



Fiona Apple

Tidal

07/1996

Work Group

Heavy with Mood: On Fiona Apple's *Tidal*

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The bedroom of a teenager is her entire world, or at least it was for me. When I think of my teenage years, I always come back to those rooms – first, the one in the small town where I grew up, where I hung tin foil over hideous blue-flowered wallpaper. Next comes the larger town with the room next to my parents' and later the converted third garage bedroom. In those last two rooms, I pinned dozens of photographs of my friends, square inserts from my favorite CDs, and one large poster. In those rooms, I discovered music and writing and used both to work through the torment of adolescence.

Jim Morrison's poetry/spoken word album *An American Prayer* made me a writer. I discovered him and his poetry accidentally, somehow stumbling over The Doors songs on the radio and into his brilliance. I hung his naked torso in black and white on my wall in the 90s. I wrote to the drums and his singing and poetry recitation, finding a cadence and a foundation of psychedelia and poetics that still bleeds through everything I write. In many ways, I think *that* album is my formative album, the one that defines me or led me to become. But I can't think of it, or of any of my musical history, without returning to Fiona Apple's debut, *Tidal*.

As I had with *An American Prayer*, I wrote frequently to *Tidal*, late at night, by candlelight, letting the rhythm guide my hand. When I reread poems from those days, I can easily identify the ones that were written to "Pale September" (mostly because I did a lot of mimicking of beat, sound, and words). Though it's one of the slowest, and dare I say moodiest songs, to me it's also the most hopeful: "And my winter giving way to warm / As I'm singing him to sleep." I listened to that one a lot.

I remember coming to Apple the way we came to most music in the 90s, via MTV. In my memory, I find her writhing in various states of undress in her video for "Criminal." She is rarely standing, her sexuality flowing all over the floor, the tub, and the closet. She is skinny in a way that makes me simultaneously hunger for her and not want to eat for a while after I first see it. I ache for her and I ache to be her. I like that the faces of the men are never shown and all I have to see are her lovely blue eyes and her bony appendages. It's a confusing sexual awakening of sorts, but also more than that.

My memories here are a bit cloudy, however, because while *Tidal* was released in 1996, the "Criminal" video debuted in the fall of '97, with "Shadowboxer" and "Sleep to Dream" preceding it as singles. I had to have heard those songs on the radio or seen them on MTV, but as an adult I've remembered "Criminal" as my introduction. Now I know I'm wrong about that, because of how my discovery of her and the subsequent purchasing and nonstop consuming of her album integrates into my recollections.

During 1996 and 1997 I was 16 and 17. These are huge years for anyone, marked by milestones, friendships, breakups, and high school angst. In those years, my home life was a mess. I was a mess. Young friends died of overdoses and in car accidents. I remember now that in the summer of '97, just before the start of my senior year of high school, my tightknit group of girlfriends split up a bit, with some of us spending most of our time with a group of older guys and their friends. I fell fast and hard for one of them

after a steamy evening at a party. A few nights later, his roommates threw a kegger, and I knocked on his closed door. He was stretched out on his bed, so naturally I sat next to him. The lights were off and music played softly. He wasn't talkative.

"I have this album," I lied. "I love it."

A wry smile pulled on his lips. "Really. Which album is it?"

It was Nirvana Unplugged, but I suddenly wasn't 100% sure, so I tripped over some excuse about forgetting the name, my face hot and tears threatening to fall. Further attempts at making conversation failed, and I could feel his annoyance. I said so long, closed his door, and went immediately to the keg. I actually fucking hated Nirvana.

I can still feel the agony of that unrequited love, how it felt to be screaming into my pillow and playing Apple's "Never is a Promise" on repeat. I obsessed over him for weeks, even after getting together with another one of his friends. I had minor heartbreaks now and again, but nothing like this. It's absurd that I would fall into what felt like love with someone I barely knew, particularly because I tended to keep boys at arm's length, never really committing or sticking around for long. Then again, there are a lot of absurdities from that time.

But that heartbreak is the nameable pain I remember most clearly, as though the surrounding events and traumas in all their actual awfulness have become a numbed part of me I cannot access. Instead, what I recall of Fiona Apple's place in my life is the way I studied her and how much she inspired me – and inspires me still. Mesmerized as I was by "Criminal," I intuitively recognized how out of place it was within the confines of the album. Later I'd learn that Apple wrote it in under an hour to satisfy studio execs and show she could write a hit if she wanted.

At some indecipherable point, I picked up the CD and I don't think I took it out of my CD player for a long time. I listened to it every night as I went to bed. I listened to it habitually and persistently in between other CDs. I internalized her words without really realizing her profound impact on me. I can see now how I scrutinized her and drew inspiration from her work, but at the time I only recognized the comfort it gave me and the thrill that I could focus on her pain instead of indulging only in mine.

