

= Song of Innocence =

Song of Innocence is the debut album of American composer and producer David Axelrod , released in October 1968 by Capitol Records . Axelrod sought to capitalize on the experimental climate of popular music at the time and composed the album as a suite @-@ like tone poem based on Songs of Innocence , a 1789 illustrated collection of poems by William Blake . It was recorded at Capitol Studios in Los Angeles with an orchestra and a variety of studio musicians , including keyboardist and conductor Don Randi , guitarist Al Casey , bassist Carol Kaye , and drummer Earl Palmer .

Song of Innocence is an instrumental jazz fusion record that incorporates elements of classical , rock , funk , pop , and theatre music . It is arranged for bass , drums , and string instruments , written in the rock idiom with tempos centered on rock @-@ based patterns by Palmer . Axelrod used contrast in his orchestral compositions and interspersed the album 's euphoric psychedelic R & B form with dramatic , harrowing arrangements to reflect the supernatural themes found in Blake 's poems . The music 's reverent , psychedelic overtones evoke their themes of innocence and spirituality .

Although Song of Innocence was innovative for its application of rock and jazz techniques , it was not commercially successful and confounded contemporary critics , who viewed it as an ambitious curiosity piece . In the 1990s , critics reassessed the album as a classic , while leading disc jockeys in hip hop and electronica rediscovered and sampled the album 's music . " Holy Thursday " , the record 's best @-@ known song , was frequently sampled by hip hop producers . The renewed interest in Axelrod 's work prompted Stateside Records to reissue Song of Innocence in 2000 .

= = Background = =

In 1968 , David Axelrod gained national fame for his controversial mass composition Mass in F Minor , which he wrote in a contemporary rock vein for the Electric Prunes . Axelrod , who was challenged by what he described as a " new breed of record buyer ... more sophisticated in his thinking " , was one of several Los Angeles @-@ based musical eccentrics during the late 1960s who expanded on the mid @-@ 1960s studio experiments of Brian Wilson and George Martin . After his success with the Electric Prunes , he was asked to record a similar album by Capitol Records , for whom he worked as a staff producer and songwriter . Axelrod wanted to further capitalize on the experimental climate of popular music at the time and chose to adapt works by English poet William Blake on an album .

At the time , Blake musical settings were at the height of their popularity among musicians and composers . Numerous serious music composers had set his poems to music since the 1870s , and the practice was eventually adapted in other musical fields during the 20th century , including popular music , musical theatre , and the 1960s folk idiom . Axelrod , a self @-@ professed " Blake freak " , had been fascinated by Blake 's painting and poetry since his late teens and frequently read the poems as an adult . He conceived Song of Innocence after he had bought an edition of Blake 's complete poetry while working in Capitol 's art department and considered the concept for a few years before Mass in F Minor . Axelrod was not sociable with colleagues , such as record executives who could have helped him professionally , and felt that he could identify with Blake ; he considered the poet " very bad at making new friends " .

Axelrod composed Song of Innocence in one week and began recording in mid @-@ 1968 . He recorded the album at Capitol Studios in Los Angeles and enlisted his close @-@ knit group of veteran studio musicians , including keyboardist and conductor Don Randi , guitarist Al Casey , bassist Carol Kaye , and drummer Earl Palmer . He had worked with them when producing sessions for other recording artists . Axelrod did not play any instruments on Song of Innocence ; he instead wrote arrangements for his orchestra and utilized 33 players to perform his notated charts . He had learned how to read and orchestrate complex music charts from jazz musicians during the 1950s . Randi conducted the orchestra and played both piano and organ on the record . Axelrod preferred listening to a session from a recording booth like his contemporary Igor Stravinsky . " That way the

sounds don't seem to go all over the place", he later said. "Music seems so small in a studio." Axelrod originally wanted some of the album's compositions to feature a large @-@ scale choir but was uncertain if he could find the appropriate ensemble, so he recorded an entirely instrumental album and included one Blake setting for each section of the score.

