical reputation of the record has endured — even after Arcade Fire became almost a household name with the success of **Suburbs** six years later, the average critical/fan opinion still holds that the band never really managed to top that first big shot. Every time a new Arcade Fire album comes out, there is a huge hullabaloo accompanying it, but the dust settles pretty soon, and through the smokescreen we once again see **Funeral** emerge victorious, its reputation undimmed. Why? Read on to find out.

There can probably be no better «defense» for **Funeral** than properly remembering and accurately laying down the history of my own reaction to it. I first heard the album five years after it had already come out, at the end of 2009 (without ever having heard about it before, actually — yes, some people can really be out of touch with the times, and proud of it!), liked what I heard, was not particularly impressed because it sounded too simplistic and overblown at the same time, took a few more listens, ended up hooked, wrote a positive original review... then I found myself

returning to the album over and over again, found myself hooked on watching various recordings of Arcade Fire's live shows (which they generously allow to be kept on YouTube forever), and as I am relistening to it one more time, I come to a clear understanding that no other album from this century that I have heard comes even remotely close to the power, passion, and depth of **Funeral**. Simply put, the album breaks completely out of the mold by... well, by hitting precisely that same nerve that I kept instinctively wishing for somebody to come along and finally hit. Not that it did anybody much good, but at least it makes me feel alive every time I relisten to it, and that has already got to count for something.

Did the band «invent» a new type of sound with these songs? Yes and no, I guess. No, because the idea of mixing rock and (neo-)classical instrumentation was not new (and, in fact, was clearly taught to them by their friends from GY!BE), and because the loud, bombastic, «sermonizing» style of art-pop had been established by bands like U2 a quarter century prior to this. But also yes, because this particular synthesis is fresh — it is essential that there is a big batch of musicians, none of them virtuosos but each of them carrying out his or her limited task to perfection, and by combining these multiple waves of perfectly honed individual simplicity, they are able to transform U2-like tight spiritual drive into something on a truly universalist scale. Although **Funeral** deals with issues that are often intimate and personal (you could easily envisage most of these tunes played on acoustic guitar by some somber basement-locked singer-songwriter), by confiding them to this huge, but loyal and understanding community of players, Butler and Chassagne enhance the power and influence of each of these statements ten-fold. (And you are hearing this from somebody who, by definition, is biased against anthems or sermons of all sorts, yet even I would not mind joining in the choir to ‘Wake Up’, were I ever to hear it live).

But the technical aspects of Arcade Fire's sound do not really impress me on their own — only as a necessary tool for achieving that incredible emotional resonance. Few albums in musical history, and almost certainly no other album in the past 15 years (though I am still not losing hope) can walk that thin line between desperation and optimism as effectively as Arcade Fire do on **Funeral**. This is an album about death — and about resurrection; about disillusionment — and about hope; about confusion — and about consolation, usually both extremes not just within the same song, but within the same bars and lyrical lines of the same song. It is incredibly well-balanced and intelligent, never leaning too dangerously to the «whiny» side, nor becoming bogged down in politically correct clichés. It is beautifully sequenced, starting out with some of the most personal songs, then gradually winding its way up towards massive sermons, and ultimately winding down on a deeply personal note yet again. And it introduces us to a couple of unforgettable personages, Win and Régine, who breathe a whole new life into the conception of «that goddamn indie rocker who can't hold a note worth a damn».

Win is, of course, the supreme ruler of the record, yet I would still like to concentrate first on Ms. Chassagne, the band's vital sprite without whose presence Arcade Fire would be so much less fun. She is, in fact, the band's most original and unique presence — successfully impersonating (or really being?) a little kid trapped in a grown woman's body, a kid so overflowing with feelings that she just has to play a little bit of each instrument without ever becoming a professional musician, has to sing without ever building up vocal muscle, and has to have these cute little songs like ‘Haiti’ that sound like fun, harmless dance numbers on the surface, but actually betray a lot of pain within: it is sung (and performed) from the perspective of the unborn children spirits of the island, and the song's chorus, with its amicable falsetto whoo-oo-woo-oo-woo-woo-

woos, is in reality a rather spooky dance of a bunch of will-o'-the-wisps that draws its merriment from a foundation of horror, while Régine herself plays some sort of Stephen King character. And this is reflected in the music: not only is the merry pop melody itself born out of chaotic noise (to which it periodically returns over the song's course), but even the tonality itself is suggestive of a very special, ritualistic, and maybe even doom-laden type of merriment. Basically, you are not invited to forget all the troubles of the world even when you are obliviously dancing or at least tapping your toes to the rhythms of 'Haiti': on the contrary, this is a funeral dance, sometimes bordering on Zombie War Dance, presided over by a dreary female presence who is usually seen prancing over the lawn with ribbons in her hair, but will also stop at nothing if she deems it necessary to put a pair of steel needles in your rotten dictatorial homicidal eyeballs.

Compared to this, Win Butler's personality actually comes across as less complex, because, unlike Régine, he never sounds even superficially happy; but his *emploi* is that of a deeply unhappy lyrical hero who never stops searching for happiness, on a personal or a global level, and, again, this is always reflected in the instrumental side of things. Take note how many of these songs begin slow and then accelerate towards the end, almost like a pre-set formula: 'Tunnels', 'Une Année Sans Lumière', 'Crown Of Love', 'Wake Up'... and the «final dance» always emerges as a demon-chasing ritual to clear away the gloom and, if not to welcome happiness, then at least to attract it, one way or another. The doom and gloom may be of a totally personal nature, as the lyrical hero mourns his family ('Tunnels') or a fading relationship ('Crown Of Love'), or of a general nature ('Wake Up' is essentially a pamphlet against the increasing debilitation of the young people), but the codas always sound credible and uplifting in their energy; it's like an "oh, okay, life sucks, let's dance on it!" conclusion that seems utterly stupid and delightfully hopeful at the same time, but is in any case preferable to just endless streams of moaning and groaning, far more typical of the indie singer-songwriter approach.

'Rebellion (Lies)', which was the fourth single from the album (and the most commercially successful at least in the UK), is probably the greatest of them all because it does not alternate between spooky and optimistic, it gives you both at the exact same time. The accompanying video pictured the band banging the drum and marching through Sleepytown, waking up its frozen inhabitants upon passing and leading them away like a 21st century Pied Piper troupe — the song, in comparison, remains ambiguous to the very end, as its throbbing bassline symbolizes dread, battle, and freedom at the same time, so you never know if they have real hope in the revolution or if they are just inciting people to arms out of sheer necessity, never really believing in eventual success. In any case, the lyrics are great (this is the second song after 'Wake Up' that uses sleep as a negative metaphor, but does not throw out any particular, personality- or epoch-based accusations, so it could be taken up as a call to arms by just about anybody anywhere), and on no other song do they show themselves as such expert masters of the steady, simple, totally efficient build-up: each individual instrumental part seems fairly simple, but once the dum-dum-dum bass, the tink-tink-tink piano, and, eventually, the droning electric guitars and roller-skating violins all merge into one big multi-colored wave, I have no idea who could ever resist this pull.

