

# The Book of Judgment

Background and notes on the conception, creation and production of  
*Judgment Day*, my opera about the end of the world

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# Introduction

*Judgment Day* is a retelling of the Christian *Book of the Revelation* set to music. It's a tale of belief and skepticism, love and loss, chaos and control, freedom and slavery, good and evil and, literally, the end of the everything.

To get a better sense of the plot, the synopsis is [here](#). But the gist of it is: boy meets girl; boy gets girl; boy loses girl because the world ends. As the story unfolds, we encounter a varied cast of characters including a morally ambiguous priest, a slimy law-and-order politician, anarchists, news anchors, pop stars, religious faithful and the Antichrist himself. Prepare yourself: Armageddon is coming soon, and she's a bad bitch.

*Judgment Day* gestated in the weeks and months after 9/11. I wrote the book and the music over a period of three to four years, approximately 2003 to 2007 - the dark era of the runup to the US Iraq War and its aftermath. Back then, I didn't think America could get any worse, or the world situation any more precarious, than it was under George W. Bush. As time would tell, I was wrong.

The project sat mostly untouched for over a decade as life intervened. Then, along came Donald Trump, and I knew I had to finally make it happen. The world is on the brink. If this goes on, we'll be living in a hellscape of corporate feudalism, environmental catastrophe, nuclear conflict, theocracy, fascist autocracy or all of the above. People fight the future in different ways; I'm fighting it with my art.

This is the story of how *Judgment Day* was conceived and created, and how I plan to have everyone in the world hear and see it in my lifetime.

# Backstory

## In the Beginning

September 11, 2001. America's imperialist chickens had come home to roost, our decades of meddling in the turbulent middle east rewarded with a rain of terror from the skies. The religious extremism that fueled the 9/11 attacks had an equal and opposite reaction in anti-Islamic fever that raged through America and ultimately led to the Iraq War. As a recovering Christian, I'd been fascinated with the mass psychology of religion, in particular the interplay between religion and warfare, for years - but this time, it was personal: I might literally die as the world ended in the fire of Armageddon.

I hadn't felt existential dread like this since my tween years, when I was living daily with the spectre of nuclear holocaust. My constant angst climaxed with the airing of *The Day After*, a made-for-TV film that dramatized a devastating nuclear war between the superpowers. 100 million terrified Americans tuned in with me to experience the horrors of a prospective nuclear conflict - a cathartic and enlightening viewing that partially helped bring about an easing of tensions, treaties and disarmament, as political leaders worldwide softened their rhetoric and embraced a spirit of cooperation that lasted for decades. Now the terror was back - but it was far scarier, because it wasn't at all clear that the show was being run by rational actors.

## The Truth is Out There

On a happier note, around the same time as 9/11, two cultural developments exerted a huge influence on me. The first was the conclusion of the full series run of *The X-Files* on TV. Conspiracy theory is another one of my big obsessions. The alien and paranormal stuff in the show is fun, but what really gets me going are the

smoke-filled-room machinations of geriatric, mostly white, always men, plotting how to best pull the puppet strings and exploit an unsuspecting populace for personal gain and political position - usually rationalized in the pursuit of vague, esoteric aims. They had to do it, the world needed them, and it would have spun off its axis without their quiet helmsmanship. Back in those pre-streaming days, we had to watch shows on broadcast TV at an appointed hour. X-Files viewing parties were social events, and we had a solid core group often hosted at my house. Together we watched the series meander in the late seasons, but it came back to finish strong and it was a shared experience that left a lasting impression on so many of us.

The other watershed was the completion of a fantastic art project a few years earlier: *DJ Christ, Superstar!* DCJS was a radical reimagining of *Jesus Christ, Superstar!* that was performed for a massive crowd at the Burning Man festival in 1999. Over the previous couple of years, long getaways with a merry band of burners known as the *Spiral Oasis* often culminated in singalongs led by myself and the more musically inclined in our tribe. My wife Marina had stumbled on a CD version of the JCS brown album in 1998 (at Tower Records!). I was transported back to age twelve, and before long we discovered that half of the Spiral were also rabid JCS heads from their youth. One thing led to another: Mark Pesce dropped an idea bomb about doing a production at Burning Man, and in collaboration with our brain trust Paul Godwin, Ameer (Ameera) Evans, Erik Davis, Marina, Mark "Vordo" Wlodarkiewicz, and several others, *DJ Christ* was off to the races. Our version kept the original music, but featured modern arrangements and updated personae, including a DJ messiah, raver disciples, three Marys, tweakers, virtual reality cyborgs and, not coincidentally, a cigarette-smoking Caiaphas (rendered by yours truly in a fantastic baritone) leading a cadre of men-in-black priests. Our production kicked ass, and I developed an appetite for pomp, theater and performance that is yet to be sated.

For the first few years of the '00s, I toyed with original musical theater concepts. I had a some vague *X-Files* inspired tunes and scenes bouncing around in my head: a ditty called "That's Classified," sung by a poncy general, with sort of the cadence of *Blame Canada* (from another contemporary pop culture phenom); another song idea would ultimately surface in *Judgment Day* as *I Want to Believe* - but only the title. It was sung by a neurotic lead similar to Thomas, though much more like Fox Mulder. But that version was about aliens, not god, and the music was completely different.

## The Dogs of War

These madcap songs and plot ideas were brewing for a year or two, until George W. Bush started beating the war drums that got us into Iraq War II. I became alarmed about a resurgent radical Christian right that I thought had been pushed to the margins of society for good after the Reagan years. The shock and bloodlust I felt in the months following 9/11 gave way to anxiety about religious extremism. I imagined radical Islam and evangelical Christianity going at it in an epic final battle, with the rest of us as collateral damage. It didn't help that I spent a decade of my youth deeply indoctrinated in evangelical thought, and a subsequent decade trying to recover; the PTSD came flooding back and threatened to consume me.

