

March 25th, 2010 was the fateful day I met my friend Dani on World of Warcraft, she thought my avatar hopping around in Dalaran (a major city in the game) as a cat was cute and we struck up a banter. Fast forward to a few weeks later (she lives in New Zealand so we aren't on at the same time much with the 17 hour time difference) and we're both on at the same time so we start chatting again, and eventually the conversation turns to musical tastes. After hearing that I love metal and a good story, she tells me to look up "Age of Shadows" by Ayreon and I was hooked instantly. For starters, any CD with a title in binary (01011001 - Y) wins over my heart as a double CS/Math major. That, along with the amazing melodies and story idea, meant I downloaded the CD off Amazon later that night. After doing research and listening to the CD many many times, I have an idea as to why Ayreon put this together. There are two main reasons, one is to continue to explore the story of the Forever, the other is to use the story and music as a commentary on humanity's increasing dependance on technology and the negative effects of this on society and the Earth.

Before I talk about the CD itself, a bit of history is required. Y is the 6th CD by Ayreon, and each of the previous 5 CD's explores various aspects of the Forever storyline and themes. Each one touches on a specific part of their history, even with CD's alluding to events in other CD's (the main character in the CD "The Universal Migrator" finds out in his past life he was the main character in the earlier CD "The Final Experiment") ("Ayreon"). Y is the CD that ties the story together, starting from the beginning of the story and moving along through the various happenings in the storyline. As for the style of Ayreon, it is a mix of metal and progressive rock with folk, classical, and electronica, and the CD's themselves are concept albums. Classic rock instruments are used, with various random instruments such as violins and the sitar ("Ayreon"). Arjen, the composer, as well as a singer and musician, for Ayreon composes the music and then writes lyrics that go along with the feel of the music. Ayreon is famed for having guest musicians and singers, with Y having 17 vocalists. Arjen is very influenced by

artists such as Ronnie James Dio, Ian Gillan, and Robert Plant. He also loves to “explore new sounds and territories,” exclaiming that he'd like to use a bouzouki in future works after a tour in Greece (“Interview with Arjen Lucassen from Ayreon”).

Y starts out with a bang with the loud and strong “Age of Shadows.” It is a very dark introduction, which is quite fitting for the storyline. The Forevers have depended on machines for life to the point where their entire world is covered in machines that “blot out the sun” and they have lost all emotions. The Forevers then send out 3 signals to the universe in binary: HELP, FOREVER, and SOS. This is probably one of my top 3 favorite songs on the CD, as well as holding a special place in my memory as the song that introduced me to Ayreon.

The next song is “Comatose.” This song is lighter paced and is a sung conversation between two Forevers, which displays the two camps of thought in the Forever society. One is that their lack of emotion is a good thing as emotions are harmful and unnecessary and their life is much better without them. The other side is that emotions are what give life meaning, and they want to be released from their comatose state (hence the name Comatose) and be able to feel again. This is a philosophical question I ponder myself, as well as a theme I've seen in other stories.

The next song is “Liquid Eternity.” This is a reminiscence by three of the Forever about the way Y used to be, with two singing positively about the freedom and beauty of the old world and the other talking about how the world is much better now that the Forever are protected from dying. A fourth Forever comes in and sings about “Liquid Eternity,” which I presume to be some sort of technology that allows them to live forever [“nourishes our brains”] at the cost of what made life worth living [“a world that does not live” and “a life that does not yield”]. A fifth Forever comes in reprimands the nostalgic Forevers, asking if they would rather live “the life they've learned to dread” of pain and suffering, with the first Forever retorting that he is losing his will to live (“Ayreon Lyrics”). I thought this was a neat

song and necessary for the plot, but not one of my favorites.

The next song is "Connect the Dots." This is the first of several divergences from the main story of the Forever's. Instead, it talks about the life of a middle class worker in modern day society. He drives to work and wastes gas to ensure he doesn't miss a light, when the drive is only a few miles. He torrents (most likely illegally) "all the latest files" instead of contributing to the authors, and buys fast food instead of cooking. He buys his kid a game and starts playing it while his kid is up in his room. When he attempts to go to sleep, he cranks up the AC because it's warm, and then can't relax and contemplates taking a sleeping pill before turning the lights on and smoking a cigarette. The theme of the song is in the chorus, which says that people know how things are wrong but refuse to connect the dots because they are living for today. I really liked this song (I don't think there's a song on here I don't like..) and felt that it brought closer the themes that the CD was trying to explore, as I can more easily relate to 21st century middle class life than life on Planet Y.

The next song is "Beneath the Waves." In this song the focus returns back to the Forever's story. This is another reminiscence of the way life used to be for the Forever's, in particular their planet. There were beautiful cerulean oceans and clear skies with caves that they played hide and seek in. Most importantly, they felt free in the "world without walls." Eventually the nostalgia is interrupted by the remembrance that this is but a memory, and one of the Forever's encourages action instead of idle nostalgia. This was a good re-introduction back into the Forever theme after the previous interruption, and I particularly liked the more opera like tone it had.