Perhaps a band like The Cure could easily outdo these layers in terms of further compositional and engineering complexity, but Robert Smith's only goal with this would be to drown you in the resulting ocean of depression, whereas these guys are inviting you to walk on the water instead, singing along to "every time you close your eyes - lies, lies!" as if your eventual survival could actually depend on how long and how loud you do this. Most likely, we will all drown anyway,

but at least we will not give up without a fight. Or perhaps we might even win the fight — it is this possible ambiguity of interpretation that makes **Funeral** really shine in all its psychological depth.

Some of the tunes are more enigmatic than others, and some of the conceptual decisions suggest ideas you would not be thinking of otherwise: for instance, the four 'Neighborhood' tracks naturally suggest that they should all go together as parts of a single suite, but what is there in common between 'Tunnels' and 'Laika', or between 'Power Out' and '7 Kettles'? Lyrically, yes, most of them have references to "neighbors" and "neighborhoods", but is this really some sort of allegorical saga of the lyrical hero's relations with his surroundings, or are we interpreting things too literally (or too seriously for their own sakes)? I do get the impression that it is all about the proverbial battle between the old and the new, the traditional and the progressive, the communal and the personal - 'Laika', in particular, seems to be delivered from the actual point of view of the «neighbors», always ready to brand an outcast ("Alexander, our older brother") and symbolically illustrated by the comically «bourgeois-sounding» accordeon melody ("now the neighbors can dance!"), but this is just one possible interpretation; the only sure thing that can be said is that it features the band at their craziest, and you, too, are invited to go crazy for a bit along with them (on stage, they used to have «battles» between Parry and Will Butler to enhance the feeling of general madness and hostility, although I have no idea who of the two was supposed to be Alexander and who was supposed to be the neighbor). In any case, all these songs are open to intellectual and emotional interpretation, but all of them go for the gut straight away.

Win's lack of strong singing voice has sometimes been mentioned as one of the band's major flaws, but I consider it a blessing — for instance, it is precisely the contrast between the big booming power of the opening one-chord riff, the immense stormwave instrumental build-up, and the choral harmony waves of 'Wake Up', on one hand, and the weak, barely holding on lead vocal of Butler, on the other, that gives the song its unique appeal: a weak, but determined loner holding on to a piece of driftwood on that ocean, a solitary voice speaking out of the maelstrom, a contrast between the brave realism of the individual and the energy field that can be generated once these individuals unite in the process of "holding your mistake up, before they turn the summer into dust". Actually, that is precisely what the line "we're just a million little gods" is about, even if the first part of the message is pessimistic, because the "little gods" are "turning every good thing to rust"; again, a combination of dread and depression with desperate optimism all the way, right down to the contrast of the boastful "with my lightning bolts a-glowing, I can see where I am going!" and the panicky "you'd better look out below!" in the end. It's an arena-rock anthem all right, but it has got so many more false bottoms than a 'We Will Rock You' that I am perfectly ready to sway along all the way.

The ambiguous attitude never ceases and, in fact, reaches its peak with the final track: 'In The Backseat' is really not so much a song about death ("Alice", who "died in the night", is Chassagne's grandmother), as a song triggered by death — that little kid in the back of Régine's mind accepting the little pleasures of life (such as sitting in the back seat instead of driving) and its little inevitable tragedies ("my family tree is losing all its leaves") as parts of the same integrated whole. It is an autumnal track, largely dependent on its baroque string arrangements, that can be simplistically construed as a modern Ophelia's lament of heartbreaking sadness, but could also be thought of as a hymn to the passing and regeneration of life, because Régine's voice is so suggestive of both mourning and joy; her "I've been learning to drive... all my life!" is

delivered with unmistakable passion, but it is impossible to tell just which component of the emotional spectrum is primary here. And as the last string passages of the song slowly roll over each other and dissipate in the air, they are like the end of the beginning, and the beginning of the end, and then you just put the whole thing on Replay mode, and the next most logical thing in the world is to get the snowy opening bars of 'Tunnels' reprised again, and renew the cycle of life.

Considering just how clever and catchy all the individual tracks turn out to be, there are fairly few mini-accusations I could fling around for the sake of simulated objectivity; and as for maxi-accusations — for instance, the record not really living up to its concept or anything like that — since the concept is so tricky, multi-layered, and ambiguous, I have my own reflection of it that suits me just fine. Phrases like «these guys cannot really sing and/or play their instruments» would be meaningful if they actually tried to play something that they couldn't (like Beethoven's 5th, for instance), or if their singing strived for theatrical/operatic mode, which it does not (with, perhaps, an occasional exception or two, like the melodramatic flavor of 'Crown Of Love' that is a little too close to the corniness of modern European musicals for comfort — and even so, for some unexplainable reason, I really love how Butler's voice tries to rise above the string arrangements). Perhaps the «start out slow, then go real fast» formula, too, is reprised one time too many, and maybe the deep, cavernous production is not always highlighting all the proper highlights (one reason why I usually prefer live versions of 'Haiti' to the original studio recording is because Chassagne's vocals are way too submerged). But overall, there isn't even a single song on **Funeral** that would feel out of place or missing its point, which is more than I can say about any of the band's subsequent releases - and what the album may lack in width / scope, it more than makes up in depth and psychologism.

In the end, if there is one record that perfectly captures the highly elusive Zeitgeist of the 2000s, I know of no better candidate than **Funeral**. That feeling of deep-cutting insecurity — in the face of the new age of information, the East/West clashes, the increased complexity and somewhat illusive prosperity of life, the growing polarization of society — that feeling is conveyed very acutely by **Funeral** and its Cassandra-style premonitions and admonitions. I still cannot understand how on Earth they managed to combine this atmosphere of almost child-like idealism with such complex lyrical metaphors and psychological allegories, but the fact is that the album works equally well on «gut level» and when you begin analyzing its symbolism. The only thing that still makes me a little sad is that, had a record like this been produced thirty years ago, it would have been all over the place, like **Dark Side Of The Moon** or something; as it is, released in an era of total splintering and niche-targeted art, there are even some young people who are only vaguely aware of it, let alone older listeners. Fortunately, it has already crystallized as the classic album of the decade, and since its themes, motifs, and moods on the whole are timeless, the personal future of **Funeral** seems quite bright to me.

