

Visceral: A Zine About Music and Feelings

By Annabel Paulsen

[Photograph of Phoebe Bridgers performing at Brooklyn Steel, taken by Annabel Paulsen]

Music is one of the only things that makes me feel like a human being, and sometimes being a human feels loud.

Evolution and Tradition

Chicago band Ratboys shares several virtues with '90s alt-rock. The melodic hooks and satisfyingly full guitars recall mainstream hits like the Foo Fighters' "Learn to Fly" and Third Eye Blind, while trading in emo consciousness. There's an unpretentious joy within the arrangements, a willingness to lean into potentially corny musical tropes and dip out before going too far.

For a while, Ratboys' greatest strength was live performance. I saw the band open for Soccer Mommy at Music Hall of Williamsburg a couple of years ago, and was charmed by their stage presence and palpable camaraderie. Part of their success is lead singer and guitarist Julia Steiner—within a genre inarguably dominated by male voices, Steiner's coolheaded, soft vocals are subversive. She's laid-back and self-effacing without seeming manic-pixie, and it's clear that she's not just a female figurehead for another dude-rock college band. But when I listened to their discography at home, I felt something lacking—songs which had seemed so strong live lost gumption in their recorded versions. The records were meeker, less dynamic.

Their new album *Printer's Devil*, released February 28, amends these limitations. Ratboys has steadily improved since their 2015 debut *AOID*; the three singles released ahead of *Printer's Devil* build upon the strongest tracks from their second record, maintaining the steady rhythm of "Molly" and "Elvis is in the Freezer" while growing in sonic confidence. These songs, which pair unconventional lyrical topics with rewarding musical payoffs, are those in which Ratboys seems to commit most firmly to themselves. Their flirtation with country, using slide guitar in tandem with traditional rock techniques, add nuance to their indie foundation; there's a sense of homage to early Wilco, for whom they're opening on tour this spring.

Ratboys shares with Wilco a certain Midwestern humility that circumvents lyrical triteness. Despite being a heavily-populated metropolitan city with a thriving DIY scene, Chicago tends to refuse prestige, or at least greet it with modesty. Maybe it's the Cubs, maybe it's being nestled in between Missouri and Indiana—it's not New York and it doesn't want to be.

Theoretically, Ratboys' simple candor could be alienating. *Printer's Devil's* "Anj" describes an evolving relationship with a childhood babysitter, Angie. Steiner shared in a press release that a conversation with Angie, in which they spoke about traumatic experiences, had resulted in "a fundamental role reversal" that destabilized her conceptions of those we grow up with and eternally see as "adults."

[Screenshot of Ratboys in their music video for "I Go Out At Night"]

[Screenshot of title card in music video for "I Go Out At Night"]

This is a theme throughout *Printer's Devil*—in "Look To," Steiner deconstructs the confusion of shifting power dynamics. "It's hard to know you'll need me soon," she sings, "Like I used to need you."

In "Anj," the refrain of "I'm not alone," and its turn to "You're not alone," has the potential to sound trite and lazy, and were the band more naively earnest, it would be. But these phrases aren't a generalized prescription of self-acceptance, nor are they shrouded in extraneous metaphor. When Ratboys embrace the ordinary nature of these words, they feel gratifyingly inevitable.

Perhaps most illustrative of the band's ethos is their irony-laced gothic music video for "I Go Out at Night." Complete with opening credits and lightning strikes, Ratboys riff on film noir as zealous trick-or-treaters, in search of adventure yet easily freaked. A suspected witch gifts them a guitar and a jam session ensues; the witch cries proud tears as she watches this burgeoning band do what they do best.

For me, it's essential Chicago. Growing up in the midwest means you have little to cling to in terms of clout, which leaves self-awareness as the most valuable social currency. The members of Ratboys flout the self-serious and reach for humor instead. Steiner writes about dead cats, twentieth-century Antarctic explorations, Victorian slum-houses, her sister. She knows you don't have to care about what she has to say, and she says it anyway.

A Not-Definitive List of the Best Crush Songs

I've decided that a crush hinges on unknowing, because crushing is the desire to know. It is such that crush songs are not love songs—fledgling feelings are never the same as their fully-formed relatives. Crush songs are bubbling with curiosity where love songs are weighted with knowledge. The yearning of a crush moves with the light, elusive and flickering—the act of crushing is trying to pin it down. I had one restriction in curating this list: that the singer of the song could not have attained their subject. The pining was imperative, though heartbreak was not. What follows are my favorite crush songs of all time.

