

## 1. CALLING ALL SOULS/INTRODUCTION

When people typically think of an *artist*, what usually comes to mind is someone who uses their imagination to capture and convey reality as it is seen and felt. In the main, what we do (or leave undone) in the course of our everyday lives is viewed as insignificant, unless or until we are thrown into the crucible of adverse circumstances and forced to demand from Self the strength and focus necessary to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds.

I write and recite these words on January the 2<sup>nd</sup> 2022, less than two years away from my proposed execution, which is scheduled to take place on November the 16<sup>th</sup> 2023. In other words, I'm standing on the brink of my existence, staring directly into that terrifying darkness that awaits us all. It's a difficult dilemma to be in, I won't lie, but the only way to face it is to make it mean something; it is in this very strict sense of the word that I consider myself an artist: someone who's trying to make a way out of no way.

The music you are about to listen to comes out of the realm of the impossible, something that, in reality, should not have been doable. Whether or not I am successful in stopping these people from killing me, you are right now listening to my last will and testament, the embodiment of everything I've endured, learned, and conquered. Because of the courage and vision of some very remarkable people who believed when there was no reason to believe, this project has come to fruition. My friend and brother, Albert Marques (who's accompanying me on piano right now) is foremost among these fearless souls. On paper, he and I shouldn't have anything in common. After all, we speak different languages and come from two very different worlds where there exist barriers that aren't always easy to overcome. But music is a bridge, and all we need do is open our hearts and minds to be able to comprehend the complexities that constitute our shared humanity. Ain't that right, Albert?

You see, for the past three decades I've lived out my existence in a cell on Ohio's death row, trapped in the carceral silence of solitary confinement. For the uninitiated, this means I've spent the bulk of my life (22 hours a day!) inside a cage no larger than the average closet. How have I survived without losing my mind? *Music!*

When I first arrived here almost thirty years ago, I was a deeply wounded and bitter person. And if it's true to say, as James Baldwin has said, that "hate, which can destroy so much, never failed to destroy the one who hated," I was surely on my way to a definite undoing.

That an innocent man could be thrown into the depths of hell is an unspeakable horror, one that stretches back to the agony and pain that attended the middle passage. Indeed, what I am going through is not unprecedented; it has been done before, a long time ago and recently. It took a fellow prisoner to point this out to me, an old man named Snoop who turned me on to the healing powers of music. It is to him that I owe my sanity. He gave me the means to sublimate my pain and the tools to reconstruct my mentality, which, in turn, allowed me to see and understand that what I'm caught up in is, in fact, the continuation of a centuries-long struggle against oppression and greed.

John Coltrane was my introduction to improvisational music, the music most commonly known as jazz, and served as the entry point into the vast reservoir of resistance and accumulated wisdom that accompanied would-be slaves on their journey to the New Land. Put in its proper perspective, this music is the blood-drenched document of man's inhumanity to man and the overcoming of it. John Coltrane's *A LOVE SUPREME* should be seen in this light: as the recapitulation of the fight to hold on to one's humanity. In the face of the unspeakable, unthinkable, one must not only speak and think clearly, but one must also strive to find the fortitude to love supremely. That's the moral of the story, folks.

When heard separately, the crashing of a cymbal can be likened to the sound of a wave; the snare to that of a heartbeat; the bass line is the rising and setting of the sun; the piano is how the wind blows; and the horn is the blood-curdling scream of someone trapped inside a dream gone mad. And it's only when these polyrhythmic sounds abound and come together that the Creator's voice can be heard: **EVERYTHING IS BEAUTIFUL!**

Planted within the perilous plight that awaited my ancestors was a seed of hope, which was watered and cultivated by music. Through the lifting up of every voice came the singing, came the ringing of this glorious thing called freedom, which is love's true destiny. Indeed: Love is the only freedom. Love is the only freedom! **LOVE IS THE ONLY FREEDOM!**

We assert our true value when we persist, when, in spite of all and everything, we insist on the highest and best from

ourselves and each other. This music is about trust and faith, about *stepping out even when you can't see the stairs* and believing that your foot WILL find something solid to stand on. Following your heart is the purest form of improvisation, being true to that voice that calls you forward and then doing, with dignity and grace, the thing that needs to be done. To change this system, to change the world, we must first change ourselves! That's what John Coltrane believed. It is to *this* that we are calling all souls. Calling all souls! CALLING ALL SOULS!

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### 3. TELL 'EM THE TRUTH

Sound engineer: Alright I'm rollin'. Let's go.