"Criminal" and "Shadowboxer" are her best known from *Tidal*, but it was her lesser-known songs that enchanted me. "Sleep to Dream," a tough and devastating takedown of, well, anyone, probably, and an assertion of independence, is her flawless opener. I remember the swell of my heart during those first beats the first time I pushed play. It's the second song, "Sullen Girl," with its lilting piano and gorgeous lyrics that astonished me from my initial listen.

I've read that she wrote it about being raped at age 12. She croons, "But he washed ashore / and took my pearl / and left an empty shell of me." For me, that line meant different things at different times. Whenever I cried to this song, it might've been because of a father or a rapist or a boy who broke my heart. The song also reads like the embodiment of the depression that took me years to recognize, which is another reason why it's so cutting.

I obsessed over her language. I'd already discovered Jim Morrison and poetry, so I wrote poetry all the time. I loved going through my thesaurus and finding new words. I'd find a single word and write an entire poem around it. Yet Apple had these amazing words she used all throughout a song. I think of "Never is a Promise" as the best example. In the pre-

chorus she sings, "But as the scenery grows, I see in different lights / The shades and shadows undulate in my perception." I paused the song and started it over just to hear the way those words worked together. And the last lines, "You'll say I need appeasing when I start to cry / But never is a promise and I'll never need a lie" get me every time. In fact, I still can't listen to that song without getting a lump in my throat.

Years later, when I read Joan Didion's idea that "the ability to think for one's self depends upon one's mastery of the language," I thought of *Tidal*. Fiona Apple wrote the majority of that album when she was 16 or so, and it's clear she had insight and self-awareness that most adults lack. And she captured not only my teenage angst, but also a universal feeling of disconnection, sadness, and hope. I am the writer I am in large part because of her. I know every word of every song on that album and I still appreciate the way she tapped into and enveloped emotion with strings of good words. Just take a moment to admire the poetry of the first few lines of "Pale September":

Pale September, I wore the time like a dress that year
The autumn days swung soft around me, like cotton on my skin
But as the embers of the summer lost their breath and disappeared
My heart went cold and only hollow rhythms resounded from within

I'm talking a lot about darker emotions and darker experiences, but of course there is much more to *Tidal* than those. There's empowerment in there, too – in "Sleep to Dream, of course, and in "Criminal," I found an outlet and an acknowledgement of sexuality. In many of her lines, I found permission to feel and to exist in my flawed form. And, again, I found out more about how words can be used to give voice to the pain and the terrible work of being human.

It's easy to find think pieces and odes to Fiona Apple, even now. With *Tidal*'s re-release in 2016, a spate of articles hit the internet reminding us of her genius and just how many girls found solace in Apple's first album. Kanye has called her an inspiration, articles discuss her "sexual confession," and so on. I'm glad to know how many loved and still love her, but there's something about her album that feels so personal to me that I find myself frustrated by others' take on it.

In my room, I alone had Fiona Apple. It was in my bedroom that I discovered and studied her, that I invoked her in my own writing, and that I shut off the world to escape in her voice and lyrics. I don't recall ever sharing my love for her with anyone, even my very close friends. Writing and reading in general were very personal to me then, so I doubt I even thought of it at the time. With friends, it was singing along to pop hits on the radio, not a critical analysis and deep appreciation of craft. My love for it is private and I struggle with trying to describe how meaningful it is. Years later, her album *When the Pawn* would give me the courage to leave a bad relationship and that particular album remains one of my favorites of all time. I can list specific moments listening to it and being affected by it in great detail. But there's something about *Tidal* that I can't shake. My attempts to articulate its power and significance feel trite and unworthy of her greatness. There aren't even many tangible memories that I associate with it – only a general sense of reverence and a squishy timeframe – but I know it's part of the fabric of me and I know that I relied on *Tidal* during times that were so harrowing that I've cut them off of me completely.

Perhaps part of that is because our love for albums is so bound up in our emotional resonance and histories that to share the love is to risk rejection of a part of us. I can't fully explain why *Tidal* meant so much then, nor why it still gets to me more than two decades later. But maybe she tells me herself in "Slow Like Honey,"

But my big secret
Gonna hover over your life
Gonna keep you reaching
When I'm gone like yesterday
When I'm high like heaven
When I'm strong like music
'Cause I'm slow like honey
And heavy with mood

An American Prayer was completely divorced from cultural context for me – I knew only the basics about Jim Morrison – but Fiona Apple had a little more. There were her videos, of course, and I cheered on her 1997 acceptance speech at the VMAs (“This world is bullshit”). I didn’t realize then what a cultural icon she was becoming, but I think that speaks more to the ways we exist as teenagers, firmly in the center of our own egos. Regardless, I know I recognized the bravery inherent in her confessions as well as the genius in her writing skills. *Tidal* was a constant for me, there whenever I had another broken heart or needed to pull back from the world. As she sang me to sleep every night, her words became ingrained in my psyche. Just as Jim Morrison influenced my writing, *Tidal* has flavored everything I’ve written since my first listen.