

Song Review

Stromae, “Fils de joie”

Mosaert/Darkroom/Interscope Records, BE 2022

J’suis un fils de pute, comme ils disent	I’m a son of a whore, as they say
Après tout c’qu’elle a fait pour eux	After everything she’s done for them
Pardonne leur bêtise	Forgive them, they’re dumb
Ô chère mère!	Oh, dear mom! ¹

“Fils de joie” (Son of Joy) tells the story of a disappeared sex worker from a variety of perspectives. The themes of “Fils de joie” make it one of the more socially critical and emotional songs that the Belgian singer and artist Stromae – whose actual name is Paul van Haver – presents in his third and most recent album, *Multitude* (2022). “Fils de joie” is the third single on the album and blends perfectly within a very diverse mix of tracks, which allows hearers to lose themselves in a wide range of moods while listening. The song features a mixture of baroque sounds and melodies – Stromae says he was mainly inspired by a teaser for the Netflix show *BRIDGERTON* (US 2020–) – as well as rhythms of Brazilian funk music.² Overall, the album stands out for its thoughtful and harmonious composition of different musical styles. It thus serves as a testament to Stromae’s indisputable sensitivity in bringing together different musical elements, as he also exhibited in his previous albums *Cheese* (2010) and *Racine carrée* (2013). Other topics addressed in *Multitude* include depression and suicidal thoughts, as in the slow and melancholic song “L’enfer” (The Hell). However, he also sings about the positive

- 1 The lyrics, as well as the translation given here, are available at <https://tinyurl.com/mvb3bcdd>; <https://tinyurl.com/2fuv8juv> [accessed 7 June 2023].
- 2 *BRIDGERTON* is a Netflix series about the life of a fictive noble family in early nineteenth-century England. <https://tinyurl.com/bddhd9yh> [accessed 7 June 2023].

things in life, such as becoming a parent in “C’est que du bonheur” (It’s Nothing but Happiness).

The following review focuses on the lyrics of “Fils de joie” and on the music video, which was released a few days after the album. Lyrics and video highlight the opposing sides of the missing sex worker’s life. While the lyrics focus on the people who were part of her life – in a negative or positive way – the video shows her funeral, giving away the end of the story by revealing that she has died.

The song lyrics begin by describing what it is to be lonely: “being alone is not easy”.³ As we continue to listen, it turns out that the protagonist of the first verse is a client of the sex worker. He defends himself for seeking her services: “I’m not against a little tenderness from time to time”,⁴ but at the same time he exposes his power over her, showing that his money allows him to treat her as badly as he wants: “Maybe this time around we can do it with me insulting her. Yeah, everything is negotiable in life, if you got the money.”⁵ In the following chorus the sex worker’s son vehemently defends his mother, calling her a heroine:

Mais OH!	But HEY! (But HEY!)
Laissez donc ma maman	Leave my mom alone
Oui je sais. C’est vrai qu’elle n’est pas parfaite	Yes, I know, she’s not perfect, it’s true
C’est un héros	She’s a hero (Hero)
Et ce sera toujours fièrement que j’en parlerai	And I will always speak of her with pride
Que j’en parlerai	I’ll speak of her with pride

The second verse contains the viewpoint of a pimp. It becomes clear that he does not see his position as problematic in any way; he is, after all, ensuring the well-being of the women: “I’m the one feeding them.”⁶ He claims that what he does is not illegal, because the women receive money for their work. Further on, he tries to justify his exploitation of the sex workers by

3 “Être seul c’est difficile.”

4 “C’est vrai, j’suis pas contre un peu d’tendresse de temps en temps.”

5 “Et puis cette fois-ci, ben, j’pourrais l’faire en l’insultant. Oui tout est négociable dans la vie, moyennant paiement.”

6 “Alors qu’c’est moi qui les nourrit.”

arguing that they are “hookers” and not models: “They say I’m guilty of human trafficking. But 50, 40, 30 or 20% is not nothing. They better not delude themselves and think they’re models. Ladies – or should I say: hookers!”⁷

Finally, in the third verse, the opinion of a police officer is made known. At first, he concedes that he and the sex worker are both just doing their jobs. However, this assessment is followed by a devaluation of her work, for he claims that at least he has paid his taxes. Furthermore, he humiliates the sex worker by denouncing her work as undignified: “Take back your ID and what’s left of your dignity. You’re pathetic, pfft. Find yourself a real job!”⁸ Between the verses, as well as at the end of the song, the chorus plays. Its second part, especially towards the end, makes a clear statement:

J’suis un fils de pute, comme ils dissent	I’m a son of a whore, as they say
Après tout c’qu’elle a fait pour eux	After everything she’s done for them
Pardonne leur bêtise	Forgive them, they’re dumb
Ô chère mère!	Oh, dear mom!
Ils te déshumanisent	They dehumanize you
C’est plus facile	It’s easier for them
Les mêmes te courtisent	But they also court you
Et tout l’monde ferme les yeux	And everybody looks the other way

Stromae clearly portrays here the injustice of a sex worker’s circumstances: although as a mother and worker she is an important part of society, she is judged, dehumanized, and degraded because of the type of work she does. The double standard the artist highlights is that while society accepts and even benefits from the services of sex workers, they receive no support or protection and continue to face guilt and shame. The problems and dangers inherent to sex work are being ignored, while the responsibility is placed entirely on those offering sex. Because she is missing/dead, her son, now tied up in her affairs, is bound to experience the same discrimination, and he fiercely defends his mother with all his heart.

