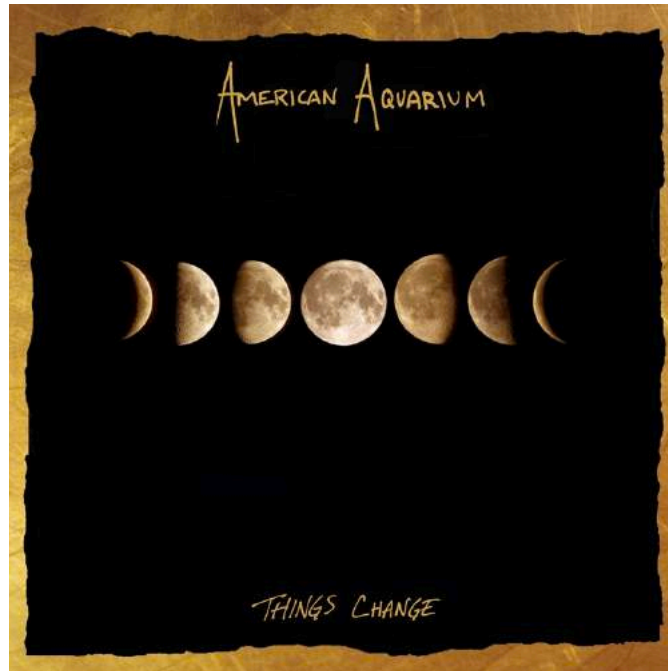


## Review: American Aquarium singer BJ Barham gets personal

By STEVEN WINE

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American Aquarium, "Things Change" (New West)

American Aquarium is a most appropriate name for the band that made "Things Change," because frontman BJ Barham presents his life for all to see.

Earnest and intense, the North Carolina native sings about marriage, parenthood and divorcing his former band. He quotes his wife, his father and Tom Petty. He delves into his drinking, his politics and his passion for writing songs and righting wrongs.

The humor Barham shows in concert is mostly absent. But he's likable and literate, delivering heavily autobiographical heartland rock with heart on sleeve.

Best is the anthemic opener, "The World Is On Fire," which recounts the reaction in the Barham household to the 2016 presidential election. Weepy pedal steel reflects the mood before Barham sings, "We must go boldly into the darkness and be the light."

There's empathy for those who voted the other way, too. On "Tough Folks" Barham sings, "I saw firsthand what desperation makes good people do."

The album's supporting cast — including producer John Fullbright — is fully invested in helping Barham explore his inner Springsteen, before power chords give way to twang down the stretch. On the closing "Til the Final Curtain Falls," a lovely, gospel-tinged ballad of devotion, Barham sounds more relaxed but still fully committed, even as he leads the band out in a spacey coda.