REVIEW

The music of letting go

Looking back on The Strokes' "Ode to the Mets

// BY REETI MALHOTRA

Julian Casablancas, the frontman of The Strokes, penned the lyrics to "Ode to the Mets" while waiting for the 7 train after the New York Mets lost to the Giants in the 2016 Wild Card game. The ode is the six-minute finale to the band's Grammy-award winning album, "The New Abnormal," and possesses a visceral quality I can't quite articulate, one that somehow makes me crave both fresh air and a cigarette.

Casablancas was a longtime Mets fan. But as Sports Illustrated's Stanley Kay notes in a 2020 interview with Casablancas a month after the album's release, the song has little to do with baseball.

It appears to be more about loss — loss and love that never ceases to disappoint. Kay cites the band's drummer, Fabrizio Moretti, for the ode's alternative meaning. The song evokes "something that you set your heart to and that you love unconditionally but that continues to disappoint you," Moretti says in a 2020 video interview.

I agree with Moretti and, despite my best efforts, can't stop listening to it.

According to my Spotify streaming data, I played it at least 37 times during a three-day span last week. That figure feels conservative. As a whiny story I posted to my Instagram close friends can attest, I stayed awake until 2 a.m. on a Tuesday night listening to it on repeat. I just couldn't turn it off. I still can't.

But there's more to the song than my ceaseless streaming and fixation.

The Strokes, formed in New York City in 1998, have a skill for expressing the existential dread that comes with standing on the cusp of adulthood, relinquishing the liberty of youth and trudging into a life burdened with responsibility. But they are careful to avoid overt sonic melancholy. The band layers pensive lyrics atop a garage rock revival sound that keeps their audience's blood pumping.

"Is This It," the first song of the band's debut album, ruminates on the singer's apathy and exhaustion, not knowing where to go in life; finding himself in the same, unfulfilling relationship that promises more than it delivers. By its conclusion, Casablancas is no longer asking for an answer to the song's title. "Is this it?" becomes a rhetorical question, a cynical, morose statement.

"Ode to the Mets" is no different in its lyrical focus. It perhaps typifies The Strokes' familiar, melancholic questioning. But it feels different, because released 19 years after the band's debut, it is especially painful to still be musing upon the same yet again.

As Casablancas croons through his typical gritty, disaffected and intense vocals during the bridge: "Gone now are the old times ... Old friends, long forgotten ... The only thing that's left is us, so pardon the silence that you're hearing."

Casablancas expresses the grief of getting older and life changing in a way one would not expect. Or at least that is how I find myself interpreting his lyrics as a 20-year-old waiting to go on spring break, enervated by the semester and frustrated that I am. We have four years here — I am two years in. I should relish it all more, but I'm just so tired.

But Casablancas does not succumb to his exhaustion. The Strokes' frontman channels his sentiments into his music-making. The final lyrics of "Ode to the Mets," reflecting on the "deafening, painful, shameful roar" that has become the backdrop to life, is an act of recognition rather than defeat. Casablancas accepts that disappointment and loss are the price of caring for something truly and deeply. It's a trade off he's willing to make. It is this feeling that transforms Casablancas' gritty croon into a form of comfort for me. Beneath Casablancas' visceral weariness is a steady persistence. Even as the guitars swell, the rhythm steadies, and Casablancas sings about the inevitable, overwhelming sorrow of life, the song still moves forward. As do we.

Disappointment is a guarantee in our lives. Some people try to bury that fact; others run from it. Occasionally, someone channels the sentiment into something else entirely: a poem, a painting, a six-minute song that a 20-year-old college girl will listen to while wallowing in her disappointment, looking for a way to free herself from it.

If disappointment is unavoidable, "Ode to the Mets" tells us to do something with it: Feel it, let it overwhelm us and to transform it. Hope, persistence and art are all we have — that's not a bad lesson to live by at twenty.

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MAIA WILSON

COLUMN

Lend Me Your Ears: Nostalgia sells. Are you buying?