Then it hit me: I would tell the story of The Book of the Revelation in opera form. There was precedent for religious musical works like this: *JCS*, *Joseph and Godspell*. Why couldn't I do it? No matter that my songwriting experience to date was scanty and my music career was in mothballs. Divinely inspired and emboldened by my artistic advance with *DJ Christ*, I was fired up. And thus, *Judgment Day* was born. Once the direction was established, the work came to me in waves, hard and fast. As it often goes with these things, some songs seemed to arrive cut from whole cloth; others were hard labor. The bulk of the work was composed between 2004 and 2007, at which time I had a fairly complete two hours of book, words and music, and a solid picture in my mind of how to produce and stage it.

I was excited about recording and performing the opera, but the first step was to create demos of the songs. Up to that point, I had only ever played them on piano and guitar and sang them for friends. I got hold of a copy of Logic, installed it on my PC (hardware dongle and all-- this was ages before Apple bought the product), and that is when the project stalled out. I hated the prospect of the impossibly steep learning curve, especially given that my day job was all about sitting at a computer. Given that, as well as trying to remain gainfully employed, raising a child and life generally happening, there the project sat... until the spring of 2020.

## Behold, a Pale Horse

Fast forward to 2020. Recording the *Judgment Day* demos became my COVID-19 project. My employer told us all to work from home indefinitely as lockdown was instituted in the San Francisco Bay Area. Like many folks, I suddenly had a lot of free time on my hands to pursue a hobby. Logic had been acquired by Apple and transformed into something approaching usable. My son Lucian, now in college, was back home sheltering too, and helped me get up the steep but now attainable Logic Pro X learning curve. I finally had the motive, means and opportunity to commit this wonderful piece of art to physical media.

The timing couldn't have been better for apocalyptic content as, once again, the world was facing a religion-based existential threat-- this time around with the US helmed by a criminal lunatic lauded by the Christian right as the deliverer of the long-promised End Times. Simultaneously, the fight against the rise of global fascism seemed to me a quite literal incarnation of a final battle between the forces of good and evil. So there I was, once again, in panic mode, on high alert for the end of everything. It was now or never: I absolutely had to share *Judgment Day* with the world.

Looking back, I marvel at how much of the original book and lyrics were preserved-- I'd say about 99% of it. I guess not much has changed. Social media has become a more predominant worry, but even back in the early noughts, the potential dangers of surveillance capitalism were in the public discourse. Plagues, conspiracies, totalitarianism, belief and the other themes in the work are pretty timeless. Even so, it's amazing to me how much of the content from almost twenty years ago is still so relevant. In 2020, before starting the recording sessions, I added a couple of numbers to move the story along (*Tomorrow* and *Saved*). But otherwise, *Judgment Day* is pretty much as I conceived and composed it more than a decade before.

The demos were recorded between March 2020 and January 2021. I did everything: analog and digital instruments, vocals, samples, programming, arrangements, and engineering. It was a mammoth effort, but I was filled with the holy spirit. During the recording process, I flexed in terms of showing off my vocal talent and chops on drums, keyboards and rhythm guitar. I also stretched out in new directions, forcing myself to learn to play lead guitar, bass, ukulele and harmonica, honing my falsetto for the stand-in female parts, and creating passable symphonic arrangements. I decided to go it alone originally out of COVID paranoia, but eventually that gave way to a stubborn resolve to show that I could do it all by myself. Ultimately, it was worth every sweaty minute. After all of that, I am quite ready to bring in a handful of professionals to take it beyond the demos. Recording and releasing a finished album is one of the many next steps for this project, though I envision and hope that it is realized on stage, in film, in print and other media in my lifetime.



# About the Book

## Plot

The plot is based on *Revelation*, the final book of the New Testament. Over the millenia, the events outlined in Revelation have been blended with elements from other works to form a modern apocalyptic canon and a narrative that goes, in broad strokes, as follows:

- The world is troubled— wracked by war, plague, famine and all manner of human-generated suffering
- A growing number of prophets make dark and foreboding pronouncements about the impending end of the world, and issue a “save the date” for us to be judged by God soon
- A putative savior arrives on Earth to rescue mankind from our plight, if only we can renounce our irrational ways
- This savior, initially embraced by humanity, is ultimately revealed to be a malign force intent on enslaving humanity in service to Satan (“the Antichrist”)
- Faithful adherents of Christ abruptly vanish from the physical plane of existence, taken up to heaven by Jesus (“the Rapture”)
- Those left behind are forced to choose between service to God or to Satan. Those who choose God must endure seven years of torment (“the Tribulation”) to prove their fealty before being accepted for salvation
- At the end of the Tribulation, the survivors engage in a boss battle between good and evil (“the Battle of Armageddon”), wherein Good triumphs and everything in existence is destroyed, to be replaced by a new heaven and earth (“the New Jerusalem”)

- The souls of all the departed (basically everyone) are judged before God (“the Day of Judgment”)

Additionally, *Judgment Day* layers a handful of well-known Revelation personae and tropes on top of the core outline, e.g. the Four Horseman, the Whore of Babylon, the opening of the seven seals, and the Mark of the Beast.

The tale is told mainly through the point of view of protagonist Thomas Judge, a rational skeptic, technically an agnostic. He is vexed by the current state of world affairs, in particular because he believes that most of the problems mankind faces can trace their roots to religion. He actually wants to believe in something greater than himself... but it's hard. (Spoiler alert: Thomas is heavily based on me.) Thomas' love interest, Maggie, is his foil: deeply faithful, a practicing Christian, driven by the belief that we are indeed approaching the end times as foretold in *Revelation*. Against the backdrop of the main storyline, Thomas and Maggie develop a romantic relationship and their characters evolve as each tries to see the other eye to eye and meet halfway. The final scene is intentionally left vague: Thomas is the lone survivor of the final battle, leaving the audience to wonder whether the world truly ended, or the whole tale is a product of his troubled mind.

