

The Strokes' *The New Abnormal* and Hamilton Leithauser's *The Loves Of Your Life*: Two decades on from the rise of “indie rock”

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Two of the more notable bands to emerge from the early 2000s’ “indie rock” music scene, which was centered in New York City, have recently produced new albums. The Strokes’ *The New Abnormal* and the solo album *The Loves of Your Life* by lead singer Hamilton Leithauser of the Walkmen (2002-2012) were both released in April of this year.

At the beginning of the 2000s there was something of a surge in the popular appeal of “straight-ahead” and “revivalist” rock music. Several bands emerged, generally outside the larger record labels, that emphasized propulsive rhythm and guitar sections, gritty blues riffs, primal “punk” vocalization, jangly 1950s-era rock melodies and an inclination for a 1960s-70s avant-garde rock aesthetics. Some of the bands became genuinely popular. The music was generally invigorating, infusing an often energetic and urgent quality into a field that had grown largely stale in the 1990s.

Though the categorization is provisional and always disputed, bands such as The Strokes, The Walkmen, The Hives, The White Stripes, The Black Keys, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, the Arctic Monkeys and others loosely composed—or were lumped in together as—the latest in the “indie rock” genre in the US and Europe.

Initially, this music found a large audience, in part because it was a conscious rejection of the lifeless, cynical and bloated “alternative rock” and even drearier “rap-rock” produced by the large record companies throughout the 1990s. The “indie” bands were very deliberately “looking back” to earlier specific periods of music for inspiration, often melding these musical and aesthetic styles to fit contemporary moods.

Twenty years on, bands like the Strokes and figures like Leithauser are attempting to move in new musical directions. It is worth briefly reviewing where they are now.

The Strokes’ *The New Abnormal*

The sixth studio album by The Strokes, *The New Abnormal*, as the title would indicate, is attempting in its own way to grapple with the current crisis-ridden social situation. It is the first album in seven years from the popular New York City quintet—with Julian Casablancas on vocals, Nick Valensi and Albert Hammond Jr on guitar, Nikolai Fraiture on bass and Fabrizio Moretti on drums. The album was made with well-known music producer Rick Rubin.

Of all the albums from the early 2000s’ New York City music scene, the Strokes’ *Is This It* (2001) most certainly had the broadest popular impact. Music magazines like NME named it the Album of the Decade, and dozens of contemporary artists continue to cite it as a major influence. The album and band were impressive for their sharp, catchy and gritty musicianship.

Carefully steeped in musical influences from popular music of the early decades of rock music, the group quickly made an impression. They led with a tight and hard-charging rhythm, angular and creative guitarists, and a “raw” crooning lead singer. Songs like “Last Nite,” “Hard To Explain” and “Someday” give some sense of the appeal—propulsive and driving, but yet buoyed by genuinely catchy melodies and excellent timing. The lyrics, though a bit too abstract and sometimes overly adolescent in their sexuality, expressed a mood of eager desire to break out of certain constraints of the period.

But the band hit an impasse quickly after the enormous popularity of *Is This It*. The subsequent albums, though they have continued to draw strong interest from audiences, have been less and less exciting or focused.

Unhappily, the music on *The New Abnormal* does not buck this unsatisfying trend. To its credit, the band has a sense

they need to speak to the growing popular opposition to the present political situation. But the results are a musically scattered and largely unappealing album.

The lyrics are even more abstract and indirect than in the past. Almost nothing seems worked out, and very little moves or sticks. On the disjointed and dreary “Eternal Summer,” for instance, a song loosely addressing climate change, the chorus yells “I can’t believe it/This is the eleventh hour/Psychedelic/Life is such a funny journey/Hercules, your service is no longer needed/It’s just like make-believe.”

There is a good deal of this type of lyrical repetition throughout the album, on songs like “Selfless” and “At The Door” (“Hard to fight what I can’t see/Not trying to build no dynasty/I can’t see beyond this wall/But we lost this game/So many times before”), for instance. There is indirectness and obscurity and the lyrics lack any real bite.

Musically, the band is still attempting to invoke earlier musical trends, with less success. There is very little consistency to the sound of the album. There is brief evidence of some of their ability to create tight, catchy rhythms and melodies on a song such as “The Adults Are Talking”—perhaps the only song that actually reminds the listener of the strengths of the band in the early period. But even here, the singing of Casablancas now tilts toward muted, somewhat boring sentiments. Much of the musical edge has been lost.

Hamilton Leithauser’s *The Loves of Your Life*

Leithauser’s voice has generally been the most gripping element of his musical efforts since his stint with the Walkmen (2002-2012). It is instantly recognizable and serious, particularly when compared to the generally distant or purposefully garbled singing of many of his “indie rock” contemporaries. He has something of a balladeer’s approach to songcraft, filtered through punk rock, with an intensity that can be infectious when it works.

Leithauser’s *The Loves of Your Life* is comprised of character sketches of people he knew personally, or came across in a chance encounter, according to recent interviews. The album is produced by Leithauser, and he performs most of the instruments in the studio too.

Most of the song-characters are at odds with their own lives in some way: the wistful regret of “The Old King” sung almost as a lullaby; the lost souls on the “Cross-Sound Ferry (Walk-On Ticket)” about an outsized personality on a boat trip; a seemingly lonely couple in the drum-heavy

ballad “The Garbage Men”; or the naïve middle-class “Isabella” who is on the verge of a reckoning with reality, sung with pedal-steel guitar and a mouse-like backing chorus.

Leithauser sings with compassion about his characters, attempting to make them complex characters, but an entire album of these mostly sad and yearning people becomes a burden to listen to at times. The human figures also flash in and out of the songs so quickly, without much about them to hang on to, that one’s encounters with them can feel very distant and unmoving.

Occasionally the songs are effective, like the lively folk-ballad “Here They Come,” which starts ominously and then takes a dramatic piano-steeped turn halfway through the song. But the content of the song—a man hiding away from his problems in a movie theater—is not much of a deviation from the others. The past weighs heavily, but the listener never really understands why. There is not much to sink one’s teeth into on this occasion either.

In his previous work, Leithauser’s singing could be captivating. It had the power to add an emotional urgency to a song, like the blitzing ballad “Four Provinces,” the punk-influenced anger on “The Rat” the heartfelt waltz “I Lost You” or the anthemic yearning of “A 1000 Times.” That power is still evident in flashes on *The Loves of Your Life*, but the work is generally not gripping. While attempting to draw out perhaps broader and more universal traits in his character studies, the telling of the stories comes across a bit flat. The musical flourishes that appeal on the album are often overwhelmed by the less-worked out elements of the song-characters.

All in all, there is no indication that the musicians in question here have absorbed—or even thought very deeply about—the convulsive events of the past two decades, events that have dramatically changed life in the US and Europe for great numbers of people, including of course artists, and made that the basis for new, challenging music. There is no great surprise in that, but it is unfortunate and damaging.



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