

= Congregation (album) =

Congregation is the third studio album by American alternative rock band The Afghan Whigs , released on January 31 , 1992 , by Sub Pop . After touring for two years in support of their 1990 album Up in It , the band received \$ 15 @, @ 000 advance from Sub Pop to record a follow @-@ up album . It was primarily recorded at Bear Creek Studios in Woodinville and Buzz 's Kitchen in Los Angeles during July to August 1991 . The band 's frontman Greg Dulli produced the album entirely with audio engineer Ross Ian Stein . The album 's production and release were hindered by Sub Pop 's financial difficulties , which were eventually resolved by the massive commercial success of Nirvana 's 1991 album Nevermind .

Expanding on the aggressive sound of the band 's previous work , Congregation has more refined musical details and slower songs such as ballads . Its music also incorporates R & B , soul , and funk influences . The album 's cover depicts a nude black woman holding a white baby in her arms and alludes comically to the band 's African @-@ American music influences . The songs have themes of pleasure and guilt , and deal with topics such as dysfunctional relationships and sexual deviancy . Conceived during the burgeoning grunge scene , the album has been viewed by music writers as stylistically distinct from other Sub Pop and grunge music .

Upon its release , Congregation was very well received by music critics , who praised its musical quality , stylistic elements , and emotional content . It was promoted with two singles , " Turn On the Water " and " Conjure Me " , and The Afghan Whigs ' extensive touring in the United States and Europe . Although it did not chart , the album helped the band attain a cult following and receive offers from major record labels , leading to their signing to Elektra Records . Since its initial reception , Congregation has been viewed by writers as the band 's breakthrough album and a significant release in rock music during the 1990s .

= = Background = =

After forming in 1986 in Cincinnati , The Afghan Whigs ? vocalist and rhythm guitarist Greg Dulli , bassist John Curley , lead guitarist Rick McCollum , and drummer Steve Earle ? released their 1988 debut album Big Top Halloween on an independent record label and gained the attention of Seattle @-@ based label Sub Pop . With their second album Up in It (1990) released on the label , the band toured regularly in the United States for two years and occasionally in Europe before recording Congregation . Sub Pop gave the band a \$ 15 @, @ 000 advance to record the album , which Dulli later said was a " then @-@ unheard @-@ of " and " bloated " amount .

The album 's cover shows a nude black woman sitting on a blanket with a white baby held in her arms . It serves as a comical reference to the band 's African @-@ American music roots . Along with a collective interest in classic rock , band members had other individual tastes in music , including McCollum 's interest in free jazz , experimental , and Indian music , and Dulli 's love of hip hop , soul , and funk , particularly Motown artists and Prince .

= = Recording = =

The Afghan Whigs began recording the album in July 1991 . They held recording sessions for Congregation at Bear Creek Studios in Woodinville , Washington and Buzz 's Kitchen in Los Angeles , California . Dulli wrote most of its songs and produced the album with audio engineer Ross Ian Stein . Session musicians such as Miss Ruby Belle , Shecky Stein , and Lance Ellison also contributed ; Belle sung lead vocals on " Her Against Me " , Stein played piano on " Conjure Me " , and Ellison played piano and sung lead vocals on " The Temple " with John Curley and Rick McCollum . Singer @-@ songwriter Shawn Smith contributed backing vocals to " This Is My Confession " and " Dedicate It " . After the rest of the band finished recording their parts , Dulli stayed in Los Angeles to record his vocals , overdub the recorded tracks , and mix the album . However , the album 's production was delayed due to Sub Pop 's financial difficulties , and Dulli got another job in Los Angeles to pay for the studio .

Although the label eventually settled the studio 's bills and the album 's sessions ended in August 1991 , the band was unsure if Sub Pop had enough money to release any more albums , let alone Congregation . After the massive commercial success of Nirvana 's 1991 album Nevermind , Sub Pop recovered financially by receiving royalties from the album after the band left them for a major label . Dulli later said that while he was " stranded in L.A. ... Nirvana saved the whole fuckin ' label " . He recalled thanking the band 's frontman Kurt Cobain upon the album 's completion , saying that " I went to Nirvana 's show at the Palace in L.A. and hugged Kurt and said , ' Good one , bro . Congratulations . And thank you ? now I can go home . ' " .

After the album 's sessions were done , Dulli was inspired to write and record an additional track on the day of Miles Davis ' death , September 28 , 1991 . He received two messages on his answering machine from music executive David Katznelson , the first providing directions to a cookout and the second informing Dulli that Davis had passed , saying that " Miles is dead . Don 't forget the alcohol . " Working at Ultrasuede in Cincinnati , Dulli incorporated Katznelson 's line as a lyric and , with a guitar riff from Rick McCollum , hastily recorded " Miles Iz Ded " , which was included as a hidden track on the album . Congregation was mastered by Jack Skinner at K Disc Mastering in Hollywood . Dulli subsequently took a drive in his car and listened to the album while observing his scenery , a practice he continued with future albums .