## Themes

### *The End Times*

I am fascinated by the idea of the end of the world. I think of it as a rorschach test of sorts: how much energy one spends fretting about it can tell us a lot about a person. The fact that many world religions have end times myths speaks to their universality. The way that such tales have been used to mass-manipulate people through fear is telling-- in particular the inexorable, final, binary and zero-sum nature of the Abrahamic religions' versions. Those aspects have contributed greatly to my fixation with the topic,

and the lifetime of anxiety I have experienced, all of which led to the conception and development of *Judgment Day*.

### *Belief*

Primarily, *Judgment Day* is an exploration of belief. Initially, Thomas and Maggie represent two ends on a spectrum from extreme skepticism to blind faith. Beyond Maggie's personal qualities, it is Thomas' deep desire to believe in something, anything to explain what's happening in the world, that attracts him to her: she represents a pathway to security, integration, and possibly redemption. Maggie, on the other hand, has her faith continually challenged by the events unfolding around her-- though in the end she finds her way back to God.

### *Love*

Structurally, the romance between Thomas and Maggie keeps the story grounded and human (a challenge given the subject matter), and provides a gender balance for the protagonists' points of view and vocal performances that I believe will be key to its accessibility as a work of live theater.

More broadly, the love between these two is a reflection of higher work we all need to undertake in our personal journeys. True love is all about endurance and surviving challenges ("if the world should end... I'll still be here.") As above, so below.

### *Judgment*

Judgment in this story means two things. First, discrimination: the ability to distinguish right from wrong and the personal responsibility that comes with that. A major takeaway in the final scene and title song is that, regardless of the nature of reality, or what events actually transpired at the end of the story, it's ultimately up to each of us to decide for ourselves.

Judgment also means adjudication, and in this context we are talking about the father of all judges: the Almighty himself. While the finality of the Christian apocalypse is terrifying, there is also something compelling and beautiful about the idea that at the end of days your soul will be judged based on your choices. Live every waking moment like it's the last...

### *Power*

It's impossible to separate the idea of the end of existence from that of the end of human civilization. As such, the main events, actors and dynamics that drive the narrative are mapped to ones that power civilizations: tyrants and demagogues; chaos and control; freedom and slavery; propaganda and group psychology. In the modern world, these take concrete form in political systems, pop culture, mass communication, surveillance, reality TV, conspiracy theory.

The dark side of technology as a modern embodiment of apocalypse (*Eye in the Sky*, *Mark of the Beast*), seasoned with right wing bugbears like the spectre of a One World Government bent on taking away our cultural identity and our guns (*Simon Says*) creates a stew of tropes that makes for paranoid, edgy theater. It was impossible to resist these flavor notes when building the story. This undercurrent crests when Maggie poses a final question to the audience in Act II: what's the point of all the fuss of civilization if the world is about to end?

Being raised on a steady diet of the post-boom American Dream, I also feel keenly attuned to the fall of American exceptionalism that appears to be underway over the last several decades-- as evinced by the withering of institutions, mass media going wrong but going viral, and the ascendancy of magical thinking in our politics. *News of the World*, *Tear it Down*, *Order, Order, Order!* and *Eye in the Sky* delve in, exploring the opera's existential questions from a tribal perspective.

## *Gender*

*Judgment Day* is a very male work in its tone and point of view. When I dusted off the libretto in a post-*Me Too* world, I took some time thinking about whether I needed to update the point of view for our newly-woke climate. I decided not: *Revelation*, and Christianity generally, are hypermale. With all its bias, the story doesn't warrant a *male gaze* label; I think the worst you can say is that it's adolescent in terms of EQ. Hardly ideal, but it is what it is.

My one and only regret in this regard is that because I decided to stick to the script as supplied by John the Divine, I didn't have room for more female lead roles. Even including Maggie was a stretch; the only woman of note in the original is the *Whore of Babylon*. This is one area where I took significant liberty with the storyline, establishing Maggie as a mother goddess and protector instead of the fallen temptress of the New Testament (though she does admit to stumbling earlier in life). In doing so, I dropped original sin back into its original lap: Lucifer's, not Eve's. This point is the tip of a massive iceberg—one which I intend to explore in the sequel to *Judgment Day*. (Yes, there is a sequel.)

## Literary Influences

My primary influences for the story come from speculative and dystopian fiction, conspiracy theory, and a handful of films on the Christian apocalypse. In my youth I was exposed to the *A Thief in the Night* series, end times exploitation films of the 70's designed to freak teenagers out (mission accomplished in my case). I was also inspired by Michael Tolkin's fabulous film *The Rapture*; like *Judgment Day*, it's a very personal rendition of the end of everything, and while Thomas' path is quite different from Sharon's, they ultimately wind up in the same place.

At this point I am compelled to call out the elephant in the room: inevitable comparisons to *Jesus Christ, Superstar!* Both works are based on books in the bible; both begin and

end with a tortured soul delivering soliloquies; both feature biblically named principals. To me, the similarities end there. As I've already explained, I'm a huge fan of JCS and I certainly was inspired by its structure and the characters-- much more so than by the music, which I love dearly but doesn't influence this piece that much. To the extent that I would like the audience to draw a connection between the two works, I admit that I had a goal of creating a biblical bookend to that great piece of theater that is *Jesus Christ, Superstar!*, but for a different time. I hope with all humility that *Judgment Day* will be received as a complement, versus being perceived as an imitation.