I do not think it did all that much to really shake up the listeners — the call to "wake up and hold your mistakes up" largely fell on deaf ears, no matter how many thousands of mouths formally picked it up at all your Coachellas and Glastonburys; but then again, this is a **Funeral**, not a *Revival*, and we cannot assume that Butler and Co., showing such astuteness in their musical and lyrical decisions, could really hope to change the world with their music any more than the big heroes of the Sixties and Seventies. But they did the next best thing — rejecting the cynicism and irony that often (though not always) accompanies indie art, they loaded their guns with a stack of idealistic cannonballs and bombarded the musical establishment until it capitulated before them.

Only Solitaire Album Reviews: Arcade Fire




One might say that the true act of capitulation did not take place until six years later, when **The Suburbs** brought them much wider popularity; but without the legend of **Funeral** in the air, **The Suburbs** would most probably never have had even half of that success. So here's hoping that, even if it won't save us from World War III, ecological catastrophes, Martians, etc., **Funeral** will continue to inspire people with its open and hidden qualities for decades to come.

NEON BIBLE (2007)

1) **Black Mirror**; 2) **Keep The Car Running**; 3) Neon Bible; 4) Intervention; 5) Black Wave/Bad Vibrations; 6) Ocean Of Noise; 7) The Well And The Lighthouse; 8) [Anti-christ Television Blues]; 9) **Windowsill**; 10) **No Cars Go**; 11) **My Body Is A Cage**.



 ['Black Mirror'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *A sympathetic record, but one that too often sounds like Arcade Springsteen rather than Arcade Fire — a handful of great songs surrounded by a lot of monotonous stomping and pumping.*

To improve on **Funeral** would probably be impossible. Other bands take years, sometimes decades, to reach that order of magnitude — or, perhaps, «used to» take years, because, in this age of constant acceleration and violent competition, even minimalist solo artists can no longer allow themselves a proper growth period, let alone an entity with a bulk as huge as Arcade Fire's. We can only guess, but it is a fairly strong guess: had **Funeral** not garnered all its rightful accolades from the start, there might never even have been a **Neon Bible** — in order to survive, Arcade Fire need to be loved... *strongly* loved.

No surprise, then, that their first album was their one true masterpiece. As much as I would like to hail the follow-up as a worthy successor, I am unable to extract the same emotional response. It is a different record, in some ways expanding upon the musical and lyrical themes of **Funeral**; but it is inconsistent, its social message occasionally interferes with its musical content, and sometimes it looks as if they are taking some steps *back*, instead of continuing to look forward. In part, this is linked to the impression that the album is too heavily dominated by Win Butler and his personal vision rather than the collective spirit of the band or any of its other members. Thus, not only is Régine Chassagne all but eliminated from the proceedings as a voice in her own right (nothing like 'Haiti' to bitter-sweetly lighten things up, or 'In The Backseat' for one last shot of solitary autumnal gorgeousness), but there are also no truly anthemic tracks like 'Wake Up' to remind you of the strong brotherhood feeling behind the music. (Although 'No Cars Go' comes close, and the decision to re-record it from their first EP may have been a last minute decision to help remedy that problem).

Nevertheless, it does not seem particularly difficult to empathize with Win Butler and his personal vision. As his most personal demons have been dealt with on **Funeral**, he now makes the music more extravert, constantly shifting his attention from family circles and suburban plights («neighborhood») to matters more global in scope. For the most part, **Neon Bible** was recorded in a local church that the band bought, restored, and converted into a studio, and what kind of an album is best recorded in a church, of all places?.. If you are Arcade Fire, you do not mess around with such an environment.

Anybody who restricts himself to assessing **Neon Bible** from its purely musical side will likely be disappointed. The music per se is not tremendously interesting, and it certainly added nothing new — at least, nothing new for the jaded rock listeners — to the style already established on **Funeral**. If in 2007 your favourite band was somebody like The Arctic Monkeys, at the time riding an amphetamine-powered bulldozer to assert the values of an active lifestyle, you would probably hate **Neon Bible** as a pile of depressed boring shit produced by prematurely geriatric

whiners. («How many more years do we have to listen to stupid pretentious white guys singing about the apocalypse?», some people would ask on the Web — failing to understand that, who knows, there is quite a strong possibility that one of the few things still hindering the apocalypse are stupid pretentious white guys singing about it; and no, I have nothing against stupid pretentious black guys singing about it, either). If, however, you do agree that the rate at which the planet is sinking into a boiling cocktail of stupidity and cruelty keeps accelerating (and there are quite a few things to support this conception in the ten years since the release of **Neon Bible**), Win Butler and his friends are a pretty decent pick to voice your concerns for you.

What I really like, though, is that they will voice them in their own way — powerful, but smart, without the same degree of blunt pretentiousness as some of their idols (I am thinking particularly of a well-known band from Ireland). This is a Church album, see, and the Church relies heavily on symbolism, so two of the most important symbols are established at the beginning: ‘Black Mirror’ and ‘Neon Bible’. The former gives Butler and Co. a general vision of the state of the world; the latter represents the (a)moral law according to which this world is living. The album is thus determined by two slogans: "mirror, mirror on the wall, show me where their bombs will fall" and "not much chance for survival, if the Neon Bible is right". The former has a fresh whiff of creepiness; the latter, a fresh whiff of correctness.

Musically, the first three songs also form an auspicious beginning. The band makes everything possible to make ‘Black Mirror’ as bleak and apocalyptic as the lyrics suggest — where ‘Tunnels’ opened **Funeral** on a note of hopeful sentimentality, the opening deep rumble of ‘Black Mirror’ immediately casts a grim shadow on everything that is come: the song’s minimal melody is nothing new, but the deep-black production brings on associations with a monumental eclipse rolling all over the land. The mandolin-driven pop-rocker ‘Keep The Car Running’ continues things in a style that mixes together elements of uplift and paranoia. Finally, the title track tones down the atmosphere with its melancholy acoustic musings upon the fate of mankind — the album’s only stripped-down number in a sea of raging rock power.

