

LIFE & ARTS

MUSIC REVIEW: 'WEEZER' (THE BLACK ALBUM)

Melodies to Cherish, Lyrics to Forget



BY MARK RICHARDSON

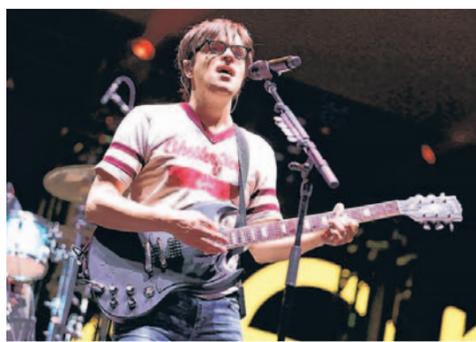
THE MODERN ROCK band Weezer has a devoted cult following, but its place in the larger world of music varies from one year to the next. When it arrived with its debut album in 1994 (like many of the group's records, it was self-titled, and like the other self-titled albums, it was identified by the color of its cover art, in this case blue) the group—led by bespectacled singer, guitarist and songwriter Rivers Cuomo—found itself squarely at the center of the post-Nirvana alternative rock landscape.

From the start, Weezer's music appealed to a certain kind of discontented teenager, alternating slow, tense verses that mused on alienation with exploding choruses that brought the lonely masses together in a moment of shout-along catharsis. Mr. Cuomo lived the part of the nerdy outcast, his self-aware songwriting steeped in corny jokes, creepy sexual obsession and a fascination with the lives of the rich and famous. The key to Weezer's longevity is that it has never changed and shows no interest in growing up. For a quarter-century, Weezer has reliably serviced its audience, releasing a dozen studio albums

that vary greatly in quality but remain rooted, however indirectly, in the awkward ache of adolescence.

At times, the sheer goofiness of Weezer threatens to overwhelm everything else about the band, and when that happens, some fans who formed an emotional bond with the group feel betrayed. The past year, which has seen a considerable increase in the band's profile thanks to its 2018 cover of Toto's "Africa," has been a serious test for this cohort. The song became one of Weezer's highest-charting singles and led to a full album of covers, mostly of songs from the 1980s, which found the band's members dressing in "Miami Vice"-style pastel suits on the sleeve. The media hubbub centered on "Africa"—including a video starring Weird Al Yankovic—meant that the group's new album of original songs is being greeted with higher than usual interest.

Produced by David Sitek, best known as the studio mastermind behind the rock band TV on the Radio, "Weezer" (referred to as the Black Album, based on the color of its sleeve) has some welcome sonic tweaks. Mr. Sitek is known for productions stuffed with detail that spread attention across many processed instruments. For Weezer, this means that the focus shifts



At top, all of Weezer, from left: Pat Wilson, Scott Shriner, Rivers Cuomo and Brian Bell. Below, Mr. Cuomo.

away from pummeling guitars and toward a carefully layered array of keyboard instruments. On the single "Zombie Bastards," Mr. Sitek helps Weezer do more with less, as he takes power chords and reduces them, letting them do their work by suggestion rather than domination so the song resonates as much "bigger" than it actually is.

In terms of the sheer memorability of the tunes, the Black Album is an upper-tier Weezer release. Mr. Cuomo is famously a student of what makes a pop song work, taking a scientific approach to his craft in which he catalogs ideas for verses, bridges and cho-

rases in a spreadsheet. The catchiness of these melodies and the force with which they resolve are impossible to deny, providing the same kind of tingle you got when you solved your first algebra problem. And the scholarship extends beyond songwriting construction, as references to classic

sounds from the past abound. "Piece of Cake" is driven by a melancholy piano refrain that brings to mind Queen, "Living in L.A." has Mr. Cuomo singing "Feel so lonely" in the chorus in a way that sounds exactly like the Police, and on "Too Many Thoughts in My Head" Mr. Cuomo offers a line from "Everybody's Talkin'," the Fred Neil song made famous by Harry Nilsson as the theme from the film "Midnight Cowboy."

But it's not always a pleasurable sensation to have a song stuck in your head, and the Black Album is filled with lyrics that might make you resent Mr. Cuomo's melodic

skill. "Can't Knock the Hustle," which shares a title with a song by the rapper Jay-Z, is partly an ode to the sharing economy (sample lyric: "Leave a five-star review and I'll leave you one too"), and it spends much of its time stringing together meaningless catchphrases. The aforementioned "Too Many Thoughts" describes being overwhelmed with Netflix options—a familiar-enough feeling, but hardly an observation that bears repeated listening—while "High as a Kite" offers loopy observations on the joys of parasailing. And when the songs aren't banal, they're simply meaningless. "The Prince Who Wanted Everything" has an appealing glam-rock shuffle and is more or less about the late singer and songwriter Prince, but it's ultimately just a stream of silly, disconnected lines. On the one hand you could say that Mr. Cuomo is down-to-earth, writing about the small things that consume so many of us day to day, but the effect here is often like scrolling through a dull acquaintance's Facebook feed. Soon enough, it's time to close the tab.

Mr. Richardson, the former executive editor of Pitchfork, is a writer and editor living in Brooklyn, N.Y.