Albert: Are you ready, Keith?

Keith: I'm ready.

You know whenever I think about all the struggles and strife I've been through in my life,  
it's truly hard to comprehend.

I mean, I'm sitting inside a cage on death row, yo,  
so far away from home, so far away from everything I know.  
Might as well be sitting inside the hold of a slave ship. That's what it feels like to be here.

Yet it's hard sometimes to see how what I'm going through is connected to what my ancestors suffered and survived.  
Truth be told, I'm lucky to be alive, real talk.

Sometimes when things get too heavy to carry,  
I close my eyes and drift back to a time when everything was all good,  
a time when it was fully understood that being here on this earth was the biggest blessing.  
My grandfather taught me that.

You see I grew up in a neighborhood called The Village,  
a small enclave on the East side of Cleveland,  
a beautiful place, yo,  
with fruit trees and sweet things on every corner. No lie.

I was surrounded by my family and friends then.  
I'm telling you, there was no end to the love we shared,  
a real community planned by people whose only plan was to live and give everything they had.  
They gave it all.  
Children of slaves who braved the worst of it,  
so we, their children and grandchildren, could make the most of it. Yeah.

You know, to shield us from the pain of knowing the truth,  
they never explained what kind of society we were born into.  
They didn't tell us about all the tricks and traps that were designed to re-enslave,  
or about the hate that could deliver us to an early grave.

They wanted us to be free.  
They wanted us not to see all the ugliness around us.  
So a lot of us got caught up in the darkness,  
and lost the light that was meant to guide us through.

Gotta tell the children the truth.  
Tell them it's not what they say, but what they do.  
Tell them the *real* about reality,  
that life isn't meant to be fair, that it's meant to be lived.

Tell the children the truth. Yeah.  
*Tell 'em the truth.*

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## 5. UNINTENTIONAL VIGNETTES

Even after all we've just seen—  
George Floyd, Breonna Taylor  
and everything in between—  
people still don't want to believe it when I tell them  
I was sentenced to death for something I didn't do.  
When I tell them I've been in solitary confinement for 28 years, they find that hard to believe, too.

I can show them proof of my innocence and ten minutes later they'll ask me,  
"Keith, what did you do?"

In a country where black men can be killed for simply running down the street, or standing on the sidewalk,  
no one wants to believe the truth.

After a prison riot, I was falsely accused and charged with nine counts of aggravated murder  
almost immediately *after* I was offered a deal:  
Plead guilty and the nine counts will be drastically reduced.

*Problem was, I didn't kill anybody.*

So when people ask what did I do  
I tell them I did what any innocent person would do:  
I pled, "Not guilty." I demanded a trial. I told the truth.  
Since I didn't do anything, I assumed I would be found *not guilty*,  
but an all-white jury was assembled and evidence of my innocence was suppressed.  
That's how the criminal justice system works in America when you are poor and black:  
If you don't have the capital, you get the punishment, and that's just a simple fact.

It took over two decades for me to find and realign the pieces of my case.  
On the way, I nearly lost my mind.  
Twenty-three hours a day in a cell is hell, believe me.  
John Coltrane saved my life.  
When all my hope was gone and I felt most alone in my struggle,  
it was A Love Supreme that meant to everything to me.  
It gave me the strength and motivation to continue my fight.

It was my grandmother who told me that what was in the dark would come to light,  
but that in the meantime, between time, it was important to keep my heart right,  
to not allow the darkness I was moving through to conquer me.  
"The truth will come out," she said, and she was right.

The system is broken, and deep down inside a lot of us know it.  
And it's broken because the people who run it are broken.  
So the goal, if you want to be free, is to not let it break you.

I've seen a lot of people give up along the way,  
give in to what other people had to say,  
but it's important when you're traveling this road of life to believe in yourself, no matter what.  
Keep fighting. Keep moving forward.  
Never, never, never give up.  
That's what's up.  
*Never give up.*

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## 7. ON LIVING (Nazim Hikmet)

Living is no laughing matter  
you must live with great seriousness  
like a squirrel, for example  
I mean without looking for something beyond and above living,  
I mean living must be your whole life.  
Living is no laughing matter:  
you must take it seriously,  
so much so and to such a degree  
that, for example, your hands tied behind your back,  
your back to the wall,  
or else in a laboratory  
in your white coat and safety glasses,  
you can die for people  
even for people whose faces you've never seen,  
even though you know living  
is the most real, the most beautiful thing.  
I mean, you must take living so seriously  
that even at seventy, for example, you'll plant olive trees  
and not for your children, either,  
but because although you fear death you don't believe it,  
because living, I mean, weighs heavier.