Eventually, however, **Neon Bible** starts to lose my attention. At a certain point, what you get is one standard mid-tempo roots-rocker after another, with similar arrangements and similar feelings. I do like the grand pipe organ riff of ‘Intervention’, but it seems to be the only thing that the rest of the song is hanging upon, and stuff like ‘Ocean Of Noise’ and ‘The Well And The Lighthouse’ do not have even that (although the shift from fast to slow tempo and to the anthemic "lions and the lambs ain’t sleepin’ yet!" chorus on the latter is a nice trick).

Worst offender is ‘Antichrist Television Blues’, a clearly obvious «tribute» to Springsteen that is simply *not* Arcade Fire. There is nothing wrong about wanting to sound grand, pompous, and monotonous; there is nothing wrong with admiring Springsteen; but there is nothing right for a band like Arcade Fire to lapse into some kind of ‘She’s The One’ mentality and batter out a couple of repetitive neo-rockabilly chords for five minutes — no crescendo, no buildup, just a poor excuse for critics to start accusing the band of selling out to the shady past of arena-rock excesses. (That is not *really* what is going on, but with this kind of evidence, how many people are going to pronounce you not guilty — outside of New Jersey, that is?).

Fortunately, after that low point the record manages to recuperate and round things out with another blistering trio of songs. ‘Windowsill’ is a tight protest song that contains some of the

most straightforward lyrics on the record ("I don't wanna fight in a holy war, I don't want the salesman knocking at my door, I don't wanna live in America no more"); many have emphasized the song's anti-war and anti-Bushist stance, but it goes far beyond that — "MTV, what have you done to me? / Save my soul, set me free / Set me free, what have you done to me? I can't breathe, I can't see... World War III, when are you coming for me?" Blunt, but this time, with a great buildup from verse to chorus, featuring what is arguably Butler's single most passionate vocal performance on the album — not surprisingly, the mixture of the quiet and loud parts here is stylistically close to the rough subtlety of **Funeral**.

The re-recording of 'No Cars Go' might not have been a necessity, but the song deserved it — it was, after all, one of the best numbers on the original self-titled EP, and by giving it a thicker, more resplendent sonic coat and including it on a post-**Funeral** LP, they pretty much saved it from oblivion ('Headlights Look Like Diamonds' is another number that deserved the same fate but never got it). Its psychedelic escapism is somewhat at odds with the overall tone of **Neon Bible**, but perhaps every bleak album deserves its own bright spot, and, come to think of it, with their huge instrumental arsenal and their ability to generate psychedelic polyphonic ecstasy, it is almost strange that the band has no other songs quite like this one — simply a glorious musical representation of their brand of paradise.

But they do not end the album with it: instead, the honor is passed on to 'My Body Is A Cage', a grim, organ-driven, bleeding-hearted confession revolving around one infinite mantra ("my body is a cage that keeps me from dancing with the one I love — but my mind holds the key"). This is a surprisingly theistic conclusion to the album: "the one I love" is clearly someone or something more power-endowed than Butler's spouse, and his hysterical howls of "set my spirit free, set my body free!" as the song thunders into its dark conclusion almost imply suggestions of intentional ending of one's physical and spiritual suffering. The last time we witnessed the notions of love and death so closely intertwined, I guess, was while listening to the final aria of **Quadrophenia** (an album whose possible influence on the band as a whole and **Neon Bible** in particular I would not rule out, though my mind certainly does not hold the key in this particular instance).

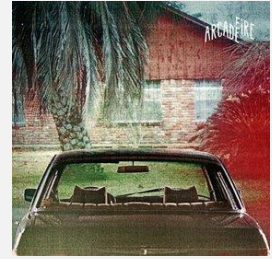
If Butler's primary goal here was to keep on promoting Arcade Fire to the status of "Biggest Band of Our Time", he very nearly succeeded. Critical reaction, occasionally whipped up by the guilt of having missed out on the importance of **Funeral**, was sometimes even more positive than first time around, and just look at the sales — No. 2 on the Billboard charts? Ironically, though, the same year saw Britney Spears' **Blackout** rise to the exact same position, not to mention both records receiving the exact same three-and-a-half-star rating from *Rolling Stone*. "I know a time is coming, all words will lose their meaning" indeed; but it is one thing when people are ready to shell out money for hedonistic dance-pop, and quite another one when they are shelling it out for end-of-the-world statements like **Neon Bible**. By making their stance even more openly socio-political, Arcade Fire had hit a nice public nerve here.

It is quite telling, however, that once the supporting tour had come to an end, only 'No Cars Go' (the album's oldest and cheeriest number) managed to survive as a live favorite — ten years later, the band would still be playing about half of **Funeral** at each of their live shows, but **Neon Bible** had pretty much disappeared from the radar. Perhaps our Canadian friends had decided that the bleakness was too strong, or that there was a lesser need to dwell on these issues in the Obama years (though, as far as I know, neither 'Black Mirror' nor 'Antichrist Television Blues' made




any triumphant reappearance in the Trump age). More likely, though, they just filtered out most of the material to make way for better things — songs with more creative dynamics and stage potential. From here on, filler would become a persistent problem with Arcade Fire; **Funeral** avoided it nicely by mixing together songs with anthemic power, like ‘Wake Up’ or ‘Rebellion’, and material of a more whimsical or introspective nature, like ‘Haiti’ or ‘Une Année Sans Lumière’ — but **Neon Bible** tries to be a blast of energy and loudness all the way through, and it is hardly possible to keep that blast catchy and inspired from start to finish.

THE SUBURBS (2010)

1) **The Suburbs**; 2) **Ready To Start**; 3) Modern Man; 4) **Rococo**; 5) Empty Room; 6) City With No Children; 7) Half Light I; 8) Half Light II; 9) Suburban War; 10) Month Of May; 11) Wasted Hours; 12) Deep Blue; 13) **We Used To Wait**; 14) Sprawl (Flatland); 15) **Sprawl II (Mountains Beyond Mountains)**; 16) The Suburbs (continued).



 [‘Sprawl II \(Mountains Beyond Mountains\)’](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *As ridiculously overcrowded and sprawling as the very urban dangers it tries to warn us against, this is an album of a few absolutely breathtaking highs and multiple yawn-inducing lows.*

Arcade Fire’s third album seems to have thrown the world into an even greater state of confusion than **Neon Bible**. If you were anything like me at the moment, you were probably expecting the band to learn their lesson, rebound from the Springsteenisms of the alleged «sophomore slump», and deliver another fine barrel of neighborhood catharsis that would at least be comparable to **Funeral**, if not top it outright. Now **The Suburbs** could be called many things, good or bad, but one thing the album completely refuses to do is give you that emotional overwhelming — at least, not when taken as a whole (we will eventually get around to the album’s highest points). But with the stakes already raised so high, what is there to do? Most of the «official» reviews had no choice but to be positive, since no self-respecting critic likes to come across as a dumbass, writing about the same band as saviors of the world one day and as pathetic losers the next. This was in stark contrast to the «unofficial» (amateur) line — on RateYourMusic, for instance, the album remains rated slightly lower than **Neon Bible**, and significantly lower than **Funeral**.