## Characters

**Thomas Judge.** Our protagonist Thomas has a desire for deep spiritual connection, but is ultimately an agnostic. He is passionate but flawed, an everyman trying to make sense out of a frustrating world. He's anxious, sullen and pessimistic, but he still thinks that, in his own way, he's trying to make the world a better place. Thomas has a touch of *The X-Files'* Fox Mulder, given to flights of fancy but with a burning desire to find truth. He's a bit narcissistic, as becomes clear in his relationship with Maggie. Physically he's slim, handsome, nerdy, and stylish, an urban metro type.

Biblically, he is the Doubting Thomas of the New Testament, and his name is also a nod to apocrypha such as the Nag Hammadi codices, which identify Thomas variously as Jesus' twin brother and *Judas Thomas*. To the extent that our Thomas is a mirror of Judas from *Jesus Christ Superstar!*-- a lone voice delivering dire warnings-- this was a connection I couldn't resist making. I appended the Judge surname to signify discrimination, adjudication and justice.

**Madeleine (Maggie) Morningstar.** Maggie is spiritual, a true believer in Christianity and the literal word of the bible. She is devout and a leader in her evangelical church, though from her relating her personal story (*Saved*) we know that she also has had a bit of a past. Maggie is optimistic, nurturing and strong. She is beautiful, expressive and artistic, though she is stylistically and culturally normcore.

Maggie's given name is obviously a nod to the various Mary and Magdalene characters in the bible. Her surname connotes both Venus, for which it is the original Latin, and Lucifer ("light bringer"), which was later equated with the morning star. Christianity conflating the two tells us all we need to know about its stance toward the female; I am hoping this little bit of name magic can help tip the scales ever so slightly back toward balance.

**Brother John.** Brother John is named for John of Patmos, the author of *Revelation*. He leads the evangelical congregation, but at the end of Act 1 we see him seduced by THE ONE, and by Act II he has become THE ONE's minion. He is a firebrand and a zealot, burning with passion for his mission. He is in his mid-40's. The character is partially inspired by Clancy Brown's brilliant turn as the morally problematic Brother Justin Crowe from the HBO TV series *Carnivale*.

**Marshall Law.** Marshall Law is a conservative politician, a slick campaigner running on a law and order platform. His authoritarian streak tends toward cruelty, as revealed in *Order, Order, Order!* He is in his late middle age, handsome, and charismatic. By Act II, he is THE ONE's muscle. By the finale I picture him becoming some kind of man-machine hybrid akin to the "cymek" general Agamemnon from Brian Herbert's *Dune* prequel series. The character was originally inspired by Wesley Clark, a retired general and former US presidential candidate.

**Peter.** Peter is tall and stringy, driven and urgent. He develops from a self-righteous Occupy/Antifa ringleader type in Act I into a religious zealot heading up the Christian resistance, and ultimately God's Army, in Act II-- an unsurprising evolution.

**Psi.** A flamboyant techno/hip hop pop icon with an entourage. In Act I, he's an up and coming indie artist passionately promoting a vision for the world to come; in Act II, he's a sellout shilling for an oppressive regime in arena-sized venues. I envision him as a composite of popular hip hop artists like Eminem and Kanye.

**THE ONE.** He's the man: the Antichrist. He is beatific, charismatic and charitable in Act I and high strung, egotistical and monstrous in Act II, as he drops his benevolent facade and reveals the demon within. He's slick and well groomed, with close-cropped black hair. In Act I, he's Don Draper with a slighter build; in Act II he's a pomp Kylo Ren.



# About the Music

## The Demos

[Link to demos and listening guide here.]

## Compositional Elements

### The Main Melody

The main melodic line is an ascending major third, fourth and fifth of the diatonic scale. It is uplifting and transcendent. It is also a call to action: Gabriel's trumpet ushering in the Day of Judgment.

The line is used liberally through the opera, most notably:

- The primary melody in *Prepare Yourself*, *Tear it Down*, *THE ONE*, and *If the World Should End*
- A guest appearance in many numbers, as a quote (*News of the World*, *Tear it Down*), an outro (*If This Goes On*), an essential instrumental part (*Tomorrow, Saved*, *The Battle of Armageddon*)
- Modified: reversed in *Saved*, reversed and made minor in various parts of *The Battle of Armageddon*
- At the end of the *Battle of Armageddon*: Gabriel's trumpet blows, ushering in *Judgement Day*
- At the end of the Overture, introducing *If This Goes On*
- The guitar anthem in *Judgment Day*, concluding the opera

## The Devil's Interval

The opera makes liberal use of the tritone, also known as *the devil's interval*-- which seems appropriate as our antagonist is the Antichrist. In terms of notes, the tritone is the midpoint in the chromatic scale. Sonically, it is thoroughly unsettling and wants to be resolved.

The devil's interval is often used to convey ominous, dangerous situations and evoke fear and anxiety. I think of this interval as the western musical embodiment of good and evil. *Judgment Day* is a black and white story; so go the notes. Some examples of the use of the tritone include:

- The key transition from *If this Goes On* into *Revelations* (F# to C)
- The keys of the songs divided between the "good guys" and the "bad guys"-- though reversed, if one were to assume that C is the "good" key and F# is "bad," e.g. *If this Goes On*, *Tear it Down* and *Judgment Day* are in F#; *Revelations*, *The One*, and *The Mark of the Beast* are in C
- *The Mark of the Beast* uses the interval as the main harmonic structure (C to F# cello line); it also has the unorthodox chord progression Cmaj Bbmaj Amaj F#maj in the chorus, forcing a tritone leap back to the verse
- *The Battle of Armageddon* alternates between the keys of C and F#
- The final chord of the overture is the final chord of the chorus of *If the World Should End*: it's the flat six major of Bb i.e. F#maj - thereby completing the devil's interval from the opening Cmaj to F#maj (and also setting up the 3-4-5 melodic line of Gabriel's trumpet, leading into *If This Goes On*)

## Modes

A healthy percentage of the songs in Judgment Day are in the mixolydian mode-- unsurprisingly, since it's largely a rock piece. The ballads, being modern pop songs, are also heavily mixolydian.

