



Claims Department

February, 2023

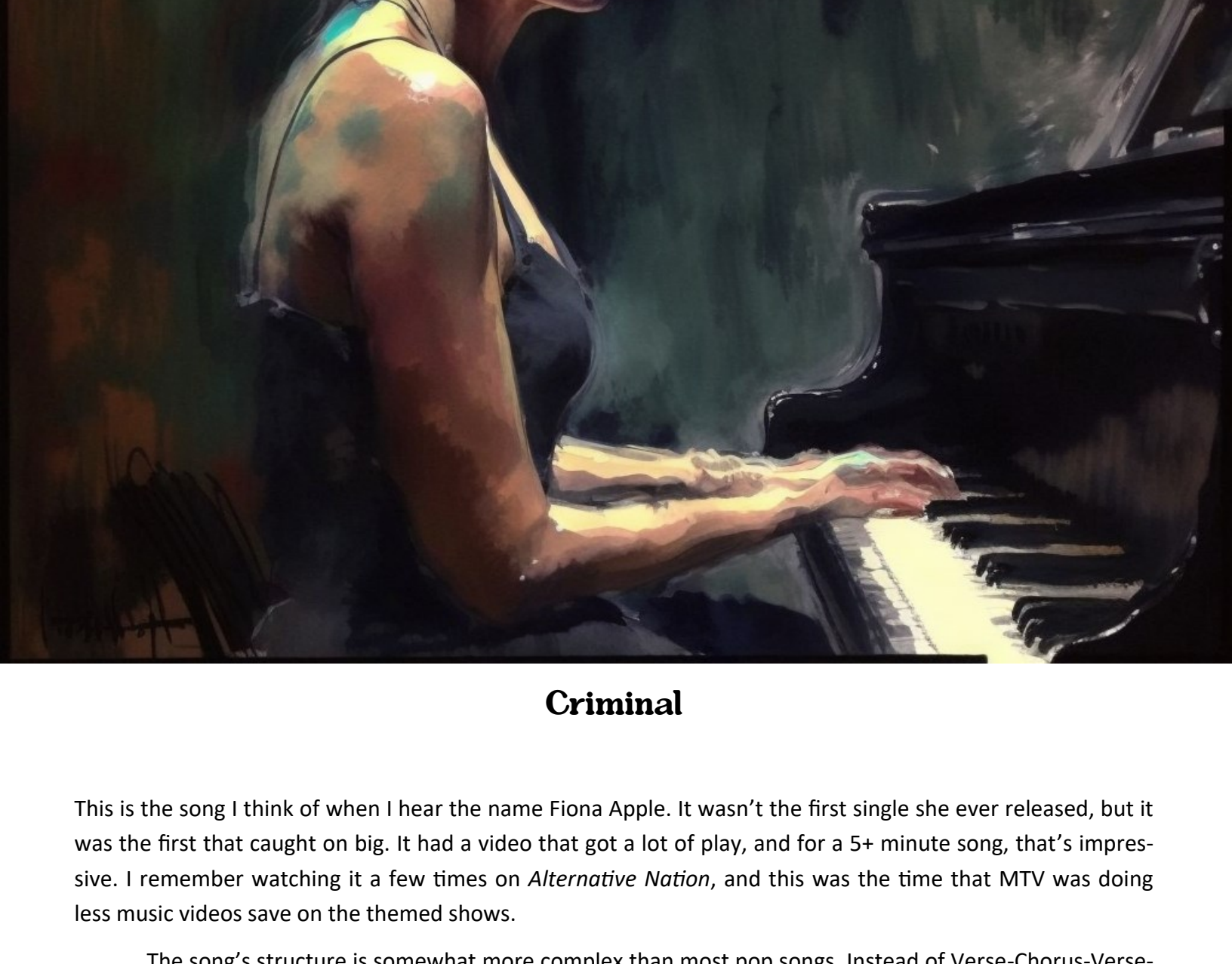
johnngeponymous@gmail.com

There's gonna be a lot about song structure in this one. Or at least about what I consider to be song structure.

Fiona Apple understands song structure in a very different way. The best I can compare her to is The Smiths. A full understanding of the verse-chorus, verse-chorus, bridge, verse chorus, while also being able to break it into so many permutations that seem to float and flutter away. She's certainly a follower of Tori Amos' style of performance, featuring exceptional piano work as the basis for her incredible lyrical ability, at the same time as folding in Alanis Morissette's ability to infuse both cynicism and humor, with her own touch of absurdity. That makes her a master of the modern pop song format during a time when that ideal was being raked over the coals. She's equal parts Tori Amos and Elton John. She's got the lyrical and vocal talent of Aimee Mann, while performing in the style of Billy Joel.