Indeed, the saddest thing about **The Suburbs** is this: Arcade Fire’s third record left little, if any, doubt, as to the fact that this band will never ever top **Funeral** as its finest hour, and, on an even sadder scale, confirmed my deep-running suspicion that no band or artist of today has it in them to lay down more than one definitive masterpiece — with everything that follows it existing primarily because the people in question are musicians, and this is what musicians do. By no means is **The Suburbs** a generically bad album, nor does it show any significant deterioration of the band’s enthusiasm — but neither is there any discernible progress, except for one questionable aspect (on which see below). On the whole, at this point in their life Arcade Fire are running on the spot; and it does not help matters much that they do this over a running length of sixteen tracks and sixty three minutes, either.

Let us begin with the fact that this is a record about... *the suburbs*. Not exactly the least untapped subject in the world of American art. Not exactly the least untapped subject even in the world of Arcade Fire themselves: *suburbs* and *neighborhoods* belong together, don’t they? It is not a crime that they decided to step away from the globalistic-apocalyptic ambitions of **Neon Bible**; it is a bit of a worry, though, that the alternative was to retread back to the trodden paths of **Funeral** in order to stretch wider and dig deeper across that which has already been stretched and dug quite sufficiently. It shows that Butler has a serious-as-heck obsession with his suburban past, and runs the risk of eventually declining into self-parody.

Of course, for the listener this particular weakness is easy to override. Want it or not, lyrics and concepts in rock albums generally exist so as to facilitate the job of the critic, who is supposed to entertain his readers with mock-philosophical babble rather than dry descriptions of scales,

modulations, and tonalities. Burn the CD booklet, unlearn the English language, forget the Latin alphabet, and you will never know that Butler and Chassagne's songs are somehow supposed to deal with memories of their suburban lives and reflections on how different those lives are from those of suburban kids today. But even though I have not formally performed any of these three tasks, I still fail to see a truly deep connection between the words and the music. I am certainly no expert on the suburbs of Texas, but my intuition quite suggestively tells me that **The Suburbs** is as much a proper reflection of that life as a hip-hop musical would be reflective of the life and times of Leonardo da Vinci. (Which is not to say that a hip-hop musical on Leonardo da Vinci would not make sense — it simply would be more about hip-hop than about Leonardo).

Unfortunately, there are some serious issues with the musical side as well, which prolongs and, sometimes, even exacerbates the problems already evident on **Neon Bible**. First, there is the issue of monotonousness: most of this frickin' monster sounds exactly the same. Not only that, it makes little use of the band members' individual talents. I had to doublecheck, for instance, whether Sarah Neufeld is still an official member: her violin, so essential to the sound of **Funeral**, is pretty much drowned out for good on most of the songs. Guitars have been compressed and reduced to one- or two-note drones, or, at best, echoey substitutes for white noise in the background. And even so, with individualities spliced together in one monolith, the album *still* does not have even one truly collective, boundary-shattering anthem *à la* 'Wake Up'. At times, the band starts to feel like a huge army of clones, blindly following general Butler's directions.

Second, I join the angry chorus of those who insist that the whole thing is just way too drawn out. All of us will have our own choices of which songs are winners and losers, but most of us will probably agree that *at least* four or five tracks should have been left on the cutting floor (for the record, my immediate choices for the shitter are 'City With No Children', 'Suburban War', 'Wasted Hours' — indeed! — and maybe one or two other tracks from the way too saggy middle). God had his reasons for deeming 40–45 minutes as the ideal running length of an album, and if Arcade Fire are God's chosen ones, what's up with forgetting His covenant? There should be *no* return to the «Michael Jackson CD Age» in this millennium.

But if there is one thing that still saves **The Suburbs** and shows that **Funeral** was not an accidental fluke, it is that Arcade Fire still understand the devastating power of the simple vocal and instrumental hook. About half of these songs, when all the nasty words have been spoken, are still great pop music, and they are still capable of reminding us how so much can be done with so little — and then, how it takes so much to make you believe in the power of so little. For instance, the title track, opening the album — first time around — with no build-up at all, but launching directly into battle, would have never worked without its trivial honky tonk piano riff, but it also takes all the Cure/U2-precision-level arrangements of keyboards, strings, and haunting vocals in the background to make that honky tonk piano riff work.

The arrangements may be devoid of individuality, but on the best songs their components are still perfectly integrated together; the simple vocal slogans of 'Ready To Start' and 'We Used To Wait' would probably have never worked without all the electronic and analog backing. (On the other hand, 'Empty Room', with Chassagne's vocals brought closer to the forefront, seems to work better live than in its overproduced studio arrangement). And it still puzzles me why the final grand scale number, 'Sprawl II (Mountains Beyond Mountains)', works as well as it does, despite being all rooted in a simplistic, repetitive synth-pop riff that could have come off some

Kylie Minogue album, for all I know; most likely, due to Regine's ongoing charm — she still sings the same way as usual, as if she'd just learned the basic technique the previous evening, always on the verge of breaking down but always careful enough not to take that treacherous last step.

If there is one totally unusual song on the album, it must be 'Rococo', eerie and creepy in its total absurdism. It may warm my heart to hear the lyrics mercilessly lambasting today's hipster kids ("they seem wild but they are so tame, they're moving towards you with their colors all the same"), but the music itself is much weirder than that, a slow whirlwind of strings, keyboards, and howls the exact likes of which I never heard before, as if The Cure, Cocteau Twins, and Radiohead all joined forces on that one. Of course, the music has nothing to do with "rococo", but the word is cleverly chosen here as an example of a "big word they don't understand" — something that would sound like pretentious gibberish to those who do not know the meaning of the term, but would make perfect sense to those who do.




