FUTURE TENSE: 'THE EXPANSE'

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Kicking off with the 2011 novel "Leviathan Wakes" and concluding with 2021's "Leviathan Falls," "The Expanse" is a recent juggernaut of sci-fi literature written by James S. A. Corey, the pen name of authors Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck.

In 2015, the series was adapted into an Amazon Prime TV series that ran for six seasons until 2021. The most recent entry in the franchise will be The Expanse: Osiris Reborn, an upcoming video game in the style of Mass Effect, developed by Owlcat Games.

The series begins in the far future during a rush of space exploration. Thanks to the unfortunately named Epstein drive engine, humanity has been able to colonize much of the solar system, although it remains technologically far from exploring the broader galaxy. Before that limitation can be overcome, humankind has settled for fighting amongst itself over planets and territory.

The United Nations of Earth lays claim to Earth, the moon and several gigantic space stations. The government of Mars separated its colonies from U.N. control in the past and now commands the most technologically advanced navy known to humankind. While at the start of the series these are the only two official governments orbiting the sun, major political power is still held by megacorporations that license their stations to Earth and employ most colonists.

All the while, the current power dynamics of the solar system are threatened by growing discontent in colonies far from Earth that inhabit a group of asteroids and stations referred to as the Belt. "Belters" have grown restless at being taxed and controlled by what they see as the distant and domineering governments of the core planets. As a result, militias quietly organize to fight for freedom. A chief among them is the Outer Planets Alliance, or as it's more commonly referred to, the OPA.

This core political dynamic is where the series' first three novels derive their conflicts. Throughout the narrative, the reader is introduced to an increasing cast of point-of-view characters that hail from all these factions. The juggling of perspectives quickly makes it clear that each of the major groups have legitimate reasons for their specific worldviews and end goals, with no faction being presented as the "good guys" or the "bad guys." Even the megacorporations, which in most sci-fi stories are blatantly evil organizations (think Arasaka from Cyberpunk or Weyland-Yutani from "Alien"), are given some small shred of complexity with the inclusion of sympathetic characters working for them.

This morally complex worldbuilding is a departure from a lot of popular sci-fi stories that begin with similar premises. Take the "Halo" franchise for example, which like the "The Expanse," starts off with a U.N. controlled age of space exploration and a growing insurrection in its outer colonies. While this political dynamic was introduced early in the series with the intent of making the U.N. a morally gray organization, the series fails to fully capitalize on this as, at the end of the day, the U.N. still needs to be the "good guys" for storytelling reasons. The reader always needs to fully root for U.N., as they are the ones that eventually fight an alien invasion during the events of the series' many novels and video game series. As a result, the insurrection faction in "Halo" was never given proper protagonists and are always depicted as crazed terrorists rather the freedom fighters.

In "The Expanse" there is no massive extraterrestrial invasion that requires readers to root for one faction above the others. As a result, different factions can simply exist in the story, each having their own share of decent people and evil ones. This opens a huge swath of storytelling potential that is explored thoroughly throughout the series, as antagonists and heroes can come from any side of a given conflict.

The authors also craft a compelling moral argument throughout the series' first act, being that your allegiance to a government or group doesn't make you a good person. In "The Expanse," heroes aren't defined by what flag they salute. Rather, what makes someone a hero is the values they uphold when everything around them falls apart. The POV characters the reader roots for are the ones that avoid violence, try to deescalate conflict and are even willing to forgive their enemies when necessary to preserve peace.

This moral thread is easily one of the series' best features and is something that elevates it above most stories written today that often rely on violent spectacles over conveying an effective message.

If what I've described sounds interesting, I'd highly recommend that you read "Leviathan's Wake," the first novel in "The Expanse" series. If you're not a big reader, feel free to check out the series' Amazon Prime TV adaption, just be aware that it only adapts six out of the nine total novels.

If you're just into the setting and like video games, consider keeping an eye on The Expanse: Osiris Reborn, which looks like it's shaping up to fill the void left by the Mass Effect franchise now that BioWare is defunct.



The Amazon Prime TV series "The Expanse." The show ran for six seasons from 2015 until 2021.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE EXPANSE FANS ON FACEBOOK

DIIV TEAMS UP WITH A.G. COOK ON ALBUM 'ZIRP!'

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DIIV released their fifth studio album "ZIRP!" on Friday, Oct. 30. This is the band's first album since 2024's "Frog in Boiling Water."

"ZIRP" stands for "Zero Interest Rate Policies," which reflects the anti-capitalist messages this album portrays. The album cover displays a distorted pink and white American flag, with the stripes looking like stock market arrows pointing down.

