

GARBAGE

Let All That We Imagine Be The Light

Let All That We Imagine Be The Light, Garbage's expansive, explosive, all-too-human album is their eighth. It's the first one that arrived unexpectedly, due to unforeseen circumstance. Conjured into existence when the band was all at sea.

In August 2024, Shirley Manson, the band's lead singer and lightning rod front woman, was abruptly forced to stop performing. An old injury sustained when she fell from a stage, at KROQ's Weenie Roast in 2016, had flared up and it took her down. "I fell off stage and battered my hip," she says. "All these years later, it basically shattered on me."

She was in a bad way. An operation was needed, with time afterwards for her to get better. Garbage's world tour for *No Gods No Masters*, one that had been planned to take them into 2025, screeched to a halt.

"We were catapulted into a situation out of our control," says Shirley. "It felt at the time like a curse, but I actually think it was a gift. It gave us a brand-new shift in perspective."

The band had to change to continue. Not only Shirley, who, post-op, embarked on serious at-home rehabilitation, using exercise machines at home and a walking cane outside ("I loved the aesthetic element of that cane," she says, "but walking was very hard") - but Butch Vig, Duke Erikson and Steve Marker, too. Their year was completely upended. A void presented itself. They reacted in the way they know best. By making music.



photo credit: Joseph Cultice

As Shirley battled to regain and reclaim her body, Butch, Duke and Steve were busy in Butch's studio, making soundscapes and atmospheres which they sent to the recovering singer. "Little sonic gifts via email every couple of days", she calls them. Something for Shirley to hang on to in the tough months post-operation. "I'm a fierce character," she says. "I've never moved through the world feeling particularly scared of anything. But during my recovery, I felt incredibly vulnerable and incredibly fragile."

Frailty was a strange sensation for a woman who, at 58, is a full-force queen of performance and

interview: charismatic and intelligent, impatient and loving, front foot and honest. The new emotion transferred into her lyrics. “There’s a sense of mortality and vulnerability in there,” she says. “I had less interest in being really forthright and more interest in trying to capture a feeling. And I did that.”

No Gods No Masters, their last album, was, she says, “a very confident, aggressive record”; also very prescient, given some of the subject matter. But this new album became strong in a different way. “When you’re able to give voice to your own fears and vulnerability, that is actually strength,” says Shirley. “It helps to ignite your survival skills, your desire for joy, and your desire for life and adventure.” She found herself thinking of others, as well as herself. “We’re all freaked out, we all have to be vigilant, every human being is hurtling towards the same fate in the end,” she says. “And our challenge is how to live a really joyful existence as best as possible in the circumstances we find ourselves. We’re here and we must move forward. Trying to mend that which has been broken.”

Such mending and moving forward are rooted in hard-won hope, a belief in togetherness. Love can be defiance in a world that seems crueller and crasser by the day. Though love, in particular, is not Shirley’s usual subject matter: “I usually leave that to others.” But, struggling to re-find herself after her injury, isolated and frustrated, she found herself taking strength not only from those she loves directly - the band, her family, her friends - but from the larger love that comes from others, from like-minded people. Their tenderness and solidarity. The album has a sense of being part of something bigger than yourself, something that veers into the magical.

(As an aside, the band refer to themselves as The Octopus - something bigger than their individual beings. “The Octopus is our group name on texts,” says Shirley. “We’re stuck together, with all our weird limbs reaching out in all different directions at different times.” Hence the cover of *Let All That We Imagine Be The Light*.)

The songs on *Let All That We Imagine Be The Light* tell stories, both musically and lyrically. Some are direct tales from Shirley’s life. “Have We Met (The Void)” recalls a specific moment

in Barcelona where a love affair crumbled in the face of a furious woman. “Chinese Fire Horse” is a riposte to a ridiculous, ageist retirement inquiry from journalists. Other songs emerged less directly. A half-remembered memory; a ‘we must flee’ emotion. “Sisyphus” and “Radical” combine Shirley’s desperation about recovery with mantras (prayers) for those that are repressed.

The music is generous, full of atmosphere and drama. Filmic. You might hear a Joy Division-style bass, some no-messing riffs. There is dignity and splendor, dynamics and beauty. A sense of a full world, of story-crafting through sound scaping.

So, yes, this record is different. The circumstances may have forced the band out of their preferred way of working, but, as Shirley says, the broken-ness became their inspiration.

