

Throwback Thursday: Review of Voltaire's *The Devil's Bris* (1998)

**Originally published on 21 October 2013 at [Stetson.edu/reporter](http://Stetson.edu/reporter)**

By Michael Johnpoll

I've been thinking about the 90s a lot lately. As someone who was born in the 90s and grew up listening to the music of the time, capable of singing almost all of Marilyn Manson's "Portrait of an American Family" by age 6, I remember the decade fondly.

Last time I touched on the revival of an older genre with a review of Green Day's album, "Dookie." This time, I'm looking at Voltaire's first studio album, "The Devil's Bris." I know – sounds a little off kilter. The name of the album itself comes from this weird juxtaposition of the Devil and the Jewish cultural ritual of circumcision. Voltaire, especially over the last 15 years, has built an image of a gothic cabaret singer who doesn't take himself completely serious. Who else could make describing premeditated murder or willing service to the Devil so poetic – relatable, even? His style has changed a bit over the years, yet remained humorously dark.

The album starts off about as dark as it gets. The first track, "Ex Lover's Lover," begins with the line: "Three heavy stones will keep it from floating." This describes the plan to brutally murder and dispose of the bodies of the singer's titular ex-lover's lover. As this provoking track continues, the plan escalates into a graphically described disposal method. However, the speaker comes to the realization that he is unable to go through with the killings: "I don't have the courage / to carry out my dreams. / And only there will I see them / Die." The track's powerful sound, relatable ending, and its place dead-center on the sliding scale from taboo to artistic, makes "Ex Lover's Lover" my favorite song on the album.

"Anniversary," the second track, appears to be a beautiful summation of mutual love. The chorus speaks of the relationship of an aging couple who are slowly becoming less and less beautiful, but more attracted. At first listen, "Anniversary" doesn't sound like it belongs on the album. It's too sweet for our expectations. However, when the speaker admits "everything must change as time goes by / like the flowers that dry, locking inside / forever their beauty," he speaks of the darkness of trying to keep his love life alive, yet

stagnant, in preservation. These first couple tracks convey messages of love, whether normal or lacking in sanity.

“Parade” continues with this theme as it describes a love-hate relationship which culminates with the line, “I know I can’t replace you / and it would be a lie to say that I could ever try.”

“The Man Upstairs” and “They Know Me” differ from the previous three tracks in its departure from speaking about love to complaining about people. “The Man Upstairs” begins by commenting on something everyone can understand: bad neighbors. “The guy upstairs is such a freak / for five years now I’ve had a leak / what does he do up there?” Granted, not all of us plead with whatever God will listen to kill that man upstairs. Either way, the point is made. “They Know Me” is down-right silly. It speaks of a ridiculous sinner who acts like, and even references, Don Quixote. Both of these tracks speak to me about having to deal with people that just don’t make sense. They are easily the most relatable, at least when it comes to having to deal with people outside of your comfort zone.

Voltaire manages to make paranoia and lying about relationships sound poetic and downright beautiful with the two tracks, “Snakes” and “Ravens Land.” His ability to shift perspective and keep me deeply intrigued as a listener speaks to his skills as a writer. He switches from the perspective of a possessive and paranoid boyfriend to one who has already been hurt by love and is lying about his relationship. This association between the two songs allows them to work well together.

I once played “The Chosen” for someone, and all they could say was, “that’s so gross!” Although there are some dicey lyrics, it’s a great beginning to the end of an album which displays a slightly insane perspective, continuing the album’s overarching idea of warped ideas of love and evil.

“All the Way Down” is one of the sweetest songs on the album, even exceeding “Anniversary” in the altruistic aspects of the content. Our speaker tells his lover, likely an angel he’s fallen in love with, “You know I wouldn’t mind being / All the way down,”

when considering what he'd do just to be with her. It's a song about his willingness to leap into hell for the purpose of love.

One of Voltaire's most well known and best songs, "When You're Evil" comes paired last with a rendition of the traditional Jewish song "Haiveinu Shalom Alaichem." This track is a glorious medley describing just how great it is being evil. This track opens with some wonderful violin, which leads into the speaker, the Devil's Advocate, telling of the minor evil he commits in the Devil's stead; being the "fly in your soup," and "the pebble in your shoe."

The track progresses into darker and more evil acts. It reaches a fantastic and powerful climax when the speaker describes his absolute love for his job, making his pledge of allegiance to the Devil and noting that his lord "has never seen a soldier quite like me / Not only does his job but does it happily." He sings of being fear and treachery itself- something I've never seen done as well in any music. He concludes, with glee, what his reward is for his actions: "And I do it all for free / your tears are all the pay I'll ever need."

Between the poetically crafted lyrical content, the wonderfully performed music, and the broken taboo on evil, I give Voltaire's "The Devil's Bris" a full 5/5 Hats.