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Commentary: The Music of Pandemics and Epidemics

The sorrow of an opioid epidemic happening in tandem with a global pandemic is communicated poignantly by musicians often playing “three chords and the truth.”

by **Alana Anton**
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There’s something about hearing a song for the first time and thinking, “I know this.” You’ve heard the lyrics in your mind, know the location, can feel the emotions—you already know the tune. Lately, many of the songs I hear reflect our current reality a little too seamlessly.

It’s been a sad, grey space to live in, this timeline. On one side of the road, there’s a billboard warning against opioid usage; on the other side a different billboard encourages Covid-19 vaccinations. Time barely means anything anymore, unless you’re dopesick, or Covid-sick. Then it means everything.

In the 12-month period ending in May 2020, over 81,000 lives were snuffed out by opioid—or opioid-adjacent—overdoses. Compared to data from the year prior, these deaths increased by up to 98% in some western states and 50% in some rural areas.

Rural folks have struggled to find ways to get vaccinated, manage addiction, and reduce harm. While the coronavirus pandemic surges upward, the opioid epidemic worsens too, in Covid's shadow.

When you watch the United States reach an 800,000 person death toll at the hands of a global pandemic and know that at least some of them died dopesick, alone, without proper care, when you hear “three chords and the truth” (an oft-quoted phrase coined by American songwriter Harlan Howard to describe country music), that despair lodges in a spot under your sternum.

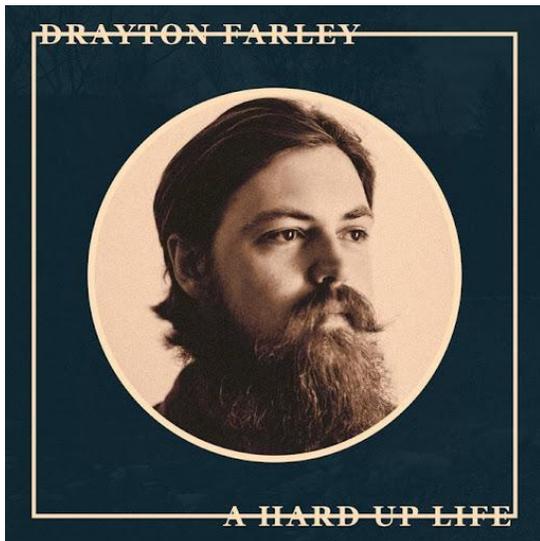
“Livin’ Next to Leroy” isn’t a single on the radio, but it was on Ashley McBryde’s setlist in August 2021 at the Ryman Auditorium. At the show I sang low to myself, inside my face mask, thinking that if someone came up and asked me for a spoon that evening, I would not have placed myself at a bluegrass concert. And yet, a love of bluegrass doesn’t shield a person from our current reality. I do know the places where people go to die. I have thought about how that “last hit’ll get ya, boy.”

In fact, it’s not such a stretch to say that my life and this fictional Leroy’s—a representative for so many people who are suffering—might overlap. I could be “livin’ next to Leroy”, or near people like him. I wonder, would Leroy have access to the vaccine? Or would he have been left to die among those we have failed to protect from both a pandemic and an epidemic?



Ashley McBryde performs at the Ryman Auditorium, August 2021. (Photo by Alana Anton.)

I wonder if Leroy is the man in Drayton Farley's "Blue Collar," working so hard, the pain is unreal, and relief comes only from a prescription for the opioids those billboards warn against. When you're from a place where "work is all there is", the reality of capitalism as a health risk is something you know in your bones.



The album "A Hard Up Life" by Drayton's Farley features the song "Blue Collar." (Image via Bandcamp.)

The way I see it, music will always shine a light on the deepest secrets of society and it's certainly illuminating those now. Rates of Covid have been highest among the least of ours: the unhoused, the incarcerated, the addicted. These songs can be mapped onto so much of the suffering we are experiencing collectively.

Is McBryde's Leroy dopesick and afraid? Does he wonder if anyone will give him medical care in the county jail?

How can we hear these songs as anything but a condemnation of the people and things we care about? When I listened this feeling of demoralization sung out in The Hill Country Devil's "Kerr County Dopesick Blues" it was so palpable, so material, that tears would not come but hid just behind my eyes as I drove up I-85 into the Blue Ridge.



The Hill Country Devil is the moniker of Texas-raised singer-songwriter Hayden Karchmer. (Image via The Hill Country Devil's Facebook page.)

I fear that often those without work or as THCD sings, those with only “golden scrip (worthless outside of Wal-Mart) in their back pocket,” will find no quarter in an ER. A cell, perhaps.

There is a deep sadness to the song of the weary worker. It's the song Mother Jones took up when she marched for the souls and safety of children in Alabama factories in 1903. It is the same song now, but a march for souls and the security of our sickest is not underway.

Nine thousand opioid-related deaths a month are projected in the upcoming data for 2020-2021, meanwhile, the U.S. just passed a grand total of 800,000 deaths from Covid-19. Lately, Covid overshadows the horror of our ongoing opioid crisis, and the bitter debate about vaccines drowns out the deep tragedy of this double, and compounding, pandemic.

I listen to these songs that reflect our current reality stingingly well and wonder what ballads will be born of this new bleak epoch. After all, our songs often tell the stories we refuse to grapple with, and the dire consequences of that refusal.