

# On punk rock, the role of the artist, and the importance of ceremony



Composer, conductor, and Killing Joke vocalist Jaz Coleman on the importance of magic and ritual, punk rock as a gateway to the world, and why every person has the capacity for genius.

December 2, 2019 -

As told to J. Bennett, 2695 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Inspiration](#), [Beginnings](#), [Independence](#), [Mental health](#), [Politics](#), [Success](#).

**You've talked about the importance of magic in music and art. How has that principle guided your artistic path over the years?**

When you start out and you just have dreams, you need magic in order to make those dreams happen. It's really that simple. On the last tour that we did across England, there was an occasion where somebody who was in my class at school turned up, and they said that when I was 14 and a half I said I was going to start a band and make a success of it, and there we were 40 years later.

But, of course, when you start, you have so many odds stacked against you that you need to tap into a higher force, if you like, in order to overcome the overwhelming odds. For example, when I met [Killing Joke drummer] Big Paul, how the hell did we find two other people who had a revolutionary style of playing, and at the same time they understand geopolitics, and at the same time they had some sort of understanding of the mystery tradition? It was a tall order, but we found them through magic. It only took a couple of weeks.

And then, when I look at my crazy ideas... You know, there I am, I leave school at the age of 16; I've got four criminal offenses before the age of 16. And then the journey from squats and this kind of life, to becoming a maestro with orchestra is a long journey, and I owe everything to Killing Joke, because Killing Joke was the principle of self-education that got me there.

**You've always spoken about politics, capitalism, and the environment in Killing Joke lyrics. Do you feel it's your responsibility—or the artist's responsibility in general—to hold a mirror up to society?**

Well, I think the role of art itself is such an important function. It was Lawrence Durrell who said, "When the mob becomes an artist, we will enter the golden age." And you know, I feel this is very much so. The facts that have been thrown at us—for example, that with artificial intelligence 70% of the workforce is going to be laid off. Well you see, that's a good and a bad thing in many respects—mankind will have more time on his hands to think more beautiful thoughts and make the planet a better place. The role of the arts is going to be very important when we have a workforce that is no longer needed. We're moving towards a time when the model of capitalism is no longer needed as well. You can't have exponential growth indefinitely—we're going to have to replace this with models of sustainability and human well-being, frankly.

**When Killing Joke started in 1978, the punk movement was in full bloom in London and across England. What appealed to you about the punk attitude, and does that attitude still inform what you do today?**

Yeah. Punk really gave me everything. First of all, it gave me that sense of having no fear of failure. The ability to have a go, as it were, at anything you like, whether it be acting or architecture. Punk has given me that ability to be able to move from one medium to another without even thinking twice about it, so it was a vehicle of freedom for me.

**You recently wrote and conducted music for the St. Petersburg Philharmonic for your *Magna Invocatio* album. Besides the fact that you're working with different musicians in Killing Joke as opposed to the orchestra, how does the musical or artistic approach differ for you between the two things?**

With classical music, it's the composer's vision. It's one man's vision, and he's the apex of the pyramid. The orchestra is the broad base, if you like. Whereas—and I compare it to the communists, which is the collective experience—my work with Killing Joke is a shared experience. And I genuinely like doing both of these functions. I love sharing the experience of being in Killing Joke with the guys, especially these guys I've been with since my teenage years. It's such a blessing, to put it mildly. At the same time, I love the complete—how should I put this—autocratic control that I have as a composer. [laughs]

**Why the St. Petersburg Philharmonic, specifically?**

The first record I ever bought was called *Russian Orchestral Masterpieces*, and it had "Prince Igor" and "Capriccio Espagnol" and all of the Russian orchestral classics on it. And I just fell in love with this sound. That was 1968, so since that time I've been drawn culturally to Russian music, and more importantly the way Russians approach classical music is a very different school of thinking, the way they get from A to B, as it is with many other things Russia does. But when it comes to classical music, it's so very special working in Russia. The standard that they deliver is fantastic.