As I put the album on one more time, eight years since its original appearance, I am mildly pleased to find out that the impressions remain the same — it goes through a great start, a decent bit of momentum, a dreadful sag in the middle, and a noble rebound in the end, with 'We Used To Wait' and 'Sprawl II' proudly standing the test of time. Indeed, Arcade Fire now *very* rarely perform anything from that saggy middle part: as of 2018, **The Suburbs** have pretty much been reduced to four or five great songs. We celebrate the escape from the suburbs (understanding, in the process, that you can take the man out of the suburbs, but you can still never take the suburbs out of the man), we reboot our life with 'Ready To Start', we nostalgize about the good old slow days when we used to *write* letters in 'We Used To Wait', we complain about the "dead shopping malls" on 'Sprawl II', and that's about all you need to know about the album — and its journey from the boredom and danger of quiet suburban existence into the mad hustle and bustle of the modern urban sprawl. Nothing but the music, so it seems, to give solace and respite from these constant perils. But even the music suffers from the sprawl effect — who knows, perhaps that was exactly the intended self-irony.

REFLEKTOR (2013)

1) Reflektor; 2) We Exist; 3) Flashbulb Eyes; 4) Here Comes The Night Time; 5) Normal Person; 6) You Already Know; 7) Joan Of Arc; 8) Here Comes The Night Time II; 9) Awful Sound (Oh Eurydice); 10) It's Never Over (Oh Orpheus); 11) Porno; 12) Afterlife; 13) Supersymmetry.



 ['Reflektor'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *A classic case of imploding under one's own weight, though even all the arthouse pretense and all the old-fashioned electronics cannot stop them from delivering a small bunch of classics.*

First and foremost, let us get this straight. From my (current) perspective, Arcade Fire are the... no, not necessarily the «greatest band of the 2000s», but simply *the* band of the 2000s, *par excellence*. Well, either that or Franz Ferdinand, I guess, but you cannot really be *the* band of any particular decade if you do not manage to rise above and beyond all the given subcultures of that particular decade. **Funeral** was a great album, **Neon Bible** and **The Suburbs** less so, but all three had what it takes to convince me, and maybe you as well — there is really something about these guys that says, summarizes, and wraps up it all. Is there any other song released in those ten years that is more deserving of a generational anthem status than 'Wake Up'? Is there a better call-to-action epic than 'We Used To Wait'? Is there a different band out there that could offer a more satisfactory set of «Happy / Sad» packages where cynicism and idealism would be more elegantly and accurately settled next to one another? Individual flaws, filler issues, technical problems aside, the 2000s belonged to Arcade Fire if they belonged to anyone at all.

But if there is one thing that I am almost certain about, it is that, with **Reflektor**, the 2010s no longer belong to Arcade Fire. This would not be a big problem, of course (no band has been lucky enough to claim two decades of domination under its belt), if only we knew who exactly would claim the takeover — and if Arcade Fire had not released but its meager share of three albums in their decade of triumph, never landing another **Funeral** in terms of sheer gut impact. As it is, the change in style that they introduce here is quite likely to become permanent, and gradually transform them into an elitist esoteric act, which is, of course, better than transforming into a generic adult contemporary or New Age act (and, all things considered, is still better than having them break up, which is also a possibility), but...

If asked to come up with one quote from the album to describe my current feelings about it, that would, of course, be the refrain of the title track: "I thought I found the connector — it's just a reflector". There are good songs on the record, and some bad ones, and some that require a long time to decide, but one thing that it does not have is even a *single* tune of genuinely heartbreaking power, of which there were lots on **Funeral**, and at least two or three on each of its follow-ups. For Arcade Fire, **Reflektor** is that threshold which separates «meaningful accessibility» from «pretentious obscurity» — and while there is nothing inherently wrong with the latter as such, *loving* a record like this, for me, is out of the question. Recognizing its complexity and symbolism, recommending it for musicological study, sure. Shedding tears over its convoluted storylines and abstract feelings — well, I would rather leave it to arthouse junkies.

On the formal musical side, **Reflektor** picks up right where 'Sprawl II' left us last time — in a tight electronic grip, with synthesized loops, atmospheric backgrounds, and even drum machines

prominently featured throughout, giving the band a mock-futuristic feel where in the past they would, on the contrary, bring out various antiquated instruments. This is already not a good sign, because it shows a lack of immunity for the relatively common «Eighties nostalgia» virus that has already infected scores of other artists — and it is particularly strange to see it spread over to Arcade Fire, a band with so many people playing so many different things. (No wonder Sarah Neufeld has been «demoted» from full-time band member to «additional musician» status — she simply does not have as much to do on the record as she used to; synthesizers and violins do not usually need one another too badly).

On the formal «artistic» side, **Reflektor** is something much more bizarre than just «Arcade Fire with synths». Its conceptuality is influenced by Haitian rara music, Marcel Camus' *Orfeu Negro*, Søren Kierkegaard, and other aesthetic objects and personalities that are all tied up in the grand scheme of things, since, after all, everything is made up of just a small bunch of elementary particles in the final run. Topping it off is the band's presentation of a split-off part of their personality as «The Reflektors», a masked alter ego that they invented for themselves in September 2013 and exploited in a bunch of secret gigs and video clips. Well — you might like the album or hate it, but a lazy affair it certainly is not: quite on the contrary, it is the band's most ambitious, pretentious, and (at least technically) complicated and multi-layered enterprise so far. That is more or less an objective assessment. Subjective assessment — this is one of those «off the deep end» albums where it never feels certain that the band itself knows what the hell it is doing.

Butler confesses that the original idea was to make a «short» album, so it is only natural that, in the end, it all turned into an unprecedented sprawl, stretched over two CDs without an adequate reason. The two parts, as many have noted, are stylistically filtered: Disc 1 is «rockier», concentrating more on dance-oriented, drums-'n'-bass-heavy tracks, whereas Disc 2 enters the twilight zone of «atmosphere», slowing down and getting in the mood — no wonder, since this is where the bulk of the Orpheus/Eurydice storyline is concentrated. Consequently, the second part is less immediately accessible, and will probably appeal more (in the long run) to hardcore fans, while the first part will be more benevolent to newcomers; in keeping with the spirit, the two singles from the album were 'Reflektor' from Disc 1 and 'Afterlife' from Disc 2 (to be fair, 'Afterlife' is also quite danceable, but still shares the same shadowy shape with the rest of the disc).

Now far be it from me to deny the presence of some really great Arcade Fire tracks on this album. 'Reflektor' itself is a good way to start off, using the somewhat corny dance-pop settings of the track as a background for human drama — after all, *Black Orpheus*, too, did pretty much the same with the somewhat corny Rio carnival settings — and the cold, mechanical drive of the song suits well its basic theme of the «inability to connect», with Win and Regine playing quite skilfully against each other (greatest pair since Lindsey and Stevie, I guess, except they really have to act it out, since nobody has reported on any alienation issues between the two). However, even 'Reflektor' is not entirely free from «what-the-hell-was-that?» musical ideas: the bubbly synthesizer riff that comes in after each chorus, sounding like a memento of an Eighties' video game, is either unintentionally awful, in which case they must have been high when recording it, or intentionally awful, in which case it is a Major Artistic Decision that we can Respect, Tolerate, or Despise, but never Ignore. I choose «Despise», because I just can't help it, but fortunately, that does not affect my general feeling towards the entire track.

