

MUSIC

# On Her Transcendent New Album, Anohni Finds New Ways to Be Hopeful

BY LIAM HESS

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Photo by Anohni with Nomi Ruiz, courtesy of Rebis Music



The way Anohni opens her new album comes as something of a shock. Not in the same sense as “Drone Bomb Me,” the thunderous, devastating opener of 2016’s *Hopelessness*, which announced a radical pivot from the piano-led balladry of her previous records. Written from the perspective of a nine-year-old Afghani girl whose father has been killed by a U.S. drone strike, praying to be put out of her misery by the same means herself, “Drone Bomb Me” served as an entrée to *Hopelessness*’s epic sweep: its lyrical subjects ranging from the climate crisis, to U.S. foreign policy, to mass surveillance, all made sublime by her unmistakable voice and the glittering production of Oneohtrix Point Never and Hudson Mohawke.

Instead, Anohni’s *My Back Was a Bridge for You to Cross*, released earlier this month, feels like a shock because it seems, well, so diametrically opposed to the previous record’s moments of wilful abrasiveness. The opening blues guitar lick of “It Must Change,” the album’s lead single, is so gorgeous you want to roll around in it like a silk sheet. The lyrics hint at hope on the horizon: “It must change,” she croons, over and over again, with growing urgency. “The truth is that our love will ricochet through eternity,” she adds, her signature vibrato fluttering gently. But once you let the song’s classic soul trappings wash over you, and tune into what’s happening under the surface, it’s clear there’s something more subversive at work—it’s just buried a little deeper. There are whispers of cities collapsing and fires and darkness, and how we only have one world: “That’s why this is so sad,” Anohni sings, soaring sweetly into her upper register.

## ANOHNI and the Johnsons - It Must Change (Offic...



Consider Anohni's new album a Trojan horse of sorts, then. It's drenched in the meticulously retro sonic textures conjured up by co-producer Jimmy Hogarth; in something of a departure from *Hopelessness*'s collaborations with the cream of underground electronic music, Hogarth is arguably best known for his work with Duffy on her 2008 smash hit album *Rockferry*. Anohni was introduced to Hogarth by her label, Rough Trade, when she noted she was looking for someone to help write her record: preferably a skilled guitarist and pianist, to allow her to concentrate solely on her voice. "Jimmy's a great guitar player, which was a real relief—because I just hate playing piano, and I'm not very good at it," Anohni says, over a Zoom call from Amsterdam. (She's underselling herself a little there: It's that very simplicity that lent the piano chords that underpin songs like "Hope There's Someone" and "Another World" their heartrending majesty.) Still, she says, "I've always sort of felt like it was a necessary evil in order to support me having some chords to sing a song, you know?"

It's a testament to the power of Anohni's songwriting that the record still honors the spirit of protest music that coursed through *Hopelessness*, just with more familiar textures: notably, in the fuzzy electric guitar licks, saxophones, and strings that hark back to the golden age of soul music. "I mean, to be clear, the album isn't really a soul record, but there are some songs that are influenced by it, and I *did* want to talk about soul music,"



she says. She was interested in tracing her own lineage as a musician back through the “blue-eyed soul” musicians (“Obviously now that reads as a horrifying appropriation,” she says, outlining her deep respect for the genre’s origins within Black American communities) that first captivated her as a child growing up in the British county of West Sussex—people like Alison Moyet and Boy George, the latter of whom she affectionately refers to in her lilting, transatlantic drawl as “a 19-year-old white Irish queen called George O’Dowd.” “As an 11-year-old, 10-year-old child to hear him singing, it changed me, it changed everything: I never even thought of being a singer until I heard George singing,” she adds. “It was the first time I’d heard someone and said, ‘Oh, they’re like me—that’s what I am.’ To hear his voice, the tears in his voice, the resilience in his voice, and all that was unspoken—it changed me forever.”



Photo by Anohni with Nomi Ruiz, courtesy of Rebis Music

For many who first heard Anohni's striking, irresistible voice on her breakout second record, 2005's *I Am a Bird Now*, the effect was similar. Few singers are able to capture their roiling inner world—of feeling like an outsider, of the urge to transform, of longing and of love—with a single melodic flourish quite like Anohni. And over the course of her nearly three-decade-long career, she's traversed the boundaries of art, performance, politics, and pop music like few before her, even as at certain moments—notably during the press tour leading up to *Hopelessness*—she found herself reluctantly brushing up to a more mainstream audience. (In 2016, she became the first openly trans performer to be nominated for an Oscar, for her song “Manta Ray” from the documentary *Racing Extinction*, but chose to boycott the ceremony after she was not invited to perform, describing the experience as “degrading.”)



“I felt like I had this agency, I had this unique platform—as a trans-bodied person, a sort of unprecedented opportunity—to participate in the broader thoroughfare of conversation about society,” she says. “You know, at least I had access to the newspapers. Around 2008, I started to realize, I don't want these people to talk about my biography. I want to make one line in the newspaper that provokes conversation for them regionally. I'll never forget doing the press in Italy, and just saying, ‘We won't be redeemed until such time as Jesus is a girl, and Allah is a woman, and Buddha is a mother,’ and knowing that would probably hit the Pope's breakfast table. I started to feel like my conversations in the media were ultimately a broader intervention than my music.”