Then She Appeared, XTC

Buoyant, twinkling guitars and drums kicking on the fade-in; affected vocals, offbeat and niche references, Catherine wheels and phrygian caps. The singer is in absolute awe of the creature he beholds, who seems to have appeared spontaneously and without detectable origin, like a developing photograph, as Venus on the half-shell. He is “frightened,” “frazzled,” “dazzled,” “troubled.” Throughout the verses, the singer attempts to render his crush comprehensible via images—but the abundance of comparisons is evidence that she is ultimately unknowable, indefinable, too vast for even him.

La Vie en Rose, Lucy Dacus

I chose Dacus' cover of this classic because I think it conveys the essence of crushing more vividly than its jazzy predecessors. The rapid drum is a heartbeat, racing, the strumming a racing mind. Dacus switches effortlessly between French and English, neither language solely able to communicate her desires. Edith Piaf's original is thick and full-bellied, the confident and unwavering nature of which is more akin to love itself than crushing. The Dacus version is excitement and nerves and hope.

I Will Dare, The Replacements

“I Will Dare” is marked by its swinging guitars and anxious eagerness. As always, there is desperation in Paul Westerberg's voice, matched by the lyrics, which plead for reciprocation: “Meet me anyplace or anywhere or anytime.” He gets carried away by possibility in the bridge, full-band, then a brief respite of treble guitar, followed by a return to fervor. Westerberg nearly shrieks in the last verse. He falters in the last line, soft and sincere: “If you will dare, I will dare.” And dare is the operative word here—not as a taunt, but a venture, a risk, a promise.

Everywhere, Fleetwood Mac

Like “Then She Appeared,” “Everywhere” enters with a glittering. I can only imagine this effect as shorthand for bliss, and the chiming could be considered unimaginative if it didn’t feel so devoutly effervescent. This song is delightful! It has a spring in its step. Christine McVie wants what we all want: “to be with you everywhere.” (I remember once: packing up my overnight bag at my now ex-girlfriend’s apartment, an off-hand complaint, my voice near-whine. “It’s not fair that you get to hang out with you all the time.”)

Bags, Clairo

Clairo knows she is not too cool for yearning. In “Bags,” as with “Immunity” in its entirety, Clairo is aware of her position and its possible ramifications; she references an inkling that the object of her desire will tease her for her feelings. Such is the nature of friendship-based unrequited love—but “Bags” shirks a lot of the melodramatics typical of this genre. It’s not steeped in tears, or overly earnest, instead opting for soft-spoken and sonically weightless confession.

Skin, Soccer Mommy

As with many of Sophie Allison’s songs, there’s a sense of reluctance to the feeling—perhaps she wants to be too cool for yearning, but even she is not immune. She toys with images of carnality (the album’s motif), her attention on viscosity, sinewy and rank of wanting. There are flashes of brief delicacy (more twinkling) above the heavy bassline, the reel of exchanges cycled through while lying in the dark, before the crush is all-consuming, instrumental, “balled-up fists,” “clawing,” “scratching at your skin.”

I’m On Fire, Bruce Springsteen

It’s more lusty than crushing, and bursting with longing—punchy drums and fingerpicking pulse out impatiently. The song doesn’t seem to live naturally at this pace, instead forced out by the angst (Soccer Mommy put out a languid and marginally sadder cover in 2018). Bruce is breathy and insistent, streaming out images of fire and sweaty sheets and knives to an addled brain. Something menacing lives inside this song (other than the reference to the “little girl” and her “daddy,” which I will not prod further) but that’s to be expected. Crushes can, as the word implies, crush you.

Pang, Caroline Polachek

Though far more intriguing, I’d still call this introduction variations on a twinkling; a small build, and then the exquisite “pang.” Frightening and frightened, hopeful and overwhelmed.

It's a sonic burst to accompany the word, leaning on the sharpness it implies, sudden and all-consuming. The pain is not coincidental, but necessary, and expected. Polachek is ravenous in that way of a first night spent awake talking, which is a cliché because it's true. She wants to know everything, she wants to consume and be consumed in return.

Please, Jack Antonoff, Leave Julien Baker Alone!

Every few weeks one thought slams into me like only oppressive memories do: Jack Antonoff wants to work with Julien Baker. In an interview with *Stereogum* from 2017, the producer talked about writing with Lorde, Taylor Swift, and St. Vincent on their albums, his work post-Bleachers, the New Jersey festival he plans every summer called Shadow Of The City. “Let’s do what excites us,” he said, excitedly, in regards to making music that sounds different, music that changes with you. But then he said this: “I hope someone like Julien Baker calls me. I’d love to make an album with her.”

