

# Frances Quinlan and the Tranquil Intelligence of 'Likewise'

By **Murjani Rawls** - Mar 9, 2020



Photo Credit: Julia Khoroshilov

*Likewise*, the solo album from Hop Along frontwoman Frances Quinlan plays like a work of art. The lyricism serves as intelligent, abstract pictures that you can interpret in different ways. The instrumentation provides color that can invoke different moods and emotions. Quinlan approaches these nine songs with inherent freedom like the stroke of her paintbrush – coloring in and outside the lines as you see fit. The song ‘Rare Thing’ was [inspired by](#) Quinlan watching her niece interact with the world around her. Oftentimes as you get older, things tend to dull your optimism and glee. While Quinlan contemplates things about adult life on *Likewise*, the essence of this album captures an artist in a childlike splendor of natural creativity.

I spoke to Quinlan about her album, the recording process that happened over the course of two weeks, and interpretations of some of the songs.

You start *Likewise* off with ‘Pitdown Man.’ The Pitdown Man is based on archaeologist Charles Dawson and him believing he discovered the link between ape and man. It was eventually uncovered as a hoax. Throughout the song, you speak to a specific memory about a dog catching something and starting a commotion at 6 AM. It feels like the song is in a loop.

We have points of life where we think that we've figured things out, then something throws us for a surprise. Or perhaps, we recognize the same reoccurrences and routines. When you say, "*A template, if there is one, I still think of,*" I pictured someone wanting to break out of a loop in their lives. Or maybe the reality that they were living in wasn't necessarily true to what they wanted.

In the past, I've really tried to explain what I was after. The funny thing is, in writing the song, I was in a different place than I was when I recorded it. When you try to make a complete thing, it's hard to really come to terms with the fact that by the time you're done with it, it and you will be different. As I said, I love your interpretation. There's that Bob Dylan line where he said, "*but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now.*"

With experience, you can't help but have doubts. Experience exposes us to many of the confusing elements that are in the world from random cruelty and disaster. We're certainly seeing more of that now more than ever. I didn't want the album to be just me immersed in myself or immersed in these speakers only. Nina Simone, at one time, said that artists should be speaking to the time that they're living in. It's the artists' duty and I certainly wouldn't consider myself a person that really expounds upon the times that we're living in. However, I don't want to exclude them. They are happening right now. I just was trying to find a way to speak to the interior world, but also not exclude the exterior.

With 'Detroit Lake', I love that there's it feels like there's this mystery undercurrent. With how you use the dramatic cello and violin, it's like a TV show and a big plot point is revealed. You speak about algae bloom leaking into the water of Detroit Lake. That's the macro thing. There's also the smaller conversation that's taking place within this. It's a juxtaposition of lives happening versus bigger things occurring at the same time.

I think something to feel meaningful to me, it has to feel true. I think a lot of us are aware of the fact that the things that we agonize over can be a bit trivial. I mean, we're just one part of this massive..we don't even know how big the universe is. I am one of those people that have that very loud inner monologue. I'm just trying to speak to that conflict. I think it would be a mistake to ignore that little nagging concern of just like, "how important is this?" "What do I really owe other people and what do they owe me? How can anyone owe anyone anything?"

It's such a mess. I keep reiterating that. The other thing I aspire to do are songs being able to have a cinematic quality. For them to have a feeling of a play or just something that takes it out of its form. Something that can be felt. There really is so much drama in a violin, the cello, and a harp. Even a piano because it's one of the most incredible mood-setting instruments. It's amazing that a piano by itself is able to induce so much. I don't know what it is.

'Detroit Lake' was maybe the biggest challenge to finish, but also one of the most rewarding and where we were able to get with it. Especially, again with Joe's hand in it. That collage of the verses, the reverse guitar and the blips of the rose. That was a collage that he really pulled together and I think it does so much.

**I wanted to talk about the musical structure of the album a bit. How was it trying out instruments like the drums or instruments you didn't play since you were a kid? Likewise is also very layered with instruments like violin and the harp. It's very well rounded and interesting from a musical standpoint.**

I play drums at the end of 'Now That I'm Back' and we had to track the kick and snare separately. That's just because I'm worse at drums than perhaps the piano, I suppose. I love playing, but I am extremely not good. Joe [Reinhart] is a far better drummer than I am and Mark's [Quinlan] a better drummer than both of us. That's why he plays on 'Rare Thing' and 'Lean.' We wanted the expertise of someone who knows the instrument.