= = Music = =

The album expands on the aggressive sound of the band 's previous work with refined musical details and occasionally slower songs . In The Rough Guide to Rock (2003) , music journalist Alex Ogg writes that The Afghan Whigs were " managing to balance volume with subtlety " amid the burgeoning grunge music scene . The album 's music incorporates heavy counterpoint rhythms , indie rock harmonics , wah @-@ wah and slide guitars , and staccato riffs with funk , metal , and blues influences . Chicago Tribune writer Brad Webber compares its melodies to those of " later Hüsker Dü " . Option perceives influences from " ex @-@ indie guitar bands " such as Dinosaur Jr. and Nirvana in the songs ' " catch @-@ iness and in the arrangements ' juxtaposition of frenzy and laziness . " David Sprague of the Trouser Press comments that the band 's instrumentation " contriv [es] panoramic images through judicious use of wah @-@ wah guitar ... and the tribal drumbeats with which Steven Earle invokes an air of ritualistic surrender . "

The album 's rock sound is complemented by a predominant soul influence . Magic magazine 's Christophe Basterra characterizes the music as " The Four Tops appropriating ' Search and Destroy ' by Iggy & the Stooges " . The slow @-@ burning ballad " Let Me Lie to You " incorporates soul and grunge musical styles . Dulli wrote the song in an attempt to deviate from the aesthetic of Sub Pop , whom he felt discouraged its acts from recording slow songs . He cites writing the song as the moment he began having faith in himself as a songwriter . Songs such as " Miles Iz Ded " , " Conjure Me " , and " Turn On the Water " incorporate funk influences and wah @-@ wah guitar . Pitchfork Media 's Stephen M. Deusner cites the latter song as an example of how the band " integrate [d] African @-@ American sounds and influences into their white rock " , writing that it " uses Isaac Hayes ' wakka @-@ chikka guitars as a punk accessory , and its jumpy guitar riffs instill these songs with a sense of motion that suggests amped @-@ up r & b . " " Tonight " features bluesy acoustic guitar .

= = Lyrics = =

The songs discuss dysfunctional intimate relationships and sexual deviancy , and feature themes of pleasure and guilt . They are narrated from the perspective of a broken sinner and lothario with sinister and narcissistic tones . Dulli 's lyrics incorporate haunting refrains and express angst and melodrama . His baritone vocals are moaningly husky and feature falsetto wails . Daniel Fidler of Spin compares Dulli 's vocals on the album to those of " a young Paul Westerberg in heat . " David Sprague of the Trouser Press calls Congregation a " strangely flamboyant " album that showcases " Dulli 's metamorphosis from everypunk wallflower to rakish scoundrel with a heart of glass . " Jason

Ankeny of AllMusic calls Dulli " a truly magnetic presence " and writes of his performance on the album , " by turns predator (' Tonight ') and prey (' I 'm Her Slave ') , he 's the guy your parents always warned you about , delivering each syllable of his remarkable lyrics with equal measures of innuendo and venom . " Stephanie Benson of Rhapsody comments that his lyrics are " full of stifling dissatisfaction and boozy philosophy " .

" I 'm Her Slave " is a heroin anecdote with lyrics narrated by a subjugate lover . Music critic Greg Kot cites " Turn On the Water " as an example of when " the twisted narrator is the victim " and " cast adrift " in Dulli 's lyrics . Inspired by a paranoid breakup , " Conjure Me " is told from the perspective of an aggressive predator and obscure object of desire . On " Kiss the Floor " , the narrator recounts stealing a girl 's virginity and avoiding her brothers . " This Is My Confession " has a theme of absolution . The lyrics depicts it as an empty sexual experience : " Shove my head against the door , crawl inside and kiss the floor / Waiting for the sun again , drink it , smoke it , stick it in . " " The Temple " is a cover of the song of the same name from the 1970 rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar . Dulli became a fan of the rock opera as a child when his babysitter played it . " Let Me Lie to You " has lyrics expressing passive cruelty and subtle manipulation . " Tonight " depicts a peaceful night as the backdrop for the narrator 's corrupt one @-@ track mind : " Follow me down to the bushes , dear / No one will know , we 'll disappear / I 'll hold your hand , we 'll never tell / Our private little trip to hell " . The album 's hidden track " Miles Iz Ded " is about seduction and alcohol , with a last call sensibility and despairing tone .

= = Release and promotion = =

The album was released by Sub Pop on January 31 , 1992 , and distributed by Caroline Records . It was issued on LP and CD formats . Congregation was promoted with two singles . " Turn On the Water " was released in January as a 7 @-@ inch single with " Miles Iz Ded " on its B @-@ side . It was also released as a CD single coupled with the tracks " Chalk Outline " and " Miles Iz Ded " . On February 25 , " Turn On the Water " was released as a cassette single . " Conjure Me " was released in May as a 7 @-@ inch single backed with a cover of The Supremes ' 1965 song " My World Is Empty Without You " . A music video for the single was filmed , featuring a topless woman caressing Dulli as he lip syncs the song , and received rotation on MTV . Congregation was reissued in September 1998 . It was released in the United Kingdom on November 22 , 1999 , through PIAS Recordings .

