

# Indie rock duo Quasi returns to the fray with new album: “Thoughts and prayers won’t get you there”

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The indie rock duo Quasi ended a ten-year silence with the release of its latest album *Breaking the Balls of History* (2023). As the provocative title suggests, the band is in a combative frame of mind. They play with notable vigor, and their characteristically barbed and funny lyrics show an unusual specificity this time out. Some of the new songs address the pandemic and the rise of fascism. But the persistent limitations of the band’s outlook conflict with their defiance and determination.

Keyboardist Sam Coomes and drummer Janet Weiss formed Quasi in 1993. At the height of the grunge era, when millions of ears were turned toward Seattle, Quasi was founded in Portland, Oregon, without a guitarist or bassist. While grunge drew on punk and heavy metal, Quasi’s music sounded more like 1960s garage rock and even Tin Pan Alley. All these factors placed the band slightly left of center.

Weiss is well known as the drummer for indie rock band Sleater-Kinney. Coomes previously played in the band Heatmiser with singer/songwriter Elliott Smith. Weiss’s powerful drumming and Coomes’s 1960s-era electric organ are equally crucial in defining the band’s sound. Coomes is the main songwriter and sings in a thin tenor that is free of typical blues or rock mannerisms. He eschews posturing and sounds like an intelligent and not-very-intimidating suburbanite.

In 2019, Weiss was in a car accident that left her with a broken collarbone and two broken legs. By the time she had fully healed, the initial lockdowns of the pandemic had begun. She and Coomes adapted to the situation by jamming together every day, and these sessions ultimately produced the band’s newest songs. After the band rehearsed the songs, they needed only

five days to record the album.

One of the best songs, “Last Long Laugh,” comes first. Coomes sings the quiet first verse to the accompaniment of single, sustained organ notes and a deliberate, slow pattern on the bass drum. When the verse is over, the drums come crashing in, along with a heavily distorted, one-note organ riff. The band sounds rejuvenated and plays at gale force. They’re clearly having fun. These dynamic shifts continue, albeit in less dramatic form, throughout the song. The band even feels playful enough to switch briefly to a disco beat here and there. Coomes’s gallows humor is evident in phrases like “a trail of tears up a hill of beans.” He occasionally plays adjacent keys simultaneously to add dissonance, which not only makes the song raunchier, but also underscores his jaundiced worldview. Yet Coomes also offers the saw: “You can’t let the bastards bring you down.”

Opening with an overdriven, bluesy organ riff, “Back in Your Tree” continues the momentum established by the first song. Coomes fires off squibs such as “a dead horse before the cart.” Seeming to acknowledge the high stakes of the current crisis, Coomes sings, “You gotta be a fool to be foolin’ around.” Lending a sense of urgency to the song, he puts unusual force into the refrain, to the point where his voice starts to fray.

Other songs provide a counterpoint to the more aggressive tracks and reflect Quasi’s stylistic and timbral variety. Weiss often provides well-mannered harmonies with a hint of knowing humor, which may be a hedge against the more pessimistic lyrics. The comparatively conventional pop chord progression of “Queen of Ears” is offset by tart, imaginative lyrics that do not quite cohere. The rising, woozy “Gravity” is

drenched in Mellotron. “You can walk on water if you so choose / In your made-in-USA concrete shoes,” Coomes sings. “Gravity don’t care at all.”

The album’s weakest song is the eerie “Inbetweenness.” The problem is not that Weiss sings lead, in her typically unaffected way, while Coomes provides harmonies. It’s that the lyrics do not make much of their subject, which is the unease and disorientation that one might feel when facing an ambiguous situation. The music and lyrics evoke this unease without seeming to understand it or even hinting at a way out. The song crystallizes the indecision and inability to commit that are classic traits of a certain social type. It provides a clue to the weaknesses in Quasi’s outlook.

Quasi is more powerful by far when they take a stand. They plunge headlong into “Riots & Jokes,” with Weiss flailing the drums and Coomes smashing the keys. He throws down the gauntlet: “Uncle Sam, sick old man, / What’s the plan, baby? / Obliteration?” Coomes grunts as he accents the beat, which is almost unheard of on a Quasi album. “The world is yours, ladies. / Take it now! / What are you waiting for?” Feminist overtones aside, the band seems to hint at the need to disrupt the social order.

The title track, which lasts little more than a minute, provides the album’s climax. Its lyrics (“I’d rather be / Breaking the balls of history!”) are minimal, somewhat cryptic and apparently tossed off. Yet Coomes, not usually a forceful presence, belts this phrase with all his lungs. He inhales audibly, then hits higher notes than he has previously sung in modal voice. He and Weiss play insistently, as though defying all the world’s dangers. The song is a deeply felt, cathartic rejection of the crises rocking humanity, a statement that a line must be drawn, and a battle engaged.

Not surprisingly, the rest of the album does not match this intensity, but certain songs articulate what the band is rebelling against. After the descending, chromatic riff that opens “Doomscrollers,” Coomes surveys the ills of the pandemic era, including people doomscrolling [spending excessive amounts of time online searching for negative news] at home and children unable to go to school. His scope broadens: “And all the houses lost to fires, / The anti-vaxxers and the climate deniers.” He observes the symptoms of reaction: “All the puffed-up patriot pigs, / Punisher skulls on the backs of their

rigs.” This attention to social reality is refreshing in the insular world of pop music. But who are these people, and what made them that way? Who is the real enemy? Coomes does not ask these questions. Instead, he sounds a note of fatalism during the chorus: “Clouds hide the stars and the helicopters.”

The character sketch “Rotten Wrock” has similar weaknesses. “You don’t know wrong, you don’t know right, / But you know you’re spoilin’ for the big fight,” Coomes sings over dissonant organ and thumping toms. “And two plus two can equal five / If that’s the buzz in your beehive.” Coomes later refers to “the elephant in the room,” who “would send the whole world unto its doom.” The song appears to be about Trump supporters who deny the would-be dictator’s 2020 election loss. Yet it is unnecessarily oblique and largely rests on the surface of things. Moreover, it ends on a distinctly bleak note.

*Breaking the Balls of History* is one of Quasi’s strongest albums. After a serious personal setback, the onset of a pandemic and an attempted coup, Coomes and Weiss have come back swinging. Their performances are full of gusto, joy and protest. But this healthy rebellion is undercut by Coomes’s failure to shake his gloomy outlook. He’s been paying attention, and his lyrics have wit and color. But too often, they are a catalog of impressions that do not penetrate the situation deeply. Nevertheless, Quasi’s music has newfound urgency, and adversity hasn’t diminished their talents. They may yet find a way forward.



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