- It's the main mode for *If this Goes On*, *Tomorrow*, *Saved*, *News of the World*, *THE ONE*, *Peace on Earth*, *If the World Should End*, *The Battle of Armageddon*, *Judgment Day*
- This mode reinforces the tritone motif with the major 3rd to minor 7th interval
- It is encoded in the overture: the progression of keys is Cmaj, Emaj, Gmin, Bbmaj, reflecting the keys of the songs *THE ONE*, *News of the World*, *Eye in the Sky* and *If the World Should End* (and spelling out a C7 chord). I'm not sure whether this was conscious or not; I merely constructed the overture to do what overtures do. But the result is a nice echo of this predominant element.

The other mode worth calling out is the Phrygian Dominant mode used in the *Poor Little Planet* movement of *THE ONE* as well as elsewhere. Some would say that this mode is the saddest of all keys... all I know is that it perfectly captures what I was trying to express there: 1. The deep pathos THE ONE feigns over humanity's plight in his attempt to win us over; 2. Hinting at the possibly Middle Eastern origin of this *Shaitan* who has arrived to hoodwink humankind-- could he even be the demon who originally visited Jesus to torment him during his forty days in the desert?

## Musical Style and Influences

I was raised in a musical family, with an instrument in my hand since the age of three. The drum kit in my living room was the perfect outlet for my teen hormones, so I chose that over piano (much to the chagrin of my parents). I'm a rocker through and through, a child of the 70's who cut his teeth on hard rock, metal and prog rock. As a Berklee College of Music student I switched back to playing keyboards but rebelled against jazz, opting for new wave and post-punk, and dropping out to play in bands before coming to my senses and finishing college-- but not for music. That said, I never drifted far away from playing some instrument or another and composing the occasional tune, but not at any sustained level of effort. In this regard, I guess *Judgment Day* was an inevitable explosion of twenty years of pent-up material and creative output.

In terms of general influences I would list 60's psychedelic music, 70's hard rock and glam, 80's post-punk, and 90's alt rock and electronica. As to artists, we're talking the likes of Jefferson Airplane, The Doors, Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, Roxy Music, David Bowie, Brian Eno, Talking Heads, Echo and Bunnymen, Gang of Four, U2, Nirvana, Hole, Beck, Public Enemy, Radiohead, Muse, Chemical Brothers, Daft Punk, as well as artier fare like Captain Beefheart, and Pere Ubu... this is a partial list of course. By the early noughts, I would have to concede that like most people entering early middle age, my musical plasticity had all but vanished. I try to stay current, but I think I pretty much got off the taste train back then. Everything new sounds like a rehash to me, except a handful of pop masters like Lady Gaga, Lana Del Rey and St. Vincent... interestingly skewing more female as I age.

All of this might explain why *Judgment Day* is much more in the vein of *Tommy* than *Jesus Christ, Superstar!*, or other cherished musical theater pieces by Kander and Ebb, such as *Chicago* and *Cabaret*. It's primarily a pop work, with an emphasis on song

structures and singability, more so than I originally intended. I guess one could call it a “rock opera,” though it’s equal parts rock, pop and electronica with a few symphonic elements. It might be more accurate to call it a “modern opera.” Note also that technically it is indeed an opera, not a musical, in that the entire story is told in music; there is no spoken dialog, nor any plot points acted out in words, save the occasional interjection.

I’m extremely happy that several of the songs feel like they have hit potential. I didn’t set out to do that. To me, those tunes are *Revelations*, *Prepare Yourself*, *I Want to Believe*, *Peace on Earth*, *The Eye in the Sky* and *Judgment Day*. A few others might make the cut, like *If This Goes On*, if only due to its pole position. But of course, which tunes folks end up listening to on loop will be for the swarm to decide.

While in all humility I do believe that I have the makings of a popular record, it’s important to remind readers that *Judgment Day* is intended first and foremost as a stage production. Several of the compositions exist primarily in service to advancing the story or supporting a massive stage spectacle design for the moment in the plot. Hence some heartily long instrumental passages and a generous amount of reprises. So while for now the work is to be experienced in audio form only, it’s best to try to envision the stage production by reading the libretto and the notes here.

# Song by Song Notes

## ACT ONE

### If This Goes On...

The story begins with Thomas delivering a tense soliloquy. He's ranting about an impending apocalypse— a man made one of mass media, surveillance capitalism, global terrorism and religious extremism. If we don't change course, he warns, things will end very badly.

The lyrics explore themes of media manipulation and power politics. The music is a frenetic blitz of 90's-style electronica, a genre that I had in pretty heavy rotation at that time. The goal is to put the audience on edge in a way that doesn't get resolved until the finale number and title song, which brings closure to Thomas' personal journey (not to mention all of New Testament cosmology).

The title comes from a 1960 Robert Heinlein novella about a Christian theocracy that has come to power in the United States, and a Masonic revolution intent on overthrowing it. It explores many of these same themes of media, power and belief. The novella uncoincidentally features a strong female lead named Magdalene, a nun who plays a key part in the plot to take the country back.

### Revelations (I Have Seen)

In the second number, a gospel affair in the spirit of *Let it Be*, a fiery minister named Brother John is preaching to his congregation, flanked by a choir led by Maggie. Brother John (named in homage to John of Patmos, the first-century author of *Revelation*)

describes several visions - a grab-bag of *Revelation* tropes and a foreshadowing of events to come - such as the four horsemen, the Whore of Babylon, natural disasters, and the arrival of a new savior on earth. Maggie takes up the second and third verses, drumming up soulful enthusiasm for the coming salvation, after which an old-fashioned revival meeting kicks into high gear. The song ends with Brother John bellowing out the final verse and collapsing in exhaustion on his lectern, the mood shifting from glorious to portentous: very soon, all will be revealed.

