

Music Review - November 14, 2023

## **Kluane Takhini & James Hill – *To Catch Lightning In A Bottle* – Album Review**

I would certainly encourage you to have a listen to this record right here.

On the one hand, we've got a world where half of its inhabitants scarcely ever listen to instrumental music, while the other half can quickly recognize award-worthy stuff from a mile away. This is the latter scenario, I assure you – I'm completely impressed with this collaborative effort. If catching lightning in a bottle was the objective for Kluane Takhini & James Hill, then consider that mission fully accomplished. These two musical minds are remarkable talents without question, and together they've created a genuinely compelling record to listen to that is stocked and loaded with sincerely mesmerizing content.

As the album drifts into its opening/title-track, "**To Catch Lightning In A Bottle**" delicately welcomes you into this set-list of eleven songs and displays the wide array of instrumentation you'll find throughout this lineup of tunes. You could say it sets the standard you'll find to a degree...the impeccably intricate musicianship definitely speaks volumes on behalf of what they're capable of, though I'd charge that the title track of this record was so laidback in other ways that I'd understand if it wasn't THE track that sold you on the album itself. For myself personally, having been raised with a healthy selection of sound and instrumental tunes in a musician's household, I can absolutely hear the precision and skill that is being presented through "To Catch Lightning In A Bottle" – there's more than enough to keep me completely engaged. For others...well...I suppose that's why I wrote the intro I did to this review. Many people out there are needlessly resistant to instrumental music for no particularly good reason other than they just need something to sing along with, and I'd certainly advocate on behalf of this being that time where you should break outta your shell if that's you. I mean...c'mon y'all...listen to those first moments as you tick past the first minute and the melody is enhanced...or listen to the spectacular tone of the percussion when it comes into play...or the guitar towards the end of this track as Kluane begins to light it up as "To Catch Lightning In A Bottle" heads to its finale. The longer they get to impress you, the more they will – this opening track is a testament to the song-writing of Takhini and how he utilizes the art of the reveal.

I'm very realistic about what people can and can't hear in a song. Like, I'm confident just about anyone would be able to hear the incredible level of talent shared between Kluane and James on a musical level, but if you're asking me whether or not the average everyday listener, or even the advanced ones, can pick up on what drives instrumental music conceptually, then we're having a whole different conversation. Emotion is something we can pick up on...expression is something we can hear...moods are

things our ears understand – all of these things are fair game. The rest needs explanation, and a little concession from the creators that we'd have no way of picking up on what a song is truly about. Almost all the songs on *To Catch Lightning in A Bottle* are inspired by something important, something uniquely personal, or something like social causes that require our attention. In the case of "**She Doesn't Know Me Anymore**," the notes I've got with this record indicate that it "*is the true story of a daughter and her mother who has been captured by dementia.*" And to that, I say okay. Who would I be to dispute what is or isn't true in a song without words? If this is the story – the true story in audible form, and that's what we're being told that it is – I don't think anyone could really claim it's anything otherwise, could we? Like I said...I'm very realistic about what people can and can't hear in a song. Without notes, I'd have had no way of knowing that, despite the best intentions of Kluane and James. Would I have loved what I hear? Of course! Those are two very different things. I can hear the pure sincerity and emotion they're playing with, and "She Doesn't Know Me Anymore" sounds completely played with purpose, intent, and meaning...those are the key elements that are honestly most crucial. It's a beautiful song that possesses strength within its melancholy...dignified, and representative of the ideas & inspirations that caused its creation. I've got nothing against the concept of writing songs on behalf of a great cause or being inspired by a great idea...again, I'm just realistic about what gets heard.

"**90 Seconds To Midnight**" is a reference to the ol' Doomsday Clock, which more or less monitors how close we are to the end of the world as we know it. The versatility you'll find in this song and the degree of expression it presents represents how we all have different "*reactions to a world in chaos*" – which is completely true. So while you might assume a track like "90 Seconds To Midnight" where the position of the clock is entirely too close for comfort would come out sounding desolate & forlorn, the extended title of this song also reveals a hidden secret as well...it's often referred to as "90 Seconds To Midnight – Baila!" – where '*baila*' translates to '*dance*.' Some of us choose to be mired in the muck of politics and pay too close attention to our impending doom, and some of us choose to dance the pain away. There is no right or wrong answer to how you handle the information, there's simply freedom of choice. Both of the main types of reactions are on display within "90 Seconds To Midnight," so you get a solid mix of dark and light spread out evenly throughout this song, and I think folks will appreciate that. Listen to the technique that Kluane plays with when this song makes its first major transition will ya? Absolutely impressive stuff without question – and the way that James balances out the mood of this song as it shifts between its main modes of communicating our various reactions to chaos is nothing but superb.

