

MUSIC

Reality Awaits

The Strokes return, vocoder first

SHARAR CHOWDHURY

Six years after *The New Abnormal*, The Strokes are back, and *Reality Awaits* has very high highs and very low lows. People are calling it an evil version of the last album, which is about right. It sounds like The Strokes and, at the same time, not like them at all. *The New Abnormal* had no skips for me. This one has a few.

The elephant in the room is the autotune, smeared across one of the most recognisable voices in music. Some people have joked that Julian Casablancas took the Daft Punk break-up too hard, and honestly, I would not count that out to be true. It worked on "Instant Crush" and "Infinity Repeating" because those songs were meant to sound like transmissions from a haunted future.

Here it feels more like a statement that Julian Casablancas is trying to make: Artificiality doing to a human voice what it is currently doing to everything else. That is the generous reading. The less generous one is that the two singles – "Going Shopping" and "Falling out of Love" – are the weakest tracks. They are over-processed and under-produced, and gave everyone the wrong first impression.

The rest of the songs are good, and it grows on you. I first heard it on Friday when it came out. It is now Sunday, and I have caught myself humming it in the shower. "Dine N'Dash" is the standout: clean guitar tone, minimal effects, and Julian actually singing. "Lonely in the Future" is the catchiest track here and the most argumentative, with Julian taking aim at artists who copy and steal, reminding everyone he was doing the same as a kid.

"Going to Babble On" carries the summer, with a pre-chorus that will have you reaching for "You Only Live Once". Underneath the funk, Julian sounds tired of shouting about politics while everybody scrolls past. One line, about how one side in a fight is simply stronger and some things never shift, hits quite hard. Lyrically, it is Julian doing his thing: politics, yearning, nostalgia, swipes at corporate power, none of it spelled out, which can either be read as profound or convenient depending on your mood.

The middle stretch is patchier. "Liar's Remorse" is all keys and voice, no drums, circling love, sacrifice, AI and lonesome old memories, and reads better than it listens. "The Fruits of Conquest" leans on percussion, takes its time, and creeps up on you. Then "Tyrants of the Mellow Moon" concludes properly, with a riff worth the wait and one of the few moments where the autotune does not feel like a misfit.

Overall, this album gets a three out of five. Not bad, not remarkable, lifted by four or five properly good songs.



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