= = Composition = =

A jazz fusion album, *Song of Innocence* combines jazz elements with impressionistic musical figures and hard rock guitar solos. Its music also incorporates funk, rock, theatre, and pop styles. Music journalists categorized the record as jazz @-@ rock, baroque pop, and psychedelic R & B. John Murph of *JazzTimes* magazine said the music could be better characterized as art pop than jazz. Axelrod, who had produced bebop albums before working for Capitol, asserted that jazz played a crucial role in the music: "For years, all I did was jazz. When I first got in the record business, I was so into jazz that I had never heard Elvis Presley. I still probably listen to jazz more than anything else."

Axelrod composed the album as a tone poem suite based on Blake's illustrated 1789 collection of poems *Songs of Innocence*. His compositions borrowed titles from Blake's poems, which dealt with themes such as visions, religious iniquity, rite of passage, and life experience after a person's birth and innocence. Mary Campbell of *The Baltimore Sun* said the classical and Christian church music elements made the record sound "reverent, as if describing a biblical story". *Les Inrockuptibles* described it as a "psyche @-@ liturgical" work dedicated to Blake. According to *AllMusic*'s Thom Jurek, psychedelia was implicit in the record's musical form and feeling, which impelled Axelrod to "celebrate the wildness and folly of youth with celebration and verve".

The album's music was written in the rock idiom and arranged for bass, drums, and strings. As a composer, Axelrod abandoned the conventional unison approach to orchestral writing in favor of more contrasts while centering his tempos around rock @-@ based drum patterns played mostly in common time by Palmer. He utilized his instrumental ensemble as a rock orchestra, playing melodramatic strings and pronounced, echo @-@ laden breakbeats. The music was also embellished with electric piano, intricate basslines, Echoplex effects, and elements of suspense. Axelrod used to reflect the supernatural themes found in Blake's poems. According to David N. Howard, the album's "euphorically" upbeat psychedelic R & B form was interspersed by "dramatically sparse" and "harrowing" arrangements.

Axelrod and his musicians used key musical phrases that are expanded upon throughout *Song of Innocence*. He was interested in György Ligeti's 1961 piece *Atmosphères* and Lukas Foss' idea of starting a piece with a sustained chord, having musicians improvise over 100 bars, and ending with another chord as they finish. "Urizen" opened with long sustained chords, sound effects, reverbed guitar stabs, and a supple bassline. On "Holy Thursday", the rhythm section played a slow, jazzed @-@ out groove and bluesy bop piano lines, as a big band vamp was played by a large @-@ scale string section. In response to their swing style, the brass section and guitarists played dramatic, high @-@ pitched overtones built around a complex melody. The middle of the album featured more traditional jazz passages and the presence of a psychedelic harpsichord. "The Smile" was recorded with a rhythmic drum beat, offbeat bass, and a progressive string part. For the songs near the end, the musicians steadily transitioned to heady psychedelia featuring gritty guitars and disorienting organ licks. On "The Mental Traveler", Axelrod said he tried to experiment with atonality but "chickened out".

= = Reception and legacy = =

*Song of Innocence* was released in October 1968 by Capitol Records. It received radio exposure on both AM and FM stations with songs such as the title track and "Holy Thursday", which became the album's best @-@ known recording. The album was not a commercial success and only sold 75 @, @ 000 copies by October 1969. *Billboard* magazine called it "an aesthetic mix of music and philosophy ... chock full of mysticism, creativity, and change", believing that Axelrod's idyllic

music was interesting enough to impact the record charts . In a review for Gramophone , Alasdair Clayre said Axelrod 's impressions of Blake " reveal a depth of imagination and skill warranting attention beyond the confines of pop music " , proving he could compose innovatively for a large orchestra , which Clayre felt comprised the best of California 's studio musicians on the album . He questioned whether the " occasional guitar gobbling " reflected Axelrod 's genuine ideas or " an obligatory concession to contemporary sound " on an otherwise compelling record . The magazine 's Nigel Hunter found the record 's songs to be " of absorbing power and depth " , but complained of the electric guitar parts . Nat Freedland from Entertainment World was more critical , accusing Axelrod of " indulging himself here to little avail " . Stereo Review magazine 's Paul Kresh panned Song of Innocence as a pretentious , inadequate album dependent on movie music tricks and outdated techniques such as forced climaxes and gaudy orchestration . He said it fell severely short of the concept Axelrod aspired to and that " only the most uneducated will be taken in by the mountains of misterioso claptrap that surround these squeaking musical mice " .