**The subtitle of *Magna Invocatio* is *A Gnostic Mass for Choir and Orchestra Inspired By the Sublime Music of Killing Joke*. Do you view the record as a re-imagining of Killing Joke's music?**

To an extent it's the fulfillment of a prophecy, if you like. Because when you consider that when I started with Big Paul Ferguson, we did hermetic and magical rituals to find the other two [members of Killing Joke]. You know, the things that have happened and Killing Joke's role with the occult agenda, if you like, some four decades later, it's really the fulfillment of what we started. Indeed, in the third movement of *Magna Invocatio* are some of the lines that we said in our vows when we were 18, 19 years of age.

At the same time, I can remember having conversations with Big Paul in 1978 and reflecting on how bands, when they start their careers, are so idealistic, and then by the time they get near the end of their career they're kind of, well, sold out or become part of the establishment, as it were. We knew that we would never know until we'd gone through the journey ourselves. Well, here we are some four decades later having gone through the journey ourselves. But I cannot say that Killing Joke has lost any of its rebelliousness. It has not—far from it. It's become more rebellious as we've gotten older, and the anger has become even more focused. Because it's a bit like disaster capitalism, Killing Joke. Of course Killing Joke will get bigger as the world moves toward singularity. And as things get worse, our work is understood more broadly.

We've been saying the same things for years and years and years, you know. We were the first band to understand that our lives were being ruled by corporations. We were singing about it long before it was talked about, and the things that are happening... You can look at our early work and we were 30, 40 years ahead of our time.

**What were some of the challenges as far as maintaining a relationship between the original Killing Joke music and the reinterpretations or re-imaginings on the orchestral album?**

Well, for me the orchestra is a natural language and I don't really use my brain a great deal. I use my second

brain, which is my art, to feel things as opposed to think things through. The creative process is not a cerebral process at all. It's something that's essentially felt. And the way I write music is I turn the mind off for a start, and my secret to writing music is forgetting about music.

**I love that.**

If you make your life colorful, and you make sure you have a series of contrasts so that you're traveling to all the places you wanted to go to, and you're doing the things you always wanted to do, then it just comes to you. You see, it comes to you without you even realizing it. You can't download it. It's a very spontaneous process. The best weapon you can have is a map of the world, and put pins in it and dream of where you want to go.

**The album is also described as a Gnostic Mass. How do you view the relationship between music and religion?**

The first thing that attracted me to music was music with ceremony or music with ritual. Religion is another thing altogether. But ceremony is very important, and I'm interested in ritualistic music primarily. I have been since childhood.

**Why do you think that is?**

I think it's because of previous incarnations. But it's easier for me to understand the idea of transmigration of souls or reincarnation because part of my DNA is Indian, so maybe it's a little bit strange for you to talk about. But for me, when I met the various individuals in Killing Joke I had the sense of déjà vu. Actually the word for déjà vu, when it's personified, means loss of forgetfulness, which is remembering.

And if you think that Plato said that all knowledge is remembering, and then if you add to that my fervent conviction that each one of us possesses the genetic history of mankind within us and we can tap into it, we can remember everything, because we're connected. We're connected to everything that's happened. And we haven't even tapped into our potential yet. Each one of us is so, so gifted. Most of us don't realize that we're born with innate genius, and that life is the location of our genius and the selfless execution of it, really.

And we have this in us. Each one of us has a god gift. You asked me what punk gave me. Punk gave me all this—the ability to realize that we are all gifted and life is the location of your god gift, and when you selflessly execute your god gift you are spiritually and biologically in harmony with the universe. You are secure in your personal sovereignty to the extent that you become king or queen. That's what I believe in the kind of meritocracy that I've discovered through self-education.

**There's a theory that rock 'n' roll actually replaced religion for many people when the Beatles came along, and that popular music has retained the superior position ever since. What do you make of that?**

I'm all for dissolving all organized forms of religion, especially Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the patristic religions, because essentially they are apocalyptic cults which focus the consciousness of their followers on basically apocalyptic events that will bring about their Messiahs. And, you know, when the scientists are telling us that we are all participants in creating our own reality, I think it's very dangerous to have these dark religious cults. We need to outgrow them. Now, that being said, I don't believe that we should continue without spiritual compass, but spiritual growth is different from organized religion.