### **Prepare Yourself**

Maggie builds on Brother John's abstract, psychedelic exhortations with a concrete formula: judgment day is coming; each of us needs to renounce sin and accept Jesus as our savior (though Jesus is not named until nearly the end of the opera); those who do accept will be taken up to God in the Rapture; those who don't will be forced to endure seven years of Tribulation; and it's all happening soon, so get with the program.

This song captures the playbook driving modern evangelical Christianity, typified by a focus on the end times, the need to accept Jesus or else risk the eternal fires of damnation, and the directive to tell as many others as possible. The number takes place in a city park, done in a folksy style with a Bo Diddley/*Not Fade Away* feel, and performed with street instruments such as steel drums, tin cans, hubcaps and plastic buckets, acoustic guitar, harmonica and penny whistles.

The comet mentioned here is a McGuffin, repeated throughout Act I as a symbol of the impending destruction of all life. The lyrics also contain popular end times cliches such as *turn or burn*, *a thief in the night*, and *left behind*, immediately recognizable phrases to anyone versed in modern evangelical lore.

## Tomorrow/Saved

*Tomorrow* and *Saved* are of a piece: they introduce Thomas and Maggie to each other, and establish the dialectic between the two as they explore issues around faith throughout the opera.

It's a pretty enough tune, but by design, the minor-key *Tomorrow* clunks in after *Prepare Yourself* to put a damper on the evangelists' happy spreading of the Good Word, because Thomas isn't buying it. A Beatles-esque somber french horn threatens to sink the mood completely, but Maggie rescues the dour confrontation in the second half of the tune. It changes from D minor to D major, weaving in an instrumental variant of the main 3-4-5 melodic line and leading into *Saved*.

*Saved*, a soulful trip hop ballad, is the personalized flipside to *Prepare Yourself*. Evangelism is a contact sport, and here Maggie tries to close the deal with Thomas. She relates her backstory as a troubled soul who found salvation, and explains to him that he can too-- if he will only open his heart. Thomas, hoping that he can find a way out of his nihilistic funk, and willing to try anything, agrees to give it a go. It doesn't hurt that he finds Maggie wildly attractive.

These two songs were composed in 2020, over a decade after the rest of the opera was completed. An earlier version had a more hostile encounter between the two, a song titled *Lord Only Knows*, which lives on only as a reprise in *Tribulation*. (I have dubbed this a phantom reprise; I'm not sure if such a thing exists, but I'm coining it here.) When I dusted off the libretto in preparation for recording the demos, I realized that I had left a big hole in the development of the characters and decided to fix it. The story now flows better and Thomas is slightly-- though only slightly-- less of an asshole for it.



## **News of the World**

*News of the World* is about the media-military-industrial complex. An evening newscast delivers a barrage of disturbing images and sound bytes designed to fill our brains with the latest marketing messages and government propaganda. In today's top story, a decorated military veteran, Marshall Law, announces his intent to run for president on a law-and-order platform. The newscast cuts to a live political rally in which Law makes his case to voters, then cuts back to the newsroom for the wrap-up.

The staging and music are divided into distinct parts: the newscast takes place on a cable broadcast set backed by a newsroom orchestral theme; the political rally happens outdoors to guitar rock, with chords reminiscent of Jethro Tull's *Living in the Past*, though with totally a berserk arrangement. Both parts are in 5/4, mostly because I always wanted to write a song in 5/4. But it's also a meter that never settles down, so it should put the audience on edge-- much like a typical cable news segment today.

## **Tear it Down**

This genre-hopping piece is a stew of counterculture personae and tropes: raves, the Occupy movement (or now Antifa), defund the police, burn it all down. As Marshall Law quite publicly pushes for consolidating power and the rule of law, Peter and his band of anarchists plot to fuck shit up. The wealthy and powerful control so much, and they always want more: it's time to turn the tables.

The song is set in a nightclub and divided into three distinct successive parts: a dance section, set in the early evening hours, with Peter and his crew plotting over the music as the patrons stream in, culminating in a loud rave with a large crowd of dancers; a gritty funk/hip hop bit, wherein Peter makes the case to whoever will listen that we're not

going to take it anymore; and a hard guitar rock ending with Peter's gang and the patrons going wild and trashing the club.

### **Order, Order, Order!**

A jackbooted police force dressed in full riot gear breaks up the mayhem at the nightclub, in a Nine Inch Nails-inspired industrial romp that explores police brutality and authoritarian overreach. Marshall Law beams in over the TV screen (in homage to 1984 the film)-- forceful, triumphant and giddy with power.

The lyrics are a dystopian grab bag of fear mongering pulled straight from the George W. Bush area: bad people are out to take away our freedoms; they could be your next door neighbor or best friend; security is paramount, even at the expense of privacy and personal liberty; those who don't think like we do can't be trusted; listen to the government, we have your best interests at heart. War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, etc. This tune takes on additional meaning today in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests and Defund the Police movement.

### **I Want to Believe**

As mentioned elsewhere, before *Judgment Day* was a twinkle in my eye, I had been thinking about an *X Files*-inspired musical about aliens and conspiracy. I eventually incorporated this thread into the opera with *I Want to Believe*, but now focused on Thomas' longing to believe in a higher power than himself. I was actually grappling with the chorus lyrics for a few years, until I quite randomly stumbled on a rerun of the *X Files* episode *Closure*, in which Mulder's sister Samantha's fate is finally revealed. I somehow had missed this one before. It all clicked for me-- and I found some closure of my own. The secret's in the stars.

Musically this is squarely in the power ballad category, with an acoustic guitar part inspired by Led Zeppelin's *Thank You*, but ultimately grooving more like Bad Company's *Feel Like Making Love*. These are my 70's hard rock roots on display. About a third of the way into the opera, this solo tune provides a break for the cast and audience after the bombast of the *News of the World*->*Tear It Down*->*Order, Order, Order!* Sequence. With the right vocalist, it could also be a showcase number.