“As an artist,” she says, “I don’t want to do the same record over and over again. I want to explore. What does it mean to be a human being on this earth? We’ve not been in these societal circumstances before. I’ve never been 58 before. The matrix that we live within is designed to make us all feel disempowered by ageing, and yet it’s such a thrilling part of our existence. It’s interesting, and in the lineage of pop music, much of that stuff is not yet explored. It remains a mystery.”

Sometimes her injuries felt catastrophic, as she worked her way through to health. This chimed with the world outside, but also, perhaps, the catastrophe chimed, somewhere deep, with how she works. “Each record feels like our last record. That’s how I always approach it. Like, if you never, ever get to say or sing anything again, what is it that you’d like to say?”

And what is that?

“Well, this record is about what it means to be alive, and about what it means to face your imminent destruction,” she says. “It’s hopeful. It’s very tender towards what it means to be a human being. Our flaws and our failures are still beautiful, even though we’re taught that they’re not. I love being a societal elder. I’m really grateful that I’m old enough to be called one. I feel it’s me and my generation’s duty to ignite hope. This is a tender, thrilling record about the fragility of life.” ●

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Let All That We Imagine Be The Light

Track By Track



1. There's No Future In Optimism

I *love* the title. The band sent it me and I was like, “This is fucking great. I’m keeping that.” But the lyrics are an action against that title. Because if we allow our fatalism or our negativity to really take over, we will crumble.

It’s about a city - in my case, Los Angeles, but it could be anywhere where bad stuff is happening. And it’s a Bonnie and Clyde love story, dealing with crazy chaos and surviving.

After the George Floyd murder - which is one of few things in my life that I wish I’d never seen: I was changed entirely by seeing the footage of that cop kneeling on George Floyd’s neck - in Los Angeles, there were *huge* protests and a lot of upheaval. Above our house in Hollywood, there were helicopters all day long, for days on end. It was really

distressing. And then, in the middle of this, there was an earthquake, and I woke up and I plucked my husband’s arm and said, “We need to get out of here!”

So when I think about the lyrics, that’s what I imagine – a couple waking up in the middle of the night and going, “We need to get out of here. We need to save ourselves. Let’s go!” The lyrics came really easily. I could see it all. Very cinematic.

The song is a clarion call. These times feel very precarious and chaotic and terrifying, and you’re either with us or against us. You’re either for loving the world or you’re for destroying it. We have no choice but to practice hope, practice optimism. It’s a call to arms to anyone who’s feeling like we are.

2. Chinese Fire Horse

On the first day of promoting the last album, at the age of 54, I was asked if I was going to retire. By two different journalists, one female, one male. It was unbelievable. Laughable. I am undaunted by that kind of attitude towards me now.

It’s empowering when you take that narrative of being too old - one that is thrown at women all the time, to keep us in our place - and you throw it right back. When I was young and beautiful at 30, and I was told I was too old, it really hurt me. I took it to heart, and it did exactly what it was designed to do, which is crush my spirit and disempower me. Now, I’m like, “Oh, boy, have you just revealed not only yourself to me, but all your fears in your sad little psyche. I do nothing but pity you, sir or madam.” To take that power back for yourself is a great feeling. It’s very upbeat. Not sad, not “Oh, poor me”. It’s just “You can just take whatever you’re going through and keep it to yourself. Thank you very much. Moving on.”

Chinese Fire Horses are considered troublesome! Traditionally, they left girls born in Fire Horse

years on the mountains to die, because according to superstition, they will grow up and kill their husbands. And I wanted to make it very patently clear this lyric was coming from me and nobody else. It was my story. Being a Chinese Fire Horse is an emblem of pride. You picked the wrong girl, motherfuckers.

3. Hold

Sometimes when you're feeling up against it, you develop these threads of spiritual practice to get you from A to B - but deep, deep down there's a fear that you're off the mark. When you're practicing positivity, there's always - at least for me - a little voice of, "Who are you kidding?" I fight against myself all the time, and I find that if I defy myself and my old practices of thinking, it is ultimately very good for me. When I break habits, stop talking to myself a certain way, and I accept my power in the world, that is good.

It's all stuff that, when you're a younger person, you really struggle with. When I was younger, I didn't believe in myself. I was really insecure. I had body dysmorphia. I had all this baggage of stuff. But that was all just how I'd chosen to frame it in my sad, sick little mind.