ART REVIEW

A GLITTERING EDUCATION IN THE JEWELER'S CRAFT

BY LAURA JACOBS

GOLD beater's block, repoussé hammer, solder pick, bezel pusher, burnishers, pliers, the torch and the kiln. Over millennia these tools have hardly changed. Eternal as well are the elemental metals and precious stones they work into wearable form. It all happens at the jeweler's bench, where age-old techniques are tantamount to alchemy and earthly treasure is hand-wrought into adornments of spirituality, sovereignty and status. For anyone who has ever wondered what goes into the making of the finest jewelry—and why it has always been so costly—"A View From the Jeweler's Bench" at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery is a gem of an education.

The exhibition is subtitled "Ancient Treasures, Contemporary Statements," and it is principally a dialogue between past and present on the essential subjects of mastery and imagination. Juxtaposing the work of 12 contemporary jewelry artists with a number of definitive historical pieces, the curator Sasha Nixon—who received her master's degree from the Bard Graduate Center in 2018 and developed this show from her qualifying paper—shows how these artists repurpose long-ago forms and techniques to witty, poetic and postmodern ends.

"Inside every piece of contemporary jewelry can be found the DNA of its archetypal ancestor," sums up one of the artists, Lin Cheung, who is quoted in the nifty little exhibition guide, given free.

Located in the gallery on the Graduate Center's first floor, the show has seven sections. The first, "The Jeweler's Bench," is central, and thus centered in the space. This bench, which is not unlike a standard midcentury desk, holds a

jumble of tools, gemstones and pearls. Small display cases that flank the bench explain "Cold Working," "Stone Setting" and, most provocatively, the importance of "Practitioners as Researchers." Ms. Nixon informs us that "contemporary jewelers who study archaeological evidence and incorporate ancient goldsmithing techniques in their work are largely responsible for the resurgence of these methods." This is fascinating. Castellani & Sons, the revered Italian firm that produced the 19th century's most coveted revival jewelry, never figured out how the ancient Etruscans achieved their spectacular filigree granulations of gold. That came in the 1930s, and the answer was cupric oxide.

Like the facets of a brilliant-cut solitaire, the show's other sections circle the jeweler's bench. "The Lure of Ancient Gold," a nod to the consummate goldsmith skills of antiquity, pulls us into history, myth and metaphor—gold as wealth, warmth and light, the golden fleece and the sun god Apollo. Here a Greek wedding vase circa 340 B.C. depicts Aphrodite offering Adonis a gift from her jewel box. And a terra-cotta head of a woman, decked out in large earrings and a diadem, is actually



A 'Kul Oba' brooch (c. 1875), left, by Castellani & Sons; above, a bronze-antler tiara (2014) by Gabriella Kiss.



an Etruscan antefix (a rooftop architectural detail). Nearby, the magnificent "Kul Oba" brooch (c. 1875), a Castellani & Sons reconstruction of an earring from a Scythian tomb, shows just how huge jewelry could get in ancient times. Equally magnificent is Jeanette K. Caines's pair of cascading gold "Bird" earrings, made in 2018 especially for this exhibition. Ms. Caines employed Etruscan techniques while also echoing the "Helen of Troy" parrure that was excavated at Troy in 1873. A video shows her making the earrings (Ms. Caines says it took her 3½ weeks, plus 27 years of experience), and though technically maximal, the design is slimmed-down, modern.

"Comeos and Memory" leaps from the political and mythologi-

cal portraiture traditionally carved in stone, shell or glass to show how artist Nicole Jacquard makes it personal: Laser-engraving family photos onto thin sheets of mica, she then sets them in enameled oval frames. The result is a ghostly spin on the scrapbook. "Value and Fashion" addresses the "symbiotic relationship between synthetic and genuine gemstone jewelry, with one encouraging further elaboration of the other." Two ornate pendant necklaces—an 18th-century amethyst and glass paste beauty, and a Tiffany & Co. diamond extravaganza circa 1900—meet their millennial incarnation in Ashley Buchanan's "Iconic Decorative Neckpiece" (2016). Cut from brass and powdercoated in white, it's the silhouette without the stones.

"La Peregrina" translates as "The Wanderer," and this section follows the path of an exceptional pearl, found in the 16th century, that appeared in one oil portrait after another as it moved from one royal family to another, ending up on the 20th-century neck of Elizabeth Taylor. "What is an heirloom but a time traveler," says emiko oye, whose 2013 version of Taylor's necklace is fashioned from

pixel-like Lego pieces—an acknowledgment of the role digital screens now play in showing jewelry to the world.

In "Power and Prestige" Gabriella Kiss rethinks the crown. Her tiara of bronze antlers and gemstone raindrops (2014)—hauntingly sylvan—suggests an elf princess in Tolkien. The show's final section, "Archetypes and Attachments," embraces the sentimental aspect of jewelry, its role as emotional touchstone or talisman. This is a charmed realm of symbolic shapes and engraved words, of lockets containing images of loved ones. Ms. Cheung's "Secret-locked Locket" (2016) is a solid gold oval with no embellishment and no opening. A secret, however, has been permanently sealed inside. We are asked to consider a mystery, the question of who brings meaning to a piece of jewelry. The artist who made it? Or the person who sees their soul in it?

A View From the Jeweler's Bench Bard Graduate Center Gallery through July 7

Ms. Jacobs writes about culture and fashion for the Journal.

FROM TOP: SEAN MURPHY; RICH FURY/GETTY IMAGES FOR HEARTMEDIA

BARD GRADUATE CENTER GALLERY (2)