

Evolve by Imagine Dragons: Noisy emotion without artistic depth

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Art is no stranger to feelings and moods of every kind, but these feelings also need to be truthful in important ways, corresponding to and penetrating deeply into real life. They also need to be accompanied by real thinking.

Popular music today features an inordinate number of acts and bands who concern themselves almost exclusively with inspiring feelings without any regard for artistic truth. The emotions often come across as detached, overblown, insincere and clichéd.

Many artists, who don't really know how to connect with (and don't have any great interest in the fate of) large numbers of people, merely bludgeon their audiences indiscriminately with overwrought emotion. There is a tendency on the part of many artists to wallow in how awful things are, which frequently goes hand in hand with resigning oneself to the state of things. More often than not, all of this is accompanied by a large dose of marketable self-pity.

The band Imagine Dragons embodies this phenomenon of heavily emotive music decoupled from any tendency to reveal much about life more than any of their contemporaries. The band soared to stardom in 2013 with their hit singles "Radioactive" and "Demons" from their debut album *Night Visions*. Imagine Dragons have sold some 50 million records and have a massive following on their tours.

"Radioactive" is at least an attempt to address something real, a deep anxiety and hostility to the existing situation, if only in a rather general way. The song's soft acoustic guitar notes and an eerie choral introduction give way to a heavy, synthetic reverberation, though the lyrics tend to be heavy-handed:

*I'm waking up ... to ash and dust
I wipe my brow and I sweat my rust
I'm breathing in the chemicals (loudly inhales)
I'm breaking in, shaping up, then checking out on the prison bus*

This is it, the apocalypse

Whoa

Then vocalist Dan Reynolds slowly belts out the refrain:

I'm waking up, I feel it in my bones

Enough to make my systems blow

Welcome to the new age, to the new age

Welcome to the new age, to the new age

Whoa, oh, oh, oh, oh, whoa, oh, oh, oh, I'm radioactive, radioactive

Whoa, oh, oh, oh, oh, whoa, oh, oh, oh, I'm radioactive, radioactive

Evolve is the band's third studio album. As was the case with previous albums, a certain outlook colors the music. A scintilla of artistic truth shines through a heap of resignation and unhelpful ideological baggage. Among other things, lead singer Dan Reynolds grew up in an Orthodox Mormon household and is now an LGBTQ activist attempting to reform the church's attitude toward homosexuality.

This finds expression in the latest album. *Evolve* features 15 songs. All but four of these are filler tracks. The rest are catchy pop songs that unfortunately tend to dwell on the strivings, sufferings and self-promotion of the lead singer.

"Thunder" is the best song on the album by a wide margin. The lyrics come forth in a well-paced, hip hop style, describing the singer's rise to fame and the path that led him there. The refrain, "I was lightning, before the thunder," serves this subject matter well enough, and the drum line gives a sense of personal growth, fulfillment and triumph, of proving doubters wrong. Having one's art enjoyed by thousands and millions must indeed be an exhilarating feeling, though it's not a widely shared one.

Despite its catchiness, "Thunder" has limitations. The aforementioned growth comes without regard for broader forces, social, creative or political. Personal ambition and strength of will emerge as the decisive elements of

success. As it turns out, self-congratulation can be as grating as self-pity.

“Whatever It Takes” concerns the artist’s love-hate relationship with fame. Reynolds delivers the lyrics in a pleasing manner, but they feel childish. “Falling too fast to prepare for this / Tripping in the world could be dangerous / Everybody circling, it’s vulturous / Negative, nepotist,” he chants, before singing the refrain twice:

Whatever it takes

‘Cause I love the adrenaline in my veins

I do whatever it takes

‘Cause I love how it feels when I break the chains

Whatever it takes.

“Mouth of the River” is a slower song, more subdued in its tone, but at the same time a bit optimistic. Still, this theologically inspired ballad does little to illuminate the theme of self-acceptance and finding one’s place in the world.

Evolve will not stand the test of time, even if “Thunder,” “Believer” and “Whatever It Takes” ride high on the pop charts right now.

Reynolds and others of his artistic stripe are not entirely to blame for their limitations. Certainly, profit-driven record companies are all too willing to foster those bands with a lowest-common-denominator emotional appeal. An overall social and cultural stagnation and the suppression of social opposition and popular restiveness have also not been kind to artistic development.

The years 2017 and 2018 have witnessed the beginnings of a new period of social upheaval. New creative forces will emerge. The best of them will find inspiration in the movement of millions, and have the courage to leave no stone unturned, no subject untouched.

In this context, albums like *Evolve* already feel terribly outdated.



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