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Jeff Rosenstock's *POST-* : A Sonic and Political Manifesto

A modern-day punk rocker's voice takes an ambitious step out of the garage-band fun of ska and onto today's sociopolitical landscape.



cover of Rosenstock's 2018 album *POST-*

Music criticism and review, whether written by a musician or a skilled teacher, is not only about what's good or bad. It's also about categorizing the creative experience. The role of the critic is to investigate and produce an understanding of how our world is being reflected in popular culture, in this case specifically music, and how that reflection compares to what came before it. The critic or reviewer helps the listener understand what they're listening to and how it fits into music and the larger world's big picture. Right? But if you believe the adage that perception is reality, wouldn't everyone hear music differently? And if that is true then how one listener reacts to a piece of music is just as relevant as the next listeners.

We can look to a well-known example to illustrate this point. Let's consider Black Sabbath's self-titled debut album in 1970. Even *Rolling Stone* misunderstood at the time, saying, "Vocals are sparse, most of the album being filled with plodding bass lines over which the lead guitar dribbles wooden Claptonisms from the master's tireddest Cream days". The album was widely hated by most every critic of the time, and the consensus review was that it was trash. Still yet the album defied the professional criticism, went on to sell millions of copies, and is even now thought to have created the heavy metal genre. To their credit, in 2004 *Rolling Stone* took a second look at Sabbath's album and said, "They took the blues out of blues-rock and replaced it with Wagner, creating epic battle rhythms filled with a tension and release that any adolescent boy would know about firsthand. Its 'mankind is evil and must repent for its wicked ways' thesis

Rosenstock's Solo Discography

I Look Like Sh## mixtape (2012)

"Summer" 7" single (2013)

"Hey Allison!" 7" single (2013)

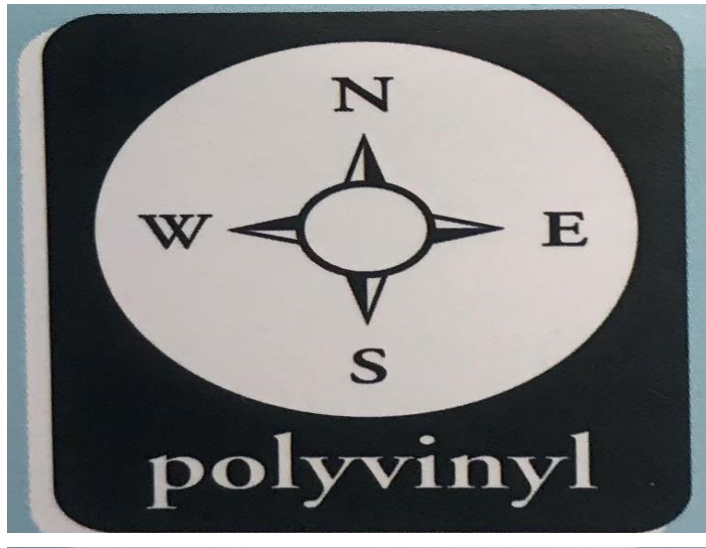
"I'm So Gross" 7" single (2014)

We Cool? album (2015)

Worry album (2016)

POST- album (2018)

would influence almost all the future bards of the metallic arts”. So why are reviews still important if they can be so wrong about what fans are listening for and react to?



POST released on Polyvinyl Records

Well back then, before MTV and the internet, printed reviews were vital to records sales. In the years since, the printed review has dropped off the consumer’s radar, and music coverage has found a new home on the internet. Reviews that had been found in traditional print magazines and fanzines at your local record store, which would

cost you a couple of bucks, have been replaced by an avalanche of free and easily accessed electronic sources. In reaction, the internet birthed a new kind of critic — the everyman. The internet also unleashed millions of ways for this everyman to discover and never find the end of available music. As the number of streaming and online services that put out music grew so did the number of people’s opinion about that music. From *Pitchfork*, which started as an online magazine, to independent bloggers, if you produce a record rest assured someone will have something to say about it.

I started listening to rock and punk rock as a teenager in the 1980s and have spent time working in music venues as a booking agent. And it doesn’t take a professional critic to hear and understand the outright call to America Jeff Rosenstock delivers on his newest solo release *POST*.

HISTORY & BIOGRAPHY

Jeff Rosenstock, commonly known as the nicest man in rock music, is an American musician and songwriter that hails from Long Island, NY. Recent interviews describe him as warm, engaging, and often more interested in the views of others than he is talking about himself. And although commercial success is new found, despite being twenty years into his career, the people alongside him say Rosenstock is as hardworking now as ever and wants those around him to be respected and valued.

As a musician in the industry as long as he has been, he is under no illusions as to what all this means to him, "I mean it's weird because this is what I've been doing now forever and while the success is super cool and I'm super excited about it. It's never been a goal or an end game to me. I just want to make cool shit. I just wanna try and make good records."

Rosenstock was formerly the lead singer of the ska punk band The Arrogant Sons of B#tches (ASOB), the indie rock band Kudrow, and the musical collective known as Bomb the Music Industry!. ASOB, started by Jeff and Joe Werfelman, was a six-piece band that released nine albums from 1998 to 2009. Having found some success, the band went onto play with other well-known ska groups like Catch 22 and The Toasters. Adhering to punk's Do-It-Yourself manifesto, in 2003 the band started following The Warped Tour completely on their own. They played their own shows outside the venues until they were invited to join the tour. In 2004 Jeff left the band to help form Bomb the Music Industry!. The band, which became known as a collective, shifted membership over the years. Over time the band's lineup has included more than twenty different musicians. Also known for their DIY ethic, they staged all-age shows for tickets that were only \$10 – a price anyone could afford. They also offered fans the chance to

play on stage with them, causing them to acquire a cult following. Bomb's musical style has been classified as hardcore punk, but I preferred the comparison that called them the "Fugazi of the Internet Age".