Let's say we're seriously ill, need surgery  
which is to say we might not get up  
from the white table.  
Even though it's impossible not to feel sad  
about going a little too soon,  
we'll still laugh at the jokes being told,  
we'll look out the window to see if it's raining,  
or still wait anxiously  
for the latest newscast  
Let's say we're at the front  
for something worth fighting for, say.  
There, in the first offensive, on that very day,  
we might fall on our face, dead.  
We'll notice with a curious anger,  
but we'll still worry ourselves to death  
about the outcome of the war,  
which could last years.

Let's say we're in prison and close to fifty,  
and we have eighteen more years, say,  
before the iron doors will open.  
We'll still live with the outside,  
with its people and animals, struggle and wind  
I mean with the outside beyond the walls.  
I mean, however and wherever we are,  
we must live as if we will never die.

This earth will grow cold, a star among stars  
and one of the smallest,  
a gilded mote on blue velvet  
I mean *this*, our great earth.  
This earth will grow cold one day,  
not like a block of ice or a dead cloud even  
but like an empty walnut it will float along  
in pitch-black space

We must grieve for this now  
we have to feel this sorrow now  
for the world must be loved this much  
if we're going to say "I lived."

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## 8. BE FREE (ALBERT MARQUÈS/KEITH LAMAR)

This is how it all began  
in confusion, pain  
a spark turned to a flame  
Ten people died, lost their lives  
somebody had to be blamed  
Even though it would never be explained how  
after 22,000 pieces of evidence was collected  
none of it could be connected to a crime  
This is what blows the mind!  
The phony uncorroborated testimony  
of jailhouse informants willing to sell their souls  
for the chance of an early parole  
But the state had the power to indict  
they had the power to incite  
an angry community out for blood

Let it not be misunderstood:  
An eye for an eye, somebody has to die  
An eye for an eye, somebody has to die!  
It's hard to cut through the cacophony of sound  
so many different voices  
so many people standing around  
"Keep your mouth closed, Keith" I was constantly told  
An all-white jury, white judge, black robe  
Eighteen years without touching a soul  
I went for this, went through this  
sat by silently as they tortured me  
They tortured me!  
They TORTURED ME!  
sat by silently as they tortured me  
Had to open my eyes before I could see  
open my mouth before I could speak  
Put a pen in my hand...THIS is what they did to me!  
I'm here to speak truth to power, yo  
to tell you that WE have the power, yo  
that we have the keys to the kingdom, yo

So hard to believe, but you need to know:  
Until all of us are free, none of us can be  
Until all of us are free, none of us can be!  
Until all of us are free, NONE OF US CAN BE!

It took me a long time to find my way out  
a long time to understand what it's all about  
Find out what any people will silently accept  
and you have found out the exact amount of injustice that will be applied  
We have to draw the line  
do more than just survive  
To live we have to be willing to give  
that's the only way that peace can be achieved

the only way the soul can come to rest  
We have to reach for the best in ourselves  
So we can be free  
So we can be free!  
So we can BE FREE!

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## 10. NO MAN'S LAND (ROY NATHANSON/KEITH LAMAR)

This shit can test a man  
make you doubt what you know  
what you understand  
and leave you stranded in a no-man's-land

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Navigating this insanity  
takes a lot of energy  
a lot of moving around  
constant scrutiny

Whole days float by in pieces  
My job:  
to assemble the moments  
make them mean something

But sometimes  
the beginning is the end  
and the part that goes here  
appears out of sequence  
forcing me to rush ahead  
or back to the beginning again

Naturally  
things get confusing  
and I end up losing  
track of time

*You can lose your mind down here*

This shit can test a man  
make you doubt what you know  
what you understand  
and leave you stranded in a no-man's-land

This shit can test a man  
make you doubt what you know  
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and leave you stranded in a no-man's-land

Being here is like being trapped in a lucid dream  
except it's a nightmare  
and I can't just close my eyes and fly away

To survive  
to stay alive  
I have to engage and wage a constant battle  
And to the victor go not the spoils  
but the realization that Sisyphus is a real person  
who's been in solitary confinement *for three decades!*

And that's not even the half of it  
Indeed, the truly terrifying thing is that  
no one can hear me scream down here  
My mouth opens, yes  
but the voice that comes out is not my own  
saying words that do not belong to my real thoughts and feelings:  
"How's it going?"  
"Thanks a lot."  
"Have a nice day."  
This, when what I really want to say is:  
"GO TO HELL!"