When things get really pressing and worrisome, a connection with another human being is necessary. It doesn't have to be a romantic connection. When I was fighting vulnerability as a result of my injury, I found I was missing my friends, I was missing my work, the band, my family. So there's the idea of, "We can get through anything if we are all together." I'm trying to encourage myself not to lose faith and to push forward, even though the playing field looks... unequal.

4. The Void

Duke said something about witches. I went into the booth and I said, "I'm going to try something". And then this vision from my past came into my view. This is a true story, it actually happened to me.

I went to Barcelona to play a show. My boyfriend was living there at the time, I was staying over with him in the flat, and there was a knock on the door, and it was this beautiful young woman in a state of enormous distress. She was so powerful, she was in a fury, she wasn't trying to pussyfoot around and she'd dressed herself completely in white. She and my boyfriend were clearly involved, because of how she presented and what she was saying and how she

was saying it. It was a moment for me of putting two and two together, realizing what was going on, and the visual of it has stuck with me. I remember the Gaudi cathedral bells, because he lived right opposite Gaudi cathedral. So the Gaudi bells are rolling, and I'm registering it at the same time as this tableau is unfolding in front of me.

I see it as a coming-of-age story, because it shifted something in me for the rest of my life. I never was the same after that. I was by myself in a foreign country where I didn't speak the language... I didn't have anything to hold me. I didn't quite know what to do, and in that moment, I found my feet and jumped into the unknown. I was in my late teens, early 20s and I left my childhood behind that day. I accepted what had happened to me, I didn't fight it, I got on a train and travelled on to some other big Spanish city to join up with my band.

The Void was the name of the instrumental the band had sent me, but I reprised that title at the end because it felt like diving into the void. I was leaving behind the most significant relationship of my teens and jumping into the complete unknown. Terrible things can happen, but beautiful things can grow from that.

5. Sisyphus

It's all to do with my body. I had a broken body. The feeling of complete helplessness is really wild, I honestly didn't think I was ever going to be able to get my body back working again. So, it's a little mantra to myself of, "You've got this."

I was thinking about all the things that you call upon when you're trying to recover from anything. It doesn't have to be surgery, it can be a heartbreak, a death, the loss of an animal. You have to reach out to your totems to try and garner strength. You're believing in your saints and also trying to muster a protective power. It's almost like conjuring a spell.

At the time of my recovery, there were some terrible things going on. Most of all Gaza, which was killing me, and this horror story of persecution of trans peoples that has come into vogue over the last couple of years, just as we felt that we were moving forward. A tide of intolerance. Misunderstandings and ignorance have swept trans people's rights back 100 years.

I realized, as vulnerable as I was, that there were so many other people and other things that required protection. All of us, everyone, everything, we all

need protection, and we're living in times that are so brutal. There's very little space in our society currently for softness.

Since COVID, people are really focused on themselves, their family and their needs, and that gets out of balance when you *only* think of yourself and your needs and protecting your own. Society is there to protect the majority of people, and without that protection, we are all fucked. Do we really all want to go back to the jungle and start having to fend for ourselves? I feel like we've all forgotten our duties to protect one another.

6. Radical

It's a continuation from the theme of Sisyphus. I was in a bad place, really sad and dark. But I realized all I had to do to keep myself sane was just try to be a good person. That simple and that basic.

"All you have to do is save a life." That line wouldn't leave me. I ended up sticking with it, because I really loved it, and I couldn't get out in my head.

And then when I was recording the final vocal, "let all that we imagine be the light" became the obvious go-to. It's not often that you change the lyrics of a chorus. I've never done it before, I'm not sure if I've ever heard a song that's done it. But it feels like a natural evolution from the idea of saving a life. If you focus on something good, it tackles the darkness. If you can reach for light, you banish the dark.

7. Love To Give

The theme of searching for love is massive on this record. It was only when I looked back that I realized it. I never write about love; it's not something I'm particularly interested in pursuing. But there's this yearning for it all over the record, and it's never more obvious than on this track.

You can't force people to love, it's an impossibility, as we all know, to our own detriment and unbearable heartbreak. But I've decided - and it's taken me a long time to get here - that I have to put my love into practice every day. I'm often guilty of forgetting about it, or not exercising it, or leaving it to languish. I have discovered that if I put my own love into practice, it pays, over and over and over again. But it has to be *my* effort and *my* determination and *my* love.