Two other great songs on Disc 1 are 'Normal Person' and 'Joan Of Arc'. The former arguably is the most «conservative», old-school-Arcade-Fire number on the entire album, a grizzly-grunt against common denominators with distorted guitars and dry saxes from the long-gone era of glam rock and one of those dreamy, but witty «multi-Regine» bridges that nobody really knows how to bake except for good old Arcade Fire. And Win's excited "I've never really ever met a normal person..." coda is a classic finale, though a bit too simple and repetitive to send off real sparks. 'Joan Of Arc' may be even better, with a suitable martial punch and another cool exchange between Win and Regine (for some reason, the call-and-response thing between the collective chorus of "Joan of Arc!" and Regine's «correcting» "Jeanne d'Arc" from the prompter's box is almost intensely cute) — that's the Arcade Fire we know and love.

But then there are the questions. 'Here Comes The Night Time', for instance — is this really a good song? Is its electronic arrangement with a few piano chords sprinkled around really a good match for its poetry? Is the poetry itself worth your attention? "If there's no music up in heaven, then what's it for?" This sounds almost like a question I would like to re-address to the band: if there is no (well, *almost* no) music in this song, then what's it for? The piano bits are probably the best part of the song, and the noisy acceleration towards the end, which used to work so well on **Funeral**, does not work, because if the main part of the song does not wreck your emotions, no use counting on a mad frenetic coda for compensation. 'You Already Know' reintroduces the stupid synth tones, moves along at top speed like a generic filler track on **Neon Bible** or **Suburbs**, and, judging by the sampled «glitzy» announcement of the band's entrance in the intro, should work as a piece of self-irony, but it really doesn't. It's all just... odd.

However, my biggest disappointment still concerns the second («moody») part. This is where the pretense takes over big time, and the band starts thinking of itself as disciples of some abstract Brian Eno — unfortunately, they never had Eno's kind of musical genius, and while 'Awful Sound (Oh Eurydice)' thankfully does not totally justify its title, its electronic soundscapes are derivative and dull, and its attempts to mount a gargantuan 'Hey Jude'-esque coda are uninspiring: where the grand choral movement of 'Wake Up' came so naturally, this one sounds too forced, too self-conscious — a failed attempt at grandioseness. Much better is the counterpart, 'It's Never Over (Oh Orpheus)', driven by a handsome U2-style bass riff and featuring an intriguing duet between Win as Orpheus and Regine as Eurydice; this is easily my favorite number on the entire disc.

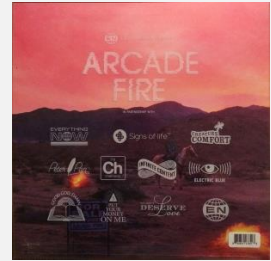
But that's about it. Much as I hate to admit it, I have no love for 'Afterlife', a song quite true to its title because it sounds so totally stiff in its electronic shell. Its basic message has potential, and it could work both as a part of the Orpheus/Eurydice oratorio *and* an independent rumination on life after death in its own right — but if it is a frickin' anthem, give me the full power of Arcade Fire, the band, instead of a bunch of synthesizers rolling out the tired old tapestries of yesteryear (in fact, to hell with yesteryear, it was all done decades ago and way better on Bowie's Berlin trilogy, among other things). And if I have no love for 'Afterlife', there ain't no use even beginning to discuss inferior tracks like 'Porno' or 'Supersymmetry' (except to mention that the latter ends with six minutes of gratuitous electronic noise that either represents the afterlife, or the perfect and imperfect symmetries, or somebody's pet dog left in the studio by mistake after hours).

It would be too crude, of course, to say that **Reflektor** fails to be a great album just because the band decided to rely on electronics (although that *is* part of the mis-deal). Most of all, it fails to be a great album because this time, the band *really* decided to open its jaw much wider than usual, and ended up twisting it all over the place. Too much Kierkegaard, not enough violin. Too much Greek mythology, not enough Regine (there isn't a single song here where she would sing a clear, dominating lead vocal part). Too much general arthouse attitude — we need more songs like 'Normal Person' and 'We Exist', and fewer songs like 'Awful Sound' or 'Here Comes The Night Time' (a title that sounds *way* too close to the old Beach Boys disco disaster, by the way, to suspect sheer coincidence). Too long, too beset with problems and issues, too full of itself, too — pardon the bluntness — *meaningless* (if they are able to explain the point of 'Supersymmetry', I'd prefer rather not hear it) even though it pretends to be going deeper than ever before, and that is what irritates me to no end.




I certainly would not want to nail the point further by giving the album a thumbs down: ambitious projects carried out by fabulous artists, even if they turn out to be grandiose failures, do not deserve nasty slams. It was curious to hear this thing, and if I ever manage to get over the flaccid reaction to 'Afterlife', trimming all the pompo-fat makes up for about thirty-five minutes of high quality late period (late period? we'll see about that) Arcade Fire music. But on the whole, it was simply *wrong* what they did here. If I want Orpheus and Eurydice, I'll take Monteverdi — here, it feels I have pretty much lost the connection. Much as I would like to join the critical ooh la la, it would just be dishonest. Instead, here's hoping the next album will be a «back to roots» revival, or else somebody is *really* going to get pissed.

EVERYTHING NOW (2017)

1) Everything Now (continued); 2) Everything Now; 3) Signs Of Life; 4) Creature Comfort; 5) Peter Pan; 6) Chemistry; 7) Infinite Content; 8) Infinite Content; 9) **Electric Blue**; 10) Good God Damn; 11) Put Your Money On Me; 12) We Don't Deserve Love; 13) Everything Now (continued).



 ['Electric Blue'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Catchy dance hooks, intelligent message, passable 1977-meets-2017 arrangements. What was the band's name again?..*

Well, guess the expected «back to roots» revival is postponed again. But really, you just know something is not quite right when the general critical consensus is starting to turn against the biggest (or, at least, formerly biggest) band of the 21st century — *despite* the fact that they seem to be doing everything right. On their fifth LP, Arcade Fire continue to avoid the trap of whatever passes these days for «rockism», while at the same time trying to stick to their core values, dreams, and phobias. They even lower their ambitions a little, sensing that, perhaps, **Reflektor** might have shot *too* high and mighty with its art-for-art-sake conceptualism, sprawling song lengths, and bombastic arrangements. Result? This band is *lost*. As in, literally *lost* in the forest. "Looking for signs of life / But there's no signs of life / So we do it again" — this verse just about perfectly describes the state they are in at the moment.