The Afghan Whigs promoted the album with an appearance on MTV and an international tour with dates in major American cities and Europe . During their shows , the band interspersed R & B songs in their set list , including an interpolation of The Spinners ' 1972 song " I 'll Be Around " in " Turn On the Water " . Their extensive touring for the album helped the band garner a larger audience .

= = Reception = =

Although it did not chart , Congregation received very positive reviews from music critics upon its release . Michael Azerrad of Rolling Stone called it " superb " . Daniel Fidler of Spin called the album " a clean move toward musical excellence " and commented that it " shows the band bursting its Sub Pop chains with catchy , heavy guitar riffs , downright lovable song arrangements , melodies that jerk your emotions back and forth , and yes , endearing , raspy vocals that wail , moan , scream , and shout " . Brad Webber of the Chicago Tribune gave it three @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half out of four stars and described the album as " a more accessible brand of music than normally associated with the Seattle @-@ Minneapolis axis of grunge guitar groups . " He found The Afghan Whigs to be " on rock 's cutting edge " and commented that the band " stirs a torrent of emotions on neatly paced songs " .

J. D. Considine of Musician characterized the band as " clever enough to find hooks in the sort of gnarled riffs and guitar noise Fugazi plays for atmosphere " , as well as " canny enough to avoid most of the mannerisms that make much Amerindie rock seem so clichéd . " Considine concluded in his review , " The best reason to join this Congregation is that the songs are catchy enough to hold

their own against the best work of bands like Dinosaur Jr. or the Replacements . " In a mixed review , Option commended the album 's " sheer listenability " , " clear recording and dynamic performances " , but criticized Dulli 's subject matter and panned the band 's cover of " The Temple " . Melody Maker ranked the album number 25 on its year @-@ end best albums for 1992 .

With the album 's critical acclaim and their steady touring , the band attained a cult following and was courted by several major labels who wanted to sign them . Frustrated with the distribution limitation of a small record label , they signed to Elektra Records after their final release for Sub Pop , an EP of soul cover songs called Uptown Avondale (1992) . Their major label debut Gentlemen was released in 1993 to critical acclaim and mainstream exposure .

= = Legacy = =

Along with Gentlemen , Congregation is generally considered by music writers to be part of The Afghan Whigs ' peak era . Dulli cites it as " the record where we came into our own " . Melody Maker dubbed it " the finest rock LP of the decade " and commented that it is " nothing less than rock raping pop , a ferocious deflowering of Motown 's romantic ideal " . With Congregation , Stephanie Benson of Rhapsody found the band to be " crucial to the birth of ' 90s alternative rock . " AllMusic 's Jason Ankeny said that it was the band 's artistic breakthrough and " ticket to the big leagues " . He gave the album four @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half out of five stars in a retrospective review and called it " an incendiary and insidious set which bridges the gap between the noisy aggression of the band 's early releases and the soulful swagger of their later work . " Ankeny also cited it as " the grunge era 's most overlooked masterpiece " and an indication of the band 's musical growth , writing that " while still unmistakably a member of the Sub Pop stable , there 's a greater maturity and depth to their sinewy sound , with a newfound grasp of mood and nuance " .

Yahoo ! Music 's Chris Norris called it a " disjointed set , which finds the band suspended between its punky roots and a more voluptuous later style . " The Spin Alternative Record Guide (1995) noted " a creative musical blend " on the album , but concluded that " the results feel like dress rehearsals for Gentlemen , with one partial exception , ' Conjure Me , ' and one absolute triumph : a surging final track ... that might be the Afghan Whigs ' strongest recorded performance . " In The New Rolling Stone Album Guide (2004) , Rolling Stone journalist Joe Gross gave the album three @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half out of five stars and viewed it as a " quantum leap " over the band 's previous work , commenting that it " shows that they ditched grunge for soul because they were no damn good at the former and ladies dig the latter . " In 2002 , Italian music magazine Il Mucchio Selvaggio included the album in its list of 100 Best Albums by Decade . Polish webzine Screenagers ranked it number 79 on its 2004 list of the Top 100 Albums of the ' 90s . Italian music journalists Eddy Cilia and Federico Guglielmi included Congregation in their 2010 book on essential rock albums .

= = Track listing = =

All songs were produced by Greg Dulli and Ross Ian Stein .

= = Personnel = =

Credits are adapted from the album 's liner notes .

The Afghan Whigs

John Curley ? bass , photography , vocals

Greg Dulli ? producer , rhythm guitar , vocals

Steve Earle ? drums

Rick McCollum ? guitar , vocals

Additional personnel

Miss Ruby Belle ? vocals

Larry Brewer ? engineer , second engineer

Chris Cuffaro ? photography
Caroline De Vita ? design
Lance Ellison ? piano , vocals
D.A. Fleischer ? photography
Jane Higgins ? design
Rick and Bubba ? vocals
Jack Skinner ? mastering
Shawn Smith ? background vocals , vocals
Ross Ian Stein ? engineer , producer
Shecky Stein ? piano