

IDLES' *Crawler*: Intriguing musical effort at odds with its own imagery

Matthew Brennan
4 April 2022

Crawler is the fourth full-length album from the Bristol, England rock quintet IDLES. The band formed in 2011 and issued a series of EPs before their first full-length album in 2016.

IDLES' music loosely falls into the "post-punk" sub-genre because of its generally aggressive and raw approach to the standard rock song structure, but also because it draws on "non-rock" elements such as industrial music, electronic dance music and even hip-hop to some degree.

Fronted by singer Joe Talbot, the band includes guitarists Mark Bowen and Lee Kiernan, bassist Adam Devonshire and drummer Jon Beavis. Their first two albums, *Brutalism* (2017) and *Joy as An Act of Resistance* (2018), brought them prominence, particularly in the UK where the latter album was nominated for a Mercury Prize.

The band has developed a devoted following in the US and Europe because of its energetic and unpredictable live shows. IDLES often blur the line between the stage and the audience while playing, consciously creating a kind of performative chaos intended to jolt the audience into movement. In interviews, Talbot has noted that the decision to form the band came about in part because of the members' distaste for the perceived boredom and indifference many groups displayed in the first decade of the 2000s.

At their best, IDLES are capable of genuinely invigorating music. The best example is the 2018 song "Danny Nedelko," which is a defiant and optimistic defense of immigrants. The song was released in opposition to the chauvinism of the Brexit campaign. Full of life and humane sentiment, the song is both engaging and universal.

On *Crawler*, produced by hip-hop producer Kenny Beats (Kenneth Blume), the album is a step forward for the band musically, but also a step backwards or at least sideways, thematically.

Many of the songs on the album are musically inventive and propelled by a high level of skill and confidence. The rhythm section of Beavis and Devonshire stands out. The band is at its best in up-tempo, sonically cascading songs,

like the primal drum-driven "The Wheel" or the furnace-blast of "Crawl!," where the powerful danceable rhythms envelop the listener.

Guitarists Bowen and Kiernan often provide moody, discordant contrasts to the tight grooves, and at times create an interesting tension that heightens the dramatic effect. Certain songs like the down-tempo "When the Lights Come On" or the ominous opening track "MTT 420 RR" are paced by the guitars' dark precision. The foreboding of the riffs and chord changes draw the listener close, and never fully release the tension.

Very little comes across as meandering or dull, at least in the quintet's playing. A strong sense of musical purpose is at work here, often aided by Talbot's urgent singing.

In its lyrics and themes, however, the album ultimately falls short. The IDLES' previous three albums took up immigration, poverty, racism, sexism and homophobia. Concern for these matters was often presented in confrontational or self-confessional form. As noted earlier, sometimes these themes are effectively taken up.

But while these issues are worth pursuing musically for the most part, it should be noted that they are generally treated by the band in a trite "left" manner, characteristic of upper-middle class academic layers. Phrases like "toxic masculinity," "white privilege," "cultural appropriation" and even "classism" appear here and there on the previous three albums, though not so often on *Crawler*. The term "classism" in particular—frequently used on other IDLES albums—treats social class as merely one more "identity," not as the axis around which society revolves.

IDLES' too frequent reliance on these conceptions has been a weakness, often weighing down songs that are musically valuable. In his attraction to this jargon, coupled with an over-reliance on vulgarity at times, Talbot seems to be taking the line of least resistance.

In addition, Talbot often refers to his own personal and psychological challenges. Up to a point, of course, this is entirely legitimate. On *Crawler*, however, this type of theme and imagery tends to dominate. The songs mostly explore

the singer's difficult childhood and early adulthood. Personal and family struggles with alcoholism and drug addiction, and the turmoil connected to these crises, hang like a cloud above most of the album.

Midway through it becomes hard to distinguish between the different tales of personal misery. It is also material that has appeared in various ways on their previous records, and at this point feels somewhat threadbare.

The images on songs such as "MTT 420 RR," "The Wheel" and "Car Crash" involve "wreckage" metaphors about life spinning out of control. The tracks "Stockholm Syndrome" and "The Beachland Ballroom" also continue the "tailspin" imagery. Songs like "Crawl!" function as a recovery tale about trying to pull oneself off from the floor after hitting rock bottom. A musically upbeat song such as "King Snake" encourages a kind of Buddhist-like resignation amid the chaos.

Only one track seems at odds with these themes, the dance-floor instructional "The New Sensation." Talbot somewhat caustically sings about different dances that the audience should attempt. In an interview, Talbot said this was intended to mock Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak's austerity budget, in which funding for the arts was cut, as well as Sunak's comments that artists should simply give up and change professions.

The album ends with a track entitled "The End." It is perhaps the only generally optimistic song on the album, in terms of thematic outlook. Grand in its musical structure, the constantly rising discord of the song reaches a chorus where Talbot bellows out "In spite of it all, Life is beautiful!"

In interviews, Talbot has revealed that he drew inspiration for the line from Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky in his famous "Testament" of February 1940. This is an interesting note on which to conclude.

Talbot explained, "Before his assassination, Trotsky knew that Stalin's dudes were coming over to kill him. He knew he was going to die. What did he do? After watching his wife out in the garden, he wrote in his diary, 'In spite of it all, life is beautiful.' A week later, he gets an icepick in the head. He was just happy to sit in his garden watching the person he loved most do what she loved. I think that's a beautiful thing ...I am Trotsky."

It is promising that Talbot drew inspiration from Trotsky's comment and situation. At the same time, it should come as no great surprise that the musician's interpretation of Trotsky's comment is one-sided, to the extent of missing much of the point. Talbot seems to suggest that the exiled revolutionary was writing out of resignation in regard to his individual fate.

The full passage from Trotsky entirely dispels any such notion: "For forty-three years of my conscious life I have

remained a revolutionist; for forty-two of them I have fought under the banner of Marxism. If I had to begin all over again I would of course try to avoid this or that mistake, but the main course of my life would remain unchanged. I shall die a proletarian revolutionist, a Marxist, a dialectical materialist, and consequently, an irreconcilable atheist. My faith in the communist future of mankind is not less ardent, indeed it is firmer today, than it was in the days of my youth.

"Natasha has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter more freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression, and violence, and enjoy it to the full."

Trotsky's optimism and understanding of life's beauty and possibilities were guided by profound insight into the historical and social process. He fought with all his strength and ability to help raise the working class's understanding of its world-historic tasks. He viewed social and cultural matters, as well as his personal fate, from the point of the view of the objective development of the social revolution. As he once explained, "It is necessary to find in reality itself the force to overcome its reactionary and barbaric features."

IDLES would do well to dig deeper along these lines, above all, to study the history of the social and psychological issues with which they are clearly and legitimately concerned. The musical talent is certainly on display in *Crawler*, but the conceptions with which they operate need to develop for them to make a real advance.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact