Little Green House: Debut album by Anxious offers punk without politics

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10 February 2022

Connecticut band Anxious rang in the new year by releasing its debut album *Little Green House* in January. The first thing that strikes the eye about Anxious is its members' youth: their ages range from about 19 to 21. The musicians grew up together and have been playing as a band since at least high school, which is not a very distant memory for any of them. Moreover, the album is named after the childhood home of the band's singer Grady Allen.

Journalists have described Anxious as having connections to the local hardcore punk scene. Hardcore was a faster, more intense version of punk rock that emerged partly as a reaction against the more romantic or self-consciously arty directions in which punk was evolving circa 1979. Hardcore songs tended to be short (sometimes less than a minute) and to feature angry shouting, vaguely leftist political themes, and dark or provocative humor.

But Anxious bears a closer musical resemblance to emo, a trend that developed out of hardcore and focused on feelings and relationships rather than politics. The influences of early emo bands Dag Nasty and Rites of Spring, and the more recent and popular Jimmy Eat World and New Found Glory, can be heard on Anxious's debut. The Connecticut band clearly has paid close attention to its predecessors' music.

From the first note of the debut, one notices how polished the band is, especially considering its members' youth. The guitarists use basic techniques such as palm muting and harmonics intelligently to provide accents. The singers can carry a tune and even harmonize. But most impressive is the dexterous, precise and powerful drumming of Jonny Camner, the most musically accomplished member. Camner supplies a good deal of the band's energy.

The songs' arrangements also show intelligence and creativity. Some of the band's techniques, such as switching to half time in the middle of a song or building tension by pounding out staccato eighth notes, are hallmarks of this style of music. But other devices are more interesting, such as the occasional suspended chords that suggest both possibility and tension. Dynamic shifts, within and between songs, hold the listener's focus and provide variety. The band also makes good use of its multiple singers by contrasting low and high parts and counterposing singing to shouting. This palette suggests that someone involved in this album is shrewder than one might have expected.

The opening song, "Your One Way Street," valuably captures the band's approach. The band comes storming out of the gate to establish the main theme of the song. But soon, all the instruments stop except for a muted rhythm guitar as the vocal melody begins. After a few lines, the rest of the band re-enters, and the singing turns to a guttural, cartoonish bellow. (This technique is tolerable in small doses but wears thin quickly over the course of the album.) When the main theme is reprised, the vocals become earnest, buoyant harmonies atop the charging band. After the song crashes to an end, the harmonies are left to float ethereally above the overtones and fade away. This is one of the album's more memorable songs. The overall effect is of a band that, even if it does not expand the boundaries of its chosen style, certainly plays with panache.

Anxious uses similar techniques, with similar success, on the aptly titled "Growing Up Song." Insistent arpeggios convey an adolescent's impatience to enter adulthood. The call and response of the chorus complements a low vocal part with a high one. As in the opening song, the high vocal part, sung by several

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voices, continues after the band finishes playing. One voice ends the song with a flourish too calculated to have been improvised.

At times, the band's ostensible sincerity is a bit too winsome. One example is the gentle "Wayne," in which an acoustic guitar is the sole accompaniment. The ingenuous singing and Partridge-Family-style backup vocals are enough to make punks snicker. A different problem is evident on "Let Me." The album's weakest song is a bellowed emotional appeal that fails to elicit sympathy.

The closing "You When You're Gone" is easily the album's peak. It washes in on a distant, echo-like chord and proceeds at a more relaxed pace than the other songs. Sustained notes from clean electric guitars evoke a summery daydream. The unforced, affecting singing of Stella Branstool (of the Brooklyn, New York band Hello Mary) provide a breath of fresh air. Although the song faintly recalls bands like the Sundays, it seems to show Anxious finding its own distinctive voice. The song's style is suited to its themes of innocence and love.

Little Green House is a respectable debut album. The band's energy, fast tempos and crisp playing keep the songs fresh. Not every song is memorable, but they almost all have an appealing musical phrase or two. Unfortunately, they also each contain at least one cliché. Granted, the band's youth calls for indulgence, but surely they can do better than to pile up tired phrases like "no one's to blame," "you left me speechless" and "you're all I need."

This problem points to the most notable weakness of the album. Not a single song addresses the outside world. Each one deals with issues related to relationships or coming of age. Anxious comes across as a group of well-adjusted, well-intentioned young men who are finding their bearings as adults.

But they are doing so amid a global pandemic that has claimed millions of lives, the threat of world war and the increasing turn of the American ruling class toward fascism. If Anxious has connections to hardcore, then why haven't they addressed any of these issues? For all their political limitations, hardcore bands like Dead Kennedys, the Circle Jerks and the Dils sang with urgency about political reaction, inequality and war. The crisis has become far more advanced in the decades since these bands first turned on their amps. Anxious's silence about these matters is all the more conspicuous.

Nevertheless, the band's debut album shows professionalism and a certain amount of creativity. "You When You're Gone" suggests what the band is capable of, but it may be a bad sign that the album's best song showcases someone from another band. Anxious are still defining themselves. To progress artistically, they need to move farther away from their childhood homes.

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