Ironically, **Everything Now** is not a «bad» record at all, not if by «bad» we mean «boring». Its dance-pop stamp is now so solemnly official, they actually take care to attach an unforgettable melodic or vocal hook to nearly each of the tracks — they are perfect for club consumption, so perfect that the title track became their biggest selling single to date. In terms of pure listening enjoyment, I cannot honestly recognize that it is a step down from the level of **Reflektor**. But if we are talking about music that is supposed to transcend run-of-the-mill mediocrity on any given level, then **Everything Now** fails on all counts. It is not a genuine Arcade Fire record — and neither is it a respectable, top-of-the-line dance-pop record. And perhaps it fails on both these counts *precisely* because it tries to be both at the same time.

Structure-wise, the album takes its cue from **The Wall**: 'Everything Now' is present here in two versions (a fast-danceable and a slow-ceremonial one), the second of which is broken in two segments so that the second one is at the beginning of the album and the first one is at the end. But if Pink Floyd at least made a point with this gimmick (implying that walls are only torn down to be built up again), Arcade Fire, whose song cycle here is hardly a rock opera, just make a gimmick with this gimmick. It does make you want to *try* to take this cycle seriously: after all, we have a ten-year history of taking this band seriously, so why stop now?

Unfortunately, as soon as the dance-pop version of 'Everything Now' invades your personal space, taking it seriously requires a lobotomy. So here is this song about oversaturation — Win Butler is complaining about how "every song that I've ever heard / is playing at the same time, it's absurd" and how "every room in my house is filled with shit I couldn't live without". These are valid points, I am ready to admit this without irony. But what do they have to do with an old-fashioned disco beat, underpinning a piano line that sounds like a porn parody version of 'Dancing Queen'? Why are they once again flogging that old horse — dropping subliminal anti-

consumerist messages inside one of the most consumer-oriented media ever? How is this ironic rant against the illusory comforts and fake pleasures of modern life going to work in the context of music that brings about visions of leisure suits and mirror balls?

Okay, so they did it before, so they do it again. But here comes the worst part: this music no longer requires the Arcade Fire logotype. The collective power of the band that once rocked the world down with its multi-instrumental onslaught on tracks such as 'Power Out', 'Black Mirror', or 'Ready To Start', is no longer felt. Everything and everybody is faceless and replaceable here, and that concerns Win and Regine as well: their voices are losing individuality, merging with everything else behind a wall of effects — I am pretty sure they would explain this as a symbolic representation of the loss of individuality by modern man as such, but hey, I'd be more than happy seeing the two play Winston and Julia in the face of Big Brother, and they sure as hell would be capable of that, so why don't they?

Or perhaps the worst part is that every now and then, the album descends into genuine boy-meets-girl stuff without any hints of irony — Win does this with 'Chemistry', a synthpop-rockabilly exercise in sexless sexuality, and Regine with 'Electric Blue', a song that re-casts her in her old 'Sprawl II' role as dance-pop forest nymph but completely misses the mark by glossing over her vocals and going for commercially cute seductiveness rather than an atmosphere of exuberant freedom, which was all over 'Sprawl II'. And I *like* 'Electric Blue': I think its hooks are among the album's best. But there is like a million dance-pop bands today that could have come up with something like that; why should the authors of **Funeral** want to lose themselves in that crowd?

All right, so they do not want to be Winston and Julia, so perhaps they really want to be Wendy and Peter Pan, and this is why they dive into the world of twee and retreat to the sonic comforts of the Eighties — the last great decade of hedonistic innocence. But in that case, what's up with all the dread and despair that still keeps cropping up? 'Good God Damn' seems to be about suicide; 'Creature Comfort' is about crumpling under all the insane social pressure; 'Put Your Money On Me' tells the lover to "tuck me into bed, and wake me when I'm dead". The album is tearing itself apart with these extremes, which never really feel at home with each other. And it seems that at least one of the extremes itself has more to do with crumpling under social pressure than with honoring the artistic message of Arcade Fire — because, honestly, all those years ago, when the band was just emerging from under the protective post-rock shadow of God Speed You! Black Emperor, who would have guessed that they would eventually morph into such casual disco revivalists?..

The real bad news is that while the record has certainly sold well and has managed to certify the casual man, **Everything Now** is going to irritate the hell out of the thinking parts of the audience on both sides. Young optimists will kick it for being too grumpy and complaining too much about the young optimists and their "infinite content, infinite content, we're infinitely content" attitudes. Old pessimists will despise it for pandering to the mindless dance instincts of the crowds (and that's not counting all those glitter suits that Arcade Fire like to sport nowadays just because, you know, nothing is more anti-establishment than draping yourselves in establishment). This semi-sell-out is, in fact, even more treacherous than a complete 180 degree turnaround; and nothing is more illustrative of it than the current shamefully low rating that the album enjoys on RYM.

Only Solitaire Album Reviews: Arcade Fire

I cannot put the blame on individual songs, though. Three listens into the album and I have them pretty much memorized — quite an achievement, actually. But what is the good of memorizing something if there is no emotional satisfaction? There were three things I used to love about Arcade Fire — Win Butler as the tormented prosecutor, Regine Chassagne as the newly born child of the universe, Arcade Fire as a multi-elemental unstoppable force of nature. And we may have **Everything Now** if you say so, but of all those three, the record only retains broken shards of the tormented prosecutor, whose regular job now consists of singing about how "you and me, we got chemistry".

Perhaps it's all intentional, perhaps it's all for our good. Perhaps, they say, *these* are the musical forms that are most accessible for today's new generation of consumers, and perhaps there are certain trends that you just have to follow if you want to ensure that your message of hope, faith, and warning gets spread around. And, of course, this is far from the first time that an artist has sold his soul to the machine in order to expose the machine; in fact, some artists have managed to do this quite brilliantly over the course of pop history. Arcade Fire, however, do this crudely and unconvincingly. And now, as they approach the fifteenth year of their existence, they also tend to sound more and more like grumpy old men (dressed in leisure suits) rather than the prophets of the young generation that they were at the time of **Funeral**. Will they ever make a meaningful comeback? Possibly — the problem is, by the time they do, the world will most likely have already written them out of its *plus-ça-change* history. They came, they amazed, they adapted. Next position, please.