

Rock bands Boygenius and the Hold Steady: Diverging approaches, diverging results

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Boygenius, a collaboration between singer-songwriters Julien Baker, Phoebe Bridgers and Lucy Dacus, recently released their debut album *The Record*. It has generated even more excitement among fans than each of these musicians has on her own.

On the same day, veteran indie rockers the Hold Steady unveiled their new album *The Price of Progress*. If the latter group has not necessarily enjoyed the spotlight, it has nevertheless enjoyed a loyal fan base over the years.

These two new albums take diverging approaches. One celebrates friendship and love. The other expresses fellow feeling in the face of strong social and economic pressures. One album is more artistically successful than the other, and it is worthwhile to compare the two.

Baker, Bridgers and Dacus established themselves individually as artists in the 2010s. Their confessional songs often feature acoustic guitar and quiet accompaniment such as strings or electronic instruments. Their lyrics focus on personal themes such as emotional attachments, and Baker has tackled difficult topics such as mental illness and addiction.

The musicians wrote many of the songs on the record for and about each other. Like diary entries or personal letters, the songs refer to shared experiences and make inside references. Any songs that are not about the band members are about their lovers. As the album progresses, it feels more and more like a stuffy room that needs its windows opened. Where is the outside world?

The musicians open the album by singing to each other, “Who would I be without you, without them?” “It feels good to be known so well,” they affirm on “True Blue.” “I never thought you’d happen to me,” they sing on “Leonard Cohen.” The mutual appreciation becomes monotonous.

Compounding this problem is the succession of slow, quiet songs that feature fingerpicked guitar and gentle harmonies. Without strong melodies, these songs exert little musical pull and instead sink into torpor. “You said my music is mellow. / Maybe I’m just exhausted,” sings Bridgers. She seems to need a shot in the arm. Even the two songs with slightly more energy, “\$20” and “Satanist,” aren’t exactly barn burners.

The band members are capable singers and harmonize well. Each shows an eye for the concrete detail that brings immediacy to her lyrics. Yet they convey little sense of (or interest in) the larger social world that they inhabit.

In an interview with NPR, Dacus commented that the band has “extreme presence and gratitude.” In fact, what they convey on the record is insularity. As major banks collapse, millions protest austerity and the world teeters on the brink of nuclear war, these musicians are gazing at their own navels. How can artists practice “extreme presence” without taking notice of the extreme crisis that we are living through? What toll has the pandemic and economic insecurity taken on people’s personal relationships? Without an impulse to understand this social context, the band’s “gratitude” resembles complacency.

The hosannas greeting the first Boygenius album (which follows an eponymous 2018 EP) are inseparable from the group’s promotion of gender and sexuality politics. The press has presented the musicians’ friendship and love for each other as unusual and rebellious. *Pitchfork* has gone as far as to claim, absurdly, that “their commitment to making music together pushes against the competitive forces of patriarchy.” In *Variety*, we read that Boygenius is “one of the best touring rock shows that’s going to come anyone’s way in the near future.” This fulsome praise

contrasts sharply with the low stakes for which the band plays—and the low energy with which they play.

The Hold Steady hails from Minneapolis and has now been active for 20 years. They have established a reputation for lyrics that tell detailed stories and music that tends toward the expansive and anthemic. Leader Craig Finn often writes about members of the middle class who use drugs and party to cope with their increasingly precarious circumstances. Close observation, frankness and sympathy for his subjects are among his strengths. Finn has cited Bruce Springsteen as an influence on his lyrics.

Instead of singing, Finn usually talks like the guy on the next barstool. This technique can become tiresome. And as enjoyable as the music is, it functions primarily as a setting for the lyrics. The listener doesn't walk away humming these songs.

“Grand Junction” follows a couple as they travel to the West and begin to realize the obstacles that their relationship faces. “If we stretch out our funds, we can get through the month,” one of them says.

In “Carlos Is Crying,” a man admits to his drinking buddies that he stopped showing up for work weeks earlier and doesn't know how to tell his girlfriend. Remembering his youth, he says, “We didn't mind being broke. / Now every conversation I have's about money.” The narrator offers Carlos moral support but no solutions. Finn does essentially the same thing in his songs about people in difficult straits.

In “Flyover Halftime,” a fan leaps onto the field at a National Football League game, grabs the football and runs, only to get clubbed by security when he reaches the end zone. In their impotent anger, his friends rip up the seats and give the middle finger to the fighter planes flying overhead. Here, Finn draws the connections between professional sports, police repression and the military.

The allusions to guerrilla battles in other countries in “The Birdwatchers” and “Distortions of Faith” show that Finn is at least aware of the wider world. But these other countries are not named, and the agendas of the rebel groups pass unmentioned. Like the thrill seekers of “The Birdwatchers,” who simply want to be “at the scene,” Finn seems to be at a psychological remove from the turmoil he depicts.

Overall, the album gives a vivid sense of daily life as many experience it, but Finn tacitly accepts that the

game is rigged and that small victories are all that can be won. This pessimism is unwarranted and unhelpful. How much stronger would the songs be if Finn asked why it's so difficult to pay bills or even hold a job? Why do so many of his characters feel alone and without support? Finn's sympathy for his characters is positive, but his songs would be more powerful if they asked questions about the bigger picture.

Diverging approaches, diverging results

Although the new releases by Boygenius and the Hold Steady each have their weaknesses, *The Price of Progress* is the more substantial work. Unlike the Hold Steady, Boygenius makes no attempt to look outside their window or describe what's going on in the world. Romance, friendship and sexuality are worthy themes, and artists have made them the basis of strong albums. But the expressions of love and gratitude on the record are unenlightening and frankly boring. It also doesn't help that the album reflects the weary, passive style so prevalent in indie rock. The Hold Steady's effort, however, is more likely to retain its meaning and impact over time.



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