// BY CIELO GAZARD

Does popular music of the 2020s have a unified aesthetic? What makes music from our current decade sound like "today?" Much of the Top 40 sounds like it's been done before. Music from the last six years seems to resemble and be inspired by the trends of Y2K club music, '80s synthpop and '70s pop rock. The most defining aspect of 2020s music is that there is no uniquely identifiable aesthetic.

Borrowing from musical trends from decades past and reviving old songs, the 2020s is the era of misremembered nostalgia.

With music streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music, an artist's entire discography is at one's fingertips. Social media apps like TikTok and Instagram have revived decades-old songs, putting them back into the zeitgeist for a new generation. Due to its inclusion in the series "Stranger Things" and the consequent TikTok videos, Kate Bush's 1985 single "Running Up That Hill" reemerged in 2022 as a long-dormant hit. I have been a massive fan of Bush since 2019 after watching her "Wuthering Heights" music video on YouTube, so it was gratifying to see everyone I know finally discover her after "Running Up That Hill" went viral.

Resurgence of an older song after its inclusion in a TV show, movie or advertisement is nothing new. But the sheer number of trending audios on TikTok that come from older songs is new. Even new songs are callbacks to other recent hits. The song "Say So" by Doja Cat, one of the biggest and most viral songs of 2020, is a callback to '70s funk and disco. More recent hits are even taking inspiration from "Say So," as some music critics have pointed out sonic similarities between it and Sabrina Carpenter's 2024 smash "Espresso."

Hit songs are built around earlier musical trends. Then they're the basis for later hit songs. What does this say about what the music industry is looking for in the next smash hit? TikTok has drastically changed the way artists promote their music. Many pop artists have called out the industry for its overreliance on getting a "viral moment" and pushing them for a quick snippet of their next single to go viral on TikTok. The marketing teams at major labels are fully aware of the power of social media and its ability to revive old hits.

We are living in an epidemic of sampling and interpolation. Sampling is an artform that few producers and music-makers have mastered. But some recent hits like David Guetta and Bebe Rexha's nauseating "I'm Good (Blue)" with its painfully obvious sample of "Blue (Da Ba Dee)" demonstrate how virality and listener recognition may matter more than innovation. At the same time, however, I think that if a newer artist builds a new song around an already proven hit, it only makes the listener yearn for the original song. Similar backlash was seen with Doechii's "Anxiety" which blatantly sampled Gotye's "Somebody That I Used to Know," even though the original song is built around a 1967 bossa nova instrumental: "Seville" by Luiz Bonfá.

There is still innovative, potentially decade-defining pop music being released in the 2020s. The easiest and most cited example has been Charli xcx's "Brat." While informed by 2000s club music, "Brat" has punctured the zeitgeist and stands alone as a unique musical and commercial achievement. Looking beyond the Top 40 on the Billboard charts or the TikTok algorithm, one will find a vast array of songs by artists carving out a sound of their own.

This decade isn't the only one that has been criticized for relying on previous hits. The current critiques aren't new or groundbreaking. What is different is the sheer number of pop icons who have "daughters," broods of newer artists who take clear inspiration from their predecessors. 2000s pop stars like Britney Spears and Avril Lavigne's aesthetics and music have influenced musicians like Tate McRae and Olivia Rodrigo. Even some very new singers like Addison Rae are already inspiring recently viral TikTok stars like Mckayla Twiggs. Since anyone can upload a video on TikTok, anyone can piggyback on the trends and aesthetics of an already established artist.

Usually, the passage of time boils decades of music down to a handful of "classics." There has been "bad" and uninspired music in every decade. The 1980s were not all synthpop. The 1970s were not all disco. The 2020s are not all rehashing and reviving trends and aesthetics from prior decades. When the dust settles on our current time, who knows what musical trends musicians of the future will take inspiration from, or whose pop daughter lineage will reign supreme?

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WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

LISTENING TO MUSIC ON THE SUBWAY