There's so much emphasis put on romantic love in our society, but the problem with romantic love is you can lose the love of your life overnight. It's much

healthier for us all to think of a much bigger love than just our own personal love.

My dad lost my mum. They were dedicated to one another, and she died before him. He's now 87; he's lived for 15 years without her. It's so hard. But that doesn't mean there's no place for his love, you know? People need to believe their love is going somewhere. A lot of people don't have a partner, or things didn't work out with their husband or their wives, and they can feel really despondent. But there's a bigger love available.

8. Get Out My Face AKA Bad Kitty

The patriarchal structure of things has become so apparent to me. When I was young, I didn't really notice how things worked. People like to shuffle older women off the lot, because you start to see the chessboard in a way you didn't when you were younger. When you're young, you're wanting to get on with your life, have an adventure, do what you love, and you're conditioned by the society that you grew up in, so a lot of the time you don't see what's going on. Then, as you get older, you start to see how things are stacked up against some of us - not all of us. I am outraged by the way the world treats Blacks and browns and gays and trans peoples and animals and women. Living in America over the last couple of years, the absolute war on women in America is astounding. All the rights that we felt had been secured are starting to get pushed back into the Middle Ages. It is something that I can no longer tolerate silently. It's not just infuriating, it's alarming. It's frightening.

In the 90s, I was described as "angry" and "feminist" - and the word feminist was used as a slur. And now that I'm pushing 60, I'm like, "Oh, I see what was going on there." Any woman that is willing to articulate her frustration at the system is basically tagged a witch, and we are metaphorically burned at the stake as a result. We're dismissed as being insane or angry.

But social media means there's a much faster, more powerful way of galvanizing people now. Women have access to information and group outrage in a way that we never did growing up. It's fantastic. It's helped educate women about the way the world works - because, of course, we've been deliberately kept in the dark a lot of the time. We've been made to feel embarrassed about our menstrual cycles and our vaginas and our sexual desire, all that stuff that my generation were shamed by. I was full of shame

growing up. We were taught to be so ashamed of our bodies and our sexual drives. It's just crazy. I feel like the new generations of young women, thanks to social media, they're all embracing it. It's wonderful.

9. R U Happy Now

"Make no mistake, friends, they hate your women. They rob your children, and they love their guns." It's a drip off from the last song, that patriarchal mood that was sweeping the country in the run-up to this last American election.

They were burning books! The investment in education in America has dwindled, I think deliberately. They want to keep the populace uneducated. The idea that I'm living in a country where they are burning books because they don't like the content. It's madness. And while going on about free speech! The hypocrisy is astounding. I find it all so infuriating, you know? But historically speaking, those who burn books have never been the good guys, ever.

This isn't ancient history. My dad is still alive, and he lived through the Second World War. And yet we're still making the same mistakes over and over and over again. I literally don't understand it. It's lunacy.

10. The Day That I Met God

I was absolutely out my mind on painkillers; specifically, Tramadol. I was doing my walking on my treadmill, trying to get my body stronger. The band sent me the track, I came up with the words on

the treadmill, came off it and said to my husband, "You need to set up a mic." He set the mic up in my bedroom. I was still in my pajamas, and I sat down, and I recorded the vocal from start to finish. This complete story came out of me. My husband was laughing at me at the time, going, "Where did that come from?" I don't even know.

It was one of these times when you just open your mouth and something comes out that you have no control over. It's just as is.

It's so weird. I felt like it came to me in a dream. I grew up with a very religious upbringing, I went to church from when I was really small, and the church has played a large role in my family's life. I've always been obsessed with the amazing stories I was taught at Sunday school, and watching how faith has played out in my life, and the life of those that I love. It's fascinating, whether you're a believer or not. The rich story of it all is magnificent. The themes of faith and God and belief, they come up for me every time I'm ever in a creative space. So, this is my hymn.

"I found God in Tramadol", I thought was pretty funny. I was pleased with that line, because it just turns everything on its head. And then we got a friend of mine, this amazing composer called Shruti Kumar, and she embellished it at the very end to build it into something more majestic. These gorgeous horns that sound like the Salvation Army or something. Beautiful strings. She's incredibly tasteful and talented, and it was an honor that she would write that for us. A hallelujah chorus at the end. I love it.

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