

Much More Than a Lark: A Fugazi Opera Sans the Fugazi Songs

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Punk music without the music, as it turns out, is still pretty punk.

"It's All True," an opera from the Brooklyn-based experimental performance group Object Collection, comes to Austin's Paramount Theatre for three performances May 18-20. The show is inspired by the live recordings of the seminal post-hardcore punk band Fugazi. Featuring a live ensemble and four performers, "It's All True" is an operatic adaptation of the passion, politics and uncompromising attitude of the legendary band.

And yet, this Fugazi opera features no Fugazi songs.

"It's All True," 8 p.m. May 18-19, 5 p.m. May 20, \$22, austintheatre.org

From 1987-2003, Fugazi recorded over 800 of the 1000-plus concerts they performed around the world. Dischord Records, the band's label, made this collection available for online purchase in 2011, titling it the "Fugazi Live Series." Besides music, the 15-year archive contains 1500 hours of concert interludes that include everything from political discussions between Fugazi and the audience to the scrambled noise of police breaking up shows.

"It's All True" sonically reanimates those conversations and events using only the incidental music played between the recorded songs for accompaniment. The end result is a 100-minute non-narrative haze of feedbacking guitars and rants about Operation Desert Storm, the U.S. healthcare system, and ice cream-eating jerks.

Premiered in 2016, "It's All True" was commissioned by Norway's Borealis Festival. It's since been recorded and it's toured the U.K., where a critic for The Spectator called it "not pleasant, pretty life-changing."

In Austin, "It's All True" is presented by Co-Lab Projects, Sean Ripple, Vault Fine Arts Services and Fusebox.

But why base a show around the Washington D.C.-based hardcore band that's been on a self-described "indefinite hiatus" since 2003? Composer and co-founder of Object Collection Travis Just reasons that the unconventional nature of Fugazi's past concerts "dovetails perfectly" with Object Collection's own tenets of challenging viewers and breaking down the ritualization of theatre performance.

As the band's fans know, every Fugazi show was an experiment. They adhered to self-imposed edicts such as playing without a setlist, encouraging audience engagement and discussion, and a strict ban on show violence. They played in variable venues from restaurants to fans' basements and dorm rooms. Fugazi did all this to ensure that every show had the potential to develop its own character and challenge expectations.



Fugazi in concert. Photo by Glen E. Friedman.

In observing this, Just further hypothesizes that experimental theater and experimental music, like Fugazi's, is based on the same DIY philosophy — that dynamic, independent art can only flourish when individuals can connect and create communities to sustain that art. Like Fugazi, Just recognizes this not only as the way art forms persist, but, as he says, as “a model for a greater society, politically and socially.”

With the release of “Fugazi Live Series,” Just and Object Collection co-founder Kara Feely began to kick around the idea of creating a Fugazi show without the Fugazi. Admittedly, the two first considered the concept to be a “lark,” but later revisited it and thought, “Remember that really bad idea we had, how ludicrous would it actually be to do?”

Nailing down what material that would be featured in “It’s All True” was no easy task. Methodically scanning through each performance of “Fugazi Live Series,” Just kept a log of every sound or conversation that he found interesting, building up the database of material in the process. During his research, Just scanned through the *all* 1500 hours worth of audio.

Just’s extreme vetting validates the show’s character as a living Fugazi archive. “You have to deal with the entire thing,” says Just, “Otherwise it doesn’t stand up in some way conceptually, in our brains anyway.”

Feely, who wrote and directs “It’s All True,” took Just’s findings and scripted a libretto that defies any sense of traditional narrative, and is delivered by performers Catrin-Lloyd Bollard, Avi Glickstein, Daniel Allen Nelson and Deborah Wallace. Though it would be easy to classify the vocal performances as spoken word, the lyrics elude conversational rhythm, but also stray from strict musicality. It’s a mess of words and half-melodies that’s just as disorienting as it is magnetic.

Instrumentally, “It’s All True” presents the sound of a band in a perpetual state of pre-performance. Just presents a meticulously composed score made up of drum fills and aimless guitar riffs — many moments being musical quotes of Fugazi shows. The composer says that the composition process was challengingly “uncreative” at times, as the inspiration for the score wasn’t just an ethereal concept, but a real musical source.

But while “It’s All True” features music from a live ensemble, don’t expect a one-to-one reproduction of a Fugazi show. The actors of the show don’t use instruments. Feely says that she specifically “didn’t want it to look like a rock band.” Even so, those familiar with Fugazi and their variable venues will still get some visual *deja vu* from the performance.



Object Collection's "It's All True." Photo by Henrik Beck.

In staging the show, Feely aimed to capture the spartan and road-centric aesthetic of Fugazi. Weary armchairs and motel lamps constantly shift their position from scene to scene, individually coloring every moment with a surprising amount of variance.

"It's All True" visually telegraphs "having to set up a show every night and then pack it up [and] put it in a van," as Feely puts it, evoking the many spaces that Fugazi performances took place in throughout the band's career.

"It's All True," like the many Fugazi shows before it, is visceral, unexpected and anything but static — it's a show that demands the audience's attention. And as far as Object Collection is concerned, that's all the show needs to do. Though neither opera aficionados nor punk purists may recognize "It's All True" as the respective art forms they're used to, open-minded showgoers of all backgrounds are certain to be engaged.

"It's not for everybody," says Just. "But it is for anybody."

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