I'm very lucky to have bandmates in Hop Along like Mark, Tyler [Long], and Joe. When you work together as long as we have, we've all become stronger collaborators with one another. Joe is an incredible producer-engineer. He mixed the album as well as engineered it with some assistance from Ryan Schwabe doing some the final mixing and mastering. Joe happens to play bass and drums really well. He played both of them on 'Your Reply.' For a song like 'Sure Thing,' we wanted those instruments to expound more and Tyler is a brilliant bassist. He also played on 'A Secret.' Mark plays drums on 'Rare Thing' and 'Lean' predominantly.

With piano, I have played piano on Hop Along songs. I've found that I would be learning to play a part at the same time as coming up with it in the studio. Studio time is so valuable than it ever has. So, I decided that any songs needed piano, I should write those parts before going into practice them. On 'Your Reply,' I had to sit with that and figure it out at home before we because

we only have like two weeks. On the strings, that's Molly Germer. I told her the feeling I wanted and if I wanted more drama in spots. I didn't notate any of that. Molly is incredible at interpreting music for strings. She also plays on Alex G's album, *Rocket*. Yeah, she's amazing. Then we had Mary Lattimore playing the harp. All these brilliant, brilliant musicians. It's a blessing to get to work with them

In 'Once In L.A,' you say that heaven is a second chance. A lot of people go to California in search of a fresh start. You also say, "*wait, wasn't it with a friend? What difference does it make?*" At the start of the song, either yourself or the character going there with a maid. When we think of heaven, we always say, "we'll meet again someday." These lyrics made me think will it really matter to someone because it's heaven? Go into formulating this song because I thought that was a really interesting concept.

That song took so long to write. It changed so much that it's hard at times for me to really remember. I started writing it at the end of 2013, so it's strange now to think of how I was changing as I was finishing that song. Also, the fact that it was recorded three years ago. Looking at it now, hopefully, as a different person than I was before, I think there certainly were a lot of thoughts going through me. Not to be evasive.

One person that came in later to that song actually changed it quite a bit was a painter named [Francisco] Goya. He at one point went deaf, I believe. I also think he was in some trouble for some of the political and visual art he had done. Coming at the government because he was not happy with the way people were being treated. One of his most famous paintings is a man being shot by soldiers. Anyway, he spent a lot of the latter part of his life in flight. I can't imagine the difficulty of that being an old man fleeing his home. I also didn't realize that he lived with the painting of Saturn devouring his son. It's one of his most unsettling paintings and it was hanging up in his house. I just think that was gonna have an effect even the one who created it.

That was an element that even as I say it now, I don't want that to tarnish anybody's thoughts on it. I think your interpretation is beautiful. It's just crazy for me to think of how much the song can transform. I mean, the structure stayed pretty similar, but the lyrics really needed to go through changes. That's why it took so long to write it. By the time I get close to the end of finishing a song, oftentimes the lyrics will have changed because my mind has changed. That's a strange thing to keep up with.

You put a lot of thought and effort into this album and it shows. It's lyrically and musically rich. It challenged me in a good way because I was thinking of so many interpretations. I love music that does that. In speaking about the artwork, you painted the cover yourself. There was some inspiration drawn from Joni Mitchell's *Clouds*. You also had an art gallery showcase in New York at Selina. How did it feel to have those worlds collide? You can close your eyes and get a very astute visualization of these songs. It's like you painted these songs on a canvas.

Thank you! That's really wonderful to hear. I love painterly sounding albums. I like vivid imagery. I love *In The Aeroplane Over The Sea* and *Highway 61 Revisited*. With the art show in New York, I can't believe how well that went. I was really nervous because it wasn't a music performance. I was thinking that people wouldn't be so interested, but I was floored by the results. I was happy that people wanted to know about the work. Oh, and also I should say it was partially inspired by clouds but I keep forgetting it's also inspired by Frank Ocean's album, *Blonde*. I love the layout. That photo of him with his head in his hand and then it's surrounded by this big white border. The font is up on the top as a little aside. Oh, by the way, this is an album. I like that.

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