## **Simon Says**

This song introduces Psi, one of the morally ambiguous characters. He's a rising pop star with a message heralding the arrival of THE ONE, a superbeing come to Earth to save us from ourselves. The lyrics amplify Maggie's messages of needing to prepare and sort ourselves out before the end of days, but with an added dose of right wing conspiracy dog whistle: specifically, the globalists are coming to take away your guns and money under a new One World Government. The music is bubble gum electronic soul, a bit of fluff intended to lighten the mood and pick up the pace as Act I draws to a close. The staging and the production design should be glam, glitz and pomp to reflect this.

## **THE ONE**

The last song in Act I features the arrival of the Antichrist, aka THE ONE. It is a sprawling piece broken into four distinct movements:

1. A candlelight vigil, in which a multitude of excited end times-believers gather in anticipation of the much-reported comet crashing into the earth and ending all existence. A chorus sings in unison, begging to be spared but fearing the worst. The music and choreography are initially deliberate and worshipful, and then transition to a swirly, ecstatic drum-and-bass ritualistic dance.

2. Annunciation: angels appear in the sky and in high-pitched tenors and tell the crowd not to fear. It wasn't a comet after all; it is the arrival of the new savior of the world. A raucous glam rock shuffle reminiscent of *Ballroom Blitz* accompanies the aerial spectacle on stage.
3. Poor Little Planet: this movement is a mournful 6/8 dirge in Phrygian Dominant mode. THE ONE makes his first appearance on Earth and addresses the crowd, telling them that after millenia of suffering it's all going to be ok: they just need to renounce their irrational, religious ways and follow his lead. He's lying of course, as will become clear in Act II.
4. The Four Horsemen. It's time to break that first seal, as the four horsemen of the apocalypse appear and a right shitshow takes place on stage-- the first of many cleansings of humanity in preparation for THE ONE's reign. The music reprises the Annunciation, with an angel singing while THE ONE's advance guard lays waste and the curtain is drawn on Act I in a blinding flash of white light.

The foundational 3-4-5 melodic line runs through all four movements, spanning key and mode changes. This song is the centerpiece of the opera, and it is foreshadowed many times from the overture through Act I, and reprised and modified throughout Act II. And somehow... all four movements and twelve minutes of it popped into my head nearly fully formed.

## **ACT TWO**

### **Peace on Earth**

Is there any more iconic pop ditty from the 1970's than *I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing*? The song, and the *Hillside* TV commercial it was based on (fun fact: it was a Coke jingle first!), with doe-eyed, thick-maned, white turtleneck-clad hippies singing a message of love, are permanently burned into my brain from childhood.

This is the vibe I was tuned into when *Peace on Earth* sprung out of my brain one day more or less in complete form while thinking about the plot development for Act II. (If memory serves, I wrote the tune start to finish in a couple of hours; the lyrics didn't take much longer). The second act opens with a host of singers on a hill-- right out of the *Hillside* commercial, styled similarly-- singing a message of love, hope and a brand new day. It's a truly joyous song (the only one in the whole opera), though in the context of the plot, the lyrics drip with irony, because everything goes downhill fast and for the remainder of Act II. Musically, it's straight ahead pop with a catchy melody and beat, majestic rhythm guitars, and electronic keyboards and a horn section evocative of 1970's jazz-pop groups like Chicago.

### **The Eye in the Sky**

After the delightful opening number, the mood turns instantly dark. Cello and viola grind out an ominous dirge in G minor, followed by a Picardy third that opens into a ripping dance groove in G major, with piano pedal tones underneath and a punctuating Motown horn line.

Onstage we see a massive production, an arena concert fronted by Psi, who makes his second appearance of the opera. He's now a megastar and a corporate shill for THE ONE's propaganda machine. The lyrics explore commodified religion, mass media, consumerism and surveillance capitalism, and ultimately admonish the audience to comply or be left out of all the good things that the new regime controls-- a *mark of the beast* trope that is one of the major hobgoblins in evangelical lore.

The music is a blistering electronica piece with a shredding guitar on top; the chorus provides a steady, dancy and melodic respite from the relentless churn of the verses.

## **This is Not the Way**

In the final dialogue between Thomas and Maggie, the couple are distraught over the world events playing out on their devices. They've just seen the Psi broadcast urging people to comply with ever stricter measures being imposed by THE ONE. Maggie takes it as a clear sign that the end times are upon us right now; Thomas, fed up with all the religious talk and frustrated with his own inadequacy, blows up at Maggie and storms off to, effectively, join The Resistance.

The song takes place in Thomas' loft apartment. Musically, the vibe is 80's New York all the way, but it's divided into two parts: piano jazz followed by grinding guitar rock. Both bits heavily feature baritone and tenor sax solos and drones.

## **If the World Should End**

Maggie's big torch song provides a last rest break for the cast, crew and audience. It's a somber but pretty ballad that begins softly and steadily builds to an orchestral big finish. Lyrically, it's one of the more philosophical pieces that asks: why does anything matter if the world ends and, like the fabled Ozymandius, all our creations come crumbling down? She asks other questions, too, and leaves them all pretty much unanswered. The one thing she does know is that, whatever happens, she'll still be here; that is, love endures, even after everything else is gone.

## **Tribulation**

I have to admit, I'm really pleased with myself for thinking to make *Tribulation* a blues song. The piece begins with Peter's band of anarchists-- now a group of devout Christians living on the margins and rebelling against the tyranny of THE ONE-- singin'

the blues. The tune is equal parts Howlin' Wolf, Grateful Dead and The Beatles' *Revolution*, and should be played tongue in cheek. Enter Peter, who scolds the group for whining, in a reprise of the hip hop funk part of *Tear it Down*. Thomas is discovered lurking in the bushes and berates the rebels, especially Peter, for what appears to be a lot of talk and not much action. In full weekend warrior mode, Thomas gets everyone worked into a frenzy, reprising the hard rock ending of *Tear it Down*. Finally, the group is captured (except Peter) by Marshall Law and a handful of riot cops, to a verse of *Order, Order, Order!* (Reprises come hard and fast as operas draw to a close...)