When it comes to "**Poem for The Shadow King**," you'll find the duo expanding their sound to include a third member in the mix, Shane Beck, who comes in to deliver a spoken word performance along with the

music. Ultimately, that makes this particular track a bit more unique in comparison to the rest of the lineup for the simple inclusion of words in what we hear, but all-in-all, it's just a stand-out for a wide variety of reasons. First & foremost, I don't think we can deny the fact that not only do the words make a huge difference, and will for many instrumental-resistant listeners out there, but LISTEN to the spectacular texture in the tone of Beck's voice will ya? This man has a voice of pure character, and he does an exceptional job in bringing the "Poem for The Shadow King" into the light for all of us to hear. As far as Takhini and Hill are concerned, they do an outstanding job of setting the stage for this story to feel like the fairy-tale that it is. It's got that sense of wonder and fascination to it, and I felt like that's what really makes a moment like this work. While we're undoubtedly hanging on every word that Beck is saying, it's the music surrounding him that provides a setting we don't want to shake ourselves out of. The words are hypnotically poetic, the story is tangible and has an insightful conclusion to it, the music that is supporting the tale is absolutely brilliant, and just the mere presence of a voice will undoubtedly make "Poem for The Shadow King" that much more accessible to a world of listeners out there overall.

**"And Then There Were None"** includes additional orchestration by Ivanov Basso, which also makes a difference in terms of what we hear. Takhini and Hill alone are well worth the price of admission, I assure you – but the guest stars they've chosen to include in this lineup of songs make a noticeable impact as well. The professionalism is always there, whether it's in a performance like you hear from Shane Beck on "Poem For The Shadow King," or the remarkable contributions to the sound of what we hear on "And Then There Were None" and what Basso brings to the music. This particular song is based around the current Russian/Ukraine war that now has casualties in the six-digit terrain, with more than thirteen million also removed from the place they call home...which is tragic and sad, and what you'll hear in this song of course reflects that. Don't get me wrong, the trumpet CAN be a joyful sound at times when that's what's intended...but the instrument's ability to communicate sadness is so profound in my opinion, especially in the hands of an expert musician that communicates like James Hill does. The same ultimately goes for Kluane as well – whether it's his guitar or the keyboards, we always feel the emotion that they're looking to present in their ideas. "And Then There Were None" even has moments of drums in the background that feels like the traditional soldiers-marching type of sound...a subtle nod to the battle scenes taking place right now at this very moment, and costing far too many human lives.

One of the most enchanting and endearing songs you'll find in this lineup is **"Peace Begins with A Smile"** – it's straight-up beautiful, angelic, graceful, and filled with gorgeously warm & inviting sound. Which is all intentional, of course – Takhini knows what he wants to create, and executes professionally every single time. This particular tune is intended to be the reprieve that it genuinely is. So much of what Kluane

chooses to write about conceptually is HEAVY STUFF that has serious emotional weight to it, which is the natural result of being the 'musical activist' that he clearly is. My notes here say that label is "suggested," but let's be real here Takhini – it's accurate. If it wasn't, this record would have come with no notes whatsoever, and we'd all be free to interpret what we hear the way that we hear it, full stop. I enjoy music in a variety of ways...and for the most part, instrumental tunes usually end up without an explanation for their inspiration far more often than it's included...so while I do enjoy being able to come up with my own theories, it's also cool to dig into these tunes and have an idea of what it was that Kluane was thinking about as he composed them. "Peace Begins with A Smile" is inspired by Takhini's "*beautiful granddaughter*," and we can hear from the sound of a song like this what a ray of sunshine she truly must be. As attracted as I tend to be to tunes with darker inspirations & conceptual substance, I gotta admit, every time "Peace Begins with A Smile" came back around in the rotation of listening to this album, not only did I appreciate the serenity it brought, but felt like it was one of my favorite tunes.

I love the way the ambient sounds of nature are threaded into "**Lungs Of Mother Earth**" – it's powerfully symbolic of what Takhini is looking to express through this tune. It also has a great balance between real drama and peace in the mix as well, which likely represents the battle we're in for the fate of the planet right now. You'll hear everything from calm control, to colorful chaos..."Lungs Of Mother Earth" runs the gamut of its expressions and takes us on a real journey. Largely dealing with what its title implies, this song is about the deforestation occurring in the Amazon Rainforest and how that ultimately affects every single one of us on Earth. So, you'd THINK that we'd all be concerned about this issue, yet I think it's more than apparent that isn't the case. The comfort of capitalism, the skewed importance of commerce, and continually creating our valley of malls has far outweighed what's really crucial to the circle of life on this floating rock we're all spinning on, and it's devastatingly sad. Soul crushing really. If I had some kind of answer to how we fix that, I'd be the first to tell ya...but I'm coming up as dry as drought when it comes to the choices we humans make. The only truth I've ever found is within music, and that's the only place I've ever been able to affect change in what humble ways I can contribute, so I concentrate my energy there. I certainly acknowledge the horrors of the environmental disasters we've created and the ones that we're heading towards in our future, but I'm at a loss as to what can be done. "Lungs Of Mother Earth" was a truly moving composition that really echoed the inspiration behind the music, and as a result, becomes one of the most thought-provoking moments you'll find on this record.