Alongside her music career, Anohni has also worked as a founding member of the Future Feminism project—alongside the music duo CocoRosie and artists Johanna Constantine and Kembra Pfahler, who she first met in the '90s via the New York underground art scene—which encompasses exhibitions, films, dance and music performances, and symposia. That's why she's in Amsterdam currently, as the group prepares to debut the latest iteration of the project as part of the 2023 Holland Festival. (When I ask how Holland is treating her, she notes, drolly: “Well, there's lots of cheese here—and clogs.” But she'd actually lived there for a year as a child, describing it as “a wonderful relief from

the south of England, because it was so colorful and diverse: I just felt like one of many for the first time in my life.”)

It’s when turning to the subject of Future Feminism that Anohni is most enthused. “We initiated [the project] at a time when there really was a lull in popular usage of the word feminism, you know,” she says. “It’s hard to imagine that now, but 12, 13 years ago, people weren’t using that word—in popular culture, it was sort of taboo.” It didn’t take long for the movement’s surface-level message of “the future is female” to be paraphrased and regurgitated into slogans on T-shirts—and even quoted by Hillary Clinton. “If they want to steal our work, why did they only take the icing?” Anohni asks.

It’s clear, however, that the boundary-defying nature of her activist work has seeped into the way she makes music. Where in the past she tended to write songs one by one, for *My Back Was a Bridge for You to Cross*, Anohni describes the process as a “bit more abundant.” Part of that came from the unexpected responses she received to *Hopelessness*. While she anticipated people feeling confronted by it, she instead found that many of her fans—front-line activists, in particular—came to her to say it had offered them comfort. “I think they were just really relieved to hear someone seeing the thoughts that they were having, to hear someone singing, *I feel ashamed, and I feel exhausted and I’m horrified by the fact that I’ve been drawn into complicity in this murderous drone bombing campaign and the fact that I’m burning animals in the forest alive*,” she says. “I hadn’t expected that it would be useful to people that were doing this work.”



Photo by Anohni with Nomi Ruiz, courtesy of Rebis Music

*My Back Was a Bridge for You to Cross* does contain its own moments of palpable fury and frustration: “You are determined to take me down / I don’t stop you, I won’t stop you,” she sings, erupting, over the scuzzy guitar riffs of “Go Ahead,” while the delicate, twinkling piano of “Why Am I Alive Now?” belies the song’s lyrics mournfully charting the emotional weight of bearing witness to ecological collapse. But the impetus for its richer sonic landscape lies in Anohni realizing that she could communicate these horrors through a greater economy of means. “Singing reaches into a different part of your perception—it’s such an ancient way of connecting, [and] it can be so affirming and fortifying,” she says. “So that was sort of my intention, really, in making the work. I feel like now I better understand who it’s for.”

In some ways, Anohni sees the mere fact of making an album today as an act of resistance—against the slow, insidious creep of technology into every aspect of our daily lives, and the overwhelming daily onslaught of the attention economy. “Most people only listen to like 15 seconds of a song at most on Instagram, and they usually take off at about six seconds,” she sighs. “So really, what is this all about? There’s a lot of suffering that we’re all having to deal with—they’ve just degraded our ability to sit in one space and be present for a while. I can’t do it, even in a work environment. It’s just so hard, everything is just smashing at you all the time. I don’t know if you’re having that experience?” I am, I reply. “We’re being asked to become like machines,” she continues. “They’re rewiring us in their likeness, rather than forming around our wellness as human beings. And it’s become so extreme, it’s almost like everyone’s constantly being electrocuted. Even the most privileged people are feeling mentally electrocuted by this process. It’s just horrible.” She recalls an article she read in *The Guardian* about shifting baseline syndrome: Coined by the fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly, it argues that we judge the state of the natural world by our own perception of it, meaning that while we might notice it depleting, we remain perilously unaware that those initial experiences were based on a precedent of existing depletion.

“I think that process has now become so accelerated, people just accepting that their playground is a cut-down forest,” she adds. “Children are born into the normalization of an unstable climate. It’s for the old people to remember that it wasn’t always this way. And yet most old people are hoping that Greta Thunberg is going to solve this. Most people are hoping that teenagers are going to be the ones exhibiting the moral fiber necessary to make a shift. As if they hadn’t themselves once been that same age, with those same idealistic dreams for the world that they were about to enter. It’s a demented burden to place on young people, that they’re supposed to fix this problem on behalf of the elders.”

It’s fitting, then, that the visual world surrounding *My Back Was a Bridge for You to Cross* looks to both the past and the future. The album cover features a portrait of Marsha P. Johnson, the pioneering trans activist who was a prominent figure in the Stonewall uprising and the ACT UP movement. The video for “It Must Change,” meanwhile, stars the Black trans model and activist Munroe Bergdorf (Anohni previously described her



“dignity and ethical courage” as a “guiding light”), and “Why Am I Alive Now?” is accompanied by a visual celebrating trans sisterhood directed by *Euphoria* star Hunter Schafer, who shared that she grew up listening to Anohni’s music.

ANOHNI and the Johnsons - Why Am I Alive Now? ...



In figures like Bergdorf and Schafer, Anohni sees hope for a better future—and really, *My Back Was a Bridge for You to Cross* is a gift to them, an offering of solace and solidarity with those who are fighting every day for the causes Anohni so fiercely believes in. “That’s the provocation of this record: that maybe if we could open up that space in our imaginations, that change might be possible,” she adds. “That’s my dream for everyone. It’s my dream that we could imagine.”