The music video breaks with the portrayal of this unjust discrimination by showing a fictional world in which the sex worker receives the respect

- 7 “On m’accuse de faire de la traite d’êtres humains. Mais 50, 40, 30 ou 20%, c’est déjà bien. Faudrait pas qu’elles se prennent un peu trop pour des mannequins. Mesdames, ou devrais-je dire putains!”
- 8 “Reprends tes papiers et c’qu’il te reste de dignité. Pauvre femme, pffff. Trouve-toi un vrai métier!”



Fig. 1: Stromae, as the president, is holding a speech in front of other authorities. Music video still, Stromae, FILS DE JOIE (Official Video, Mosaert/Spotify, BE 2022), 00:01:44.

she deserves in a national tribute. At the same time, the scene of a pomp-filled funeral highlights the dangers of life as a sex worker. In just under four minutes, Stromae delivers a remarkable variety of imagery with “Fils de joie”. At the center of the video is the sex worker’s son, embodied by Stromae himself. He acts as the president of a fictitious state, delivering a eulogy to his mother. The ceremony contains numerous elements that are well-known to the viewer from great political or religious rituals. Important authorities from different countries are shown behind a grieving Stromae, different military troops perform an impressive choreography, and a column of black cars and motorcycles with mourning guests makes its way to the monumental location where the national tribute is to take place. And, of course, not to be missed from a ceremony of this kind: a grieving audience.

The burial ceremony is staged at the Parc du Cinquantenaire in Brussels, Belgium, which has been digitally edited to make it look even more monumental and to add a fictional character. Among other things, an immense sculpture of two women holding a torch has been added. One of the highlights of the video is the moment a group of women appear. They approach the coffin and slowly carry it towards the sculpture, dancing all the while. What makes them stand out is their clothing: while wearing black, as expected at a funeral, they are not dressed as decorously as the others in attendance. The dancing women wear short dresses, lingerie, and lace

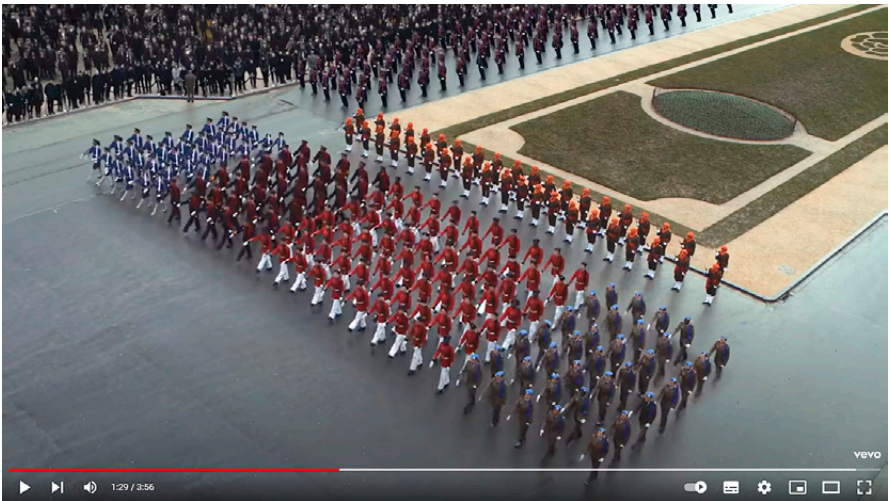


Fig 2: Different military troops doing a choreography. Music video still, Stromae, FILS DE JOIE (Official Video, Mosaert/Spotify, BE 2022), 00:01:29.

stockings. These women are not just attending the funeral to grieve or to be part of a “show”. They are sex workers who are having to bury one of their colleagues, knowing all too well how much injustice this life brings with it. At the end, the coffin is covered with the fictional country’s national flag to



Fig 3: The group of sex workers carrying the coffin of her colleague. Music video still, Stromae, FILS DE JOIE (Official Video, Mosaert/Spotify, BE 2022), 00:03:01.



Fig. 4: The coffin is brought to the monument and covered with the national flag. Music video still, Stromae, FILS DE JOIE (Official Video, Mosaert/Spotify, BE 2022), 00:03:29.

pay last respects to the sex worker. The ceremony and the video close with military planes flying over the memorial.

The staging of this great national tribute reminds us of other religious and political spectacles that are broadcast in the media, such as the funeral of a queen. Stromae takes this image and adapts it for a tribute to a profession that in his eyes deserves this level of attention and respect. An extravagant funeral service like this is usually only granted to people who rank highly in the hierarchy of our society. In “Fils de joie” the artist criticizes this unfair distribution of respect by underlining the discrimination that sex workers face, as do other people who work in professions that are not deemed socially acceptable. He also illustrates the normalization of dehumanizing living conditions faced by people in these professions. Stromae stated in an interview, “I wanted to take everyone’s point of view since everyone has an opinion on her, but unfortunately we don’t often ask her for hers.”⁹ Finally, “Fils de joie” can also be seen as a spark of hope: in a fictional country, a fictional state, sometime in the future, sex workers may receive the kind of respect they deserve without being dehumanized, judged, or harmed.

9 Zemler, 2022.

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