I mean, let's be real here – "Peace Begins with A Smile" is such an undeniable rarity on this album. Most of the subject matter and inspirations are pretty downright tough to come to grips with...Kluane is creating awareness for a whole bunch of stuff that the world at-large tends to want to look away from, or ignore as

best it can. **"I Just Want to Hold Her"** for example, is about *"a story of separation from family, friends, and loved ones."* Not exactly the kind of upbeat subject matter that everyone out there is necessarily ready to absorb, even if I might personally believe it should be the kind of stuff they should be paying close attention to and doing their best to create the kind of awareness to it that Takhini & Hill are. "I Just Want to Hold Her" is admittedly more peaceful than perhaps you'd imagine it would be given its inspirations...but it's more of a nostalgic remembrance than it is a venting of rage, know what I mean? It's equally a reminder to hold the people you love as closely and tightly as you possibly can as it is a story of those we've lost to circumstances along the way. Essentially, while it's based on some fairly devastating subject matter, Kluane and James have expertly found the beauty on the inside of tragedy. This would be another song that's right up there with my favorites on this record...there's some notes from Hill that absolutely blow my mind on this track...listen to moments like you'll find around the forty-five second mark, or later on around the two-thirty mark...the expression and emotion is spellbinding. You'll never find these two executing at anything less than an all-star level of professionalism, but it's songs like "I Just Want to Hold Her" that reveal how captivating they can be with their melodies as well.

**"Code Red"** dives into topics of climate change, similarly to how "Lungs Of Mother Earth" tackled them. These are tunes that are generally intended to be warnings...and perhaps the most optimistic among us will feel like there's still some time for the Titanic we're on to avoid the iceberg. I can tell you without question, Kluane's guitar steals the show on "Code Red" for the most part. The song has got a lot of cleverly added atmospheric qualities to it, up to an including the wind you'll hear...but it'd be hard not to acknowledge how much Takhini is crushin' it on "Code Red" with his guitar. It's as great a tune as they all are here...this duo hasn't missed a single beat.

One of my favorite concepts on this album is found on **"The View from Six Feet Under,"** which essentially attempts to examine what 'life' would be like on the other side. I think we all have different ideas as to what that's going to be like. For my old man, who is still alive, he believes there's nothing; there's blackness, that's it, that's all...like turning the television off. For my father in-law, who has passed on – I asked him what he thought the next phase would be like and he was kind enough to answer. He believed he'd wake up in another place, in his Hot-rod of all things, and be cruising up and down the street with all his friends and family on the side cheering him on as he drove. It was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever heard a dying man say, and it has stuck with me to this very day. I don't have any concrete evidence to prove what I believe to be true, but I've always felt like this wasn't my first spin around the sun. I've had the same thought-process I have now since I was eight years old, and somewhat unfortunately I guess, I'm still probably just as smart now in my forties as an adult as I was back then when I was a

kid. Anyhow. "The View from Six Feet Under" is stunningly well-composed – it feels mysterious...it feels ethereal...even a bit hollowed-out, like there's nothing left but the essence of who we are trailing on wisps of the wind like memories we can't quite recall. I found this song to be absolutely fascinating from start to finish, and another one of the record's most thought-provoking cuts. Ultimately, I suppose "The View from Six Feet Under" is more about what we'd want to believe than what we could ever prove...but I side with Takhini's hopes about there possibly being something more than what we know...that maybe we continue on to the next level somehow, whatever that may be.

Finishing things off on a reflective note with "**Duet for The Shadow King**," I gotta say, this has been quite the experience with Kluane Takhini & James Hill all around. There's no doubt about WHY they've been getting such impressive accolades and racking up awards for their efforts – these two are masters of their craft and it's been a pure joy to listen to them play. I think that's one of the most wonderful things about heavier concepts done right...you can consider them on a contemplative level for sure, but you can also marvel at just how well-played things are too. For as short as "Duet for The Shadow King" was, this last track also shows this duo as the perfect collaboration they truly are...they're purely wonderful to listen to – that's not an opinion, that's an outright fact y'all. Make sure to check out Kluane's channel at YouTube as well...dude's got a whole set of visuals to support all the songs on this album as well, and you can take the story even further by hitting that up. If there was something outta place on *To Catch Lightning In A Bottle*, all I know is that I never heard it...and I'd imagine it's probably better to err on the side of **two passionate professionals that have put their heart & soul into every moment of this album**. They didn't make any mistakes...heck, I think they'd have to TRY to make mistakes, because they're truly THAT good at what they do. *To Catch Lightning In A Bottle* is a flawless record & fantastic to experience.

Find out more about Kluane Takhini at his official website: <https://www.kluanetakhini.com>

Find out more about James Hill at his official website: <https://www.jameshillcomposer.com>

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