The next song is "Newborn Race." The Forever's are pondering ways to revive themselves, wanting to be taken back to their beginnings. They realize that they could divert one of the many shooting stars that come by and put their DNA on them, creating new life wherever the star lands. There is a debate whether they have the right to make life, and it's eventually decided that this is the

only way they will be able to revive themselves. This song refers to the "well known idea" that our DNA came from a comet crash from a foreign planet, and Arjen wanted to build part of the story around that idea ("Interview with Arjen").

The next song is "Ride the Comet." In this song, the Forevers bid farewell to their "little extremophiles" and send them off into space, hoping they are able to reach a planet and spread their genes. This is a rather short song, but it always makes me giggle because there is some silly sounding vocalizing throughout parts of the song, particularly in between lyrics. Also, this taught me what the word extremophile meant (organisms that live in extreme conditions).

The next song is "Web of Lies." This is another deviation from the Forever's storyline, going back to modern Earth. This song is the story of two people who fall in love over online dating, but then when the guy takes too long to respond to the girl she moves on to another guy, repeating the same words of attraction. This also makes the theme of the decay of social interaction apparent. It also has a more personal meaning, as I've experienced and watched somewhat similar romantic situations go on in the online world.

The next song is "The Fifth Extinction." This returns back to the Forever's storyline. The Forevers find a planet perfect to start their new race on, namely Earth. They realize that there is life already on the planet, and realize that the comet crashing into the planet would kill the majority of it all of, but decide that because the life is mostly reptiles of inferior intelligence (dinosaurs) it's an acceptable cost.

The next song is "Waking Dreams." At this point, humans have formed from the genes in the comet, but have not awakened yet. One of the Forevers gives them imagination and the ability to sense color and emotions. He then encourages the humans to "live the dream that we have been dreaming." I've always felt very soothed by this song, the singing and music is very mellow.

The next song is "The Truth is In Here." This is the third deviation from the Forever's storyline. In this song, which is also set in the modern day, a man in an insane asylum receives visions from the Forevers about how man will perish if they don't change their ways. The nurse reacts to his outbursts by asking him if he's taken his meds and tells him to relax, eventually forcing him to take more medicine. This song is a big allusion to previous Ayreon CD's. It is suggested that the man is a character from the CD *Into the Electric Castle*, and the references to the Forevers are based of *The Human Equation* and other songs in this CD as well.

The next song is "Unnatural Selection." This song returns back to the Forever's storyline. As the Forevers watch humans progress, they realize that they need help to evolve faster, or they will be overwhelmed by disease. Some disagree with this though, as they feel that interfering with humanity will cause them to become like the Forevers and perish and that curing disease will lead to overpopulation and destruction of the environment. This last part especially is a comment on modern human society, as the song has an interlude with quotes from JFK, Gore, Bush, Roosevelt, and Churchill talking about war and the destructive effects of technology. After that, the Forevers look at all the things they gave humanity (feelings, science, reason, etc) and agonize that they just seemed to use the gifts for destruction of the environment and themselves. This is also in my top 3 favorite songs.

The next song is "River of Time." In this song, the Forevers realize they need to do something and meddle with the time stream to give humanity the technology to send messages back in time, leading to the CD *The Final Experiment* and the next song $E=mc^2$ where scientists attempt in vain to send messages back into the past to save humanity ("Progarchives.com Review of 01011001").

The next song is " $E=mc^2$." This is the fourth and final deviation from the Forever's storyline. A 21st century scientist receives visions from the Forevers about humanity's collapse and how to send messages into the past. They realize the way to do this is to "break the equation $E=mc^2$." Their first

attempt is a failure as they realize they can't control the destination of their messages. The second attempt works, but changes nothing except “a line in some ancient lore.” This is the 3rd in my list of top 3 favorite songs. My nerdy self just gets a kick from hearing $E=mc^2$ in a rock opera. Also, I'll be honest, I have no idea what they mean by breaking $E=mc^2$, but nonetheless it's still awesome.

The final song is “The Sixth Extinction.” The story returns back to the Forevers for the final time. The Forevers watch as humanity exterminates itself because of the knowledge the Forevers gave to them. While they are sad over the fate of humanity and their failed experiment, they realize that in the process they have gained back the ability to feel emotions. In the end, they stop the machines that sustain them and pray to the Universal Migrator (The first living being in the universe and similar to a deity, a reference to the CD *The Universal Migrator*).

In the CD *Y*, Ayreon hoped to continue to tell the story of the Forevers, as well as ponder themes such as dependence on technology and its effects, as well as the overpopulation and destruction of the Earth. *Y* does a very good job of this, and it is clear by the end what the message for the listener is supposed to be. Ayreon stays true to its style, bringing in many guest performers and having a wide range of styles, from progressive metal to rock ballad to synth solos. While the CD ended on a closing note, some hope that Arjen will come around and make one more CD to close off the story, but he is currently working on other projects and is unsure if he will make another Ayreon CD.

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1 Wikipedia was used for three things mainly. First is that of song/CD info, including lists of instruments, that I would have a booklet for had I bought a physical version instead of a digital version. Second was some information that I was going to use the actual site for, but the links were 404'd. Third was for descriptions of some of their earlier works, as this CD is very much interconnected to their earlier works, and I don't have all their music.

2 Same as 1.