### **The Mark of the Beast**

Could you imagine meeting the devil himself? Thomas is brought in for interrogation. Brother John, who is now a minion of THE ONE, works Thomas over for a bit, before bringing him to his boss for an interview. THE ONE is no longer the charming, beatific pitchman of Act I; he's agitated, shrill and impatient. THE ONE offers Thomas a Faustian bargain, and in short order reveals his true demon nature as the scene onstage explodes into an orgiastic spectacle of torture and agony. Thomas refuses THE ONE's offer in an ironic reversal (*I serve no one!*), so the demon has his thugs beat on Thomas for a bit. Eventually he gives up, annoyed that he's lost another potential thrall, and goes back to his business of enslaving humanity and destroying the world.

As for the music, the verses consist of a menacing cello bass line-- the devil's interval-- a nauseating chromatic vocal melody doubled with piano, a dorky 808 drum machine for rhythm, and a melange of oddball instruments. The performance evokes a demonic cocktail combo, with the players intentionally out of step as they often just play whatever they want. The chorus is industrial hard rock in the style of Marilyn Manson's *Dried Up, Tied and Dead to the World*, and has a bizarre chord progression (Cmaj, Bbmaj, Amaj, F#maj) that keeps the song wickedly off balance. There is an interlude that reprises *Poor Little Planet*, though instead of the orchestral arrangement of Act I, it's done in

klezmer style and performed by an onstage cabaret band-- adding a chilling Berlin 1929 vibe to the piece.

## **The Battle of Armageddon**

This is the last big production number: the end of the world.

Part 1. In a sober ritual, a bard strums an acoustic guitar, chronicling the tale of the End of Days as it unfolds. Peter, now the leader of the Army of the Lord, addresses his troops on a hilltop in Israel (yup, that's where Megiddo aka Armageddon is) and explains the stakes of the upcoming final battle. Referencing Jesus's conversation with one of the thieves crucified next to him, Peter assures that today they will all be together in paradise. Maggie, taking on the role of high priestess, delivers a benediction as the music explodes into a majestic hail of bagpipes, horns and military drums.

Part 2. The Armies of THE ONE are a ragtag mix of trained soldiers, mercenaries and lesser demons commanded by Marshall Law, who is fully decked out in battle regalia. Law recommends no mercy, to kill all enemies, and the troops grunt out militaristic call-and-response lyrics reminiscent of army boot camp. The distorted bass line, clangy rhythm guitar and shrieking lead guitar accents in this section are Black Sabbath-inspired psychedelic hard rock.

Part 3. The Army of the Lord moves onto the battlefield accompanied by a steady dance groove and modified versions of the main melody streaming overhead on piano and synth. They're fighting for the right (or, the Right?), and God is on their side. This is a sideswipe at the arrogance of this group as they enter battle-- a nod to the famous Abraham Lincoln quote "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right." (I first learned about this quote



from John Kerry during one of his 2004 presidential campaign speeches, so it was probably top of mind when I wrote these lyrics.)

Part 4. The battle is joined by the Armies of THE ONE, along with the angels from Act I, who are now darkly clad and demonic. The music reprises the fast glam rock section from *THE ONE*, and gets louder and more chaotic as the battle-- and the world-- comes to an epic end, with everyone on the battlefield left dead.

Part 5. Somehow (don't ask me how), Thomas survives and arrives at the battle scene in Israel (don't ask me how). He discovers Maggie's limp, lifeless body and in a borrowed musical snippet from *THE ONE*, laments the loss of his beautiful one true love, accompanied by gospel piano and organ.

## **Judgment Day**

Thomas is shaken from his grief by the blaring of Gabriel's trumpet; Judgment Day is upon us. He ponders all that has happened, singing to no one in particular, accompanied by a four-on-the-floor kick drum and a galloping bass line. A hi-hat and snare backbeat join in as he turns his gaze to the audience to finish the first verse. The dead bodies rise up into the air and eventually all disappear, leaving Thomas alone onstage. A full band arrives for the chorus, which is followed by a jangly guitar anthem featuring the signature 3-4-5 melody. The orchestration builds with each verse, and there is a simple Who-like interlude of thunderous barre chords and Hammond organ. Finally, there are doubled-up chorus and anthem sections backed by a choir singing hallelujahs, and the opera ends.

Lyricaly, Thomas gets to have the last word about the meaning of life. The good news is that he's learned something; the bad news is, he's not telling. Thomas does offer a few choice tidbits: most of the drama around us is of our own making; we seem to thrive on

letting other people manipulate us; and as to the ultimate question of reason vs. faith, it's up to each of us.

This song has an interesting history. I wrote the music and a handful of lyrics in the early 1990's, completely independent of the opera. It was originally a fuck-around-and-find-out anthem of rebellion, with an already complete arrangement. It had the title, too, which turned out to be really handy when I was searching for a capstone piece for the opera. It's almost as if *Judgment Day* had been... waiting around for me to write an opera.

### **The New Jerusalem**

The coda is a reprise of *Peace on Earth*, with vocals sung offstage and a lone harp accompaniment. The title invokes another end times staple: after the end of everything, there will be a new kingdom of man, on another plane of existence, ruled by Christ in peace and harmony for a thousand years.

## Scene List

TBD: shot-by-shot notes from the libretto. Would be great to get a storyboarder on the team.

## Production Design

TBD: notes on staging and production design. Would be great to get a concept artist on the team.