

Why is Sonic Youth's *The Eternal* such a disappointment?

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The American rock group Sonic Youth have been making music together since 1981. They have been a mainstay in “alternative rock” ever since, and their influence can be felt in the work of countless other bands that have followed them.

Their best work, found on the albums *Daydream Nation* (1988), *Goo* (1990), and more recently on *Murray Street* (2002) and *Rather Ripped* (2006), deserves to be heard and accounts for some of the more interesting and exciting rock music made over the last two decades or more. Just as often, however, Sonic Youth have turned out self-indulgent, “experimental” or “avant-garde” works to which, heard once, one rarely, if ever, feels compelled to return.

Sonic Youth began as an experimental noise-rock band, playing music on “prepared” instruments. They used heavily modified guitars that were placed in radically alternate tunings. It was not unusual to see guitarists Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo sliding a screwdriver or a drumstick beneath the strings of their guitars and running them up and down the length of their fretboards.

By the late 1980s, the band had reined in some of its noise experimentation and long, dissonant, droning songs. The music became more structured and featured a stronger and more coherent sense of composition. Criticized by some at the time for turning to a more traditional or “popular” sound, the band did some of its best work during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The landmark *Daydream Nation* (1988), in particular, is one of the more innovative and exciting works made by any rock band at that time and features inspired guitar playing from Moore and Ranaldo. The snarling vocals of Kim Gordon and the drumming of Steve Shelley, always underrated in this “guitar band,” also make a strong impression.

In the mid-1990s, however, Sonic Youth returned to the experimental and abrasive, spending a great deal of time releasing works that seemed self-indulgent and inaccessible, on their newly founded SYR (Sonic Youth Recordings) label, while their more popular works—released on major label DGC—were no longer as well received as they once had been.

With years of often confounding “noise” recordings and disappointing major label releases behind them, there seems to

be a critical consensus that Sonic Youth experienced something of a regeneration or “return to form” around the time of their 2002 album *Murray Street*. Not coincidentally, this was the first of their albums to feature producer and multi-instrumentalist Jim O'Rourke as a member of the band (he has since departed). These new works—*Murray Street*, *Sonic Nurse* (2004) and *Rather Ripped* (2006)—saw the band retreating from “noise” almost entirely in favor, perhaps, of “beauty,” but without sacrificing any of their intensity. If they were once again more controlled or structured, they were not less spontaneous or exciting.

Regrettably, *The Eternal*, released in 2009, is their least interesting effort since the much heralded return to form. On the whole, the album too often fails to move the listener. One struggles to think of a stand-out moment. Virtually all of the beautifully arranged guitar work found on their previous three albums is lacking in *The Eternal*. The interplay between the guitars of Moore and Ranaldo had hardly ever been more alive than on those works, and it is almost shockingly absent on this album.

Some of the new music simply feels by-the-books. “Sacred Trickster” is a standard rock song for the group, not unlike what one has heard from them before. It features a straightforward up-tempo groove, with chugging guitar chords not so far removed from some of their punk rock influences. Vocalist Kim Gordon offers self-consciously naive or adolescent-sounding lyrics that leave one cold, “I wish I could be music on a tree,” and later the standard feminist rocker stance, “What’s it like to be a girl in a band? I don’t quite understand. That’s so quaint to hear.”

Many of the other lyrics on the album are too often obscure and, one feels, intentionally so. Much of it feels like stream of consciousness. The listener may stumble across a memorable line or description here and there (“skyscrapers in the dead love dawn” from “Antenna”), but will struggle to find a coherent, worked-through piece.

“Antenna” is perhaps the best song on the album, containing a well constructed vocal melody that draws one in. “No Way” also has something to it, but ultimately not enough. It features a solid vocal performance from Moore.

The guitar squall that follows the thumping bass and drum

introduction of “What We Know” provides the ideal accompaniment to the words of Lee Ranaldo who enters the track shouting, “I’m in a state of shock!,” but the rest of the song falters. The guitar breaks in the center of the song make a slight impression, but just enough to remind the listener what Sonic Youth are capable of in their stronger moments.

With little to recommend it, *The Eternal* strikes one as a surprisingly lukewarm album from a band that has always inspired (or incited) strong reactions. Neither its successes nor its failures make much of an impression. If there is anything truly remarkable about it, it is how little it seems to have to do with the state of the world.

No Wave and Sonic Youth

The artistic aims and limitations of Sonic Youth can’t be fully appreciated without considering a short-lived artistic movement of the late 1970s from which the band emerged. Centered in downtown Manhattan, No Wave was primarily, though not entirely, a musical movement. The bands associated with No Wave have most often been described as “noise rock” and sometimes, with a certain degree of accuracy, as “noise terror.” The music of No Wave bands typically featured distorted guitars drenched in feedback with anxious and jagged chording, wailing vocals, and a primitive, thumping percussion.

Among the best-remembered of these groups are Teenage Jesus and The Jerks, DNA, Mars, and James Chance and The Contortions; all of them were featured on the influential compilation album *No New York* (1978), produced by Brian Eno.

There’s something exasperated about this music which, at best, rails against things, but is unable (and abandons any attempt) to make sense of them. Like the punk rock scene taking shape at the same time, the No Wave bands were reacting, in part, to a music industry that had begun churning out more and more glossy, superficial and overproduced recordings.

The No Wave musicians’ art was characterized by a kind of anti-technique, their music made as loud, noisy, and “wrong”-sounding as possible. It’s doubtful one was ever *meant* to like much of this; one gets the feeling listeners were only ever meant to side with it.

That so much of their work was also angry and pessimistic was a testament to the unfavorable conditions under which these musicians worked. By the time the No Wave bands were making their first recordings, the wave of social upheaval that had erupted during the late 1960s and early 1970s had subsided or been betrayed. A period of reaction and assaults against the working class, identified with Ronald Regan and Margaret

Thatcher, was beginning to take shape.

Many young artists were at a loss to understand the immense social changes and to see a way out. As Lydia Lunch, lead singer for Teenage Jesus and The Jerks, remarked in a revealing 1997 interview, “How did we get so far afield from the ideology of the ‘60s? In the ‘70s, I saw activism turn into apathy.”

These bands had an enormous influence on the members of Sonic Youth, who frequented No Wave shows, immersed themselves in this milieu, and eventually collaborated with some of the musicians who were a part of it. They have inherited many of their limitations. But to their credit, the members of Sonic Youth never rejected all that their No Wave influences threw out.

However, like the No Wave musicians, Sonic Youth seemed to have kept a close and ultimately insulated connection to the art world in New York. Among their friends and collaborators can be counted figures such as Raymond Pettibon, Christopher Wool and Richard Kern. The influence of Andy Warhol and his “Factory” crowd is always in the periphery.

Sonic Youth have too little to say. A change to their formula only gets them so far. They have not done the hardest work of making a critical engagement with reality. At a time of the worst economic conditions for the population since the Great Depression, when the US government is prosecuting colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and threatening to expand its war drive throughout the region, not a whiff of this finds its way into Sonic Youth’s music. The band’s work has developed an almost academic quality. What are any of their supposed innovations or “experiments” worth if they have no connection to the world?

There is, finally, not one note of urgency or protest to be found in *The Eternal*. Nothing about the work feels necessary or terribly alive.



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