**You've said that *Magna Invocatio* is designed to "lift the listener up and away from the traumas of our world into another dimension, a more desirable reality of positivity and possibility." Why is that important to you?**

I think it's important to keep your visualizations right. Napoleon said, "Beware of the man who dreams with his eyes open." And that is somebody like me, where basically what I dream manifests. It comes true. Most of the things that I've dreamt have become very real in my life. So to summarize, we have to be careful about what we dream, and we have to visualize how we want things to develop in a responsible way, because we have the ability to shape the future. And art has this.

You've heard of the expression, "Life follows art." Well, it most certainly does, and that's why *Magna Invocatio* is such an important work because I wanted to create something that whatever frame of mind you're in at any point in the day, you could listen to it and it would lift your spirit to a place of possibility. I really wanted to do this and I also wanted to explore the idea of planetary consciousness.

We can find so much in common with people all over the world, our common sense of purpose; the things that we share as human beings. We need to find these factors, and so this is, for me, planetary consciousness that we need to evolve to. At the moment, things are very dangerous. We're in a time that's more dangerous than the Cold War of the late '70s and early '80s.

**I agree.**

During the last Cold War, there were two sides with a hotline between them. Now, there are multiple players with nuclear weapons, and there's no hotline, for example, between Tel Aviv and Tehran, or any real hotline between Pakistan and India. Of course we can keep going like this, so we're increasing the law of averages for unforeseen consequences to occur. I mean, it's inevitable that we are. And at the same time, if we continue to employ capitalism, we have a resource war ahead of us, there being only a finite amount of quantifiable resources on the planet.

So *Magna Invocatio* is where I've actually, at the very end of the whole work, dared to imagine what world peace would sound like. A polycentric world peace. And this recording... You have to remember I've done a lot of recordings in my life, but this recording is like no other. I've played it nonstop every single day since I recorded it, because it has a function. It takes me out of the mundane world and it connects me... It connects me with divine forces instantaneously when I listen to it.

**Do you think that's what all music and art should aspire to?**

Well, that's one of the things music can do. It's not what we do with Killing Joke, necessarily. Killing Joke is more of a social function, which is to say it helps us process the horrors of the 21st century in a way that replaces aggression and the war impulse with an effective surrogate. So I think that the violent art that Killing Joke is known for stops us from becoming potential criminals. [laughs]

**In addition to Killing Joke's social function, you've also talked about the "panoramic beauty" of the band's music. What do you mean by that?**

I was such an angry person in my teenage years, and I know Big Paul was as well. But I think that the music helped us focus or direct our aggression into something and transmute it to something more positive. So I see it as essentially a force for good—this violent art is a force for good. That's what we discovered with Killing Joke.

***Magna Invocatio* was also designed to be listened to in a single sitting, which I think is important. That's something we've lost in the digital age—the art of creating the ebb and flow of an album meant to be listened to as a whole—don't you think?**

One of the great things we all love is when we sit around a table and eat with the people we love and have a feast. And so one of the things I wanted to do is create the music for the feast of the gods. And the thing is, you can't listen to Killing Joke music and eat. It's not good for the fucking digestion, you know? [laughs] So it's good that we've re-scored it so now you can put *Magna Invocatio* on just as you're putting the wine and the appetizers on the table, and by the time you've finished dessert and you're getting the cigars and the weed out with coffee and chocolates, the music is still going.

**\*\*Essential Killing Joke: \*\***

1. *Killing Joke* (1980)
2. *Night Time* (1985)

3. *Brighter Than A Thousand Suns* (1986)

4. *Killing Joke* (2003)

5. *Absolute Dissent* (2010)

Name

Jaz Coleman

Vocation

Composer, Conductor, Vocalist

□

Photo by Ester Segarra