

Little Rope: Rock band Sleater-Kinney shows signs of wear

Erik Schreiber
26 March 2024

Little Rope (2024), the latest album by rock band Sleater-Kinney, is the work of artists grappling with creative and personal difficulties. Underneath an array of studio effects and flourishes, the band sounds enervated and uninspired. Several relatively conventional love songs suggest a loss of direction, despite occasional hints of the band's wonted defiance. Although not a dishonorable effort, *Little Rope* will not rank among the band's best albums.

Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein (both singers, guitarists and songwriters) formed Sleater-Kinney in Olympia, Washington in 1994. Alongside groups such as Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear, Sleater-Kinney (named after a road in suburban Olympia) became part of the riot grrrl scene, which drew heavily on punk rock, feminism and LGBT politics. From the beginning, their unusual guitar techniques set them apart from their peers. "We came up with a sonic vernacular, mostly because we were self-taught," Brownstein recently told NPR. "These detuned guitars playing these kind of half-formed inverted guitar chords. And that became the lexicon with which we wrote." Above all, Tucker's piercing ululations made the group immediately identifiable.

When drummer Janet Weiss, also a member of Quasi, joined Sleater-Kinney for their third album *Dig Me Out* (1997), the band's identity was solidified. Weiss played with a power that not only matched the exuberance and rebellion of Tucker and Brownstein, but also pushed them to greater heights. The indie band gained increasing mainstream popularity and critical acclaim. After reaching a climax with the raw and varicolored *The Woods* (2005), the band broke up. In 2014, they reunited and released three more albums before Weiss left for good five years ago.

Little Rope is Sleater-Kinney's second album without

Weiss. The latter's loss is keenly felt. New drummer Angie Boylan does not have the same presence as Weiss. She does not play with her predecessor's dexterity, power or imagination. Many of the songs on *Little Rope* feel torpid, and Boylan may be partly responsible for their sluggish tempos.

Another thing that strikes the ear is the amount of sonic gauze over the music. The buzz, hiss, distortion and flanging do add color to the arrangements. But overall, the production saps power from the songs. In addition, the vocal interplay between Tucker and Brownstein, which energized the group's previous albums, is notably absent. Instead of seeming to be in dialogue, the two seem to be in separate rooms.

The album opens slowly and mournfully with "Hell," which Tucker sings. She told NPR that the song is "about the kind of culture of violence that we live with in the United States and how we've come to sort of normalize it as something that is an everyday occurrence." Tucker seems to think that all Americans are responsible for this daily brutality, and she is not alone in ignoring the role of the ruling elite. But the song's lyrics are too vague and clichéd to convey their intended message. Tucker's voice has mellowed somewhat. When she hits the high notes, she sounds more like a mourner than a Fury.

On this album, Tucker's main focus is not social issues, but romantic relationships. "Say It Like You Mean It" is the first of her love songs here. It features synthesizer and high-pitched percussion that faintly evoke the pop music of the 1980s. But the song lacks the freshness and lively tempo of the better '80s songs. In fact, Boylan plays an incongruous march beat. The line "It hurts when you go," captures the tenor of the lyrics, and Tucker's singing does not renew or redeem them.

“Six Mistakes” is a similar offering. “I’m hangin’ on, but / I can’t feel your love for me,” Tucker sings, again with notably less power than she previously has shown. The song and vocal performance suggest an artist casting about for a meaningful theme or an inspiring idea. “Untidy Creature,” too, focuses on a lover and includes a few tired phrases. Though Tucker also asserts her independence and refuses to be controlled, she does so without the missionary zeal she once displayed. It is as though the fight has worn her down.

Brownstein seems the more inspired of the two this time. While she was recording the album, her mother and stepfather were killed in a car accident, and several songs reflect her attempts to cope with this tragic loss. On the bouncy “Don’t Feel Right,” Brownstein tries to drag herself out of her grief and back into the world. “I get up, make a list / Of what I’ll do when I’m fixed,” she sings. Items on this list include (admirably) “read more poems” and (amusingly) “dress my age.” We hear hints of the band’s previous vigor here, although Boylan holds the song back.

“Dress Yourself” is slower and more subdued. Brownstein steels herself to face the day. “Get up, girl, and dress yourself / In clothes you love for a world you hate.” Despite this antipathy, she orders herself, “Step outside and show yourself,” which shows a healthy determination. But Brownstein has been thrown off course and is looking for answers. “Give me a new word for the old pain inside of me,” she sings. Significantly, this song of uncertainty and grudging acceptance ends with a major chord.

Brownstein targets the far right on “Crusader.” “You’re burning all the books in this town, / But you can’t destroy the words in our mouths. / So, do yourself a little favor. / No one asked for a crusader.” The political engagement is welcome, especially amid the album’s banal love songs. Yet the song does not have the headlong rush of which the band is capable. It has life but lacks spark.

Sleater-Kinney have set a high bar for themselves, and *Little Rope* is unfortunately a disappointment. The songwriting, and sometimes the playing, is mediocre compared with the band’s earlier work. Some of the band’s urgency and uniqueness seem to have dissipated, most notably on Tucker’s songs. Although Boylan does not help matters, she is not to blame.

The band’s discouraging drift away from political and social themes may provide a clue. It is possible that the intersecting world crises or personal problems are weighing Tucker and Brownstein down. But there are enough positive signs on the album to justify the hope that the band will overcome its artistic difficulties.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact