

Lauren Bennett

Dr. O'Donnell

Advanced Composition

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Retro Goes Metro

A Track-by-Track Analysis of *Villains* by Queens of the Stone Age

Today I felt the first coolness of fall. It's finally October and so far the year 2017 has failed to accomplish any ideas of a futuristic/utopian pleasure-garden. The current earthly climate (besides being unusually warm) is socially dissonant to say the least. Politically—the “leadership” situation is downright absurd. Furthermore, I can't help but find myself obsessing over change and fretting profusely that things may be changing for the worse. I have found several ways to escape this anxiety, and music is one of the safer ones. And even though I have always been able to rely on finding some sense of mental reconciliation in music, the sounds that have defined my core of auditory enjoyment—my rock-n-roll roots—have now waned. When I stop to assess the contemporary happenings of rock, I am, typically, shocked and horrified to find that a frenzy of electronic influence has seemingly debased everything that I have ever known to be righteous and upstanding in a time-



This is the album cover for *Villains*. It was designed by a graphic artist named Boneface. They also designed for the album *...Like Clockwork* (2013).

worn genre that, since the 1950s, has been just *fine*. Hell, I find myself departing, entirely jaded, from the decades of the 20th century in terms of rock-n-roll. I've reached the point where I'm just ready to move on to something new. That is, until I dusted off the old CD player and delved into the new Queens of the Stone Age (QOTSA) album. Being one of my childhood favorites, QOTSA's hard rock repertoire has rarely ever failed to meet my expectations, and *Villains* is no exception. The full-length 2017 release factors a fresh, 21st century electronic-heavy wave of sounds into the more familiar hard-rock equation.

Queens of the Stone Age, a band characterized by sex, drugs, and driving chord changes released *Villains*, their seventh studio album, on August 25, 2017. QOTSA first entered the music scene in 1998 in Palm Desert, California. The group was formed after the dissolving of Kyuss, a Californian stoner-rock band led by Josh Homme. With the addition of Troy Van Leeuwen, Michael Shuman, and Dean Fertita throughout various collaborations, QOTSA would become a mainstream riot. Throughout the 2000s, the band developed albums well characterized by Rolling Stone's J. Keyes as "arty, blues-based...that wandered stylistically from gentle acoustic songs and Delta blues stomps to Black Sabbath-like metal and the thick, sludgy garage rock characteristic of early-Nineties grunge bands."



The band, in 1998-ish. Minus the elderly lady wielding ribs. From left to right: Troy van Leeuwen (guitarist), Josh Homme (vocalist/guitarist/bassist), Joey Castillo (drummer).

With the release of *Villains*, however, QOTSA has managed to reinvent their typical rock sound in a more contemporary alternative fashion.

In an online article, Rolling Stone's Will Hermes states, "No Queens record has prioritized groove like this." With the inclusion of a very Pop-oriented producer, Mark Ronson, who produced the likes of Bruno Mars and Ed Sheeran, fans are presented with a new dimension of danceability. In fact, Ronson had a pretty substantial impact on the album as a whole. In an interview with BBC Newsbeat, Homme mentioned that working with Mark Ronson "was like having a sixth member in their band." Fans were highly critical of the dramatic, potentially commercializing move. Nevertheless, the album rocks hard, and disgruntled fans have retracted some of their reservations. Despite my own former qualms about electronic music weaseling itself into the field of rock, *Villains* marries the two genres effectively.

