

I Should Call Them: For singer Dua Saleh, the apocalypse is essentially an afterthought

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I Should Call Them (2024), the first full-length release by singer Dua Saleh, is a concept album about two lovers who meet, separate and reunite while the world ends.

By choosing such a setting for their (as the performer prefers to be referred to) album, Saleh acknowledges indirectly that the world is wracked by deep and potentially fatal crises. Yet this album neither seeks to explain the apocalypse that it briefly depicts (essentially as an afterthought) nor suggests that it can be prevented. Instead, it evokes the heady, insular world of two lovers who are indifferent to what's going on outside their window. In this way, it unintentionally provides an accurate and unflattering picture of the social layer to which the singer belongs.

Saleh, who identifies as nonbinary, was born in Sudan to parents originally from Chad and Darfur. During the Second Sudanese Civil War in the 1990s, Saleh's family became refugees. They lived for a time in a refugee camp in Eritrea before moving to the United States, where they finally settled in St. Paul, Minnesota.

In college, Saleh double-majored in sociology and gender studies and became active in identity-based groups such as the Pan-Afrikan Student Union and LGBTQIA Student Services. They began writing poetry, partly to grapple with their experiences and partly to make money. Amid school and relationship difficulties, Saleh felt an urge to start singing and writing songs. For inspiration, they drew on Sudanese music, 1940s jazz and 1990s hip hop.

Saleh's distinctive identity as a singer was already evident on their moody debut EP [extended play] *N?r* (2019). On the *Rosetta* (2020) EP, Saleh included a song sung partly in Arabic because they wanted "to break into the Sudani market." *Crossover* (2021),

another EP, followed a year later.

On *I Should Call Them*, Saleh continues to develop their talents as a singer. Using a palette of vocal techniques, they conjure multiple personas that alternately (and sometimes simultaneously) seduce and disturb. At times, Saleh feigns innocence with a falsetto that nevertheless carries a chilly undercurrent. At other times, their breathy singing evokes a scary intimacy. They also deploy a husky alto or digitally alter the pitch of their voice to achieve otherworldly effects. Occasionally, Saleh adopts a mannered pronunciation that recalls Billie Holiday. Behind Saleh's deliberate use of technique lurks carnal desire. Their singing conjures the thrill of the taboo, the seductive power of the forbidden or strange.

Unlike the austere *N?r*, *I Should Call Them* is mostly given over to luxuriant R&B. "Chi Girl," the opening song, begins with a dreamy, distant choir before Saleh enters with their falsetto. An unhurried, insinuating bassline contrasts with their vocals. It is not easy to tell that the album has a story, but this song seems to describe the meeting of the two lovers. "Chi girl, what's the mood? / I like that you're kind of rude." The lyrics are not profound, but the song is enjoyable.

Like "Chi Girl," the rest of the album focuses on love and sex. "Want" is one of the album's few dance songs, and Saleh sings it with an attractive vibrato. The lyrics convey the charge of a new and forbidden romance. "You don't even wanna keep it on the down low," Saleh sings. "Can't be tippin' off the edge of the tightrope." Again, the lyrics are not necessarily memorable but convey the mood effectively. "I know we probably shouldn't, but ..."

As the album goes on, it becomes clear that the lovers (or Saleh) are shutting out the outside world. The libidinous "Bo Peep" centers on a nursery rhyme

conceit that is not as clever or successful as the singer perhaps had hoped. Yet Saleh's vocals, a low electronic bass drum and electronic hand claps provide some interest.

"Television," one of the more memorable songs, also exemplifies the creativity of the album's arrangements. It begins with pastoral sounds that recall tweeting birds. Then a slow beat accompanied by slap bass begins. Saleh sounds gentle and almost childlike: reassuring yet threatening. Do we hear fleeting hints of the coming catastrophe? "You never know what's next, fighter jets," Saleh sings. Later, "Sunset comes around in its final form." Reeds and trumpets enter toward the end of the song.

Saleh begins the final song, "2excited," at the lowest end of their register, a point verging on vocal fry. Their delivery is lethargic as they indulge in a "shopping spree on Melrose." Then, in passing, they refer to flames and bodies. "I don't wanna leave here feelin' too alone," Saleh sings. The music begins a crescendo. The drums reach the tempo of hardcore punk, and the sound becomes distorted. We hear unintelligible shouting, a scream — then nothing.

Little, if anything, on the album has prepared us for this moment, and nothing explains it. The world has ended, but how and why? Did anyone try to stop this disaster? The listener has no inkling, because the album has focused on romance, seduction and sex. (Even the fact that the songs all concern the same couple is unclear.) Except in the most glancing of references, the album does not refer to climate change, world war or any of the other urgent threats to human existence.

This focus on one community at the expense of the rest of the world is not new for Saleh. "In Sudan, there's a lot of queer, trans and nonbinary people who are closeted, so I try to put out as much content that's like, the gay and trans agenda, as possible," they told *i-D* in 2020. Daily life is no doubt oppressive for this group in Sudan, which until recently was under Sharia law.

But most Sudanese, of whatever gender or sexual orientation, fear for their very lives. Sudan is one of the world's poorest and least developed countries. For more than a year, war has raged between its military and a rival paramilitary force, which is carrying out ethnic cleansing against non-Arabs. More than 24,000 people have died, and more than 14 million people

(about 30 percent of the population) have been displaced. About half of the population faces acute hunger, and some regions are at risk of famine.

Saleh's apparent lack of interest in the crises gripping Sudan and the wider world reflects the malign influence of identity politics. Based primarily in the upper middle class, identity politics is used to agitate for a greater share of resources and privileges to be allotted to people of a given gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity. Its aim is not social justice but personal advancement. It seeks to preclude any focus on the working class: the only social force that can bring about true equality.

Saleh likely is troubled by the state of the world and may have wanted to respond to it on *I Should Call Them*. But the focus on gender and sexuality has resulted in an album marked mostly by escapism and hedonism. Given the creativity, thoughtfulness and vocal talent that they have demonstrated, one would expect them to be capable of more.



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