

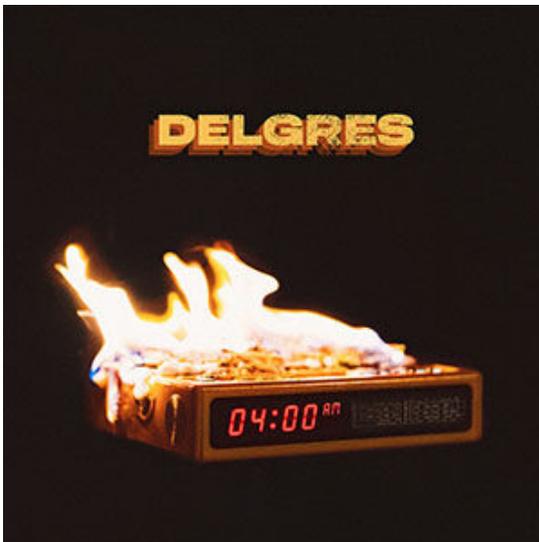


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## DelGRES and the 4:00 AM Immigrant Blues

The sophomore LP from Paris-based blues-rock trio DelGRES, *4:00 AM*, is a cohesive and moving response to the forced migration of people of the Global South.

By [George de Stefano](#) / 20 April 2021



An immigrant worker rises at four in the morning, stuffs newspaper in his boots to keep out snow, and goes to a backbreaking job where he must ignore the names he's called. A mother

demands to know what other children said to her child at the playground; the child refuses because “those words burn my heart”. A refugee who spent 100 days at sea with the hope of breaking old chains laments that “in La Rochelle harbor I broke my dreams”. Another immigrant worker, whose papers have been stolen, works off the books and is treated “like a dog” by churchgoers who “call themselves Christian”.

The quotidian experiences of those forced to leave their homes and families to seek better lives, or just to stay alive, are at the heart of *4:00 AM*, the new album by [Delgres](#), the Paris-based, blues-rock trio led by guitarist and vocalist Pascal Danae. The follow-up to their 2018 debut, [Mo Jodi](#), the band’s sophomore outing offers a cohesive and moving response to the ongoing crises of displacement and forced migration experienced mainly by people of the Global South.

Like Danae’s parents, Delgres’ leader is the son of immigrants from the Caribbean island Guadeloupe who settled in France, where Danae was born and raised. He named the band after Louis Delgres, a Creole officer in the French Army who was killed in 1802 while fighting Napoleon’s troops, which the emperor sent to Guadeloupe to restore slavery. Danae’s great-great-grandmother had been enslaved, and when he visited the island several decades ago, he was given her letter of manumission. He sang about Louise Danae on “Respecté Nou” (Respect Us), the opening track of *Mo Jodi*.

As on that album, Danae’s lyric writing on *4:00 AM*—mainly in Guadeloupe Creole, French, and occasionally English—telescopes global issues through the details of daily life as lived by immigrants, migrants, and refugees. But while *Mo Jodi* “was linked to what Louis Delgrès did in his fight for freedom,” Danae says the second album is “about our times”.

“A lot of people from the West Indies moved to France” in the 1950s and 1960s when his parents emigrated from the Caribbean. “And many years later, we can see the same thing happening with people from Africa, risking their lives trying to give their families a chance of a better life. This is the background of what we address in this album.”

If Delgres’ lyrical focus has shifted (and sharpened) since their first album, their sound also has taken some new directions. What Danae calls the trio’s “creole blues” is African diaspora music, derived from West Africa, the French Caribbean, and the US South, particularly Mississippi and New Orleans. Recorded in Brussels, mixed in Paris, and mastered in Austin, Texas, *4:00 AM* retains the band’s core instrumentation, with Danae, on guitar and vocals, drummer Baptiste Brondy, and Rafgee, whose sousaphone provides the bass lines. But this time, there also are keyboards (Danae), trumpet and flugelhorn (Rafgee), and a second guitar (Brondy). The sound is fuller and more layered than *Mo Jodi*, with more variety in the songwriting (by Danae and with his bandmates) and arrangements. But there’s no loss of funk, of blues power.

Danae grew up on Cuban, Haitian, and African music; he also listened to pop and rock, American and British. “Just Vote for Me”, the one English-language track on *4:00 AM*, has a bouncy New Orleans rhythm boosted by Rafgee’s sousaphone. But the lyrics (about a politician whose lavish promises evoke only skepticism) have something of Ray Davies’ amused irony. “Lese mwen ale” (Let Me Go), a standout track, begins as guitar-driven blues-rock and ends with a jazzy coda featuring Rafgee’s trumpet. Opening and closing with the playground sounds where

a child heard the burning, unrepeatable words, “Se Mo La” (These Words) has a pop melody, dance rhythms, and Danae’s George Harrison-like slide guitar. “Libere Mwen Chorale” is 42 seconds of a cappella vocal harmony reminiscent of Ladysmith Black Mambazo. This calm interlude leads to the angry “L’ecole”, another song about school but from the perspective of a disillusioned graduate who listened to his parents’ admonitions about education but finds that he can’t get work.

The title track, about the day in the life of a hardworking immigrant, is a driving blues with a bridge in free time. On “Lundi Mardi Mercredi”, (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday), Danae’s urgent vocal, which at times recalls, of all things, “My Sharona”, soars over the band’s crunch and stomp. “Ban mwen on Chanson” (Give Me a Song) is a blues in structure and feel, with acoustic and electric guitars and horns. The lyrics draw on two classic blues themes: travel and song as a palliative for pain. But the narrator’s movement was forced (“You’ve got to move/You’ve Got to Go”), his new life is an ordeal, and he begs God for a song “to sing through it all”.

*4:00 AM* consolidates Delgres’ strengths—Pascal Danae’s emotive vocals and guitar mastery, the flexible and in-the-pocket rhythm section, the social consciousness that is never rhetorical or preachy but sharply observational and intimate. The new album also builds on those strengths, revealing a band whose identity and purpose are so strong that they can confidently venture into new territory. A wake-up call about today’s humanitarian crises, *4:00 AM* speaks about suffering but also resistance and resilience.

RATING 8