Following the blueprint of Ian Mackaye, the front man for legendary DIY punk bands Minor Threat and Fugazi, Rosenstock made Bomb's music free and accessible across as many platforms possible just as Mackaye had done a decade earlier on MySpace for both Fugazi and Minor Threat. And while other punk bands on the Warped Tour with them made the jump to major record labels as their success grew, again like Mackaye and Fugazi, Rosenstock chose to keep Bomb under the radar and off corporate labels. The band played their farewell show in 2014 at Warsaw in Brooklyn, NY. Warsaw, also known as the Polish National Home or "where punk meets pierogies", carries the scene past down from previous NY rock clubs like CBGB's and The Knitting Factory.

Rosenstock has also founded the independent record label Quote Unquote Records. True to his punk rock roots, the label puts out all its records for free. More recent he created Really Records, which has released albums by Shinobu, an American indie rock band from California, and most of Jeff's solo projects. Since 2012 he has put out six independent albums beginning with the "mixed tape" *I Look Like Sh#t*. His first two solo studio albums, *We Cool* and *Worry*, came out in 2015 and 2016.

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POST-

Rosenstock used 2016's *Worry* to give voice to the desperation and anxiety felt by many Americans leading up to the 2016 presidential election. On *Post-* he has created the most politically relevant albums of the year to deal with the aftermath and shock of the result. The first lines to the opening track "USA" shout:

*Dumbfounded, downtrodden, and dejected
Crestfallen, griefstricken, and exhausted
Trapped in my room while the house was burnin'
To the motherf#@kin' ground*

The majority of the album is a statement of indignation with the political process and speaks to the divide between passionate, youthful activism and out of touch, old politicians. Eventually, inspired by resistance movements like #metoo and #blacklivematter, the confusion turns to a call for unified action on the final track "Let Them Win".

Released in 2018 and closely following *Worry*, Rosenstock doesn't screw around on *Post-*. For the most part, the 10 songs are straightforward punk; there is a hidden song four minutes and twenty-five seconds into the 11th track. The pretenseless presentation is what makes *Post-* great; because it's ambitious without trying to be something it's not. Songs like "Yr Throat" or "Beating My Head Against a Wall" are upfront pop-punk that can be heard within the well-established traditions of self-deprecation and the antiestablishment principals of punk rock. Even songs that aren't brashly direct still come across in a punk tradition. "9/10" (my personal favorite) and "TV Stars" are both excellent power-ballads that keep self-destructive and self-aware tendencies in your face, while being played over delicately strummed guitars. The lengthier "USA" (over 7 minutes) and "Let Them Win" are also undisguised punk tracks. Even

though they're longer, they still mostly work within the confines of distorted power-chords, sing-a-long vocals, and scathing criticisms of the government. Each song has lengthy synth breakdowns, which are nice, but don't really bring much to the track.

The best way to describe the songs from a lyrical point of view is that it's largely comprised of political criticism, with love songs dropped in occasionally. "USA" sets this mood, by asking every person in the United States if they'll take responsibility for our current presidential predicament. He calls on us all in the final refrain singing, "*Stabbed in the back by our own people. Et tu USA.*" "Yr Throat" is an intense critique of those who tend to stay quiet when they see something's wrong and narrates Rosenstock's frustration at being able to affect meaningful change:

What's the point of having a voice?

*What's the point of having a voice?
If it gets stuck inside your throat?*

"Beating My Head Against A Wall" is instantly relatable to anyone who's tried to prove (or disprove) a political point with family at dinner and knows it's as frustrating as the title suggests. The closing track is a uniting and anthemic song that vows "We're not gonna let them win again." It's impossible to not read this as reactionary to the 2016 election and what's been happening in Washington over the past year.

Even though *Post-* is a scathing political masterpiece in my opinion, Rosenstock does have his more heart-felt moments. "Melba" and "Powerlessness" are both intensive personal narratives about feeling nostalgic for a certain town once visited and social anxiety. And on "Powerlessness" Rosenstock rattles the sentimental chains when he pays homage to the venue Warsaw singing, "meet me at the Polish bar". "TV Stars" is a personal song where Rosenstock discusses either a

breakup or simply being away from a lover, while falling asleep to separate apathetic TV shows.

He still pokes fun at himself though:

*I can't play piano all that well
Like, I'm fine
I can get away with it.
If I'm acting like I'm drunk on stage
And you're shocked that I'm playing anything
I'll get away with it.
Like TV stars.*

The most touching moment though is in the song “9/10.” It’s a song about unsteadily shaking into the landing of adulthood and finding a suitable romantic partner- or an exact description of my life these days. It’s oddly charming how the chorus just resolves with “*Nine times out of ten, I’ll be thinking of you.*” Rosenstock sets a high bar with a song that will stay with you.

Obviously dedicated to his beliefs and in love with what he does, Rosenstock’s resistive energy has the music press calling him the savior of rock music. Drawing on the familiar sounds of punk Jeff Rosenstock’s *Post-* is both incredibly personal and politely confrontational, while staying simple to get its message across.