And somehow, she synthesizes it all into something so special and unique that it almost annoys the hell out of me.

I'm going to look at 4 songs. Yes, just four songs. It's all you need to see to understand why she's an absolute goddess among performers.



Criminal

This is the song I think of when I hear the name Fiona Apple. It wasn't the first single she ever released, but it was the first that caught on big. It had a video that got a lot of play, and for a 5+ minute song, that's impressive. I remember watching it a few times on *Alternative Nation*, and this was the time that MTV was doing less music videos save on the themed shows.

The song's structure is somewhat more complex than most pop songs. Instead of Verse-Chorus-Verse-Chorus-Bridge-Verse-Chorus, she goes with a smart structure that actually plays with the thematic tenor of the song. It's Verse-Transition-Chorus Verse-Transition-Chorus Bridge-Chorus.

Now, what that allows for is the reflection of the verse in the Transition (sometimes called the pre-chorus). The song is about the narrator coming to grips with the fact that she's hurt a former lover and feels less than zero remorse.

Well, that's not true. She wants someone to absolve her of her sins, or at least to show her how to be remorseful. She's said that it's about using sexuality to get what she wants, and not feeling that she's done anything wrong until she reflects back. The transition takes the chorus and shifts things until it can go into the chorus which is uniform across the three presentations.

There's an aspect of sound design to the song that harkens back to The Beatles at the end. It's not a performance, but it feels like an insertion of textured sound from the *Sgt. Pepper's* era. It makes it all feel more expansive, and the piano in it is hammering, and somehow jangly at the same time. It's not a saloon piano style, but it's all about the lyrics, and the performance doesn't disappoint.



Paper Bag

The follow-up to *Tidal* was *When the Pawn* which is an abbreviated form of the full, 100-or-so word title. The best song on the album is *Paper Bag*.

This song is... well, it's about a certain tendency to completely miss the reality of the situation, or even moreso, the reality of the person. She misidentified a paper bag, thinking that it was a dove. That part is based on an actual event that happened when she was being driven around by her dad. The song is scattered, in the way that you might be if you've not found your proper mindset.

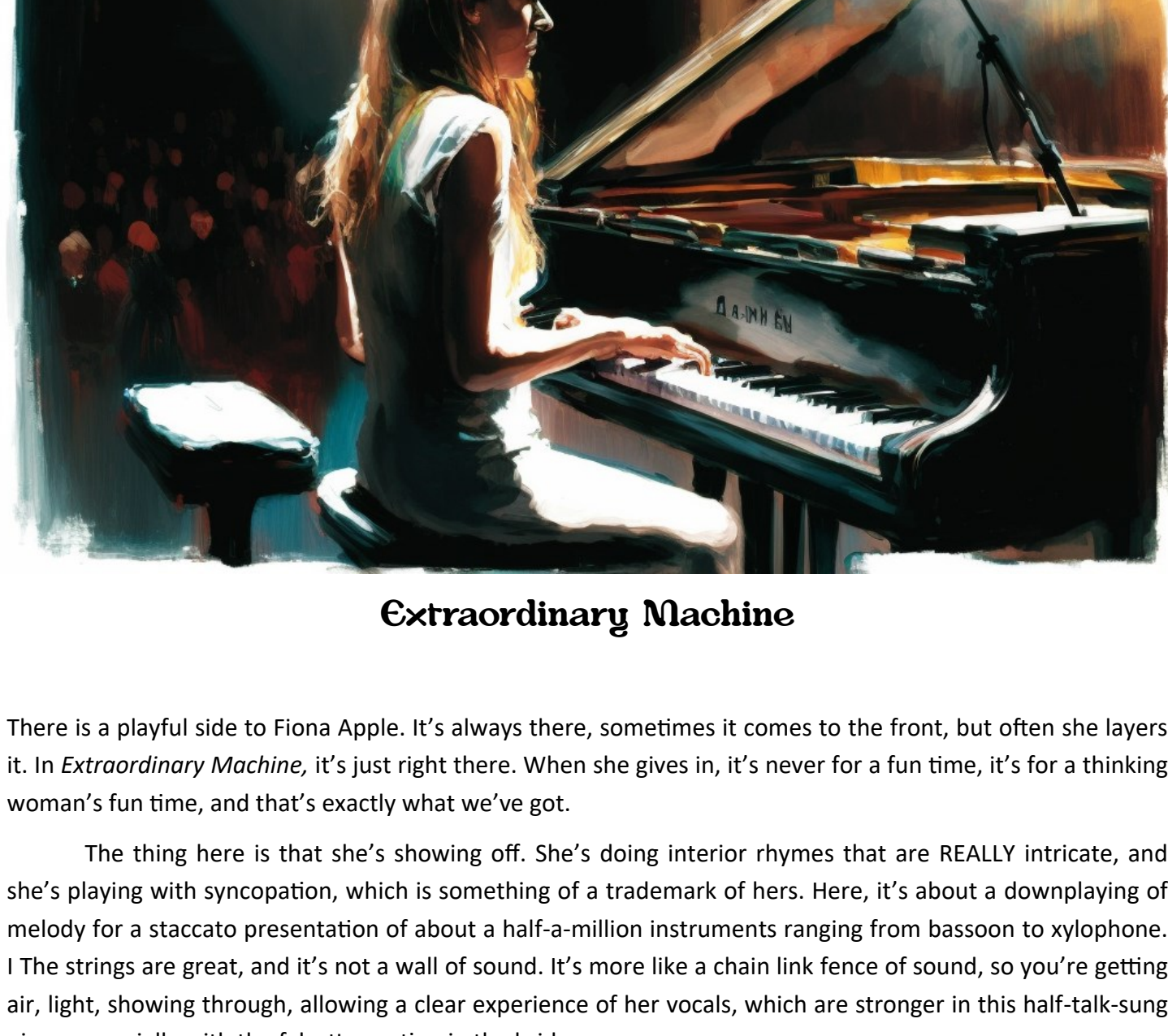
It also might have a theme of anorexia.

