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psychiatry in music

A dissection of 'Paranoid Android'

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Psychiatrists, psychologists and philosophers have tried with varying degrees of success to describe and delineate mental distress; and yet it is perhaps poets, artists and authors who have captured the disturbance of human thought and emotion better. Contemporary culture is profuse with descriptions of madness, but an epochal piece of work that considers themes of alienation, disaffection and insanity is the album 'OK Computer' by the alternative rock band Radiohead. Considered by many to be one of the great albums of recent times, it deals directly with modern day influences that serve to dehumanise and provoke madness. A song from the album that gives a rare individual account of insanity is 'Paranoid Android'.

The title is a reference to the depressed and neurotic robot from Douglas Adams' science fiction novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The song was inspired by a night in a Los Angeles bar, when the lead lyricist and vocalist in the band, Thom Yorke, found himself surrounded by cocaine-fuelled strangers. One of these, a woman, became 'inhuman' after a drink was spilled on her. Yorke subsequently spoke of her as turning into a 'fiend . . . there was a look in [her] eyes that I'd never seen before . . . whether that was down to me being exhausted and hallucinating . . . no, I know what I saw in her face'. Unable to shake the memory, Yorke penned the basic structure of the song that night.

Heavily inspired by 'Happiness is a Warm Gun' by The Beatles and 'Bohemian Rhapsody' by Queen, the song creates soundscapes in four distinct but overlaid parts. It begins 'please could you stop the noise . . . from all the unborn chicken voices in my head', before the protagonist asks 'What's that?' as mutterings are heard in the background ('I may be paranoid, but no android'). The protagonist speaks of someone (maybe his therapist) having an opinion of him 'which is of no consequence', before the song broils into the darker second section. 'Off with his head!' Yorke screams over a distorted guitar riff, 'Why don't you remember my name?' The third section is introspective and choral – 'rain down, rain down on me from a great height' the singer asks, as if seeking redemption – for what is left unknown. He finishes with the line 'God loves his children' before the disturbing fourth and final segment begins. Indecipherable sounds and words are heard under discordant and multilayered guitar motifs which echo the menacing second segment. The song ends suddenly and violently as if the plug has quite literally been pulled. It is left to the listeners to draw their own conclusions about what has happened to our protagonist.

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