

Sean Sullivan has been serenading the California coast for more than ten years now as the creative force behind several unorthodox neo-folk outfits out of Monterey and Oakland. Warbler, Sullivan's latest and most enduring experiment, recalls the psychedelic experimentation of Skip Spence and the haunting fireside verse of Phosphorescent and O'Death, playfully combining a keen grasp of disparate genres with explosive sociopolitical commentary to create some rare protest music for the culturally disenfranchised.

Set to a brave blend of electro-folk instrumentation — beat-driven fingerpicking playfully layered with synth, slide, brass, close harmony, reverb and a panoply of effects — *Sea of Glass*, Warbler's 2015 release, often sounds like an apocalyptic indictment of everything American. Amid Sullivan's dreamy warbles, a self-described postmodern anti-folksinger inveighs against the aggression and avarice of U.S. foreign policy ("Be the Beast") and the increasing autocracy and immunity the nation's corporatist police state enjoys at our expense ("Iron Scarecrow," "The Politician," "Koolaid"). Critically, however, he subsumes these criticisms under the consumerism, resignation, self-deceit and self-congratulation that bind together and define the American masses, a group the songwriter strives to disown but among whom he cannot help but find himself: "We are the hungry, we swallow it whole, slaves to the lender for paper tender."

With each macabre indictment of an external body ("corporatists, they pucker lips 'round Machiavelli's bullhorn"; "imposter father fixes strings, hogties our hands and feet; his brothers lick their fingers, take pay for tinkering"), Sullivan's anti-folk persona also pillories himself and the people fighting these very same enemies. "Be the Beast" makes a refrain of "I will kill for peace," which finds the underlying culprit of the American state's global escapades in individual expediency and fear, while "Iron Scarecrow" ends with the devastating concession: "We want a failure, a father to shame."

At the same time, each track seems to model a step in the singer's internal transformation. He may begin by censuring the architects of our disposable culture, but he increasingly finds meaning in the revelations of human experience and divine deliverance ("Testimony," "Why Do I Do?" and "Tidal Effect") — subjects he treats with a frankness akin to Sufjan Stevens.

Right in the middle of this broad journey from anger to surrender stand the three arguably strongest tracks on the record, which all share a slightly tangential relationship to this loose narrative arc. "Golden Gate," a heartbreaking suicide ballad evocative of an autumn sunset, exploits Sullivan's command of nightmare metaphors to narrate a single individual's struggles with doubt and mental illness while "The Idiot," Sullivan's inquisitive self-portrait, dives into the songwriter's past to probe his frustrations and link them with the naïveté and idealism born amid spiritual transformation. Between these, "Inhibitor Inhibitor," driven by a flourish of imagery and harmony, can pass as a thinly veiled invitation to the wonders of psychedelic insight while doubling as a warning against mining one's vaults too deeply ("When you peek through keyhole eyes, you're overwhelmed and crystalized; the salty light will shatter you, dilate and vaporize"). Together, the three songs reveal how personally the songwriter takes his plight against this planet — the cost of succumbing to deceit, the treasures we conceal from ourselves, and the value of dissent.

“Tidal Effect” closes out the record with a paean to the “painter of painters, the author of color” intoned earlier in “Why Do I Do?” Cleansed by the “light and richest fire” of God, he relinquishes his bloodlust and vengeance amid a nuanced chorus of bells and harmonics, assured that all the hardships of this life can do nothing to shake the hold God has on his soul.

Bridging the hollows that many modern troubadours often leave between their pitchfork Philippics and candle-lit soul ballads, *Sea of Glass* and its spirited approach to songcraft approaches true greatness — not only in the world of rock-forward folktronica, but also as a bright new voice in the wildly variegated and rapidly evolving landscape of West Coast pop.

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