

Futures

Apocalypse playlist

Songs for the end of the world. **By Beth Cato**

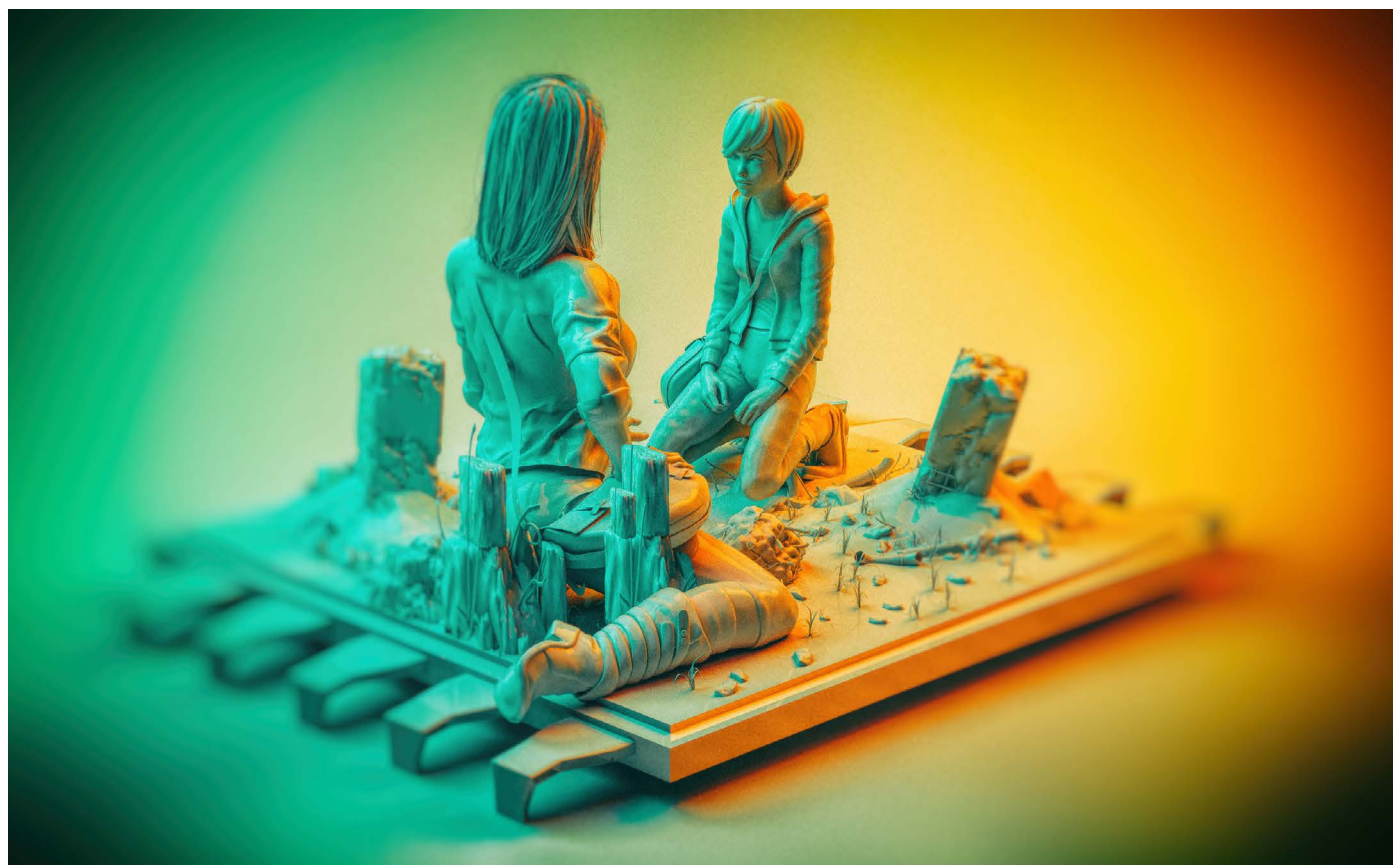


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

***Roar Like a Lion* by Triumph**

Nothing like an 1980s arena rock ballad to establish optimism as news comes about the imminent, probable end of humanity.

Music constantly streams through Orchid's head thanks to the chip installed behind her right ear. Such implants are fairly commonplace, but most augment the brain and senses in other ways. Her curated filter of tunes enables her to work, survive, even to sleep in an otherwise overwhelming world.

As her co-workers begin to cry, some calling up family, some running for the door, Orchid decides there's little point in finishing her expense report. The song – the original album cut, not the abbreviated radio version – enters its prolonged dramatic drum solo as she goes to the office kitchen to equip herself with a carving knife, medical kit and anything else of use for the long walk home.

***My Love, Love, Love is like a Ball-peen Hammer* by Unorthodox Carnage**

Orchid is hungry. Despite frequent dieting throughout her life, she hasn't known true starvation until now. Her heavy-metal musical catalogue empowers her with anger and strength, even as she quivers with weakness behind a gutted electronics store. Gun shots punch the air nearby, an eerie fit with the frenzied drumbeat. Dragging footsteps approach. This man has tracked her since his gang raided her friends' hideout two nights ago. Orchid and five other women had banded together in recent weeks. She needs to find them again. She needs them to be okay.

She bobs her head slightly to an enraged rhythm only she can hear. She doesn't possess the titular ball-peen hammer from the song, but she does have a brick. She clutches it with trembling fingers. She hopes he's carrying food.

***Rainbow, Shine Down (Lord, Shine Down)* sung by Angela Terry, composed by Felicity Fayette**

Religious songs occupy a small fragment of her chip's database, but Orchid finds herself mentally queuing up the music often these days – not for herself, but for the others in the compound. No matter their backgrounds, everyone craves hope, in this life or the next. This contemporary a cappella rendition of an 1893 hymn is especially pleasant.

Most evenings, Orchid sits before the community and sings along with the music in her head. Her voice is nothing extraordinary, but she possesses the repertoire, and that's what matters. Many people have told her that this after-dinner gathering is their favourite part of the day.

She feels the same way.

***March on the Dark Lady's Castle* composed by Himari Nakamura**

Orchestral video-game music establishes a necessary rhythm throughout hours of mundane labour. Scoop shovel into mud, toss into pile. Make the pit. Assist with the bodies. Start on next pit. Never mind that Orchid is still enervated after her own bout of influenza. She's in better shape than most. She's alive.

***I See the World Inside Your Eyes by Colorblind* (featuring DJ Hector-Hector)**

Orchid never expected to get married. By the age of 40, she had only hoped to pay off her student loans. Instead, here she is, singing as she walks towards a bearded man with bright blue eyes. Friends surround them and sing along with the '90s R&B song she chose for this moment.

She selfishly wishes she could write down the lyrics for this song as part of her compendium. In her new official role as community Bard, she's transcribing songs deemed 'most important' to preserve. That requires many hard, yet necessary judgement calls, as there is never enough paper.

One thing is certain. This ultimate love-song-style moment will be something she remembers for the rest of her days.

***My Name is a Flower* by Rose, performed at the same time as *Lala Haha* by the Jiggly Rhythms**

"Mama! You have to put this song in your brain!" Rose stands atop a boulder as she belts out yet another song of her own creation. Orchid smiles as she hoes the field, saying nothing until the performance is done. Rose doesn't have her mother's medical need for a constant soundtrack, but her passion for music is undeniable.

"I can keep your song in my brain as a normal memory." Orchid taps her forehead. "But I can't upload it to my chip with the rest of my music library."

"Oh." Rose's face puckers as she struggles to understand the difference. "Well, I'll keep my songs in my memory! I can fit a bunch in there, huh, can't I?"

"Oh yes. Lots. In my brain, I fit all five songs you've composed today."

"Five! That's how old I am! Sing one of my songs to me, Mama!" Rose pauses. "Please?"

"I'll sing your newest song again because my name is a flower, too," says Orchid, smiling as she matches the beat with that of the pop anthem simultaneously pulsing through her mind.

***Three Cats on a Fence* by Banana Girl and the Splits (TV version)**

For several days, Orchid debated what song should be her last one. Finally, she settled on her first favourite song. The one that, in her anxiety-filled pre-chip early childhood, she sang to herself constantly to help her cope with the noisy, overwhelming world.

Before the Apocalypse, her cancer battle would've been hard. Now, a quick end is inevitable. The music of the past cannot die with her. Today her chip will be transplanted to her teenage daughter. It's unknown if the chip will take, but Rose is determined to try.

Orchid is hurting. She's scared for herself, for Rose. Her husband and daughter anchor each hand as the familiar melody fills her brain. Despite all, she smiles.

Her lips trace the preschool lyrics and count down cats. Her doctors and family sing with her. They know the words.

Beth Cato resides in Arizona. She's the author of the *Clockwork Dagger* duology and the *Blood of Earth* trilogy with Harper Voyager. Her website is BethCato.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Beth Cato reveals the inspiration behind *Apocalypse* playlist.

I belong to a site for neo-pro writers called Codex. Throughout the year, they run different contests to encourage productivity, and my favourites are the twice-annual flash-fiction competitions.

For this particular week, five story prompts were provided, with stories due in two days. As I mulled possibilities, two of the prompts twined in my head: "What was the first song?" and "What's the worst thing you can do to someone?"

The end of the world is a frequent theme in my writing, and is indeed a dastardly thing to inflict upon my characters. As I considered the musical aspect, the phrase 'apocalypse playlist' came to mind. That seemed like a catchy title, but what was the actual story? I realized I could structure a plot around a list-format of made-up song titles. It's not the kind of story I usually write, but these competitions push me to try out experimental techniques.

Creating the songs and connecting them to the mood and action of each scene ended up being incredibly fun. I especially loved the opportunity to bring in a video game track, as game music has played an important role in my own life.