In the first track, "Feet Don't Fail Me", a fresh and promising rock-n-roll palette is

revealed. The song begins with a mishmash of

analog fuzz and what sounds like some obscure yet

epic 1970s satanic monster movie title music. Once

the effectual mood is established, John Homme's

chanting grows in audibility as all the mountains of

layers build up to-- honestly the best fucking

slamming riff of any QOTSA song. What causes this

album to depart from the past is evident right from

the start: the obscuration of analog/electronic synth

meeting a funky, titillating electric guitar sound. It's not that QOTSA is just now— in the year

2017, picking up these keyboard-y moments—it's that the line between fat, analog electronic

Villains Tracklist

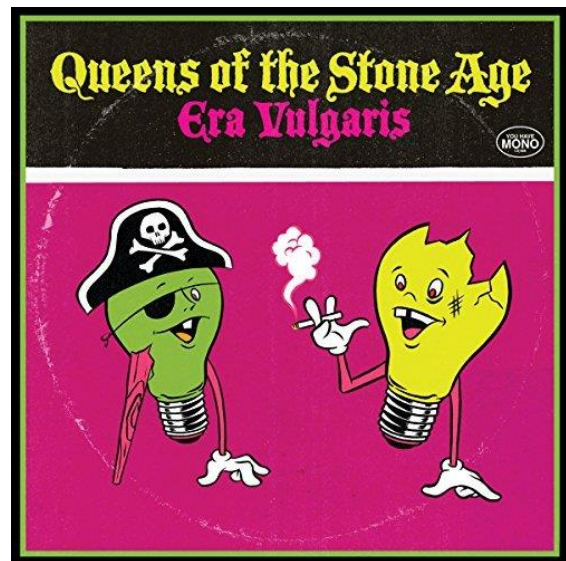
1. "Feet Don't Fail Me" 5:41
2. "The Way You Used to Do" 4:34
3. "Domesticated Animals" 5:20
4. "Fortress" 5:27
5. "Head Like a Haunted House" 3:21
6. "Un-Reborn Again" 6:40
7. "Hideaway" 4:18
8. "The Evil Has Landed" 6:30
9. "Villains of Circumstance" 6:09

Total length: 48:00

sounds and good ole' distorted electric guitar has been purposefully blurred. The sonic experience is juicy.

The second track off *Villains*, “The Way You Used to Do”, has been buzzing throughout the workweek, playing two times an hour on the local rock station over the past few months. I’d sort of had my fill of this one before embarking on the album as a whole but it deserved at least one more listen. For one, it slams with a low-fi distortion, sort of like the way old tinny microphones sound. This paradoxical pairing of loud and thin kind of throws off my idea of a hard rock harmony. I could take it or leave it. All in all, this song has more of an *Era Vulgaris* (2007) feel which, to QOTSA fans, means that it kind of sucks. However, I have to admit, something is particularly enticing as well as monstrous about the lyrics: “Let nobody dare confine us/ I'll bury anyone who does” when referring to loving a seventeen year old “arsonist” while asking the question “is love mental disease or lucky fever dream?”

The third track, “Domesticated Animals”, is absolutely packed with layers. It is at this point in the album that social commentary emerges. In the lines, “I'll tell you where the gold is/ It's in the ground. You wonder where's the freedom? In the lost and found/ Still not found,” Josh Homme, QOTSA’s main vocalist and lyricist, finds it hard to equate meaningfulness with materialism. Furthermore, the song begs its listener to embrace reality, to admit that our attempts to change the world are eternally insufficient: “Get right up, kneel and bow/ Where's your revolution now?” It possesses an active voice.



This is *Era Vulgaris* (2007). No one ever really liked this album.

I'll admit I didn't particularly dig this song until the percussion picked up; Homme seems



This is Jon Theodore. He previously played with The Mars Volta from 2001-2006 and has been with QOTSA for the past 4 years.

like he's singing in one key and the rest of the band is playing in another. This song builds up to something pretty remarkable in the end, with a doggone great guitar solo and tasty syncopated robotic drumming by the recent QOTSA addition, former Mars Volta drummer Jon Theodore.

“Fortress” is next in line, track number four on *Villains*. This song is more of a standard QOTSA recipe. In contrast to the first few tracks, the energy here is lulled into sort of a pseudo-ballad. This is a bridge song for the album—separating the entrance from the exit. The first couple of tunes come at you kicking and screaming until “Fortress” soothes the mania. The echoes of a failing relationship are heard: “I don't want to fail you so/ I tell you the awful truth. Everyone faces darkness on their own/ As I have done, so will you.”