Song of Innocence was one of many concept albums recorded as rock music was developing in various directions during the late 1960s , following in the wake of the Beatles ' 1967 album Sgt. Pepper 's Lonely Hearts Club Band . It was innovative for its original application of both rock and jazz techniques . According to music journalist Zaid Mudhaffer , the term " jazz fusion " was coined in a review of the record when it was released . Axelrod followed the album up in 1969 with the similarly Blake @-@ inspired Songs of Experience , which adapted Gunther Schuller 's third stream concept to baroque orchestrations and rock , pop , and R & B rhythms and melodies . Both albums established Axelrod as an unpredictable , challenging conceptual artist . His instrumental interpretations of Blake were the first in jazz , followed in 1971 by Rafa? Augustyn 's Niewinnosc and Adrian Mitchell 's musical Tyger : A Celebration of William Blake with composer Mike Westbrook ; Westbrook later composed more Blake @-@ inspired works , including The Westbrook Blake : " Bright as Fire " ( 1980 ) .

During the late 1990s , Axelrod 's records were reassessed and considered innovative by critics , including Song of Innocence , which was regarded as a classic . Mojo cited it as " the heart of Axelrod 's legacy " , while NME called it " sky @-@ kissingly high and divine " , finding Axelrod versatile enough to " soar above his own pretensions " , Writing for AllMusic , John Bush said the album " sounded like nothing else from its era " , while Thom Jurek argued that it continued to sound new upon each listen due to a lack of " cynicism and hipper @-@ than @-@ thou posturing " in the music . In a four @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half star retrospective review , Jurek said it was innovative in 1968 and still " withstands the test of time better than the Beatles Sgt. Pepper 's Lonely Hearts Club Band album that allegedly inspired it " . Giving it a five @-@ out @-@ of @-@ five score , Tiny Mix Tapes said it sounded engagingly magnificent and diverse , citing it as one of the most dynamic musical fusions and " one of the most unique and thought provoking musical efforts of the last several decades " .

Axelrod 's music was also rediscovered and sampled by leading disc jockeys in the 1990s including hip hop producers . When sampling in hip hop peaked during the early and mid @-@ 1990s , they searched for archived records with atmospheric beats and strings to sample . Los Angeles @-@ based disc jockey B + recalled finding a copy of Song of Innocence at a Goodwill in Culver City and said it appealed to him because of its dissonant quality , musical dynamics , and string sound : " This big sound . It was like somehow [ Axelrod ] was summoning the future , that you can project this environment , this moment into the future . " Electronica pioneers such as DJ Cam and DJ Shadow also sampled Song of Innocence . The latter producer sampled the record 's choral themes and piano motifs on his influential debut album Endtroducing ..... ( 1996 ) . " The Smile " was sampled by Pete Rock on his 1998 song " Strange Fruit " and by DJ Premier on Royce da 5 ' 9 " ' s 2009 song " Shake This " . " Holy Thursday " was frequently sampled by producers , including The Beatnuts on their 1994 song " Hit Me with That " , UNKLE on their 1998 song " Rabbit in Your Headlights " , and Swizz Beatz on Lil Wayne 's 2008 song " Dr. Carter " .

The renewed interest in Axelrod 's work prompted Stateside Records to reissue Song of Innocence in 2000 . Now wrote that after sounding odd during the 1960s , the songs had become " a sampler 's dream come true ? who knew ? " David Keenan of The Wire attributed Axelrod 's sampling legacy

with producers such as DJ Premier and DJ Shadow to Palmer , " the original badass drummer [ who ] played on all of these tracks " . He facetiously critiqued that the album 's songs " may reek of stale joss sticks and patchouli @-@ scented self @-@ actualisation , but in their very datedness they somehow sound very modern . " Pitchfork journalist Sean Fennessey felt Axelrod 's first two records were " essential if only as a tour guide through early 90s hip @-@ hop " , having " literally been a rap producer 's delight for years " . In a 2013 list for Complex , DJ and production duo Kon and Amir named " Holy Thursday " the greatest hip hop sample of all time .

= = Track listing = =

All songs written , arranged , and produced by David Axelrod .

= = Personnel = =

Credits are adapted from the album 's liner notes .

= = Release history = =