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phone holding a leash attached to a tiger; Death handing out fliers; a bulging, grinning bodybuilder dragging the cross. You get the idea.

Tillman wrote a long description of "Pure Comedy" on the album's press release, perhaps an irregular move for most musicians, but apposite for him. Here's an extract: "Pure Comedy" is the story of a species born with a half-formed

brain. The species' only hope for survival, finding itself on a cruel, unpredictable rock surrounded by other species who seem far more adept at this whole thing (and to whom they are delicious), is the reliance on other, slightly older, half-formed brains.

"This reliance takes on a few different names as their story unfolds, like 'love', 'culture', 'family', etc. Over time, and as their brains prove to be remarkably good at inventing

meaning where there is none, the species becomes the purveyor of increasingly bizarre and sophisticated ironies."

One of the main subjects he lampoons on the album is religion. Tillman was raised in a devoutly Christian family in Rockville, Md., and until the age of 17 was only allowed to listen to religious music. And even after that, he could only listen to secular music that had a "spiritual theme." In the eponymous title track, he derides the "woman-hating epileptics" who worship "risen zombies" and get "terribly upset" when you question them.

One of the great ironies, he said, is organized religion.

"The religion of Christianity was founded

on a profoundly anti-religious guy, who was despised by the religious orthodoxy of the day. They hated him, and even his followers were permanently frustrated with his answers," he said, getting into a bit of an impassioned rant. "If he were around today, they'd be saying 'Oh, this ironic bearded hipster, ugh.'"

Another major theme that runs through the 13 new songs is a scathing critique of celebrity culture. In "Total Entertainment Forever," he croons about: "Bedding Taylor Swift/ Every night inside the Oculus Rift." "Ballad of a Dying Man" is a soulful song, complete with harmonies from a gospel choir, about a man worrying about his online presence once he has died: "The homophobes, hipster and 1 percent/ The false feminists he'd managed to detect/ Oh, who will critique them once he's left?"

When I asked him about his feelings on entertainment culture, he snorted and said the phrase was an oxymoron.

"There's an important distinction to be made between entertainment and art," he said. "Entertainment has only one motivation, and that's to do whatever it takes to make you feel good and purchase the products that are being advertised. Art just has a completely different set of incentives."

He said it's an important distinction when you are listening to "Pure Comedy."

"There are parts of this album that are engineered to make you feel bad, or make you feel anxious, or make you feel despondent. The parts of the album where I want you to feel hope or empathy, those don't really do that thing if you haven't experienced any kind of anxiety or despair along the way. If I were just about entertaining people, I'd be Jimmy Fallon; I wouldn't be doing this."

He said the album is a kind of catharsis for him. Perhaps catharsis from living in Los Angeles (which he said he does only because he was sick of having to fly in to see his plastic surgeon), catharsis from living in Trump's U.S. (when Donald Trump was elected president, Tillman said: "We're

fucked; we're really fucked"), or his long-term struggle with depression and anxiety (for which the artist takes micro-doses of LSD).

"There's a very simple equation where if I'm feeling really despondent, then singing and playing piano makes me feel better," he said. "But from there, there's about 100 other steps, you know, where it's like now I'm going to finish this song, and now I'm going to record it, and now I'm going to put it out, and now I'm gonna do interviews about it and now I'm gonna take it on tour." In the end, he said, making music only makes him "crazier."

But even though listening to these songs might make you worry about the state of Tillman's mind, he said it's not actually a despairing album at all. It just takes a couple of listens.

"Right around five, it gets really positive," he insisted. And while at first glance the album is a swirling cacophony of despair, he's right.

"I've raised all these questions and it all seems so daunting; it all seems so insurmountable, and you're kind of hoping that the answers will be some kind of new revelation, and they're not," he said. "The comedy is that the answers are the same as they've always been."

When he does deliver his missive of hope, hidden in the final line of the opening track, it seems almost reluctant, but all the more true for being so.

"I hate to say it," he sings, "but each other's all we've got."

Courtesy of The Big Issue Australia / INSP.ngo

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FATHER JOHN MISTY



"Pure Comedy" album cover art by Edward Steed. View it in more detail at fatherjohnmisty.com.

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