

Alynda Segarra is 36, or a little less than halfway through the average American lifespan. In that comparatively brief time, though, the Hurray for the Riff Raff founder has been something of a modern Huck Finn, an itinerant traveler whose adventures prompt art that reminds us there are always other ways to live.

Born in the Bronx and of Puerto Rican heritage, Segarra was raised there by a blue-collar aunt and uncle, as their father navigated Vietnam trauma and their mother neglected them to work for the likes of Rudy Giuliani. They were radicalized before they were a teenager, baptized in the anti-war movement and galvanized in New York's punk haunts and queer spaces. At 17, Segarra split, becoming the kid in a communal squat before shuttling to California, where they began crisscrossing the country by hopping trains. They eventually found home—spiritual, emotional, physical—in New Orleans, forming a hobo band and realizing that music was not only a way to share what they'd learned and seen but to learn and see more. Hurray for the Riff Raff steadily rose from house shows to a major label, where Segarra became a pan-everything fixture of the modern folk movement. But that yoke became a burden, prompting Segarra to make the probing and poignant electronic opus, 2022's *Life on Earth*, their Nonesuch debut. Catch your breath, OK? We're back to 36, back to now.

During the last dozen years, these manifold tales of Segarra's voyages have shaped an oral folklore of sorts, with the teenage vagabonding or subsequent trainhopping becoming what some may hear *about* Hurray for the Riff Raff before hearing the music itself. Segarra has dropped tidbits in songs, too, but they always worried that their experiences were too radical, that memories of dumpster diving or riding through New Orleans with a dildo dangling on an antenna were too much. But on *The Past Is Still Alive*, Segarra finally tells the story themselves, speckling stirring reflections on love, loss, and the end or evolution of the United States with foundational scenes from their own life.

There is, for instance, sex and communal musicmaking on an island of San Francisco trash during "Snake Plant (The Past Is Still Alive)," a charged attempt to reckon the erosion of our childhood innocence with a belief that a worthwhile future is still possible. Or there are the cops and the trains and the long walks down empty Nebraska highways to escape said cops during "Ogalla," the cathartic closer that tries to maintain the spirit of the past while actually surviving in the now. *The Past Is Still Alive* is the record of Segarra's life so far, not only because it chronicles the past to understand the present but also because it is the most singular and magnetic thing Hurray for the Riff Raff have yet made. A master work of modern folk-rock, *The Past Is Still Alive* resets the terms of that tired term.

In March 2023, when Segarra returned to the North Carolina studio of producer Brad Cook to cut *The Past Is Still Alive*, they weren't so sure about the session, if they could even handle it. Only a month before, their father, Jose Enrique (Quico) Segarra, had died. A musician himself, he had long been fundamental to Segarra's songs, a point of inspiration and encouragement. What's more, Segarra had made *Life on Earth* with Cook, and drummer Yan Westerlund had long toured in Hurray for the Riff Raff. But much of the band they'd assembled for these sessions—guitarist Meg Duffy, fiddler Libby Rodenbough, saxophonist Matt Douglas, multi-instrumentalist Phil Cook—were unknown quantities. At the edge of catastrophe and in the headlock of grief, could Segarra share these bone-deep songs among strangers?

Segarra simply let those complex feelings lead the way, hurling themselves into these excavations of memory and blueprints for what's to come. Witness, for instance, the tensile resolve in opener "Alibi," a yearning reflection on addicted childhood friends that pleads with them to join the land of the living while they still can. As the pedal steel moans beneath the snappy country shuffle, their voice frays, a testament to the way they're bearing difficult witness. That call to survival returns in "Snake Plant," a song so stuffed with specific childhood memories—scenes from family road trips to Florida, snapshots from discovering oneself on the edge of the world—that Segarra feels like an actual tour guide. "Test your drugs/remember Narcan," they sing toward the end. "There's a war on the people/What don't you understand?" The demand is graceful and winning, not pedantic, lived-in advice from someone who has managed to live when so many friends have not.

This quest to live in spite of outside attempts to kill us off animates "Colossus of Roads," at once the most devastating and uplifting entry in the entire Hurray for the Riff Raff catalogue. Written like an urgent dispatch after the Club Q shooting in Colorado, it is a paean to the outsiders, a love song for the vulnerable—the queer, the homeless, the radical. Their voice taut as a piece of barbed wire, Segarra deploys poet Eileen Myles and boxcar artist BuZ blurr (the Colossus of Roads himself) to suggest a sanctuary of solidarity for the dispossessed. The United States as we know it can and probably should dissolve, they seethe; as it all comes down, though, Segarra asks to "wrap you up in the bomb shelter of my feather bed." Brilliantly written and rendered, it is an anthem for a dawning age of collective liberation.

Throughout *The Past Is Still Alive*, Segarra suggests the profound ability to navigate all this pain, chaos, and trauma, or at least to meet it with senses of wonder and want. To wit, the delightful "Buffalo" uses the iconic American mammal that Americans almost drove to extinction as a metaphor for a new love; can it survive the pressures of society? A duet with Conor Oberst, "The World Is Dangerous" is a heartbroken waltz that still offers to hold someone close, if and when they're ready.

And even as Segarra tells the tale of the first trans woman they ever met, Miss Jonathan in New Orleans, and the beatings they took during "Hawkmoon," they seem to beam, advocating for a better world yet to come. "I'm becoming the kind of girl that they warned me about," Segarra sings at the end with devilish aplomb, proud to be carrying on Miss Jonathan's work of upending norms, whether by sharing Miss Jonathan's story or simply taking up space for themselves and their own multitudes.

It is especially fraught these days to speak of art in terms of national identity, to flirt with a jingoism that has led to new autocrats and rekindled old wars. But in the best ways possible, *The Past Is Still Alive* is a distinctly American record, built on twin pillars of peril and promise that have forever been foundational to this country.

The wanderlust that leads to piñon fires near the pueblos of New Mexico's high desert and all-night escapades in New Orleans. The independence that shapes communities of like-minded outcasts, looking after one another. The inequality that makes such enclaves essential, that makes one of us eat out of garbage and the other with a silver spoon: It is all tragically and beautifully

bound inside *The Past Is Still Alive*. Just as Louise Erdrich has done of late with Native Americans, Lonnie Holley with African-Americans, and Julie Otsuka with Asian-Americans, Segarra expands the scope of American stories here, stretching a long-safeguarded circle to encompass outsiders forever on the fringes. “The past is still alive/The root of me lives in the ballast by the mainline,” Segarra sings at one point, sweeping their days of riding rails directly into whatever success they have found now. Hurray for the riff raff, indeed.