The line 'Hunger hurts, but starving works,' would speak towards that, and with Apple's well-known issues with PTSD, Obsessive-compulsive disorder, and disordered eating. She infuses *Paper Bag* with an energy that seems to reflect it, at least hintingly.

The orchestration here, with a piano that is, as *Pitchfork* pointed out, it's a brilliant combining of cabaret-type brushed drums, Weill-esque piano, and magnificently muted horn line that somehow echoes The Beatles. There's a lot of Beatles in Fiona Apple. A whole lot.

The song is kinda confessional, but like with *Criminal*, it's simply showing self-awareness, not any sort of real remorse. This characterizes a lot of Apple's work in her first two albums, and it's a part of what I attached to so strongly in this period. She knows there are aspects of her that suck, and while avoiding the sort of song-as-therapy that Tori Amos specializes in, she sees it as a form of journaling, or so she has said.

This is the song that makes me realise that Fiona Apple isn't in her own head too much, that she floats far more than dwells.



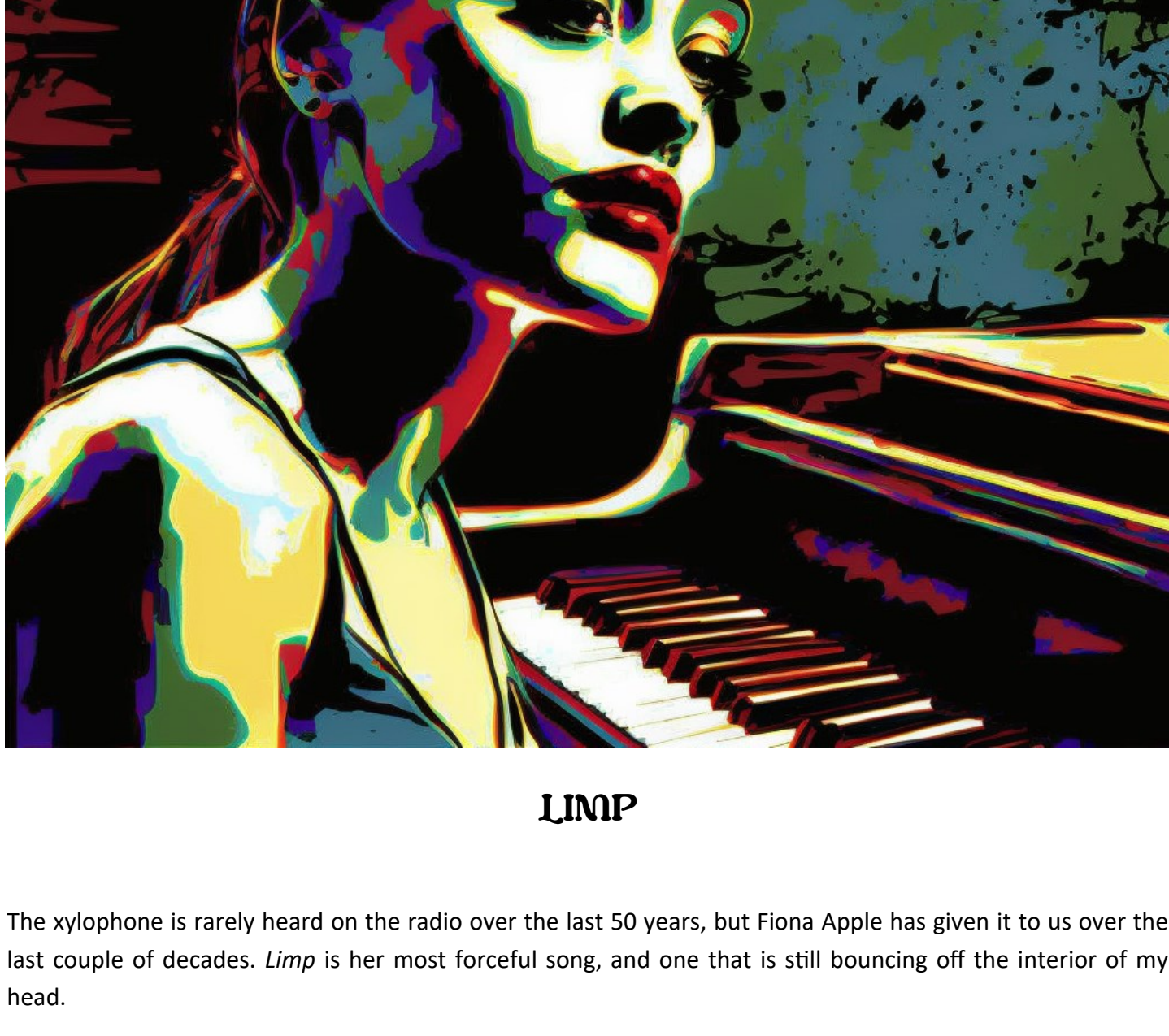
Extraordinary Machine

There is a playful side to Fiona Apple. It's always there, sometimes it comes to the front, but often she layers it. In *Extraordinary Machine*, it's just right there. When she gives in, it's never for a fun time, it's for a thinking woman's fun time, and that's exactly what we've got.

The thing here is that she's showing off. She's doing interior rhymes that are REALLY intricate, and she's playing with syncopation, which is something of a trademark of hers. Here, it's about a downplaying of melody for a staccato presentation of about a half-a-million instruments ranging from bassoon to xylophone. The strings are great, and it's not a wall of sound. It's more like a chain link fence of sound, so you're getting air, light, showing through, allowing a clear experience of her vocals, which are stronger in this half-talk-sung piece, especially with the falsetto portion in the bridge.

The lyrics are playful, the orchestration is playful, the whole effect is playful, and somehow that seems to answer the question of why Fiona Apple fans are so dedicated. She's got a fanbase who is dedicated, and I'm pretty sure most of them are music journalists. Every release seems to be greeted with a 'hail the conquering hero' from her fans and several publications, which included *Entertainment Weekly* for a number of years.

I love this one so much. It's one of my pure joy playlist songs.