Oh my god! You would think this might inspire joy, that a relatively small artist like Julien would get the attention of a big-ticket producer like Antonoff. And yet! I am filled with frustration. I’m literally sweating.

I don’t hate Jack Antonoff—Taylor’s snappiest pop songs are those with his producing credits, and *MASSEDUCTION* is one of the best albums of the decade. He’s a good producer, and he seems like a nice enough guy. But if he touches Julien Baker, an independent artist who produces most of her own records herself, I will lose my mind.

Early March, the Dixie Chicks announced their revival with the Antonoffed single “Gaslighter.” It’s fine. Despite a “Best New Track” christening from Pitchfork, the song disappointed me. “Gaslighter, denier,” rhymes Natalie Maines. “Doin’ anything to get your ass farther.” Her voice is still as twangy and resonant as it is in *Fly*, but it has fewer places to roam. Instead of punchy and anthemic, the chorus feels repetitive and abrasive; instead of empowered, the lyrics feel conceived.

Mostly, I think it’s boring—which is exactly the risk of one producer monopolizing pop music.

Antonoff’s trio of greatest successes—Taylor, Lorde, and St. Vincent—have fairly distinct sounds and crossover audiences. It makes sense that he’d want to work with the most innovative artists in the field, and also that he’d want to steer a music monolith like Taylor in new directions. And these musicians’ *ouvres* are molded mostly from their own lives, the personal and specific experiences that could never be duplicated by another. Antonoff likes working with friends to ensure honest discussions in the studio, distilling vague feelings to singular potency; he carries himself with an aura of anti-establishment, despite birthing number one hits.

When working on *1989*, Antonoff’s production quirks were more alternative. 2014 was just wading out of bass drops and EDM features and into ’80s synths, marking a mid-decade shift in pop music trends. “Out of the Woods” didn’t sound like anything I’d heard from a contemporary musician, and certainly didn’t sound like the same Taylor who’d written “All Too Well” just a few years earlier. It took me a while to accept the change, and even longer

to appreciate it. But now, nearly every song of his features gated reverb and gang vocals—which I love, but which also get tired when they make an appearance on every track from a popular female artist. In 2020, pop seems to be hurtling more toward the campy Eurodance from Dua Lipa, and Caroline Polachek’s glitchy syncopation.

Antonoff’s touch is so noticeable that Caryn Ganz, pop music editor for *The New York Times*, refers to several of his Taylor Swift concoctions as “Getaway Cars,” after the memorable *Reputation* track; on an episode of the *New York Times’ Popcast*, Ganz counts five “Getaway Cars” on *Lover* (“Cruel Summer” is among them). It could be that Antonoff has a distinct style—he knows his voice, and his audience—but it also could be that he struck gold with one single and knew it, and then stuck with it far past its expiration date.

Lost in “Gaslighter” are the charming quirks of early Dixie Chicks, the candor present in empty sonic spaces. Now every inch is covered, no pocket left unfilled. The single, for me, is doing too much of everything in the way of uninteresting genre crossovers. It ticks too many boxes.

It might be most noticeable in the harmonies—the vocals are tight and full, no margin of error. This contained, they feel as if in a tunnel; they lose the airiness within “Travelin’ Soldier” and “The Long Way Around.” Antonoff’s production is clean—if the bass is grimy, it’s still streamlined. His hallmark is a catchy hook, maybe to the detriment of any possible eccentricity.

Writing this kind of feels like yet another argument against selling out. Quit stealing all my secrets, you might imagine me yelling. Leave my faves alone! Maybe I’m doing a little of that. But mostly I just don’t want my entire music taste to end up sounding the same, just screaming bridge after screaming bridge, gated reverb pulsating so incessantly it knocks me flat on my ass.

For the love of God, Jack Antonoff, please stop Jack Antonoffing all over my favorite artists. I’ll say it: Leave my faves alone! I just want one of them to avoid the studio with you in it. If you make Julien Baker sound like Lorde there will be no point in having a Julien Baker or a Lorde at all.

Your love for an artist does not entitle you to their production credits. Apparently it doesn’t even entitle you to a Top Fans notification from Spotify because I didn’t get one and I really deserve it. It’s like the barrage of Joan Didion comparisons for writers—enough! We only need one.

And we only need one “Getaway Car.”