Track number five, “Head like a Haunted House”, is best played at a loud volume. The wacky guitar voicings and Theremin fuse together atop the punkish rock beat to create the most conceptual song on the album: the concept is Halloween. Since the album was released at the beginning of fall, this track fits into the atmosphere of creep quite nicely. It is in this track where we also find a needed infusion of color; a depiction of the conceptualized villains or otherwise dysfunctional characters portrayed by the album artwork and suggested in the title.

This song in conjunction with the following, “Un-Reborn Again” (track six), fuses all the new QOTSA sounds with the thematic elements of the album as well as incorporating this 1950s rockabilly thing that Josh Homme has been perpetually undertaking throughout the history of QOTSA. “Un-Reborn Again” hits all the right chords; it seems as though Homme has finally achieved his degenerative doo-wop goal.

Really, it’s no fluke that this album would have so much punk and rockabilly entwined; the band has been doing session work with the legendary Iggy Pop on a project entitled “Post Pop Depression” since 2016. The New York Times reviewed the conquest last year and the crew’s attempts at (re)arranging some Bowie tunes that were once collaborations between Iggy and David. The NYT’s Jon Pareles writes, “Its [Post Pop Depression] music shows both songwriters’ clear fingerprints: the pithy, hard-nosed clarity of Mr. Pop’s lyrics and the



This is Josh Homme and Iggy Pop.

unflinching tone of his voice; and the crispness, angularity and deft convolutions of Mr. Homme’s chords and melodies.”

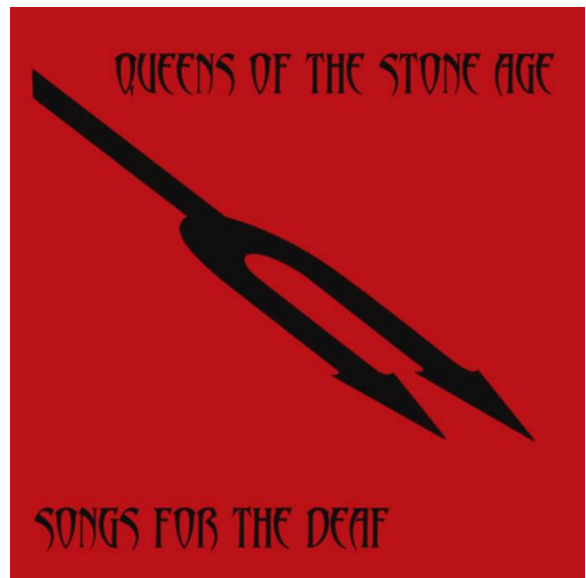
Moments of Pop’s influence are apparent throughout this album: however, QOTSA always manages to keep things original.

“Hideaway”, track seven, follows “Un-Reborn Again” like a grindhouse double-feature. The eerie whining sounds simmer down to a lower pitch, more like a

Doors’ era psychedelic trance. The choice of percussion immediately leads me to recall a certain David Bowie tune entitled “Sound and Vision” off his 1977 release *Low*. To onomatopoeiatize

the specific sound would be to spell it out like this: “pssssss. pssssss.” It’s just a really thin crash cymbal, but I love that sound and I love being reminded of Bowie. The lyrics spell out a strange kind of unholy, sexually charged nostalgia: “Innocence is what you lose/ Like keys and dreams and old tattoos. With one quick twist love turns to scar/ Cruising the bruises in my car.”

Next up is the second coolest riff off the entire album. Track number eight, “The Evil has Landed”, is the perfect title for this hard-rock number. Aside from the almost palpable fuzz, The Mars Volta’s ex-drummer has some time to shine with some characteristically progressive time signatures. This song may be the most classically QOTSA out of the whole album. I could see it appearing on any QOTSA album, in fact. The beginning harkens *Songs for the Deaf* (2002) and the ending takes the listener all the way back to QOTSA’s self-titled first album, released in 1998. The rhythm guitar is showcased all throughout this number but the rogue solos really solidify this track as a “feel good hit”. It’s at this point that the album’s protagonist hits the brakes and gives in to the nihilism or hedonism that has been welling up in his conscious—hence the “Evil”.



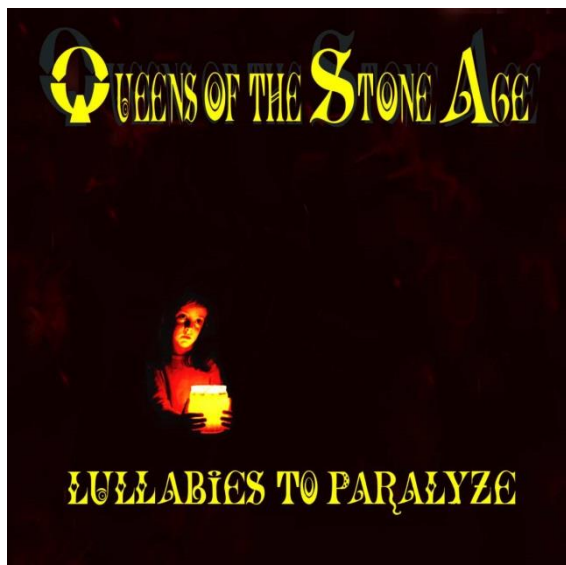
*This is the cover for **Songs for the Deaf** (2002). Typically, this album is rated at the top of QOTSA’s discography. It’s alright, I guess.*

Track number nine, “Villains of Circumstance”, wraps up the album with an unusually optimistic turn of events. Not entirely typical of any QOTSA album, this track is an honest love song with lyrics like, “I better do something, move earth and sky/ And patiently, sweetly, with all of my might/ I sing only for you/ To the beat of my footsteps in the night.” The protagonist has

experienced “Life in pursuit of a nameless prey” and it has left him pleading “I need you now, nothing is real/ Save me from the villains of circumstance/ Before I lose my place.”

As a finale to *Villains*, “Villains of Circumstance” strikes hard as a bittersweet, optimistic prayer reflecting on the events portrayed throughout the whole album. The end of *Villains* also represents a turning point in all things QOTSA. “Villains of Circumstance” plugs a fully evolved meaning into the album’s theme. In a contextual sense, it portrays an in-depth personal dialogue. The protagonist has reached the end of the rope only to find he has wasted too much time on hedonistic artifices. Since its inception, QOTSA’s albums have been thematically dwelling on the connection between desire and impulse. After *Villains*, this is all changed.

The album *Villains* gives QOTSA fans a new outlook on accepting electronic, or for lack of a better term, “synth-y” hard-rock. For me, I had high hopes after the past four years of listening to *...Like Clockwork* (2013). That album got the tears but *Villains* gets the head bops. Additionally, *Villains* has a dancehall quality to it that I believe will compete well with the average 21st century electronic/pop-rock band but still maintain an air of hard-rocking good musicianship.



This is the cover for *Lullabies to Paralyze*, my #1.



This is the cover for *...Like Clockwork*, my #2.

Villains has managed to compel me, a long-term fan of 20th century hard-rock, to appreciate the addition of electronic sounds to the genre of rock, issuing a 21st century update to my personal repertoire. I didn't think it was possible. However, is it fair to place this album above anything else released by QOTSA? Has *Villains* successfully revised the hard-rock sound we all know and love? To conclude, I would have to say *yes*. It's hard to shake the past, so I will place the seventh album, *Villains*, in my top three QOTSA full-length releases after *Lullabies to Paralyze* (2005) and *...Like Clockwork* (2013).

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