LIMP

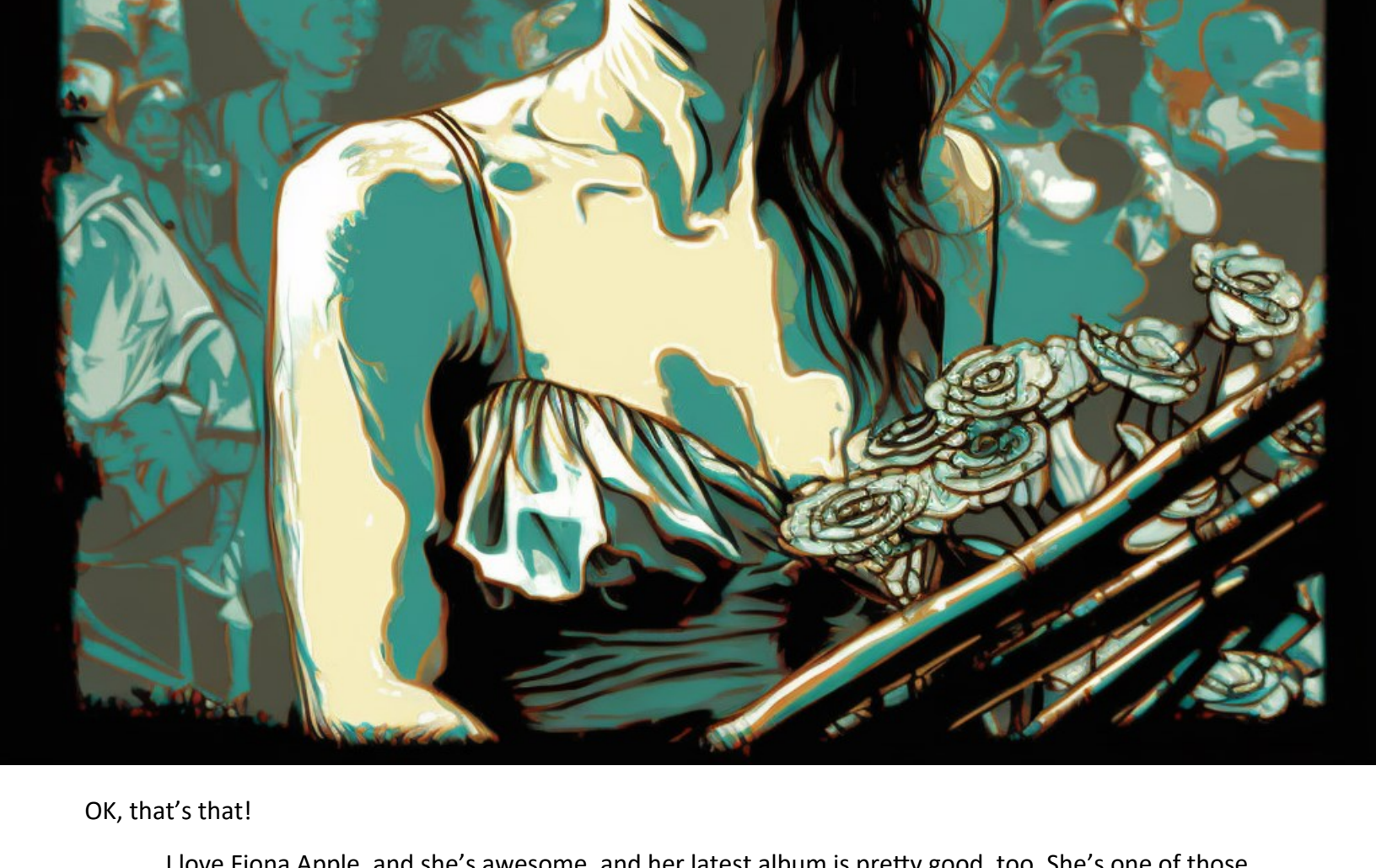
The xylophone is rarely heard on the radio over the last 50 years, but Fiona Apple has given it to us over the last couple of decades. *Limp* is her most forceful song, and one that is still bouncing off the interior of my head.

It's lyrics are incredible. Heavy, dark, and pretty much about a toxic relationship. The narrator is broken, at least somewhat, and her partner is a White Hat type, riding in on the white horse to save the day, and then manipulates her, and perhaps even assaults her. There's a lot of imagery in here that hints at violence.

And when I think of it, my fingers turn to fists
I never did anything to you, man
But no matter what I try, you'll beat me with your bitter lies
So call me crazy, hold me down, make me cry
Get off now, baby
It won't be long
Till you'll be lyin' limp in your own hands

Now, that's not the worst part. The single greatest line, the most telling, the most brutally accusatory set of lyrics she's every written, calling out the clear manipulation she endured: "you fondle my trigger then you blame my gun."

Wow, the power of that single line is incredible, and it calls out the type of person who will bring you to the edge for their own pleasure, then push you over specifically so they can shame you, poison yourself against your own pleasure. There's also a clear sexual component to the lyric, and the whole song, and I think that's what gives it so much power.



OK, that's that!

I love Fiona Apple, and she's awesome, and her latest album is pretty good, too. She's one of those one album every five years types, but they're always worth the wait.

I have been listening to *The Great Courses* and in a weird thing, my kids love them too! So far, we've heard Ancient Egypt, Medieval Myths & Mysteries, and the History of Video Games. They're all so good, and Dorsey Armstrong is amazing (I interviewed her for *Journey Planet* once!)

Our exhibit at Arion press is nearly complete, but I'll still be going to SF a lot since now I'm a Supporting Member of SFMoMA!!! I love that place!