"Frog in Boiling Water" didn't stick with me all too well. The singles for their new album created a ton of buzz for me, along with the announcement of A.G. Cook as producer. How has DIIV's shoegaze, dream-pop sound evolved with Cook's help? Let's dive in.

The album opens with "The Fountain," which was released as the lead single. The song begins with the distorted guitar line that perpetuates the entire record. The guitar tone on this tight track is great. The band sounds locked in, and the vocal melody is sticky. Throw in some punchy synths at the end of the track, and you have a great opening to the album.

"Kid," a brighter track than the first, backed by a sweet acoustic guitar, is next and was the second single. There's a trip-hop adjacent beat sitting in the mix that adds to the song, with the distortion picking back up towards the end — solid track.

"Dare Me" has a nice melody and goes back to more atmospheric soundscapes like track one. It's a pleasant song that has a great bridge. The way the background vocals compliment the lead vocals is phenomenal.

"The Crash" is the first sighting of this record's head on political themes. Lead singer Zachary Cole Smith implies "The Crash" is coming, referring to the end of capitalism. With lyrics like, "We're living through the era of American humiliation" and "Throw the billionaires screaming in an alligator pit," the track is not subtle about its message. Those lyrics are combined with some heavy drums, and a murky guitar tone which make it a highlight.

"Trillions," a sugary tune that would fit perfectly on the "Wreck It Ralph" soundtrack, is a big highlight. It's very colorful and bright, with obvious themes of the uselessness of rich people. The song depicts buying a bunch of expensive items for no reason, followed by the post chorus of "'Cause I win / And you lose." Overall, "Trillions" is my personal favorite track.

"Us Against You" feels like a classic DIIV track; muddy and dark but Smith's vocals are gentle. A great chorus melody helps boost the song.

"Evangelizer" opens with a groovy guitar lick with some quirky bass in the verses. Smith sounds hungry on this track and sings the most forward line on the album, "Forgot to take my Palantir-Pfizer collab pills." The space this song creates is great — mix that with a tight guitar line in the back half, and you have another great track.

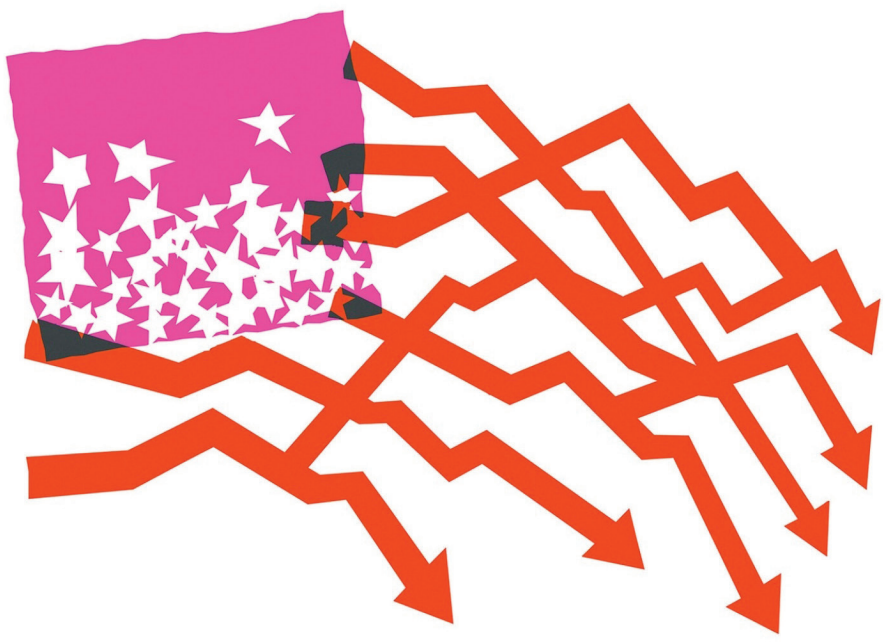
"Underground" is the first hiccup on the album. It remains laid back the entire time but leaves me wanting more. An odd vocal effect on the chorus leaves me questioning the choice to add it to the track list.

"My Star" comes in strong and heavy, with some chugging guitars and compressed drums. The whole album is very compressed overall. A breezy change occurs in the middle of the track that is like nothing else on the record. That part creates tension and then the song explodes into a great outro.

"Idiot In The Sky" is a lush closer to the album; a charming chorus that contrasts well with the quicker verses. Then the instrumental gets increasingly distorted before transitioning into an airy guitar solo.

"ZIRP!" is a great showing from DIIV. A.G. Cook's production makes their usual sound much more interesting and fun without removing what makes DIIV, DIIV. The assertive themes of economic inequality give the album more depth and make it better.

Rating: 4/5



The cover for DIIV's fifth studio album, "ZIRP!" The album released on Friday, Oct. 30.

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