

# Adulkt Life's *Book of Curses*: Indie veterans make a new beginning

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Adulkt Life is a new band that already has a history. Its front man is Chris Rowley, who previously sang in the British indie group Huggy Bear in the 1990s. Its guitarist John Arthur Webb and bassist Kevin Hendrick previously played in the British noise rock band Male Bonding. The only member without a résumé is young drummer Sonny Barrett, who worked at the London record store where Rowley and Webb met last year. Adulkt Life (the “k” is silent, according to Rowley) recently released its first album, *Book of Curses*.

For Rowley, the formation of Adulkt Life marks the end of 25 years of public musical inactivity. Social and political concerns were a motivating force for his former group, which was part of the riot grrrl movement and collaborated with the American band Bikini Kill. The acute political, economic and social crisis seems to have inspired Rowley to end his silence. Even though its lyrics often are oblique and its images fragmentary, *Book of Curses* depicts a world wracked by authoritarianism, corporate domination, hunger, generational change and protest. The band aligns itself with the oppressed, even if it expresses uncertainty about how to fight and about the prospects for victory.

Like many punk vocalists, Rowley alternates between recitation, tuneless half-singing and shouting. His voice occasionally breaks or gives out as though he has run out of breath. His shouting is not an assertion of masculine dominance, but the rebellion of a scrawny underdog who has been pushed to his limit. At varying moments, he conveys incredulity, fear, grim determination and gusto.

The musical influences on *Book of Curses* extend back before the time of Huggy Bear. The opening song “County Pride” begins with a squiggly, fluttering tenor saxophone that calls to mind the Contortions and other New York no wave groups of the early 1980s. The

saxophone subsides when the band begins to play in earnest, and the timbre of the instruments evokes albums such as Joy Division’s *Closer* (1980) and the Cure’s *Pornography* (1982).

Contrasts enrich this energetic song. Guitar arpeggios play over sustained bass notes, and the rhythm alternates between common time and waltz time. In an interview with *Flood* magazine, Rowley described “County Pride” as a rejection of “too much casual racism and sexism,” but it is hard to make out the song’s lyrics.

A buzzing bass figure draws the listener into “JNR Showtime,” a song that soon dives headlong into a mosh pit. With the band’s dynamic shifts, Rowley’s shouts turn to gasps. His voice momentarily gives out as he challenges, “Son to a father, you’re a father to a son. / Why would you let this shit carry on?” Fatherhood has made Rowley’s concerns about violence and repression deeper and more urgent. “You know there’s a van outside. / There’s nowhere else you can hide,” he warns.

It may not be a surprise that a band founded by record collectors named two songs after its musical influences. One of them is “Flipper,” which grinds forward insistently, but more slowly than the other songs. The song is more controlled and contemplative than those of its namesake, the California punk band. As on the rest of the album, the song’s lyrics do not cohere, but they include intriguing images such as “mustard gas and fake ID,” and the challenge, “If this is the high life, then prove it.” In a more tranquil view of parenthood, Rowley reassures us, “I got your book at bedtime.”

“Stevie K,” a blast of hardcore punk, is named after guitarist Steve Kroner of Nation of Ulysses, a Washington D.C. band (1988-92) that cultivated a radical left image. The song sounds like a righteous

broadside, but its target is vague.

“Move” seems to combine political agitation with an exhortation to enjoy the moment. “Still no rupture in the corporation dam,” Rowley admits, before urging, “Gotta move this night along!” When the band gets quieter, Rowley offers what might be the tactical and mundane discussions within a guerrilla group. “Post invasion, we still got to fight. / Argue whether to get to bed on time. / Argue over where you’re gonna sleep. / If we’re ever gonna clean our teeth. / Where’s the evidence that you seized?” Rowley told *Flood* that he wrote “Move” as a “song for the disenfranchised.”

The closing song “New Curfew” is “a parents’ prayer in the smoke and petrol,” he said in the same interview. More explicitly than the other songs, “New Curfew” addresses the pandemic and the recent mass protests. The title could refer to a means of slowing viral transmission or suppressing insurrection. The song begins as a slow waltz with a circular guitar pattern and somewhat clumsy drumming. “Synchronize your watches. / Listen out for the drum,” chants Rowley, as though preparing a group for a mass action. “Bite the hand that feeds / Down into paste.”

But as the band plays louder, Rowley confesses his fear and uncertainty. “I don’t know what I feel / When I hear sirens outside anymore!” After this louder passage, the band becomes quiet again, and a sinister, tremolo bassline enters. “What are these kids, nine or ten? / Masks wouldn’t make them any less frightening,” says Rowley. As though observing a scene with his daughter, he adds, “She said, ‘Dad, one day all this will be gone.’” During the coda, hissing moves between the left and right channels like smoke rising from wreckage.

Although *Book of Curses* closes with a note of foreboding, it is not consumed by negativity. In fact, Adulkt Life often sounds like they are enjoying themselves. Rowley is confused about the political and social crises he sees. He has no clear ideas about what caused them or what to do about them. But rather than hiding from or surrendering to them, Rowley and his bandmates have responded to them artistically. This suggests a seriousness of purpose for which they deserve credit. Though in the above-mentioned interview, Rowley describes his lyrics as “word play,” he also acknowledges that his words refer to our current situation. Rowley’s fear and uncertainty are

understandable, but his desire to fight for a better world is a valuable contribution.



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