But that would be redundant, wouldn't it  
given the fact that we're already here  
And it turns out that the devil does wear a blue dress sometimes  
or a blue button-down, red tie, or high heels  
I mean this shit is real!  
And more often than not  
they come clad in a sad uniforms  
made up of different shades of gray  
which serves as camouflage  
so they can play the gray areas without being detected

I'm saying: this shit can test a man  
make you doubt what you know and understand  
and leave you stranded in a no-man's-land  
as in NO MAN WOULD SIT BACK AND ACCEPT THIS SHIT!

This shit can test a man  
make you doubt what you know  
what you understand  
and leave you stranded in a no-man's-land

This shit can test a man  
make you doubt what you know  
what you understand  
and leave you stranded in a no-man's-land

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This shit can test a man  
make you doubt what you know  
what you understand  
and leave you stranded in a no-man's-land

But what to do when your hands are tied  
when your mind is tired  
when everything you believe in is crashing to the ground around you  
and your life is seeping out the hole in your soul  
like blood from a bullet wound?

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## 12. AFRO BLUE + UNTITLED POEM (KEITH LAMAR)

Dream of a land  
my soul is from  
I hear a hand  
stroke on a drum  
Children of slaves  
Master of none

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God is alive and  
resides inside of us.  
All we have to do is trust  
and have faith,  
stop the madness and give thanks  
for the blessings that shape  
our lives....  
We have to look ahead instead  
of always looking back to the past,  
slow down instead of moving so fast,  
and laugh, reach deep and have  
the courage to dream  
about beautiful days  
and different ways  
to give, with love... in peace.

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Dream of a land  
my soul is from  
I hear a hand  
stroke on a drum

Seeds of delight  
cocoa hue  
Children of slaves  
Land of the brave  
Afro blue

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## 15. THE DROWNED AND THE SAVED

You know in this country  
most of us operate under the delusion



that we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century  
and that somehow  
without actually doing the work  
we have overcome our history  
It's not true  
Instead of hanging people from trees  
we use the so-called criminal justice system to perform legalized lynchings  
and take this as a sign of progress  
We confuse form with substance

When I embarked on this journey 29 years ago  
I was given the choice to either plead guilty to something I didn't do  
or face the death penalty  
I was twenty-five years old  
and the thought that I would have to give up my life  
represented a great burden to me  
a burden that I wasn't so sure I could bear  
I didn't understand back then that there was something more valuable  
than simply being alive  
although I intuitively understood that existing was not the same thing as living  
I also somehow understood that in order to live with myself  
I had to be true to myself  
and for this I would have to pay a hell of a price

After I was sentenced to death I was thrown in solitary confinement  
It felt like I was thrown into the middle of the ocean  
Try to imagine it:  
water as far as the eye can see  
and it's just you by yourself, floating  
That's what solitary confinement is like  
In situations such as this, God ceases to be an abstraction  
something that exists apart from who you are and what you do  
This is the domain of *the drowned and the saved*  
Life is very real here  
and your senses mean more to you than they ever will:  
What you can see, what you can feel  
what you can hold in your hands  
these are the only things that matter  
You begin to comprehend that, under the circumstances  
a piece of driftwood can be God  
I mean the smallest thing can save or change your life  
and this piece of driftwood, a book, a dream, a random stranger  
has not come to inquire about your particular race or religion  
Instead, it has been sent to ask a more basic question:  
*Do you want to live?*

And what does it mean to be alive?  
What are we doing here?  
If you ask Nazim Hikmet, who's one of my favorite poets,  
He would tell you that, "Living is no laughing matter"  
which, to me, implies that we didn't come here to play  
to have fun  
And if that be the case then I can live right here where I am  
right here on death row  
I needed to know that  
More importantly, I needed to know that it's possible to lose everything  
and still be saved  
At some point, I had to be willing to accept that the vastness I was so afraid of was God

which exists inside of me, inside of all of us  
To accept this truth, I had to go within  
and teach myself how not to be afraid  
And what exactly did I have to be afraid of anyway?  
*Death? Hell?*

Well, as James Baldwin once famously said,  
“When one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring,  
one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring.”  
I amen his clarity  
The arc of the moral universe bends towards justice, we are told  
This may very well be  
but we, with our own hands and mind  
must bend it  
We have to do the work  
People are dying who could be saved